

The Mustang Chronicles:

Samurai Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The summer routine on the Duryea ranch rarely altered from year to year. Foals ran with their mothers through the pastures, oats which would fill the grain silo in anticipation of winter grew on a hundred acres near the property's north border, and hired hands were busy from sunrise to sunset branding, breaking and training horses.

Rick Shimoto made his appearance, as well.

For as long as Mustang could remember, Rick's dusty silver Dodge pick-up had pulled his unmarked, enclosed trailer through the remote Montana counties. He'd unload a portable gas forge, fire it up, and painstakingly create custom shoes for all the horses. Kids of every age group gathered to watch, awed by the force the dark-haired young man wielded with his hammer, shaping the metal.

When the Dodge swung into the drive that late June Tuesday, Joe Duryea left his lunch uneaten to greet the blacksmith. The pair shook hands warmly and, while Rick set up his equipment near the corral, Joe directed the ranch hands to gather the stock needing new shoes.

Mustang trotted up on Heartbeat, her pinto, and waved to Rick. Carrying the crank bellows, he nodded and smiled in return.

"Need any help?" the girl called.

"Later, maybe."

In fact, Mustang had always been impressed how Rick needed no assistance in dealing with the horses. He not only knew metal craft, he shared the same affinity with animals which had won her the nickname even her parents now used, rather than the legal "Elizabeth".

She returned in mid-afternoon with a pitcher of lemonade. While always tranquil and vibrant, shoeing horses was strenuous work and, on hot days like this, he needed to keep himself hydrated.

He paused when she filled a tall glass, clinking with ice cubes. A red-hot length of iron thrust back into the fire, he rested on the anvil.

"How'd you do in school this year?" he asked.

The teen averted her eyes.

He chuckled, "Skipping again, eh?"

"That, and other things."

"You've been ill?"

"No." Mustang wasn't sure what to tell Rick, or if she should reveal what happened on her travels to Scotland. She changed the subject. "What about you? When will you graduate?"

“I’ve got two more classes and my dissertation to finish.”

“Then we’ll have to call you ‘Doctor Shimoto’?”

“Since I’ll be a horse doctor, only my patients will have to call me that.”

They laughed together.

“Will you be going back to Japan?” queried Mustang.

The dark haired blacksmith shook his head. “Not right away. My parents would prefer me to settle in our hometown of Sakurai, marry and carry on both the family business and family name, but I’ve learned a lot about life living in America for almost ten years.”

“I’m in the same situation. When I graduate high school - or, I should say, *if* - my parents expect me to take over the ranch, so they can enjoy their old age. Not that I’ll mind.” She refilled his glass. “What kind of business does your family own?”

“They are swordsmiths.”

“Sounds cool.”

“It is, really. The easiest way to explain it is to take what I do, and bump it up a few notches. They use carefully smelted metals, and techniques honed over centuries, to make the finest samurai swords in the world.”

“Samurai? I thought the samurai died out years ago.”

“In the sense of warriors riding into battle, they did. The tradition is very much alive in Japan, though, to this day.”

“Wow.”

“My family is honored throughout Japan, and around the globe, for that matter. When the British Prime Minister visited Tokyo last summer, he was given one of the katanas my grandfather made as a gift. I think the President has one, too.”

“I’d think you’d be dying to get back, then...”

“Not really. I’m a good blacksmith, but I don’t think I’d make a good swordsmith. Ever since I was a child, I was drawn to animals. I decided to become a veterinarian when I was twelve. To say the least, my parents were disappointed, since I’m their only son.”

Mustang didn’t know what to say. Rick drained the lemonade, and wiped perspiration from his forehead with a towel. “Can I show you something?”

“Sure,” the girl replied.

He led her into the open trailer and, despite the gloom, reached up and grabbed an object from a wall rack. Moving toward the sunlight, he unsheathed a razor-sharp katana, holding it with a silk cloth.

“It’s fantastic!” Mustang gasped.

“My grandfather made it for my 21st birthday. It’s perfect in every aspect...”

Mustang squinted at the blade. “There’s a pattern in the metal...”

“That happens in the final stages. A special clay mixture is painted on the metal before it’s heated one last time, then plunged into cool water. The two types of steel used in the forging contract at different rates, which makes the blade curve. The clay also makes the metal contract slower in spots, and leaves the pattern behind.”

“You know a lot about the process...”

“I spent my childhood watching Grandfather work. It can take as much as six months to make a sword, and I can’t remember how many come out flawed and are discarded.”

“Really?”

“Even after doing it for sixty years, the wrong temperature, or heating the metal too long, can make it brittle, or cause some imperfection.”

Delicately, Mustang ran her fingers over the hilt. “I’d love to see one of these being made.”

Even after riding a lightning bolt from Scotland to Montana, and from Montana to Italy, she’d still not learned to control her impulsive tongue. The control of natural forces occultist and rocket scientist Jack Parsons had bequeathed to her was triggered by her words and, once again, she’d uttered a poorly chosen statement.

Worse, still, because both her hands and Rick’s were touching the katana, the lightning bolt which ripped through the trailer snatched both of them simultaneously.

Having experienced the phenomenon before, Mustang woke first. She lay on dew-covered grass, staring up at the wall of a Buddhist temple. The sun peeked over mountains to the east.

“Oh, hell...”

Sprawled beside her, the sword between them, Rick moaned. Struggling to her knees, Mustang first inspected his hands. If he, like she, had suffered scorches to his palms, his career as a blacksmith, and a veterinarian, might be permanently ruined...

The sole damage was a cut, where he’d grabbed the katana as a reflex when the lightning struck, and the blade had penetrated the silk into his flesh.

“Heal,” she whispered, and the skin mended without so much as a scar.

Rick blinked then, and jolted upright. “What the...”

“It’s okay. We’re safe.”

“Safe?” he stammered. “What happened?”

“We... went on a little trip.”

“What, you spiked my lemonade with acid?”

“No!” Mustang bristled. “Look, it’s hard to explain; just trust me. I’ve a feeling we’re in Sakurai.”

Rick brushed the dampness from his t-shirt and looked around. Slowly, he rose and walked to where he could see beyond the temple. She saw his jaw sag, and he returned to her, stunned.

“You’re right. This is Sakurai.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Sorry? Why?”

