

The Mustang Chronicles:

Subconscious Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Perhaps the sensation Mustang Duryea despised above all others: having someone watching her from the shadows.

She'd risen early, as always, to tend her horses in the barn erected near Boleskine House on the eastern shore of Loch Ness. The sun shone brightly, the air thick with an almost oppressive humidity. Skipping her own breakfast, she trudged across the gravel in a green tank top, dusty jeans and sneakers, aware the company of those magnificent animals would lift her spirits.

As she filled buckets with oats, she felt the eyes upon her. No defenses on the acreage deterred trespassers during the day - only at night were the invisible traps in place by her orders to the natural forces. So, if a stray tourist wandered through the unfenced grounds, she did not stop them from satisfying their curiosity.

"This isn't a public venue," she spoke, not turning.

"I'm looking for... Jock White," boomed a basso profundo which rattled the rafters overhead.

Mustang wasn't expecting to hear the pseudonym used by her grandfather, Jack Parsons, when he'd spent decades of exile on the estate. "He no longer lives here."

"Do you have a forwarding address?"

"He's... dead."

"Damn!"

She heard the boots retreat and, on impulse, pursued the sound. "How did you know him?"

The massive figure, built like a brick - squarish and solid - halted. Attired in black: collared shirt, trousers and boots, when he shifted toward her, she saw his squarish countenance framed by loose black curls, a thin, dark mustache and goatee circling sensuous lips. Mysterious eyes seemed to bore into her soul, yet his face remained at a curious three-quarter angle.

"Twenty years ago today, we met here. He made me promise to return on this date..."

The concept made Mustang wonder if Parsons had expected to still be alive, or if he'd known the visitor would find her occupying his former lodgings.

"I'm sorry. You must be disappointed," she said.

"I knew he was already old, though he didn't appear so," countered the man. "I should have expected..."

"Did you meet by chance?"

“I was writing a college paper on solid fuel rocket boosters, and learning he was still alive...” He bit his tongue and grimaced.

Mustang retreated toward the barn. “Give me five minutes. I’ll fix you something to eat.”

He observed from the drive how she lovingly tended the horses, then preceded him through a steel security door into the vast Georgian mansion. They settled on chairs at the dinette table as coffee percolated.

“Tell me all you know,” Mustang prodded.

“He swore me to secrecy.”

“He’s dead.” She rose to fetch the steaming pot and filled two ceramic mugs. “Would it make a difference if I told you he was my grandfather?”

“The Moonchild?”

“In these parts, I’m known as Lady Elizabeth Neville. My real name is Elizabeth Candida Duryea. My friends call me Mustang.”

His smile showed no teeth. “Incredible!”

“Why?”

“You must not have been born when last I saw him. He spoke of your coming...”

She repeated, “Tell me all you know.”

“Don’t you want to know my name?”

“At this point, it’s inconsequential. You’ll be gone after breakfast, and we’ll never see each other again.”

“Very well, Elizabeth.”

She bristled at the use of her given name, something else she despised.

“I’d been studying the origins of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, as part of a space science course at MIT. Delving into what little information was available on Jack Parsons, I found... inconsistencies in the story about the explosion which reputedly killed him. Contacts with some friends of my dad brought to light declassified FBI papers which indicated Parsons hadn’t died after all, but his status as a leader of the occult community around Pasadena warranted... certain penalties. Suffice it to say, I found him living here under the name Jock White.”

“He told you what happened?”

“Much of it.”

“Why did he make you promise to come back on this date?” she pressed.

“I don’t know. He hinted the fruits of my research would be complete if I did.”

Mustang sipped her coffee. “What have you been doing in the meantime?”

“I was ordained to the Catholic priesthood, selected to become bishop of a mission diocese in Wyoming, then defrocked.”

She went from dejection to confusion in less than ten seconds.

“Defrocked?”

“In this age of transparency on the internet, the paper I ultimately wrote on Parsons and his beliefs was discovered by some disgruntled members of a parish where I’d served. When I was questioned about some of the statements I’d written, I did not lie.”

“They branded you a heretic?”

He shrugged.

“Too bad.”

