

The Mustang Chronicles:

Battlefield Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

School could be so boring at times.

It was all Mustang could do some days to stay awake through her senior classes. She saw no need for Trigonometry or Physics, home economics or foreign languages - especially when a mere command enabled her brain to understand various dialects. Only English and Government held her interest and, then, because the teachers had a unique way of presenting the material.

Mustang, listed in Montana's Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School's computer system under the name "Elizabeth Duryea", flexed her fingers waiting for the bell. She'd acquiesced to her parents' wish and resumed taking classes in September, though she could still barely hold a pencil with her deeply scarred hands. Numerous times in the past year, the red-headed horse rancher's daughter had "ridden the lightning" - how else to phrase what happened when she traveled through space without the aid of any conventional mode of transportation? Each time, the stray bolts of electrical energy had charred her palms to the point she feared damage to muscles and tendons.

The nerves were intact, however - excruciating pain originating from the wounds proved as much. The way her muscles twitched when she bumped a wall or desk confirmed them to be in working order; her fingers could still move, meaning the tendons hadn't been severed...

Ultimate power could be a real drag.

More than a year after her trip to Scotland, the girl harbored a continuing resentment against her maternal grandmother, for issuing the dying wish which sent her across the Atlantic. The same latent anger was directed at Jack Parsons, rocket scientist and occult enthusiast, who had tricked her and transferred his command of the natural elements - and other phenomena, she later discovered - to her.

During the passing period, Mustang hurried to her locker, spinning the combination lock an agonizing challenge. She shoved her books on the narrow shelf; why were so many trees wasted on such useless material? she puzzled. She'd earned credits for her junior year by taking oral exams over the summer, never cracking the cover on one text the prior nine months, thanks to her "adventures"... The principal had agreed to the arrangement with the proviso the teen wouldn't skip so much as a single day - a bad habit in the past - thus preventing her from being a year behind others her age.

She breezed into sixth hour not even carrying a notebook. Unlike other instructors, who tortured students with unannounced pop quizzes, Tom Nugent

had an easy-going style. He regularly invited speakers to keep his classes informed of widespread views on governmental practices and politics, hoping they would expand their knowledge base in order to be better prepared to vote and interact in the real world as adults.

This particular Friday, a survivor of World War II concentration camps would speak on the potential dangers of dictatorships. White-haired, bespectacled and stooped, George Solomon gave a heavily-accented, moving account of his capture in the Jewish ghetto and years behind barbed wire at Dachau. He showed them numbers tattooed on his left forearm, encouraging the youngsters to make the trip to Germany and visit the camps, now museums memorializing the six million dead.

“To say I became numb to the devastation,” he concluded, his baritone cracking, “is not accurate. To continue living, I forced myself to hope... Still, I felt each death of both friends and strangers like a hammer blow to my skull, until the day the Allies liberated us.”

A lively question and answer session followed. Twirling an auburn lock around her finger, Mustang listened to the points her classmates raised. They demanded explanations why the German people so blindly followed Hitler, why the Jews didn’t fight for their freedom.

“People fear death,” Solomon replied. “Some felt it was better to live oppressed than be shot in the street, or tortured until the body gave up in defeat. Both German civilians and the Jews were subjected to the same fate, if they objected to Herr Hitler and his policies.”

Three o’clock struck, and students filed from the room. A few lagged behind to make final comments, with Mustang pulling up the rear. Solomon was already shaking Tom Nugent’s hand, a trenchcoat draped on his arm.

“Mr. Solomon?” Mustang ventured.

The man turned.

“What do you think about those who deny the Holocaust took place?”

“They are ignorant and stupid, no better than those who denied Hitler was a monster,” came the gruff retort. “If they could experience what those people endured for just one day, they would quickly change their tune.”

“I wish I could experience what you went through. It might help me understand why people can be so foolish...”

No lightning, despite the girl’s expectation her ill-chosen words would conjure the phenomenon to catapult her thousands of miles. This time, a weird rippling effect enveloped her, like gentle ocean waves propelling her sideways. She succumbed to blackness - not unconsciousness - then...

Desert?

Mustang had no opportunity to orient herself in these bizarre surroundings before screams and gunfire reached her ears. Bombs whistled and exploded on all sides. Involuntarily, she fell prone, tasting sand in her mouth. Her eyes glimpsed a helmet roll across the dune - but, not *her* eyes. She sensed she was seeing through the eyes of another, and the realization was eerie, to be sure.

“Achtung! Schnell!” barked a masculine voice.

Legs not her own scrambled upright and jogged in tandem with a squad of uniformed men. She'd seen the uniforms before, and it took a few minutes for her to grasp they weren't images from recent news footage. She recognized costumes from old movies - World War II movies.

German uniforms, and the soldiers toted rifles with bayonets.

“Oh, hell...” she muttered.

“Schnell, Feldweibel!”

More bombs; the group dropped in unison. Moving again after shrapnel rained down, the legs beneath Mustang now limped. A twisted metal chunk had penetrated the thigh, and the girl could feel searing pain, as if her tissue - not someone else's - had been invaded by the offending object.

The soldier collapsed. Mustang watched two men hoist the casualty and carry him to a tent encampment on the horizon. Low moans emitted from the mouth - the voice of the person with whom she had bonded? Drenched in sweat from intense heat, stretched on a cot, a doctor in grubby uniform bent over her.

He was called away almost instantly. “Herr Doktor, Generalfeldmarschall Rommel...”

Some control over the situation - if not the body itself - was necessary, the teen acknowledged. “I wish I could understand what they're saying, and that they'll understand me.” The dictate audible to her alone, it was no less effective.

“Herr Doktor, Field Marshal Rommel is not feeling well,” related an arrogant officer. “He requires your presence at once.”

The doctor answered, “The Field Marshal knows my first priority is the wounded. I will see him within the hour.”

Frustrated, the officer marched from the tent. The doctor, his oval face bronzed and leathery, shifted his attention back to Mustang.

“So, Sergeant, you didn't duck fast enough?” he joked, examining the bloody leg wound.

The girl tried to speak; the soldier groaned incoherently.

Signaling a corpsman, the doctor instructed him to fetch a scalpel and bandages. "He's delirious; he won't feel a thing. After the sutures are in place, we can treat the fever."

To her horror, Mustang watched a sharp blade widen the opening around the jagged gash, and blood pour onto the cot and the ground. The soldier might be semi-conscious; *she* was fully aware of her surroundings, and felt nauseous.

She wondered what would happen if she did vomit. She wondered where - and when - she was. In a way, she got the impression her position was similar to a cartoon character's "conscience", drawn sitting on its shoulder and giving bad, or good, advice.

The doctor tied off a gauze wrapping and smiled at his patient. "There is muscle damage, but he should be able to walk in a few days," the corpsman was told. "Make sure he gets a dose of penicillin as soon as the supply trucks arrive."

"The trucks are weeks overdue," remarked the young man, his blond mane close-cropped in military style.

"I know. There's nothing we can do."

He moved to the next cot, where shrapnel had penetrated the soldier's boot into his foot. Mustang stared at the pointed canvas roof, listening to the continued sounds of battle in the distance.

