

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 Kara and Michele are original to myself. The character of Monty is original to Alfisti / wraith11. The character of John Darne is original to Officer_Charon.

"Remember Then"

A *Gunslinger Girl* Original Story by Chris Wallace

SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMMISSARY LUNCHTIME

SRT Trooper John Darne walked into the spacious main commissary and proceeded to the order station. While an Italian agency, its staff was international enough that the lunch menu featured more than just pasta options and he settled for a *cotoletta a orecchio di elefante* as the breaded veal "elephant ear cutlet" was the closest thing on offer to the breaded pork tenderloin he'd enjoyed back in the United States. Swiping his ID badge at the pay station (which deducted the cost of the meal from his next paycheck) he headed for the rows of tables, looking for one that was open.

He noticed a figure waving at him and identified it as the perky blonde intelligence analyst, Priscilla. Also sitting at the table with their backs to him was another woman, who he assumed was Olga, and a man who, based on the cut and quality of his suit jacket, was most likely Michele Pagani. His guesses were confirmed as he came around and took a seat next to Priscilla.

"Good afternoon, all," the American greeted as he settled into his chair.

"Save me from these two," Priscilla pleaded. "They're boring me to tears with their talk of silencers."

"Well, I definitely can't add to your pain. In our line of work, we don't bother with sound suppression," John replied with a grin.

"You're looking a little green around the gills, John," Michele noted. "Giorgio running you guys ragged on the course?"

"No, that was fine. It was the ride back. I drew short straw and was in the vehicle with Scarponi."

Michele nodded sagely while the two women looked confused. A native from Sicily, Moro Scarponi was as mad a fan of the FIA World Rally Championship as Allison McDonnell or the Loeb *fratello* and could quote stats off his head to anyone who cared to listen to them. When behind the wheel of the agency van, he was known to attack sweeping bends and tight curves as if in mortal combat against a stopwatch.

"I noticed that you let Kara drive a good deal," John stated to Michele.

"That is because he is not such good driver," Olga replied with a smile.

"I'm a perfectly fine driver," Michele retorted.

"Ah, but remember Saint Petersburg?" Olga asked and Michele winced.

"Oh god, they're going to talk about the Cold War again," Priscilla lamented.

"Swapping war stories?" John asked.

"Oh, these two have a history together," Priscilla replied.

Monty Blacker appeared beside Michele and set her tray down next to his. "You had my interest. Now you have my attention," she noted as she took a seat.

Kara returned shortly thereafter, flummoxed to find her spot now taken. John tilted his head to his right and Kara settled down beside him.

"*Arigato.*"

"Dontouchmymoustache," John said, intentionally butchering the pronunciation of "*doitashimashite*" and bringing a smile to Kara's lips.

"And for the record, I was out-gunned in Leningrad, not out-driven," Michele said.

"Your VAZ-2106 was based on Fiat 124 from here in Italy. It was even rally car!" Olga exclaimed.

"Hey, the Fiat 124 was a pretty decent car in its day – that day being the 1970s I might note. But when you double the thickness – and the weight – of the body panels and replace the steel disc brakes with drum units – *aluminum* drum brakes–"

"Aluminum is lighter than steel and are you not always saying that lower un-sprung weight better?"

"Making something that converts kinetic energy to heat out of a material with a low Melting Point is rather counter-productive. Anyway, my brakes were fading from the moment I pulled out into traffic and she had twice the number of cylinders and like three times the horsepower."

"My GAZ-24 was much heavier vehicle."

"Mine cleared 1000 kilos and it was considered a compact car! Between that weight and milquetoast engine, Laika could have out-run me in the quarter mile," Michele hypothesized, referring to the female dog launched into space aboard Sputnik 2.

"We were much more evenly matched in Schwedt, and yet I bested you then, too!" Olga crowed.

"You tried to run us off the road," Michele accused.

"It was little nudge," Olga insisted.

"I was in a Trabant 601!" Michele exclaimed.

"So?"

"It was made of pressed cotton!"

"Wait! Seriously?" John asked.

"He exaggerates," Olga stated. "The body panels were made of Duroplast which was resin plastic reinforced with cotton fibers much like American fiberglass, but better."

"More like cardboard considering how it caved in when you plowed into me," Michele recalled. "It also knocked the rear suspension out of alignment, which sent me into a spin."

"You should have held it," Olga noted.

"I was lucky to keep the damn thing off its roof. The suspension being made of recycled bed springs didn't help."