She rose, collecting the mugs and placing them in the sink.

“How did Jack die?”

The question came from directly behind her, as his head hovered above hers.

“An Enochian ritual,” was her reply.

A pause. “Involving a knife?”

She nodded, auburn tresses obscuring her face.

“I sensed the power in you, just as I did in him.”

Through grit teeth, she hissed, “Are you clairvoyant, too?”

“Part of my theological classes involved preparing to become an exorcist.”

A mug dropped, shattering on the stainless steel. “Oh, hell.”

“I came to understand, in the majority of cases, it’s not some hellish demon possessing the soul which causes extraordinary phenomena, but an inexplicable connection to the forces of nature which manifests in... unusual ways.”

“Such as freak bursts of wind, spontaneous fires, and so forth?” Mustang snarled.

“Yes. Jack showed me as much.”

She spun, her nose pressed against his chest. “Why? He trusted no one, after what American government officials did to him. Why would he trust you with the intimate details of his exile?”

She sensed rather than saw pieces of the broken mug vibrate and reassemble into wholeness.

Exhaling deeply, Mustang queried, “Who are you?”

“Now, or before?”

“Don’t play games with me.”

“I know far better than to do that.” He stepped back and bowed slightly. “Up until I left the priesthood, I was known as Edward Rankin. I currently use the name Orson Foster.”

The Mistress of Boleskine chuckled. “Meaning someone paid to have your identity changed.”

“The Church.”

She moved past him, leading him into the living room, settling in the cane-backed rocking chair near the chess table. “They would, to save themselves embarrassment.” She restored pieces from her last game against Erwin Rommel to their opening positions. “If you checkmate me, you have my hospitality for one night. Otherwise, you leave and never return.”

“You must have as many questions of me as I have for you,” Rankin objected.

She moved a pawn. “Not really. You and Jack bonded in some way. He imparted a small bit of his power to you.”

“The power was mine before I met him. He... only helped me grasp the depths of its potential.”

“Fine. You’re a rare savant connected to nature. Why should I care?”

Rankin moved his knight. “There’s no reason, I admit. But, haven’t you ever wanted to be rid of it?”

“Rid of what?”

“Your power.”

“What power?” She nervously fingered a bishop, then reconsidered.

“You mentioned the Enochian ritual involving a knife. Jack Parsons is dead, and you’re here, meaning his power is now yours.”

“You’re vastly simplifying what was a terribly complex situation.”

“You’re saying you’ve been through hell.”

“Exactly.”

“So have I.”

“And you hoped, by coming back here, you could be relieved of the torture?”

“Jack promised, if I returned, all would be resolved.”

Mustang finally moved another pawn. “Well, he lied.”

Six minutes later, and without another word, she had Rankin checkmated.

He resignedly straightened to that full, impressive height. “I appreciate your tolerance, Elizabeth.”

She followed him to the door. “There’s nothing I can do to help you. Honestly, I’m sorry.”

“Honestly, you’re tired of dealing with people who only want to use you,” he mocked.

“That, too.”

“So am I.”

“Then, we both have our own personal hells.”

“Indeed.” With a flourish, as if he’d been wearing a magician’s cape, he strode across the threshold and along the gravel drive.

Mustang presumed he’d come in a car, but he continued walking, undaunted.

“I won’t call him back. I won’t. I won’t,” she muttered to herself.

No, she didn’t call him back; nature did. Clouds rolled in abruptly and rain poured in sheets onto the earth.

“You’re soaked,” she commented when he re-entered the structure.

Dripping on the foyer tile, Rankin favored her with that three-quarter angle glance. She fetched some bath towels, allowing him to dry his hair and face.

“I have some sweats, but I don’t know if they’d fit you,” she confessed.

“We could throw your clothes in the dryer...”

“Have you a robe?” he inquired in that disturbingly somber voice.

It wrapped about double around her slender waist; it might just encompass his torso, she guessed, pulling it off a hook in her closet.

That, it did, leaving his calves exposed due to his height.

“Come, you can warm yourself by the fire until the rain stops,” she offered.

No fire burned on the living room grate; she reached for a stack of kindling.

The logs erupted in flames, however, without her assistance.