“Because it’s my fault.”

Rick studied her dripping red hair and narrow face. “How, your fault?”

“About a year ago, something happened to me, and I ended up with these powers...”

“That cause weird weather, like rain with no clouds?”

“Sometimes.”

“Some of the guys in the university’s meteorology program have been talking about that stuff for months. I shoot eight-ball in a pool league with them on Wednesdays, and thought they were full of...”

“They’re not,” Mustang interrupted.

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain how we traveled ten thousand miles in a matter of seconds.”

“Yes, it does. Lightning.”

“You... summoned... lightning?”

“Not exactly. I expressed a desire to see a katana being made. The lightning responded automatically, to fulfill my command.”

Rick turned away in disbelief. He rested his head on the trunk of a cherry tree, remnants of faded blossoms still clinging to the branches. “I’ve been kicked by a horse, and this is all a hallucination,” he reasoned aloud.

Mustang climbed to her feet and hesitantly touched his arm. “No, it’s not, Rick. You’re home, so you might as well make the best of it.”

“But, how do we get back to Montana?” he stormed.

She held up her charred palms. “The same way. Or, a plane, if you prefer.”

Rick gazed past her wounds toward a dozen saffron-robed monks, who had approached silently from the temple. He straightened and bowed, muttering a greeting in the local dialect.

An elderly, bald individual responded.

“He said, we are welcome to remain in their garden as long as we wish,” Rick translated for Mustang’s benefit.

“You don’t have to bother,” she countered. “I can understand him.”

“You *can*? I didn’t know you spoke Japanese.”

“Any time I wish. You’ll hear me in English, however, because you know the language.”

Puzzled, Rick glared at her.

Mustang bowed to the monks. She picked up the samurai from the grass, wiping the blade dry with the hem of her tank-top. “We appreciate your kindness, honored one,” she said. “We are looking for the maker of this sword...”

The monk didn’t have to read the inscription on the blade; he knew Rick’s family from many years living in Sakurai. “Walk this road to the north, and you will find the place, two kilometers from here.”

“Domo arigato.”

Rick followed her complacently as she moved toward the street.

“Believe me now?” she challenged.

“Do I have a choice?”

Sakurai was a beautiful city, Mustang discovered, surrounded by mountains shining in the morning sunlight. The technological advances which had transformed much of Japan did not seem to have invaded this tourist haven. Shops displayed locally-produced wood products, dolls and even sporting goods.

Suddenly, Rick stopped in his tracks. Mustang followed his gaze.

“This is it,” he murmured.

The simple dwelling impressed Mustang with its functionality. So many houses built in the States catered to excess; here, every inch of living space had a purpose.

She waited at the gate while Rick announced his homecoming. He was greeted with hugs and excited chatter by two generations of elders - parents and grandparents - who had been enjoying their breakfast. When Rick signaled Mustang forward, all smiles faded.

“This is the girl you brought for our approval?” scoffed Rick’s father, straightening his kimono.

His grandmother added, “You couldn’t find a nice Japanese girl to marry?”

“You haven’t heard a word I said!” Rick blushed. “Mustang is my friend, nothing more.”

“You go to school together?” asked his mother.

“No, I work for her father during the summer.”

His white-haired, bespectacled grandfather breathed, “Ah!”

Mustang knew she would enjoy talking to that man. He exuded the same contented demeanor which made his grandson a friend to the horses.

“Rick wanted to show me where this incredible katana was made,” Mustang bluffed. “He speaks warmly of his revered grandfather’s skill.”

“Aika, Haruko, bring food,” instructed the swordsmith. “They must be famished after their long journey.”

Rick and Mustang exchanged a secretive look; his family didn’t need to know their journey had taken less than a minute.

Seated on plump cushions around a low wooden table, they shared tea, fruit and rice cakes together. Mustang was glad she didn’t need to use the chopsticks beside her plate. Rick’s parents pummeled their son with questions about his studies, with repeated references to a more permanent return to Japan. He dodged the questions as best he could. Mustang knew better than to offer her opinion. Japanese society didn’t abide outsiders telling natives how they should live.

The meal concluded, Kiyoshi Shimoto escorted Rick and Mustang to his workshop. Almost lovingly, the college student approached the huge forge and patted the stones.

“So, you *do* miss it,” observed Kiyoshi.

“The forge I have is small, good enough only for making horseshoes and utilitarian items. I can carry it on my truck.”

“As long as you make an honorable living with it, there is no shame...”

“I am not ashamed, Grandfather,” Rick stated. “It’s just... there are times I wish for more.”

“You must follow your heart, my boy. Your work with the animals is honorable, too.”

This elder was obviously more open minded than his son and daughter-in-law, Mustang mused.

“So, young lady, what do you want to see?”

II

No words could describe the process by which a magnificent katana originated as misshapen lumps of smelted iron. In the days which followed, Kiyoshi showed Mustang how the shininess of those lumps - and their carbon content - determined which would be used for the outer surface of the sword, and the inner core. From watching Rick work his forge and bend the horseshoes, the girl knew metal could be manipulated into different forms when red hot, but she

never would have guessed it could be heated, bent in half, pounded flat, over and over, to increase the strength of the final product.

“Art collectors buy my grandfather’s swords for as much as half a million dollars,” Rick noted one afternoon, sipping a cup of tea in the family’s garden.

“What does he do with all the money?”

“He paid every cent of my college tuition. He also preserves our culture and tradition. There is a samurai master in Kyoto; Grandfather provides scholarships for those students who wish to train but cannot afford the tuition.”

“Can you show me?”

“If you wish. I suggest we take the train, though.”

“How else would we get there?”

Rick pointed at her hands. “Your little... trick.”

She wanted to smack him for the sarcasm, but knew it would hurt too much.

Kyoto was another city rich in Japanese history. Buddhist monasteries spilled their monks on the streets, mingling with ordinary citizens in Western attire, creating a blend of old and new which thrilled Mustang. The building where the samurai were trained might have been a restaurant or a souvenir shop at one point, converted to a higher purpose.

“Learning how to use a katana properly is a fraction of the training,” Akira Watanabe, the instructor, related when Rick announced the purpose of their visit. “Integrating Bushido into one’s life is the most important thing.”

“Bushido?” Mustang echoed.