Until a commanding shadow filled the space left by the open tent-flap.

Hers weren't the only eyes to focus on the tanned, lean figure. Even the most severely wounded gazed upon the man. The doctor abandoned his ministrations and rose to attention.

"Guten Morgen, Herr Doktor," the authoritative statement rang through the chamber.

"Guten Morgen, Herr Feldmarschall."

"If I may have a moment of your time..."

"Of course, of course."

The doctor led Erwin Rommel to the rear of the tent. Mustang strained to hear the conversation, and shuddered when a hypodermic needle was produced and thrust into the older man's arm. She'd always hated needles.

Seconds later, Rommel approached the cot.

"The vitamins should help you recover your strength, Herr Feldmarschall. You must get more sleep..."

Rommel paused near the pair of still-booted feet attached to Mustang's host body. "What happened to Feldwebel Schiller?"

"From what I was told, his tank was destroyed during the Allied bombing this morning, and he caught a mortar fragment in the retreat."

“Will he be all right?”

“If we get the medicines we need to prevent infection...”

“You need your medicines, and the soldiers need food,” Rommel lamented.
“The difficulties of desert warfare.”

Mustang finally recalled the context in which she’d heard the name Rommel - a trivia question on an episode of *Jeopardy*. Known as the “Desert Fox”, he’d coordinated the German tank forces in northern Africa...

“Oh, hell...”

Rommel met her gaze. Had he heard her?

“Schiller?”

“He’s delirious, Herr Feldmarschall...”

“Have your corpsmen carry him to my tent. His younger sister is a classmate of my son, Manfred. I would hate writing home to tell his parents he died not from wounds, but from the sorry conditions here.”

“Jawohl, Herr Feldmarschall.”

Not that Rommel’s was a larger tent, or reinforced to resist the desert winds and blowing sand, but Mustang detected a more organized atmosphere, if that were possible.

Officers filed in and out, consulting the field marshal, delivering radio messages. With his cap off, Rommel appeared thinner - perhaps because of his waning health. Still, his sun-bleached crew-cut and straight back affirmed his control of the *Panzerarmee* troops. Periodically, he glanced up from writing to the cot set up near his make-shift desk.

“If we get out of Tunisia alive, Georg, I will send you home to your sister,” he said to the sleeping soldier, lighting a kerosene lamp against the increasing gloom.

The teen heard him on the fringes of her thoughts. She was intently struggling to determine why she was connected to a man named Schiller in the middle of the African desert during World War II.

“Why am I here?” she vocalized.

Rommel’s pen halted on the paper. “Who speaks?”

The last thing Mustang wanted was to make the German suspect his own sanity. If he did hear her feminine contralto, there could be problems.

If, indeed, she was riding along in this Schiller’s body, could she not control that same body?

“I... am... Schiller,” she declared.

A blast of wind pummeled the canvas. Rommel rushed to secure the flap and, when he returned to the desk, Schiller was sitting upright.

“Georg?” the general marveled.

Unfamiliar lips mimicked the word, pronounced “Gay-org”.

“You should be resting, son...”

“I am... fine, Herr Feldmarschall.”

“Stop that, at once! I tire of being addressed so formally 24 hours a day. Back in Ulm, you used to call me ‘Sir’. I give you leave to do so now.”

Please, sir, tell me, why am I here?”

“Your chance of recovering from your injury is better here than with the other wounded. I did promise your sister I would keep an eye on you.”

“That’s not what I mean,” grumbled Mustang. “Here, in this place. Why am I in Africa?”

Rommel’s thin lips twitched. “Are you saying, you don’t remember... Perhaps I should call Doktor Gruber. You may have suffered a concussion, in addition to the leg wound...”

“No, Herr Feldmarschall. I am all right, truly. You must help me... We are Germans...”

“Correct.”

“In Africa?”

“Yes.”

“Fighting whom?”

“The British and the Americans, naturally.”

“By orders of...”

“The Fuhrer himself.”

She cringed - visibly, given Rommel’s concerned reaction.

“Are you in pain?”

“More than you know,” she admitted. “One more question, and a request.”

“Anything, Georg.”

“What year is this?” Mustang hoped beyond hope this was some re-enactment of a battle, and not...

“It is 1943.”

“Oh, hell...”

Rommel waited patiently until her composure returned.

“Please, do you have a mirror?”

She could tell the general viewed it as an odd request. He nonetheless complied, extracting a small mirror from his shaving kit.

No more did she have the glass in her hands, than she dropped it, to shatter on the plank floor laid inside the tent. She recognized in the reflection the twenty-

year-old version of a man who had - hours before, on her time-line - introduced himself as George Solomon and rendered a stirring account of life in a German concentration camp.

II

“What a damned liar!” hissed Mustang.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel glared at her. “I have no reason to lie to you, Georg...”

The girl looked up and scowled. “Not you, sir. Even though you’re on the wrong side, many books were published analyzing your tactical genius...”

“Wrong side? Georg, you *are* delirious, and if the Gestapo were to hear you say that - wounded or not - you would be shot.”

Fortunately, her other reference had slipped past Rommel, because it would lead to a lot of explaining, and then Schiller *would* be shot. Mustang pondered whether she would die when the bullets ripped through the soldier’s flesh.

“I’m sorry, sir. I must sleep...”

“So should I.”

Extinguishing the lamp, he shuffled to his own cot. Soon, Mustang heard him snoring.

She couldn’t sleep, herself. For one, the chill night air made her uncomfortable. Second, she was so angry at George Solomon/Georg Schiller, she wanted to scream. Adrenaline coursed in the veins of her host; she felt like pacing the floor, and tearing the wooden desk into kindling.

Scrabbling noises outside the tent stifled her rage while simultaneously heightening her awareness. She knew scorpions inhabited the desert, and poisonous snakes - she didn’t want to encounter either. Had she any courage, she would’ve risked lighting the lamp; she didn’t dare lower her feet to the ground.

Faint moonlight cast five human shadows on the tent wall. They weren’t soldiers’ shadows, erect and proud. These were crouched and furtive, up to no good.

The tent flap seemed to fold itself back. Three shoe-blackened faces appeared; one pointed toward Rommel’s slumbering frame.

Advanced high school math was not necessary to put two and two together. These were Allied commandos, hoping to end Germany’s African campaign by kidnaping their chief architect. Mustang wished she’d paid attention in her history classes through the years, to know whether the attempt had been successful.

Then again, she did remember Rommel was involved in the German response to D-Day in 1944. If the Allies had captured him on this mission, they never would've released him to be part of that later invasion. She couldn't let history be altered...

"Not so fast!" she spat.

The men hadn't expected another person to be in the tent, and stopped short. Ropes meant to bind Rommel dangled from their hands. Only one had a weapon drawn, and he aimed it at her.

She tried to stand; the wounded leg wouldn't hold the weight. She pitched forward, knocking two of the commandos to the floor. The clamor roused Rommel; he rolled off the cot and kicked the third man's legs from under him.

As aides and officers rushed the tent, Rommel lifted Mustang from the pile of bodies. "You saved my life, Georg!" he breathed, pulling the young man into a warm embrace. "You have my eternal gratitude!"

