

The Mustang Chronicles:

Pirate Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Mustang Duryea hated eating in the cafeteria. She never arrived in time to find a seat alone, and sharing a table always meant overhearing gossip about other students, and disparaging comments about herself from fellow classmates. She'd discovered her reputation as a "lone wolf" stemmed from her failure to talk, during class and in the halls.

They didn't know why she kept her mouth tightly shut most days.

They didn't know she could bring the roof of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School down on all their heads in a moment of anger, or set fire to the gymnasium with a word.

More than once, she'd wanted to command a strong wind to blow up the skirts of the snooty, bleached-blond pep squad, during their impromptu daily "performances" in the courtyard. Embarrassing them publicly might have taught them criticizing others' imperfections wasn't very nice.

She'd learned, in the previous two years, to control her power - for the most part. Occasional accidents continued to happen, like dropping the engine from Jim Neville's police car. Besides that, she had been behaving herself.

Still, squad captain Chelsea Barker annoyed Mustang something fierce. The senior's attire never complied with the dress code - mid-drift shirts, mini-skirts and spiked heels deliberately intended to shock the teachers and attract boys. She lacked the intelligence for serious discussions in the classroom, and rumor had it her homework was completed by her younger sister, not fortunate enough to share her sibling's good looks.

The situation came to a head that May Friday, weeks before graduation. They'd been reading short stories in Senior English, analyzing the descriptive language and dialects used by British and American authors. One tale, recounting the career of pirate Sean Forbes the Parson, seemed almost too outrageous to be anything except fiction, until Mustang remembered where she'd previously come across the name.

In Jack Parsons' journals.

So seldom did she raise her hand, teacher Jean Wedgewood called upon her immediately. "Is it known whether any of the actual reports written about Forbes by the British Navy officers survived?"

Her fellow students laughed outright.

"It's not a true story, you idiot," came Chelsea's harsh, high-pitched snarl from two seats behind.

Mrs. Wedgewood didn't really know the answer. "The story is supposed to be based on a historical character, though whether his name was really Sean Forbes is unclear."

Mustang heard additional derisive comments later, passing through the lunch line with her tray. This time, though, she had truth on her side, from an incontrovertible source. Her illegitimate grandfather, rocket scientist Jack Parsons, had not only bequeathed his control of natural elements to her, she also had brought his hand-written journals back from Scotland, against FBI instructions.

And the last time she'd been flipping through the pages, she'd noticed an interesting reference to the Parsons' family tree: "There are days I feel like ol' Sean Forbes the Parson two hundred years ago, defending his beliefs with every ounce of strength, while his government thought him a lunatic."

She hadn't known then the man had been a pirate or, at least, ended up branded as a pirate. He'd started off a seaman in the British Navy, jumped ship at Wexford in Ireland, disappearing for nearly ten years. The sea called strongly to him, evidently, for he figured prominently in reports filed by African slave traders: Forbes began a one-ship blockade of the slave ports on the continent's western coast, coaxing the packed craft to return to shore, under threat of his cannons. He allegedly saved thousands of men, women and children from being transported across the Atlantic and sold in the Colonies.

The short story studied in class told of Forbes' later life, senselessly attacking British freight convoys for their wares. He commanded a modest fleet by then, crewed by less-than-reputable sailors. After being chased by two Navy gun ships north from the Equator, Forbes vanished in waters near Ireland, never to be seen again.

Mustang wasn't going to let herself be ridiculed for daring to speak the truth. She navigated between the foldable tables and slammed her tray beside Chelsea. "You'd better think long and hard before you answer this question: will you shut up once and for all if I prove to you Sean Forbes was a real person, and not a fictional character?"

The saucy blonde tossed her head, not pausing one second to consider her the implications of her reply. "If you could, I'd broadcast on the school news you're the smartest kid in the senior class."

Yes, Mustang decided, it would be deliberate, and decisive. She didn't care about the consequences, either.

She stuck out her hand, using the pirate-like phrase they'd read in the narrative. "Do we have an accord?"

Chelsea Barker clasped Mustang's fingers. "You bet."

The rancher's daughter tightened her grip and spoke quietly, "Great. Let's go see what Sean Forbes the Parson was doing on this date in 1720."

"You're..." The pep squad captain didn't have a chance to finish her outcry or pull away before being engulfed by a cyclone of trays and plastic spoons. Chelsea practically leapt into Mustang's embrace, her face pale behind the lipstick and eyeshadow as students, floors and walls melted into blackness.

A rhythmic rocking sensation lulled the pair back to consciousness. Mustang was first to realize they were lying flat, staring upward at the sky - and three tall masts, sails unfurled.

The teen also realized she was sea-sick.

She scrambled to her feet and dashed to the rail, leaning far over to prevent the contents of her stomach from blowing onto the deck. Laughter filled her ears as her muscles clenched; she raised her head to see twenty filthy deck-hands watching her.

Chelsea screamed when two pairs of greasy hands seized her. One of the men stroked her tousled hair as she strained to free herself.

"Back to work!" shouted a cultured baritone from above.

Mirth was replaced with grumbling while the crew resumed their duties: polishing brass, cleaning cannon barrels and mending sails. "They're angels sent from 'eaven, Cap'n!" a Cockney voice hollered.

"I highly doubt that, Mr. Thompson. Methinks they may be mermaids, washed aboard with that last high wave, except they don't seem to be dressed for swimming."

For once, Chelsea offered no biting retort to the insult, as was her habit in school. Mustang's stomach empty, she straightened and turned to see her fellow senior gawking at the figure descending weather-worn wooden steps from the quarter deck.

Mustang had to admit she might have been watching a swashbuckler film from the 1940s, his presence so dynamic. Broad shoulders protruded from a shirt whose sleeves had been ripped off. His brown trousers were tattered, stuffed into scuffed black boots. Wind-blown, shoulder-length sandy hair, a matching mustache and mutton-chop sideburns framed a tanned, oval face. Brown eyes smoldered with a resolve which brooked no interference.

And, he definitely viewed the two girls as interference with the routine functions of a sea-going vessel.

"Sean Forbes!" hailed Mustang, hoping to preempt an order forcing the intruders to walk the plank.