“The samurai code of conduct,” supplied Rick. “As a short definition, it involves living the virtues of honor, honesty, respect, loyalty, courage, benevolence, and rectitude, always prepared for death.”

“Yes, Rick knows these things, because he numbered among my best students, before leaving for the West. He could have been a samurai master in his own right, had he continued with the training.”

Rick bowed his head at the praise.

Mustang grinned and elbowed him in the ribs. “So, you have secrets, too.”

“In America, to be a samurai means nothing,” Rick lamented. “That is why my katana hangs in the trailer, and I live Bushido quietly.”

His statement raised another question in Mustang’s mind. “Did Rick’s grandfather study as a samurai?”

Watanabe nodded. “Many years ago, under my own honored ancestor.”

No wonder the katanas were made with such care. The elder Shimoto knew their importance to those who trained to use them.

Rick and Mustang were granted permission to witness students garbed in kimonos and hakama pants train with wooden swords. Later, more advanced students demonstrated their prowess, slicing through thick bamboo stalks in one stroke.

“Do you know the ultimate test of a samurai master?” Rick ventured as the group moved outdoors.

“No.”

“You’re about to learn.”

In a walled garden, two students held up an inch-thick board in front of the fence at one end. Akira Watanabe stood with his back to the board, sword at the ready. At the opposite end of the yard, another student held an archery bow. Ceremoniously, an arrow was selected from a quiver and presented to the archer.

“You’re kidding!” Mustang protested.

“It is a sign of respect for the student to assist in this test,” commented Rick, restraining her with a firm hand. “Don’t interfere.”

The shaft flew and, before it made contact with Watanabe’s chest, was sliced in half with the katana. Mustang’s knees buckled, and she sank on the step.

“What if he would’ve missed?” she choked.

“He would have died.”

The instructor offered Mustang the two halves of the arrow. “It takes many years to prepare for this moment,” he remarked. “I am glad you shared it with me.”

Mustang accepted the gift, looking at Rick. He shrugged.

“There is religious significance in all of it,” the young blacksmith acknowledged on the train back to Sakurai. “Comparing it to people going to church on Sundays doesn’t work, however. It’s far more intense than that. Every drop of sweat which falls on the forming blade, every stance taught in the training... it permeates one’s innermost being.”

Again, Mustang was speechless. She gazed out the window at the rapidly passing countryside, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

“What’s wrong?” Rick prodded.

“I envy you, I suppose.”

“Why?”

“Tradition doesn’t mean that much in America anymore. Or, respect for tradition, I should say. We’ve lost a lot, because of that attitude.”

“Ah, but here, tradition can impose a strangle-hold on independence. Those who decide to break with tradition can be... scorned and ridiculed...”

“You mean, like you, for wanting to be a vet?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I probably wouldn’t fit in here, then, either.”

“Because of your...”

“Power, yes.”

“It could go either way. You might be revered, if the power was discovered, or rejected. You could probably get away with starting your own religion, and gather a thousand disciples, until some tragedy occurred, then you’d be ostracized, or worse.”

“You make it sound like it’s happened before.”

“In the old days, about the worst thing that happened was the occasional sex scandal at a Buddhist monastery. Temptations are greater in the internet age, and news travels faster. I heard about two monks who, discontented with how tradition has been convoluted by technology and wealth, decided to bomb a factory. They were arrested the day before, and killed by a mob of the factory’s employees. The monastery where they lived was burnt to the ground. Barely a handful of the others escaped.”

“Oh, hell...”

“That’s why you should take great care with this power of yours. Every time you use it in public, you risk your life.”

“I don’t know if you realize how difficult that is. How many times a day do you say things like, ‘I wish I could do that,’ or ‘I want to go to Mexico’? Not until those random phrases start becoming reality in the same instant they’re spoken does their enormity become clear. For the most part, I’ve stopped myself from saying them offhandedly, except in unusual situations.”

“Like admiring my katana.”

“Exactly.”

“Then, you can be forgiven, because you’re right. If I were in your shoes, the weather service would need three full-time experts tracking the pop-up storms and earthquakes.”

“Thanks.”

Hiking from the train station to the Shimoto home, Mustang got to see a bit of Japanese night life. Bars, virtually invisible during the day, were crowded with tourists and locals enjoying drinks and music. When two drunks burst onto the sidewalk from such an establishment, Rick pulled Mustang from their path.

The men noticed Rick holding Mustang’s arm, and assumed what the veterinary student’s family had assumed. “Can’t you find yourself a Japanese girl?” drawled the taller of the pair.

“Mind your own business,” Rick retorted.

“Speak respectfully to my friend,” said the other, fists raised. “He’s Yasuo, the mayor’s son.”

“I don’t care if he’s the mayor’s wife. He needs to keep his mouth shut.”

Yasuo piped up, “Hey, Jiro, if she’s special enough for this guy to defend, maybe I should have her.”

He reached for Mustang; Rick stepped between them and blocked a weak punch. Simultaneously, Jiro lunged for Mustang, recoiling a moment later, screaming in agony.

Rick and his opponent spun to see the other man blowing on his fingers, as if to cool them. Mustang stood, unphased, a smirk playing on her lips.

“What’s the matter?” roared Yasuo.

Jiro blubbered, “Let’s get out of here!”

The two half-ran, half-staggered down the street. Rick faced Mustang, scowling. “What’d you do to him?”

“No one touches me, unless I choose. Best way to describe it: he stuck his hands in your grandfather’s hot forge.”

“Remind me to stay in your good graces,” Rick snorted.

Mustang wasn’t in Sakurai’s mayor’s good graces, after that politician saw the burns on his son’s friend’s flesh. She and Rick were accompanying Kiyoshi to his workshop the next morning, when two police officers approached and arrested her. Rick watched in desperation as she was led away, not knowing her power could free her from almost any situation.

Except not having a passport.

It was easy to get Jiro and Yasuo - sober but hung-over - to confess the truth of their actions, and for the charges of assault against Mustang to be dropped. Her presence on the island was not so readily discounted.

“We have no record of you flying here from the United States,” intoned a diminutive inspector, rifling a manila file. “If you were on a cruise ship, that information would be available to us, as well. Unless you can produce the proper documentation, we must presume you are here illegally, and will be deported.”