All five Allied soldiers were dragged away for interrogation. Calm restored, Rommel poured himself a glass of schnapps, and a half-portion for Mustang.

"From now on, you are on my personal staff, as Oberfeldwebel - First Sergeant," the general remarked. "I shall send a report to Berlin, asking the Fuhrer to reward you for your heroism."

Mustang held up her hands in protest. "No, really. I don't..." Rommel's horrified mien silenced her. She resisted when he seized her fingers, examining the very tangible, very ugly scars on the palms of the body she inhabited.

"Georg, does Doktor Gruber know of these injuries?" snapped the general.

She swallowed hard. "They are nothing, really. An accident when I was younger..." Why they had manifested on Schiller's flesh, she could not say.

The older man accepted the story. He hugged Mustang again. "You are a good boy, Georg. I'm very proud of you."

"Danke."

"Now, back to bed with you. We've a busy day tomorrow, trying to push back the British on the border."

Allowing Schiller's eyes to close in the semblance of sleep, Mustang remained awake, studying Rommel's brooding, chiseled profile as he leaned over the desk, scribbling reports and mapping attacks. Had she done the right thing?

Considering, what *had* she done? She'd tripped and fallen. For that, some colorful ribbon would be pinned on Schiller's uniform.

Crazier still, the accolades heaped on her by other soldiers in the division. They clearly respected Rommel, and were glad of his safety. Going about the business of being a general's aide - albeit, a lesser one - she was saluted and complimented by both privates and captains.

In the evenings, she and Rommel enjoyed games of chess by lantern light. They talked of Ulm, the city on Bavaria's western border near which Rommel lived and Schiller's sister attended school. Discussing news of battles in France and Italy was common, however unpleasant for Mustang.

"What if Herr Hitler and Herr Churchill sat down as we are now to decide the winner of the war?" she proposed one night in late February.

"You know as well as I neither would agree to let a mere game determine the future of the world."

"They would rather shed the blood of thousands to prove their superiority?"

"Georg, dear boy," chuckled Rommel, patting the drumming fingers beside the chess board. "This is my second war. Bloodshed is part and parcel of the human experience."

"It's no laughing matter, sir. It's ludicrous for us to be in the middle of nowhere, chasing the British one minute, having them chase us the next. For what? A few grains of sand?"

"Shh..." he warned. "You are very close to speaking treason."

Biting back further outbursts, Mustang bumped Rommel's queen with her bishop. "Checkmate."

"Interesting gambit," praised the general.

"Bloodless and to the point," she countered. "If I speak treason, sir, you would be wise to heed my words." With that, she rose, clicked her heels in salute, and flopped on her cot, face to the canvas.

"You are so young, Georg," Rommel mused aloud. "Someday, you will see..."

Schiller's leg healed gradually, as Mustang gradually grew accustomed to being inside his body. She went from walking with a cane to marching with the stiff pride shared by every German soldier. Pride - or fear. Already rumors were circulating that Germany was losing ground in Europe, which demoralized Nazi troops across the continent. Rommel didn't have to use propaganda to sustain his men; those who came after him would.

The field marshal rode to the front lines on a daily basis in an open, armored vehicle. Only once did Mustang accompany him. On that occasion, she saw two German Tiger tanks blown apart by incoming shells. She might have

equated the scene with an exploding fire cracker, metal reduced to scrap in the blink of an eye, except for the dead bodies recovered and transported to the base camp.

The words of a rock and roll song resounded in Schiller's skull: "War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing."

Rommel left Africa in March, 1943. During the months to follow, he checked in and out of hospitals, recovering his health. Then, rounds of strategy meetings in Berlin consumed his energies, until he was assigned to Italy as Sicily fell to the Allies. Schiller/Mustang accompanied him throughout, a black and silver Knight's Cross - awarded for valor - hung below the Oberfeldwebel's uniform collar. The year elapsed in a haze of military duties.

Early in 1944, Rommel's staff moved operations to France. Vaguely recalling important historical dates, the teen hoped - in a creepy way - to witness the D-Day invasion, knowing Schiller hadn't been a casualty, since he survived to invent his ludicrous tale of the concentration camp - to escape prosecution as a war criminal?

The answer to that question might never be known, since she wasn't privy to Schiller's thoughts while in his body. It was almost as if she'd displaced him, and she could never quite be certain he was performing the actions at his own instigation, or if she was influencing him.

She and Rommel traveled often to Normandy during Spring, 1944. Standing on the beach, he outlined his reasons for believing the Allies would attack on this stretch of coastline, rather than farther north, a tactic the majority of German generals supported. Mustang admired his mind, and tried to comprehend his soldier's mentality.

"How can countless men fight so violently, and not see how their hatred destroys their souls?" she ventured quietly one afternoon as they strolled along the warm sand.

"The British, Russians and Americans are the only ones motivated by hatred in this conflict," responded Rommel. "When those who have discovered the true purpose of existence are rejected by the rest of the world, it is our duty to convince them - with force, if need be - of the rightness of our convictions. I don't hate the Allies for opposing us, but I will make sure my troops stand their ground, to prevent the destruction of everything Germany has accomplished."

"Even if the only thing Germany has accomplished is the destruction of what millions of others hold dear?"

Rommel gazed over the English Channel. "I wish Hitler had not pulled so many youngsters out of school before they had properly studied history. Georg,

what the Germans are doing is not new. For millennia, people have stood up for their beliefs, using violence to protect their rights. Consider the Christians or, earlier, the Jews attacking Jericho after spending forty years in the desert. Chinese nobles warred against each other as recently as the last century! African tribes continue to fight among themselves, and no one can stop it.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“And exactly how would you convince someone who maintains an opposing view of what is right?”

Mustang had to admit a valid point. She shook her head and snickered. Rommel wrapped his arm around Schiller’s shoulder as they strolled near the water line. “Never stop learning, Georg. Never stop thinking or asking questions. Some people might not like the questions you ask, but they will respect you for being courageous enough to speak.”

The actual D-Day spectacle eluded Mustang - Rommel was on leave in Ulm when the Allied troops landed at Normandy. The mines and other traps he’d planted there proved effective in killing a large number of U.S. Marines; still, the offensive drove the Axis troops back toward Paris, and Rommel was called to Hitler’s temporary headquarters at Margival.

“Stop the car!” Schiller choked while the convertible Mercedes sped toward Soissons.

Rommel raised his eyes from the map he’d been studying. “What’s wrong?”

“Please, stop the car.”

The driver swerved onto the shoulder of the road. Schiller fumbled with the door handle, unprompted by Mustang. He leapt from the back seat, falling on hands and knees in the tall grass, stomach heaving. Rommel shook his head, lifting the young man’s chin. “You’re not one to get car-sick,” he remonstrated.

“It’s not that. Am I really going to meet Hitler himself?” Then, Mustang understood. Schiller’s panic so engulfed him, it overrode her curiosity about the German leader.

