

The Mustang Chronicles:

Artistic Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

Nothing smelled better than a Scottish breeze tinged with the delicate aroma of heather.

Even though a top-of-the-line washer/dryer set occupied half of Boleskine House's laundry room, Mustang Duryea elected to hang the damp bed sheets and towels on a rope suspended between two maple trees in what might be considered the Georgian abode's back yard. The summer sun and air currents across Loch Ness gave the fabric something no artificially-scented softener sheet advertised.

A bulky wicker basket resting in tall grass, the young woman bent to extract more clothes pins from a burlap pouch. That's when she noticed a pair of muddy leather boots skirting the north side of the house.

She straightened, eying the gangly figure, age indeterminate due to a balding sandy head, scruffy mustache and goatee. "Can I help you find something?"

"Lady Elizabeth?"

In those two words, Mustang - known in the region as "Lady Elizabeth Neville" for her own security - could distinguish the thick local burr. No curious tourist, this. "Yes?"

"I knocked at the door, but no one answered. I've got your grocery order."

Mustang squinted at him. "You're not the regular driver."

"He left for school last Sunday. I'm Barney Kerr. I'm helpin' out until I start at the university in Edinburgh."

So, a teenager with premature hair loss. In the States, so many boys would've given anything to look older, as this youth did, and illegally buy liquor without being carded. Mustang chuckled as she preceded Kerr to the locked entry way.

"I have to keep the doors bolted, against tourists who wander the grounds," she explained.

"My parents do the same," acknowledged the lad. "Some people have no qualms about walking into a rustic cottage, uninvited."

A well-traveled delivery van waited on the gravel drive; calloused hands yanked aside the sliding panel. Mustang grabbed a cardboard box overflowing with her bi-weekly supply of foodstuffs, pausing when she glimpsed a strange lump partially hidden by a tarp.

Deft fingers plucked at the canvas, exposing a sizable length of flecked grey granite. “Why do you have a gravestone in here?” queried the dark-haired Mistress of Boleskine.

“Only part o’ one,” Kerr replied, hoisting two parcels. “The engraver made a mistake spellin’ the deceased’s name, so I convinced him the marker could be put t’ other uses.”

“Such as?”

“A small statue.”

Mustang awkwardly maneuvered the key, shifting the tumblers. She ushered the delivery boy over the threshold with his burden. “Are you an artist?”

“I want t’ be a sculptor. That’s what I’ll be studyin’ at university.”

“You could work in clay. It’s less... weighty.”

“I’ve tried. I don’t like how other factors can spoil weeks o’ effort.”

“For instance?” prompted Mustang.

“The clay dries, but it wasn’t mixed properly, so it cracks. Or, it breaks while being fired in the kiln. Or, the glaze dinnae smoothly coat the surface. With stone, everythin’ depends on the artist’s motion with hammer and chisel. If he screws up, ’tis his mistake, nae one else’s.”

“True.”

In the kitchen, they set their load on the counter and unpacked while the conversation continued.

“That chunk could win me a full scholarship, if I’m careful.”

“Really?”

“The University of Edinburgh is holdin’ a competition for a new statue t’ place on their grounds. The winner will ha’ all expenses paid in the Fine Arts program.”

“You’re so sure you’ll win?”

“If I dinnae, university will only be a dream.”

“When is the deadline?”

“Three weeks.”

Mustang gulped, almost dropping the orange juice jug she held. “You expect to complete a statue in 21 days?”

“I’ll work ‘round the clock, if I must.”

“What do your teachers have to say about this?”

“Nae o’ me previous schools had art instructors who did more than paint and draw. I’ve had t’ teach myself.”

“Teach yourself how?”

Kerr admitted, "Studyin' books and pictures - mostly from the Renaissance."

Memories flooded from Mustang's subconscious. "At least, you've chosen good examples. I... visited Rome a few years ago, and saw some exquisite sculptures. Michelangelo's were, by far, the best. The *Moses*, the *Pieta*..."

"Some days I wish I lived then," said Kerr wistfully. "To apprentice under such a genius..."

"You've heard the saying, 'When the student is ready, the teacher will appear'?"

"Aye."

"I'm certain you'll find an excellent teacher eventually, one equaling Michelangelo's skill." She closed the refrigerator and leaned against the stove, never considering the import of her words.

Kerr finished stocking the cupboards with cans and cartons, then turned. "That means a lot, Lady Elizabeth. Me parents would rather I take a construction job in Inverness, or work in a factory. They think I'll never make a living as an artist. Knowing someone has confidence in me..."

"And I've never seen any of your work!" grinned Mustang.

"I can show ye, if ye like."

"Sure."

Out in the van, a sketchbook contained ideas for various busts and poses, including intricate details of human musculature and... horses.

"You've been drawing my Arabian," Mustang commented.

"While I was waitin' for ye t' answer the door. A magnificent animal."

"You can ride him, if you wish."

"Thanks, but I ha' three more deliveries this afternoon, then I must get started..."

A British ten-pound note was slipped into Kerr's fist when he shook Mustang's hand. He smiled in parting, his vehicle's treadless tires kicking up pebbles as he swerved along the winding drive.

Mustang strolled back to her laundry, the items on the line already half-dry. She buried her nose in a thick terry towel, inhaling deeply with satisfaction.

Next on her list of chores - albeit enjoyable ones: weeding flower beds she'd cultivated against the house's southern face. Pink and white roses, day lilies and an assortment of perennials grew in the rich loam, as did unwanted greenery of the stubborn sort. Garden gloves covering her scarred palms, she jerked at tangled roots until sweat trickled down her temples.

Resting briefly on a three-legged stool, the fact Jack Parsons had never bothered with such trivialities made her laugh. The man she'd come to know not entirely by accident, who - she learned after his death - had been her illegitimate grandfather, as well as a renowned rocket scientist and occult enthusiast, had confined himself to the dilapidated Gate Lodge more than five decades.

Coming to terms with the command over nature he'd passed to her, Mustang had endured trials and tribulations after returning to her parents' horse ranch in Montana. She chose, in the end, for the same exile the FBI had offered Parsons, though a more comfortable version. Those inhabiting the district believed her a rich young noblewoman, not knowing she "earned" her money by surreptitiously traveling to the world's gambling capitals, shooting craps or tugging the "one-armed bandits".

She seldom left the property, otherwise.

And she had no regrets.