“Aye,” he acknowledged, glaring at her.

“My friend and I traveled here especially to meet you.”

“By what means, Missy? I see no land from which you might have rowed a dingy, nor a ship anywhere on the horizon.”

“If we might converse in the privacy of your cabin, I can explain...”

“After you have clothed yourself in something a bit more... modest.”

Mustang saw nothing wrong with her jeans and t-shirt - some of the sailors wore less than she. Chelsea, on the other hand..

They followed Forbes below deck. His quarters were typical of the period, boasting a cot, desk and chair, a chart table holding a large leather-bound book and rolled maps, a wardrobe, red velvet couch, and a large cross on the bulkhead between two portholes.

A curious ornament for a pirate, Mustang thought.

The captain threw wide the wardrobe doors, allowing Chelsea to rummage through the dresses. “Where’d you get these?” she gushed.

“Salvaged from... sinking ships,” responded Forbes.

Mustang hinted, “Ships damaged by your guns?”

“On occasion.”

Chelsea selected an embroidered green gown, twirling around the floor with it like a fashion model.

Forbes averted his gaze. “I will leave you to... dress, but I shall return shortly.”

Did he make the Sign of the Cross as a gesture of self-protection when exiting the cabin? Mustang puzzled. She didn’t have an opportunity to dwell on the matter, because Chelsea required her assistance, unable to manipulate the gown by herself.

“Where’s the zipper on this damned thing?” she swore.

Mustang snatched the fabric. “They didn’t have zippers in the 18th century.” Nimble fingers - albeit more accustomed to untangling horses bridles and reins - loosened the bodice laces and stuffed the cheerleader into the narrow-waisted design.

“Ouch!” objected her companion

Mustang yanked on the laces, chuckling, “You definitely weren’t built for this era in fashion.”

Nonetheless, after finding a whale-bone comb and tending her hair, the girl looked quite presentable, an opinion confirmed when Sean Forbes crossed the threshold.

“Magnificent!” he muttered.

Chelsea, dumbfounded once more, said nothing.

“I have been remiss in my hospitality,” continued the captain, stepping forward to kiss her hand. “You know my name; may I ask yours?”

“She is Chelsea Barker. I am Mustang... er, Elizabeth Duryea.”

Not releasing Chelsea’s fingers, Forbes nodded toward Mustang. “Would you be having something to eat, Miss Barker?”

“I...”

“Oh, snap out of it, girl!” Mustang remonstrated. “He’s not a ghost.”

“I... am hungry,” stammered Chelsea.

“I shall have the cook prepare a meal, then. Would you like a glass of wine?”

Mustang supplied, “Where we’re from, Captain, we aren’t allowed to drink alcohol.”

Forbes studied the red-haired diminutive female closely. “And, where might that be?”

“How much do you know about the Colonies?”

“I have seen maps.”

“Let’s just say we come from... beyond the farthest western settlement.”

“You speak truthfully, though in riddles. I fear we have much in common, you and I,” hissed the man.

Not sure she liked the sound of that, Mustang cringed. Abruptly, she realized her discomfort originated elsewhere. She rushed from the cabin and up the ladder to the railing, her stomach capable of only dry heaves.

Pale and weak from the nausea, the teen stretched herself on the cot in the captain’s quarters after her ordeal, while Forbes proceeded to make Chelsea comfortable. Mustang didn’t envy the curvaceous student this attention; she preferred a man like Montana State Police detective Jim Neville, who spoke honestly and appreciated her natural attributes.

Yet, Forbes wasn’t what she expected. The movies glamorized pirates; reality included the stench of unwashed perspiration, moldering food, rum and salt water. He wasn’t exactly handsome, but his bearing and attitude left no doubt regarding his leadership on this vessel.

Slanted sunlight filtered through the portholes when Forbes approached the cot. “Have you need of anything, Miss Duryea?”

“Not...” she belched, hoping to suppress another trip to the railing, “at the moment.”

“Miss Barker is asleep. I fear the wine was too heady for her...”

“I told you, we don’t normally drink.”

“Apologies. At present, our store of fresh water is rather limited. I could spare a cup for you, though; your lips are quite parched.”

“No, thanks. How long have you been at sea?”

“This voyage? Four months.”

“And the ship is...”

“The *Freedom*.”

“Ah.” The subject of the story they’d read in class.

“If I may trouble you for some answers?”

“Sure.”

“You came aboard my ship courtesy of a passing water spout. Are you of the mer-people?”

“No. We are human, like you.”

“Victims of vile sorcery, then?” He gazed tenderly at Chelsea, sprawled on the divan. “Some curse enacted by her scorned lover?”

Mustang bit back a snide comment. “Yes to the first, no to the second.”

“Be you the cursed one?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“You are doomed to roam the seas, perhaps, never to set foot on land again?”

“Don’t talk nonsense. My curse is... difficult to explain.”

“I will respect your silence, in that event. My crew, however, may not abide cursed passengers, especially women, on the ship. “

“We won’t be here long. Now that Chelsea is convinced you aren’t merely a character on the printed page, she’ll get off my case once and for all.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Never mind.”

Forbes opened his mouth to voice the next question, but circumstances intervened. A barefoot deck-hand burst through the cabin door. “Cap’n! A ship approaching to starboard!”

“Flying what colors?”

“British!”

“Pipe the men to their stations!” Forbes commanded.

Within seconds, a shrill whistle blew an intricate series of notes. The sounds of feet could be heard on the deck above. “You will excuse me, please. Duty calls.”

“Duty?” Mustang challenged.

“You will be safe if you remain here.”

Safe, hell, mused Mustang, when a cannon ball splashed into the water directly outside the porthole near her head. She scurried into a cloud of acrid fog, concealing herself behind the ladder leading to the quarter deck. Planks beneath her feet shuddered with each firing of the *Freedom's* cannons, and she watched smoke billow from the opponent's ship as their armament continued the offensive.

To her surprise, no British Navy projectiles struck Forbes' ship. They either fell short, or soared past the bow. The gunners serving His Majesty had to be better aims...

A lead ball arced toward the mainmast. Mustang expected it to shred the cloth, until she glimpsed Sean Forbes - ensconced near the quarterdeck rail - divert its path with a deft wave his hand.