“You would have met him long since, had you not absented yourself from these meetings. You may, like many in the Hitler Youth, think the Fuhrer a god, but those of us who’ve dealt with him throughout the war know he’s just a man. I have no doubt he will take you into his confidence, as he did me, which is the reason I carry this marshal’s baton.”

Accepting the driver’s canteen, Schiller rinsed his mouth and stood face-to-face with Rommel. Mustang reasserted control of his body in that moment.

“I apologize for my weakness.”

A firm, reassuring hand thumped her back. "It's all right, Georg. Things will be better, very soon." Something in his tone had altered in recent months, Mustang had noticed, and pensive furrows lined his brow. He was not an old man, in his fifties - they'd celebrated his birthday together the previous November - but he'd begun to look much older.

French towns put on a brave face in those days before Allied forces restored their freedom. Lively music emanated from the taverns they passed, and portly women wearing scarves to protect their hair from the wind trudged homeward with grocery purchases for the day. Children played soccer wherever enough grass grew to set up impromptu goals, some rode bikes through the streets.

"It'll be good when things get back to normal," Mustang murmured as the Mercedes cruised toward a complex draped in Nazi flags.

"What do you mean?" queried Rommel.

Thinking fast, she replied, "Whether or not we win the war, nothing will stay as it is..."

Her first encounter with the Supreme Commander of the Third Reich amounted to little more than salutes and reports. Standing behind and to Rommel's right, Mustang distinguished the squat figure with greased hair and signature mustache, gesticulating wildly about the D-Day losses.

"It cannot happen again!" Hitler shouted. "If my generals do not make use of the intelligence we intercept, I will replace those generals! Do you understand, Rommel?"

"Jawohl, Mein Fuhrer," acknowledged the field marshal

"Go, get your dinner and enjoy your evening. Saturday, we will talk further at Berchtesgaden."

"Jawohl, Mein Fuhrer."

As one, Rommel's entourage snapped to attention, extended their right hands and chorused, "Heil, Hitler," before goose-stepping from the office.

Mustang's disgust was evident on Schiller's face in the anteroom. Rommel confronted the Oberfeldwebel, blocking his view of the others, and theirs of him. "Control yourself, Georg. You endanger us both."

"Apologies, sir. It's just..."

"We shall speak at length later, in private," he whispered. "There are too many... ears here."

The field marshal dismissed the rest of his staff officers, liberty in a French village a well-earned reward for their service. As they dispersed outside headquarters, Rommel led Mustang along a side street.

“Have you ever been in this part of France before?”

“No, sir.”

“There is much for a youngster like you to do, and much trouble to be caused, if you don’t curb your tongue.”

“Again, I apologize, sir. Knowing what I know...”

Rommel halted abruptly and glared at the girl in the soldier’s body. “What do you know?”

“Were I to tell you, it might... put you in danger. I’m sorry, I cannot.”

“That may be for the best. Remember, though, if the Gestapo should get wind of your secrets, they would use most unpleasant methods to make you talk.”

“I will try my best.”

She was steered into La Parisienne, a tiny café. The pair sat at a small round table amidst subdued civilians and officers en route to the front. They ordered a cheese souffle, filet mignon, chocolate savoyard and wine.

A sudden hush fell on the establishment when a dozen black-clad members of the Waffen-SS crossed the threshold. When the crowd realized no one would be arrested, they resumed their conversations, some keeping a wary eye on the squad at the bar.

“I’m hoping the Fuhrer gives me at least a week’s leave before sending me to the Russian front,” Rommel commented, tearing a chunk from the loaf of warm bread served with the main course.

Mustang prodded, “What makes you think you’re going to the Russian front?”

“Defending the eastern border is vital to the country’s survival, now our defenses in the west have been breached. Should Germany be forced to surrender, the British and the Americans will deal with us fairly. The Russian communists have only one end in mind...”

The laughter which met this statement disconcerted the general. He ran trembling fingers through his short, dark mane. “You think I’m joking about this?”

“Oh, no, sir,” replied Mustang, inhaling deeply to ease her mirth. “You are more correct than you’ll ever know, but the Russians will meet their match, in time.”

“Shh...” Rommel raised a forkful of beef to his mouth. “You sound like some gypsy fortune-teller in the camps.”

With a smirk, she fell silent. She toyed with her food, while Rommel cleaned his plate and drained half the bottle of burgundy. He - unlike some military men, who saw themselves as deserving free service from civilians - paid the check and left a generous tip.

Four of the Waffen-SS snapped to attention and saluted as Rommel made his way to the door. As soon as they returned to their drinks, though, Mustang heard rumbles of discontent. Being alone in an interrogation room with those goons was not included on her list of wishes.

Since Rommel had sent the car to their billet with the luggage hours before, the two trekked through town on foot. At least the roads were firmly packed, Mustang grinned inwardly, not like trying to walk on the African sand, and sinking ankle-deep with each step.

Rounding a dark corner, Rommel grasped at his belt. Briefly, Mustang assumed he was reaching for the 9mm Luger he carried for protection; he grumbled under his breath instead.

“What it is, sir?”

“I left my gloves on the table. We’ll have to go back.”

“You go ahead,” Mustang volunteered. “I’ll get them and catch up with you.”

She jogged to the café, where diners didn’t give her a second glance as she squeezed past their tables. So brisk the trade that evening, their place settings had not yet been cleared; she snatched the gloves and turned toward the exit.

To find herself nose-to-nose with two Waffen-SS lieutenants.

“Oh, hell...”

“Well, Brandt, if it isn’t Rommel’s lap-dog,” the athletic one drawled.

His stockier companion chimed in, “He’s got this boy well-trained to fetch and carry, eh, Eichmann?”

Ordinarily, restraint would have been in order, but Mustang’s knowledge of the injustice and atrocities wrought by Heinrich Himmler’s flunkies compounded her anger. “Unless you want to go to the hospital splattered with spilt wine and Bearnaise sauce - rather than for being shot honorably in battle - I suggest you stand aside.”

Mock terror twisted Eichmann’s scarred features. “I cower at such a challenge from this minuscule insect.”

Behind her, Mustang’s hand had clamped on a dinner plate. The pair lunged at her; she whipped the ceramic disk around and smashed it against Brandt’s temple. The shards which remained in her hand proceeded in their arc, slicing open Eichmann’s cheek.

Both retreated, leaving their comrades to take up the fight. Two pinned Mustang’s arms, while a third assailed her mid-section with a barrage of punches.

“This does *not* feel good,” the girl hissed, rage mounting. She was about to raise her voice and bring the roof down on their heads, when she noticed what her attackers had ignored: Field Marshal Erwin Rommel framed in the doorway.

III

“Enough!” Rommel barked.

All eyes shifted toward him, the Waffen-SS squad recoiling *en masse*. Mustang didn’t let on how badly Schiller’s body ached, instead straightening her uniform and gingerly propelling herself through pure strength of will past the bar.

“This isn’t the end,” snarled Oberleutnant Eichmann, a bar towel soaking up the blood from his mangled cheek.

“You will want to think twice about those words,” Mustang retorted, not looking at him, “or you won’t live to see the sunrise.”

“Big talk from a little man,” scoffed Brandt, wiping bread crumbs from his eyes.

