

This story uses characters and locations based on the Gunslinger Girl manga written by Yu Aida and published in monthly shōnen magazine Dengeki Daioh. The characters of Kumari/Kara and Michele are original to myself.

"Intersections of Vertices"

A *Gunslinger Girl* Original Story by Kiskaloo

The shrill beeping of the clock-radio alarm woke Michele Pagani at 5:00 on the morning of March 11, 2004. While the shades were open, dawn would not break for another two and a half hours, so he turned on the lights in his suite at the Park Hyatt Villa Magna in the capital city of Spain. He ordered breakfast for a 6:00 delivery and then showered and dressed.

After breakfast, he left the hotel and walked to the Madrid Metro subway at Rubén Darío station and rode it to Gran Vía where he transferred to Line 1, which carried him to Atocha railway station. He had a meeting with the Grupo Especial de Operaciones headquartered in Guadalajara, 60km northeast of Madrid. At Atocha he would take the Cercanías Madrid C2 line to Guadalajara.

Four years prior, Michele had returned to the reserves of the Aeronautica Militare after serving in support of NATO operations in Yugoslavia. Prior to being recalled to active duty he had worked for the Scuderia Ferrari Formula One team as an engineer, but that door was effectively closed to him as there had still been a chance that he would be called back to serve with the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) and he had not wanted to be in a position to have had to leave the team in the middle of a season.

Michele was independently wealthy so his need for employment was not immediate. However, a job offer was extended to him by a Giulio Draghi who introduced himself as working for a counter-terrorist organization working directly for the Prime Minister under the cover of a social organization. They had met at Practica de Mare air show outside of Rome in 1999 and Draghi said he was interested in Michele because of his extensive liaison experience and his command of languages (he spoke six). The group Draghi worked for – and where he wanted Michele to join – was organized along two lines and he worked for the Public Safety division, which concerned itself with surveillance, intelligence and espionage.

At the time, Italy was faced with an active and violent separatist movement – The Padania Republican Faction – who were attempting to create an independent state in the north of Italy. They also went by the name “The Five Republics Faction” after the five largest republics in the northern part of the country: Piedmont, Lombardy, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna. Italy literally had over a score of military and civilian counter-terrorist agencies and they all did an excellent job...of getting in each other’s way. This allowed the PRF to advance their agenda through bombings, kidnappings, and political murders.

Michele had been raised to love the Italian Republic and he viewed the PRF as a cancer that should be excised. He therefore took Draghi up on the offer and joined Public Safety in late 2000, just prior to Draghi himself moving to lead the Special Operations division, tasked with protective custody, protective security, hostage rescue, and sanction.

The PRF worked with other separatist groups like the IRA, ETA, and FARC so in addition to his liaison work with all of the Italian counter-terrorist forces, Michele’s command of foreign languages and knowledge of foreign cultures made him the natural choice to liaison with foreign agencies in countries including France, Northern Ireland, Spain and Columbia. Michele’s meeting today with the GEO concerned possible explosives smuggling into Italy by the Basque separatist movement Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), whom had been caught earlier that year sitting on a large cache of explosives

At 7:37 Michele was on the overhead walkway making his way for the escalator leading down to the C2 platform. At that same time, the first bomb detonated on train 21431 from Alcalá de Henares on the same platform as it began the final deceleration into the station, tearing through the fourth carriage and filling the immediate area with a gray, smoky haze. People on the platform and riding the up escalator craned their heads back towards the sound, unsure as to what had just happened.

Six seconds later, the fifth carriage was rocked with an explosion and people started to rush towards the escalators, only to be caught in the explosion and fireball four seconds later from a bomb in the sixth carriage parked right next to it. All three explosions echoed like thunder through the station and a cloud of debris shot into the air and smashed into the ceiling, ricocheting back down on the platform like steel and concrete rain.

Michele's military training and instincts kicked in automatically and he was already heading for the ground as soon as his brain registered the flash of the first explosion. He picked himself up and rushed down to see thick grey and black smoke billowing across the parallel sets of tracks. The line next to the affected train had been empty so the force of the explosion dissipated outward into open space once it had crossed the platform, but Michele could not see the platform below through the dust and smoke.