Living in isolation might prove untenable to many modern humans; Mustang had always preferred solitude. She'd enjoyed skipping school to lounge beneath trees on the Duryea homestead, listening to birds and wildlife. Graduating high school by the grace of the principal and sheer willpower, she'd originally planned to assume responsibility for the horses so her father could retire, but circumstances of her own making intervened.

In less than two years, she'd watched buildings nearly crumble, fire consume harmless trees, and too many people die - including her beloved Jim Neville - due to her impulsive utterance of directives nature obeyed. She'd lost count how often she'd scolded herself for not heeding her own mandate, "I mustn't get angry. I do horrible things when I'm angry."

Here, she'd been fairly successful at not causing trouble.

Not much, anyway.

A cool glass of lemonade drained from a pitcher she'd made that morning, Mustang renewed her battle with tenacious dandelions. Later, she decided, she'd set out the portable charcoal grill and cook hamburgers for dinner. The sunset would be glorious over Loch Ness, and she could enjoy it from the hillock where remnants of Jack Parsons' ceremonial altar were gradually disintegrating.

She never expected the meal to be interrupted.

Her first act when taking possession of Boleskine House involved ripping the gate off its posts at the drive's entrance. Curiosity seekers periodically visited the site because of its connection to the infamous Aleister Crowley, though none of his personal effects remained after creditors emptied the dwelling a century

earlier. Mustang didn't mind if Scots and foreigners made use of the paths through the 47 acres during daylight hours, but she didn't tolerate nocturnal intruders.

No more did dusk fade on the horizon, than rather unusual booby-traps were employed to repulse trespassers.

Barney Kerr did not fall victim to these precautions, arriving minutes before the last shafts of light vanished.

His slight, stocky companion's face was barely visible from Mustang's position on the grassy slope.

"Is something wrong?" she called, rising and brushing dirt from the backside of her jeans.

Kerr answered, "I'm nae sure."

Advancing, Mustang distinguished the older man's curly white hair, long, unkempt beard and oddly flattened nose. His stained brown tunic, ratty leggings and black pointed boots smacked of a Shakespearian theatrical production, not 21st century Scotland.

"Tell me what happened," she insisted.

"I was drivin' home after me last stop," related Kerr nervously. "This... gentleman was shuffling along B852, disoriented. I stopped and volunteered t' give him directions, but I couldna understand his gibberish."

Mustang bit her lip to hide a smirk. There'd been occasions she couldn't understand her own neighbors speaking their heavily-accented variation of English. If this man was American, or another foreigner struggling with the regional dialect...

"Why bring him here? The tourist office in Dores..."

"Ye had mentioned being in Rome, and could be he's speakin' Italian." A possibility. And, though Kerr assumed she understood that language, he had no way of knowing her power enabled her brain to translate any known tongue, and those with whom she conversed to comprehend her in kind.

She didn't want to go that far. If the man was Italian, no purpose in confusing him. If Kerr simply couldn't recognize his pronunciation, the matter could be easily resolved.

"Sir, are you in need of help?" she inquired.

Watery blue orbs glared at her.

She persisted, "Can you tell me your name?"

Nothing.

She made a motion as if bringing a glass to her mouth.

"Ah!" he beamed, adding a rapid phrase...

In Tuscan-accented Italian.

Mustang *had* heard the language, during a misadventure traveling via a lightning bolt. Assisted by a group of Franciscan friars, she'd resurrected their founder while visiting shrines in Umbria.

Tricky to make this man hear her in Italian, with Kerr listening to both in English. She opted to avoid the stream of inevitable questions...

Instinctively, she motioned Kerr to stay put, and guided the elder a short distance down the incline.

"Are you lost, sir?" she asked.

He muttered angrily, "I do not know how I come to be here."

Not good.

"What is your last clear recollection?"

"I was carving the face of Nicodemus for my latest *Pieta*..."

Definitely not good.

Gingerly, Mustang flipped the man's gnarled hands skyward. Compared to Kerr's worn flesh, the leathery surface boasted stone dust embedded in callouses upon callouses, from countless years wielding hammer and chisel.

Her stomach knotted. She forced herself to recall what idle statement had triggered this travesty. She'd ended up in Japan, a dazed Rick Shimoto in tow, after admiring his grandfather's katana, and wishing to see one forged. She'd spent two years with Erwin Rommel during World War II, having verbalized a desire to share the hardship of a supposed former concentration camp inmate.

This time... she'd merely predicted Barney Kerr would find a teacher the equal of Michelangelo.

Unless nature fathomed what she didn't: Michelangelo *had* no equal.

"You must be hungry after your journey."

"I haven't eaten in many days."

Hoping against hope, she motioned him forward. "Let me welcome you into my home, then, Signore..."

"I am called Maestro by some, but mostly Michelangelo, the sculptor."

Though secretly expected, the name's vocalization caused Mustang to stumble on the rocky path. "Oh, hell..."

II

Kerr had followed at a distance as the pair conversed, now sprinting to catch Mustang before she fell.

"Are ye all right?" he gushed.

Steady once more, she nodded. Their leisurely pace, given Michelangelo's advanced age, prolonged the trek to the house.

And Mustang was anxious to screen the Renaissance artist from any potential prying eyes.

Especially once she disclosed his present location.

Or tried to rationalize for Barney Kerr how this 16th century genius had manifested five hundred years in his future.

She already felt the headache throbbing behind her eyes.

The two men milled around her cozy living room; she brought a tray of glasses and the replenished lemonade pitcher. Michelangelo spat the liquid on the floor in distaste.

"Have you no decent wine?" he snarled.

Mustang's stash of alcoholic beverages amounted to a half-bottle of Jameson Limited Reserve whiskey. "I'm sorry, I..."

"I ha' a case of Merlot in the van," offered Kerr. "Mom and Dad ordered it for a party at the weekend."

"Do you mind?"

He flashed a pleasant grin and sidled from the room.

"What would you like to eat?" Mustang prodded her other guest.

"Fruit, if you have any, and some bread."

Kerr had uncorked one bottle from the crate when she reappeared from the kitchen with a modest repast. Michelangelo would be the only one eating or drinking, while the others watched.

He ate like one starved.

During the lull, Mustang whispered to Kerr, "You're not surprised to be hearing him in English?"

"I ha' heard plenty of stories about ye, Lady Elizabeth. I dinnae believe them, but that doesn't mean anythin' happenin' around ye would surprise me."

"You know who he is?"

"I ha' a vague idea."

The teen's open mind eased the tension somewhat, allowing her to focus on acclimating Michelangelo to his surroundings.

