

*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 characters of Danilo Olivetti and C. Raych are original to Alfisti.*

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## "TŌKYŌ DRIFT"

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

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**ROPPONGI HILLS MORI TOWER  
ROPPONGI, MINATO, TOKYO  
THURSDAY EVENING**

Gerino Badoer, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Italian Republic to Japan, thanked the hosts of the reception party held for the opening of a new exhibition on the Italian Futurist movement at the Mori Art Museum and then stepped into the elevator with his aide. The Hitachi elevator quickly and silently lowered them the 52 floors from the museum to the lobby and they stepped out into the cold night air. A light rain was falling from leaden grey skies as the aide opened an umbrella, holding it over the Ambassador, who cinched his overcoat tighter and lowered the brim of his fedora to protect his face as they waited for their official car to arrive.

"Call the residence and see what's holding up our ride," Badoer instructed the aide. He was not even supposed to have been at the event, however the Japanese Foreign Minister wanted to bend his ear regarding a recent trade negotiation and asked if they could meet at the event.

"Yes, sir," the aide said and looked down, rummaging in his pocket for his smartphone, which he promptly dropped onto the pavement as soon as he extracted it.

"Good thing you went for the heavy protective cover," Badoer noted with a chuckle, taking the umbrella from the aide to allow him to stoop down and recover his phone.

The aide was checking the screen for damage when he heard the sound of a heavy impact followed by the Ambassador grunting and then the sharp crack of a car exhaust backfiring. He looked up to see Badoer stumble backwards, the umbrella tumbling from his hand as he

fell backwards onto his butt. A mix of surprise and pain spread across the Ambassador's face, which was draining of color into an ashen state.

"Ambassador? Ambassador! Gerino!" the aide yelled as Badoer slowly collapsed onto his back. Thinking the Ambassador was having a heart attack, the aide ripped the upper part of the coat away and recoiled in shock and horror at the spreading splotch of blood soaking the white dress shirt crimson as the Ambassador's heart gave it's last feeble contractions before stopping.

"Somebody call emergency services!" he screamed to the passersby, and while they could not understand his Italian, the urgency in his voice made his request clear and tens of phones started dialing 119.

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**ABOARD AIR FRANCE F-GSPZ  
FRIDAY EVENING**

The teenaged girl seated in Suite 1L in the La Première cabin at the front of the Boeing 777-228ER picked at the roasted fillet of Scottish beef with Morel sauce as she looked out the window at the lights of Scandinavia passing 11,000 meters beneath as the plane followed the northern track from Paris Charles de Gaulle to Narita International Airport.

The pinpoint lighting from the overhead service unit highlighted the Asian facial features inherited from her Japanese mother. It also accented the various shades of brown in the straight hair that cascaded over her shoulders about one-third down her torso, this contributed from her French father. Tall for a Japanese woman at 168 centimeters, her "three sizes" of an 82cm bust, a 56cm waist and 84cm hips gave her a figure most men found as attractive as her face. Her outfit of a Gucci dress in a burgundy wool-blend cady with half-sleeves and pleated waist matched with Christian Louboutin knee boots in burgundy leather, 70mm heels and the signature red soles highlighted that figure and befitted a traveller in a premium cabin.

Kara Michelle Delaroux's disinterest in the meal on the tray table in front of her did not arise from the preparation, which was based on a recipe by acclaimed chef Joël Robuchon, whose dozen restaurants held a combined 29 Michelin Guide stars. Her attention, and her brown pupils in almond-shaped eyes, constantly shifted to the man seated

two suites to her left in the First Class cabin.

Dressed in an impeccably tailored suit of 200-twist black-dyed Australian merino wool from the famed Italian atelier Kiton and black calfskin Salvatore Ferragamo Italia S.p.A. Oxfords, Michele Pagani looked the part of a corporate tycoon even if he'd never set foot in a Board Room. His short dark hair looked somewhat unkempt from a distance, but on closer inspection showed careful coifing to create the shape. Blue eyes sparkled with good cheer as he ate dinner and discussed the upcoming opera season at the Teatro alla Scala with the raven-haired girl who sat across from him on the ottoman of his La Première suite.

Claes turned her head toward Kara and her violet eyes narrowed behind her wire-rim glasses. She looked the part of the daughter of a wealthy man in an outfit from the British luxury fashion house Burberry consisting of a cotton polo with a button-down collar in the signature check trim and the Burberry Knight logo on the chest; a pleated wool kilt also in signature Burberry check; and black leather riding boots with almond toe, 25mm heel and leather straps with burnished-gold buckles.

Michele's gaze followed and he nodded his head towards her with a smile. Kara smiled wanly in return and settled back into the wide leather seat with a quiet sigh, resigned for the moment in accepting that a day that had started poorly would not be ending in triumph...

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**CYBORG WAREHOUSE  
SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND  
FRIDAY MORNING**

Kara involuntarily jumped in her bed as the door to her room crashed open and the overhead light snapped on, throwing her into a state of full wakefulness.

"On your feet, C. Raych!" a male voice bellowed and as she buried her head into her Collie dog plushie, Kara could hear the other bed creak as her roommate threw back the covers and rolled out onto her feet.

"Downstairs! Ten minutes!" the male voice barked. Kara heard a heavy bag hit the floor and then the door slammed closed.

"Sorry," C. Raych apologized to Kara as she went to her wardrobe and removed from it a pair of black cargo pants and a short-sleeved black undershirt.

"I had to get up soon, anyway," Kara lied as she pulled back the covers and sat up on the edge of the bed, stretching and yawning.

"Range practice again?"

"Yes," Raych replied as she quickly dressed and slipped on her combat boots. Her handler was determined that Raych would earn her Verifica della Competenza Operativa as soon as possible and he drilled her mercilessly on all of the topics covered in the test performed on every second generation cyborg prior to them being allowed to travel off-compound and partake in active missions.