He'd no sooner done his initial assessment when a second set of four explosions echoed across the hall and he saw bright flashes less than a kilometer away. While he didn't know it at the time, those explosions were tearing through the carriages of train 17305, which was arriving at the station from Principe Pio.

Within two minutes the platform was empty and Michele and a few others made their way down to the platform. Numerous dead and injured lay strewn about and there were people who had been blown off the platform and onto the tracks. He put the basic medical training he had learned in the military to use and checked those he found for signs of life. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and he focused on an Asian teenaged girl lying on the ground, moaning and calling out in Japanese. Michele was fluent in the language and held her hand, trying to calm her. She asked for her mother and father and he asked the girl for her name and she replied "Kumari Rosier". She also provided the names of her mother and father before she went unconscious. It was clear she was seriously wounded and in pain, but her grip on his hand was strong, so Michele stayed with her and spoke encouragement until the first medical teams arrived on the platform just after 8:00. Michele helped load her onto the stretcher and accompanied her to the ambulance, not letting go of her hand until they prepared to load her aboard. As he let go, her eyes opened and focused on his face, and she said "arigato, ojisan". Then the doors closed and she was gone.

By then, medical and security emergency services were arriving in force. Michele identified himself to an officer in the Unidad Especial de Intervención of the Guardia Civil and informed him he was a direct eyewitness to the attacks. The officer paired him off with a Guardia Civil Sargento to take his statement. As the cellular phone system was jammed, Michele used one of the military phones to make contact with the person he was supposed to meet at the GEO. Due to the emergency, they agreed to cancel their meeting and Michele flagged down a cab and returned to the Hyatt where he contacted Director

Reschiglian at Public Safety about the attack and informed him the meeting was cancelled. Reschiglian ordered him to return home as soon as he could arrange transport.

Michele changed out of his clothes and took another shower, then watched local news coverage of the attack. He learned of the second train at Atocha as well as the two other trains bombed at El Pozo and Santa Eugenia stations back up the line. Reports said at least 50 were dead, though the toll was expected to go higher as rescue workers cleared the rubble away and entered the damaged cars.

As he watched the rescue operation, the local news gave information on a command post that had been set up with pictures and names of victims and where they had been sent for family and friends to use to try and find out what had happened. His thoughts turned to the Asian girl with the French name he'd rescued. Knowing he couldn't bother the authorities, he instead took a cab as far as he could and then walked the rest of the way to the center. There were two rows of pictures, the first with names and the second without. Michele had placed a piece of notepad paper with her and her parents' name on her before they loaded her into the ambulance so he checked the list with names and quickly found Kumari's. He also saw a picture for her mother, but none for her father. He wrote down the hospital she was in and then flagged the first cab he found.

The cab dropped him off out front of Hospital General Universitario Gregorio Marañón and he walked inside. He approached Reception and flashed his Interpol credentials before asking for the location of Kumari Rosier, stating she was a direct eyewitness to the attacks. While he was not actually part of Interpol, the credentials were legitimate should anyone check and had been issued to make it easier for his foreign operations. The Receptionist had seen badges flashed in her face since 9:00 so she didn't ask any questions of her own and informed him she was in the intensive care ward undergoing surgery. Michele decided to wait and pulled up a chair outside of the operating theatre. One of the hospital security guards came over to protest, but another wave of the badge and the look on his face sent him away.

Two hours later a doctor came forward and asked if Michele was here for Kumari. Michele nodded and the doctor reported that she had been severely wounded with major trauma to her legs. While they would not have to amputate, it was likely she would not walk again without braces and crutches. She also suffered significant blunt-force trauma to the torso, which had resulted in one of her lungs collapsing and her

heart undergoing severe bruising. She'd also partially torn one of her major arteries, leading to heavy internal bleeding. She had a minor brain contusion that had put her into a very mild coma, but her skull had not fractured and the contusion did not look like it was causing any direct damage to the brain or cognitive functions.

Michele asked about her mother and father and was told the mother had suffered a major head injury and was in a coma. The father, who unfortunately had been killed in the blast, had shielded her. Michele contacted Public Safety and asked them to check to see if she had any family. They called back about an hour later with information that the mother had a brother in Japan and Michele passed this information onto Spanish authorities, but they were unsuccessful in contacting him.

Michele returned to Italy, but he kept tabs on Kumari's progress. She'd come out of the coma and into a minimally conscious state. The doctors were frankly amazed she was still alive, but they didn't hold out hope for a recovery.