She'd had ample practice in that regard, having embodied the spirits of Francis of Assisi, Mark Twain and Mahatma Gandhi in the course of gaining control over her power. Whether clothes, cars, technology or architecture, she was prepared for most any inquiry.

She wasn't prepared for Michelangelo's unbridled egomania.

It started when Kerr brought in his sculpture “textbooks” - volumes he’d bought depicting famous statues, which he analyzed in his quest to perfect his own style. Leafing through the pages, he and Mustang highlighted where each piece was exhibited. Michelangelo had a scathing critique for each.

“The lighting is wrong in that cathedral,” he barked about one. “Every commission I accepted, I integrated the lighting into its composition. My *David* was supposed to sit outdoors, atop a church. I designed the eyes to reflect the sunlight. What do they do? Stick it inside four walls! Fools!”

Works by other sculptors were met with derision. Finally, Mustang closed the cover.

“We just wanted you to know how famous you’ve become around the world,” she murmured.

“I’ve known that for many years. I could command any amount from those who wished my work to ornament their houses or libraries.”

“What about the Sistine?” puzzled Kerr.

Both swiftly learned not to mention that word in the Florentine’s presence.

There could be no mistaking, though, Michelangelo’s passion as an artist to expertly finish endeavors once contracted. Having no real teacher himself - as an apprentice to Ghirlandaio, he’d done little more than fetch and carry - he imbued even his earliest work with depth and quality casual tourists missed. He had a curious mind, always willing to amass more knowledge, but not without challenging the *status quo*.

“Because some authority says, ‘This is so,’ does not mean it is so,” he growled in the course of a ponderous diatribe. “Too often, the ambitious who buy their way to power are uneducated, illiterate fools. It is the task of every man to show courage and stand for what is true in the face of oppression.”

“Tis that why ye carved so many o’ your statues as nudes?” wondered Kerr. “In defiance o’ the Church’s condemnation o’ the human body?”

“Partly. Partly because nothing in the universe parallels the beauty of the male form.”

“I ha’ been experimentin’ wi’ carvin’ horses,” Kerr announced.

“In some ways, more difficult than human anatomy. It is vital to capture the movement correctly, or ruin the lines. To sculpt a horse standing still is a waste.”

Kerr dropped to his knees near the green sofa where Michelangelo reclined after his meal. “Please, Maestro. Teach me.”

“You know how to hold the hammer and strike the chisel?”

“I... think so.”

“Can you shave a narrow sliver or larger fragments off the whole with equal ease?”

“Aye.”

“Then, so long as you visualize the image within the stone, there is nothing I can teach you. You must draw it out, with painstaking care, never giving in to despair.”

Dejected, Kerr sank on his heels. “Will ye, at least, look at some o’ me work?”

“I will, before I leave.”

Mustang leapt from the cane-backed rocker. “Leave?”

“I will return to Rome.”

“But, you... can’t!”

“Who will stop me?”

“It is many hundreds of miles, Maestro,” Mustang objected. “It’s not like you can walk to Rome from here.”

“Then, I will hire a carriage.”

“You’ll need papers.”

Michelangelo glowered, “You mean, in all this time, the world has not reached a point where people can travel from city to city without being suspect?”

“From city to city, yes,” responded Kerr. “From country to country, no.”

“Rome still wars against Bologna?”

“No. Italy is a unified nation now. There are... other conflicts.”

Mustang laid timid fingers on Michelangelo’s forearm. “Please, stay here tonight, Maestro. Tomorrow, Barney will buy you some new clothes, and then we can discuss... travel arrangements.”

“After he looks at me sculptures,” hinted Kerr.

Their hostess shrugged, a tightness claiming her chest as she escorted them to the guest room, where freshly-laundered sheets were stacked on the mattress. In the course of making the bed, she nursed a fear always entertained when rash action brought a historic soul from the past: that individual’s refusal to return to the ethereal plane. Francis of Assisi had gone willingly, though fanatical members of his Order yearned for him to remain in the present. Mark Twain had enjoyed the visit to his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, but had no intention of lingering. Gandhi had been harder to sway, wanting to re-launch his non-violent crusade against the injustice prevalent throughout society.

Michelangelo, by his tone and demeanor, didn’t want to go back to Rome of the 1560s. He wanted to pick up where he’d left off, a man in his 80s ready to

seize a claw chisel and hand-powered drill to reveal the beauty within the finest Carrara marble.

She pulled an oversized Pink Floyd t-shirt from the chest of drawers, and purple sweat pants. “You can shower in the bathroom, then sleep in these,” she directed.

“What about me?” quipped Kerr, his balding head framed by the doorway.

“You drive to Inverness and pick up a few outfits from the first tailor shop which opens in the morning.”

“On me good looks?”

A British 100-pound note found its way from her jeans into his shirt pocket. Closing the front door behind him moments later, she knew she wouldn’t close an eye all night.

Three A.M. saw her pacing the tiny study which she’d planned as a refuge if the FBI or Interpol ever came to arrest her. Sensing no immediate danger, she’d not closed the steel-reinforced panel with its triple locks.

“Are you like me, sleeping little when much is to be done?”

Michelangelo’s Tuscan intonation jarred her from hushed contemplation of her own stupidity. She twirled, toppling an end table and porcelain-based lamp. Her chest heaving, he bowed his head apologetically.

“Forgive me, Signorina. I did not mean to intrude.”

She squeezed the wings of a floral-print armchair and stammered, “I’m so used to being alone, I forget when others are in the house.”

“Your husband is traveling on business?” Michelangelo queried.

“I’m not married.”

“You are so young to be a widow.”

“I’ve never been married.”

“You inherited all this from your father?” His arms swept wide, symbolically encompassing the estate.

It wouldn’t be a lie. “My... grandfather.”

The sculptor settled on the overstuffed love seat. “Your parents are dead?”

“No, but they don’t...”

“My father did not approve of my choice to be an artist. Lorenzo de Medici treated me like his son, because he appreciated my talent. I received schooling in many subjects, and created pieces which professed my... own beliefs, not those sanctioned by the Church.”

He seemed calmer, so she risked the questions swirling inside her skull. “Did you know Leonardo da Vinci?”

“He spent time in Florence while I lived there,” came the curt reply.

“Was it he who broke your nose?”

His abrupt guffaw stunned her. “No, no. Leonardo’s... eccentricities didn’t include physical violence. He... was a peculiar man, very suspicious of others stealing his ideas.”

