



# ALPINE FOXES

## A GUNSLINGER GIRL STORY

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**CYBORG WAREHOUSE  
SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND  
LATE MARCH**

“Do you have any shoes other than boots?” Gattoneo asked from her bed in the corner room on the upper floor of the cyborg dormitory that she shared with Kara.

“Of course,” her roommate replied, pulling on a pair of Christian Louboutin Tuba knee boots in black leather.

Gattoneo rose and walked over to Kara’s side of their shared wardrobe.

“One...two...three...four...five...six pairs...”

“And two pairs of sneakers, a pair of pumps, a pair of ballet flats, a pair of loafers and a pair of sandals,” Kara stated, her arm moving to identify each.

“But you never wear any of the others,” Gattoneo quipped.

“I wore the sandals on Saturday.”

“I heard about your attempt to get into Section One’s pool,” Gattoneo said with a grin. “And for the record, it was a pleasant 17 degrees in Padua.”

As promised, the air conditioning repairmen worked their magic on Monday and the rooms were once again fit for habitation.

“Seriously, why do you wear boots so often?”

“Because boots that end just below the knee matched with a skirt or shorts that end well above the knee make my legs look longer and myself look taller,” Kara replied as she put a plastic



flower hairclip in her hair.

Gattonero took in the brown suede shorts trimmed in white fur and had to admit that the amount of bare leg between them and the top of her boots did give the impression of height. Kara also wore a grey long-sleeve tee that had the caption “Just amazing ☆ over” on three lines. To the right of the star were the words “Glamour Rock” in script.

“And of course you want to look taller for your handler,” Gattonero teased.

“Of course,” Kara replied, the barb sailing over her head. “I’m off to class,” she added and headed for the door.

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In the Handler’s Annex, Claes and Michele sipped iced tea and read books in the latter’s room as they enjoyed a cooling breeze coming in from the open window, preferring fresh air to the dehumidified atmosphere pumped out by the air conditioning system. The new week brought offshore flow with it, bringing the ambient temperatures back towards normal.

By rule, the Handler’s Annex was off-limits to cyborgs without the presence of their handler, but every rule had an exception and both Fleda Claes Johansson and Monique Blacker were allowed to use rooms at their leisure.

In Monty’s case, her presence at the compound could be measured in hours per month and therefore she had no permanent room in the Cyborg Warehouse.

For Claes, she’d inherited a room of books as her personal library. When Michele had joined the Agency, he’d been assigned to the room formally used by one Captain Raballo – the room Claes had at the time been using as a library. Preferring to reside in an apartment in the nearby town of Sola, Michele only used the room when he was required to be on-site in preparation for a mission. This allowed Claes to continue to use the room as her library and as an escape from the other cyborgs when she desired peace and quiet.

Michele’s iPhone started to trill the opening of the song “Yakety Sax”, made famous for its use in The Benny Hill Show. He grabbed the device and put it to his ear.

“Michele Pagani...yes, Renato...tomorrow?...what about your own detail?...I see...of course, old friend...will there be room?...Understood...I’ll see you on the plane...Ciao.”

As soon as Michele ended the call, his phone started playing John Williams’ “The Imperial March” from the film The Empire Strikes Back.

“Yes, Jean...yes, I just spoke with the PM...I understand...I’ll be there...”

“Mission?” Claes asked.

“Yes.”

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**MAIN BRIEFING ROOM  
SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND**

An hour later, Michele Pagani, Elio Alboreto and Brian McDonnell assembled for the briefing to be given by Jean Croce.

“The Prime Minister is leaving tomorrow for a ski trip to Cortina d'Ampezzo. His...companion... Noelia is entered in an International Ski Federation snowboard cross event on Mount Tofane and he wishes to show his support.”

“I’m surprised Vittoria is still standing for it,” Elio whispered to Michele, referring to the PM’s second wife.

“The longer she waits, the stronger her eventual divorce case,” Michele replied.

“AISE have picked up chatter amongst known Padania operatives and there is a fear that they may try something,” Jean continued. “We will therefore be providing resources to the Protection Detail and your fratelli have been chosen for the role. Ferro is completing your briefing packets. They’ll be available by 1400. Study them and we’ll meet again here at 1630.”

