

The Mustang Chronicles:

Angelic Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea bolted from her bed as if she’d been bitten by a snake. Perspiration trickled from her temples, goosebumps covered her arms, and she shivered from fear.

She’d been dreaming on this chill April morning of a previous Christmas gathering. A festive dinner gave way to dancing in a massive, French decorated ballroom, with a crowd of... angels - though not sporting wings - waltzing in synchronized perfection around the floor. Their numbers mysteriously multiplied as the Strauss melody quickened, crushing her in the center of the throng until she could not breathe.

Lungs heaving as she snatched a thick, yellow terry robe from the closet, she sank on the stool near the dressing table, concentrating on regulating her pulse.

For all the weird experiences she’d survived since inheriting powers over nature from her grandfather Jack Parsons, the former occupant of this very dwelling, she didn’t attribute any real spiritual origin to them - except her encounter with Jude Griffin, a supposed truant officer from the Canyon Creek School District back in Montana, who turned out to be a demon straight from hell.

Even the fact she could manifest the dead - St. Francis of Assisi, Mohandas Gandhi, German general Erwin Rommel and Samuel Clemens - didn’t really strike her as having ethereal significance. Universal energies interacted with the elements and responded accordingly when she chanced to issue a command, impulsive or intentional.

The notion of a supreme deity seldom crossed her mind; a freshman comparative world religions class had dispelled any illusions she had in that regard, even though her parents, Joe and Maggie, had encouraged her to attend Sunday services with them, disappointed when she chose to saddle her pinto, Heartbeat, and roam the horse ranch, those open spaces more a church than some steeple-topped brick edifice.

Her hands finally stopped trembling, and her knees solidified from a gelatinous mush. She donned a purple hooded sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers, running a brush through her auburn mane before tying the strands in a ponytail. On her way out, she grabbed a windbreaker off the coat tree to protect her from near-freezing breezes.

At least, the barn was warm when she rolled aside the door. Five horses greeted her, eager for their breakfast of oats, hay and fresh water.

When the temperature rose later in the day, she’d saddle them each in turn and exercise them along the trails of the 47-acre property.

No finer life could she have envisioned for herself, the necessity of abandoning the States for the Scottish Highlands notwithstanding.

Boleskine House, a Georgian-style mansion on the eastern shore of Loch Ness, could have housed a decent sized family, and hosted lavish parties - and had, in the days when the lunatic occultist Aleister Crowley had resided there, though his idea of festivities amounted to little more than drug-fueled orgies. In the decades since, Jack Parsons had endured a lengthy exile - after the FBI staged his death via an explosion in a Pasadena, California, garage - interrupted by the brief ownership of a rock guitarist. Then, Mustang laid claim to the domicile, spending thousands to renovate the crumbling facade and interior.

Money she'd amassed during a stopover at a Las Vegas casino, and which she replenished periodically by traveling via lightning to the French Riviera.

In the region, she was known as Lady Elizabeth Neville, widow of a British nobleman, though the name stemmed from her relationship with Montana State Police officer Jim Neville, who she would have willingly married, had he not been killed by overzealous FBI agents while facilitating her escape in southern California.

Her rage escalated as she poured a bowl of corn flakes in the kitchen an hour later. Taking revenge on those trigger-happy idiots - unable to distinguish between a wallet and a pistol - still tempted her in odd moments, but she couldn't allow herself to get angry, because she did horrible things when riled.

Then, she had to clean up the mess.

By traveling across the Atlantic, she hoped to isolate herself from the mundane trials of ordinary life, and stay as far from people as possible to prevent a recurrence of previous calamities.

Three days' worth of dishes cluttered the sink; Mustang squirted liquid soap in a stream of hot water. Plates, glasses and silverware drying in the rack, she scrubbed dried eggs off a skillet. She rotated her right arm to ease the strain on her elbow; a pair of amber eyes stared at her through the smudged casement.

The Mistress of Boleskine recoiled, steel wool sloshing water on her jeans, sneakers and tile. "Oh, hell!" she gasped.

She didn't mind visitors on the grounds during daylight hours; there were always curiosity seekers poking about to find souvenirs of the Crowley era. The four-room Gate House situated near the highway had been ransacked and partially destroyed by a combination of inclement weather and amateur fortune hunters. The boldness to walk up and peek inside the house... intolerable!

Having grabbed a stack of tea towels to soak up the puddle, she glanced at the double pane.

The intruder had vanished.

Not that Mustang would mount a search, or notify the local constabulary. She owned no phone, no radio, television or computer. Her intent to stay “off the radar” had worked fairly well, so far, and she wouldn’t put her own privacy at risk.

Her horses might be hurt, however. She tossed wet towels in the washing machine, bound for the barn.

A sigh of relief accompanied the 20-year-old hoisting herself on the corral fence. The time and stamina required for anyone to trek the distance from the road, along the curved gravel drive to the house meant no random peeping tom, this.

But, what purpose... she mused.

From her perch, she had a 360 degree view yet, when she hopped off the painted wooden slats, those brownish-gold orbs appeared directly in front of her.

Quick reflexes honed through practice of kung fu - since acquiring the skill in China - she backhanded the exceptionally thin face and, taking advantage of his off-balance stance, aimed a roundhouse kick to put him on the ground. She deftly rolled him onto his spine and straddled his chest, right fist poised to break his nose.

She abruptly soared through the air, crashing against the barn wall, frightening the animals within.

Stunned, she lurched upright and dusted off her clothes, glaring at the long, tall drink of water smirking at her 50 yards away.

“Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?” she shouted.

A reedy tenor retorted, “Good call, kid. Hell is exactly right.” He strode toward her, black jeans clinging to the skinniest legs she’d ever seen on a grown man. “That’s the last time you’ll best me...”

“Hey, when you pop out of nowhere and scare a body to death, what do you expect?”

He slowed his pace, sneering. “Point taken.”

Mustang sensed something off about this... intruder. His windblown brown hair, fringed black leather jacket, red turtleneck, and square-toed black boots gave the impression of a biker, but with his excessively lean frame, he couldn’t have handled the weight of an overturned motorcycle without help.