She whirled on Rankin. “Look, my biggest challenge is to *not* use my power. I’d appreciate if you didn’t use yours while under my roof.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m here,” he rumbled. “To teach you about your power, while groping with my own.”

“I doubt it.”

Rankin dropped onto the cushions of an armchair near the fireplace, while Mustang occupied herself in other parts of the house. Something about the man made her uncomfortable. More uncomfortable than any of the other visitors who’d invaded her privacy over the months. More uncomfortable than the periodic, unexpected manifestations of Mahatma Gandhi, St. Francis of Assisi, Mark Twain or Erwin Rommel.

The rain ceased before noon. Mustang left her uninvited guest to himself, while she meandered to the barn to clean the horses’ stalls. Here, she felt peace, at

any rate. Once the ground dried a bit, she would saddle Pietra for a ride around the property.

“I would like to go with you,” Rankin stated from the doorway, again attired in black.

Gruffly, she pitched a load of straw. “I didn’t ask you. Are you going to tell me you can read my mind, too?”

“How else do you think I knew to come back when the rain began? Your spirit called to me, and nature responded by creating a dynamic where you couldn’t refuse me shelter.”

“Bullshit.”

“The sky was clear when I arrived this morning. The weather forecasters in Inverness called for pleasant conditions all day.”

“When have weather forecasters ever been right?” she snorted.

“You did it, without saying a word, without conscious intent. You started the fire the same way.”

“Bullshit! I can... do things without speaking sometimes, but I’ve always had to think it...”

“That’s because you haven’t the faintest notion of your true potential,” Rankin oozed. “You could wreak havoc...”

“I’ve done that.”

“Or raise the dead...”

“That, too.”

Rankin’s deep brown eyes widened. “You have?”

“Resurrected, and killed.”

He recoiled, instantly recovering his composure.

In that instant, Mustang knew he had plans for her, of nefarious intent.

“Get out,” she ordered.

“This is an indescribable opportunity for both of us...”

“Out!”

Feigning submission, Rankin made a grand exit.

Mustang watched, pitchfork in hand. She sensed the need to double her defenses around Boleskine House for the foreseeable future.

II

Mustang mulled over her next move, sitting opposite Mark Twain at the chess board.

“Sam, he frightened me,” she sniffed. “He tried to convince me that any basic intention passing through my mind could become reality, like starting a fire or mending a broken cup.”

“You say he was formerly a priest?” inquired the author.

“Priest and bishop, who studied space science and dabbled in the occult before being ordained, I guess.” Her queen took the black rook. “He claims also to have been trained as an exorcist.”

“Do you think he’ll return?”

“I have a sneaking suspicion he’s on the grounds this minute, waltzing through my defenses as if he were strolling in Central Park.”

“You’ve encountered Enochian practitioners in the past...”

“This guy is different.” Mustang leaned back on the chair. “He’s hoping to resolve some personal issue, while teaching me a much-needed lesson.”

Twain’s bushy white mustache twitched. “Are you open to such a possibility?”

“I’m still trying to learn self-control of my conscious impulses,” she chuckled. “Adding some subconscious dynamic to the mix... I just don’t know.”

The manifested soul stretched his arms. “Perhaps if you sleep on the idea...”

She sniffed. “I know. It’s late.”

Sleep would not come for the woman, though. She tossed and turned on the mattress; the chance her subconscious might do more damage than her off-hand remarks had caused over the years petrified her.

She heard crunching gravel a good distance from the dwelling. Pulling on jeans and a t-shirt, she crept out the kitchen door into the moonless gloom. With luck, it would be only a deer or even a bear.

Those, she could easily handle.

The shadow filled a space between two tree trunks: more than six feet in height and wide. A bizarre light emanated from its right side, as if a flame burned yet consumed no fuel.

“Rankin?” she called.

“Here.” The basso profound reminded Mustang of rolling thunder.

“Y’know, this is getting quite tiresome. I really want to be left alone...”

“Do you know why?”

“Sure. I’m a disaster waiting to happen, and any human being who gets close to me either suffers or dies.”

