

The Mustang Chronicles:

Forceful Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The phrase irritated her.

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea knew its origins and didn’t care. Hearing the words repeated time and again in that corner of the Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School cafeteria nearly drove her to do something she would regret.

“May the Force be with you.”

There it was again.

Mustang put forth every effort to restrain herself from using the powers bequeathed to her during her time in Scotland by occultist and scientist Jack Parsons, mostly because she ended up having to make amends for her irresponsible actions when nature obeyed the impulsive commands.

She was also trying to comply with her parents’ wishes - and Montana state law - requiring her to get an education.

The teen despised school, all the idiotic rules, and the idiotic, shallow students. During lunch, she retired to a corner of the cafeteria where the rejects ate alone at their tables.

Until the Jedi decided to settle at three tables beside her.

Star Wars freaks, this crowd. Mustang had never seen any of the series of science fiction movies, but she’d seen posters. They dressed like the characters called Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi in pseudo-robos and baggy pants. Some even carried toy lightsaber hilts hooked to their belts.

Ridiculous! Mustang snorted silently, munching on a Red Delicious apple.

When the bell rang summoning the students back to class, it began.

“May the Force be with you.” Again and again and again, like some weird chant or blessing.

They had no idea what having the Force meant, the girl sighed, pitching her crumpled brown paper bag in a trash bin as she passed.

Mustang sat through the afternoon’s Junior English class, attempting to ignore the teacher’s droning, nasal voice. She had no interest in writing college-level research papers, college a non-starter for her.

A horse rancher’s daughter, she would live on that ranch until she died.

The days dragged for her. She only felt alive when helping the ranch hands tend the horses in the early morning or evening. The crisp autumn breeze smelled of wood smoke; the bunkhouse fireplace took the chill off the building before the hands bedded down for the night.

That Friday, with just two weeks of regular attendance on Mustang’s record, two Jedi slid onto the seat behind her on the morning bus.

“Oh, hell,” she muttered.

She hoped other conversations would drown out discussions of Skywalker’s motivation and the series of novels which were filling the gap until the next movie was released.

Every nerve in her torso tensed as she prevented herself from turning to shush the pair.

Fleeing the bus as soon as it braked at the school’s door, the girl scurried to her locker. Only then did she dare breathe, noticing metal doors on the row rattling ominously.

“No, no, no,” Mustang scolded herself. “Not here. Not now.”

Her heart rate returning to normal, she grabbed her chemistry text and navigated the corridors to the science lab.

So life proceeded interminably for the teen. If she’d had a calendar in her bedroom of the ranch-style house, she would’ve marked off the days until Thanksgiving break, Christmas break, spring break, summer.

If she could stay out of trouble and last that long.

If she could keep from getting angry and not doing anything destructive.

If those damned Jedi would just go away...

The latest excitement for the two dozen fanatics involved some contest where one of the stars of the franchise would visit the town for a festival. They spent the better part of the next week proofreading and commenting on each others’ essays - part of the entry process, from what Mustang overheard in the cafeteria.

Maybe if they lost, they would abandon this obsession and move on to something else, she speculated.

Once the submissions were mailed, the group annoyed Mustang with daily updates on what had been received in yesterday’s mail.

She could imagine how many thousands of essays would arrive at their destination and how naive the Jedi were to believe anyone would actually read them. A winner would be picked from a bag of mail at random, probably New York, Chicago or Dallas.

To her astonishment, the announcement came via daily notices broadcast by the principal during home room. “We are pleased that actor Mark Hamill will give a presentation to the entire student body during a special pep rally this Friday, thanks to the diligent efforts of our local chapter of the Star Wars Fan Club.”

So, that was their official title, Mustang smirked.

Maybe the contest had been rigged to find the most remote, small town for the event.

Her own disinterest was not reflected by her classmates - and those in other rooms - given the raucous cheers which echoed through the building.

In that moment, Mustang decided to skip school on Friday.

She'd done that a lot since childhood, always feeling bored or out of place.

The horses were her life, her great love. Riding her favorite pinto, Heartbeat, through the woods of the ranch gave her the only peace she'd ever known.

In recent months, even that had been mostly lost to her, thanks to Jack Parsons.

"Ah, Elizabeth!"

En route to Spanish class, principal Zack Olson waylaid her.

The Armani-suit clad retiree with a jagged scar across his forehead was a temporary replacement for the regular principal, who'd taken leave for medical reasons. Mustang sensed he was no educator and hated kids. Anything he could do to make their lives miserable, he did it.

"You've been chosen to be one of the flag bearers for Friday's pep rally," White declared.

"No, thanks."

What started as a friendly hand on the left shoulder of her blue flannel shirt tightened into an iron grip. "You don't have a say in the matter. We want to be sure you're there, to prevent another unexcused absence."

Biting her lip to silence a directive to wither his fingers, Mustang pulled free. "Whatever."

Every school assembly began with the National Anthem - which the band played badly, in Mustang's estimation - but the Junior ROTC cadets normally presented the colors, in their uniforms with the gold braid and rows of citations.

"If you don't show," Olson warned as she strode along the corridor, "you'll have two weeks of after-school detention."

The fact he slipped and fell on a puddle from a leaking water fountain on his way to his office had nothing to do with Mustang.

At least, not that she would confess.

The days couldn't pass quickly enough, and not because the teen nurtured any excitement for Friday's gathering.

She decided, after this public humiliation, she would abandon school permanently.

Not only students from the junior high and senior high classes converged on the gymnasium that fateful morning, but youngsters from the district's elementary schools were bused over for the occasion.

Watching from the boys locker room door, Mustang recognized Canyon Creek's mayor and members of the city council, police and fire chiefs. Parents took off work to join their children - fans all, evidently.

Through the open exterior doors, the sight of a sleek black Cadillac limousine silenced the throng. Behind it, a U-Haul truck pulled in, with the crew from a Ford Econoline van rushing to unload promotional materials and camera equipment.