Still, he’d sent her flying - and no one had managed that since...

“Talk, or be gone,” she declared.

“Can’t we be comfortable?”

“I’m not inviting you in the house, if that’s what you’re hinting.”

“I don’t need an invitation, when push comes to shove.”

The steel-reinforced front door opened of its own accord; Mustang’s hazel eyes widened.

A battle for supreme control of the natural elements was not on her schedule for the day.

The door slammed and sealed itself.

No matter how many times he snapped his fingers, he could not reverse her directive. “Well done. You’re more competent than the council intuited.”

“Council? What the hell do you mean?” She closed the gap between them and lifted him off the gravel by his jacket’s lapels. “Stop giving me the run-around, or you’ll regret it!”

He wriggled from her grip and floated sedately to earth. “Okay, okay.”

“What’s your name?”

“Haniel.”

“Unusual.”

“Your grandfather didn’t think so.”

Mustang sucked air through grit teeth. “Not again...”

“He called me Harry, last time I paid a call. You may do likewise.”

“Fine. Harry it is. What... are you?”

He studied her youthful features. “Brace yourself.”

“Don’t give me that...”

“I’m an angel.”

She swallowed her heart, but neither fainted nor flinched. Her suspicion about the vivid dream had been correct: a precursor of imminent danger. “I don’t need...”

“Think twice before you make a hasty decision about keeping me around for awhile, Mustang,” Haniel warned. “Remember the turmoil when you dealt with Jude Griffin.”

“How do you know about...”

His thick left eyebrow arched. “Whenever Mephistopheles leaves the nether regions, we know.”

“Why would an angel care if I was nearly obliterated by...”

“Because you performed a selfless gesture: defending one demon against another. That put you in a position of authority over the infernal forces...”

Mustang contemplated the scenario. “Authority you held...”

“Usurped... by a mere wisp of a girl.”

She chuckled. “Hey, if it’s that big a deal, you can have it back.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Oh, hell...” Her stomach growling, she tramped toward the mansion. “Nothing ever is, is it?”

The offer of a cup of hot cocoa was politely refused when they entered by the kitchen door. Milk was heated in a saucepan on the stove, ingredients added and steaming brew poured in a ceramic mug, which Mustang toted into the living room.

Hariel settled on the green sofa, fascinated by the hand-carved chess set on the inlaid board.

“If you’re jealous of power I received purely by accident...” his hostess grumbled between sips.

“Angels don’t... possess emotions.”

“Good for you.”

“Eh?”

“Emotions have caused me more trouble the past few years...”

“Yes, we’ve seen the... fruits of your impulsiveness.”

“Now you sound like Francis.”

“Francis?” queried Hariel.

“You should know him: Francis of Assisi.”

The angel’s eyes grew so huge, the sclera fully encircled the iris. “How could you...”

“Ask him yourself.”

The Little Poor Man, in his patched robe, appeared on the threshold. Mustang stifled a snicker; what was it about heavenly beings that rendered them so malnourished?

Maybe because they didn’t eat - but Francis hadn’t eaten much while he resided in the hillside Italian city he’d made famous, either.

The pair resembled two matchsticks as they greeted each other with a filial embrace.

While they reviewed celestial events, Mustang prepared herself a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich for lunch, with a bag of potato chips - or, as the locals called them: “crisps.”

She’d never become accustomed to the lingo of the British Isles, nor the thick Scottish burr that rendered English unintelligible.

Not even the translation capabilities integrated by her brain - thanks to Parson’s unsought bequest - could decipher that muddle.

Hariel joined her in the kitchen as she took the last bite of slathered bread.

“So, you’ve received the latest intelligence for your superiors; what now?” she prodded.

“Francis has... great affection for you. He... wasn’t privy to the... debacle with Mephistopheles...”

“So, of course, you told him.”

“Indeed.”

“Just another reason for him to rag me about my... lack of self-control.”

Hariel removed her plate and empty milk glass, placing them in the sink.

“Your power gives you limitless potential... but your age carries inherent perils. Before he died, Jack should have trained you...”

“He... tricked me into assisting at his final ritual...”

The angel bit his lip, dismayed. “That’s a shame.”

“A damned tragedy, given what’s happened since. But, there’s nothing I can do.” She stretched tired limbs. “I’m surprised Jack never mentioned you in his journals.”

“His journals?”

“Yeah. Handwritten volumes I discovered in the Gate House after... He wrote about how to defeat demons, but never that an angel dropped in for coffee.”

Hariel briefly pondered his reflection in the window, then turned to her. “In light of what is to come... I would be happy to spend the coming week sharing my insights.”

““In light of what is to come?”” she repeated. “What the hell...”

“Exactly.”

“You’re saying, hell is coming for me?”

He nodded stiffly.

A series of expletives issued from her throat, and she didn’t apologize for the breach of decorum. “Next thing you’ll let slip: if I defeat the demons again, you angels will get your claws into me... permanently.”

Hariel wiggled two sets of long, twig-like digits. “We don’t have claws.”

“Depends on your perspective.” Mustang left the metal table and shuffled to her room. “Go away, please.”

“I... can’t do that.”

She whirled on him beneath the lintel. “I’m willing to go for two out of three falls, *Harry*. How ‘bout you?”

II

“Why didn’t you confide in me?”

Francis of Assisi stood near the window in Mustang Duryea’s bedroom, thin lips scowling. She lay on the king-sized mattress, gazing at the ceiling.

“I thought the dead knew all about the living,” she replied idly.

“Before you... freed me from my tomb, I had no knowledge of you. Had I fathomed you the sort to defend a demon...”

She rolled onto her right elbow. “Why the fuss? He was in trouble, and I got him out of it. Besides, that was three years ago.”

“On the... eternal plane, three years is a drop in the bucket, as they say. Your association with this fallen one leaves an indelible brand...”

“What? No heaven for me when I die - as if I believed in such nonsense?”

“In the war predicted for the end times... you’ll not be allowed to fight in the ranks of the righteous.”

“Who says I’ll fight, anyway? If war comes, I’ll wipe out the lot - both factions, regardless of whether they’re right or wrong! Forego the violence.”