"Oh, hell!" the girl spat.

No wonder Jack Parsons had been fascinated by this pirate. He controlled the forces of nature with the same ease the 20th century occultist had enjoyed.

Her knees buckled as pieces of an obscure puzzle fell into place: Sean Forbes the Parson might well have had his name shortened over time to Sean Parson or Parsons, a possible ancestor of Jack Parsons, whose blood ran in her veins...

Something must've distracted Forbes, because a cannon ball shattered the grate covering the main hold feet from Mustang's position. When she regained her balance after the impact, she peered between the slat stairs into the penetrating brown eyes of the captain himself.

II

"I told you to stay below," Forbes barked.

"Why, so I wouldn't see *your* sorcery?"

He seized a handful of Mustang's t-shirt, yanking her within inches of his foul breath. "That is not a word to be bandied about lightly, girl."

"You made mention of it first, if you recall."

The yardarm overhead shattered under fire, raining splinters of wood upon the deck.

"The truth, now: why are you here?" hissed Forbes.

Mustang ducked away from another incoming round. "You'd better focus on protecting your ship, before there's nothing left to protect."

"Not until you answer me!"

"Fine!" Mustang side-stepped him, shouting above the din, "Nothing else touches this craft!"

Two shots, on a direct course to severely damage the mast, veered off and splashed harmlessly in the water beyond the stern. Forbes spun Mustang around, towering threateningly above her. “How come you by these powers?”

“The same way you came by yours, I’d guess.”

“An anomaly of the blood?”

“More an anomaly of the mind.” Given the time period, Mustang dared no more elaborate reply.

Forbes ruminated, “My father often accused me of being mad...”

“I’ve had friends say the same of me, like Miss Barker down there...”

A myriad of emotions distorted the pirate’s countenance before it settled in a wry smile. “Have you discovered any limits to what you can do?”

“There are certain things I will *not* do.”

“For instance?”

“I won’t alter the weather for any reason.”

“That is wise. I tried once to make the rain stop. It was not a pleasant experience.”

The battle waged on; the pair might have been standing on a sunny street corner in London. “Dealing with British attacks seems to be equally unpleasant,” said Mustang. “How do you intend to bring this fracas to a satisfactory conclusion?”

“Our worthy adversary’s ship is already taking on water below decks. Unless they make a hasty retreat to the nearest port, they will founder with all hands.” Forbes slipped a knife from his broad leather belt. “How are you with weaponry?”

“Don’t see the need for it, most days.”

Carelessly, as if it were a piece of trash, the captain pitched the blade toward the mast. The steel buried itself in the wood up to the hilt.

“Impressive,” praised Mustang. “If it will prove anything, I can make the rigging collapse...”

He bowed in submission. The crew had left their posts at the guns, the conflict ended. No revelry, no celebration, just another day’s work complete, and more chores to be done.

The excitement concluded, Mustang realized she hadn’t vomited in an hour. Her confidence was premature, however. Forbes was about to usher her back to his cabin, when she bolted for the rail.

Chelsea staggered into the warm evening then, her blue eyes glazed, brain not registering the scenery. “My God, I’ve got a headache!” she moaned.

The captain confronted the high school senior, smiling. “The best thing for such a condition is sleep, Miss Barker.”

“But, I just woke up!”

“A cool cloth might help...”

“What I need is aspirin, stupid!”

Mustang winced, trying to spit some horrible tasting saliva into the ocean. She could cure this awful *mal-de-mer* if she wished, and she might, if it persisted much longer. She could certainly cure her companion’s hangover.

“You’re fine, Chelsea,” she stated forcefully. “Take a couple deep breaths, and you’ll feel a lot better.”

Less than a minute later, the blonde was her perky, conceited self once more. “Captain Forbes,” she declared. “I have read that pirates are no gentlemen, treating their women little better than whores, getting them drunk and taking advantage of them.”

What the hell prompted that comment? pondered Mustang.

“I have known those who fit such a description,” Forbes conceded tersely.

“Those captured on ships are held for ransom, am I correct?”

“If their families are wealthy, yes.”

“I wish to make it absolutely clear: I will not tolerate the first, and do not qualify for the second. I will not have this stinking mob anywhere near me while I am aboard!”

Forbes straightened, glaring down at Chelsea. “If you disapprove of my crew, Miss Barker, you may take your leave of us whenever you choose.”

“I choose now.”

“As you wish.”

Three men broke out a narrow, warped plank and thrust it over the port side. The captain motioned Chelsea toward it.

Only then did the girl grasp the magnitude of her mistake. Mustang stifled a giggle, wishing the same fate were available on an ordinary school day. But when Chelsea, sobbing, grasped desperately at Mustang’s arms did the latter reconsider.

“You’re responsible for this, Mustang! Save me!”

“Sean, let her go.”

He snapped, “No female dictates terms to me.”

“I can do more than dictate terms, *Captain*,” Mustang insisted. “And I don’t think you want me to demonstrate in front of these swabs. Lock her in your cabin until morning, so she’ll be out of your hair.”

“What happens in the morning?”

“We will return from whence we came.”

He stepped toward Mustang, rumbling, “What if I lock myself in the cabin with her?”

She touched his arm; an electrical current coursed through his body. “I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

He recoiled. “You claim to despise her, yet you protect her?”

“She’s a child playing with fire. This is her chance to feel the heat before she gets burned.”

“As you have?” He flipped her scarred palms upward.

“When you ride the lightning, you take the risk.”

“You...”

“Confine her below and dismiss your men. We’ve much to discuss.”

Forbes issued the orders and the deck rapidly cleared. Mustang remained at the rail, her stomach still queasy; he joined her there as the sun descended.

“You are a vicious creature, Miss Duryea.”

“You’re no angel, for a Christian.”

“How...”

She mimicked the Sign of the Cross he’d made earlier. “Or were you merely warding off evil spirits?”

“You are an observant, vicious creature.”

“Why did you abandon your attacks against the slave traders?”

“You know of that?”

“I know many things about you.”

“Are you a British spy?”

“Do I talk like a British spy?” Mustang snickered.

“No, your accent is unfamiliar to me.”

“I truly like yours. Just Irish enough to make my skin tingle.”