The school would be famous, the news broadcast nationwide.

Mustang didn't care.

She did manage to crack a smile, though, after observing the limousine driver approach Zack Olson for a hushed exchange. The principal's entire demeanor transformed from proud dignitary to dejected toady.

Reluctantly, he tested the microphone on its stand at center court. "Good morning, all. Thank you so much for coming. Unfortunately, I have bad news."

A wave of concerned mumblings rippled through the bleachers.

"Due to a sudden illness, Mark Hamill will not be with us today."

Groans.

"But, we are proud to bring you Mr. Raphael Moreno, who played a stormtrooper in the most recent Star Wars film."

Tepid applause as the beefy bit player entered the gym.

As the pep rally commenced, Mustang glimpsed adults and teens exiting the building in a steady stream. By the time Moreno announced distribution of Star Wars t-shirts, action figures and bumper stickers, only the school's own students remained.

Only the Jedi descended the steps to accept the goodies.

A pall remained over the building the rest of the day. Mustang noticed her classes were half-empty as the afternoon progressed. Disappointed children had gone home to pout.

On her way to the bus, she passed the Jedi - in elaborate costumes for the day - surrounding Olson, demanding answers.

"I phoned the studio," the principal explained. "The secretary told me Mr. Hamill came down with the flu and didn't want to infect anyone."

"Bullshit!" cried more than one of the fanatics.

"We heard on the noon news that these kinds of Star Wars promo parties were held in schools across the country today, and Mark Hamill appeared at the one in Washington, D.C.," growled the self-appointed group president.

Olson shrugged. "I can only repeat what I was told."

"Too bad it's not the truth!" whined some of the girls.

The last thing Mustang heard before pushing open the door was the group would meet in the city park Saturday at 10:00 to formulate a protest against the studio.

“Good luck with that,” she spat.

The two Jedi who rode the same bus sat mute, a redeeming aspect of this school-wide debacle, in Mustang’s view. If they discarded their robes and costumes, she would not object.

Early Saturday, Mustang rose as usual, riding Heartbeat to the far pastures to check the horses’ water troughs for ice. Over a hearty breakfast cooked by Maggie Duryea, the girl discovered she would be required to drive into Canyon Creek with her father to shop for groceries.

“You know I’m no good at that, Mom,” she protested. “I always pick out the wrong brand, and you get upset.”

“It’s high time you learned how to do it right. Now, go shower and get into some decent clothes.”

“To go shopping?”

Joe Duryea slammed his utensils on the table. “You heard your mother, girl!”

Obediently, Mustang shuffled to the bathroom.

Bouncing along country roads in the rusted black Ford pickup, Mustang stared out the passenger window at the murky horizon. Storms were coming, and not of her making.

While she loaded the metal cart with milk, bread, cereal and assorted food stuffs, Joe drove to the parts store to get a new fan belt for one of the tractors. Waiting more than 30 minutes in the parking lot for his return, she guessed he was chatting with some of his long-time friends who rarely got into town from their own properties.

It wouldn’t be the first time he forgot about his daughter, or inconvenienced her.

Mustang meandered to the park beside the grocery store, settling on a bench with the cart beside her. Not wearing a watch, she didn’t realize the time, until the Jedi began their meeting at two damp picnic tables near the street.

She couldn’t hear the conversation; their gestures conveyed the meaning all too clearly. If any of them had the funds, they would’ve flown to California to confront the studio heads themselves.

The tirade continued. Distracted from whether the milk would sour before reaching the Duryea refrigerator, Mustang observed the group move through a variety of emotions over the course of an hour.

“They did it all for publicity and expected us to forgive them!” raged one senior.

Another bellowed, “If they don’t publicly apologize, I’ll never watch another Star Wars movie as long as I live!”

“Good,” Mustang snickered from her vantage point.

When people, of any age, refused to live in the real world and chose to retreat into some fantasy life, everyone suffered, the girl mused. Be it video games or other extremes, they missed the signs of which way humanity was moving.

Or, they contributed to the decline of the species.

By ignoring real issues and real people, they made it possible for oppression, bullying, abuse and violence to thrive.

From overhearing their erstwhile discussions, Mustang knew enough about Star Wars to grasp there was a tyrannical Empire and a Rebellion which sought to overthrow it.

“If those idiots got a taste of what it meant to be oppressed, and to fight for every bit of freedom, maybe they would...”

Mustang clamped her mouth shut before anything untoward occurred.

“I’ll be good. I’ll be good,” she promised herself.

The pickup’s brakes squealed as Joe halted at the curb. He didn’t acknowledge his tardiness, nor did he help his daughter load the groceries in the truck bed.

As he veered into the center lane, Mustang let slip, “What those fools need is to talk with a real Jedi.”

II

Three ranch hands down with the flu, 20 feet of split-rail fence destroyed by an unbroken stallion and a coming storm made Mustang’s afternoon quite hectic.

“Get out there, girl,” her father instructed as soon as the groceries had been unloaded from the pickup.

Deep in her heart, the teen grasped Joe Duryea wished she’d been born male. She’d heard vague remarks exchanged by her parents over the years that Maggie’s two subsequent pregnancies had ended in miscarriage, sorely disappointing her husband.

As the sole heir to the Duryea estate, Mustang had to live up to his often-unreasonable expectations.

So, she grabbed a set of leather work gloves from the barn, pausing briefly to feed and water Heartbeat, who enjoyed a stall out of the wind. She ached to saddle him and ride to the far edges of the vast property or even beyond.

Her muscles rebelled at lifting the lengths of thick, rough wood with the assistance of one unenthusiastic part-timer from town. Two other hands maneuvered the rails into slots hewn in the new fence posts.

At least, she hadn't had to dig the holes for those posts.

When the splinter dug through her left glove into her palm, she stifled a scream.

Not some tiny fragment, this, but a relative spear which drew blood.

"Oh, hell," she swore.