“Signorina...”

She punched her pillow. “C’mon, Francis. What’s on your mind? Harry ratted me out over Jude Griffin; what else did he tell you?”

“Hariel isn’t... male.”

“Huh?”

“Angels... have no gender.”

“He looks like a guy.”

“That may be, but it is a fact,” proclaimed the Italian saint.

She quipped, “Simplifies things, doesn’t it?”

“Do not mock the angelic choirs, Signorina.”

“Why not? They’re no different than human beings. All they want is control of my power.”

“They want *you* to control your power.”

“And, you believed him... er, it... For that matter: if it’s really an angel, where are its wings?”

She yanked the quilt over her head, not that she’d be able to sleep.

Exhaustion wrought by these befuddling circumstances, however, got the better of her, and she snored until late afternoon. When she noticed the alarm clock on the night stand, she kicked off the covers, grabbed her shoes and headed for the barn.

The horses needed attention, whether or not an angel was loitering on the premises.

Peace.

Bouncing in the saddle might be the only time the young woman felt her soul disentangled from gnawing anguish. Budding flowers and a canopy of leafy sprouts above the trail enfolded her like a metaphorical blanket on a winter’s night.

No one disturbed her on these outings, except an occasional squirrel or low-flying hawk. Fresh air filled her nostrils and her nerves tingled with delight.

That is, until she mounted the hillock where Jack Parsons' former altar - a decomposing picnic table - lay in ruins. Mustang watched Hariel leading Wench, another of her roans, from the barn to the corral, where Pietra and Crystal contentedly chewed grass.

She flicked the reins and Molly accelerated to a gallop. She veered toward Hariel at an angle where, had she wished, she could've kicked him squarely in the head.

"How dare you touch my horses!" she howled, sliding from the saddle inches from him.

He retreated two steps. "I... was just trying to help."

"Then, you bloody well should've asked."

Pretentiously, he used a linen handkerchief from his jean pocket to wipe mud flecks off his leather jacket. "You're no better than a spoiled child..."

"When it comes to my horses, I'm a bona fide tyrant. I told you earlier to get lost, and I mean it!"

"I'm afraid I can't leave you to your own devices. Not when there's this much at stake."

A fraction of a second had him pinned to the corral fence. "What's at stake, dammit?"

"You..."

His efforts to resist pressure applied by unseen forces in vain, she laughed in his face.

"You'll be a doddering old fool before I cut you loose, Harry," she snarled. "I want the whole story, every detail, *now*."

He spouted, "Angels don't age."

"I suppose you'll claim to be a thousand years old."

"Try six million."

"Bullshit!"

"Scientists have written that the universe may be as many as fourteen million years old, so why wouldn't I..."

"Because you're a mythical construct, and it takes humanity to create entities by sheer belief."

"Ah, there you're wrong."

"I don't care. You haven't answered my question."

"And I won't, until you release me."

“Then, it’s stalemate. I have no qualms about leaving you where you are until those boards rot around you.”

“God, you’re cruel!”

“Don’t invoke your deity, dude.” She snorted. “I’m pragmatic. I came to Scotland to escape all the crap that had been dumped on me and live in harmony with creation. I won’t have that disrupted by some manufactured crisis.”

Hariel slumped against invisible shackles. “Suffice it to say: Mephistopheles is not big on forgiveness. You disgraced him in the eyes of his subordinates, and he resents that. He has been assembling his dark legions for an all-out assault...”

“On me?”

“If you won’t surrender your control over the natural elements, he is bound and determined to wrest it from you by force.”

“He’ll kill me?”

“By any gruesome and brutal method available.”

“And, the angels want me to do the same to him?”

Hariel straightened. “His annihilation would make our jobs easier.”

“If I rid the world of both sides, people could go about their business without guilt,” she taunted.

Genuine terror clouded his eyes. “Why you find this amusing, I can’t imagine.”

“Lacking emotions, you wouldn’t. You’re so preoccupied by the battle between good and evil, there’s no room for a third option.”

“What third option?”

“Me as the god who really *can* answer prayers - instantly - as judge, jury and executioner, and savior of the environment.”

Hariel crumpled to his knees, the force of breaking from his fetters ripping his sleeves and jeans. “Blasphemy!” he bellowed, cowering with his forehead touching the ground.

She twirled before him, arms spread with her severely scarred palms exposed. “If I have blasphemed, then let your boss punish me!”

Branches rustling in the wind reached their ears as the prostrate angel anticipated swift retribution.

But, nothing transpired.

Mustang lifted him gently off coarse grass, his garments instantly mended. He towered over her, amber orbs caressing her features, then flashed a brilliant smile, upper lip curled over straight, white teeth.

He whispered, “You are...”

“Hungry.” She preceded him into the barn, restoring the horses to their stalls and filling their troughs with oats and water. En route to the mansion, she ventured, “Do you know how to cook?”

“Angels don’t eat.”

“That’s... irrelevant.” She unlocked the steel-reinforced door. “You’ve been hanging around people for millennia; you should’ve picked up a trick or two.”

“I...”

“Some ravioli, a salad and a bottle of wine...”

He halted. “You’re too young to drink.”

“For *you*, silly.”

“We don’t... imbibe alcohol.”

“I thought angels were incapable of lying.”

“We are,” he attested.

“Then, you have my permission.”

Hariel squinted. “*You... give me...*”

“Remember, I can shred the molecules of your adopted form quicker than you can say ‘Jack Robinson.’”

That realization agitated his physical guise. “You would not stoop to such savagery.”

“Wanna bet?” Auburn tresses cascaded over her shoulders as her head tilted left in a defiant pose. “Check your records - I’m sure somebody where you’re from keeps track of all the deaths I’ve caused, premeditated or unplanned.”

Hariel gulped. “Indeed. You’re a walking plague.”

“I’ve never been described quite that way before, but it fits. The plague was contagious, and so am I for anyone who gets near me.”

He threw up his hands. “Okay, okay. I’ll cook dinner.”

For an unearthly being, he handled skillet, utensils and the various ingredients exceptionally well, admiring the state-of-the-art appliances. Mustang chipped in, as well, preparing chocolate pudding for dessert.