"Over here," Kara instructed and Raych walked to the other side of the bed and presented first one foot, then the other, to Kara, who quickly and expertly tied the laces of her combat boots around her calves, leaving the top eyelets undone. While not "regulation", they were less likely to come loose and considering how difficult Raych found it to tie her laces, Kara figured every bit helped. She gave her roommate a thumbs-up

"Thank you, Kara," Raych said as she set her hair into the usual topknot before grabbing her pistol case from the wardrobe. She dashed through the door with a wave, the sound of her boots echoing down the hall.

Standard practice was to pair cyborgs, and as one of the first six second-generation cyborgs went active, Kara should have been paired with a sister. However, with Monty not assigned a room, Kara became the "odd one out". While the extra room being a single tenant offered had been nice, Kara envied the camaraderie those with roommates experienced.

The first trepidations about finally having a roommate occurred with the initial appearance of the handler, Danilo Olivetti, two week's prior. The stocky, shaven-head handler with a trim beard in a sharply cut black-on-black suit and clipped speech pattern made quite a first impression on Kara – an impression not entirely positive.

The second set arrived the following day with his cyborg, C. Raych. A couple of years younger than Kara, she was of similar height but also

possessed of a more compact build than her second-generation peers. Her handler applied his monochromatic aesthetic to all of her clothes, keeping the style simple and the combinations minimal. Her handler's obsessiveness with being prepared had implanted on her own psyche and while Kara's "neat-freak" inclinations kept her on the good side of Ferro's "White Glove of Doom", C. Raych took fastidiousness to a new level. While two cyborgs occupied the room on the top floor, a casual viewer would be excused if they assumed only one lived therein for only Kara's side of the room displayed knickknacks on the desk and the shelves filled with books.

Fortunately, C. Raych proved to be a considerate roommate and showed flashes of vivacity when around her peers during their gatherings in the room Petrushka and Fleccia shared. However, she was not one to take the initiative nor did she at times show the proper level of common sense when roped in by some of the more rambunctious cyborgs and their schemes. On the latter part, Kara had to admit to herself she sometimes did not, either.

Kara prepared to return to bed when her iPod Touch chimed at her. She pulled it off the shelf, sliding to unlock it and opening the FaceTime application.

"We've been summoned to the Palazzo Chigi at seven for breakfast with the PM. Meet me at my office in 45 minutes, please," her handler's face ordered.

"Yes, sir," Kara replied, ending the call. She rose and exchanged her pajamas for a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt, grabbed a towel, and headed for the showers.

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**PALAZZO CHIGI  
PIAZZA COLONNA**

Shadows and light played along the various curves and angles of the metallic green Ferrari F12berlinetta as it prowled the Via dell' Impresa in the III rione of Rome. Kara turned Maranello's latest Grand Tourer off the street, past the security gate and through the colonnades into the central courtyard of the residence and office of the Prime Minister of Italy. As she put the transmission into park and set the hand brake, she noted the clock presented the time as 6:55 AM.

Michele closed the leather cover on his iPad, modern technology having allowed him to replace a briefcase of paper with an aluminum and glass sheet of electrons. It was no secret that Michele hated to drive in Rome traffic and he handed the keys to Kara as much as he possibly could on the grounds he found city-driving "too stressful", though Kara found her conditioning didn't exactly reduce the stress of piloting multi-hundred-thousand-Euro supercars with V12s producing half a megawatt of power along narrow cobblestone streets amongst swarms of scooters, motorcycles, city cars and pedestrians. She preferred the open *autostrada* where she could just put her right foot down and let the kilometers unwind and sometimes envied her sister Allison McDonnell, whose focus was on high-speed pursuit and mobile operations and therefore navigated through the traffic like a barracuda through a school of herring.

The *fratello* were escorted into the building and climbed the grand staircase, the red carpet that ran down the middle contrasting with the grey marble of the stairs. Marble statues stood guard to either side at the base of the staircase and an empty sarcophagus at the top held a collection of leafy plants. The walls and ceiling were unadorned white plaster, reflecting the light cast by hanging bronze fixtures.

In contrast to the sterile grand staircase, the Gallery Deti was richly decorated with frescoes of biblical subjects and heraldic figures. Named after a cardinal who resided in the room from 1626 to 1630, the ceiling was dominated by three great gilded frescos – the center rectangular one depicting the creation of Adam and Eve flanked by two circular frescoes showing the two original humans committing the Original Sin and their subsequent expulsion from Paradise. Four large wall sconces cast soft light along the walls, adding to the filtered sunlight seeping through sheer curtains drawn over the two doors that led out to a balcony that wrapped around the corner of the building and overlooked the Piazza Colonna and the Via del Corso, respectively. The furniture predominately dated back to the Late Baroque and early Rococo eras. An oak refectory table dominated the center of the room, surrounded by four master chairs, a loveseat and sofa covered in soft moss-green velvet.

Michele and Kara sat beside each other on the loveseat opposite the couch, upon which sat Renato Pisano, Prime Minister of the Italian Republic and Monica Maria Petris, Minister of Defense. To their left (and the Pagani *fratello's* right), sat Minister of Justice Giovanna Lombardi and on the opposite side sat Foreign Minister Enrico Pantano and a woman Michele did not recognize.

A staffer placed a demitasse of espresso along with a silver tray of various *biscotti* before each of them and then stepped away.

"As has been splashed all over the news the past 12 hours, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Italian Republic to Japan was murdered outside the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. We believe this was not a terrorist incident, but a deliberate assassination," Pisano stated gravely.

"In recent months, we've received strong intelligence that Padania have started working with the Japanese *yakuza* in moving methamphetamines and counterfeit pharmaceuticals smuggled from North Korea," Giovanna reported. "We launched an investigation and determined that the Ambassador has been importing small arms and counterfeit versions of Italian luxury goods acquired from China via the Chinese Triads active in Tuscany.