Her green flannel shirt and jeans soaked with a mixture of mud and sweat by the project's completion, Mustang limped to the house for a shower.

Not surprisingly, Joe sat in the living room, fireplace generating what would otherwise have been cheery warmth. The evening news blared and, somehow, a meal had been eaten without her.

The remnants of barbeque chicken, rice and asparagus had been cleared away, only the dirty dishes remained - for her to wash.

Mustang flipped on the light above the kitchen sink, bright enough for her to remove the end of the splinter. She'd broken off the biggest chunk and continued working, causing the rest to wedge itself deep under her skin.

Using a paring knife to cut through the scarred tissue she bore from traveling on a lightning bolt, she grimaced at the agony. She could've asked her mother to help, but the woman was consumed by her crocheting on the sofa beside her husband.

Finally, Mustang had to stop. Blood was gushing down the drain and her every nerve was sending messages to the pain receptors in her brain. As she tried to regulate her breathing to prevent fainting, she heard ominous narration from the television speakers.

"Six Canyon Creek high school students were arrested this afternoon for the theft of top secret government communication equipment," announced a nasal female.

Mustang hastily wrapped a tea towel around her wound and moved to the living room threshold.

The blonde professional journalist stood in front of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School's main doors. "Local police had been notified shortly before noon of a strange occurrence in the city park, where the students had met to test the equipment. When officers responded, the teenagers, who claim to be members

of a regional Star Wars fan club, told them they'd been visited by a Jedi knight of unknown identity.”

A blurry photograph taken from what Mustang guessed was the grocery store parking lot showed the students in a semi-circle around a brown-robed, translucent figure, resembling a hologram.

Mustang was familiar with that technology, thanks to an article she'd read in one of the ranch hand's scientific magazines the previous summer.

The mention of a Jedi knight, though...

Had her impulsive statement in the pickup earlier precipitated this mess?

The next image in the news report showed the students, all of them clad in mock Jedi costumes, being loaded into a police van.

“The teens are being held in the Canyon Creek town jail until they are remanded to the custody of federal officials after their arraignment Monday morning,” concluded the blonde.

Mustang retreated into the kitchen. “Oh, hell.”

She discarded the blood-soaked towel and grabbed a pair of needle-nose pliers from the junk drawer. Yanking out the splinter, she fought against a rush of dizziness by holding tight to the counter.

When she could again think straight, she rinsed red rivulets from the stainless steel sink and hurried to the bathroom, covering the fresh wound with large gauze squares and securing them with adhesive tape.

Suddenly, she broke into a laugh.

Glancing into the mirror, she realized she should have jumped in the shower *before* fumbling with the bandage.

She realized, nonetheless, that she would be even dirtier by the time she returned home from unraveling the mess she had created with her unguarded remark.

Gingerly removing the mesh screen, Mustang climbed through the window and strode to the barn.

Saddling Heartbeat was no easy task with her injury. She had to make three attempts to adjust the stirrups, because her fingers would not cooperate. Once mounted, she cringed anew, forced to change how she handled the reins.

She chuckled once more, remembering the need for a flashlight now the sun had set. Fortunately, she was able to snatch one from the shelf beside the barn door without having to adjust her position too much.

Into the night she rode, the pinto's white patches bound to confound anyone who saw the dark streak galloping along the country road.

Canyon Creek didn't exactly roll up the sidewalks at 9:00 on a Saturday night, but the sleepy town boasted little to do on weekends. Many residents drove to Helena or any larger metropolis for whatever action they craved, whether movies or beer.

This enabled Mustang to slow Heartbeat to a walk and tether him near the water trough which had been converted into a public memorial to the town's founder.

She hesitated on the city hall's bottom step, formulating a plan. Freeing the students, who would be under the supervision of one lone officer, would not be difficult. Not being recognized in the process...

A smile flashed across the teen's lips. If the group believed they had seen a Jedi, why not fool them with another?

Thanks to her powers, she could trick people's eyes into seeing what she wished. Thus, if anyone had been nearby, they would have viewed a brown-robed Jedi knight ascend concrete steps and breeze through the main entrance without tampering with the lock.

The police corporal on duty in the dim, cluttered level popularly called "the dungeon" saw nothing. He reclined in a leather swivel chair - commandeered from the chief's office, possibly - his feet propped on the metal desk, fast asleep.

Mustang didn't bother to relieve him of the cell keys, dangling from a hook on the wall beside the security corridor.

The metal panel slid back, creaking slightly. If the prisoners had been dozing, they were awake now. Their savior heard them rustling in the gloom behind the four wrought-iron grilles.

"Who's there?" said one boy.

A girl moaned, "I'm thirsty. Can I get some water?"

Summoning an ethereal glow to light her, Mustang stopped in full view. With a dramatic - and unnecessary - wave of her bandaged left hand, the cell doors groaned open.

Six terrified teens cowered against block bulkheads.

"Go home to your families," Mustang's voice boomed in the confined space. "Never mention any of this again."

"Yes, sir!" they chorused timidly

One by one, they stepped from their confinement, paused to gaze at Mustang, then scurried from the dungeon, past the guard and to freedom.

Alone, Mustang snickered. The feds could, of course, re-arrest the students at any time, but they had no cause. No classified equipment had been discovered missing.

While she was there...

At the corporal's desk, she rifled through a stack of police reports. The one detailing this incident made her choke with laughter.

Two patrol officers had stopped at the park to eat their lunch. Noticing the kids behaving strangely, the duo presumed drugs were involved. When the kids didn't run as they approached, they became confused.

The kids were focused on a hazy robed image hovering a foot above ground. He spoke to the group, but did not acknowledge when they spoke to him.

When one of the officers shook Walt Connors, the tallest of the students, the image vanished - except for a metallic cylindrical device which dropped into the grass where he'd been standing.

The object had been turned over to federal investigators, but a photo had been taken and developed at the one-hour booth in the local drug store. It was paper-clipped to the report.