“If I remember my freshman art appreciation class, you draped tarps around your work so no one could steal yours.”

“Not steal, view. I despised those with no knowledge of art criticizing my incomplete work. I never came so close to killing anyone as when Julius tore down my scaffolding to show the Sistine ceiling before all the frescos had been painted.”

“A project you hated, anyway.”

“I hated the idea behind it. Glorifying one’s own lineage - even if the Pope - is the worst kind of conceit. The money spent erecting and decorating the Sistine, and the basilica, could have been used to feed the poor. Instead, those hypocritical clerics wanted their family crest to embellish plaster 60 feet in the air, where few would perceive it.”

“Were you ever able to see the entire ceiling? Some books say you lost much of your eyesight...”

“Between marble dust and drips of paint, I am nearly blind.”

“Yet, if you went back to Rome, you’d resume sculpting...”

He flexed thick fingers. “I see far better with my hands than with my eyes.”

“I could...” Mustang restrained a fresh impulse.

Michelangelo pressed, “You could what?”

“I could... heal your eyes.”

“Many doctors have tried, without success.”

“Medicine has come far since...”

“You are a doctor?”

“No. I’m...” She sat beside him on the cushions.

With surprising agility, he snatched her wrists and aimed her scarred palms toward the goose-neck lamp burning in the corner. “You are a saint?”

Her laughter erupted, echoing through the silent abode.

“I see nothing humorous in being tortured for one’s faith.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Mustang panted, her mirth subsiding. “If I’d lived in your day, I would’ve been burned as a heretic.”

“You are a Jew?”

“No. When it comes to religion, I’m... not much of anything. But, I do have... abilities.”

The man’s blue orbs glimmered with comprehension. “You are a sorcerer.”

“Some have called me that.”

“You chant no incantations, own not mortar and pestle.”

“Don’t need ‘em.”

“You can resurrect the dead?”

She averted her gaze. “I don’t like that term.”

“No matter. You can come to Rome with me!” He rose, not releasing his grip. “Together, we can reform the Church and eliminate the corruption which has plagued artists’ true expression for decades!”

Mustang resisted. “Hold on, now! The corruption you speak of, if I recall, no longer exists. People of every faith can express themselves, in writing, song or art, as they choose, without fear of condemnation. For the most part, anyway.”

“Then, you admit the problem persists...”

“Only in the Middle East. Certain sects have... no sense of humor when it comes to being mocked.”

“I mocked the Popes by painting God’s own bare rump on the Sistine ceiling, because I could not tell them what I thought of their behavior face-to-face. Their self-obsession prevented them from discerning the meaning of that insult. I want to be able to openly declare my disdain from the church steps.”

The Mistress of Boleskine gradually drew Michelangelo onto the love seat once more. “Maestro, neither you nor I are that kind of crusader. We... exist beyond the strife of common people. If we try to interfere, we... only make the situation worse.”

“You speak nonsense, child.”

“I speak from experience.”

“I have far more experience than you, Signorina. We leave tomorrow for Rome.”

The Florentine would brook no opposition. He marched to the guest room, Mustang close behind, mute for lack of a logical argument.

Getting him on an airplane would be impossible without a passport; she didn’t relish flying, herself. They could take the train as far as London, but they would have to be invisible to cross the English Channel without proper documents. The same applied to boarding a cruise ship bound for the Mediterranean from any convenient port of call.

She considered her mutilated palms. Clutching a fold of Michelangelo's rumpled t-shirt, they would be transported instantly to the Eternal City via a lightning bolt. She might even be able to propel him to his own era...

But would she be able to get back to the 21st century?

She didn't want to try.

"You must rest," declared the aged artist. "We will depart when the church bells toll noon." On that harsh note, he slammed the door.

The young woman's sole hope: Barney Kerr would arrive early with the clothes. Perhaps he could help her urge Michelangelo to... to...

What?

She trudged to the master bedroom, disheartened. Unlike the predicament of bringing Francis of Assisi forward in time, Michelangelo could not be disguised as an ordinary tourist. He, like Gandhi and Mark Twain, bore a uniqueness unto themselves which made loosing them on modern society incredibly dangerous. No matter how they were dressed, one random comment might reveal their true identity...

And earn them a padded cell in the nearest hospital's psychiatric ward.

She collapsed atop the quilts and buried her head in a pillow to stifle her sobs. Of all her mistakes, this might be the worst. Men had died as a result of her imprudent intervention, but she always managed to rectify the dilemma and fade into oblivion. This time, there might be no way to keep the intelligence agencies of numerous governments from discovering her power.

She beat the goose down with her fists. "Oh, hell! Oh, hell! Oh, hell!"

III

With the dawn, Mustang Duryea's hazel eyes fluttered open. She'd never been able to break the habit of waking early, no matter how late she fell asleep. Her horses demanded attention, and her body obliged their need for fresh water and oats.

What she saw, however, raised a scream in her throat.

Two men, hovering above the bed.

At first, she recognized neither. One appeared younger than his receding hairline typified. The other wore a collared dress shirt and black slacks, with a dignified white beard and damp, curly hair. Only the misshapen nose reminded her of his status as a Boleskine guest.

And what they were supposed to do that sunny Thursday.

“Rise and shine, sleepy head,” chuckled Barney Kerr, tugging at the lumpy quilt.

She retorted, “Don’t you know how to knock?”

“I did, and the Maestro let me in an hour ago. I played barber wi’ the kitchen scissors, then showed him how t’ use the shower and work the zipper on his pants.”

“Nothing I haven’t done before,” she grumbled.

Both men gaped at her. She didn’t feel like defending her innocence.

“You need me to cook breakfast?”

“Already done,” countered Kerr. “Bowls o’ cereal and sliced bananas.”

“An amazing fruit,” Michelangelo interspersed.

“Up with ye, now, if ye are going t’ ride with us to my studio.”

Mustang stretched. “You have a studio?”

“A shed in me parents’ back yard,” Kerr clarified. “Sufficient for me needs.”

She shoed them from the room. “Give me a minute, okay?”

Stripping off her perspiration-drenched t-shirt and jeans, she cranked the knobs in the master bath and washed herself from head to toe. A red tank top and beige corduroys covered her slender frame, black tresses briskly brushed and hanging over her shoulders, when she emerged from the front door a half-hour later.

“In all these centuries, it still takes a woman far longer to dress than a man,” sniffed Michelangelo.

“Depends on the man,” Mustang remarked. “Some guys spend ages ogling themselves in the mirror, playing with their hair...”