"We at first thought Badoer might be involved in the smuggling ring. With the 'Ndrangheta controlling the cocaine trade and the Mafia controlling heroin and cigarettes, the smaller syndicates, and especially foreign gangs, have had to look for new niches to exploit. While overall drug use in Italy is declining, high unemployment amongst our youth has resulted in an increase in the use of cannabis and methamphetamines. And high health care costs have also made it easier to sell counterfeit pharmaceuticals. Adding these activities to his existing portfolio would have contributed handsomely to the Ambassador's bank accounts, so we assigned Miss Caterina Moretti here with Office III of the Directorate General for Political Affairs and Security to investigate."

"We determined that the Ambassador had no knowledge of the ring," Caterina stated, idly pushing a strand of her blonde hair away from her eyes. "The Minister...convinced...the Ambassador to assist us in trying to identify whom in the Embassy could be assisting Padania."

"And you think whomever it was got wind of these efforts and called in a hit on the Ambassador?" Michele asked.

"We assume it was Padania, but we're not sure who exactly ordered the hit," Caterina admitted.

"There is an auction of a number of pieces of art planned in two days. The pieces are on special display at the National Museum of Western

Art in Tokyo. Two senior Padania operations men boarded the afternoon Alitalia flight to Tokyo and one of them is a known associate of a major financial backer of the Five Republics Faction. It seems likely that a deal is about to be made and that it will happen during or soon after the auction," she added. "It's possible one or both of these men are part of the ring and the Ambassador was eliminated to prevent a link being discovered."

"I want you and Kara to go to Tokyo and see what you can discover," Pisano requested.

"Kara is a sniper, not a detective. You should be asking Director Lorenzo to assign Hilshire and Triela," Michele retorted.

"You two are my 'trouble consultants'," Pisano reminded Michele with a smile, referring to his original pitch to Michele to get him to join the Social Welfare Agency's covert operations group as a handler to a new cyborg. Michele and Renato traced their friendship back to boarding school and it had remained strong in the intervening decades.

"And no one will question your presence at such an auction," he added.

"And what are we expected to do once we identify who carried out the hit?" Michele asked.

"Take them out, of course," Renato replied.

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**HANDLER'S ANNEX  
SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND**

By standing order, a cyborg was forbidden to visit the Handler's Annex without the express permission of their handler or Ferro. Every rule had its exception, of course, and in this case there were two: Monique "Monty" Blacker and Fleda Claes Johansson. The former gained her access because she and her handler spent so little time at the compound it was easier to just assign her to whatever spare room was available in the Handler's Annex rather than have a permanent room in the Cyborg Warehouse that mostly went unused. The latter secured her access because she'd been granted one of the rooms as her personal library and through some bureaucratic cock-up, Kara's handler Michele had been assigned to that room. And rather than



accept Claes' offer to move her books to another location, Michele instead allowed her to continue to have full access to his room as he seldom spent any time there, instead choosing to live at a hotel suite in the city.

As such, Kara was not surprised to find Claes reading a book on Michele's bed when she entered his room. That did not mean she was pleased, however, as she had yet to fully determine her place with Michele and she did not welcome the extra stress of trying to also determine where Claes' place lay with him, as well.

"You must be psychic," Michele remarked as he followed Kara in.

"Ferro stopped by my room and said I should wait for you here," Claes replied as she rolled onto her side and moved into a seating position to make room for Kara.

"Did she tell you why?" Michele asked as he took his seat at the desk. Claes shook her head.

"There's been a diplomatic incident in Tokyo with the Ambassador."

"Is he being recalled?" Claes asked.

"In a pine box," Kara deadpanned.

"He was assassinated Tuesday evening, local time. The Prime Minister has instructed Kara and I to fly out there and try and determine who ordered the assassination and repay the favor in kind. Jean wants an additional asset to accompany Kara and I, however there are no fratelli available so he's ordered you to accompany us in the guise of my daughter."

Kara did not feel convinced of the need for a daughter in relation to the cover story nor did she understand why Claes could fill that role better than herself. She accepted that Claes' European features were physically closer to Michele's, however Kara's own father had been French and that she exhibited mostly Asian features from her Japanese mother was but a fluke of gene combinations during her early *in utero* development.

"I've booked us on the evening flight to Tokyo via Paris, so you and I are off to the Via dei Condotti to buy you some new outfits."

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**PARK HYATT TOKYO  
SHINJUKU PARK TOWER  
SHINJUKU-KU  
TOKYO, JAPAN  
SATURDAY EVENING**

From the front seat of the Toyota Century limousine as it drove through the streets of Shibuya into Shinjuku, Kara looked out on a world very different from the one she was familiar with in Rome and Milan. What seemed to be every color in the visible range of the electromagnetic spectrum flashed in neon from the buildings on either side of the wide street while massive LCD monitors displayed advertising, news and music videos.

The sky above mirrored the chromatic discord below through a mix of oranges, yellows, reds, pinks and greys as the setting sun lit the underside of the cloud deck. Those clouds had recently unleashed a heavy rain and everything glistened with a wet sheen. The thought that sprang to Kara's mind was the future Los Angeles as portrayed in the movie *Blade Runner*, though that thought brought back the memory of her overhearing Michele commenting to Doctor Bianchi that Kara seemed "more real than real" – the advertising tag-line of the Tyrell Corporation for their Nexus-6 replicants. The parallels with those creations were not lost on Kara for she also possessed superior strength and agility – as well as a short lifespan.

As they pulled up to the hotel entrance, a doorman stepped forward to first open the front passenger door for Kara before moving to the rear passenger door. As Michele and Claes exited from the back, Kara craned her neck up the side of the Shinjuku Park Tower, the uppermost floors bathed in the orange light of the setting sun.