Mustang studied it. Shiny chrome with assorted knobs and grooves, it resembled the lightsaber replicas carried by the young fanatics.

"Not a replica," was scrawled across the back of the photo. "I tried it."

The signature was illegible.

On the back of the report, another hand had printed. "This information is not to be discussed with the public or the media. Anyone who violates this gag order will be immediately terminated."

A real Jedi had appeared to those annoying Star Wars fans - and left behind proof.

Mustang sighed.

The feds being involved, she imagined FBI agent Ben Espinoza drooling at his desk, waiting to catch her and expose her to the world.

The document and photo disintegrated, drifting as ashes into a dented plastic trash basket beside the desk as she exited the dungeon. Emerging into the fresh night air, she released the image projected around her and balanced on the water trough's edge to reduce the pain of mounting Heartbeat.

So rapt in her own thoughts of how to retrieve the lightsaber and make the whole situation vanish, Mustang rode right past two of the former prisoners, sitting on a bus stop bench and raving hysterically about what had just transpired.

They didn't pay attention to her; riders on horseback were normal in the town.

A third pair of eyes, however, understood exactly how unusual the entire scene was.

Exhausted by the night's excitement, Mustang deliberated whether to stay and groom Heartbeat once they arrived home. She loved the horse, which hadn't been expected to survive his birth until she revived him and cared for him.

Her mother found her brushing the animal. "Dear, you didn't eat your dinner."

"I didn't know I was allowed any," her daughter countered.

"Your plate was warming in the oven. All you had to do was ask..."

Mustang scowled. "You couldn't have waited for me? Dad left me to work with the guys and went in to eat and relax..."

Maggie inched toward the girl. "You know your father likes to eat promptly at five."

"Yes, and to hell with anyone else!"

Lamely, the woman withdrew. "Don't stay out here too long, dear. It's getting chilly."

Swallowing hard, Mustang pulled the brush off Heartbeat's mane, having gotten rough in her frustration.

She wanted nothing else in the world than to live in harmony with nature, forever on the ranch tending the horses. Her parents... they seemed to hate the life, and each other.

Turning to fetch the water bucket, she bumped her left hand on a post.

"Oh, hell!" she yowled.

Fifteen minutes later, calmer and ready for bed, Mustang switched off her bedroom light. Her hand throbbed and a red stain seeped through the gauze.

She lay on the pillows, staring at the ceiling, piecing together another situation she had fouled up through her impulsive behavior.

The Canyon Creek police knew those kids hadn't stolen any equipment. They were just afraid of aliens or the unknown. They had no explanation for why someone visible one minute would vanish the next.

For Mustang, it was like special effects in old movies - no big deal.

For those who relied on logic, or only believed what they could see, an experience like Saturday's could rattle the very fabric of their being.

She'd been rattled many times since Jack Parsons had conducted that mysterious ceremony at Boleskine House in Scotland which ended when she thrust a knife through the man's heart at his own insistence. She'd traveled on a lightning bolt half-way around the world and created assorted havoc, endangering lives.

Improving her self-control remained at the top of her priority list, with many failures to her credit. Keeping off the radar of all law enforcement

organizations - as well as those curious about her random displays - came next, another unsuccessful endeavor.

If Ben Espinoza had his grimy fingers in this pie, she could not fathom how she would react. An ambitious sort who yearned for a department of his own to control, and her power to use in the process, she wished she'd done more than send him flying into Loch Ness at their first meeting.

Sunday morning came too soon. Mustang didn't want to get out of bed. Her entire body ached, both from the labor of the prior day and the long ride into town.

She heard her parents rustling around; they would leave for church and she would have a few hours of peace.

They'd long since stopped pressuring her to attend services with them. Her view of a supreme being had nothing to do with words in a book or imaginary beings. She found holiness in the trees, the winds, the animals. These things knew how to coexist with each other.

A lion, for instance, did not kill more than it needed to eat. Senseless destruction did not enter into the natural order of these creatures.

Humans, despite professing faith in a god and belief in commandments which should have prevented such actions, killed at will, ravaged the environment and amassed wealth which served no purpose.

Mustang believed that nature - given recent upswings in severe storms, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions - intended to wipe humanity off the face of the earth and start over.

She would've been fine with that.

Crawling from beneath the quilt well past 9:00, the girl stumbled to the kitchen. She poured herself a bowl of corn flakes and ate at a leisurely pace. Not having her parents arguing across the board during a meal made it possible to digest her food without fighting the knots in her stomach.

She showered, rinsing flecks of mud from her auburn tresses. The scrubbing she gave her body re-opened the wound on her left palm, smearing blood on her skin. It proved problematic to hold a washcloth in her fist while soaping up her legs and arms.

Healing the injury would have taken only a word. She'd done as much for others with a hushed command.

Two things she had determined absolutely unwise to do with her power: tamper consciously with the weather and heal herself. She knew the first would unbalance the natural order. The second didn't seem ethical.

Peter O'Donnell, the step-father of her cousin Rachel, had advised her to do good with her abilities. She had interpreted his words to mean doing good for others, not for herself.

If she'd wished to do good for herself, she could have summoned a fortune, friends, comfort. She was accustomed to doing without those things and would be discontented having them.

Wrapped in a worn purple terry robe, a fresh bandage on her hand, Mustang settled on her bed after selecting John Wayne's *The Shootist* from her video collection.

Just at the scene where Wayne and Scatman Crothers were haggling over the purchase of a horse, a firm knock sounded on the front door. Mustang hoped whoever wished to sell the family Girl Scout cookies or evangelize about Jesus would go away.

The knocking persisted.

Grumbling, she paused the video and shuffled through the living room. Yanking open the panel, Quentin Leiberman waited on the stoop.

"What the hell do you want?" Mustang barked.

The scrawny, black-haired, bespectacled geek in a hand-me-down blue Sunday suit wore a disturbing side-wise grin. "I saw you last night," he said. "I know what you did."