She drank milk, pouring Hariel a large glass of chianti, the only bottle in the pantry except for a partial liter of Jameson whisky. They both enjoyed the meal, tensions eased by its conclusion.

“Why... do you look like you do?” she inquired, stacking dishes on the granite counter.

“How so?”

Her hand swiped from his scuffed boots to his brown mane, thick with product. “It is a personal choice, or just... random?”

“A bit of each. No human could withstand our... true essence, and none of us would want to present ourselves as repulsive or scary.”

“And, is what Francis told me true? That you’re...”

“Genderless?” he supplied.

“Yeah.”

“Well... when the universe came into being, there was no need for male or female. So, we were established as guardians without the traits later developed by humans. The idea your... species was made in the divine ‘image’ was invented by early authors of what you call the scriptures. To be accurate, only after a dozen more centuries - and an extensive transformation of your way of thinking - will humanity evolve to be like angels: without gender or the small-mindedness that restricts authentic progress.”

“So, there *is* a... sort of supervisor who runs things?”

“That depends on your definition of the term. If you mean the polar opposite of Mephistopheles...”

“Who was once an angel?”

“Correct.”

“And landed in hell because he screwed up?”

“In reality, there are no such designated realms as heaven or hell. I’m sure Francis has explained that to you. The... other planes exist in tandem with this one, simply put.”

Mustang filled the sink with soapy water. “If more people knew that, the world would be a totally different place.”

“Amen.”

They navigated to the living room, where the Mistress of Boleskine parked on the cane-backed rocking chair and toyed with the white queen on the chess board.

“You fancy a game,” Hariel noted.

“The strategy keeps my mind focused on things other than...”

“Loneliness?”

“No. I can’t say I’m lonely. Francis and the others make sure of that. My mistakes... haunt me.”

He lounged on the sofa. “Would you undo them, if you could?”

“Oddly enough, I could. I did, most of them. But honestly, I don’t want to be a god, dictating anyone’s day-to-day routine. I just want to tend my horses and enjoy nature.”

“Once this is over, perhaps you shall be granted that privilege.”

She dropped the queen and retrieved it; their eyes locked. “You never finished explaining why you’re here.”

“You’ve heard of Armageddon?” countered Hariel.

“References in old movies, more than anything.”

He recounted the tale of an ongoing war pitting angels content with their lot over the centuries against others who wanted to control their own destiny. Had Mephistopheles been successful - or, rather, the demon/truant officer Jude Griffin - in acquiring Mustang’s power for the lesser realms, the conflict would have escalated exponentially and the angels would have been defeated.

This new offensive, a frontal assault, would restore Mephistopheles’ reputation after Mustang had humiliated him on a cold night in Montana at the tender age of 17.

“The only reason I was able to send him back to hell - or whatever alternative realm - was because I was too naive to grasp the implications of failure.”

Hariel shook his head, strands immobile. “Your heart was pure, untainted by... the disillusionment that subsequently warped your optimism.”

“Yeah, the lies of ambitious men and the stupidity of others... can really foul things up.” She yawned. “Oh, excuse me!”

“It’s past your bedtime,”

“I... don’t suppose angels sleep?”

“No, I’ve never had a chance to experience blessed unconsciousness.”

“You’re welcome to the guest room, if...”

“Thank you, but no.”

Mustang retired, not bothering to even strip off her jeans, hoodie or sneakers.

Good thing, too, for when every window in the house exploded as midnight chimed, she avoided the embarrassment of rushing outdoors in her pajamas, or enduring the anguish of jagged shards slicing her feet.

Hariel met her on the gravel drive, his demeanor placid.

“What the hell...” she protested.

“If I were permitted the pleasure, I’d use far stronger words.”

She didn’t object when he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Is it starting?”

“No, just a warning.”

“An expensive one, if I contract the job to the glaziers from Inverness.”

“Mephistopheles doesn’t care whether you’re... inconvenienced.”

“Last time, he knocked our house clean off its foundation.”

“Which you restored without a word,” Hariel interjected.

“That, or let my parents foot the bill.” She plucked a stray hair from her mouth. “What’s next?”

“No clue. Mephistopheles is nothing if not mercurial.” The angel entwined his fingers with hers. “Let’s get inside. We’ve a lot to clean up.”

Her free hand stroked his bony cheek, grinning. “You’re kind and considerate, but a tad dense.”

“Eh?”

Repairs caused a racket as fragments of glass melded together, the chore finalized before a torrential downpour commenced.

Hariel gazed down at her in awe, being pelted by pea-sized hail of no concern.

She tugged him toward the door. “I couldn’t leave it ‘til morning.”

III

A towel wrapped around her dripping auburn mop, Mustang Duryea inspected the interior of Boleskine House, ensuring all casements had been properly restored; Hariel accompanied her, his clothes already dry, marveling that not one speck of glass posed any danger for bare soles.

“To make things simple, Harry,” she muttered in the last of three vacant bedrooms she’d never furnished, “is there any set structure to hell? Any buildings, caves, pits...”

“Sorry, I’ve never...”

“What about Mephistopheles? When he invaded my bedroom at the ranch house, he scared the shit out of me: his face scaly flesh coating a misshapen skull, lacking a nose or ears. He couldn’t have stood straight, with his twisted spine. His feet weren’t hooves, but gnarled stumps, and he leaned on a petrified wood walking stick.”

“That sounds about right.”

“But, does he have a tail?”

Hariel’s lips pursed in a sort of reverse smile. “Why should that...”

“Yes or no?”

“It’s a running joke how it aggravates him when he - literally - sits in judgment of the damned.”

“Great. That’s where we begin.”

“Begin what?”

Mustang yanked her windbreaker over the purple hoodie and left by the kitchen door, hiking to the hillock, leaves dousing her with remnants of the rain.

“Where are we going?” prodded Harry, hot on her heels.

“I don’t want to... wreck the house.”

“What are you...”

She held her right index finger to her lips to hush the angel, taking up a position beside the rotting picnic table. “You’re my witness, Harry. I’m merely defending my property.”

“Eh?”