“I will consider that a compliment.”

“I meant it so. Why *did* you jump ship in Ireland and hide out all those years?”

Forbes sighed. “As a lad, I noticed I could make things happen...”

“Like this?” Mustang whispered to the wind, and a pillar of fire appeared on the water.

“Not quite so... dramatic,” he gasped, eyes wide.

“Sorry. Go on, please.”

“I fled my parents’ house after they told the local priest I was dabbling in black magic. Joining the Royal Navy seemed the best way to escape interrogation by the witch hunters.”

“Except, you didn’t like the military discipline.”

“I didn’t like seeing comrades die. When we docked in Wexford to resupply, I sneaked down the gangplank when the watch were occupied elsewhere.”

“And?”

“I took sanctuary in a Benedictine monastery, and became a priest.”

“You’re a priest?”

He nodded.

That explained the “Parson” title, but not other aspects of his life. “You were going to make Chelsea walk the plank!”

“Aye.”

“Wouldn’t that break one of the commandments your kind claims to observe?”

“I left the monastery a long time ago.”

“What difference does that make?”

“Things are different at sea, missy. God may exist out here, but men must fend for themselves.”

“That’s why you stopped blockading the slavers?”

“No. There were too many of them, and I, one man. It was a hopeless cause.”

“So, now you’re a full-fledged pirate, preying on innocent ships, your hands soaked in blood.”

“Do you think I have to kill?” Forbes erupted. “I can crack a mast in twain and disable a rudder chain in the beat of a heart. I disable the ships and plunder them, leaving the passengers to their fate.”

“What about the crews?”

“If they choose to resist, some may be lost to Davy Jones’ locker.”

“Who’s the vicious creature, Captain?”

“Miss Duryea, I fear we are cut from the same cloth.”

Mustang fell silent.

“We should form an alliance...” he proposed.

“Thank you, no. I’ll be returning home on the morrow, as I said.”

“What if I make it worth your while to stay aboard?”

“Nothing you could offer would tempt me.”

“Then, I bid you good night.”

He strode across the deck and descended the ladder. From Mustang’s perspective, he’d given up the argument too readily. She suspected he would muster every resource to discover some weakness, and use it against her.

That weakness might well be Chelsea Barker.

Or her own stomach.

Another five minutes at the rail, and Mustang's physical weakness could be in no doubt. Adrenaline alone propelled her to the ladder when Chelsea screamed.

The teen crashed into the captain's cabin, encountering a terrifying sight illuminated by hanging lamps. Eight scruffy sailors in various stages of undress surrounded the cot, where Chelsea bucked against the restraining hands of two others.

"Don't fret, missy," they chortled. "We washed ourselves a month ago!"

Mustang darted forward; an iron grasp halted her. She whipped around to confront Sean Forbes. "You condone this behavior?"

"My men fought well today. They deserve a reward."

"Oh, they'll be rewarded, all right, when certain parts of their anatomy shrivel and fall off!"

Forbes squinted at the girl, to determine if she was serious. Her pursed lips and flushed cheeks might have been caused by another bout of nausea; he thought not.

"Enough!" he commanded. "Out, all of you!"

Disappointed, the crewmen abandoned their prey and shuffled from the chamber. Mustang pulled free of Forbes and crossed to sit beside her cowering classmate.

"You're okay, Chelsea. Nothing happened..."

Except the bodice of the green dress had been ripped open, and the skirts cut away.

"You bitch!" shrieked the senior. "You got me into this, and look at me!"

"You're the one who opened your mouth about the way pirates treat women, inserting your expensively pedicured foot. Besides, once we're back where we belong, you'll remember it as a really bad nightmare, that's all."

"You're a heartless bitch, Mustang Duryea!"

"Bitch?" Forbes echoed.

"A derogatory term for a vicious creature," replied Mustang, matter-of-factly. "You might be more familiar with the insults *shrew* or *harridan*."

"And mustang?"

"A wild horse common where we live."

"I can see why you earned such a name."

She rose. "You see nothing, Captain. Somewhere on your journey through life, you lost your way in a dark forest of self-deceit and greed..."

In two strides, he blocked her exit. “For one such as me, there is naught but piracy or the hangman’s noose. That is, unless we ally together and conquer the seas...”

“I don’t want to conquer the seas.”

“Then we will wrest the English throne from the Hanover usurpers and together rule a vast empire.”

“No.”

“If you will not join me, your fate will be worse than death.”

Dejected, Mustang admitted, “There are days, Sean, when living is worse than death.”

The remark gave him pause. He gazed down at her pale mien, pitying them both. His arm slid around her waist, and he drew her close...

Knowing what she did, Mustang wriggled free. Kissing a man who might occupy an isolated branch on her family tree was too creepy a prospect.

“Do I offend you so completely?” he queried.

“You have no idea.”

III

Mustang spent much of the night at the starboard rail. The seas were growing rough; she clung to the wood to prevent herself from pitching backward, and from collapsing entirely. At the helm, Sean Forbes manned the wheel, but his eyes weren’t on the stars or the waves. They bored into the back of her head no differently than a power drill.

She could see herself becoming like the wild-haired seaman, using her power to fulfill every impulse. Would there be anything wrong with owning a horse ranch, having expensive cars in the garage, and a sprawling mansion? Forbes had a hold filled with gold and jewels he would sell when next he sailed into port, spending the money on fine food, wine and women.

Nothing wrong with any of it, really.

No meaning to it, either.

Waves pounded the ship; Mustang’s knuckles whitened clutching the rail. She cursed herself for giving in to petty anger, for risking life and limb to prove a senseless point. But then, she’d wanted to experience the pirate world herself, first-hand. The freedom of sailing the seven seas appealed to her - less agonizing than scorching her skin riding the lightning.

Less agonizing for her hands, maybe. The rest of her body didn’t agree with this mode of travel in the least.

The sound of boots on the forlorn deck roused her from the reverie. Feebly, she swiveled her head.

“I come bearing a peace offering,” announced Forbes.

Dangling from his fingers, a ruby and diamond necklace, worth thousands of dollars in the 21st century, Mustang guessed.

“Give it to Chelsea. She likes bling.”