III

"Oh, hell," Mustang mumbled. She stepped aside. "Come in."

Awkwardly, she offered him a seat on the sofa. He dropped tentatively onto the overstuffed cushions.

"The Force is strong with you," he began.

Mustang had settled in her father's recliner. She leaned forward and buried her face behind her hands. "Oh, here we go," she groaned.

"I came to find out if it was you who met us in the park yesterday."

"No."

"But you know what happened?"

"Only what I saw on the evening news."

Quentin exhaled loudly. "It was a fiasco. We'd come to the park to draft a letter of complaint to the movie studio after Mark Hamill did not materialize at Friday's school rally."

Mustang sucked air through clenched teeth. He even talked like a geek.

Squinting behind thick lenses, the boy continued. “We were also considering pooling our resources to send a representative to California to deliver the letter personally.”

A waste of time and money, his companion mused.

“Just as we were about to adjourn the meeting so Connie could take the draft home and email it to all the other members for their input, he appeared.”

“Who?”

“The Jedi Master.”

“What was his name?”

“He did not give it,” Quentin replied.

“Yet, you believed him not to be a...”

“Hoax? Of course not. He was not... flesh and blood. He was...”

“Translucent?”

The geek nodded enthusiastically.

“What did he say?”

“He instructed us to seek the one who controlled the forces of nature and learn all we could.”

Mustang slumped in the recliner. “Oh, hell.”

“When you freed us last night from the jail, I knew...”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I recognized the wounds on your hands, despite the bandage. And, I saw you leave the building.”

“I...” She couldn’t lie to him, not even about something this trivial.

Suddenly, Quentin sank to his knees before her. “Will you be our master and teach us the Jedi ways?”

“I know nothing about being a Jedi.”

“But, the Force is strong with you.”

“I... it is a curse I bear, not a blessing.”

“What? We who have worked so diligently to discover the ways of the Force have not so much as been able to lift a pebble from the ground. You unlocked our cells with a mere wave, and the glow about you...”

Never again, Mustang swore, the use of dramatics. They only caused more trouble!

She rose and lifted the boy to his feet, leading him to the door. “Quentin, you must not mention any of this to anyone, unless you want to land in jail again, or worse.”

“Worse?”

“The funny farm. The authorities will think you unhinged if you persist with this story.”

“Are you denying what you did?” he challenged.

“No. But, it wasn’t what you think.” She grabbed the knob; he prevented her from turning it.

“What about the lightsaber?”

Her head cocked slightly right, red locks obscuring her face. “What about it?”

“You can’t let the authorities duplicate it. It would change the face of the world.”

“I know that.”

“What do you intend to do?”

She withdrew her hand from the brass knob, considering. “I must get it back, except that I’ll need help.”

Quentin genuflected; Mustang’s skin crawled.

“You have my absolute obedience,” he pledged.

Again, she raised him. “I don’t want your obedience. But, if you have a car...”

“Right outside.”

“Will you drive me to Helena?”

“Why?” he puzzled.

“To fetch the lightsaber.”

“It’s not in Helena.”

Her nose twitched with doubt. “How do you know?”

“The federal agents are staying at the hotel until the hearing tomorrow. They have it in their possession.”

Mustang broke into a smile and clapped Quentin’s shoulder. This would be less time-consuming than she thought. “Then, let’s go!”

The battered black Dodge Dart had torn grey cloth upholstery and lacked a radio in the dash, making it the perfect first vehicle for a young driver. In true geek style, Quentin drove just at or below the speed limit into Canyon Creek.

One lone hotel sat between brick storefronts on Main Street. Mustang directed the boy to park on the side street, so they could access the building by the service entrance.

“Can you not make us invisible so we can go ‘round the front?” he asked.

She could; she didn’t want to abuse her powers.

“We don’t know which room the men are using,” objected Quentin.

“There are only four rooms available. It won’t be that tough to figure it out.”

Especially when two of the rooms were unlocked and empty.

“How many agents were there?” Mustang queried.

“Four. They planned to handcuff us to three, with a fourth available for other business.”

That wouldn’t have worked if she were one of the prisoners, the girl snickered quietly.

What it meant, though, was that the remaining two rooms were both occupied by the targets of their search.

“You take that one,” Mustang directed, pointing right as she unlocked the doors without a gesture.

Quentin complied, vanishing inside and closing the door silently.

Mustang admitted he impressed her with his savvy.

The men using the second room were slobs, plain and simple. Their dirty laundry had been strewn across the floor, leaving little in their open suitcases on the folding racks. Nothing of importance had been placed in the desk drawers or left on the table near the shuttered window.

A small safe in the cabinet beneath the television presented no challenge for the teen. Tumblers clicked, untouched, and the handle moved readily.

Perched on the edge of one double bed, Mustang contemplated the device she held.

The metal not steel, the components not transistors, this was not of Earth. Nor was it of the movies.

She abruptly found herself questioning the source of the Star Wars saga... an alien from a galaxy where this technology was real?

Footsteps on the stairs interrupted her reverie. Too late in the day for the cleaning woman, she surmised, glancing at the bedside alarm clock. She ducked out the window onto the balcony, hoping Quentin would use the rear window to access the fire escape.

With luck, the agents wouldn’t check the safe until the next day and, by then, the lightsaber would be dust.

She listened briefly through the screen to the conversation. “We’ve got to apprehend them by tomorrow, or it’s our asses,” griped a basso profundo.

“Don’t worry. I have an idea where they can be found.”

Mustang recognized that voice.

Ben Espinoza.

Descending an access ladder built into the side of the structure, she met Quentin beside his car. He practically drooled at the sight of the lightsaber.

“It *is* real,” he whispered, fingers extended.

“Yes, and now that it’s safe, we can make sure those who saw it forget it ever existed.”

“Huh?”

“Drive me home, then get yourself home. That’s all I’ll say.”