“He fired the first shot, maybe hoping I’d surrender before he inflicted any real harm.” She inhaled deeply. “If that’s what he thought, he has another think coming.”

Hariel seized her arm. “Are you sure about this? Mephistopheles isn’t an entity to... casually piss off.”

“Neither am I.”

In her mind’s eye, Mustang visualized an insidious creature gradually hardening into stone. She equated the process to plugging an electrical cord in a wall socket, and the current flowing into the device - only the demon’s tail served as the cord.

She then discovered certain sounds can penetrate parallel planes.

The yowl defied words as to its pitch and intensity. Birds roused from their nests took flight *en masse*; deer and other forest animals fled the vicinity at full speed.

Even Hariel quaked in his square-toed boots. “By all that’s holy!”

A sudden silence jolted the pair, the shriek cut off like a speaker blowing a circuit breaker.

“Take that, you bastard,” she huffed, retracing her steps to the mansion.

Hariel’s long stride quickly brought him beside her. “Have you any idea what you’ve done?”

“Proved to the nether regions they can’t win this battle?”

“Made them even more resolute. They’ll disregard the rules of engagement, leading to casualties among the living, and untold collateral damage.”

Mustang froze in her tracks, hazel orbs scathing his features. “And you didn’t think it important to mention these rules of engagement earlier?”

“I... didn’t think the skirmish would escalate... with the infernal forces cognizant you’re subject to angelic protection...”

She stormed off, not glancing over her shoulder as Haziel yowled, his footwear and jeans ablaze.

Once indoors, she instructed the natural elements to create an impenetrable shield around the whole 47 acres, preventing angels and demons alike from accessing the grounds. She sacked out on the living room sofa until sunrise, then dragged herself to the barn to tend the horses.

The lack of bird song startled Mustang, though she'd become aware during her two decades on the planet how wildlife exhibited a greater sensitivity to impending disaster than humans. They reacted far sooner to fires, tornadoes, earthquakes...

What did they know that she didn't?

She learned the truth in short order. Not necessarily a flaw in her command, but voices of ethereal beings could pierce the invisible barricade, even when their physical - if that was an apt description - corporeality could not.

"Elizabeth Candida Duryea!"

A rumble of thunder after lightning struck in close proximity could not have reverberated around the barn any louder. Metal buckets and tools tumbled from the shelves; bales of straw plunged onto the concrete from the loft, the horses skittish.

Reminded of rare occasions her mother would get upset over some trifle - her father never called Mustang by name that she could recall - the recitation of her full legal name hardened her jaw.

She leaned on her pitchfork, half-finished cleaning Sarge's stall. "Get on with it!"

"If you persist in your contrary behavior, we shall resort to harsher measures..."

"Do what you gotta do."

"Even if it means ultimate destruction?"

"From what Harry implied, you guys have that on your calendar for some future date, anyway. Now, or later, does it matter?"

"The deaths of your friends..."

"I have no friends," lamented Mustang. "And the few I cherished are already dead."

A change in the disembodied tone intrigued her. "You will not participate in good faith negotiations to resolve..."

"Negotiate for what? My powers aren't for sale to the highest bidder. They will only pass to the one who kills me and, today, I'm not in the mood to die."

She resumed her task as the echoes faded, dismissing whether she'd been conversing with an angel or its deceptive counterpart. When Hariel grabbed a rake, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“How did you...”

“You’d set up your defenses before I recovered from your attempt to barbeque me, so I was caught within the perimeter.”

“Oh, hell. It’s always the little details I miss.”

“Indeed.”

“So, you heard...”

The angel smirked. “They heard it in Glasgow.”

“As words, or thunder?”

“Thunder. You’re the only human privy to the actual discussion.”

“Thanks for that, at least.”

Hariel bristled at the blatant sarcasm. “You can’t make light of this, Mustang. Do you *want* to be the catalyst for an all-out war?”

“A stupid war - but, then, all wars are stupid. People killing each other for a patch of earth, or because they believe their faith is superior to another’s...”

“Or, for supreme power,” he added. Taking Mustang’s hand, he led her to the overturned wooden bench, righting it and sitting beside her. “It’s ridiculous for the angels and the legions to draw their swords against each other, the victor charged with killing you.”

“Make it a chess game, or a cricket match, then. No violence, just skill. That would be more sensible. After all, anybody can hack apart a rival with a blade.”

“It’s quite a challenge to compel opposing forces to stand down, once they’re armed.”

“Human or... not.”

Hariel’s left eyebrow arched.

“Who was that... with the bullhorn?” wondered Mustang.

“It sounded like Mephistopheles’ lieutenant.”

“Jude Griffin is...”

“No. His replacement.”

“So, ambition is alive and well in hell?”

“For those who fail in fulfilling their assignments, there’s a separate realm...”

“So, Jude didn’t... die...”

“Our existence doesn’t end, in the way humans think of death.” Amber eyes stared into her hazel orbs. “Jude’s fate - being encased in solid form - is that why you did the same to his boss?”

“Partly.”

“But, you have no notion...”

“No.”

Hariel described how the lining of the hardened casing contained a substance that generated a perpetual itch, with the victim unable to scratch.

Mustang chortled, “Now, that’s hell!”

“It’s not a source of levity. It’s absolute misery.”

She sobered. “What about your sort? What if you screw up a mission?”

“We are forgiven, of course.”

When he averted his face, she knew better. “How can you go on, subjected to such tyranny?”

“We... aren’t human, Mustang. We are not bound by your rules.”

“Then, maybe I should solve the problem by taking over.”

Hariel couldn’t be certain whether the young woman’s cynicism colored this proclamation, rendering it a joke. He glowered at her. “Are you serious?”

She rose, brushing straw off her jeans. “Have the gang - both gangs - assembled on the hill tomorrow morning at nine. They’re to bring no weapons of any kind, and be prepared for radical changes!”

Crystal saddled, she trotted out of the barn for a ride through the tranquil, spring-tinged forest.

“You’re mad!” Hariel’s tenor carried on the fresh breeze to her ears long before the sorrel gelding Sarge came abreast of her. “Don’t you see there’s no intrinsic difference between war and mutiny?”