“It is for you. It belonged to my mother.”

“What?”

“Her father was the second son of a duke. Since he didn’t inherit the family estate, he was allowed to give this to his wife as a wedding present. I... stole it from Mother’s jewel case when I left home.”

“Why, then, give it to me?”

“To seal our bargain.”

“There is no bargain!” Mustang cried, slumping against the rail, drained of energy.

“You are in no condition to protest.”

A telling edge to his baritone put the teen on the defensive. Best to teach this pirate a lesson before the situation got out of hand.

“Ropes can leave permanent marks if you fight the bonds,” she grumbled. She didn’t have to shift her gaze to know Forbes had been trussed up by a coil of thick hemp and was dangling two feet in the air.

“And a slippery deck can wash a body overboard!” he shouted.

A veritable wall of water slammed upward, aimed directly for Mustang. “Evaporate!” she countered, and every droplet flashed into nothingness.

Their power might be evenly matched, but the girl had a clear advantage: she had studied the rudiments of modern science, of which Forbes had no awareness.

“If I let you down, will you observe a truce?” she queried.

“Aye, you have my word.”

The ropes slackened, and he slammed onto the wood. Gemstones scattered everywhere when the necklace’s delicate chain broke.

“Damn you for a scheming harridan!” Forbes cursed, rolling into a crouch - a tiger on the attack.

“Who’s doing the scheming here, Captain? I rejected your bauble; what would’ve been your next move if I hadn’t trussed you up like a scarecrow?”

“To wring your scrawny neck.”

“What will it take to get it through that thick skull of yours: I can’t do anything you can’t do for yourself!”

He straightened to his full height. "You can oppose me..."

"I don't *oppose* you. Your conduct on the high seas matters not one whit to me. I didn't come here to reform you. I... made a stupid mistake. And, quicker than you can change course, I'll vanish from your life forever."

"Leaving Miss Barker behind?"

"She may be annoying, but I'm not *that* cruel. I know what your men would do to her."

"You honestly think I would let them defile her?" Forbes challenged.

"Not two hours ago..."

"I wanted to see how you would react. I wanted to know the limits of your power."

"And what did your little test prove?"

"There is no limit to your power."

"Nor is there to yours. You are limited only by your knowledge."

"Then, teach me." It was a genuine, humble request.

"There isn't time, Sean."

"Where can I go to acquire this knowledge which has made you a god among men?"

"Here and now? It is impossible."

"But you..."

She stooped to pick up a rose-cut diamond, sparkling in the moonlight, and laid it in Forbes' hand. "Three centuries from now, my knowledge will be a joke compared to the geniuses of the age."

"What age?"

"The year 2000."

Forbes jaw dropped. "You travel through time?"

She didn't feel the need to answer.

"I would see this future."

"Then, utter the command." A tiny voice inside her head shouted, "Don't say another word!" She ignored the warning.

"But..."

"You will need to choose the time period and destination carefully - that much I've learned. You may want to start in Wexford, since you lived in Ireland and may be able to recognize some of the landmarks. Or, if you want to see new sights, pick a city like San Francisco, or New York."

"Will I be able to return... here?"

"As long as nothing goes wrong."

"What about the ship, the crew?"

“They’ll be here when you get back. Not a day older or any wiser than you’ve been gone.”

“Amazing!” He paced the deck, head bowed in thought. “Will you come with me?”

“No. I must go my own way.”

He left her to the railing, anxious to consult his maps.

In her exhaustion, Mustang failed to consider another point while instructing Forbes: the ending of the story she’d read in English class. That author claimed the Parson disappeared off the coast of Ireland, never to be seen again. What if the truth involved him traveling forward in time, and not being able to return to 1720? Might he be wandering through the future, a lost soul?

The days might pass for him, but he probably wouldn’t age physically. Though Mustang spent two years in the body of a German soldier during World War II, barely a few seconds passed in the Canyon Creek classroom in the interim. Sean Forbes would remain his present age for as long as he absented himself from the 18th century.

“Oh, hell.”

She vomited again, this time from self-disgust.

If she had unwittingly unleashed a demon on the future, how would history be altered?

A fresh blast of adrenaline powered her descent below deck. The door to the captain’s cabin was open; Mustang swallowed her heart, hoping Forbes had not already departed.

Chelsea lay, huddled on the cot, blue eyes open and staring at nothing. She could well be in shock after being so brutally assaulted. Mustang crossed to the girl and covered her with a thick quilt, another bit of plunder from some victimized ship, most likely.

“So, you *can* be an angel of mercy,” Forbes murmured, standing at the chart table, a small lantern casting eerie shadows on the bulkhead .

“If she dies, I’ll be hard pressed to explain it.”

“Where I’m going, there’ll be no need to explain anything.”

“Just your clothes, your lack of money, your ignorance of local customs...”

“Money? I have plenty of gold coins.”

The teen crossed the floor, pulling a wallet from her jean pocket. “They use paper money in most countries.” She showed him a \$5 bill.

“Worthless!” Forbes scoffed.

“Except when you’re buying food or a car.”

“A car?”

“Replaced the horse and carriage around 1900. People seldom travel by ship anymore, either. They fly.” With any luck, she’d scare him enough he’d reconsider uttering the essential command.

“Fly?” He was clearly horrified. “What sorcery is this?”

“No magick involved. Actually, Leonardo daVinci, some years before you were born, drew the original designs for an aircraft.”

“I have heard of this daVinci. He was denounced as a heretic by some in the Church.”

A lightbulb flickered inside Mustang’s head. “That’s why you took to the sea after so many years. You feared being labeled a heretic if you stayed in the monastery.”

“Aye,” Forbes confessed. “The prior was an unscrupulous sort. He saw me refresh a crate of rotten pears being given to the poor. He threatened to expose me if I didn’t provide him with certain... luxuries.”

“Nice, giving rotten fruit to the hungry,” sighed the girl. “What did this guy want?”

“He had cast his eye on a woman of the town - a very pious matron who would never be part of a monk breaking his vows. He wanted gold to buy her a fine house and beautiful clothes, to win her affection.”

“Did you?”