“Bigger than you, when you’re begging for mercy.”

The two slammed onto the floor, distraught staring up at her from their knees.

“That’s just a small taste of the fate awaiting unrepentant bullies,” she vowed.

Rommel’s promise: “Herr Himmler shall decide your punishment.”

Out in the night air, beyond curious eyes, Mustang slumped against the café’s facade, arms clenched around her stomach.

“You are badly hurt?” Rommel inquired.

“I’m not sure, but at least, we’re even.”

“Even?”

“I saved your life, now you’ve saved mine.”

Rommel chuckled. “I’ve a sense you were about to save yourself... at the expense of some innocent bystanders, perhaps?”

Mustang nodded.

“Come. The car will be here momentarily. You’re in no condition to walk.”

Schiller’s body was in no condition to get out of bed for the next three days, for that matter. Rommel summoned a doctor from the temporary hospital opposite their hotel, who stopped short of confirming internal injuries. Black and purple bruises discolored most of the torso, and made moving unbearable.

“Will you be sufficiently recovered to fly with me to Berchtesgaden on Saturday for the meeting with the Fuhrer?” Rommel asked upon his return from the front Thursday evening, as he spooned chicken broth down Mustang’s throat.

“I’m... not sure. Why it is so important I go with you?”

“We will be able to spend a night in Ulm, with our families.”

A faint smile curled Schiller’s lips. “I’ll do my best.”

At 11:59 PM that Friday, Mustang’s anguish hadn’t lessened. Lying in the dark, she mulled how much longer she would accompany Schiller on his escapades. She fought to recall the words she’d used which had gotten her into this predicament - so long ago. Something about sharing his experiences...

A grandfather clock in the lobby below her room struck midnight. In six hours, she and Rommel were due to board a plane taking them to Hitler’s mountain retreat. She mumbled, “I will be healed,” and soon slept.

The general knocked at dawn, bringing a tray with toast and juice, and an offer to help Mustang dress. He was astounded to see his aide up and fully clothed, boots polished, no twinge of pain distorting the young face.

“Our bags have been sent ahead,” he announced. “We’re due at the airfield in fifteen minutes.”

These flights to and from Germany proved adventures in their own right. Mustang had sat in a number of the twin-propeller Heinkel transports manned by Luftwaffe crews in recent months. The craft were a far cry from the 747 jet which had flown her from New York to Scotland, when the entire debacle with her powers began. They did provide a grand view of the German countryside, nonetheless.

Berchtesgaden crawled with guards; Hitler had grown paranoid as the number of successes wrought by Nazi forces declined. Rommel and Mustang were escorted to a room furnished with a huge oak conference table, where maps and reports were scattered, under review.

Hitler wasn’t focused on the war. He ranted about a missing hunting dog, demanding Rommel mount an effort to locate him. “You know how Eva loves those dogs. She’ll give me no peace until he’s found.”

“Jawohl, Mein Fuhrer.”

Thinking himself dismissed on this odd note, Rommel executed a precise about-face and strode away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” yelled Hitler.

Rommel halted; Mustang saw disappointment in his eyes. “How can you hope for an intelligent conversation with a mad man?” she muttered.

Ever so slightly, Rommel shook his head at her as he turned. “Mein Fuhrer?”

“I didn’t fly you here to fuss about dogs. We have the Russian problem to consider.”

Mustang spent the next hour listening to a convoluted diatribe - far worse than her freshman algebra teacher’s droning lecture on variables. Hitler wanted Rommel’s advice, yet each time the general opened his mouth, Hitler interrupted him. If she had to guess, Mustang would’ve believed the diminutive monster had ten thousand voices jabbering at once inside his skull, and he didn’t know which to heed.

Rommel himself grew perturbed, she saw. “Mein Fuhrer,” he eventually snapped, loud enough to quiet the other. “With the options available to us, I would leave barely two divisions to defend the western front, and direct every Luftwaffe wing, Panzer division and infantry brigade toward the east. At all costs, we must prevent Russia from gaining a foothold in the Fatherland.”

“You would give us up to the British and the Americans?” Hitler countered. “When the new fighter planes roll off the assembly line, we will dominate anew on both fronts...”

He was off again, and both Rommel and Mustang realized their presence was pointless. Hitler would talk to the walls, if no human being were present; he was that far gone.

“Mein Fuhrer,” persisted Rommel. “If you would be good enough to authorize a leave to visit my family, I would have time to consider other strategies...”

The glint in Hitler’s eyes caused Mustang to shudder. He looked at Rommel as if unfamiliar with the latter’s identity. “What? You want leave, when I need to find that damned dog?”

Mustang felt her blood pressure rising, and she grit her teeth to keep from spewing a string of very unmilitary expletives. Another forty-five minutes passed before Rommel managed to get Hitler to interact in a semi-coherent manner.

“Give my love to your lovely wife, Lucie, and to Manfred,” the mustached leader stated, drawing lines on a map with a pencil and ruler. “I will expect you back here in four weeks, on July 27th, with the ultimate plan to revitalize our offensive.”

“Finally,” Mustang sighed.

Slowly, Hitler raised his head and squinted at her. “You have something to say, Oberfeldwebel?”

Rommel's eyes pleaded with her; she ignored him, stepping forward and clicking her heels.

"Just this: You are an idiot and a lunatic. Future generations will despise you for what you've done these past six years, in fact, the only people who will idolize you will be the idiots and lunatics who've lost their grasp of reality, as have you."

Had a pin dropped in the room at that moment, it would've sounded like a bomb. Rommel dared not look at Mustang, nor at his commander. Mustang's gaze was steady; she didn't avert her eyes when the muscles in Hitler's face and hand began to spasm.

"You breed traitors in your ranks, Rommel?" he erupted.

"No, Mein Fuhrer."

"Then, what explanation have you for this outburst from your aide?"

No way was Mustang going to let Rommel take the blame for her actions. "He doesn't have to explain anything to you, *Herr Hitler*. My words are my own, and he's not responsible for them. Have me shot, if you wish; I'd rather die than fake loyalty to a jerk like you."

"Jerk? What is jerk?" queried Hitler.

"Oh, to hell with you." She ripped the Knight's Cross from around her neck and flung it on the table, then spun on her heel and marched from the room.

Rommel didn't follow and, after slamming the door, Mustang waited on tenterhooks in an adjacent parlor for the next explosion. She swore, if Hitler ordered Rommel arrested - or worse - she would shoot the dictator herself, and history be damned.

Two hours later, Rommel roused her from the carved wooden chair where she dozed. "Come, Georg."

"Sir?"

"It's a long flight back to France."

"We're not going home?"

"Yes, but not for three weeks."

"What about..."

"You won't be shot, if that's what you're concerned about."

"I wasn't concerned about myself," Mustang admitted. "I was afraid for you..."

Together, they walked to a waiting Dusenberg convertible. "I will face no retribution for your outburst. Not immediately, at any rate. I had to pledge us both to secrecy about what transpired, and agree to remove you from my staff..."

"Please, no..."