The boy did as requested, not daring to press someone holding an authentic, functional lightsaber.

When she alighted from the lumpy passenger seat fifteen minutes later, he leaned toward her. “What happens next?”

“You go home, and go to school tomorrow like normal.”

“Won’t the feds...”

“No. Don’t worry about it. Don’t think about it.” She didn’t bother to add, “You won’t remember anything.”

Between now and then, however, she wanted to learn a bit more about the culture which created such a weapon...

Joe and Maggie home from church, football narration droned on the television and the smell of garlic and beef drifted from the kitchen.

“Did you water the horses, girl?” the Duryea patriarch called.

“This morning, Dad.”

Not a thanks or other expression of satisfaction reached her ears. Rather than conduct her research in the bedroom, she proceeded through the back door and crossed to the barn.

Heartbeat would not dispute anything she did, where her parents might pepper her with questions.

She sat on a slanted wood bench in the dimness, holding the lightsaber vertical. “The owner of this weapon may come to claim it,” she spoke to the natural forces.

What materialized on the straw-covered floor was no hologram. A robe not exactly brown, a wrap-around shirt-type garment visible beneath, baggy pants and scuffed cloth boots completed the ensemble.

Mustang didn’t flinch. He resembled the geeks from the fan club too much. Until he lowered his voluminous hood.

A thin, weathered face framed by a shock of white hair and neatly trimmed beard could have been anybody’s grandfather. Intense green eyes studied her.

“So, you are she who summoned me,” he hissed.

“Thanks for coming.”

“The Force is strong with you. I could not refuse.”

Mustang rolled her eyes.

“You do not believe in the Force?”

“It’s not what I call these... powers I have.”

“It has many names, depending on the planetary system.”

“Then, there is intelligent life out there?” she muttered.

He countered, “We have always wondered if intelligent life existed here.”

They chuckled simultaneously.

“Is that why you sent one of your... people to write a series of movies?”

Mustang prodded.

“We did not send a person, we sent an idea.” He noticed her befuddlement.

“We sent visions, if you will, to a young man many of your years ago. He dreamed of us and later created the movies based on those dreams.”

“Must’ve been pretty good dreams.”

“Very... vivid. Very... detailed.”

She held up the lightsaber. “This, for instance?”

He nodded.

“You are a civilization with advanced technology,” Mustang observed.

“Were you not concerned about tampering with our natural order?”

“We have been visiting this planet periodically over your centuries. We... read what you call science fiction, and realized it would be a long time before you grasped the concepts behind our weapons, transports and equipment.”

“You’d be surprised. Our scientists and engineers are constantly working to improve all of those.”

“Sadly, because you are a people of war. We hoped, by inspiring the movies, you would come to see the value of peace.”

“Have you seen those movies? They tell of wars and conflict, destruction, evil and death.” Which was the primary reason Mustang had never been interested in watching them herself.

“Sadder still.” He reached gnarled fingers toward the lightsaber. “Now, if I may have my property, I will go.”

Mustang retracted the cylindrical device. “One thing before you do: how do you use what you call the Force?”

“The Force connects every living thing. We use it for good...”

“But, how?”

“If a rock was falling down a mountain, say, and a group of children were playing in the valley below, we could divert the path of the rock so the children would not be harmed.”

“What if one of those children was destined to grow up to be a murderer?” the girl postulated.

“We would save him along with the others who would do good with their lives as adults.”

“You see yourselves as gods, then, determining who shall live and who dies?”

The Jedi’s forehead wrinkled. “Don’t you?”

“I... don’t understand these powers well enough to elevate myself to that level.”

“Yet, you decided to free the students from their confinement...”

“Because my mistake put them there.”

“Your mistakes will cause harm - even death - to many,” he warned.

“How so?”

“You were advised to do good with your power. You have failed and, each time you fail, you place others at risk. There is much fear in you.”

“You’re right, there. I fear waking up each morning, I fear going to school, I fear going to sleep, hoping something I think or speak won’t wreak havoc,” Mustang confessed. “I inherited a power I never wanted...”

“Those who are strong with the Force are always vulnerable in their youth. Youth is enough of a confusing period without throwing the potential of the Force into the mix. You will work through your fears, if you exercise self-control, and be a shining light in your world if you avoid the ambitious, greedy men who would use you to their advantage.”

“Eh?”

“While we have mostly eliminated the vices on my world, your people are primitive enough to still give sway to those impulses. If you can steer clear of such individuals, you will be able to hone your skills and become a true Jedi.”

“I don’t want to be a Jedi,” the girl scoffed. “I want to be a hermit, living alone where I can’t do any harm.”

The Jedi extended his hand again. “So be it. Probably for the best. Without a wise master, you would be unable to grasp the most basic concepts of the Force...”

The lightsaber leapt to his palm. Before his fingers could close around it, the device jumped back to Mustang.

“You mean, like that?” she grumbled.

“Indeed. That is but a child’s level skill.”

The ground shook beneath his feet. His eyes reflected his uncertainty.

“Ah, so you do know...”

“A few things, yes.”

“I would invite you to come to my world for training...”

Auburn tresses shook in the negative. “No, thanks. I’ll stay here and do my best.”

Mustang released the lightsaber and, with a cursory salute, the figure vanished.

As she trudged toward the house, sirens and flashing lights approached at high speeds on the road from Canyon Creek.

“Oh, hell,” she spat. She’d forgotten to erase the memories of the federal agents...

IV

If an actual steel barrier had been in place, the black government Ford sedans could not have progressed farther along the gravel drive. Rear tires spun briefly before the engines shut down.

Mustang had concealed herself behind a 50 year old oak tree - plenty of cover for her slender frame. She heard two men complaining about having to walk the distance to the house, and Ben Espinoza countermanding the idea.

“She knows we’re here, and she’s not in the house,” the FBI agent announced.

Their progress on foot was also prohibited by the invisible fence Mustang had erected with her power. She didn’t want them banging on the door and upsetting her parents with questions they could not answer.