"I've done better with worse. Perhaps you are not cut out for driver job? That is why you train Kara here?"

"I enjoy driving," Kara replied, defensively.

"What happened after the spin?" Gattonero asked, startling everyone at the table as none of them had noticed her arrival.

"I recovered and lost her in the Nationalpark Unteres Odertal that ran along the Oder river that divided the GDR from Poland, which had just elected a non-Communist government. We crossed over into Poland and proceeded to the city of Szczecin where I handed over my passenger to the CIA."

"So, you two were spies?"

"Michele was spy. I was part of KGB Seventh Directorate," Olga replied. "Our mission was to maintain surveillance of Soviet nationals and foreigners. When the Soviet Union ended, I came to Italy to work in Embassy as driver in SVR."

"That's wild that you faced off against each other not once, but twice," John stated.

"Three times," Olga noted.

"Really?" Michele replied and Olga nodded.

"Our first time was Gorky Park," Olga stated. "Petrov," she added when Michele didn't register cognition.

"You were the one following me on Krymsky Bridge?" Michele asked and Olga nodded.

"Gorky Park! I love that movie!" Gattonero stated and everyone stared blankly at her.

"What? William Hurt is cool!" she added. She turned to Michele. "Can we maybe show it during one of your history classes?"

"Shush," Monty demanded. "Who is this Petrov character?"

"Daniil Petrov," Michele replied. "An officer in the KGB First Chief Directorate who supported industrial espionage operations in Western Europe, especially in Italy, which had strong communist leanings in the northern industrial areas since the end of World War 2."

"And yet Britain gets all the flack for its Communists," Monty noted.

"Well we knew where ours were, so we kept an eye on them and limited the amount of mischief they could do. And with the election of Enrico Berlinguer in 1969, the official Italian Communist Party gradually moved away from the Soviet Union and their form of communism in favor of a more Euro-centric flavor that took strong hold in Italy, Spain and France. By the end of the 1970s, these 'Eurocommunists' were actively undermining Soviet intelligence efforts in these countries.

"That being said, they still had friends in the General Confederation of Labour trade union and this allowed them access to Italian industrial technical information. The Fiat 124 being resurrected as the VAZ-2106 being an example of this. Daniil Petrov's position allowed him to know what programs the Soviets were targeting and gave us the luxury to selectively neuter the more critical attempts while allowing others to succeed so as to not tip off the Soviets that they had been counter-penetrated."

"I almost had you when you did that dead drop," Olga noted.

"Petrov had a dead drop between the Gorky Park Museum and Observatory," Michele explained. "I was not part of the usual detail, so I was so busy watching my usual KGB shadow and trying to find the place that I didn't notice you until I was just about ready to collect," Michele noted.

"I lost sight of you around the Gazebo," Olga noted. "I was rushing to reacquire and drew attention to myself."

"Well it worked out for me. With the local *militsiya* hassling you I was able to collect the drop and get back to the Metro and make my way to the Embassy."

"What was the Cold War was like?" Kara asked after lunch as they walked back to the main building.

"I guess the closest approximation would be the current 'Years of Blue'," Michele noted. "To most Italians, the conflict between the Five Republics and the Government has no direct impact on their daily lives, but they're aware it is happening and there is a concern it could escalate to a larger and more violent stage."

"It was like that during the 'Cold War'. I don't think most people believed there would be a nuclear engagement between the US and USSR, but that was cold comfort to all the people whose lives were affected by the regional 'brush fires' that were spawned. I admit that over a decade since it happened, I'm still surprised it actually ended."

"Why was it so surprising?"

"You have to understand that the Iron Curtain was effectively a geographical part of Europe, like a major river or a mountain range. It fundamentally affected the dynamics of the movement of people and goods across the continent for almost half a century. It was like waking up one morning and finding out that the Alps had disappeared. Where before you could only cross between countries at certain points, now you could just walk across wherever. Europe had not seen a revolutionary wave like it since the mid-1840s and it ushered in a new era of economic and social prosperity for the entire continent."

"Do you miss it?" Kara asked.

"No," Michele replied. "There was a sense of adventure operating in the Eastern Bloc under 'Moscow Rules' and while I was not a resident spy, I did have official cover and therefore diplomatic protection if things had ever gone badly so the worse that would have happened is me being sent back to Italy."

"Are you going to take Gattonero up on her suggestion to show 'Gorky Park'?"

"I think I might. And I might invite Olga as a guest speaker."