Reining her bay mare to a trot, she expounded, “In a war, factions kill each other. Mutiny involves subordinates rebelling against injustice. There’s a big difference.”

“Not when you’re the focus of both.”

“Please, Harry, be direct. You got off easy last night with only scorched leather. Twelve hours later, I’m too tired to worry if your fringes or your whole frame fries.”

“That’s just it, Mustang.” He swung long, skinny legs onto the ground, rubbing his backside, momentarily distracted. “I’ve never ridden before, and it’s tough on the joints.”

The Mistress of Boleskine did not dismount. “I warned you, Harry...”

“Okay, okay.” He leaned against a walnut tree. “You’re still a kid, so you shouldn’t be expected to grasp concepts that many can’t fathom even after millennia. To put it in the most basic terms: the angels and the demons are determined to fight a war for control of your power. If you foil their plans, they’re not likely to heed when you declare yourself a god and rewrite their daily horarium.”

“But, they’ve got to stop interfering with humanity...”

“You’ll incite anarchy!”

She nudged Crystal’s flank. “You’ve seen enough to know whatever they try will be... futile.”

“And, what will **you** become?” He leapt onto Sarge’s back with distinct agility, giving chase. “Dictator of the nether realms?”

Mustang bellowed, “Once I bring order to this chaos, that might be *your* job.”

Whether she was kidding or not, Hariel couldn’t comprehend. In the open fields beyond her neighbor Glenn MacDonough’s fence, they galloped until threatening clouds converged overhead.

The angel snatched Mustang’s reins when she paused to let the mare breathe. “You know you’ve passed beyond the protective dome...”

“You obviously *don’t* know I cancelled that the minute I left the barn.”

Amber orbs widened in terror.

Mustang reached over and patted his hand. “Frankly, Harry, I don’t care what either side does to me. When you fetch them ‘round tomorrow, though, make sure they know I won’t tolerate any disrespect - of me, or of each other. The first one who pulls a lame-brained stunt...”

“You’re so young.” He covered her fingers with his spindly digits. “You shouldn’t risk your future...”

“If the world doesn’t have a future, why should you fret about mine?” She retracted her arm. “Now, get lost.”

Hariel vanished in a puff of grey smoke, which bewildered Mustang. She looped Sarge’s lead to her pommel and trotted toward the barn.

Francis greeted Mustang sternly in the kitchen, patience wearing thin as she prepared a saucepan of hot cocoa, eggs, bacon and toast - since she’d forgotten to eat breakfast.

Fork poised over her plate, she never looked at him. “Don’t,” she muttered. “I’ve got enough on my mind.”

“If you go through with this... conference, Signorina, you will advance the end times by two millennia.”

She kicked back on the metal dinette chair, munching a crispy strip. “Fine. Tell me, then, who gets to croak me and inherit my power: the angels or the demons? Or, can’t you divulge such confidential information?”

The Italian saint shrugged.

“That’s what I thought.”

She devoured the rest of the meal, transferring the plate to the sink. In the living room, chess pieces flew in all directions as she cleared the inlaid board.

The cane-backed rocker squeaked on its runners as she rushed to the foyer, wrenching open the steel front door and careening into the noonday rain. About one thing Hariel had been correct: she was too young to bear such a burden on her slender shoulders. Her brain ran amok, swirling like disjointed gears in broken machinery.

A machine she hadn't tools to repair.

Milling about in a circle on the gravel drive, she ached for one clear thought. Her dream of a mere day ago - angels smothering her on the dance floor - would soon become reality.

Instead of a solution, a conundrum arose: how had Jack Parsons dealt with this pressure? Or, had he?

Had that occultist and scientist, adept in Enochian incantations and diverse ritual practices, devised tactics to keep himself off both human and divine radar? If so, why hadn't he recorded the techniques in his journals?

Tears streamed down her nose.

Why had he played such a dirty trick on her, at all? That he'd lived far beyond his own falsified death, not aging in the traditional sense - solitary, without companionship - waiting for this Moonchild he'd supposedly created via an illicit union with Mustang's grandmother, longing to die, to be rid of earthly frustrations...

To dump his power on a 16-year-old misfit without any explanation or instructions, leaving her to grope her way through situations that would make a mature adult cower...

The upshot: she'd allowed a psychotic murderer to escape custody, innocent people to die; she'd caused earthquakes and destruction on a global scale.

She'd never exercised self-control beyond forcing herself to attend every class during her final year at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School, a mandate from the principal that would void semesters where her absences far exceeded her presence - even before she knew she could bring the structure's roof down on the heads of students who annoyed her with their puerile carping. She preferred roaming wooded expanses of her father's horse ranch; nature displayed its wisdom in ways she could appreciate without... books or lectures.

She'd tried to use her power to positive ends, as her cousin Rachel's step-father, Peter O'Donnell, had recommended in those early days of her exploration. She'd wreaked havoc, over and over. She couldn't even kiss someone without... dire consequences.

Quashing evil proved pointless. Other villains followed in the wake of defeated tyrants, leading her to the realization that good seldom triumphed.

Here, now... would anything she do really count?

Francis loitered on the stoop, observing the escalation of Mustang's self-directed rage. Opposite him, rolling the barn door closed to protect the horses, Hariel exhaled cautiously.

"Can you stop her?" shouted the saint.

"Not if you can't!"

Ignoring this exchange, so consumed by her own regrets and anger, Mustang stopped cold. She raised her arms toward the sky; two witnesses covered their faces.

"There is no stalemate!"

IV

Mustang Duryea's agonized wail shook trees on both shores of Loch Ness, and cracked every window in an eight mile radius. Driving rain and hurricane-strength winds battered vehicles on the B852 roadway, flipped lorries into ditches and swamped fishing boats.

Energy spent, she collapsed in a heap.

"By all that's holy!" mumbled Hariel, rushing from the barn to scoop her into her arms.

Francis held the mansion's steel door open as the angel carried the young woman to her bedroom, stretching her across the king-sized mattress.

"She'll fall ill if we don't get her dry," the angel stated.

"Give her a minute. She'll wake and head for the shower of her own accord."