The flame arced, and she could distinguish its sword-like length, without a hilt. She shuffled backward. “Is that... your arm?”

“Yes. Conjured by your subconscious and meant to end your inner agony. You’d like me to thrust it through your heart, so your pain would cease.”

“Bullshit!”

“You want me to prove it?”

“You can’t!”

Rankin’s left hand reached out and grasped her shoulder.

Mustang felt abruptly nauseous and disoriented.

“Open your eyes,” Rankin instructed.

She felt his hand cupping her chin to hold her steady. “I’ll fall.”

“No, you won’t.”

Lids fluttering tentatively, she absorbed the baffling surroundings. Not Boleskine, to be sure. Old, huge stones, piled atop each other... a castle.

“What have you done to me?” she moaned.

“You have done this, yourself. You have built a castle within your subconscious to confine the fear you have of who you are meant to be.”

“Bullshit!”

She yanked away, bumping into the cold, slimy stone.

“It’s real, isn’t it?” chided Rankin.

“Look, I warned you once about playing games with me. I can transport myself to any point on the globe by summoning a lightning bolt. You... you...”

His tone softened as he bent to raise her face, meeting her hazel orbs.

“Mustang, Mustang! Don’t fight against yourself so hard! I’m here to help you grow and learn...”

“It’s been a fight since I figured out what Jack Parsons did to me!” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Parsons was much older when he... invoked the powers and made them his own. You... didn’t have a choice, did you?”

“He blindfolded me, and didn’t tell me what I would be doing, only when. He laid himself on the altar without me knowing, and I thrust the knife through his heart!”

Overcome by emotion, Mustang sank against Rankin’s unyielding chest, sobbing. He encompassed her with his arms, making no attempt to otherwise soothe her anguish.

A quarter hour passed - if time could be considered to pass in whatever dimension the pair existed - before Mustang mustered two deep breaths and spoke. “I’m sorry. I’ve ruined your shirt.”

“Inconsequential, at best,” Rankin acknowledged. “More important that you don’t ruin your life.”

“A hopeless quest!”

Once more, he lifted her face to make eye contact. “It is a process - not easy, but utterly transformative.”

“I’ve tried. Oh, how I’ve tried! My strength has long since gone. That’s why I became a hermit... albeit with interruptions.”

“Your attempts have been made alone, and without the required guidance.”

“I... have Jack Parsons’ journals.”

“Filled with complicated nonsense. You... were a pure soul, with no background in the occult, which has caused confusion and fear. This must be remedied.”

“How?”

Rankin escorted the young woman to a stone ledge at the wall’s base. They sat side by side, the sole illumination a shaft of ethereal light through a slit high in the tower above them.

“In some regard, the next few hours will be similar to confessing your sins,” the former priest began.

“I’ve never...”

“Shh.” His finger to her lips sent a shock wave through her bones.

“Nothing you have done since inheriting Parsons’ power, though, has been intentionally sinful. You have acted from ignorance, naivete and fear. Rooting out that fear will bring with it the knowledge and insight to prevent future... mistakes.”

Mustang murmured, “If only!”

“Concentrate, now. With each admission, one of these stones will vanish until, finally freed of your subconscious impediments, the universe will be open to you.”

“How do we start?”

“By untangling the web of fear in which you have ensnared yourself, strand by strand.”

“My biggest fear is of people who would use my power to further their own ambitions,” she declared.

“For instance?”

“Ben Espinoza, an FBI agent. Capturing me would be a feather in his cap, meaning promotion, respect...”

None of the stones budged.

“Have you been tempted to partner with him in his endeavors?” Rankin speculated.

“The only temptation I have in his regard is to throw him back into Loch Ness, like I did the first time we met.”

A weighty, rectangular block shattered at her feet and vanished.

Mustang glared at Rankin. “What does that mean?”

“In your heart, such an action against this man is justified, because of his less than honorable behavior.”

“Then, this guilt I’ve felt about running into him again...”

“False guilt.” Rankin favored her with a kindly glance, partially distorted by the dimness. “You... are a shining light in the world, Mustang. You have a capacity to mete out justice on those who are... scoundrels. Being fearful of the sentence you would execute on such individuals only complicates what should be a clear course of action.”