He wanted to know more about her, so he searched the web's social networks. Through them he learned she was the daughter of a French astronomer and a Japanese aerospace engineer, which explained her stated love of astronomy and airplanes; that she was fluent in three languages and passable in a fourth; that her hobbies included cooking, playing football and computer programming; that her boyfriend and she had mutually ended their relationship at the start of the new year because his family moved to Quebec and they knew that sooner or later one of them would stray and that she was looking forward to the family holiday in Madrid.

Five weeks after the bombing he returned to Madrid for his original meeting with the GEO. While originally blamed on the Basque ETA, further investigation had eliminated them as a suspect. The bombings had brought down the government of Prime Minister José María Aznar in elections held three days later and his administration was preparing to leave office. Aznar, himself a victim of an ETA assassination attempt bombing nine years earlier, had been a strong supporter of the US President's "Global War on Terror" and had worked with Italy's Prime Minister against the PRF. The new Prime Minister-elect had stated his intention to immediately withdraw all Spanish military forces in Iraq on assuming office and there was worry within Italian counter-intelligence that this might result in Spain no longer assisting with anti-PRF

initiatives. Therefore, Michele had been sent back to try and keep the relationship ongoing and effective.

He visited Kumari, who by now had been moved out of intensive care, though she remained in the minimally conscious state. Her mother, diagnosed in a persistent vegetative state, had been repatriated to Japan and was under the care of the State. All attempts to contact Kumari's uncle had been unsuccessful so they stopped trying. As she was a French citizen, her care was being paid for by their national health system. The opinion at the current time was that she would not survive being repatriated to France, much less Japan, so the decision had been made to leave her in Spanish care until such time as she recovered sufficiently for movement or she passed away. The consensus of the doctors was the latter would occur far more likely than the former as they lacked the medical technology to repair the underlying damage the bomb had done.

As Michele looked at Kumari's sleeping form, his thoughts returned time and again to Angelica: another girl who was a victim, but who beat the odds and survived because her will to live was so strong. He remained troubled by what had been done to Angelica, but it seemed clear Kumari Rosier wanted to live even more than Angelica had.

When he returned to Italy, he placed a call.

"I've looked at her medical records and I just don't think she is a suitable candidate for augmentation," Doctor Fernando Bianchi said after he had examined Kumari's medical records sent over by the Spanish.

"Are her injuries that severe?" Michele asked. They were having dinner at La Pergola a week after Michele's return. While it was a hotel restaurant, it also boasted two Michelin stars and was well known to be due a third. As such, it was one of the most sought-after restaurants in the city. From the terrace where they sat atop Monte Mario, the entire city was laid out before them.

"That is easy. As long as her brain is fine, we can replace most everything else. No, the problem is more with her age. She's 16, which means she's most likely completed puberty and is now sexually mature. In fact, she's been sexually active though there is no sign of any prior pregnancies so she and her partner likely used physical contraceptives."

"And sexual maturity is a problem?"

"It can be," Bianchi replied. "We normally like to use subjects who either have not entered puberty or are in the earliest stages and have not yet started to be able to sexually reproduce — hence our focus on girls 9 to 11. Kumari's body has undergone significant physical and hormonal changes and this might affect the conditioning medication. We also use growth-inhibitors to prevent their original components from outgrowing their cybernetics and artificial organs, though Kumari is likely as tall as she will get, so that could have proven to be a benefit."

"So there is nothing we can do," Michele said.

"I'm sorry, Michele," Bianchi said, shaking his head.

A month later, Michele's office phone at Public Safety rang.

"Michele Pagani."

"Mister Pagani, my name is Doctor Ziliani with SWA Medical. We met a few years back on the Angelica project."

"Yes, I remember. What can I do for you?" Michele asked.

"I understand you met with Doctor Bianchi and he was not able to fulfill your request. I believe I might be able to."

Even though Public Safety was familiar with the Section 2 cyborg program, Michele knew better than to talk about it over the phone.

"How about we meet for lunch to discuss it. Say Trattoria Sora Lella at two? My treat."

"That would be fine. See you then."

At the appointed time, they met on the Isola Tiburtina and walked to the restaurant and were escorted to the top dining room.