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Kara’s class let out and as she exited the building, her spirits rose at the sight of her handler waiting for her.

“Aced my trigonometry test,” she said with a large smile.

“Congratulations. We have a major road-trip ahead of us tomorrow, accompanying the Prime Minister to Cortina d'Ampezzo. Once I have the itinerary, we can determine what to pack. Let’s meet in the kitchens at 1930 and we can talk over dinner.”

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**MAIN KITCHENS**  
**SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND**

Another successful “Mystery Monday” dinner service behind them, the members of the Esercito Italiano culinary team performed their final chores and prepared to leave as they would be back in the morning to prepare breakfast.

“Kara, start a pot of water boiling. Claes, grab these items from the pantry,” Michele ordered.

“As we have much to do this evening, we’re going to make something simple and quick – spaghetti aglio e olio. Kara, how would you say that in English?”

“Spaghetti with garlic and oil.”

“Correct. The water looks ready, so put the spaghetti in and set the timer for 12 minutes,” Michele asked. “Claes, please slice these garlic cloves thin.”

Once the spaghetti completed cooking, Michele drained the water, setting some aside. He then started heating a large sauté pan and added a healthy amount of virgin olive oil. Once heated, he added the garlic slivers and stirred until the garlic just started to turn golden. He added crushed red pepper flakes and then the pasta-cooking water, raising the heat until the mixture came to a boil. He then lowered the heat, added salt, and simmered until the liquid reduced by a third.

The kitchen door opened and Avise Mancini and Agapita stepped in.

“I was not aware that the kitchen was occupied. We’ll come back,” Avise offered.

“There is plenty of room, Major,” Michele noted.

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“What are you preparing?” Agapita asked. “It smells good,” she added.

“Spaghetti aglio e olio,” Michele replied.

“Ah, yes. Due to its simplicity, we would make it in the field from time to time when we could no longer stand the boxed rations. A real treat was when we could add a protein like chicken or shrimp.”

“I’ve always had it plain, but scampi shrimp would definitely improve the dish,” Michele agreed. “Can I interest you two in some as a starter?”

“Thank you. We’ll reciprocate with some traditional Napoli pizza,” Avise replied.

“It’s a deal,” Michele replied.

Removing the pan from the heat, he used tongs to add the spaghetti and toss it in the garlic sauce. In went minced fresh parsley and grated Parmesan cheese and the mixture tossed a second time. Claes secured plates and Michele dished out portions.

“I understand you’re escorting the Prime Minister on a ski trip?” Avise asked as he worked the pizza dough a short time later.

“Yes, he tends to request Kara and I personally when he needs Section 2 support,” Michele replied.

“He must feel more comfortable working with an old friend,” Avise suggested.

“He thinks Kara’s cute,” Claes noted.

“Claes!” Kara cried.

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**CYBORG WAREHOUSE  
SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND  
THE FOLLOWING MORNING**

Ferrari offered custom luggage sets for the company’s FF grand tourer and three hard cases lay open on Kara’s bed, two filled with outfits for the slopes, the chalet and the hotel. Into the third she loaded three pairs of boots, a pair of evening sandals and a pair of sneakers along with a bag each of cosmetics and toiletries.

Kara’s outfit of a black cotton miniskirt, white long-sleeved wool sweater and Christian Louboutin Mer-villion 85 Nappa Leather knee boots reflected her successful selection of her favorite cover story – Michele’s girlfriend.

“Allow me to help,” Gattoneo offered as she took the lightest case and stepped into the hall. Kara grabbed the other two and followed her out.

Kara and Gattoneo walked to the Hander's Annex where Michele's FF, Elio's BMW M3 and Brian's Audi RS6 sedan.

The handlers universally wore suits, while the cyborgs went with more casual attire. Allison sported a Martini Racing polo and heavy leather jacket with black jeans tucked into black leather ankle boots with an aggressive sole for traction in mud and snow. Marisa wore her school uniform, adding a heavy jacket and swapping her brown loafers for brown Ugg boots.

"I wish we were taking the F12," Kara noted to Allison as the latter hefted a single large suitcase into the trunk of her handler's Audi RS6 saloon.

"And I wish my Lancia's half-shaft was not in the bin, but if wishes were horses...Anyway, the FF is still plenty fast, though once we get to the snow line, I'm confident I could take you."