A female hostess appeared and conferred with Michele, crossing their names off her arrivals list. Their luggage loaded into a waiting cart, the three were whisked via elevator to the 41<sup>st</sup> floor of the N tower. The host escorted them through a massive library and into the hotel lobby, illuminated in a mix of natural light coming through the glass atrium and artificial light from fixtures around the perimeter. With almost every step, a hotel staffer stopped and greeted Michele with a bow or handshake.

"I take it you're a regular?" Claes asked.

"I'm not exactly a stranger," Michele replied.

An agent quickly checked the party in and escorted them through the central hallway that connected the S tower with the 47-story C tower and the 52-story N tower. Once they reached the N tower, they took the elevator up to the 50<sup>th</sup> floor and entered through the double-doors into the marble-tile-covered entrance foyer of the Tokyo Suite. The walls were covered in a greenish-grey linen paneling and dominated by two large modern art pieces. Directly ahead were the living and dining areas and to the right a short hallway led to the Master Bedroom and on-suite bath.

Kara followed the agent into the living area, the hand-tufted carpet predominately a slate blue with two large squares in a parchment color – one right at the entrance just before the baby grand piano and the other kitty-corner underneath two three-position couches – one in a grey velour and the other in tan linen – and a large glass table atop two kidney-shaped wooden supports. Behind each couch stood a credenza in dark wood and topped with dark marble and two pillar lamps with square parchment shades. A circular glass-topped table stood to the side of the grey couch. Directly to the left of the entrance into the living area stood an open floor-to-ceiling shelving unit containing three masks and topped with a large bowl that also had a mask. Through the unit Kara could see a glass topped dining table, the frames of the eight chairs arranged around it upholstered in chocolate brown leather with coffee leather seat cushions. The walls were either covered in bookshelves or were massive windows offering stunning views of the Tokyo skyline – Kara identified Tokyo Tower, Tokyo Sky Tree and the Tokyo City Hall towers.

The rooming arrangement served as another sore point for Kara. Though this was only her second trip outside of Italy (the first being Monte Carlo in support of the Blacker fratello), she had accompanied Michele on a number of missions to Italian cities and she'd always shared both a room and a bed with Michele. This time, however, she'd been assigned a separate room on the opposite corner of the building and Claes would be sharing the king-sized bed with her handler. Once settled in their respective rooms, they had dinner at the hotel's Japanese restaurant and then turned in for the night to ensure they were well rested for the day ahead.

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Kara inserted her card into the reader and once the green light

flashed, turned the handle and entered her room. The entryway opened onto the bedroom and work area, the latter consisting of a chair with ottoman and glass-topped work desk with two chairs. Three large windows dominated the room and from the one behind the work desk she could see Tokyo City Hall. She walked into the large bathroom and noted the deep soaking tub with rain shower and beyond stood a large walk-in closet. She laid her suitcases on the bench and transferred her clothes and shoes into the closet, followed by the cases. She sat down on the edge of the king bed and turned on the large-screen LCD television, flipping through the Japanese and English language channels available until sleep overtook her.

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*(Claes dreams of a figure obscured by a fire at the edge of a lake.*

*Claes feels more comfortable when Michele is in the room. It just feels "right" to her. It is because her subconscious is remembering Raballo's presence. Claes sometimes gets annoyed, even upset, when Kara or another cyborg intrude on "her" time with Michele, even though she knows it's irrational.*

*When a cyborg does something good, they go to their handler. When they do something bad, they go to Michele because they know he won't yell at them and will help.)*

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The morning sun speared across the tops of the skyscrapers dotting the Nishi-Shinjuku business district, reaching into Room 5007 in the N tower and falling across Kara's sleeping form, soon stirring her to wakefulness though her body still gave indications that it believed the current time was midnight in Rome and not 7:00AM in Tokyo.

She'd slept fitfully at first due to a combination of unfamiliar surroundings, a generally foul mood and her senses telling her it was evening while her body clock still believed it early afternoon. She regretted not packing her Collie plushie, however the Hyatt provided a long cylindrical body pillow that served as a reasonable substitute.

Kara rolled out of bed, showered and dressed in a black top and leggings with her black boots and a white coat. She grabbed her iPod Touch, logged into the hotel's wireless network and sent a message to Michele's iPhone. The reply arrived shortly thereafter, giving her permission to head over. Kara went through her wardrobe, pulling out

a deep purple blazer, black sweater vest, white button down blouse and khaki shorts. Once dressed, she pulled on a pair of Christian Louboutin knee boots – these in black leather as opposed to burgundy - and walked down the hall to the Tokyo Suite, using her spare card to gain entry. She proceeded into the main living area to find Claes sitting at the piano. The younger cyborg had exchanged the Burberry outfit from the day before for a tan short-sleeve Dolce & Gabbana turtleneck and a slightly flocked pleated skirt in black wool with thin shimmering gold metallic stripes paired with Burberry riding boots in black leather.

“Where’s Michele?” Kara asked.

“In the bedroom. He’s on a call to the PM,” Claes replied.

Kara nodded and took a seat on the couch. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Quite well,” Claes replied. And she had, Michele’s body heat gently warming the soft covers and plus mattress, all contributing to a very refreshing rest. She wondered if that ambient heat, as well as the towering presence of Fuji-yama outside the bedroom window, had played a role in her dreams of sitting next to a large campfire by a mountain stream under a sky full of stars. A man stood on the edge of the lake, his features inscrutable from the deep shadows around him. He held a fishing rod in his hand and she could hear the sound of it whipping through the air as he cast. He spoke to her in Michele’s rich, sonorous voice, though his build was much shorter and stockier than Michele’s. It was a “military” build, reminding her somewhat of the SRT’s Fausto Martinello.

A moment later, Michele appeared, dressed in another expertly tailored suit.

“Good morning, Kara. Sleep well?” he asked. His cyborg replied with a non-committal shrug.