She’d never taken her passport from the backpack pocket since her return from Scotland. She didn’t think she’d be needing it, even after the abrupt excursion to Italy a few months earlier. “I’m a foreign exchange student,” she lied. “Researching sword-making techniques over summer vacation.”

“If that were the case, you would still have a passport.”

“I do. Just... not on me.”

“Then, you have twelve hours to retrieve it and present it, or we will take you into custody.”

Had she wanted to bother, it wouldn't have taken twelve minutes to fetch the passport from her closet in Montana. She wanted to stay in Sakurai, though, and watch the katana being made - and that would take longer than twelve hours.

Experience had taught her she could make herself inconspicuous. Bowing to the inspector, she left the police station, rounded the corner, and changed her hair from auburn to black. But for the shape of her eyes, she could have passed for a local resident.

Rick didn't even recognize her when she walked into the elder Shimoto's workshop. "May I help you?"

"It's me, Rick."

"What the..."

Her tale was interrupted by the long, narrow block of steel being pulled from the forge and painstakingly beaten flat, then bent to leave a U-shaped gap in the middle. Another length of metal - this one with a lower carbon concentration - had been formed to fit that gap. When the two merged, the resulting blade would be flexible to withstand the impact of the strongest blows, yet hard enough to hold a sharp edge.

She told him about the inspector's threat during lunch. "Without the red hair, they won't be able to find me, more so if I'm wearing a kimono."

"What if they come to question my family?" Rick objected.

"They won't. Now those two drunks have been put in their place, the matter should be closed..."

"You don't understand, Mustang. Those two drunks, as you called them, have lost face because of you. Yes, they were wrong for lying, but that doesn't matter. The mayor will not be pleased when the inspector reports the truth. His son's behavior may cost him re-election, and no punishment could change the public's mind about the mayor's worthiness to hold office. Things are different here."

"What are you saying? To regain face, those two may do something... drastic?"

"They will try to cast blame for their misdeed on myself, and my family."

"That's crazy."

"Crazy, yes, but true. That is another reason I do not wish to live here after I receive my degree. The slightest offense can give rise to a wave of retribution..."

"Oh, hell..."

"You two are very serious today," observed Kiyoshi, joining them at the low table with the ease of a much-younger man.

“It is nothing, Grandfather. We were... discussing how soon we should return to the States. The fall semester starts in three weeks...”

“Have you no return tickets for the flight?” He saw the pair exchange questioning glances, and snickered. “Whenever you decide to leave, know that I am glad you came. You have always been special to me, Rick, and your new friend is special, too.”

“How so, Grandfather?”

“She has a unique presence compared to most Americans I have met. Almost as if she were trained in Bushido.”

Mustang bowed. “I am honored by your compliment.”

“And, I am honored to be making your katana. Already, I can tell it will be a five-body blade of the highest quality.”

“A five-body blade?”

“In the old days,” Rick explained, “they would test katanas by hacking body parts off convicted criminals. A five-body blade would, well, cut through five bodies in one stroke.”

Startled by this description, Mustang swallowed hard. “I... never meant you to make a katana for me,” she told Kiyoshi. “I merely wanted to watch one being made...”

“While you watch it, you infuse it with your energy. Who else, then, should possess it?”

“But, I can’t pay you...”

“It is my gift. Once it is completed, and polished, I will send it to you.”

“Domo arigato, honored one.”

“Thank you for being a friend to my grandson. I was uncertain, when he traveled so far away, if he would have a good life. I see now, he does.”

Darkness had fallen by the time the three left the workshop. Kiyoshi had encouraged Mustang to help him mix the charcoal and clay compound which would coat the blade during its final heating and quenching. She wished she would have a chance to see that process, but knew time was their enemy now.

Time, and the mayor’s son. Less than a block from the workshop, a group of twenty youths in jeans and t-shirts surrounded the trio, looking like any gang which all too commonly threatened American cities. A few had pistols drawn, others held knives. Instinctively, Rick, Mustang and Kiyoshi stood with their backs together, to prevent attacks from the rear.

Rick hissed to Mustang, “I don’t want my grandfather hurt.”

“No one will get hurt, but what about all this ‘saving face’ business?”

“A show of strength - us against all of them - would make the situation worse. The only remedy is for one of us to fight one of them.”

“Yasuo?”

“No,” Rick speculated. “He’s a coward when he’s sober, which is why this crowd is with him - to fight for him. It has to be me, against Jiro, because he accused you of assault...”

“Since it was me Jiro accused, then it should be me he fights.”

“Then, I would lose face, letting a girl fight while I stood by, idle. Besides, you don’t know the first thing...”

“Quit jabbering, you two!” scolded Kiyoshi, fists raised. “I’ll pick who fights; they’ll respect my decision.”

“As you wish, Grandfather,” Rick agreed.

Kiyoshi stepped toward Yasuo. “Who among you has actually been wronged by my grandson and his friend?”

The mayor’s son bowed, as did Jiro.

“Then, the rest of you will remain neutral. The first one who intervenes will be forever sorry.”

The swordsmith pulled four stick matches from his shirt pocket. He broke two in half before arranging all four in his hand so the sulfur-coated heads were at equal height. He offered Yasuo the first draw. He pulled a long match.

Jiro yanked a short match, as did Mustang.

III

A ring of bodies formed on the quiet street corner. Mustang took a few deep breaths, standing near Rick and his grandfather.

“Say the word, and I’ll take your place,” Rick advised.

“No, thanks. It’s for the best.”

“This won’t take long,” gloated Jiro, stripping off his black shirt. He shuffled toward the middle of the circle, shaking his arms and legs. Possibly a trained fighter, from his toned muscles, he outweighed her by at least forty pounds.

She warned, “Remember what happened the last time you touched me.”

“I was drunk then, and hallucinating.”

“You’ll be telling your grandchildren about *this* hallucination when you’re old and grey.”

Jiro aimed a punch at her head; she dodged, being nailed instead by a stinging round-house kick to the chest. The blow knocked her into the crowd, who jostled her roughly before pushing her back toward their comrade.

She stumbled and ran straight into another punch. Blood gushed from her nose. Rick tugged Kiyoshi's arm. "Stop this!" he pleaded.

"No, my boy. She will triumph. She is letting him save face."

"By letting herself be killed?"