Rommel raised a silencing hand. "It is for the best, I think. I would not have been able to keep my promise to your sister, were you to accompany me to the Russian front, as I expect will happen when I return from leave."

"Then, what will happen..."

"You are to be promoted to Leutnant, assigned to command a detachment of guards in the camp at Dachau."

Puzzle pieces fell into place, then. Schiller hadn't been a prisoner at Dachau, he'd been one of those who herded innocent souls to their deaths.

More meetings, more excursions to observe the progress of the Allies across France, and Mustang grew impatient. Knowing she would be separated from Rommel - whom she had grown to admire and respect, especially for his frankness in assessing Germany's future - caused an unrelenting knot in her stomach; she wanted the whole ordeal to end.

She took to griping in hushed tones during her few private moments. Too often, Rommel overheard.

"Come, now," he soothed on the morning of July 17th. "We must smile for our families. This may be the last time we see them. Every second must be savored, like a fine meal."

After a last sweep of the threatened areas near Orne, Rommel's car sped along the road toward the Seine River. Mustang remained alert while the older man slept. How could she endure a week with Schiller's sister and parents, knowing she would soon be participating in the most horrendous of all war crimes?

"Stop the car," she directed the driver.

The brakes squealed; Rommel jolted upright. "What is it?" he demanded.

Mustang opened the door and stepped onto the gravel. "I must leave you, sir."

"Leave?"

"I can neither accept the promotion you negotiated with Hitler, nor the transfer to Dachau. I know what they do there..."

Firm fingers seized her arm. "If you desert, Georg, your family will be held accountable, as will mine."

"You mean..."

"Hitler will kill them."

Could this be the reason no one stood up to the fiend, because he would eradicate their loved ones? she lamented. "For each life he stole, he will burn in hell ten thousand years."

Dejected, she mounted the running board, a distant sputter drowning out the engine's hum. She looked up, and saw the tiny shape of an airplane soaring above the road.

"Herr Feldmarschall..." the staff officer signaled from the front seat.

"Driver, move!" barked Rommel.

The door wasn't even latched when the vehicle shot forward. Mustang slammed on the cushion, Rommel pushing her head down.

She heard the pavement behind them pierced by machine gun fire, and knew they couldn't outrun the fighter. Using all her strength to resist Rommel's protective arm, she raised herself just in time to throw Schiller's body into the general, so the bullets which strafed the convertible lodged mostly in the seats.

The driver had remained at the wheel, suffering fatal wounds. Rommel's staff officer scrambled from the immobilized car as Mustang righted herself. Rommel lay, unconscious, against the door. Blood trickled from his head.

The nearest hospital more than twenty miles away, finding immediate treatment - and a means to transport Rommel and the driver - were imperative. Waiting on decisions, the girl ripped open her uniform tunic and tore off a section of the shirt beneath, to use as a bandage. She applied pressure to Rommel's wounds as best she could.

Almost an hour passed before the staff officer commandeered a vehicle, driving the injured men to a hospital near Livarot. The hardest thing Mustang had to do, perhaps, was leave Rommel in the hands of a French doctor, knowing the primitive state of medicine in the 1940s.

Severe skull fractures and wounds to the face and temple necessitated more intensive care for the field marshal. Yet a different vehicle conveyed him, and the driver, to a hospital in Bernay. Days later, he was moved again to a facility near Paris. The driver had died.

Mustang wasn't alone in waiting to learn if the Desert Fox would survive. Lucie Rommel, the general's wife, and their son, Manfred, arrived at the hospital, along with other officers. Everyone claimed priority to see the patient when he recovered consciousness; the teen contented herself with news he would live. She feared his death on her hands, altering history, all because she had told the driver to stop on that remote stretch of road.

"Leutnant Schiller," called a prim nurse the third morning.

Mustang didn't respond immediately - the "Leutnant" title rattled her, until she recalled the promotion. She stood up from the uncomfortable chair, stiff bones reluctant.

"Ja, Fraulein?"

“The field marshal is asking for you.”

“For me?”

“Ja. You can go in, but only for a few minutes.”

The heavily curtained hospital room smelled of antiseptic, and the whiteness of the walls and bed sheets created ghostly images in the dimness. Rommel’s complexion was nearly as pale, with white bandages swaddling his head. A small lamp provided little illumination.

“Georg,” he sputtered.

“I’m here, sir.”

“I’m glad I convinced the Fuhrer your life was worth sparing. Within weeks of saving you, you did the same for me, again.”

Tears streamed down Schiller’s cheeks - Mustang’s fault. “If I had truly done my job, you would have escaped injury altogether.”

“We cannot dodge every bullet.” Rommel managed a wry laugh. “What has happened will keep me out of battle for the next few months, while giving me time to rethink the course the war is taking.”

“And time to rest,” Mustang chided. “I never saw you sleep a full eight hours the past eighteen months...”

“I will get plenty of sleep, I swear, when I get home. Now, we must say good-bye.”

The pair clasped hands, Rommel’s grip surprisingly strong, given his condition. “Thank you for all you’ve done,” he said.

“Thank *you*, sir. I have learned more from you than any book could ever teach...”

Their sentimental parting was interrupted when Manfred burst through the door. “Father, have you heard?”

“Heard what, son?”

“They just announced on the radio: a group of high ranking officers tried to kill Hitler at Rastenburg this morning.”

Rommel and Mustang locked eyes, reading each other’s thoughts.

“We shall both be suspect,” Rommel predicted.

“I’m so sorry, sir...”

“Don’t be, Georg.” He gave Schiller’s hand a last, affectionate squeeze. “If you hadn’t spoken those words to the Fuhrer, I might have myself. I surely was thinking them.”

A florid nurse appeared, bearing a tray of unappetizing food. “Out, now. The general must eat, to keep up his strength.”

“If you want me to keep up my strength, bring me a steak,” Rommel chortled. “Eating that slop will kill me, for sure.”

Mustang paused at the foot of the bed and faced Rommel. Boot heels clicked and the hand snapped a salute. Rommel nodded and smiled, as a spoonful of mashed potatoes was shoved in his mouth.

IV

Two days after arriving at the Dachau concentration camp - Mustang wasn't going to deceive herself it was a “relocation facility”, or however the Third Reich propaganda machine publicized it - she also determined no words could adequately describe the horrors within the electrified fence. A scant ten miles northwest of Munich, and not that far from Schiller's family home in Ulm, for such a place to exist...

Emaciated men in black and grey vertically striped prison uniforms were jammed by the thousands into barracks meant to house less than 300. When they were allowed outdoors for a bit of fresh air, scented by a stench from the nearby crematorium, SS guards in seven towers held rifles at the ready.

Leutnant Georg Schiller - a member of the *Panzerarmee*, the German tank corps, not the SS - was given command of the female guards brought in to monitor the women's camp, which accepted its first inmates in August, 1944. Mustang smirked at the irony: a female inhabiting a male body overseeing females.

Transported to the camp like cattle in railroad freight cars, without food or water, their condition was no better than the men's. At least, Schiller/Solomon had been truthful about one aspect of his time at Dachau when he spoke to the Tom Nugent's Government class: it was impossible to ever get used to death.