“I... can’t believe that.”

“You must believe, or you’ll never free yourself of this burden.”

She sighed wearily.

“Who else do you fear?” he urged.

“The souls of those I’ve killed.”

“They bear you no ill will. If anything, they were ready for death or, at least, discovered they were better off beyond the mortal realms.”

Another stone shattered.

“What else?”

“I fear being loved.”

“Love as in friendship, or physical love, or...”

“Any and all forms.”

“This must be explored in depth,” Rankin said. “You have to learn to experience love, the deep, shattering passions that will unloose the hidden wellsprings of your being. It must be the foundation of how you use your power.”

“It is, mostly,” Mustang pledged. “Except when I’m angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“You’ve been in love, as they say?”

“In moments of weakness, yes.”

“Why do you consider the ability to love others a weakness?”

“Others, in general, no. Loving a man... when it means his death...”

Rankin responded, “Ah! This concept of destroying everything you touch must be banished from your psyche.”

“The first time I kissed a man, after Parsons’ death, it caused an earthquake!” she shrieked, leaping to her feet.

“Merely a tangible manifestation of your emotional reaction.”

“But, why must that manifestation always be destructive? Why can’t... flowers spontaneously burst from the ground, or birds take wing, singing?”

“They can, if you will it.”

“How...”

Rankin rising reminded Mustang of a giant unbending to his full, massive height. “Without fear, love is a beautiful thing, not a threat to anyone’s health and well being.” Placing his hands gently on her shoulders, he lowered his head.

No passion behind the kiss, the woman remained unfazed. Rankin withdrew, studying her countenance.

“Well?”

“If I kissed a frog, nothing would happen, either,” she joked.

“What if I told you I traveled 6,000 miles to bask in the light of the Moonchild?”

“Many have already. That’s nothing new.”

He pulled her close, and she could feel his heat through her t-shirt. The fact he’d once been vowed to celibacy cast a pall over the encounter for her, nonetheless.

“You cannot give yourself freely?” he puzzled.

“Maybe because I was taught that... men of your ilk weren’t supposed to... give in to fleshly desires.”

Dark orbs penetrated her skull and, suddenly, the image of Jim Neville stood before her.

Mustang blinked once, twice, then stroked his smooth, unsullied cheek. He embraced her and they kissed...

The floor shifted, jolted, bucked.

She escaped his arms, terrified. Instead of her first love, Rankin had returned to himself.

“I see what you mean,” he panted, oddly satisfied.

“Deceiver!” she barked.

“If you can kiss one man, you can kiss any man with the same results. What we must do is change your motivation from one of fear and guilt to that of happiness and peace.”

“If you expect me to...”

“Practice makes perfect, my dear. You can’t deny my touch arouses you, no matter whose face I wear.”

A swift hand raked his whiskers, leaving a red mark on his skin.

Rankin grabbed Mustang, planted his mouth on hers. She resisted, calling upon nature to open a chasm to swallow him.

“That won’t work here!” he howled triumphantly, between breaths.

A knee to his groin achieved the desired results, causing the man to reel backward into the moist bulkhead.

Stunned, he glared at her for a prolonged moment, before breaking into an ear-shattering laugh.

“We’ll... come back to that point later,” he decided.

When his respiration resumed a normal rate, he signaled her to sit beside him. “Tell me what your ideal day would be like.”

“As I’ve always wanted it to be: no people, just horses.”

“Why?”

“Horses are honest, caring creatures, who just want honest care in return.”

“And people aren’t?”

“You should know that, especially since your own people ratted you out for your unconventional beliefs,” Mustang scowled.

“True.” He deliberated. “So, you fear interaction with humanity as a whole?”

“Pretty much.”

A fourth stone crumbled.

“I’m tired,” Mustang grumbled.

Rankin patted his thigh. “Use this as a pillow, and we can keep talking until you go to sleep.”

“And you’ll sit through the night against a hard, grimy wall?” she queried suspiciously.

“I’m accustomed to keeping vigil with the sick and dying.”

“I’m neither sick nor dying.”

“Not dying, but sick, of a fashion.”