“Hey!” protested Kerr, turning the key in the van’s ignition. “’Tis that a shot, because I dinnae ha’...”

“No offense intended.”

The excursion to Dores was slowed by late summer tourist busses and those unfamiliar with the Loch Ness region braking on the B852 roadway to gape at the famous lake’s panorama. Mustang understood, seeing the Kerr family home, why Barney’s mother kept their doors locked. On a lane directly off the village’s main thoroughfare, considerable foot traffic passed the dwelling.

The sturdy wooden outbuilding, possibly a chicken coop in previous incarnations, sat at the edge of the lot, far enough the noise of hammer on chisel didn’t disrupt activities in the house.

Barney’s creations reflected the size of discarded granite slabs he scrounged from the area’s monument engravers. The detail amazed Mustang. His

eyesight limited, Michelangelo stroked the figures with sensitive fingers, a minuscule smile visible beneath his mustache.

“Your technique is admirable,” praised the Italian. “Hours spent polishing the surface once you lay aside your tools is, nonetheless, as important as how you shape it.”

“I ha’ nae really worried about that, since I ha’ nae shown anyone else...”

“You need to work in marble. It is much more accommodating to the artist’s vision than this... common rock.”

“Marble is difficult t’ get, and expensive,” explained Mustang. “Unlike your day, most artists dinnae ha’ patrons t’ pay for their supplies up front.”

“Are you not this boy’s patron?”

Kerr and Mustang snickered in unison. “We met for the first time yesterday,” said the latter.

“You have wealth enough to support him.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it as the Maestro’s scowl intimidated her. She retreated, drawing Kerr with her as Michelangelo inspected the teen’s tools.

“Can you keep him interested for another hour or two?” she pleaded quietly.

“Why?”

“I’ve got to think of a way to delay his trip to Rome.”

“I laid awake last night, reviewin’ options. I may have a solution.”

“What?”

“Ha’ ye ever tried those virtual-reality goggles the scientists invented a few years ago?”

“No.”

“What about seein’ a movie in an IMAX theatre?”

“The closest one to where I lived in Montana was Chicago.”

“Surely, ye played video games growin’ up,” Kerr speculated, scratching his goatee.

“Never had an interest. What’s your point?”

“Wi’ the... gifts ye ha’, could ye nae simulate the city o’ Rome, right here in Scotland?”

She debated the prospect. While the retina registered reality, how the optic nerve transferred that information to the brain could be altered. She’d once made a teenaged boy believe he saw \$100 bills growing on a tree, made the Parthenon appear fully restored to a skeptical Interpol agent, and changed the color of her naturally auburn hair without the use of dye.

“He doesn’t know this is an island,” Mustang whispered. “We can drive the long way around the loch back to Boleskine, while I impose my memories on his mind, and recreate some of the ruins and the churches where he can wander freely on the estate.”

Michelangelo thought nothing about the pair shaking hands when he spun toward the exit. “Come, we’re to Rome.”

Favorable conditions attended the journey, including thick clouds obscuring the sun. Unaware they were traveling north, Michelangelo did not dispute the route, especially when the body of water to his left faded into more familiar Italian countryside, which Mustang had seen during her train ride from Rome to Assisi.

The city’s imaginary outskirts were a muddle of modern hotels and shops, fabricated from recollections of the young woman’s trek around the world. The Renaissance artist would not question the discrepancies. Nearing the heart of the historic district, though, she had to concentrate fully on duplicating St. Peter’s Basilica in all its glory, and other Vatican landmarks, some which had existed five centuries earlier.

They alighted from the van far beyond Boleskine House and the horse stable, walking through grass now appearing as stone roads.

“What are these columns?” scoffed the Florentine as Mustang displayed the curved colonnade before him.

“A man named Bernini designed them. To adorn the square, I suppose,” she replied.

He assessed the dome from a vantage point at the base of an Egyptian obelisk, a counterfeit afternoon sun lighting it from behind. “Supposed to be the widest in the city, the span meant to proclaim the Church’s power,” he declared. “But the circumference of the Pantheon’s dome is greater.”

“How do ye know?” prodded Kerr.

“I purposely calculated the narrower dimensions.”

Mustang ventured, “To spite them?”

His lips pursed, whether in a smile or a frown, it couldn’t be determined within the beard.

He led them through the city, disregarding the new and indicating edifices in which he’d played a defining role, such as the Palatine Hill government complex. Not only had Michelangelo excelled as sculptor - and painter - he’d been a brilliant architect.

The pair quizzed him about the imagery of the Porta Pia, a gate commemorating another Pope.

“That Pius came from a family of barbers,” was his noncommittal rejoinder.

Finding St. Peter in Chains proved a challenge - Mustang had been shown so many sacred sites during her tour, she had trouble recalling which church was which. Michelangelo recognized the facade in the distance, lengthening his gait.

His younger companions jogged to catch him as he yanked open the heavy wood and halted in his tracks.

“They sealed up the hole!” he cried.

It took a few moments for them to grasp his reference. He wasn’t looking at Pope Julius II’s tomb - the magnificent *Moses* - he squinted at the ceiling near one of the long windows.

Mustang didn’t dare reveal what her guide, Franciscan Brother Giovanni, had told her when they’d stood together between the genuine nave’s Ionic columns: how Church authorities in the years after Michelangelo’s death ordered the gap closed, because its illumination of Moses’ face not only inspired visiting Catholics, but also many Jews who, during that era, were not welcome in Christian buildings.

“Damn those imbeciles!” swore the artist.

While Kerr remained at a loss to comfort him, Mustang had alternatives she might not have employed had the trio really been in Rome. A word mouthed silently restored the shaft of light very similar to a stage spot - but far more effective.

Moses’ face, highly polished and looking left, exploded with seemingly divine brilliance, the result of the prophet having spent 40 days on a mountain receiving the Ten Commandments directly from God. Even the protrusions on the statue’s head, mistaken by many as horns, added to the aura of a halo.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Kerr. “Outrageous!”

The two women flanking Moses had struck Mustang as incongruous when she’d initially viewed them. Leah and Rachel, biblical wives of Jacob and mothers of the twelve who headed the tribes of Israel, appeared out of place beneath a prone rendering of Pope Julius II.

“Why did you choose to carve these?” she brooded.

“The tomb was originally intended to sit beneath the dome of St. Peter’s, a grand pyramid with two score statues. After Julius died, his successors saw no need for him to be enshrined in Christendom’s grandest church. These were two of the original forty.”