"Be silent, and watch."

Indeed, Jiro grew tired after ten minutes battering Mustang, proving he wasn't in as good condition as she'd suspected. His friends had new respect for the girl, who withstood every strike, and managed to come back with a few of her own, throwing him off balance.

The philosophy of saving face, as Mustang interpreted it, meant battling fairly, win or lose. Her opponent, though, seeing his advantage diminish, employed underhanded tricks, like tripping her and grabbing her hair. No one who resorted to cheating deserved to save face. And, if it meant she'd have to fight every thug huddled around Yasuo to convince them the Shimoto family should be left alone, she would.

As Jiro yanked her head backward, his fingers entwined in long black tresses, she kned him in the groin. When he doubled over, she clasped her hands together and swung the double fist at his head. He collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

"This ends here," she declared. "If you want to save face in Sakurai, behave like men, not spoiled children. Do not act in ways to disgrace your parents, nor disgrace yourself by lies. This I promise you: if any of you threaten the Shimoto family or slander their honored name, your fate will be worse than his."

At her feet, a puff of smoke expanded into a shaft of flame fifteen feet high. As Yasuo and his friends fled in terror, some shouted, "Fudo!"

The fire vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving three alone on the street. "How did you..." Kiyoshi puzzled, waving toward the singed cobbles.

"Long story," answered Rick, tearing a strip of his shirt to wipe the blood from Mustang's face. He added, under his breath, "Which I still have trouble understanding."

"Why?" Mustang probed.

"I've heard about the Harry Potter movies, and seen *Bewitched* re-runs on cable in the middle of the night. You don't wave your arms, or babble nonsense..."

She brushed his hands from her cheeks. "It isn't necessary, thankfully." Limping toward the Shimoto home, she asked, "What is Fudo?"

"The god of fire and wisdom," Kiyoshi replied. "By tomorrow, all Nara Prefecture will believe Fudo has descended the mountain."

Mustang couldn't help laughing. If it took the perceived protection of a deity for Yasuo and his friends to leave the Shimotos be, she could oblige.

She and Rick sat in the garden that night, a crescent moon overhead. Mustang loved the architecture of the home, an "L" shape, hiding expertly sculpted trees and brilliantly colored flowers from the street. Rather than doors, sliding shoji panels opened from every room, to bring the outdoors right inside. It felt great to relax, especially after the way her body had been battered, causing black-and-blue discoloration on her arms and midsection. She had no idea how she would navigate sleeping on the futon spread across the tatami-mat floor, or eat at the low tables the next few days.

"Grandfather has bought me a ticket back to Montana," Rick informed her. "He wanted to know whether he should buy you one, too, but I told him to wait."

"He didn't ask how you got here without a ticket in the first place?"

"Yes, he did. I told him we came over on a private jet with a friend of your father, who had business in Tokyo."

"Did he know you were lying?"

"I think so, but he didn't say anything."

"He's not scared of me."

"No, he honors the old ways, and understands there are inexplicable mysteries in every culture. My parents, on the other hand..."

"Would rather I left?"

"The neighbors are talking. Some of the worst gossips in the city live on this block, I think. They're speculating we're getting married, or you're a wealthy man's daughter, come to buy out the family business and commercialize it."

Mustang sighed, "People are the same all over the world."

"No more truthful words have ever been spoken," said Kiyoshi, from the doorway of his bedroom.

The two young people turned toward him. He smoked a long-stemmed, small-bowled pipe. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop. It's such a pleasant night, and I couldn't sleep."

"That's all right," Mustang remarked.

"You've been to the doctor?"

"No, sir. There's no need."

"From the swelling, I can tell your nose is broken, young lady, and maybe three or more ribs. I cannot send you back to your parents with such injuries untreated."

"I'm a bit bruised and sore, but otherwise unharmed."

“Nonsense. You would have to be the Immoveable Fudo himself to sustain only bruises from Jiro’s beating.”

Rick gripped her shoulder. “Give in, or he’ll go on like this all night.”

“Honored one, may I show you something?” Mustang persisted, not shifting her attention from Kiyoshi.

“You may.”

“It will be my gift to you, as thanks for your gift of the katana.”

She directed Rick to fetch the bow and arrows she’d seen in his room.

“No way!” he protested.

“Please.”

He acquiesced, reappearing in moments. Mustang walked the length of the garden, and faced him. Kiyoshi stood on his bedroom threshold, curious.

“Shoot,” Mustang commanded.

Rick countered, “You’re nuts, you know?”

“I’m as sane as you are. Shoot, and if you aim badly, it’s your turn next.”

Drawing the bow string, Rick leveled the shaft at Mustang’s heart. Her hands rested at her sides, her eyes wide open. In a flash it was all over - the arrow stopped less than an centimeter from Mustang’s chest and fell to the ground. It might have hit a stone wall.

She picked up the undamaged shaft and gave it to Kiyoshi for his inspection. “Now you know: Jiro barely touched me.”

How was he to know she was lying?

“Are you truly a living god?” Kiyoshi pondered.

“No, more a victim of fate.”

He studied her solemn expression for a few seconds, then retreated into his room.

“Well, you’ve definitely made a lasting impression on him,” snarled Rick, coming up behind her.

“It was either show him this, or answer his questions in the morning, when all the bruises have vanished.”

“Huh?”

“Part of my power allows me to heal myself - and others. I can even raise the dead.”

“You’ve raised the dead?”

“You know who Francis of Assisi is?”

“Sure. Every October on campus, they hold a blessing of the animals in his honor.”

“And if I told you I’ve met him in person?”

“I’d say you’re... crazy.”

“CNN broadcast the sermon he delivered from Assisi this past April.”

“A clever impersonator.”

Mustang grew agitated. “What do you want? I can bring the Buddha around for a chat, if it’ll prove anything...”

“All right, all right. Calm down. Given what I’ve just seen, I have to believe you.”

“Thanks,” she mocked.

“You don’t seem to grasp how... overwhelming it can be to deal with all this.”

“Imagine what it’s like having such power thrust upon you, without asking. Most of last year, though I tried going to school a few times, I was mostly afraid, in case I said the wrong thing and started the building on fire, or killed somebody.”

“You can... kill people?”

“Nature can kill, so can I.”