"I take it you are aware of what I am asking for?" Michele asked.

"Yes," Ziliani replied. "Doctor Bergonzi and I have put forward a plan to create a new generation of cyborgs with less augmentation."

"Won't that make them less effective?" Michele asked and Ziliani nodded his head.

"That seems a bit counterproductive," Michele noted.

"The Prime Minister wants the cybernetic and neuroprosthetic advances to be made available to adults as well as children," Ziliani stated. "If we're to commercialize the technology, we need to make it cheaper and easier to maintain. We also feel a more flexible conditioning regimen would be beneficial by allowing the girls to perform missions beyond just combat. We also hope they will last longer than the few years of the first generation girls so we can get more field data on how the cybernetics perform."

"So how exactly does this help me, or more specifically, Kumari?"

"Our target age for the new cyborgs is 16. We want girls who have completed puberty and their growth cycle so they better approximate the adults that the technology will eventually be used on."

"And this is something you're ready to go forward with?" Michele asked.

"We've pitched it to the senior medical staff. Doctor Belgonchi is interested in it, but Doctors Bianchi and Gilliani have expressed reservations."

"And since they're the two senior doctors, they have to sign off on it," Michele noted.

"Well Director Lorenzo is intrigued by the idea so he and Minister Petris will hopefully put pressure on Bianchi's superior to go forward with the program. If that happens, within three or four months we expect to be ready for our first cyborg. That could be Kumari."

"If she lives that long," Michele noted.

"We can bring her to Italy," Ziliani offered. "Our medical technology is better than anywhere else in the world so her chances of survival until such a decision is made would be much improved."

Michele had told Doctor Ziliani he'd think it over, but really he'd already made up his mind as soon as Ziliani suggested it to try and seek the approval to move her. He contacted the hospital in Madrid and they reported no real change. She remained in a minimally conscious state and in serious but stable condition.

Michele contacted Doctor Bianchi and asked about the possibility of putting Kumari's name before the Patient Selection Committee of the public part of the Social Welfare Agency. With his recommendation her approval would be a mere formality. Bianchi replied that he knew Ziliani had met with him and discussed his "Generation 2" proposal, however, he was not supportive of adding her to the list on the grounds that if she later became a candidate for augmentation, there would be a paper trail that would need to be hidden.

"You look pensive," Renato Pisano, Prime Minister of Italy, noted after the meeting broke up.

"Sorry, Renato," Michele replied. "I've had something on my mind as of late."

"Would that something be Kumari Rosier?"

Michele smiled ruefully. "Your political opponents have it right – your spies really are everywhere."

Renato winked and he escorted Michele from the Sala delle Repubbliche Marinare down the hall to his study. Inside, the Ministers of Defense and Interior were seated in front of the massive wooden desk with another gentleman sitting to the side before the window. It took a moment, but Michele recognized him as Pieri Lorenzo, Director of Special Operations, Section Two.

"Pull up a chair," Renato instructed and Michele did so.

"First up, the good news. I've approved moving forward with the Second Generation program. I've also instructed Pieri to add Kumari to the list of the first candidates."

"Thank you," Michele replied, and everyone in the room noted the hesitation in his voice.

"You're worried about who we'll make her handler?" Lorenzo asked and Michele nodded. One of his functions in Public Safety had been to create all the necessary identity documents and computer records and handle the adoption process that put the girls under the custody of their handlers for the second tranche of five *fratelli* that completed the first generation.

"I believe we have a solution that will assuage any fears you might have. This is whom we've chosen," Lorenzo said as he handed over a dossier.

Michele opened it and blinked in surprise. The subject was himself.

"You're joking, of course," Michele replied, closing it and tossing it back on the Director's desk.

"I don't have a sense of humor. At least those who work for me claim," he said with a false smile.

"You've shown a closeness to the girl since the rescue," he continued. "We know you kept tabs on her in Spain and visited her every time duties took you back. You were the one who recommended her for cybernetic conversion and when that didn't work, fought to have her brought to the SWA, anyway, for additional treatment. And since her awakening, you've spent a good deal of time with her and you demanded to have a hand in her hypnotherapy.

"In the opinion of the medical staff, you have already started to form a bond with this girl and she with you. It's no secret that we've had problems with both the cyborgs and their handlers. Our decision to draw from active duty military and police personnel has resulted in certain...moral conundrums...that have affected how their cyborgs respond to situations. The handlers themselves are also having difficult times adjusting to their charges."