Reclining on the ledge, Mustang whipped aside her auburn locks and rested her head on Rankin’s leg. She could feel the sinewy muscles tensing beneath her, but ignored the sensation.

He gazed down at her, his questions softer. “You travel from place to place on lightning bolts?”

She raised her palms into the light, so he could see the scars.

“You don’t fear that... mode of transportation?”

“Except for these, it doesn’t hurt. Mostly, it’s used for emergencies.”

“Before?”

“It... happened when I voiced the wrong wish.”

“For instance?”

“A trip to Italy, one to Japan...”

“With disastrous consequences, I gather?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How do you handle those disasters?”

She guffawed. “I spend a lot of time and energy cleaning up the mess and trying to restore order, if not actually erasing the memories of those who witness the fracas.”

“It doesn’t bother you to... manipulate the minds of others?”

“Should it? It’s self-preservation in the most basic sense. If I don’t make them forget what happened, they could end up dead, like the others.”

“What about me?” Rankin challenged.

“What about you?”

“Is it your plan to make me forget meeting you when this is all over?”

Mustang lifted herself onto one elbow. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“If we ever get out of here.”

III

“Don’t you see? You can’t let fear dictate your life,” Edward Rankin railed against a backdrop of imposing castle walls.

Mustang sighed. “What else is there?”

“The field narrows considerably if you exclude people, but there’s still knowledge, beauty...”

“I’ll stick with horses.”

“Then, we’ll be trapped here for perpetuity.”

She sat upright. “Okay, okay. What would you have me do?”

“Who was your best friend growing up?”

“Heartbeat.”

Rankin squinted.

“My pinto,” she clarified.

“Who do you play chess with? Have you no human friends?”

“Mark Twain.”

“Reading his books doesn’t make him a real friend.”

“No. I mean Samuel Clemens, the man. Mohandas Gandhi. Francis of Assisi. Erwin Rommel.”

“The German general?” Rankin gasped.

“Yes.”

“How could you make their acquaintance?”

“I manifested their souls from the afterlife.”

Mustang saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard.

“So, while you have companionship in your solitude, you can still maintain your personal defenses, nurture your fears, because the dead can’t touch the living and you can’t hurt them.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Rankin shifted on the ledge. “Did you go to school?”

“As little as possible.”

“Why?”

“When I was younger, I felt confined in a classroom. Nature taught me more about life than any discontented old maid.”

“And, later?”

“Causing wholesale destruction was not conducive to an academic environment,” she growled.

“You let your fear hold sway?”

“Anger, really. The students, with their posturing for popularity, or obsession about this or that celebrity... It ate at me until I blew my cork.”

“How so?”

“You lived in Wyoming, right?”

“Until my...”

“Did you ever hear news reports about unexplained weather anomalies in southern Montana? Microbursts of wind, storms, spontaneous wildfires?”

“Come to think of it, I did, about six or seven years ago.”

The woman thumped her chest. “That was me.”

“It doesn’t have to be so,” Rankin asserted. “If you can learn to love, you can learn to be indifferent to such antics.”

“We’re back to love again?” she choked. “Can you fathom how much I wanted my mother to love me? She cared more about having a clean house and never called me by name! Neither did my father, who wished I’d been born male, so I could be more useful on the ranch.” She hid her face behind her hands. “Hell, they didn’t even love each other, so how was I to learn what love means?”

A strong arm encircled her shoulders. “Have you never seen two people who do love each other, honestly and unconditionally?”

“In old movies, maybe.”

“Pleasant diversions, but rarely realistic.” Standing, his frame cast her in shadow. “Let’s try a little experiment. If I offered you my hand, what’s your first thought?”

“My first thought? What do you want?”

“Is that your reaction to every friendly gesture?”

“With what I’ve been through? Pretty much.”

“Suspicion and fear. A pathetic state of mind for one so young.”

“There’s nothing to be done about it.”

“Yes, there is.”

“What?”

Rankin squatted before her, cradling her hands in his. “At what point in life were you happiest?”

“Riding through the woods on Heartbeat.”

“You can’t remember any happy moments with another human being?”