“If I knew I had that capacity, I’d probably go insane.”

“There are days, I think I am. Then, I remember who gave me the power...”

They sat on the steps, a gentle breeze rustling the garden foliage, until the sun peeked over the horizon. Mustang told Rick everything about Scotland, Jack Parsons and her power, and he hesitantly accept the truth. “I’m surprised the CIA hasn’t come looking for you.”

“The FBI, you mean. Why should they care about me? I’m just a kid living on a horse ranch...”

“Who could destroy the world with a word.” He smiled at the mountains, alight with the dawn. “Stay here with me, where you’re safe.”

“I’m only safe here so long as my hair stays black,” she chortled. “You’ve changed your mind about using the plane ticket, then?”

“I’m not certain anymore. What you’ve told me has made me doubt my own choices...”

“Why? You’re very good with the animals.”

“You heard what Master Watanabe said, how I could have been a samurai master if I’d stuck with the training. Grandfather thinks I could become a swordsmith...”

“Nobody dictates what you do with your life; it’s your own decision. You may have many talents, but pursuing the right one is the only way to attain contentment.”

Rick eyed her harshly. “You speak like one of our revered ancestors.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You speak of contentment, not happiness. People today are too worried about happiness to be content.”

“There is no such thing as happiness. I could use my power to be rich and famous, but I wouldn’t be happy. I’d rather live out my days on the ranch, sitting beneath a tree and listening to birds sing.” She watched the flowers open their petals to greet the day. “How soon will you be leaving?”

“A week from tomorrow.”

“What will you tell my parents when you show up to collect your truck and trailer?”

“What *should* I tell them?”

“Just that I’m safe, and I’ll be home soon.”

“And if they ask about how we disappeared?”

“It’s not the first time for me. You can tell them you went after me, to make sure I was okay which, in a way, is true.” She yawned. “I’m going to bed. Wake me around ten.”

The following week Mustang enjoyed more than any seven days of her life. Her injuries merely memories, her black hair and kimono the perfect disguise, she grew to appreciate Japanese culture first-hand, observing the craftsmen wielding their hammers beside the forge, and wandering Sakurai shops. She luxuriated in sleeping late, after long nights in the scented garden.

“What do you think, Grandfather?” Rick queried over breakfast his last day.

“About what, my boy?”

“About Mustang.”

“If you want me to say I think she’s a goddess incarnate, I cannot. I will remind you of the story I told when you were a child of seven: the Buddhist monks who could walk through walls, levitate and make trees blossom in winter. Do you remember?”

“I remember, but I thought it was a bedtime fable.”

“Oh, no, my boy. I sat at table with those men many times when I visited their temple in the south. They had unraveled the complicated knot of truth, and conquered their own fears. Your friend has done the same, though at a much younger age. She is very human but, as I said before, very special.” The elder Shimoto sipped his tea. “Shouldn’t you be packing?”

“Packing what?” Rick retorted. “I left all my belongings in Montana.”

“You traveled all this way without luggage?”

“Grandfather, we didn’t fly here on an airplane. Your Buddhist monks could walk through walls - we rode a lightning bolt half-way around the globe in the blink of an eye.”

“Very special, indeed,” was Kiyoshi’s only comment.

The 747 departed the Kyoto airport on schedule; Mustang watched the vapor trails until they merged with high-altitude cirrus clouds. She yearned to return home, but not by spending 18 hours in flight over the ocean. Rick’s parents decided to remain in the city to shop, while Kiyoshi accompanied the girl on the train.

“I saw the mayor this morning on the way to my workshop,” he began.

“How is that esteemed gentleman?”

“He is well, though worried about his son.”

“Why worried?”

“Yasuo has not come out of his room for nearly a week. He has erected an altar, and offers constant prayers of reparation to Fudo...”

Mustang thought she detected a hint of sarcasm in the old man’s cultured tenor, and stole a glance at the lined countenance, framed by wisps of white. His brown eyes twinkled mischievously.

“More humorous still: Jiro and his friends took the bus to Tokyo the morning after our... little meeting.”

He shook with silent laughter, as did Mustang. “Rick need not fret about your safety, then,” she said. “I will be sure to pass along the news when I see him back home.”

“You will be leaving us?”

“I cannot impose on your hospitality any longer. The problems I caused have been resolved, and my parents are no doubt worried.”

“You have not told them?”

“They... are not like you, honored one. They have very... inflexible ideas about life.”

“Ah, like my son and his wife.”

“Very much like them.”

“Will we wake up tomorrow and find your bed empty?” he probed.

“It would be for the best, I think.”

“Write down your address before you go, and slide it under my door. You will have the katana in your hands before the new year.”

“I would have loved to see it completed.”

“That would take too much time. The polisher will have it many days, rubbing the blade to a brilliant finish. Then, it must be engraved...”

They disembarked at the Sakurai station and strolled home in the afternoon heat. Mustang's final meal with the Shimotos was a tense affair, almost like dinner with her parents at the ranch. Rising from the table after picking at the sushi and rice with trembling chopsticks, Mustang bowed to Rick's parents and thanked them for welcoming her beneath their roof. Tradition dictated they accept the tribute, so the couple bowed in return.

Guessing at the time difference between Japan and Montana, Mustang hung the kimono in the closet, napping on the futon in her tank top and jeans until 2:00 AM. By the time she walked to a nearby park - to avoid damaging any property when the lightning struck - the sun would be rising on the previous day over her beloved horses.

What she didn't anticipate was encountering a pair of policemen, enforcing a curfew for those under age 18. When they ordered her to show identification, she sprinted down an alley and along the adjoining street. She halted at a wide intersection, no cars coming in either direction.

"I'm going home!" she shouted.

The uniformed pair tumbled on the sidewalk, blinded by the flash of light and force of the strike.

IV

Any hopes Mustang entertained of convincing her parents this four-week absence was a dream on their part were swiftly dashed. Twilight casting eerie shadows, the lightning bolt deposited her at the end of the drive; she jogged to the house and climbed through her unlocked bedroom window. When Maggie looked in around 7:30, her daughter was asleep beneath the blanket.

The woman fainted in shock.

Mustang scrambled to her mother's side and tapped her cheek until she regained consciousness. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"You... you're home!" she gasped.

"I've been home. Is there a problem?"

"You've been gone... a month!"