“We’ll be having breakfast and then we’re heading to the Embassy, followed by a trip to Harajuku to meet the DGSE agents Coraline mentioned,” Michele informed her.

As Italy had no effective intelligence presence in Japan, Michele had leveraged his contacts within the DGSE, France’s external intelligence agency. During the drive to the airport for their initial flight to Paris, Michele noted that Coraline Louveau was an “old friend” who worked

at the Directorate of Intelligence. When formally introduced, Kara observed that Coraline didn't appear all that old, was quite attractive and had a very shapely figure.

Coraline's role was to track drug shipments into France via seaports and airports and she therefore was made privy to information secured by DGSE agents operating in known smuggling countries, including Japan and she had successfully convinced her superiors to allow Michele to meet them.

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**AMBASCIATA D'ITALIA A TOKYO  
MINATO-KU, TOKYO**

The Embassy of Italy to Japan nestled into the grounds of Keio University in the Azabu Juban area of the Minato Ward of Tokyo, less than a kilometer southeast of Roppongi Hills. The limousine pulled up to the front gates and a security agent stepped forward and, after checking the occupants against a list of expected visitors, opened the wrought-iron gates to allow the vehicle entry.

Eugenio Castelloti, Deputy Chief of Mission, was speaking with an attractive Japanese woman in an open neck white blouse and black skirt with black hose and heels on the steps of the front entrance of the embassy.

"Ah, Signore Pagani. Welcome to Japan," he greeted as Michele stepped out of the vehicle.

The woman scrutinized all three with sharp eyes, spending an additional few moments on Kara.

"Signore, this is Superintendent Saeko Nogami with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department Public Security Bureau. She is heading the Japanese side of the investigation into the Ambassador's murder."

"Superintendent," Michele said.

"Signore Pagani," Saeko replied with a bow.

"Signore Pagani is here at the request of the Prime Minister—" Eugenio noted before Michele's sharp glance cut him off.

"The Prime Minister of Italy?" Saeko asked and Michele nodded.

"So you are in Japan on official business?"

"Personal, actually," Michele replied. "I'm attending the auction for some pieces by the artist Michael Heinz."

"For yourself or the Prime Minister?"

"Both."

"And these two ladies?"

"This is my daughter, Claes, and my executive assistant, Kara Deleroux."

Saeko turned to Kara. "Deleroux...a French name, but you clearly possess Japanese features."

"I hold dual citizenship in France and Japan via my father and mother, respectively," Kara replied.

"But you live in Italy?"

Kara nodded.

"Quite the global citizen," Saeko replied.

"Signore Pagani, if you and the ladies would like to wait in the library, I'll be with you shortly," Eugenio offered.

"Thank you," Michele said. They followed one of the embassy staff inside and into a small room paneled in wood shelves with leather and canvas-bound books, a fireplace, a leather love seat and a number of comfortable-looking leather chairs arranged next to small wood tables that held elegant metal and enamel reading lamps. Michele settled into the love seat and Claes took the position beside him, causing Kara, who'd been maneuvering towards the same spot, to somewhat clumsily adjust her trajectory to take the chair closest to Michele, where she sat down abruptly, her weight causing the wooden frame to creak under the load.

"Quite a collection," Michele observed as he examined the shelves

stuffed with tomes.

"Yes," Claes noted, her interest clearly reflected in her eyes.

A few moments later the door opened and Castelloti entered, followed by a woman in business dress.

"Thank you for your patience, signore."

"Superintendent Nogami?" Michele asked.

"She's returned to her office."

Michele nodded. "Did our package arrive?" he asked.

"Yes. I have asked that it be brought up," Eugenio responded. As if to put truth to his words, an Italian Army caporalmaggiore in battle dress uniform entered after knocking and presented Michele with a hard-sided attaché case. Michele accepted it and handed it to Kara, who placed it on the floor between her legs and the chair.

"Do we have any leads as to why the Ambassador was targeted?" Michele asked.

"The event was part of the Ambassador's published schedule, was it not, Eufemia?" Eugenio asked the woman.

"Correct," Eufemia replied.

"Eufemia is the Ambassador's personal secretary."

"So it was public knowledge that the Ambassador would be there that evening," Kara noted and the two Embassy staffers nodded their head.

"Were there any reported threats or incidents recently that might help identify any suspects?" Kara asked.

"I've spoken with the Chief of Security and he reported there were no letters or emails that indicated any kind of threat against any staff. Japan is a very safe country so we tend to operate with what would be considered very lax protocols compared to back home in Rome," Eufemia observed.

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**CAT'S EYE CAFÉ  
HARUJUKU  
SHIBUYA-KU, TOKYO**

After exiting the cab, Kara approached the café, thankful for the large windows that allowed her to see the entire interior of the establishment. Two men sat next to each other at one of the tables along the front and Kara quickly matched their faces to the two DGSE agents. She also identified a woman sitting at the counter and another woman behind. They appeared to be the only people at the moment, but the café had only been open for about fifteen minutes and foot traffic along the street was relatively light.

She turned to the limousine and motioned that it was safe to proceed. Michele exited, followed by Claes, and the two quickly crossed into the building, followed by Kara.

"Irasshaimase," an attractive young woman called out from behind the counter where she was serving a Japanese woman in a pantsuit. She motioned for the group to choose a table and then returned to the customer at the counter. Kara noticed a handful of other guests spread around the café at the counter and tables, but quickly dismissed them.

Michele walked over to the table with the two men. The older of the two wore a grey blazer and slacks with a black dress shirt and black dress shoes. He had a full head of black hair, but his mustache and beard were trimmed close and showed more grey than black. Kara thought him ruggedly handsome and she could detect his formal military training in how he carried himself. The other, younger, man wore black khaki pants and a dress shirt with alternating vertical stripes of dark olive green, light olive green and burnt orange under a brown leather jacket. His brown hair was thick and unruly, presenting to Kara a somewhat mousy appearance. While he carried himself far more casually, Kara could also detect a military bearing in him.