Relaxing was another unlikely hope for the teen. She didn't so much fear an uprising among the prisoners; they had lost not just their strength, but their hope. The Waffen-SS soldiers resented her presence, an “outsider” in their midst. Whenever she had to issue orders, or posted a patrol schedule, they made it very clear they were only obeying to avoid reprisals from their *real* commanding officers. Thus, she had to be constantly vigilant, and she'd grown used to sleeping, unlike her first days with Schiller, when she remained awake as his eyes closed.

She carried a semi-automatic rifle slung over her shoulder at all times, as did the other guards. Seeing the SS disdain for the prisoners - human beings: Jews *and* Christians, from across Europe - made her want to use the weapon to mow down the black-clad thugs. Every day, a parade of skin-covered skeletons shuffled toward the crematorium; by chance in the wrong place at the wrong time, Mustang

saw them strung up one by one on the rafters and, when their legs ceased kicking, they were lowered and thrown into massive brick ovens for disposal.

Witnessing a firing squad almost pushed the girl over the edge of sanity. Summary executions were held in a courtyard between the camp's kitchen and the rows of barracks, the bodies dumped in mass graves outside the fence. She happened to be on her way to deliver roll call reports as four men were lined up against a block wall...

To compound the atmosphere of death, typhus epidemics in the camp killed hundreds. The disease was carried by the thousands transferred to Dachau as the Allied forces closed on central Germany. The high command's plan was to prevent mass prisoner escapes when the far-lying camps were abandoned during the Wehrmacht's retreat.

Mustang never had an opportunity to get acquainted with any of the prisoners, and knew only a handful of guards by name. For the best, probably, she realized. Her reaction to Rommel's death in October - purportedly of a heart attack - affirmed the need to remain aloof. Facing the wall so the others would not see, she wept on her bunk the night the radio broadcast reports of his state funeral.

She'd not used her power for months, though greatly tempted. The delivery of a letter from young Manfred Rommel prompted her to give in to temptation. The sheet of stationery was riddled with holes, courtesy of German censors. "I wish to read what was written here," she stated emphatically.

Not that she liked the paragraphs scrawled on the page. Manfred related how his father had actually been forced to commit suicide, being suspected of treason against Hitler. "It was believed Father knew of the July 20 assassination attempt, and failed to report it. You, also, must protect yourself, my friend, because they suspect you, as well."

The paper and envelope disintegrated in her hand.

Leutnant Schiller performed his duties in a haze the next week. Not until Mustang literally bumped into a weirdly familiar face did she emerge from her stupor.

The Feldwebel stepped back and saluted. "Forgive me, Herr Leutnant, I wasn't..."

"Oh, hell..." Mustang gasped.

Eichmann!

Feigning antagonism, the teen visually inspected the tall, athletic bully who had accosted her at La Parisienne in Soissons. He *had* received punishment for the incident, evidently. His own lieutenant insignia were gone; stripes on his uniform sleeve indicated he had been demoted to the lowest grade of sergeant.

The reduction in rank hadn't dampened his arrogance. "So, Lap-dog, you are an exile, too?" he gloated.

She wasn't going to tolerate his attitude. "If I am?"

"Because of you, I lost my commission, and my fiancé, and I will make you pay."

"More than likely, you lost your fiancé through your own stupidity," retorted Mustang. "And, if I'm the lap-dog, why are you the one on all fours?"

His knees buckled like broken twigs. She gave him a minute for the impact of his position to register fully. Then, she squatted beside him.

"Get this through your thick skull, Eichmann. I wouldn't have to lift a finger to make you roll over, and you wouldn't merely be *playing* dead. Is being a bully worth your life?"

Straightening, she sauntered across the compound.

Harsh Montana winters never bothered Mustang; the bleak, cold months in Germany ate at her soul. The thickest overcoat couldn't protect her from biting winds, and the prisoners had not so much as proper blankets. She reasoned they might generate some warmth packed into the barracks like sardines, or huddle around the cast iron stove - if one had been installed, and if wood was available.

She spent nights stretched on her bunk, staring at the ceiling. Erwin Rommel had been such a noble officer, fair to both his own troops and his prisoners. She questioned whether the inhumanity shown at Dachau was a "trickle down" effect, beginning in Hitler's warped mind, extending to the fanatics who swore blind allegiance to him. How could one individual believe others were inferior, based upon their religion or the color of their skin?

Sixty years in the future, the practice continued around the world. The evening news tallied casualties caused by various Muslim sects bombing each other in the Middle East. African tribes killed and maimed one another for reasons impossible to fathom. Even the United States was plagued by hate crimes, where groups such as the Ku Klux Klan rioted against everyone who didn't view the world their way.

Recalling her own time made Mustang homesick. She had spent two years in Georg Schiller's body, and still didn't know how to free herself. Had it been a matter of "riding the lightning" through space, she would have simply needed to speak the words in order to return home. This situation was different, and she was uncertain how to phrase the request which would send her through both space *and* time, without ending up where she didn't wish to be.

Another possibility existed: when Schiller's experience of Dachau ended, so would her habitation of his body.

The thoughts provided little comfort. More than anything, she wanted to talk with someone - anyone - as herself. She wanted to express her own ideas, not those approved by the government.

Her appreciation of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment increased by the day. To see millions stifled, robbed of their right to speak, soured her stomach.

But then, there were those who would not be silenced.

That particular Saturday, the sun shone brightly, and a hint of spring blew in on the breeze. Leutnant Schiller spent the morning inspecting the women's barracks, with plans to escape the confines of the camp and revitalize herself with an afternoon hike through the countryside.

Their eyes sunken, prison uniforms draped over bony shoulders, they looked not so much like women as walking corpses. A resentment burned, however, and Mustang wished she could explain...

"Sorcerer," hissed a voice, instantly muffled by trembling hands.

A scan of nearby faces revealed the source of the accusation. The dark complexion of the Romany - the gypsies - had not faded, and brown orbs glowed with secret knowledge. Mustang sensed a kindred spirit, one with power perhaps equaling her own.

How to deal with the matter, though? To give credence to the statement, or to single out the woman meant rumors would circulate within hours, and Schiller would be confronted by his superiors. Mustang aimed the slightest nod of her head toward the gypsy, acknowledging the truth, only to see a flurry of strange gestures.

"What are you doing there?" One of the female guards under Mustang's command shoved through the crush of prisoners to accost the gypsy.

The woman mumbled a denial, head bowed.

"Leave her be," ordered Mustang.

The guard objected, "Herr Leutnant, she may have been signaling conspirators about an uprising, or an attack upon your person..."

"It was the counter-curse for the evil eye," supplied a younger Romany from behind Mustang.

"As I thought," the teen snickered.

To prove the German's superiority, the guard clouted the gypsy on her ear. "Superstitious idiots!"

"Frau Kesselring!" censured the leutnant. "Consider yourself on report!"

Scowling, the guard jostled her way to where the inspection party stood. The gypsy raised her head once more, favoring Mustang with a solemn gaze. The latter clicked her heels and bowed a silent apology before exiting the barracks.