"I don't believe Director Reschiglian would approve of my having a cyborg assistant," Michele noted.

"I have no intention of having the cyborg program expand beyond the bounds of Special Operations at this time," Renato noted. "I have therefore instructed Stefania to inform Director Reschiglian that you will be joining Section 2."

"And he was favorable to the idea?" Michele said, shocked.

"He was not, but I made it clear the decision was final," Minister of the Interior Stefania Tremonte replied. Public Safety was part of her ministry so Reschiglian answered to her.

Lorenzo extended his hand. "Welcome to Section 2, Tenente Colonnello Pagani."

"I'm a Maggiore," Michele replied, still somewhat shell-shocked by what had just happened.

"Not anymore," Minister of Defense Monica Petris said, handing him confirmation of his promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

"I'm still at a loss to understand why Kumari and I having a friendship makes me a good candidate to be a handler. Especially since I am a soldier, as well," Michele noted.

"We're hoping the second generation proves to be more successful, both as operatives and in terms of their implants so we can commercialize the technology," Lorenzo answered. "That requires a different type of person to be their handler. Someone more...flexible, who can take advantage of the additional flexibility we will be putting into the cyborg's conditioning."

"And you've known about the program since the beginning," Minister Petris added. "Some of the weapons and tactics the Series 1 cyborgs were programmed with came from your input. You also showed with Angelica that you have the personality necessary to work with a young girl. That Kumari is older than Angelica should make it even easier for you to relate to her. Also, her age and height means we can make her appear older without too much difficulty which means you both will be able to more easily blend into public and she can perform a wider variety of missions."

"The Series 1 cyborgs make great assassins and Kumari will be fully capable of carrying out sanctions. However, we want to take advantage of the traits you bring from Public Safety so our plan is to employ your *fratello* more as 'Trouble Consultants', to quote the Prime Minister. In addition to the standard weapons and tactics training, we will also add training in espionage, surveillance and intelligence gathering and analysis. With Kumari's background in computer programming, we're also going to give her knowledge in the circumvention of computer security systems. We also will give her

knowledge and training in liaison operations and interpersonal relationship management.”

“I guess I really don’t have much of a choice, do I,” Michele noted.

“No,” Renato replied.

“I do have two requests as it relates to Kumari.”

“Yes?”

“First, I want to be her legal guardian so I would like you to arrange for me to formally adopt her. Second, I ask that she be imprinted with a knowledge and love of Formula One automobile racing, preferably the Ferrari team. It would give us a common point of interest to help form our partnership.”

“Done. I’m sorry we forced this on you with no warning, Michele,” Renato said, though Michele knew he didn’t mean a word of it. They were old friends, but friendship came second to necessity for the Prime Minister.

“I joined the military and Public Safety to serve the Republic. It will be no different here,” Michele noted.

Four months after the bombing, Kumari Rosier was loaded aboard an ambulance and driven to Madrid Cuatro Vientos Airport where she was loaded aboard an air ambulance, which flew to Rome Ciampino Airport. There she was off-loaded to another ambulance that drove to an undisclosed location and transferred her to a special transit van configured for medical use. This van then drove to the SWA Compound medical center.

As to the ambulance, it was involved in a staged rollover accident. The driver and attendant, both of whom were Section 2 operatives, set a charge that detonated the oxygen cylinders aboard which consumed the vehicle completely. The Polizia Stradale performed a perfunctory investigation and closed the case as a tragic road accident caused by inclement weather. Kumari Deleroux Rosier was declared legally dead and formal letters of condolence were sent to her uncle and the Japanese care facility that was caring for her mother. She never read it, however, as she would not regain consciousness and would die in 2007 from complications of an infection.

With Kumari officially dead, she became "Jeanne Biche" to Section 2 medical and underwent a complete medical examination. Doctor Bianchi called Michele in a week after her arrival and provided a status report.

"We now know why she's remained in a minimally conscious state," Bianchi stated. "I expect the Spanish did, as well, but chose not to address it."

"Why would they do that?" Michele demanded.