"You... know her quite well."

The saint of Assisi murmured, "In some aspects, she is very predictable. Others, not so much."

"How can we prevent... catastrophe?"

"The Signorina, herself, is very much like your confreres and the opposition: reluctant to submit to the system. She does not heed wise counsel until it's too late. She'd rather... figure it out on her own, even if she makes grievous errors along the way."

"The type of errors that can't be... rectified?"

"In this case, si."

Mustang stirred. Eyelids fluttered and she gazed up at the pair contemplating her prone, soaked figure.

“I did it again, didn’t I?” she sputtered.

“Si, Signorina.”

Hoodie and jeans clinging to her skin, she slid off the quilt. “Well, that’ll need to be washed,” she grunted, tossing soggy fabric on the floor. She grabbed assorted clean clothes from the chest of drawers and shuffled to the bathroom.

“Let’s give her some privacy,” suggested Hariel, ushering Francis to the living room.

“You have an idea?”

“A preemptive strike.”

Retrieving scattered chess pieces, the Little Poor Man grumbled, “Non capisco.”

“This may sound like one of Mustang’s rash schemes, but consider it well. She’s already turned Mephistopheles to stone.” Hariel paced near the dormant fireplace. “His... subordinates must be quaking in their shoes, terrified the same fate could be theirs.”

“Si. You want to take advantage of their doubt.”

“Correct. We convince Mustang to free him. He’ll be so grateful to be rid of that interminable itch, he’ll agree to anything rather than endure its recurrence.”

“And, your angels?”

Hariel hesitated in delivering his reply. “I think they’ll buy into the logic that, as long as the other side doesn’t possess Mustang’s power...”

“Along with a pledge they’ll not pursue it,” interspersed Francis.

“Yes, excellent addendum. On those conditions, they should stand down.”

“Resulting in the impasse the Signorina deemed unattainable.” Emaciated fingers arranged the carved set on inlaid squares. “What if *she*... refuses to honor those terms?”

“How have you persuaded her to abide by your advice in the past?”

“She... has insisted on traveling her own path. Changing her mind... is like molding hardened clay.”

“Then, what can be done?”

Francis settled on the sofa. “You must earn her trust.”

“I’m an *angel*!” Hariel groused. “Unabashedly trustworthy!”

“Ah, but the Signorina has been unable to trust anyone since... her grandfather arranged his own death by her hand. She suspects every woman - and moreso, every man - of having an ulterior motive in their dealings with her.”

“The power.”

“Si.”

“I’m neither man nor woman...”

“But, you’ve already revealed that the angels, of which you are one, seek to control what she could not relinquish without peril to her well-being.”

Hariel flopped on the cane-backed rocker, head in his hands. “Then, we’re sunk, and war is inevitable.”

“Not necessarily, amico mio.” Francis moved the white king’s pawn.

Amber orbs glanced at the diminutive spectre. “Eh?”

“Her entire life, the Signorina has yearned to be loved and understood - even prior to meeting her grandfather. Her parents selfishly neglected her from childhood, so she looked elsewhere.”

“What about her friends?”

“She found relating to others her own age difficult, her priorities opposing theirs. Even before this Scottish exile, she spent most days alone.”

“Poor kid.” An unexpected warmth caused Hariel to discard his black leather jacket. “Sadly, I still don’t catch your drift...”

The cadence of Francis’ statement denoted unmistakable self-consciousness. “Be a... comfort to her... tormented soul.”

He dissipated as Mustang crossed the threshold, hair wrapped in a striped towel, clad in a grey Pink Floyd t-shirt and red sweats. “I’d have bet a thousand pounds that an angel’s face could never betray guilt like yours does this second,” she quipped. “Are you hungry?”

“That’s... not...” stammered Hariel. “I’m... sorry for what we’ve put you through the past couple days.”

She massaged her scalp with thick terrycloth before loosing damp auburn tresses over her shoulders. In an off-beat way, he mused, she resembled an angel herself, backlit by the foyer’s wall sconces.

That’s when Francis’ oblique ploy clarified itself.

“Oh, no, dear sainted soul. You can’t be serious.”

For his ears alone, the confirmation.

“By all that’s holy!” he protested wordlessly. “I can’t!”

Mustang either didn’t read the uncertainty marring his narrow countenance, or deliberately ignored it. “There’s plenty of chianti left from last night, if you want a drink.”

“Why don’t we... cook dinner together, and share a glass?” he proposed.

“You... said I wasn’t old enough.”

“I was... wrong. Francis explained that even Italian youngsters take wine with their meals.”

Red wine best complimented beef, so Mustang extracted a ribeye steak from the refrigerator. Grilling outdoors would have been preferable; the chilly temperature warranted searing the meat in a cast iron skillet on the stove. Potatoes were sliced and fried, sprinkled with garlic. Greens and carrots combined for a tasty salad.

Hariel had no grasp of the proper methodology for an endeavor of this scope, basing his machinations purely on rumors circulated by guardian angels who periodically visited earth, keeping watch over their charges. He adopted a gracious mien, setting the table and serving the food, though he flinched as he sat on the unyielding dinette chair.

“How’re your... saddle sores?” queried his hostess.

“Sore.” He loaded his plate with the portions she left him. “How do you come to love horses so much?”

“Growing up with them, I admired their gentleness, their strength and nobility. My dad saw them as dollar signs, but I developed an empathy...” She cut her steak into small cubes. “Even got one to talk.”

The angel’s goblet paused near his mouth. “Eh?”

“By accident, of course. I was angry, lonely, confused. I wanted someone else to decide what I should do. I spoke an impulsive phrase and - wham! - my pinto answered my questions.”

“Incredible.”

“He begged me to make it stop, though, because forming the words hurt his jaws.”

“Did you?”

“I don’t believe in intentionally harming anyone - human or animal.”

They conversed genially as they ate.

“Do angels have friends?” she probed.

“We... get along.”

“Sounds kinda... empty.”

“Not having emotions, it’s different than relationships for humans. We don’t pout if we’re offended - angels avoid giving offense - or hold grudges. We’re courteous, but idle chatter isn’t a thing for us. It’s...”