“No.” Wistfully, he peered through the porthole. “That very night I stole the gardener’s clothes off the line where his wife had hung them to dry, and walked to the coast. This very ship was manifested from a wreck I found abandoned in the shallows.”

“All these years, an empty life?”

He flipped open the leather volume on the table. Latin words filled the pages. “I am still a priest. I have my prayers.”

“Then, the piracy and bravado...”

“The piracy placates the crew. When they go ashore, they have... needs.”

“It’s a bit hypocritical, don’t you think?” Mustang could only recall her conversations with Francis of Assisi, and how earnestly he called people to live righteously.

“It is, and I am damned for it. But, perhaps, in the future, I can redeem myself.”

So, she had not dissuaded him. His was a tortured soul, desperately seeking solace. Aimlessly sailing the oceans had not sated his aching heart; now, he was reaching out to the only hope a man really has: time.

“Sean, don’t do anything foolish. Take my word for it, you may wind up in more trouble than you can handle, despite your power. Sleep on it, at least, and we’ll talk more in the morning.”

“You promise to be here?”

“I promise.”

“I will bring a jug of fresh water before I bunk with the crew, and you must drink it dry, the two of you. If you were to fall ill, I would never forgive myself.”

Mustang settled on the red velvet divan, confused. From wanting to kill her, now Forbes was determined to keep her healthy and alive. Merely because she had revealed horizons he’d never envisioned? Or was his quiet humility another ruse to win her confidence and trick her into an alliance?

Priests in the 21st century weren’t deemed trustworthy, thanks to the highly publicized sex abuse scandal. A brief mention in her comparative religion class called into question the integrity of many medieval popes, as well, for accepting money to grant indulgences or elevate relatives to the hierarchy, and siring multiple children with their mistresses.

If such were the case, Mustang couldn’t risk letting down her guard for an instant with the pirate captain.

Rather than a jug, Forbes delivered a ceramic tankard filled with what he professed to be water. “Take just a mouthful at first,” he instructed, “unless you want it to come right back up.”

Indelicate, but truthful, Mustang realized. She sipped tentatively, and nearly spit the liquid on the boards. “Did you mix the water with rum? It tastes awful.”

“The crew uses these cups for their rum rations, and to measure gunpowder.”

“Don’t they believe in rinsing them when they’re done?”

He shrugged.

“Cleanliness is not next to godliness on the high seas, eh?” she remarked, managing to swallow a few drops of the liquid.

She turned to Chelsea. The cheerleader hadn’t moved from her fetal position. Mustang raised her head and tried to make her drink, unsuccessfully.

“It’s almost as if she’s dead,” observed Forbes.

“She may end up that way, if something isn’t done. I’ve seen men who’ve taken a bad fall from their horse look exactly the same. Her brain’s shut down, as a reaction to your crew’s... attention.” She added, under her breath, “Not that she had much brains to start with.”

“Can you cure her?”

“Getting her home will be the best cure. She’ll feel safe among her friends, and snap out of it faster.” She gazed at Forbes. “I think we should go, without delay.”

“You promised...”

“I’m not the sort who breaks promises at the drop of a hat. This is an emergency.”

Resigned, he stated, “Do what you must.”

Mustang rummaged through the wardrobe for Chelsea’s skirt and top. It took a great deal of maneuvering to slip the semi-conscious senior from the mutilated gown and restore her to school-day attire; she was heavier than she appeared. Mustang finally rose from the cot, panting, her strength spent. No one at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School would ever believe the pep squad maven if she claimed to have visited the 18th century.

“Those aren’t suitable even as undergarments,” scolded the captain.

“You’d be horrified what passes for fashion three hundred years hence.”

She hesitated long enough to take another sip of water from the tankard. Forbes hadn’t moved from the chart table; his mutton-chop side burns gave his face the appearance of a forlorn puppy. Mustang couldn’t help him; every life has its share of disappointments.

“Farewell, Captain.”

“Godspeed, Miss.”

Mustang scooped up Chelsea’s limp hand with her left, lifting her head with her right. She hoped, by keeping her close, the waterspout - or whatever natural phenomenon facilitated their travel - would do the girl no further harm.

Concentrated thus on her companion, Mustang didn’t notice Forbes creep closer. As she muttered the directive to transport them to their starting point in time, he slipped his arm around her waist from behind.

The spinning winds and flying debris caught all three in its funnel.

“Chelsea, what happened?” squealed the bubbly pep squad delegation, when the mini-tornado of utensils dispersed in the cafeteria a second later.

One of the girls flicked water on her face, another tapped her cheeks.

“Chelsea, what’s wrong?”

As Mustang expected, the senior gradually revived. “What?” she muttered.

“You, like, did a Star Trek thing, phasing out for a couple seconds.”

Chelsea scanned the room, students bustling between the tables. Mustang still held her hand; she jerked free. “You bitch!”

The whole squad leapt on the defensive. “What’d she do to you, Chelsea? We’ll take her down a peg or two.”

Mustang favored Chelsea with a withering glare, grabbing a liter water bottle and drinking deeply.

“It’s okay,” said the blonde, catching the unspoken message. “Let’s finish eating and get to class.”

“Who’s that?” a sophomore across the aisle queried.

Those with a view craned their necks; Mustang glanced over her shoulder as a disoriented Sean Forbes the Parson rose from the tile.

“Oh, hell.”

IV

Without a thought for the consequences, Mustang squatted beside the pirate, gripped his arm and shot them both back to 1720 and the *Freedom*. They plunked on the cot like two rubber balls; he groaned

“Don’t *ever* do that again,” the teen growled, tempted to slap him.

Forbes blinked, dispelling a troubling vision. “What was it I saw?”

“A 21st century school building. You didn’t believe me when I predicted you’d be overwhelmed by the future. You were there less than a minute, and look at the effect on you!”

The first mate, Mr. Thompson, stumbled into the cabin, interrupting the argument. “Captain! I’ve been hollering for orders! Are you all right?”

“Orders? What orders?” inquired Forbes.

“Two British frigates are nearly in range, preparing to broadside!”

“Pipe the men to their stations!” He was half-way to the door when he turned. “I’ll need your help to fend off two ships at once.”