"Bonjour. Je suis Michele Pagani."

"Hubert," the older gentleman replied, his French accent strongly apparent.

"Momo," the mousy one added.

"This is my daughter Claes and my assistant Kara," Michele introduced, staying with French.

Hubert and Momo both nodded, though Kara felt Hubert was looking at her as if assessing her. Claes slid into the booth first, followed by Michele, with Kara sitting on the end.

"Welcome to the Cat's Eye café," the young woman greeted in Japanese as she approached with menus. "My name is Hitomi and I'll be serving you today. Can I start you off with some coffee?"

"Is that a vacuum brewer?" Michele asked, switching to Japanese. He indicated a glass coffeepot and upper glass chamber connected by a siphon tube.

"Yes it is," Hitomi replied. "We brew our special 'Cat's Eye Blend' in it," she added as she laid down a menu in front of each guest.

"It's excellent," Momo noted, in French.

"Then we'll have it all around, please," Michele requested. "And the Pastry Collection B."

"Thank you," Hitomi replied and left to fill their order.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," Michele said to Hubert, switching back to French.

"You came well-recommended," the older spy replied.

"You know Coraline?"

Hubert shook his head. "Bob et Amande," he noted, and Michele nodded. Both were senior agents within the DGSE and old friends of Michele's

Hitomi reappeared with their coffees and a plate of assorted pastries. Once she left, they settled down to business.

"Momo and I were stationed here during the Cold War," Hubert began. "I returned to Paris two decades ago and became a cop, but private business brought me back last year and I ended up deciding to stay. Bob helped me get reinstated with the DGSE, now working with the

Public Security Intelligence Agency on surveillance of Chongryon as well as the Yakuza.”

“Chongryon?” Michele asked.

“It’s an abbreviation for what in French would translate to the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. It’s one of two organizations that represent Koreans living in Japan who can trace their roots back to when Japan occupied that country and has strong ties to the government in Pyongyang, going so far as serving as a *de facto* embassy due to Japan not having formal diplomatic relations with North Korea.”

“We believe that Padania are importing counterfeit pharmaceuticals as well as methamphetamines sourced from North Korea,” Michele noted.

“Well, ethnic Koreans in Japan are well-integrated into the largest Yakuza groups at all levels. How large is the Japanese ex-pat population in Italy?” Hubert asked.

“Miniscule. China and the Philippines are the primary source of Asian immigrants and the Triads and the Mafia have been forging closer ties as of late,” Michele replied.

“The Chinese Triads have grown their presence significantly within Japan over the past decade. And they’re a violent bunch - more than half of the crimes committed by foreigners are Chinese. If anyone had the testes to knock off a foreign dignitary, it would be them...”

“Is Glass Heart in town?” Momo asked in a jovial tone.

“Glass Heart?” Kara asked, joining the conversation for the first time. She’d followed the conversation thanks to her native fluency in the French language.

“An assassin with the Zheng Dao Hui triad out of Taiwan,” Hubert answered. “The Taiwanese National Police Agency credits her with some two dozen murders in the country and the police in Tokyo, Osaka, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore believe she’s responsible for at least half that many across their respective jurisdictions.”

“Impressive,” Michele said.

"Only the best graduate from the Zhuque Corps. They are a section of Zheng Dao Hui that specializes in assassinations," Hubert explained. "It is believed that they take in orphaned children and turn them into killing machines. The training regimen is said to be brutal, with a fatality rate approaching 95%. Of those 5% that make it through, they're pitted against each other during their 'final exam', reducing their number by half or more."

Michele, Kara and Claes privately took in the irony of his words considering their own situation.

"Does she have an adult supervisor?" Michele asked.

"We assume so as they're only in their early to mid teens, though they've undergone extensive cosmetic surgery to appear to be young adults."

The front door crashed open and a young woman burst in, chatting animatedly in Japanese on her phone. She looked around and, locking onto the group, tromped over in an exaggerated walk.

Kara's hand went for her waist and she tensed for a possible attack.

"Bonjour papa!" the woman exclaimed, giving Hubert a peck on the cheek. Kara saw Hubert's relaxed stance and she relaxed her own in response.

"Monsieur e Mademoiselle Pagani, Mademoiselle Deleroux, this is my daughter, Yumi."

Kara made a conscious effort not to gape as she took in the person before her. Yumi's short brown hair was drawn up in a top-knot and she wore an outfit that was a visual discord of colors, patterns and styles. A woven, backless, sleeveless top with random English letters lay under a fur-trimmed heavy jacket constructed from what appeared to be random geometric shapes in a mix of bright and dark colors. Her miniskirt resembled that of the traditional female Japanese school uniform, but in a plaid composed of various shades of pink and white. Burnt orange leggings and black motorcycle boots completed the look, which was accessorized with a black leather choker collar with various sterling silver objects hanging from grommets punched into it and sunglasses with pink-hued smoked lenses.

Yumi shot a hand out towards Michele and Kara clamped down on her reflex to reach across the table and grab it.

"Ravi de vous rencontrer," Yumi said, vigorously pumping Michele's hand.

"Your French is exceptional," Michele replied.

"Merci. My mother taught me. She used to work in the Embassy with my père," Yumi replied. She turned back to Hubert.

"We need to hurry, otherwise we'll be late for the performance," she noted.

"Yumi, I'm in the middle of something," Hubert noted.

"Don't let us hold you up if you have other obligations," Michele stated, earning him a large smile from Yumi.

"The performance is at Yoyogi Park. If you're using Harajuku Station, we can talk on the way," Hubert offered and Michele nodded.