Tramping toward the crematorium, Kesselring vehemently protested the reprimand. “We have to remind them they are lower than the dirt, Herr Leutnant, or risk coming to harm ourselves! You don’t have to deal with them when they get agitated or fight among themselves...”

“The old woman labeled me a sorcerer. Such a ridiculous notion merited no reaction.”

Another guard agreed. “Who knows where these backward people get their silly ideas.”

“Your action, Frau Kesselring, has put us all in danger now, which is why you must be punished. Any hostility toward us growing among the prisoners stems from their sense liberation may be close at hand. While we mustn’t ignore blatant infractions of the rules, we can let their idle chatter pass, in anticipation of the day they may be *our* captors.”

“Jawohl, Herr Leutnant,” conceded the crestfallen woman.

The familiar rumbling of an approaching train summoned them back to their duties. So much for Mustang’s afternoon trek in the country.

Patrolling the camp’s perimeter that night, Mustang debated whether the thick fog of cigarette smoke in the barracks was better for her lungs than the nauseating smell outdoors. When she heard a scurrying noise near the barracks, she unslung her rifle and held it at the ready.

“Who’s there?” she called.

No reply. Cautiously, she inched into the shadows created by the spotlights in the guard towers.

There it was! A metal trash can had been upset in someone’s attempt to escape...

More quickly, she rounded the corner between the buildings. Had she not stopped short, she would have collided with the churlish gypsy.

“You are violating curfew,” Mustang declared.

“You are violating the laws of nature, Sorcerer.”

The girl was intrigued by the woman’s insightfulness, but had to assume a disinterested guise. “You speak nonsense.”

“Do I, O she who cavorts with wild horses?”

So much for putting on an act. Mustang drew the gypsy away from the line of the arc lights. “How do you know who I am?”

“That matters not. You have laid claim to a body not your own, and unless you depart soon, there will be severe consequences...”

“There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Yes, there is.” The gypsy leaned close to Schiller’s ear, and Mustang cringed at her foul breath. “With a few special ingredients, I can brew a potion which will free you from your captivity...”

“No, thank you. Whereas your power may depend upon potions and spells, mine does not. I will leave this body at the proper moment.” It *was* the truth, though that moment might not be of her choosing.

“Your decision will scar you for life,” warned the woman.

Mustang displayed her mutilated palms. “It already has. Good night, now, or *you* may be scarred... by the guards’ bullets.”

Flipping her lank, black hair over her shoulder, the gypsy vanished through a door.

Schiller’s chuckle echoed in the darkness; there wouldn’t be much to laugh about in the days ahead.

More half-dead transfers were arriving every day. The odor of human waste and decaying flesh increased exponentially. Constant blasts of artillery grew louder; the girl pondered if the Allies were intent on reducing Germany to rubble, and not just convincing their enemies to surrender.

As had happened briefly en route to meet Hitler, Mustang lost control of Schiller’s behavior. She detected a deep-seated fear where a mostly docile, obedient soldier had been sharing its habitation with her. He surreptitiously acquired one of the black and grey uniforms stripped from a dead prisoner, concealing it inside his pillow. He cut his hair extremely short, stopped bathing, and ate little. Depression wasn’t the cause, though. The man had a plan - devised long before Mustang’s consciousness merged with his. No differently than those first few hours in the African desert, all she could do was watch the world through his eyes.

She guessed the cause toward the end of April. Fulfillment of her wish required her to experience the events which shaped Schiller/Solomon into the person he presented at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. The first was being wounded and saving Rommel from being kidnaped. The choices he made after the Third Reich fell would be the second.

And Mustang didn’t like how those choices were developing.

The morning of April 29, 1944, both prisoners and guards at Dachau woke to an eerie calm. Peering out the window beside her bunk, Mustang glimpsed a white flag hanging on the main gate. The seven guard towers were empty.

Approximately half the complement of soldiers reported for roll call. They were informed their comrades, including the camp’s commanding officer, had fled.

Standing at attention, they watched the assistant commander march to where American troops waited outside the fence.

The worst scenario, Mustang predicted, would see Schiller and the others trucked off to Allied POW camps. She never expected Schiller to sidle from the ranks to the guard house, ripping the prisoner's garb from among the goose feathers inside his pillow. He shed the army uniform, pitched his military identification papers in the wood stove, and hastily buttoned the striped shirt and adjusted the trousers.

Next, he hurried to the abandoned medical facility. He broke the lock on an equipment cabinet and commandeered a tattoo needle used to engrave the prisoners' arms.

She would have turned away, had she been physically able, when he set to work writing a series of numbers on his left forearm in murky green ink.

Her stomach revolted before she could subdue it.

To an outside observer, the scene might have struck a humorous chord. For Mustang - and for Schiller - no explanation would suffice.

The teen vomited, more like dry heaves, since her essence was incapable of ingesting food. The wrenching effect carried over into Schiller's body, with every muscle abruptly tightening as if he were suffering an epileptic seizure. He dropped the needle and, had his pants been on fire, he would have hopped around the chamber no more wildly.

Mustang suddenly realized she was watching her host from outside the confines of his frame. Both she and Schiller rushed to the window, cheers reverberating through the camp. The Americans had released the prisoners.

The lieutenant hurried to finish the tattoo. In his present neglected state, Mustang presumed he would have no difficulty hiding among the stream of refugees eager to return to their homelands and what family might still be alive. He was smart enough to crawl through the store room window and circle the barracks, falling in line with the stragglers.

Schiller went so far as to slide his arm around the waist of an elderly man, supporting him in limping along with an untreated broken ankle.

Folding tables had been set up at the gate, where soldiers recorded each prisoner's name upon departure. Hovering inches above the ground, Mustang heard Georg Schiller tell an exhausted corporal, "My name is George Solomon."

Then, a barrage of gunfire drowned out everything else.

The Waffen-SS and other guards had been corralled into the courtyard between the kitchen and the barracks where Mustang had seen her first execution. She couldn't determine if they'd already laid aside their weapons - some probably

had, others hadn't. If, in the heat of the moment, one desperate feldwebel had brandished a Luger...

The last thing Mustang saw were a hundred dead Germans littering the gravel.

What the Americans would find, clearing out the camp, would be far worse, she knew.

Mourning war and death, she didn't immediately sense the ripples engulfing her. The phenomenon accelerated until queasiness consumed her, the darkest night on all sides.

It may have been hours, or just a few seconds, before she gazed upon the wrinkled visage of the aged George Solomon, still in the Government classroom, with Tom Nugent nonchalantly erasing the chalkboard. A few deep breaths steadied her, but her relief at returning to her proper place in history was tinged with anger and sadness.

"Are you all right, young lady?" queried Solomon.

"Why do you ask?"

"For a second there, I thought you'd fainted."

Mustang sighed. "No such luck."

"You are not ill?"

"I'm all too well." She reached for his gnarled hands, flipping them palm-upward. Comparing hers with his, the scars were identical, though he had carried his far longer. Solomon's eyes widened.

"What does this mean?"

"It means Field Marshal Rommel would be gravely disappointed, Leutnant Schiller," she grumbled.

Hoisting her backpack off the floor, she shuffled toward the door.