The dispute continued, to no avail, remaining a sore point between the two throughout the day. Moreso for Maggie, because when she insisted her husband find out the truth, he refused to speak of his daughter's absence, or acknowledge her presence at all.

Rick arrived on Thursday, courtesy of a friend driving a bronze Chrysler Sebring. Red haired once more, Mustang stood inside the lightning-damaged trailer, bending the mangled metal to its original shape.

“You think you can fix it?” Rick chuckled.

“Sure. It’s my responsibility, since it was me who...”

“Never mind. When did you get back?”

“Before you did, probably.”

“You left the same day?”

“After your grandfather told me about Yasuo and Jiro.”

“He told me at the airport, before I boarded the plane.”

“He’s an incredible man.” She grasped another chunk of metal with the pliers. “My dad still needs those horses shod.”

“So do most of the ranchers in the county. I’ll be busy right until school starts.”

By the time Rick changed the flattened trailer tire, Mustang had restored the trailer’s body to showroom condition, thanks to some maneuvering at the molecular level. An interesting spectacle, which she’d discovered the previous spring when the bit snapped on a bridle. Instead of asking her father to repair it, she’d manipulated the natural forces, and the result was better than new.

The task finished, she retired to the barn, while Rick fired up the portable forge.

She saw him again during dinner the next evening. He popped in the kitchen door to report his duties completed. Joe Duryea scribbled a check and, with a respectful bow, Rick departed.

Joe resumed eating the roast beef and potatoes, mumbling to himself. Every meal since her return had been silent torture; in many ways, Mustang wondered if she should have stayed in Japan.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” she finally erupted.

“I’m tired of you wasting your time, girl. This past school year, you didn’t earn one credit, because you didn’t attend enough days to turn in any assignments or take the exams. You should be a senior this fall, but you haven’t even picked your classes...”

“Fine, I’ll go to school, and make up what I missed. Will that make you happy?”

Maggie patted Mustang’s arm. “Your father just wants what’s best for you, hon. He knows you’re smarter than you pretend to be...”

“Look, Mom, I can cut a deal with the teachers, double up on my classes, and still graduate by next summer...”

“The principal told me you have until the start of the fall term to make up your junior year classes, or you’ll be held back with the other delinquents,” Joe declared.

“And, how in hell will I manage that?”

“Oral exams,” replied Maggie. “The English, World History, Geometry, Chemistry and Spanish teachers have agreed to administer the tests on August 25th.”

“Cram a year’s worth of lessons into less than a month?” Mustang gaped. “There’s no way...”

“Then, out you go.”

The teen met her father’s sullen gaze, and knew he wasn’t joking. She’d long since accepted the fact he resented her for not being born male, and had tried to compensate by excelling with the horses, but nothing seemed to please him.

She lowered her head in submission. “All right.”

Try as she might to study the course materials stacked on the shaky desk in her bedroom, Mustang spent every afternoon watching for the mail truck, and a long, narrow package from Japan. She realized it might be months before the katana arrived, but she couldn’t restrain the anticipation.

She lost ten pounds in the course of two weeks, thanks to the stress of the forthcoming exams. Better for her to be given written tests of 200 hundred questions each, than have to stand before the teachers and recite a string of answers. With her hair-trigger temper, the slightest degree of frustration might bring down the school roof on all their heads.

The Spanish text was ignored entirely - all Mustang need do was utter a command, and the teacher would hear her talking as if she’d been born in Madrid. Or, if she preferred, she could actually speak the language fluently herself. It couldn’t be considered cheating, because it was the way her mind now functioned.

Chemistry and Geometry were not her forte at all, but she discovered an ability to memorize proofs and the Periodic Table once she set her power in motion. She could quote Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* verbatim, and *Twelfth Night* issued forth as if she were a Shakespearian scholar.

History would not be a problem, either, except for the self-righteous attitude of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High’s department head. He expected students to gain more from their journey into the past than just lists of dates and names.

Maggie drove her to school that Friday morning. Walking into the library, Mustang felt like she’d been dropped in the midst of an enemy mine field. The

expressions on the six teachers' faces confirmed they didn't want to be there any more than she did.

"Let's get this done and over," spat Ben Easterly, the Chemistry instructor.

With only short breaks for sips of water and the occasional trip to the restroom, the teen was grilled like a sirloin steak over an open fire. She managed to retain her composure, a feat which grew easier as time passed, because the teachers were actually pleased by the quality of her answers.

She felt like a fool leaving the room, ears ringing with congratulations, her hand shaken until her wrist ached. She could imagine the principal phoning her parents later to recommend an accelerated course schedule for the new academic year.

Actually, that administrator suspected some form of cheating, she'd done so well. The offer he made to reinstate Mustang as a senior was conditional on her attending every class, every day, and maintaining above average grades. Any unexcused absence or other infraction, and her junior credits would be revoked.

Why does everything I do backfire? she moaned inwardly during the ride home.

Her angst deepened when she walked into the kitchen and saw the *Helena Chronicle* spread on the table. The front page headline read, "Horrible Crash on I-15." The blurred image in the photo struck her as vaguely familiar. The pickup truck was wrapped around a tree trunk, with the enclosed trailer it had been towing flipped on top of the cab.

Mustang dropped onto the chair and started reading.

According to the Montana State Police report and witness interviews, the pickup had blown the rear left tire as it traveled north along the interstate highway at 65 mph. Because of the trailer's weight, it had been impossible for the driver to regain control of the vehicle. It had plowed through a guard rail, down a steep embankment, through a barbed wire fence and into a 200-year-old tree.

The driver was pronounced dead at the scene.

His name: Richard Shimoto.

"Oh, hell..." Mustang wept.

In her mind's eye, she envisioned Kiyoshi Shimoto learning of his grandson's death. The swordsmith loved the young man - that much had been evident during her visit to Sakurai. Would the strength and tranquility so integrated into his life sustain him after such a horrendous tragedy? she mused.

She felt herself in a bizarre kind of limbo, not knowing what was happening with the funeral arrangements or where Rick would be buried. She would have willingly made the trip to the university campus for a memorial service, but

suspected his remains would be flown back to Japan for interment. Picking up the phone was one option, though her father would fly into a rage at the cost of an overseas call. She had only to speak the words, and she could be back in the land of the rising sun in a matter of minutes...