"It's a race," Kara said.

"You've wracked up two traffic fines already, Kara, so I'll handle the driving duties this time," Michele noted as he came up behind her.

"Batsu."

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**A1 AUTOSTRADE  
BETWEEN PADUA AND VENICE  
LATER THAT DAY**

"Steven Moffat is a god," Kara noted as she put down her iPad and stretched.

"He is brilliant," Michele agreed.

Through the windshield the ruler-straight three-lane highway disappeared into the distance. Kara looked down at the passenger-side instrument display to see that the FF cruised at a steady 200km/h in seventh gear.

The convoy of seven police and civilian vehicles moved in the leftmost lane, a Polizia Stradale BMW 330i Touring in the point and trailing positions and setting the pace. The large-displacement V12s in the Rolls-Royce and Ferrari dictated the visits to the rest stops for refueling and leg-stretching and



Kara saw the turn signal indicator for the Phantom start flashing and the convoy proceeded to exit into the service area. Two Carabinieri on BMW R1100-RTP motorcycles previously secured the site so those vehicles that did not need to refuel could park.

“I need to speak to Renato, so please move the car up once she’s fueled,” Michele informed Kara.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you don’t need to return to the passenger seat,” he added as he walked away.

“Yes, sir!”

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Traffic grew heavier as they approached the Port of Venice at Marghera, but the road opened up again once they exited onto the A27 and headed north towards Lake Santa Croce. They performed their final refueling stop in the town of Belluno at the terminus of the A27 and then proceeded into the Dolomites along State Highway 51. They reached a tunnel and Kara and Allison rolled down their windows and accelerated hard, the noise of their exhaust ricocheting off the walls. Soon the flatulent bark of Elio’s V8 added to the symphony.

As they climbed higher into the mountains, the hillsides became thicker with snow. The upper reaches of the Dolomites often held snow through mid-April or even later and the unseasonably warm weather in the south of Italy had been balanced by unseasonably cool weather in the north. The road remained mostly clear, though where the highway ran through a town or village, patches of snow and ice were present and this became compact snow and ice by time they reached the outskirts of Cortina d’Ampezzo. They turned east and proceeded to the Cristallo Hotel, nestled at the edge of a large forest on the edge of the commune. The hotel dated back to the dawn of the 20th Century when the area was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Cortina was a popular winter destination for nobility and aristocracy and through the century continued to cater to rich and famous.

Having safely delivered their charge, the two Polizia Stradale BMWs continued on. Kara followed the Land Rover Discovery 4 and the PM’s Phantom to the front of the hotel while Allison and Elio headed for the parking lot.

After checking in, the Prime Minister, Noelia and the Pagani fratello were escorted to the two-bedroom Peter Sellers Presidential Suite. The others were spread out in rooms amongst the floor.

“I expect Monty would prefer the Frank Sinatra suite,” Michele noted as looked out the window upon the snow-coated landscape.

“Luck Be a Lady tonight,” Kara stated as she eyed the single king-sized bed.



**CORTINA SKIPARK  
TOFANA SKI AREA  
THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON**

“This is boring,” Marisa, entombed in a thick winter parka that extended below her knees, noted as she stood at the top of the course used by contestants in the Tofana Big Mountain Event. A big mountain contest took place on open terrain and each contestant forged their own path down the mountain while aiming for maximum style and difficulty, as these were the two criteria on which they would be judged.

“That’s actually a good thing,” Kara noted beside her, dressed in white snowboard pants and a salmon pink snowboard jacket. While the chances of someone making an attempt on Noelia were somewhere between slim and none, the presence of Marisa and Kara at the top of the course were meant to shift those odds to ‘none’.



Close to a kilometer below them, Michele sipped hot chocolate and watched the contestants cycle down the slope. The Prime Minister and his security detail were nearby, as was the McDonnell and Mancini fratelli.

His iPhone trilled Track 14 - titled "Vesper" - from the soundtrack for the 2006 film Casino Royale and the name "Vesper Lynd" presented itself on the screen.

"Michele Pagani."

"How's the skiing?" Monty Blacker asked from the other end.

"Snowboarding, actually," Michele replied. "And Kara seems to be enjoying herself."