Peeking around the thick tree trunk, Mustang didn’t recognize any of the men, though she knew one was Espinoza. They all wore kevlar vests over black suits, white shirts and ties. Three had professional haircuts - brown, blond and black manes - the fourth’s head was shaved.

Tattoos were visible above the starched collar, and a gold earring glinted in the moonlight.

Curiosity got the better of her.

“What do you want, Ben?” she hollered through the darkness, manipulating the sound to come from all directions.

“Ah, Miss Duryea! We want the students and the object you stole.”

The bald figure had spoken.

“What’s with the get-up?” she queried.

Espinoza signaled the men to fan out to locate the source of the voice. “I was in the midst of infiltrating a drug smuggling operation on the Texas border

with Mexico when I saw Canyon Creek mentioned in the Bureau's daily activity logs. I dropped what I was doing and came to join the fun."

"Your airline expenses must be horrendous."

"One of these days, I'll bring you in, and the boys in Washington will apologize for thinking I'm nuts."

Mustang detected large gold letters across the back of one kevlar vest:
NSA.

"Are the different agencies actually cooperating?" she called.

"It's their operation; I'm just a consultant."

"An expert on me?"

He guffawed. "Exactly."

"Too bad you didn't bother to tell them I can't be confined or killed, and they just might die for their troubles."

The NSA operatives spun on Espinoza. One barked, "Is she armed?"

"Not with conventional weapons."

"She has bulletproof tech?" demanded another.

"Not as we understand it."

The detail's commander spat at Espinoza. "You asshole! Bringing us out here on a wild goose chase!"

"She has the device, I know it," the FBI agent replied. "She knows where those kids are."

Mustang could have ended the confrontation by simply erasing the memories of the four men, but she was enjoying the inter-departmental conflict.

"If you want the device, you better check with whatever alien task force is working covertly at Area 51," she chuckled.

Espinoza bristled, his head shining beneath the moon. "You didn't!"

"No, I returned it to its rightful owner."

"You mean..."

"The kids were telling the truth, Ben. They saw a real, honest-to-goodness Jedi knight from a galaxy far, far away."

The commander kicked the gravel, scraping his patent leather shoe, and marched toward the car. "We're getting out of here."

His subordinates followed him. Espinoza didn't move.

"You coming?" urged the driver.

Defeat was audible in his baritone. "No. I'll get back to town somehow."

"Don't bother going back to Canyon Creek, guys," Mustang advised. "There's nothing left for you to do here." Under her breath, she added, "And

you'll forget ever being here once you return to D.C. Any reports on the matter will be... destroyed."

For all intents and purposes, the NSA agents would have taken a pleasant vacation at a dude ranch, she decided.

Espinoza, she would deal with differently.

Once the headlights disappeared along the road, Mustang released the invisible restraints surrounding the ranch house.

"Sit down, Ben," she instructed, stepping from her concealment.

"Where?"

"That fallen tree will do."

He complied, and she stopped well out of his reach.

"Why so skittish?" he puzzled.

"Because I know what you're capable of doing. You're unethical, desperate, and ambitious. Some of the worst traits any person can possess."

"I need that contraption you stole from the safe."

"Why? It's not a communication device, like the news reporters were told. Those kids wouldn't know how to infiltrate a government installation if their lives depended upon it."

He glared at her with smoldering brown eyes. "But, you would."

"That technology is not of this earth. That's why I returned it to the owner."

"Where are you hiding him?"

"He's gone."

"Where?"

"Why?" Mustang cringed. "You want another odd prisoner to add to your collection?"

"Not odd. Powerful. The potential you have for the government; the potential he would have..." He shivered.

"You cold?"

"A bit."

From among the rocks, a small campfire ignited. Espinoza scrambled backward so quickly, he fell over the tree trunk and tangled himself in the downed branches.

"You need to give this up, Ben. You can't compete with what you want to capture, and you'll end up suffering for it. Not just personally, but professionally."

Righting himself, he brushed dirt from his trousers and slammed his fist against the bark. "Look, Miss Duryea, you give me no choice. You either come with me now, or I'll make your life such a constant hell..."

Winds whipped across the property; the flames grew exponentially. “And how would you do that without worrying about retaliation?” she asked.

A hand clamped on her shoulder from behind. For a brief moment, she thought it might be her father looking for her - except, he never looked for her.

The Jedi stood beside her, blue lightsaber blade illuminating their surroundings. “You need not trifle with such a one. Remember, the Force is about keeping the peace.”

Espinoza retreated, cowering. “Where did he come from?”

A pale finger pointed skyward. If he’d been indicating a specific star, it was difficult to tell which. “There,” he said.

The FBI agent’s ambition kicked in anew. “How did you get here? Where’s your ship?”

Mustang sighed. “He doesn’t understand.”

“Obviously,” concurred the Jedi.

“What do you do with such as these on your planet?”

The elder’s lips curled slightly, barely noticeable within the white beard and mustache. “We haven’t seen his kind for many a generation. That is why we decided not to visit here until your species... advanced.”

“An unlikely prospect. There are more like him here than like you,”

Mustang stated.

“Tragic. You will annihilate each other, leaving nothing...”

“I’m afraid so.”

The Jedi moved a short distance. “Then, I shall be on my way. May the Force be with you.”

The lightsaber switched off, darkness enveloped the two who remained earthbound.

Espinoza didn’t recover his arrogance for a full five minutes, standing with his jaw agape until he inhaled and squared his shoulders. “It was a trick. You used mirrors or something...”

“Get lost, Ben. You’re getting on my nerves, and I’m tired.”

She turned and strode toward the house, not minding when a vortex of wind swirled around the FBI agent and whisked him off to parts unknown.

“You’ll forget you ever saw the Jedi,” Mustang hissed as she crossed the kitchen threshold.