“I ha’ read ye ne’er used female models,” cited Kerr. “Why?”

“They wouldn’t sit still, and chattered incessantly. Some artists brought in string quartets and audiences while they worked. My art had nothing to do with

showmanship. I wanted no distractions, just the sound of my chisel chipping away the shell until I found life within the marble.”

“Is that why their arms look so... beefy?” opined Mustang.

“Beefy?”

“Like they trained with weights.”

Michelangelo lifted the young woman’s elbow, comparing her biceps with those of his statues. “You may be correct. There is a delicacy to the female frame I... ignored.”

Obviously, an uncomfortable topic for the man. She changed topics. “Did you ever use explosives?”

“If I’d been sculpting a mountain, I might have. The largest block ever to come into my possession became the *David*, for which I mostly used a home-made drill.”

“Too bad I couldn’t show you Mount Rushmore, or Crazy Horse, down in South Dakota,” she stated. “Exceptional mountain carvings.”

“A lifetime’s effort, no doubt.”

“I think Crazy Horse is on its third generation.”

“God made the mountains in their glory. Man should not reshape them.”

With that, Michelangelo stalked out the door, eyes gleaming.

One thing he hadn’t noticed - possibly due to his failing sight or his unfamiliarity with Rome as a tourist attraction: the lack of people at each site they visited. To realistically portray the crush of bodies would have taxed Mustang’s brain, so she eliminated this aspect, without harm to the essential elements.

For another two hours, they roamed narrow alleys and busy streets - Mustang did remember to add cars and two-wheeled *motorini* speeding past, much to Michelangelo’s consternation. When he couldn’t find the house in which he’d lived, he finally slumped against a jagged stone wall near the Piazza Navone.

“So much has changed,” he lamented, thrusting a crooked finger at a scaffolding near a ten-story building, draped with a huge advertisement. “That is considered art, while my work has been consigned to the sphere of mediocrity.”

“Nonsense, Maestro,” soothed Kerr. “Your name is renowned in every corner o’ the globe. Many people, rich and middle class, ha’ copies o’ your statues in their homes, offices or even on their graves...”

“Every library has biographies of your life, and commentaries about your skill,” Mustang concurred.

Michelangelo groaned, “Don’t you know lying is a sin?”

“We aren’t lyin’,” affirmed Kerr.

Mustang's sneaker traced a crack in the cobble lane, not daring to meet the older man's gaze. "At least, not about that."

"Come back wi' me," Kerr pleaded. "Teach me how t' improve me technique..."

"Sculpting horses?" snorted Michelangelo.

"I only do horses because there are so many close t' home. I've ne'er been able t' afford a human model..."

"I'm tired. I want to rest."

"When we... reach Boleskine, the guest room is at your disposal," noted Mustang. "Tomorrow will be soon enough to begin Barney's project."

Kerr's rusty van retraced the route around Loch Ness, and the Italian landscape soon faded. Though nature had merely layered Mustang's memories on the terrain, the young woman had spent her energy in the process. She fell asleep on the passenger seat well before the vehicle veered again onto the gravel drive.

House keys retrieved from her jean pocket, Kerr carried her inside and deposited her on the living room sofa. She didn't wake until the noise of glasses and rattling pots penetrated her exhaustion.

Barney Kerr monitored a cast iron skillet on the stove, preparing vegetable omelettes. Michelangelo was trying to uncork a bottle of orange juice; Mustang demonstrated the motion whereby he could unscrew the lid.

"Interesting," he observed, filling three tumblers.

They ate without conversation. Mustang attributed Michelangelo's expression to that of a man displaced, trying to assimilate 21st century advances. She'd seen Francis of Assisi contend with it - though not to such a degree, since he'd manifested in his hometown, which had changed little in eight hundred years. Mahatma Gandhi had been most troubled by the technology, perhaps, because he saw it as a means to perpetuate the violence he'd opposed so vocally.

Nothing she'd told either made it easier. They had allowed her to restore them to the realm of death, knowing it to be for the best.

The Mistress of Boleskine couldn't be positive Michelangelo still intended to live out his days - how many, she couldn't predict - in the present. He would definitely be an exceptional teacher for Kerr, but if he tried to explain his identity...

She gathered plates from the dining room table once they'd been scraped clean. Neither man volunteered to help wash the dishes, and when she discarded the kitchen towel thirty minutes later, she discovered Kerr stretched on the sofa, snoring, and Michelangelo sprawled on the guest room bed, one shoe dangling off his foot.

In a way, she wished for a peaceful August evening, with Mark Twain or Erwin Rommel opposite her at the inlaid chess table. She'd come to know these men, appreciate their insights and wisdom. They relished a respite from the intangible planes, though being flesh and blood had its drawbacks - primarily, aching muscles and stiff joints, as Twain frequently complained.

Michelangelo *must* be in tremendous pain, Mustang realized. Phenomenal dedication to his craft had caused physical repercussions over the course of his prolonged life, far beyond the partial blindness.

Yet, that very dedication led him to dismiss his body's discomfort.

He'd wanted to resume sculpting, mustering his own inner strength. The visions of Rome confirmed no place for him there. Perhaps, after Kerr's entry for the University of Edinburgh competition was carved, polished and submitted, having no further work to do, the Maestro would be willing to let her...

What?

She faced a potentially insurmountable dilemma. She had drawn Francis from the site of his entombment, and restored him on the same exact spot. Mark Twain stepped from a bronze statue, and returned to the pedestal overlooking the Mississippi River without protest. Gandhi's ashes mixed with water to create the whole; removing the liquid reduced dust to dust once more.

Would she have to take Michelangelo to Florence to be rid of him? Having no way to know precisely how he appeared on the road where Kerr had encountered him...

She flopped on the love seat in her study, pounding her forehead with angry fists.

"Hell, hell, hell!"

IV

Barney Kerr and Michelangelo Buonarrotti found Lady Elizabeth Neville in the stable the next morning, perched on a ladder near the tack room. Her left arm was extended above her head, swatting an unseen object from the rafters, while her right provided a counterbalance.

The two artists had been discussing ideas for Kerr's sculpture. Michelangelo seized a sketch pad from the Scottish teen's hand and began drawing frantically.

Before Mustang detected their presence, the Florentine's inspiration had been flawlessly drafted.

A sparrow flapped past his curly white head as Kerr glimpsed the concept over the elder's shoulder.

"Oh, my God!" he gasped.