"Good for her," Monty replied, her tone neutral as usual. "The skipper and I came across a bit of info regarding one Count Gianfranco Sospiri while working another case. We passed it on to Ferro and when she told us you were in the area, I decided to cut out the middle man."

"I'm honored."

"Uh-huh," Monty replied, and Michele wasn't sure if that meant he should be honored or if she was dismissing his comment. With Monty, one could never be sure.

"It appears his Lordship is due to make a stop over in Dobbiaco this afternoon to discuss a financial issue before continuing on to Innsbruck," she informed him. "Ferro said she'd email you his dossier."

"I wonder if this is the chatter AISE has been picking up," Michele speculated.

"I can't answer that," Monty replied and he could almost hear her shrug of indifference pass through the phone.

"Anything you might be able to answer?"

"The people he will be meeting are from the Venice Faction."

"And you know this how?"

"I can't answer that," Monty stated again, but this time Michele knew her reasons were to protect a source.

"To be honest, it's not related to our current objective and if we did all the work, we'd take all the fun," she added.

"Uh-huh," Michele replied. "We'll look into it. Thank you."

"Ciao," Monty replied and the connection dropped.

Michele slipped the phone back in his pocket and walked over to the McDonnell fratello.

“Want to take a ride?” he asked Allison.

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The commune of Dobbiaco lay at the northern end of State Highway 51 a couple of dozen kilometers from the Austrian border.

“Any idea of what I should be looking for?” Allison asked as she swiveled her head back and forth in the passenger seat of the Ferrari FF as it motored down the snow-covered Viale S Giovanni. The commune squatted on a bit over 100 square kilometers at the bottom of a valley, surrounded by farmland that nestled up against steep tree-covered slopes.

As they drove by a nice hotel, Michele’s eyes were drawn to a black Bentley Continental GT that stood out from the surrounding mini SUVs like a swan amongst ducks.

“I think we’ve found our target,” Michele noted and parked around the opposite corner. Both checked their pistols and slipped them into jacket pockets and Michele took pictures of all the vehicle plates in the parking lot before he followed Allison into the hotel.

Greeted by the proprietor, the two were shown to a restaurant and Michele identified Count Gianfranco Sospiri and two others at a table in the far corner having lunch. Once seated, Allison used her enhanced hearing to eavesdrop on the conversation, typing out a running commentary on their discussion on her smartphone, leveraging the commonality of a teenager typing furiously on a phone to prevent anyone at the target table becoming suspicious.

“Look cute,” Michele stated and snapped a picture of Allison and ensuring the three men at the back table were in frame and focus. He then forwarded the picture to the SWA before placing the phone down as their waiter arrived to take their order.

“They’re leaving,” Allison noted. Michele nodded and drained his glass of water. When the waiter came by to refill it, Michele slipped him a 50 Euro note to settle the bill and told him to keep the change – an almost 100% tip.

The other table rose and headed for the hotel lobby. Michele and Allison counted to ten and then rose and headed after them. Allison was in the lead as they stepped outside and the person lying in wait for them, expecting Michele, rounded the corner and swung at empty air.

Her protection protocols snapping into place, Allison shoved Michele back with her left arm as she used her right to deliver two quick rabbit punches to the assailant’s kidneys, causing him to double over in pain. She flipped backwards and kicked out with her right foot, the toe of her boot shattering



his jaw and snapping his head back to the point his neck broke. As she rotated backwards, she withdrew her pistol from her coat and landed on her feet. She heard two car doors slam and she slewed to the closest, her gun settling on the windshield of a Fiat Sedici mini SUV. Allison fired three rounds from her Kimber Custom TLE/RL II through the windshield and then rushed his car. As she smashed the driver's side window, she saw that one of the bullets had torn the top of his skull from his head. Hearing the roar of a car engine, Allison turned to see the Bentley Continental tear through the parking lot. She took aim but a row of parked cars lay between her and the sports coupe.

"Get the car!" Michele ordered, tossing the key fob to the Ferrari to Allison. The brunette snatched it in mid-jump and charged across the street while Michele took close-up pictures of both assailants.