Knowing Forbes didn’t die at sea, Mustang acquiesced. She joined him on the quarterdeck to watch a pair of masterfully built craft, wind filling too many sails to count, bearing down on the smaller pirate vessel.

“They’re 24-gunners!” cried the hand in the crow’s nest.

Mustang breathed, “That’s a lot of fire power. If we could outrun them…”

“All the canvas on the seven seas wouldn’t help. The wind’s in their favor, not ours.”

“We’re smaller and lighter, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Then turn this behemoth and take advantage of the winds!”

“It will only postpone the inevitable,” Forbes reasoned.

“I can sink them now, if you wish.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder. "I don't want to sink them, just disable them enough so they end their pursuit."

The teen scrutinized the *Freedom's* deck, still bearing damage from the last battle when a select few cannon balls were not deflected from their targets. In no way was reality like film, when a ship could be riddled with holes, and reappear in the next scene fully intact.

"One mast, or two?" she asked.

"One mast or two, what?"

"To disable them. Should I take out one mast or two?"

"Losing one mast will slow them considerably."

The British had begun firing their long range guns, short of the mark. Mustang realized, had she been a vindictive sort, she could have enjoyed a bit of fun before crippling the naval ships - using the lead balls as boomerangs, impacting the very hulls from which they'd been launched.

The projectiles soon were dropping into the water just off the bow. Forbes' crew waited at their own guns for his command; he waited for Mustang.

She nodded.

"Fire!"

Six cannons on each side of the ship sent a volley toward their adversaries. According to the laws of physics, the frigates should have been untouched. With a calculated word from a young girl's lips, though, yardarms shattered and the center masts cracked and pitched into the water.

"Hard a-port!" called Forbes.

The helmsman acknowledged, "Aye, Cap'n."

The *Freedom* listed sharply left as it veered away from the two British warships. Catching the stiff breeze now in its sails, the craft picked up speed, compared to the slowed progress of its pursuers.

"Doesn't this get redundant, day after day, fighting just to stay afloat?" Mustang prodded.

"There are weeks at a time when we never fire a shot," replied Forbes. "We're within a few miles of the coast now, so the British can more easily communicate our position and try to intercept us."

"It looked like those two monsters wanted to sink you outright."

"The men in the King's service have little regard for the lives of their fellow men, even their own sailors."

"So, you'll remain on the seas until..."

"Until I tire of it."

“Well, my adventures as a seaman are at an end. I feel like I might be visiting the rail if I don’t... go.”

“I believe I will stay – at least, for now. Some day, when I have reconciled what you’ve told me with the potential of the future, I may attempt once more to defy time and tide...”

“One last suggestion: fear nothing and no man. I have learned no one can touch me, unless I permit it, thus I cannot be harmed. Even if you don’t understand what you see – and there have been quite a few times where that’s happened to me – stand your ground and let no one intimidate you. You can always travel elsewhere with a word, so you don’t need to stay where you’re ill-at-ease.”

“Wise advice from one so young,” Forbes praised.

“Our paths may cross again, Captain. I would not regret such a meeting.”

He bent over her hand and kissed it. “Nor would I.”

Mustang descended the ladder and slipped behind it, to prevent the crew – busily trimming the sails – from seeing her vanish in a spiral of dust.

She’d never been more relieved to be standing in the overcrowded school cafeteria. Even more gratifying was catching a fleeting glance of Chelsea Barker and her pep squad, scurrying from the room on their spiked heels. Seeing Sean Forbes mere inches from where she sat must’ve convinced the senior her experience had been not a dream, but harsh reality.

Mustang sank onto a molded plastic chair at the abandoned table. Reaching for the water bottle, she noticed black smudges on her arms. She picked off a few grains of the dirt and sniffed it. Gunpowder.

Her t-shirt and jeans were coated in the explosive. Had she a mirror, she would’ve seen her cheeks splotched, as well, almost like a Goth-style rouge. Tired and not caring, she drained the bottle - a small start toward rehydrating herself after the prolonged nausea of sea-sickness.

The bell clanged, signaling two minutes until the next class session. Mustang sidled along the corridor, stopping at her locker to grab her Sociology text. She slipped into the girl’s restroom to wash her hands - and her face, when she noticed her reflection over the sink.

Emerging from the doorway, she glimpsed an unusual figure saunter past. He seemed familiar, yet not. His clothes didn’t fit into the grunge and laid-back attire of the other students. He wore a purple, calf-length, tailored coat, black trousers and scuffed boots. His greying hair was combed back from his forehead, sideburns trimmed close.

He was searching for something, for someone. That much was clear by the way he scanned oncoming human traffic and peered over classroom thresholds.

Unwittingly, Mustang began following him. When he rounded the corner, he looked back down the hall, and she recognized his penetrating brown eyes.

“Sean Forbes!” she cried.

He halted, causing two freshman to collide with his unyielding back.

She dodged bodies, hurrying toward him, yanking him unceremoniously from the midst of the passing-period rush. “What the hell...”

“I came to find you.”

She studied his countenance, no longer tanned, furrows lining his brow and chin. He had aged considerably since she’d been with him, not fifteen minutes ago!

Fifteen minutes for her could have been ten years for him, though.

So much for Sociology, she decided, more gently urging him toward the building’s exit.

Outdoors in the May sunshine, they strolled across the street to a neighborhood park. “You’re... well?” Mustang inquired, watching the playground swings vibrate in the wind.

“I live quietly now, since I settled in the west of Ireland.”

“You finally tired of the sea?”

“I tired of being chased by the British. They came very close the last day off the coast. I relinquished command of the *Freedom* to First Mate Thompson and dove overboard, swimming to shore.”

“All that treasure you plundered bought you a fine life, I suppose.”

“I left the booty to the crew. Fourteen years now, I’ve occupied a small cottage on a farm, where I tend the horses.”

A sentimental note in his baritone compelled her to stare at him.

“Yes, because of you,” he answered the unspoken question. “I understand why you care so much about them. They are magnificent animals.”

“That’s great, I guess. But, why come to see me?”

“I have never forgotten what you told me that night aboard ship, about time travel.”

The teen’s stomach flipped. “Have you... tried it?”

“Only twice. I recalled your mention of this particular year, and decided to visit Boston. I... The buildings... The people...”