And Mustang nearly fell off the ladder.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!" she chided, trembling as she reached ground level.

"Perfect, no?" asserted Michelangelo. "You could call it *The Spirit of Education*, constantly thirsting for higher knowledge."

Kerr remarked, "Tis ideal, but the granite block is nae large enough..."

"Then, we shall obtain something more suitable."

Why both raised their eyes to Mustang, she didn't want to know. Wiping cobwebs from her fingers, she grinned. "Silly birds. They fly in here at night, then don't know how to get out."

"The statue will be exhibited on the university grounds?" inquired Michelangelo, his gaze not shifting.

Kerr replied, "Aye."

"Then, do your carving outdoors, to get a true feel for the light."

"I dinnae think me parents would like stone chips scattered around the yard."

"Since you have your model now, you could do it here."

"Model, what model?" demanded Mustang, pouring water into a trough near the horses' stalls.

"You, Signorina," oozed the Maestro.

The bucket clattered on the floor. "Oh, no! I'm here because I'm in *hiding*, for Pete's sake. No way will I let you make me a public spectacle..."

"Tis hopeless, Lady Elizabeth," Kerr grumbled. "I know for a fact I couldna get a block o' granite that size, so forget it."

His disappointment tore Mustang's heart. She'd always had a soft spot for those who were prevented from achieving their dreams or nurturing their talents by limited finances or other extraordinary circumstances. She sighed. "How big a chunk will it take?"

"Six feet tall by three feet thick," supplied Michelangelo.

"Granite?"

"Marble, if you can get it."

"I can't *get* it, but I'm on... genial terms with those who make it."

They pursued her to a remote clearing on the estate's eastern boundary. Kerr already cognizant of her unusual activities, she didn't care if he witnessed the feat. Michelangelo - well, no one would believe him if he told the story.

From the earth itself, a pillar of the finest Carrara marble ascended, the exact dimensions specified by the Florentine, as if just delivered from the quarry.

Kerr's jaw gaped, and he bolted like a gazelle toward the house, retrieving his tools from the van.

Michelangelo restrained this youthful enthusiasm with a firm grip. "It's not your enemy," he instructed. "Do not attack it. Caress it lovingly, like the one with whom you will spend the rest of your life."

The pair circled the stone, blistering mid-day sun accenting colored highlights and slight imperfections. When Michelangelo paused, Kerr almost knocked him to the ground.

"Do you not see it?" probed the older man. "The line of the figure?"

Kerr evaluated the angles, and Michelangelo's sketch. Without Mustang having to provide any enhancement by nature, his own artist's eye detected what his mentor had easily seen.

"Aye, 'tis there, t' be sure."

"Then, you may begin."

Unlike winter ice carving competitions Mustang had witnessed in Helena as a child, sculpting stone was not as simple as hacking away fragments with a chain saw or sledge hammer. She and her 16th century guest settled on an exposed tree root, watching Kerr make slow headway into the heart of the marble.

Infrequently, he'd require Mustang to pose, as he'd seen her in the stable. She felt ridiculous doing so, but didn't complain.

Kerr labored until the last rays of dusk vanished, sleeping on the living room sofa, then rising with the dawn to continue his steady chipping. A purple bandanna and pair of goggles protected his goatee, mouth and eyes from the dust. Michelangelo inspected the plastic lenses with interest.

"If we'd had such things in my day, I might yet have my sight!" he commented.

Mustang kept a supply of fruits, juices and lemonade available for the men, while also tending the horses and cleaning their stalls. By the fifth day, a human shape was well in evidence among the trees, and Michelangelo suggested a siesta.

"Do not let yourself get so close to the stone, you lose your passion," he advised. "The reason I spent years on my best carving was because I needed to refresh myself after intense exertion. When you see only the marble, day after day, you see little else, which can diminish the final result.

"You are recreating a human being, so examine her movements, behold her facial contortions and how the breeze fans her hair in all directions. To make the

marble come to life for those who will see it, you cannot detach yourself from reality.”

“Would bronze ha’ been easier, maybe?” hinted Kerr in his resonant burr.

“There, you are mistaken. In the early days of his papacy, Pope Julius commissioned me to cast him in bronze, so the people of Bologna would have a constant reminder of his triumph over them. I despised it. And, years later, the statue was melted into a cannon. No, marble is best, my friend, if you wish your work to endure. Few would think to demolish Lorenzo’s tomb and build a house with the rubble.”

After a shower and light meal, the trio strolled along Loch Ness’ eastern shore. Mustang felt the two men stalking her as they lagged slightly behind, watching every twitch of her nose.

“Quit already, can’t ya?” she squealed while they climbed a rise. “I feel like a bug under a microscope.”

“Apologies, Signorina, but that is what artists do,” attested Michelangelo, his flushed visage bathed in sunset hues. “In their own way, they are very much like doctors or proponents of science, learning ever more about their chosen subject.”

“Well, why does it have to be *me*? Can’t you make it some generic woman, like those historic paintings or statues which look pretty much identical?”

“Ye dinnae mean that, Lady Elizabeth!” Kerr countered. “Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* transcends any other canvas o’ that era, just as the Maestro’s statues have singular faces.”

“Except those where I used the same model more than once,” stipulated Michelangelo.

Mustang sank on the slope. “I’d much rather you chose someone else, and not put my safety at risk.”

“Surely, you are not a criminal?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

“I ha’ heard rumors in Dores,” Kerr noted, “that ye sold military blueprints t’ the KGB before the Soviet Union fell.”

“Do I look *that* old?”

The teen winced.

Michelangelo held her attention with engaging blue orbs. “No, you are an innocent, like so many, harassed by religious or secular authorities, through their own misguided devotion to duty. The Inquisition brought hell to earth for thousands in my day, and petty tyrants appointed to run the cities taxed citizens to line their own pockets. Oh, I’ve seen it often.”

“Are ye sayin’, we shouldna base the statue on her?” Kerr sputtered.

“Estimating your skill, the resemblance may be minimal.” Thick, calloused hands sandwiched Mustang’s fingers between them. “Fret not, Signorina. All will be well.”

They trudged to Boleskine House, retiring early. The succeeding days would see a flurry of activity, with Kerr refining vague limbs, and Mustang scrubbing floors, counters and pots after Michelangelo’s persistent experiments in the kitchen.

Whether or not he hiked to the clearing once she chased him from the dwelling, or assisted Kerr with the statue, she didn’t care. Unfamiliar with stone carving, she surmised the teen would’ve needed four or more hands to finish in that fortnight, when he sent word his masterpiece was ready to be unveiled.