"Her body is...well, it's a wreck, frankly. The barotrauma from the explosion was excessive, likely well into the double-digits of PSI. Her heart was slammed into her ribcage and suffered bruising and her gastrointestinal tract was damaged. Her left eardrum had been ruptured and her right severely damaged, though both have subsequently repaired themselves so her hearing should be normal. She suffered a collapsed lung, which also led to pneumomediastinum. The Spanish were able to re-inflate it via tube thoracostomy, however she did suffer acute respiratory distress syndrome from it and that did a number on her internal organs.

"Anyway, with that amount of damage the pain she would experience if fully conscious would be immense. The extent of her damage limits the amount of general anesthesia they – and we – could administer. They could put her in a medically induced coma, but whoever handled her treatment must have a background in neurology because not doing so actually worked to her advantage, managing the pain without risking damage to her brain. Therefore, at least for the time being we're going to leave her that way," Bianchi finished.

"Can you fix her?" Michele asked.

"Yes. We'd need to go by stages as her condition is too delicate to perform all the surgeries in the normal span, but we should be able to stabilize her over the next few months and assist her body to repair as much of itself as possible while reducing the stress on her organs," Bianchi said.

"Thank you, Doctor," Michele said.

Michele formally adopted "Jeanne" and as her features were predominately Japanese, he chose the name Kara because it sounded Japanese, though he chose to pronounce it as CAR-Ah as opposed to the common CARE-ah. And in recognition of her French side, he chose the middle name of Michelle.

The doctors performed a series of surgeries to stabilize Kara as the medical team drew up proposed augmentation plans for review and approval. The staff then determined Kara's "Compatibility Index". This index determined how well someone would adapt to the surgeries and conditioning necessary to create a cyborg. The scale ran from zero to 1000 and Kara scored a 905, which meant she was over 90% compatible to the procedure. In addition to Kara, a 16-year old Russian ballerina named Elizabetta Baranovskaya had both been identified as having very high Compatibility Indexes and they would become the first two Second Generation cyborgs.

Michele was present when Kara opened her eyes for the first time since she'd looked at him when she was loaded into ambulance some eight months prior. Nobody had believed she'd last eight weeks, much less eight months and Michele was anxious about what the long convalescence might have done to her mind.

She asked Michele who he was and, remembering the Japanese word she'd said to him in Madrid, he said he was her uncle. She remarked that he didn't look French, and he replied that neither did she. She laughed at that, and he found it to be a wonderful sound. She then asked for her own name, as she could not remember.

"That's a pretty name," Kara replied after Michele had told her.

"Fitting for a pretty woman," Michele replied, Kara blushing in response.

The medical team ran batteries of tests on Kara, led by the staff Neurologist, Doctor Marianna Onofrio. They determined that no brain damage had occurred and that her memories were still intact under the temporary hypnotic suppression.

It was necessary to "re-write" her memories to deal with the fact that she was no longer Kumari, but Kara, and Michele demanded an active role in this process, as he didn't want what he felt happened to Angelica to be repeated with Kara. He worked with Doctor Bianchi and

the rest of the medical staff to tailor her hypnotherapy along very special lines.

Specific knowledge of her family would be replaced with a more general knowledge. She would know she had a father and mother who loved her, but they had died years prior. All memories of Madrid would be erased, as would those of her boyfriend and other friends that Michele and Public Safety had been able to uncover. Her love of astronomy and airplanes would remain, as would her interest in computers, cooking and football. She would also be made natively fluent in Italian and her conversational Spanish was improved to match her literary fluency in the language.

This process was continued into the winter in careful stages and Kara was told that she had suffered a head injury that resulted in temporary memory loss and that she was just naturally remembering things. She also underwent physical therapy to counteract the extended period of immobility, but as the Spanish doctors had feared, the damage to her leg muscles, bones and joints was such that she could only walk with braces and crutches.

For Christmas Day, Michele made her favorite meal at the time and they enjoyed it together in her room. The staff then dressed her in warm clothes and Michele took her out in a wheelchair to see the stars in person for the first time in almost a year. The snow started to fall and Michele moved to take her back inside, but she asked to stay so he grabbed a huge umbrella and they sat together on a bench under a lamp and watched the snow slowly fall around them. When she fell asleep next to him, he picked her up and carried her back to her hospital bed.

"Welcome back, signore Pagani," Ferro Milani greeted Michele in the lobby of the Administration building.