“You left the dishes unwashed,” Maggie reminded the girl as she kicked off her sneakers by the door. “What were you doing out there so long?”

“Brushing Heartbeat.” Mustang forced herself to stop yawning long enough to fill the sink with soapy water and scrub the pots and pans.

A glance at the clock over the stove startled her: nearly 10:00. The Sunday night football game was in the last seconds of the fourth quarter; she heard as much as she rinsed the plates and positioned them in the drying rack.

The news would be on soon. Joe watched it before retiring like a ritual.

Mustang slowed her pace, a surge of adrenaline keeping her awake to hear the local and national headlines. She selected a tea towel from the rack and wiped each cup and glass carefully, ears attentive.

One thing the teen worried about when making use of her power was phrasing the command to nature precisely. She had discovered in the months since inheriting the abilities that a casual remark would be taken literally by the elements. When nothing was mentioned about the Canyon Creek students or the alleged government communications device, she breathed in relief.

All reports, including news reports, about the incident had been destroyed, as she'd commanded.

Finishing the dishes, Mustang detoured into the bathroom to brush her teeth before going to bed. She hadn't yet closed her door when Maggie said something which caught her by surprise.

The television had been switched off, and Joe was dousing the flames on the fireplace grate.

"I got three calls from the school last week about our daughter," the woman said.

It always bothered Mustang that neither of her parents used her given name, Elizabeth. Nor did they call her by the nickname she'd earned because of her love of horses. Her mother hailed her using "dear" or "honey" and her father just called her "girl".

"Is she skipping classes again?" snarled Joe.

"No. The first call came from the school counselor. He noticed that she has no friends and always sits alone in the cafeteria or at assemblies. He suggested we get her psychological counseling."

"What a load of crap. Those guys never know what they're talking about. Why doesn't he call the parents of the kids who bring drugs to school, or guns?"

"I don't know, Joe. The second call was from her math teacher. She doesn't seem interested in the subject and hasn't turned in any homework since she's been back."

"When does she have time for homework? She has chores here which are more important," grumped the man. "If she flunks a test, then we'll worry about homework."

“The last call was from the assistant principal. He thinks if she gets involved in Junior ROTC, it will give her the discipline to conform to the school’s rules.”

“What does that involve?”

Maggie’s answer was unintelligible, as if she had hidden her face behind a pillow.

“What a load of crap,” Joe scoffed.

“She needs to be more... normal,” protested the woman. “She’s so isolated, so... backward.”

“She’s fine. She’s better off staying away from those crazy kids you’d call normal. They get involved with drugs, drinking, and wind up in jail.”

“You’re not being fair...”

Her father plopped on the sofa. “Oh, here we go again. Like I wasn’t fair to you, not letting you get a job at the library in town, or volunteer at the animal shelter. It’s not wrong of me to expect my wife to be a wife and do what a good wife does - take care of me, so I can take care of business and bring home the bacon.”

“But, Joe...”

“It’s your damned mother’s influence, isn’t it? She never wanted you to marry me, said you’d be miserable. So, you made yourself miserable. You’ve been miserable nearly 20 years, and you make me miserable!”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Isn’t it? You nagged and nagged for me to give permission to let that girl go live with your mother, and what happened? She’s not there even a month, and the old gal drops dead. It’s better for that girl to stay far from people. She’s cursed, she’s jinxed.”

Those words made Mustang’s heart sink. Her own father thought her cursed. Such positive reinforcement would give her an optimistic view of life, and dealing with people.

She felt tears trickling down her cheeks as she shut the bedroom door. Changing into her sweats/pajamas, she crawled beneath the quilt and punched her pillow repeatedly, sobbing.

The lightsaber’s bluish glow lit up the corner near the window.

“What do you want?”

“Don’t give in to your sadness. It will negate any good you could do...”

She rolled onto her side. “Go away.”

“Deep within you, there is good. It’s just confused by all the evil you encounter in your daily trials.”

“Not evil. Stupidity.”

“Sometimes, they are the same thing,” boomed the Jedi.

“How so?”

“Those who have closed their minds to the infinite possibilities of life, who have limited their focus to their own puerile opinions, think only of themselves. That is both stupid and evil.”

Mustang propped herself on one elbow. “True.”

“Keep your mind open, in spite of those who close theirs. Work for good; be a shining light in this world so plagued by darkness.”

“I want to try, but it’s hard, and I’m so tired.”

“Every ounce of your energy will be spent in the effort, but never give up.”

She collapsed on the mattress. “Go away.”

The Jedi favored her with a kindly smile, raised his hood, deactivated the lightsaber and vanished.

“Who are you talking to, hon?” Maggie inquired through the door.

“It’s just the TV, Mom.”

“Better get some sleep. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

Mustang contradicted her silently.

Joe’s gruffness followed. “You forgot to clean up the living room, girl.”

“I’ll do it in the morning, Dad.”

“You’ll do it now.”

Maggie intervened, “Let her sleep, Joe.”

“She has chores, and she’ll do those chores, or not sleep at all in this house.”

Rising, Mustang’s feet groped around the carpet for her slippers as she heard her parents’ bedroom door slam shut.

Joe had wanted a son. He treated his wife - and daughter - like maids. One lamp still burned in the living room, making the mess all too visible. He’d left a half-eaten bowl of popcorn, three beer cans and a plate of pie crumbs on the coffee table. Sunday’s paper might have been dispersed around the furniture by a tornado.

Mustang glanced at the newspaper sections as she collected them.

A large photo on the front page bore the caption, “Hamill will come.”

Sunday’s *Helena Chronicle* lead story explained how the marketing company contracted to facilitate the contest mistakenly used the word “all” instead of “one” when describing the winning school receiving the visit from Mark Hamill of *Star Wars* fame.

“Acknowledging their error, the firm will be funding Hamill’s visits to each of the other 49 states’ winning locations over the next year.”

The girl chuckled wryly. She wouldn't be there to see it. She never intended to return to school again.