A week remained for him to polish the image, at which Mustang cringed. The likeness to her slender mien was uncanny and - similar to the *Moses* - sunlight washed the cheeks, giving an impression the subject enjoyed some beatific vision. Her salvation might be in the classical styling, torso and legs draped in a Romanesque robe, bare feet protruding from the folds. Her tendency to wear t-shirts and jeans, or sweat suits, would prevent anyone from making an instant connection between her and the radiant *Spirit of Education*.

Michelangelo himself lauded Kerr’s aptitude. “I came from a family of bankers and government officials, the first to express an interest in art. From experience, I know such talent is not hereditary, but born of the desire to show others the beauty they might not otherwise see.”

The trio celebrated with a hearty meal of roast beef, salad, corn on the cob, and chocolate cake that evening. Two bottles of wine were opened - Michelangelo imbibing one on his own. They discussed their next obstacle until Kerr passed out: transporting the statue to the Scottish capital city.

“Tis too big for me van,” he mumbled.

Mustang mused, “I thought competitions required only photos of the finished product.”

“Not the university. They want t’ get up close and personal wi’ every submission, checking for flaws, smoothness, detail...”

“Hire professional movers,” counseled Michelangelo.

“When I drive into Dores tomorrow to collect me dad’s electric buffer, I’ll ring up t’ Inverness and see who’s available...”

Kerr’s chin sagged; he slept.

“Young people cannot hold their wine,” the Florentine chuckled wryly.

“That’s because young people aren’t supposed to drink until they’re 21.”

“You abstain because you’ve not yet reached that age?”

“No. I turned 21 this year. I don’t drink wine because I don’t enjoy the taste.”

“If people drank fermented grapes for the taste, very few would drink. They drink to escape from the hardship of their daily lives.”

“You, included?” Mustang probed.

“No. This is a celebration...”

She caught the inflection in his Tuscan accent. He’d taught Barney Kerr what he could; the afterlife beckoned. His glass empty, he rose from the dining room table.

Mustang accompanied him to the main hall. “If this episode proved a disappointment, I’m truly sorry, Maestro.”

“Not at all, Signorina. To know my skill is still revered by other artists, if not the public, is rather humbling. I do wish, though, we’d really had a chance to go to Rome.”

The conspiratorial twinkle in his eyes brought a smile to her lips. “You knew?”

“Your memory is flawed, as is so common. I remember the streets of the city, because I walked them morning and night. St. Peter in Chains is not so close to St. John Lateran, nor is Castel Sant’Angelo opposite the Tiber from the Jewish ghetto.”

“I... apologize for the deception.”

“Your intention was commendable. You showed me what I needed to see.” He bent over her right hand and kissed it gallantly. “Farewell, Signorina.”

As he disappeared along the winding gravel drive, Mustang assumed he knew his destination - or nature did. Nonetheless, she lay awake through the night, waiting for his insistent knock.

On the dawn run to Dores, Mustang sleepily asked the slightly hung-over Kerr to fetch a newspaper. He complied, and she finally relaxed after perusing the pages and finding no report of an unidentified elderly man being hit by a car on B852, or otherwise causing a commotion.

She watched Kerr over the course of days, polishing the statue’s robes with a motorized buffer, but the face by hand. When a panel truck arrived on Friday and four burly experts crated the massive object, she felt a heaviness clog her heart.

What if Kerr won the competition? What if someone recognized her from the pursuant media coverage and came searching for her? As much as she’d tried to keep her power secret, and though some had died as a result of its misuse, too

many lived who could accidentally compromise the peace and quiet she craved. Kanti Gandhi Dinn might see a photograph of the sculpture and, repeating a previous - albeit inadvertent - mention to a journalist, point those like Lyndon Bixby White to her sanctuary...

Ben Espinoza, FBI academy instructor, might deem the display a blatant violation of her promise to maintain a low profile. Thomas Burton, actor on the Irish stage, might recall a late night in Boise, Idaho, when he drunkenly kissed her...

And, if her parents chanced upon an article posted on the internet...

She couldn't find it within herself to either sabotage the piece or alter its features.

She couldn't hurt Barney Kerr that way. His talent warranted whatever encouragement she could give.

There was always the possibility he wouldn't win, if other artists entering the competition showed superior prowess.

But she wouldn't attempt to influence the judges, either.

As Kerr's van followed the truck onto the main road, Mustang locked Boleskine's doors and crawled into bed.

Horses, gardening, laundry and dishes occupied ensuing weeks, and she entertained no aspiration to resume the hectic pace of cleaning after guests or monitoring their whereabouts. Leaves on the trees had begun changing from green to gold and red with the approach of autumn; she procrastinated anew about scrapping the Gate Lodge furniture and sealing the walls so small animals wouldn't use it as their winter home.

She'd saddled Sarge, the sorrel gelding, and was leading him from the stable when a vintage silver Mercedes cruised toward the house. Reins tied to the corral fence, she crossed to the unfamiliar vehicle.

Barney Kerr scrambled from behind the wheel, magazines and newspapers bundled in his arms. Mustang anticipated his announcement, preempting it with, "What's the deal?"

"Tis me mum's. The van finally died half way t' Edinburgh for the award ceremony."

She invited him inside, and he showered the living room coffee table with periodicals, among them the Inverness and Edinburgh Sunday editions. The cover of one artist's monthly boasted a caption for the statue, "A New Renaissance?"

Mustang felt her life crumbling. She blamed herself for another stupid mistake - involving herself in someone else's problem...

Kerr must've sensed her anguish, slipping an arm around her shoulders. "T' keep *your* talent under wraps, ye are listed as me anonymous patron. I told the reporters I'd thoroughly studied Michelangelo's works, so they assumed I'd used those as models."

"Even though you didn't make my arms look like I lift weights?" she snickered.

"Aye. Fortunately, they didn't question how I could afford Carrara marble." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "At any rate, thanks t' ye, I'll be spending a few terms improving me skills. I ha' received offers from around the world, too. I'll never be what is called a starving artist, I guess."

"Good for you."

He took his leave with a cheery wave, an excited youth embarking on the lifetime adventure.

Mustang envied him, despite knowing she belonged in seclusion, for her own well-being and the good of the world.

Plodding to the corral, she slipped her sneaker into the stirrup and hoisted herself onto Sarge's back, steering him toward the trees at a canter.