"Thank you, signorina Milani."

They went into an office where a young woman with blonde hair was working in front of a computer.

"How's Angelica doing, Priscilla?" Michele called out.

"Michele!" she exclaimed. "Long time no see! You feeling guilty about not visiting Angie and decided to come and atone?" she added,

inserting the emotional knife. Priscilla was very fond of Angelica and tended to treat her as her own little sister, as opposed to Marco's cyborg assassin. As such, she was not too forgiving of people who upset Angie.

"I've been drafted, actually," Michele replied.

"Drafted? But you're already in the Reserves," Priscilla said, confused.

"Signore Pagani has joined Section 2. He and Kara Michelle will become a *fratello*," Ferro informed her.

"Really? That's great! Angie will be thrilled to have you around. She still thinks of you, even if you never visit her," Priscilla said, twisting said emotional knife. "Perhaps getting a cyborg of your own is divine justice."

"Or maybe just a sign of bad karma," Michele deadpanned.

"Have a seat and we'll get all the records and paperwork updated," Priscilla said.

"I'll leave you in her hands," Ferro stated. "Ring me when you're done, Priscilla."

"Yes, ma'am!"

When Priscilla had finished she contacted Ferro who returned to pick-up Michele.

"The surgeries will take over a week to complete, both because of her condition and the nature of the modifications. Your tenure with Public Safety will end this Friday and then you have been granted a week of vacation. So your first day of work with Section 2 will be a week from Monday. If Kara gets out earlier, we will contact you."

"Very well. I will see you then," Michele said and headed for the parking lot and his car.

In May 2005, Michele pulled into the compound parking lot and headed for the Administrative Annex. Ferro was waiting for him when he checked in at Reception.

"Good morning, Michele," she greeted. She handed him a cup. "Café mocha, two shots espresso and four pumps of chocolate with one pump of raspberry," she noted.

"Impressive," Michele noted.

"Not really. The cantina barista says you order it from her that way every morning," she said with a smile. "Since you're familiar with most of the facility, I thought I would show you the dormitories and the cyborg's dining room. I'll also show you your office."

Michele nodded and he followed Ferro. Their first stop was the office, which looked pretty much identical to the one Michele had left.

"Victor, you remember Michele Pagani, don't you?" Ferro asked.

"Yes, good to see you again. Welcome to the club," Victor Hillshire said.

"Thank you. How is..." he searched his memory..."Triela, is it not?"

"Correct. And she is fine, thank you. I promise next time you meet her she will be friendlier than the first time," he added with a forced chuckle.

"Giuseppe Croce also shares this office," Ferro said, pointing to a third desk. "He and his brother Jean are on vacation in Sicily at the moment along with their cyborgs, Henrietta and Rico."

Michele saw that his belongings had already been transferred from his old office, so he'd unpack once he got back.

Their next stop was the handler's dormitory. While they all had their own housing off complex, the SWA assigned each handler a dorm room for when they needed to be close to their cyborgs in preparation for a deployment or just if they worked late.

Next was the cyborg's dormitory. Kara's room was on the top floor with an eastern exposure towards the mountains and the forest. There were two beds present and a basic wardrobe and desk.

"We have found that having a roommate helps the girls adjust a bit better than being by themselves. It also helps foster a sense of

camaraderie," Ferro noted. "There are five other girls in process, so Kara should have a roommate soon after she's activated."

"That sounds great," Michele noted.

"You're welcome to furnish your own and your cyborg's dorms as you see fit at your own expense, or you can draw from storage. I have to warn you that this facility was last used as a boarding school so the furnishings are very bland and basic."

Ferro showed him where the common bathroom was as well as the main shower facilities and then the cyborg's private dining room. There was no prohibition about them using the main cafeteria and some did with their handlers. However, if their handlers were off-site or otherwise indisposed, the private dining room often worked out better for them. Michele followed Ferro back to the main offices and he settled in for the first day's work.

Michele's desk-phone rang and on the other end was Dr. Bianchi, informing him that Kara had just woken up. He locked his computer and went over to the medical center.

"Good morning, Kara," he greeted as he walked in.

"Good morning, Michele," she replied. She was sitting up in bed, dressed in pajamas.

"And how are you feeling?"

"A bit tired," Kara admitted.