They paid their bill and started towards Harajuku Station. They cut through Takeshita Street and Kara felt like she was in a city on an alien planet. They passed three teenage girls, one wearing a bear face mask, pink eyebrows, and bunny ears with a pink Shirley Temple jacket over several layers of tops, skirt, pink stockings, patent yellow heels and festooned with necklaces, rings, doll head hairpiece, charms, stuffed animals and anklets. She had two bags - a pink and yellow "Little Artists" purse and a vintage Japanese hard backpack worn by school children.

To her right was an older girl with a hair bow and bunny ears. She wore a fuzzy white jacket over a pinkish hoodie over a t-shirt with a graphic of a bunny rabbit eating ice cream. Her pink tulle skirt was worn over pink and white stockings with hearts and bears and purple lace-up combat-style boots covered her feet. This girl also wore an array of accessories, including necklaces, rings, charms, pins and a belt.

The third girl eschewed the animal look for that of a living Victorian doll. Her outfit consisted of a pretty white coat matched with white stockings with flowers on them and brown platform boots. A stuffed white rabbit hung from a shoulder strap at her side and instead of a

purse, she carried a violin case, though Kara felt confident there would not be an FN P90 inside.

This last look seemed to be the more popular one amongst the young girls milling about the small stores selling various tchotchkes and fashion items, though Kara recognized some anime characters and British punk outfits – the latter being favored by the guys.

They reached Harajuku Station and Hubert handed Michele his business card before disappearing into the crowds entering Yoyogi Park where rock and roll music could be heard above the trees.

“That was interesting,” Claes mentioned to Kara as the latter purchased their train tickets from the automated machine.

“This is a very strange culture,” Kara replied. “I find it hard to fathom I am related to it.”

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#### **PARK HYATT TOKYO**

Existing Shinjuku Station, the three proceeded on foot to their hotel. As they walked, Claes noted that even though the temperature was less than ten degrees Celsius, almost every female between 15 and 25 who was not wearing a school uniform wore shorts or a miniskirt with boots to keep their legs warm. Knee-high boots; mid-calf boots; ankle boots. Boots made of leather, polished-leather, suede, or rubber. Boots sourced from Gucci, Burberry, Fendi, Ugg or Chinese knock-offs of the same.

“I understand now,” Claes informed Kara.

“Understand what?”

“Why you only wear boots. It’s a cultural thing, evidently.”

“Cute girls look cuter in boots...” Kara replied.

“...and glasses,” Claes added, earning her a scowl from Kara.

The trio rode the elevator up to the main lobby where a man and two women were waiting for them in the main atrium in front of a large

indoor tree. One of the women they recognized as Superintendent Saeko Nogami. The other woman, who wore stylish glasses, and the male were both rather attractive. The man wore a black tie and slacks with a white shirt, while the woman wore a blue jacket and skirt with a white blouse. Both wore black shoes – oxfords for the male and heels for the woman. From the cut and quality of their outfits, Michele immediately assumed both were police officers like Nogami.

“May I have a word, Pagani-san?” Saeko asked.

“Of course. Kara, see Claes up to the room, please,” Michele said and then followed the two women over to a set of chairs and tables in front of one of the large windows.

“Pagani-san, this is Inspector Mitsuko Asatani with the Organized Crime Control Bureau of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department,” Saeko introduced the woman. “And this is Assistant Inspector Toshio Utsumi with the Inunaki Precinct.”

Michele shook hands with the two detectives.

“You mentioned you are here to bid on some pieces from Michael Heinz at the auction?” Mitsuko asked.

“Yes. The Prime Minister is a fan of his works so he asked me to come and bid on his behalf,” Michele replied.

“I do hope he was aware that the auction does accept phone and online bids,” Mitsuko noted.

“Yes, however it is rare for his pieces to come up at auction and they therefore tend to command a high price. As such, the Prime Minister wanted an on-sight representative to validate their authenticity and condition,” Michele replied.

“I understand you’re quite a collector, yourself,” Saeko noted.

“More cars than art,” Michele replied. “Might I ask your interest in this?”

“Are you familiar with name ‘Cat’s Eye?’” she asked.

“I had breakfast there this morning,” Michele replied.

"Ah, the coffee shop in Harajuku. No, this Cat's Eye is a group of art thieves that have been active for the past few years. They limit themselves only to the works of Michael Heinz and have struck a number of auctions, museums and private collections."

"I see. And you believe this...Cat's Eye, you say...might attempt to steal the items up for auction?"

"It would fit their *modus operandi*," Toshio stated, entering the conversation for the first time. "They normally give 24 hours notice before they strike, but we're outside that window at the moment."

Michele refrained from commenting on why, with advance notice they were coming, this *Cat's Eye* group had yet to be apprehended.

"Well thank you for the warning, Inspectors; Superintendent. I'll be sure to inform the transport security detail of the risk so they can take appropriate measures," Michele said.

"And your presence here would have nothing to do with the death of your ambassador," Saeko said.

"That investigation is being handled by our Foreign Ministry," Michele replied. "I'm just a civilian," he added with a smile.

Saeko rose and held out her hand.

"Thank you for your time, Pagani-san."

"My pleasure, Superintendent. If I can be of any future assistance..."

"We'll be sure to contact you," Saeko finished. She headed for the elevator, the two junior detectives in tow.

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**AKASAKA KIKUNOI RYŌTEI  
AKASAKA, MINATO-KU**

The Y51 series Nissan Cima crawled through a back street of Akasaka, the reflections of the streetlights flowing across the deep black paint like quicksilver. Almost silent on the power provided by the hybrid power plant's electric motor, the vehicle came to a halt before a



narrow flagstone path lined with bamboo and Japanese maples and lit with interleaved electric lanterns.

The rear door opened automatically and Michele exited, dressed in formal evening dinner attire. Claes followed, wearing a Gucci satin dress with mock-neck collar and cap sleeves and Gucci ballet flats in white leather.

Michele leaned back in and spoke with Kara, who wore denim jeans tucked into boots and a polo top under a leather jacket.

"Figure we'll be ready for pick-up in three hours," he said.