The FF slewed into the parking lot with a wave of powdered snow. Michele jumped into the passenger seat and Allison mashed the throttle, pinning Michele into his seat. She drifted the car onto the Via di Mezzo and pressed her boot to the floor. The tachometer needle bounced up and down as the winter tires scrabbled for grip and the traction control system tried to apply almost 700hp to a surface of compact snow and ice. What took mere seconds in the dry took many multiples longer, but Michele could see the numbers on the passenger speedometer climb as the tires found traction.

In the driver's seat, Allison sawed away at the wheel, trying to keep the car on the road as it accelerated. She modulated the pressure on the throttle to keep all four wheels in traction. Up ahead, she could see the brilliant LED rear lights of the Bentley through the cloud of snow it kicked up as it reached the SS51 and continued south.

"Don't shift above fourth!" Michele yelled.

"Why?" Allison asked.

"It will disengage the four wheel drive," Michele replied.

"Fantastic," Allison fumed.

"I need fifth gear to catch him!" Allison exclaimed minutes later. She flicked the paddle to engage fifth and moments later she found herself in a huge tank slapper that took all her skills to keep from flying off the road into the trees. She stabbed the brakes and dropped back into fourth, allowing the front tires to hook up again.

While the Bentley had all-wheel drive at any speed, it also had 500 more kilograms influencing the vehicle's inertia and a driver with far less skill behind the wheel. Whether the road was straight or twisty had an accordion effect on the distance between the two vehicles, but Allison continued to gain ground as the kilometers unwound, her superior car control allowing her to extract every bit of available traction.



“This four-wheel drive system is rubbish. I really wish I had my Lancia,” Allison growled as she wrestled with the wheel to try and keep the Ferrari straight and in the lane. Every now and then the Bentley would bottom out and a huge cloud of snow powder would wash back, obliterating her view for a moment until the wipers cleared it.

The interchange with the SS48bis approached and Sospiri slewed the car in a lurid slide as he tried to make the corner. Carrying too much speed, he flew off the road and into a field in front of the parking lot of a hotel. Kicking up a tsunami of snow and ice, he powered out of the slide and started down the field, trying to get the Bentley back on the highway.

Allison threw the FF into a drift, expertly sending the car through the intersection and onto the SS48bis. She straightened out and floored the throttle, moving to try and block the Bentley from returning to the road. Michele caught a yellow warning triangle out of the corner of his eye and he watched the Bentley suddenly buck like a bull trying to throw a rider. The nose of the car slipped below the snow like the bow of a submarine on the ocean and the



sound of shattering glass and crunching metal filled the air as the back end of the car lifted into the air, came to an abrupt stop, and then crashed back down.

Allison slammed on the brakes and yanked the emergency brake, putting the Ferrari into a 160° slide that placed the driver's side door facing the Bentley. She opened the door and approached the car, her pistol drawn. As she closed, she saw that the Bentley had crossed a creek and determined that the nose of the car had dropped as the front wheels rolled down the embankment and then buried itself on the other side. What seemed like a hundred airbags had inflated inside the cabin and other than a broken and bloody nose, Count Gianfranco Sospiri appeared to be in far better condition than his vehicle.

A number of people at the hotel had dialed 112 when they saw the accident and within fifteen minutes a Carabinieri Subaru Forester appeared on the scene. Twenty minutes on Elio Alboreto's M3 arrived with Marisa. After much waving of badges and calls to superiors, Sospiri was strapped into the back seat of the Forester that proceeded to the old Cortina Airport to meet with a helicopter from the 4th Army Aviation Regiment at Bolzano, which would take His Lordship back to Rome.

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The second day of competition went without incident and Noelia finished seventh. As Elio needed to return to Rome to make his report to Lorenzo, the McDonnell and Pagani fratelli were released from the security detail and given 48 hours to report back.

With the Stelvio Pass still closed due to weather, Allison convinced her handler to head west via the SR48 and SR241 to Bolzano through a number of high passes and winding roads and then an overnight stay in Modena to visit to the Galleria Ferrari and factory the following day.

Kara and Michele choose the islands of Venice, with the intention of taking the A14 – the Motorway of the Adriatic – from Bologna to Pescara before crossing the shaft of the Boot to Rome via the A24.

All three fratelli were most pleased, however, with knowing that there would be no “What Went Wrong” meetings when they returned.

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The End