

*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.*

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## **"Thousand Smiles"**

A *Gunslinger Girl* Original Story by Kiskaloo

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It was approaching noon on Thursday, May 11 as Michele maneuvered the black 1949 Alfa Romeo 6C 2500 Super Sport cabriolet onto the grounds of the Brescia Trade Fair, which was serving as the Paddock for the 2006 Mille Miglia.

Italian for "Thousand Miles", it was originally an open-road endurance race that ran from 1927 to 1940 and then again from 1947 to 1957. As a race it had ended in 1957 and became a rally until 1961. In 1977, it was revived as the *Mille Miglia Storica* as a three-day parade on public roads for cars manufactured on or before 1957. The Storica followed the route of the 1954-1957 Mille Miglia, which were all public roads. An extensive police presence ensured that the competitors had the right of way on the roads.

Michele and the Alfa's owner had run the car in the 2004 Mille Miglia and the owner graciously loaned it to Michele for he and Kara to use this year. They underwent administrative and technical checks and received their event number and road-book. Once the paperwork was completed, they visited the Mille Miglia Museum.

They took the shuttle to their hotel and changed into evening attire for mass in the cathedral at 17:00 and then killed time before the Gala Dinner at 21:00. At 22:00 they took the shuttle back to their hotel and went to bed, though Kara kept Michele up for another hour discussing the route.

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After breakfast they drove the Maserati to the Piazza dell Loggia for the formal "sealing ceremony" and to allow the public an opportunity to view the assembled cars. It was a tradition that school children along the route were given the day off during the Friday of the Mille Miglia so they filled the square and lined the roads.

At 10:00 the bishop gave his blessing to the contestants and lunch dinner was held at the Museum at 17:30. At 19:30 the first of 375 cars

started to roll out in 20-second intervals for the city of Ferrara via Verona and Ostiglia. The route ran 191km and was strictly timed to take a specific period to complete. There were multiple Time Checks and if you arrived before or after that time you were penalized points.

Michele had Kara drive as much of the route as possible a week prior in the Gallardo, but there were many areas that were normally closed to vehicular traffic that were open to the Mille Miglia. Still, she felt comfortable she could maintain a steady time and they had portable GPS and race chronometers to help. The sun had set by the time it was their turn to go. Kara moved the column-mounted gear lever into first and slowly motored forward as the bishop sprinkled them with holy water. The 2433 cc straight-six motor growled as they pulled out onto the circuit.

The drive through the night was spellbinding, the streets lined with people and the buildings and streets all lit up for the event. The burgundy leather seats had flat cushions and backs, but they were thickly padded and the car's suspension was forgiving of rough roads.

Between the GPS and the chronometers, they minimized the points lost at the time checks. They pulled into Ferrara and parked the car in the appropriate area. They then retired to their hotel room for the evening for they had an early morning.

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After a continental breakfast, Michele and Kara returned to their car to prepare for departure. Their excellent timing had moved them up the charts so they were towards the front when the first cars started rolling at 08:00 for the second-longest leg: 523km through Gambettola, the Republic of San Marino, Gola del Furlo, Assisi, Spoleto and on to Rome. This leg was planned to take just under twelve hours to complete, including a lunch break in the commune of Sansepolcro.

The segment from Gambettola to San Marino was quite challenging, even at the leisurely 50km/h limit. The road had many bends and curves and they drove through the centers of communes and villages that were normally off-limits to vehicular traffic. The mid-May weather was beautiful as they drove, though as they climbed into the mountains the clouds descended and it began to get colder. Fortunately, it neither rained nor snowed so they could keep the top down, though they cranked up the heater.

They lost a bit more time on this longer stage, but still arrived in Rome very close to their expected time. While Michele mostly enjoyed the landscape unwinding around them, Kara's focus was on the driving, both because she loved the feel of the Alfa and because her competitive nature compelled her to do as best as possible. The arrival in Rome was a staged event to allow spectators to see the cars as they drove through the city's streets to a garage in the Villa Borghese where they would spend the night under guard until tomorrow's final stage.

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The shuttle services from the hotels started at 05:00 so most competitors were already up and ready to go by then. Kara's driving had moved them into the top 25 so they departed before 07:00. The final stage ran from dawn till dusk, travelling through Ronciglione, Radicofani, Siena, Firenze, Passo della Raticosa, Bologna and Cremona before ending back in Brescia. In addition to the main drive, there were five extra time trial stages varying from one to four kilometers in length. The commune of Ronciglione held a huge Saturday carnival for the Mille Miglia which required extra care while driving, as did the narrow streets of Radicofani, which were just wide enough to allow the cars to fit through.

Despite the laid-back pace, the *Mille Miglia Storica* was an endurance race and climbing the steep hills from Cianti towards Siena stressed all the components of the car. It was here that the largest number of breakdowns happened, but the little Alfa soldiered on without incident. With 71kW of engine power, Kara had kept her foot down a good portion of the climb to maintain the pace so they fueled the car as well as themselves at Monte Riggioni.

It was twilight as they approached Brescia and night-fall by the time they rode down the Viale Venezia and the Grand Avenue Prince Alezzi to the cheers of the crowds lining both routes. They pulled in to the paddock around 23:00, tired but invigorated from the drive. They had dinner with a few other contestants and Kara talked animatedly about the drive so far and her experiences.

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The Award Ceremony began at 11:00 in the Grand Theatre. The winners were *Storica* veterans and this was the eighth *Storica* win and the second for their BMW 328 MM Coupè, which had also won the 1940 race.

Thanks to Kara's determination, they'd moved from 123<sup>rd</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> overall, which not only impressed Michele, but most everyone else since Kara was a Mille Miglia rookie. They were also the fifth-ranked amongst Alfa Romeos, ninth-ranked amongst Sports Cars and Kara was the second-ranked female driver and the top-ranked Japanese driver (there had been six other Japanese drivers, one of whom was female).

On the drive back to Milan, Kara sat in the passenger seat, admiring the trophy in her lap.

"I am immensely proud of you, Kara," Michele said. "Your performance was amazing. Did you have fun?"

"Oh yes," Kara replied, looking at him with a huge smile. "It was everything I had hoped and more. We're going to need an older car next year, however, so we can get a better starting spot and coefficient to maximize our points. And I think we should bike through the communes and villages with a tape measure, since I am sure I lost some time worrying about clearances. And just knowing the course now should help."

"Kara, the point is to have a good time. To relax and admire the countryside and the architecture and engage the fans along the route."

"Sure, sure," Kara said, but Michele could tell her mind was on doing even better next year. He merely smiled. *As long as she was happy...*

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**The End**