“Empty,” she repeated. “How do you occupy... eternity?”

“If I told you we knelt in worship of the deity...”

“I’d call bullshit.”

“Why don’t you believe there’s... more to life than what you see?” pressed Hariel.

“You’d be shocked if I told you the weird stuff I’ve seen since this...” She sipped the wine, then fetched a tumbler from the cupboard and filled it with water.

“Not to your liking?”

“Not my thing. I’ve seen people get drunk - one man, in particular - and that behavior is far more impulsive than mine on my worst day.”

“Thomas Burton?”

Mustang shivered. “How’d you...”

“Francis.”

“A couple of chatterboxes, aren’t you?” she chided. “You up for helping with the dishes?”

“Sure.”

As she scrubbed the utensils, he puzzled, “You like living alone?”

“It’s... empty.”

“What if someone... special... came along.”

“Oh, I’ve been through that already. Too painful.” She held a glass to the light, checking streaks on the surface. “What if this afternoon’s outburst happened in a family setting? Devastation. And, if I ever carried a child...”

Hariel swallowed. “I wouldn’t want to see the hospital.”

“Now, you’re getting it.”

“You poor kid.” He dried his hands on the tea towel and slid his arms around her waist. She spun within his grasp and rested her head on his shoulder, sobbing. Tender fingers stroked her hair, though every atom of his assumed construct vibrated with fear.

“Maybe... if I didn’t have such a volatile temper... I’d have better self-control,” she whimpered, trying to regulate her breathing.

Hariel withdrew, raising her chin so their eyes met. “Promise me you’ll never utter that command. You are who you are because you’re human - for good or ill. I may incur divine wrath, but I’ll be honest: be thankful you’re not an angel.”

She caressed his cheek, then apologized for ruining his red turtleneck with her tears. “What about tomorrow?”

“What about it?” responded Hariel.

“I’ve screwed things up again, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

“I really don’t want to rule your... invisible hordes.”

“I know.”

“Then, what...”

The very fact she requested his opinion sparked a glimmer of hope for the angel. “Will you let me speak on your behalf?”

“What... would you say?”

Hariel outlined Francis’ plan as they’d conferred. Mustang listened, seeking minor clarifications, reassured by his replies.

“What if I botch it?” she concluded.

“All you need do is pretend to be imperious. I will introduce myself as your second-in-command and guide things to an amicable resolution.”

“Promise?”

“You owe me your promise, first,” he reminded her.

She hedged on complying with the proposition. “What if I swear to be more mindful about my actions?”

“I’ll be satisfied with that.” Though he towered over her by nearly a foot, she raised herself on tip-toe and kissed his lips to seal the deal.

The sensation completely unknown to Hariel, he merely blinked.

“Sorry,” she giggled.

“No need... I...”

“Felt something?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I can... do it again, if you like.”

“No, but I’ll be reflecting on this for the foreseeable future.” They returned to the dishes. “You’ll need to sleep before morning.”

“I’m too nervous.”

“Don’t be. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be a vague memory.”

Mustang scowled. “You... can’t trifle with my brain that way.”

“We won’t. But, I think, you’ll be glad to see the last of us.”

She flicked bubbles at him, whispering, “I don’t know about that.”

That sunny April Wednesday, she tramped to the hillock at 8:45 and seated herself on a grand throne Hariel had positioned near the rotting picnic table, its origins immaterial. She didn’t really expect the delegates to arrive early, but if they were late...

Hariel, robed in glistening white trimmed in gold, pursed his lips at Mustang’s Black Sabbath t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. “You don’t hold with impressing the minions?”

“If they judge me by my clothes, to hell with them. What’s real is here.” She thumped her chest.

“So be it.”

Scores of angels materialized in almost military formation at 8:59. Not to be outdone in punctuality, the demons delivered Mephistopheles’ stone-encased

image 30 seconds later. They squealed for justice in a language Mustang could not translate.

“Don’t worry,” noted Hariel. “I’ll give you the high sign at the auspicious moment.”

While she desperately longed to trust her spokesman, at the least sign of dissension or violence, she would implement her contingency plan.

Hariel delivered a summation worthy of a prominent attorney before the U.S. Supreme Court. His left hand behind his back, he wiggled his fingers, and Mustang stiffened. Stone liquified to expose the foul guise she’d much rather have forgotten from that winter night in Montana; she clenched her teeth to prevent nausea from overwhelming her stomach.

Freed of the casing, the senior demon scrutinized his oddly docile underlings before spinning on his stumps toward the young woman who’d defeated him not once, but twice.

To the horror of his legions, he paid obeisance to her.

In the rough equivalent of the wave - popular at American sporting events - the fiends followed suit, until the grass was covered with quivering mounds of pulsating muck.

The angels, for their part, bowed in awe of this gesture. Anyone who merited deference on that scale could not be opposed. A second wave, extending northward, ended the meeting.

Mustang relaxed as the space was vacated, leaving only Hariel, who beamed his broad smile. “We did it!”

“No thanks to me.”

“Yes, thanks to you,” he praised. “If you hadn’t been reasonable...”

“The clearing would’ve been dripping with blood - or whatever substances your kind lose when wounded.”

She abandoned the ornate chair, which promptly disappeared. Combat forestalled, she extended her hand toward Hariel as an expression of gratitude.

He disregarded it, clutching her shoulders and smothering her mouth with a kiss.

As had occurred when the erstwhile demon, Jude Griffin, succumbed to Mustang’s wiles, the universe seemed to pause, anticipating scathing repercussions for this violation of what Hariel had deemed the “rules of engagement.”

Mustang broke the bond, chuckling. “Had to try once more, huh?”

“It’ll be... forever before I get another chance.” Incredibly long, skinny digits traced her lips. “You’re... unique, Mustang.”

“If I need you sometime...”

His tenor grim, she detected a twinge of sorrow. “I was charged to deal with Mephistopheles, and he has been repelled. I’ll no longer be seen on this plane.”

They clasped hands, and the last image that flickered before he dissipated: a beatific grin.

One question nagged at the young woman as she descended to the barn: where were his wings?