“Remember, I also warned you about the future. What about the second time?”

“I went to Paris in 1790. Blood ran in the streets from nobles being guillotined by the hundreds, and thousands of commoners rioted...”

Mustang snickered. “You didn’t make the best choices, Sean. You should try a town you’ve visited in the normal course of your life, like Dublin, or London. Move forward a few years, to start - 1750, for example. Once you’re comfortable with the advances, you can go a couple decades further, and so forth.”

“I’ve noticed... unexpected physical complications.”

This concerned the girl. Having never opted to venture ahead of her own era, she couldn’t predict the effect on the human body. “How so?”

“My powers are ineffective, other than returning me to my original time.”

She never would’ve suspected that would be the problem. Unless...

“Did you ever marry and have children?” she asked.

“I’m a priest; I cannot marry.”

“Sorry, it slipped my mind. What about brothers, sisters?”

“I had a younger brother, living in Liverpool, last I had word of him.”

“Is he married?”

“By now, he should be a grandfather.”

“You’ve never met your nieces or nephews, or their children?”

“No.”

“That may be your answer. You once called your power an anomaly of the blood.”

“And you defined it as an anomaly of the mind.”

“It’s a bit of both, actually. I think it’s hereditary, passed down from generation to generation.”

“My brother never displayed any tendency...” Forbes paused. “Then again, I left home when he was not yet twelve.”

“And, with the power passed to his descendants, your presence in the future may have prevented you from tapping into the flow of the natural elements.”

“It sounds feasible.”

“I also could be full of...”

“Worry not, Miss Elizabeth. You are wiser than you think.” Again, he hesitated. “Is that why you have the power? Because you’re...”

Though she had contemplated this very possibility while on his ship, Mustang didn’t want to discuss it. “Your name is Forbes; mine is Duryea.”

“I use the name Parsons now.”

“Oh, hell...” She tried to make it appear that she noticed the clock tower on the town hall, and had to get back to the school. “I’ve got to go. Will you be... moving on, or do you need help getting where you want to go?”

“I’ll be going home, for now. If I attempt more serious travels in time at some point, I’ll keep in mind what you told me.”

She almost let slip the common, “See you soon,” biting her lip at the last second. She hoped Sean Forbes/Parsons never again materialized in her lifetime.

She’d missed fourth period Sociology entirely, she discovered, rejoining the between-class congestion in the halls. Passing the nurse’s office en route to her locker, she glimpsed Chelsea Barker sitting beside the desk, her ankle wrapped in an Ace bandage.

“Principal’s looking for you!” the pep squad captain shouted.

Mustang assumed, because she had skipped class, detention would be forthcoming.

But, no.

“You dropped E in my soda at lunch, you bitch!” continued Chelsea.

“Made me hallucinate I was being raped, and nearly killed. I think the cops have been called, and you’re going to be arrested.”

No sense arguing with the girl, Mustang decided. “What’d you do to your foot?”

“I thought I was being chased through the halls, and my heel broke.”

Heading toward the main office, Mustang burst out laughing. Chelsea’s stupidity in wearing shoes unfit to support the human body caused her to sprain an ankle. Just like her stupidity in making comments on topics about which she had no knowledge almost cost her life...

With trepidation, Mustang pushed open the metal door to the office suite no student ever wanted to visit. Two sophomores waited on cushioned chairs, one of them in tears.

The secretary seated behind a brightly painted half-wall eyed the newcomer curiously. “May I help you?”

“I’m... Elizabeth Duryea.”

“Oh, yes.” The brunette opened the top drawer of her desk revealing a parchment envelope. “An elderly gentleman delivered this for you earlier. He said it was rather urgent. We sent a student aide to your fourth hour class, but you weren’t...”

Knowing no “elderly gentleman”, Mustang wondered if the message could have come indirectly from her parents. “Am I in trouble?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“What about Chelsea...”

“She’s in here twice a week, at least, complaining someone or other has robbed her locker or touched her inappropriately,” the woman admitted. “She has a paranoid streak, and the principal takes her with a grain of salt.”

Mustang exhaled loudly, accepting the envelope.

As she made her exit, the woman called, “Just don’t skip class again, okay?”

Meaning the teen sprinted to the science wing to beat the bell for Physics. She didn’t pay much attention to the discussion on Eistein’s theory of relativity, stealthily breaking the old-fashioned wax seal on what actually wasn’t an envelope at all, but an expertly folded sheet of thick yellow stationery.

She read the stiff script, written with a blotchy black ink,

My dear Elizabeth,

Excuse my shaky hand, but I am quite old. I will die soon, and I wanted to thank you for making my remaining years more meaningful.

Nearly half my lifetime ago, you boarded my ship in the most unconventional way imaginable. You opened many doors for me, and I was able to gain a deeper understanding of my power, and the world. Had I told those I hold dear of my many adventures, they would have thought me mad but, because of you, I know I am quite sane.

Last time we saw each other, you asked about my brother and his offspring. I thought you would like to know there is now a direct heir to the Parsons name. Having met a young widow whose fiery red hair reminded me of you - and whose disposition was very similar to your own - I have sired a son, who is growing into manhood faster than I would have expected.

May the years ahead of you be blessed with all good things.

Sean Forbes’ signature was little better than chicken-scratch, but Mustang didn’t need it to be legible. No longer an obscure branch on the family tree, he became the main trunk - the first of the Parsons - from whom Jack Parsons may well have descended.

She suddenly felt nauseous, and lowered her head onto her open textbook, forcing herself to breathe steadily.

“Are you paying attention, Mustang?” demanded the teacher.

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Then act like it, please!”

At that particular moment, she would've given anything to be normal. She straightened in the chair and tried to smile, knowing this man's training in complex formulae could never allow him to comprehend her situation.

“Pop quiz!” he announced.

She cringed. Ask her to light a tree on fire, and she'd have no problem. Test her on scientific principles, and she was at a loss.

She just wanted to disappear, and she could have, except Chelsea Barker sat two seats to the left, glaring at her.

Nothing had been solved by the day's exploits. Even with her power, Mustang had to content herself she couldn't change people's opinions.

Graduation only weeks away, she'd be glad to confine herself to the family ranch and tend the horses.