Thus, she waited, devouring the daily paper and watching every minute of the evening news broadcasts. The autopsy, fortunately, showed Rick had not been drunk at the time of the accident; he'd spent the day shoeing horses on a ranch near Cascade, and was on his way back to campus. An uncle from California, whom Mustang didn't know, was handling disposition of the body on the family's behalf.

The night before her own classes started, she trekked through the woods on her father's property, the one way she knew to restore a small measure of equilibrium. "If I am at fault in any of this, Rick," she whispered to the wind, "I'm sorry. I never intended to drag you along on my wild adventures, but I can't say I wasn't glad to spend time with you and your grandfather. You will be honored in my memory. Be at peace, my friend."

With a lighter heart, she climbed through her window, flopped on the bed and fell asleep.

Mustang lost count how many times that Tuesday she nearly sent fellow students flying down the corridors, or forcibly silenced their tongues. Snippish comments about her reappearance in school, sideways glances, or overt insults had her biting her lip so hard, she drew blood.

She'd pretty much given up on the postman delivering the package from Japan. The Shimotos would be in mourning; there was no rush to send the katana now.

When the letter arrived in early September, with its combination of Oriental calligraphy, English lettering, and cherry blossom air-mail stamps, Mustang opened it gingerly. Smoothing the stiff parchment, a photograph was nestled within. Setting it aside, she admired the neat vertical rows of symbols, unreadable to most Westerners.

"What does it say?" asked Maggie, stirring a pot of chili on the stove.

Mustang responded, "You want to read it?"

"If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to," snapped her mother.

Grabbing her backpack, the girl carried the missive into her bedroom and closed the door.

"I want to be able to read this letter."

Not that the script on the paper changed in any way; how her eyes transmitted the images to her brain was altered. Almost instantaneously, she wished it had not been.

Dear Miss Duryea,

My wife found your address among my father's belongings. According to the notes he left, he planned to send you the katana he'd finished engraving after its return from the polisher. We thought you might appreciate this photo, to see his work. The inscription reads, "This five-body blade forged with respect for she who commands nature with a smile."

It is my great misfortune to tell you of my honored father's death. Upon being notified of Rick's fatal accident, his heart failed him. He now lies with our revered ancestors in the Sakurai cemetery.

Now that our family's tradition as swordsmiths has come to an end, it is our intention to donate Father's last katana to a worthy museum, so future generations will know what a skilled craftsman he was. We are aware Rick kept the katana Father presented to him and, if it can be found, request you also donate this to the university archives.

Please accept our humble apologies if our decision causes you disappointment. We are sure you will understand. To lose both our son, and our honored father in so short a span has devastated us, and we are doing what little we can to preserve their memories for years to come.

Sincerely,
Y. Shimoto

A myriad of possibilities swirled inside Mustang's skull. What chance was there, at this late stage, the katana could be located? Had Rick replaced it in the trailer, after transporting it back from Japan? If it had been hanging on the rack, could it have survived the crash, undamaged? Or had some police investigator discovered it, and commandeered it for his own private weapons collection? Might a curious scavenger have stolen it, or was it tucked among Rick's clothes and books, gathered from his dorm room and stuffed into boxes, awaiting shipment to his next of kin?

To get any sort of answers, the girl would've needed a contact at the State Police post, or at the *Helena Chronicle*. She had neither. Not having learned to drive a car, she couldn't just hop in her father's Chevy Suburban and drive to the crash site, or the university campus, and perform the search in person. Both locations were too far away to ride a horse, bicycle or walk.

That left two options. Riding a lightning bolt from place to place across most of Montana would surely cause more damage to her hands than the periodic journeys she'd already experienced, especially with her palms barely healed. That more than one katana made by Kiyoshi Shimoto would be within a 200 mile radius of the ranch, though, made bringing the sword to her the better choice.

To prevent any accidental mishap, Mustang grabbed her jean jacket and set off from the house. She trekked to a fresh-mowed pasture beyond a thick stand of trees. Standing in the brilliant sunlight, she picked her words with extreme care.

"Place on the ground before me the katana and sheath made by Kiyoshi Shimoto for his grandson, Richard Shimoto, from wherever it may be, and regardless of its condition."

Beneath her feet, the earth tremored. The gentle breeze transformed into a roaring wind. Thunder sounded across the clear blue sky before, deposited by a deliberate and pinpoint tornado, the katana appeared among the grass clippings.

In two pieces.

Mustang knelt beside the broken sword and examined the metal. The description of Rick's crash gave her reason to guess the blade had been sandwiched between the trailer chassis and the truck frame, and the pressure had severed it in half.

She had no qualms about writing Rick's parents to tell them the fate of their son's prized possession which, under ordinary circumstances, couldn't be mended. Keeping the pieces would then pose no problem, except she'd want the katana restored to its original form, to hang on her bedroom wall.

And, if she could make use of the natural elements to fuse the metal seamlessly, should she not, then, do so, and donate it to the university?

"I can do what they did to me," she rationalized. "I'll take a photo like it is now, and send the print with a polite letter. They denied me the gift Kiyoshi intended for me; I'm within my rights to deny them their request."

In her heart, though, she knew the chances of following through on the spiteful plan were slim to none. Not that her parents had raised her right - her father had basically ignored her, and her mother didn't understand her love of nature, and maintained a disinterested interest - she'd learned from Kiyoshi and Rick both the importance of living honorably.

Stripping off her jacket, Mustang spread it on the grass. She carefully laid the katana on the cloth so it looked whole. Then, much the same as she repaired Rick's trailer, she commanded the atoms of fire-forged iron and carbon to merge.

She slid the blade into its sheath, and carried it back to the house. In her bedroom, she composed a letter to the university - odd how her handwriting now looked so similar to the block print in Jack Parsons' journals - and foraged in the barn for a cardboard box to hold the donation. After school on Monday, she would run to the post office to mail the package, and her parents wouldn't question why she arrived home on the late bus.

A corner of Mustang's heart still envied Rick - he wouldn't have to face the scorn and criticism of his parents anymore, and he and his grandfather were together on whatever plane of existence the afterlife offered. For her, however, the drudgery of life continued, with her power making the daily routine a bit more exciting, albeit challenging, too.