"Well that is to be expected. The doctors say you need to rest for the next few days, which gives me some time to discuss with you furnishings and such. I have some presents for you," he added, hoisting the large bag he had brought in with him.

"You're like Santa Claus!" she exclaimed with a laugh.

He pulled out a box for an Apple PowerBook G4. He knew she'd used Apple computers when she was Kumari and Michele himself preferred them.

"I also bought you a number of programs, as well," he noted.

"Suteki!" she exclaimed.

Michele placed the second present on her lap – a dark grey case. Kara unlatched it and removed a pistol.

"Can you identify it?" he asked.

"Heckler & Koch. P2000 series. From the size and weight, I am guessing the P2000SK sub-compact." The magazine was in the case so she pulled back the slide and verified there was no round in the chamber. She released the slide and cocked the weapon. She then aimed it at the floor and pulled the trigger.

"Heavy trigger pull. The V2 option?" she asked.

"Correct on all counts," Michele said, earning him a smile from Kara. He knew they programmed a slew of weapons information into the girls, but it was impressive to see it in action.

"One more," Michele said, removing the P2000SK case and replacing it with a larger and heavier one. Kara opened that one and examined the contents for a few moments.

"You like HK, don't you," she noted.

"When you care enough to use the very best," Michele replied.

"XM8 Assault Rifle. I see parts for all four configurations sans the M203 grenade launcher."

"Well done," Michele said. "In general you will use the compact carbine mode as a PDW, but I like the flexibility of being able to use a single weapon in a variety of roles. That way your proficiency will carry over."

"Understood."

"Meal time," a female orderly said as she brought in a tray. She removed the cover to reveal a bowl of what looked like white yogurt.

"What's this?" Michele asked.

"White yogurt," the orderly replied. "Enriched with a number of vitamins and other additives the cyborgs need for right after surgery."

Both Kara and Michele made a sour face.

"When can she have normal food?" Michele asked.

"Usually within 24 hours. We'll do oatmeal tomorrow morning for breakfast and then pasta for lunch. If she does okay with that, then she's released and can have the normal fare."

"I'm going to make you homemade *fettuccine al burro e panna*," Michele informed Kara. "No partner of mine is going to live off yogurt."

"You cook?" Kara asked.

"Darn well," Michele replied with a smile as he patted her hand. He collected the "presents" back into the bag and rose. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

"Sleep well. I will see you in the morning for breakfast," he said.

There were three scheduled meal services at the compound. Since staff tended to work odd hours, breakfast was offered from 06:00 to 08:00, lunch from 11:00 to 13:00 and dinner from 17:00 to 19:00. For the cyborgs, meals were delivered to their dining room at 07:00, 12:00 and 18:00. The kitchen staff themselves worked in two shifts. A permanent cooking staff prepared breakfast and lunch every day. Dinner was handled by three teams working in rotation Sunday through Friday with Saturday off (when no dinner service was provided).

Everyone was welcome to use the kitchen on Saturday or off-hours to prepare their own meals. Michele approached the head of the kitchen team and asked if he could use two burners to make the *fettuccine al burro e panna* for Kara once they completed the lunch service and received permission to do so. Michele's sauce contained both a shot of fine brandy and the finest Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and cream. He also liked to mix in a bit of Asiago and Romano cheeses.

As a thank you to the kitchen staff, Michele made a huge portion. He prepared Kara's and his plate and then invited the staff to enjoy the rest. Michele then headed to the hospital wing.

He removed the warming covers from the plates and put one before Kara on a tray over her bed and set the other on a table nearby. He cracked open a bottle of 1998 Aglianico del Vulture Riserva from Donato D'Angelo and poured two glasses.

Kara tried a bite of the pasta and moaned with pleasure. She quickly put another forkful in her mouth, followed by a third, which she then washed down with a sip of wine.

"This is amazing," she complimented. "So simple, yet so delicious. *Very nouvelle cuisine.*"

"Thank you," Michele replied. "I was trained in French *cuisine classique* and I do love the style of the food, but I could see why Gault and Millau rebelled against it in the 1970s and I adjusted my style to be represent the *nouvelle cuisine* aesthetic."

Kara could only mumble, her mouth full of fettuccine which caused Michele to smile.

Maybe this will turn out alright, after all, he thought to himself.

The End