"Understood," Kara replied. "I'd feel better if I was with you," she added a moment later.

"I know, but they're not about to let anything happen to us. We're worth too much commission to them," Michele replied with a grin. He stepped back, the door closed automatically, and the car drove off to the end of the road before signaling a turn and leaving their sight.

Letting Claes lead the way, the two walked down the lantern-lit tunnel of foliage to emerge before a freestanding two-story wooden building that evoked traditional tea-story architecture. As they approached, a young woman in a kimono greeted them. She took their names, comparing them to a list on an iPad, and checked them in. They were invited to climb the steps to the second floor, where another woman in a kimono directed them into one of the four private rooms.

Michele and Claes took their seats at a low table and were joined moments later by two men who Michele and Claes realized were the senior Padania operatives they'd been briefed would be at the auction.

"Buonasera," the older one greeted in Italian. "I'm Teo Munaron and this is my associate Franco Vaccarella."

"Michele Pagani and this is my daughter, Claes," Michele replied, also in Italian.

"So what pieces are you interested in?" Teo asked. "Or would that be revealing your hand?"

"Let's just say that I have a number of pieces in mind," Michele replied.

A senior representative of the auction house, the event's host, appeared in the doorway of each room and greeted the party in English. The auction required pre-registration and pre-clearance and during their due diligence, the auction house selected the twelve "most important" of those registered and invited them to attend this private function where they would be wined and dined in the *kaiseki* style, a traditional multi-course meal that is the de facto haute cuisine of Japanese dining. In addition to a fifteen-course meal, they would be able to view high-resolution images of the various auction items and speak with experts and conservators to ensure that when the bidding started, those bidding would feel comfortable in being aggressive.

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A half-hour later, Kara slowly walked along the wide terraces of the Tokyo Midtown Galleria shopping center. Even five levels of high-end fashion and jewelry stores could not buoy her mood and the fancy restaurants and cafes she passed did little to interest her even though she could feel her stomach growl in hunger. Most of the cafes and restaurants were filled with young couples or families all smiling and laughing and enjoying themselves. This general sense of jolliness only served to dampen Kara's spirits even more and she sought out someplace private and quiet, eventually settling for a seat out on the terrace with a view of the Midtown Garden.

In her mind, Kara knew her poutiness was ridiculous, even childish. She lived a charmed life, with a kind and thoughtful handler who gave her everything she asked for. While one of the newest cyborgs, she been awarded the mantle of "senior" cyborg by the staff and peers as she (along with Triela and Rachel) was one of the cyborgs that other cyborgs, handlers and staff tended to seek out when they needed to pass on information or get everyone ready for a large mission. She was also the second-most-travelled cyborg, after Monty Blacker, having been on missions to Paris, London, Geneva, Monaco and now, Tokyo.

But in her heart, she felt the hurt. The hurt of being paired with a handler that every other cyborg liked because of his kind and thoughtful nature and his efforts to make them all feel special and wanted. The hurt of having to share Michele with the other girls on assignments, or worse, watching him leave with another girl on an assignment while she stayed behind in the dorm. *She* was Michele's sword and shield and *she* should be the one at his side every time he was sent into harm's way.

Like most of the Generation 2 cyborgs of the SWA, Kara looked up to Monty Blacker for a number of reasons. She envied her, however, for only two – she had her handler all to herself and they enjoyed the luxury of not being at what seemed the permanent beck and call of Jean Croce. She'd come to hate the sound of John Williams' "Imperial March", the ringtone Michele assigned to the Senior Handler, as it meant that Renato Pisano or Monica Petris once again had some "trouble" they needed the *fratello* to "consult" upon - this trip being further proof of that.

Kara slowly worked through her meal, the talent of the chef and freshness of the ingredients falling on dulled taste buds. When finished, she did a slow circle of the complex, adjusting her route to stay out of the path of groups of high school and college men looking to try and score an evening with an attractive girl. When she reached the plaza between the two main residential and office towers, she admired the use of buff granite squares and black granite borders, the pairing serving as a subtle reinterpretation of straw tatami mats and their dark cloth hems.

Dominating the center of the plaza area were two long glazed skylights that filtered light into the retail and subway spaces below in addition to doubling as water features. Before one of them Kara noticed a teenaged girl dancing, being filmed by a boy with a handheld video camera. As someone who shot dance covers herself, Kara walked over to watch.

"That was quite good," Kara commented when the girl had finished.

"Thank you!" the girl replied, bowing. "Do you do dance covers, as well?"

"Not as often as I once did," Kara admitted. Jean thought the idea ludicrous in general and a security risk in specific, as it put her face out to a global audience. Michele, on the other hand, thought it the perfect cover – why would a secret agent present himself or herself in so public a forum?

"Would you like to give it a go?" the boy asked. Kara started to beg off, but the girl said she'd like to see her perform. Kara acquiesced and selected the ZONE song "Fragment of a Dream" on her iPod Touch so she could have a reference to lip-sync the words. The song about a girl on the cusp of adulthood remembering her high-school sweetheart and

what he meant to her resonated with Kara's current mood and she put her heart and soul into her performance, drafting a new choreography on the fly that she channeled all her emotion into.

"That...was...amazing," the girl said when Kara finished.

"Uh, thank you," Kara said, somewhat flustered. She thanked the two and then excused herself, following a succession of water jets, terraced pools and weirs leading away from the main structures designed to simulate the mountain stream that once ran on the site. Unlike the nearby Roppongi Hills complex, Tokyo Midtown put nature above nightlife and the complex was surrounded on three sides by open space. In a city that felt somewhat like an oppressive mix of glass, steel and concrete, Kara's mood lightened a bit at being able to move free of the crowds that seemed ubiquitous on the streets of the Japanese capital city. She chose a stone bench next to the water jets and passed the time until Michele called watching the interplay of light and liquid.