Mustang’s forehead wrinkled at the memory. “Kissing Jim Neville.”

“This man you loved?”

“If I hadn’t gotten him killed, we would’ve married.”

“And because he was torn so brutally from your life, you’ve since decided marriage isn’t a good idea?”

“No. The decision was made to prevent hell raining down on those closest to me.” A sidewise grin played on her lips. “If a kiss causes an earthquake, could you imagine me giving birth to a child?”

He sank on his heels. “Yes, you could be right.”

“Then, concede my fears are justified, and let’s get out of here.”

“It’s not up to me. You must destroy these walls.”

“Pink Floyd,” Mustang snickered.

Rankin studied her, then smiled. “Sorry.”

Mustang caressed the stones lightly. “If I tell you I appreciate how you’ve tried to help me see how fear is dominating - and impeding - my life, will that make any difference? I simply see no other course...”

Two stones shattered behind her.

“It’s a step in the right direction,” Rankin affirmed. “A healthy fear is a positive attribute in every life. Otherwise, people would pick up rattlesnakes or rush head-long into traffic. Your isolated and dysfunctional upbringing, though, has twisted your perception of normal interaction. The one good man you knew is dead...” He paused before continuing. “If you manifested the likes of Rommel and Gandhi, why didn’t you bring Jim back?”

He felt her shudder, but didn’t see the tears. “We couldn’t have been together the way we were supposed to be...”

Rankin spun her toward him. “You’ve been hurt many, many times, and the scars run deeper than those on your palms. Part of being human is being open to that hurt, and finding balance to deal with it.”

“I’ve tried. How I’ve tried!” She managed a wry chuckle. “At first, I blamed my powers. I thought, if they were taken away, everything would be fine. Then, I discovered my attitude toward people would be no different, even without the power. The reaction would just be less... destructive.”

Six stones vanished in a mystical avalanche.

Her companion lifted the slender form onto the ledge, so their eyes were level. “If I tell you that you truly care too much about people, which is the root of your problem, would you believe me?”

“I don’t...”

“Mustang, you are a beacon of light in a world plagued by darkness. You have an innate understanding that people can and should love, care about and respect each other. You want to give love, care and respect, but it has not been reciprocated. This failure has caused you to erect defenses which cannot be breached. It’s not that you’ve stopped loving others - the mere fact you offered me breakfast, then sheltered me from the rain is proof! You’re willing to give, but you don’t want to deal with what people will, or won’t, give in return.”

“Makes sense.”

More stones tumbled from the walls, allowing bright sunlight to bath them in warmth.

“You’re not one to be indifferent to others. Your very essence would drive you to open your arms to the whole world, if it meant bringing peace. And, you could, you know.”

“I’ve often contemplated the prospect,” Mustang confessed.

“Yet, you didn’t act on it?”

“To force people to believe a certain way - my way - would be no different than making them slaves. Each individual must figure out his own way to peace, in his own good time. Just as I won’t willfully control the weather, I can’t control that.”

The remaining stones stood only three layers high. Beyond, fields blooming with multi-colored wildflowers extended to the horizon, dotted with shade trees and forest animals frolicking in the sun.

“Then, you do understand,” Rankin praised.

“Yes, but it still gripes me how stupid people can be.”

He leaned forward. “Me, too.”

Their lips met, and the ground shifted ominously. Birds abandoned their nests, ascending to the safety of the sky, as deer and rabbits fled over the hill.

Rankin did not release Mustang, oblivious to nature's physical outpouring of the young woman's emotions. His arms fairly crushed her to him, and she wanted to devour every inch of him.

More stones crumbled before they parted. Rankin's cheeks flushed beneath his whiskers, and dark orbs sparkled with moisture.

Mustang collapsed on the ledge, her legs gelatinous.

"A marvelous emotion, lust," he wheezed.

"Is there a real difference between love and lust?"

"Lust is... wanting something purely for the pleasure of it. Love... is all about giving the self without counting the cost."

"In other words, you're saying my desire to love and care for others has been selfish, because I want to be loved, as well," Mustang remarked.

The remnants of the castle disappeared, leaving the pair free to walk through the fields.

"We're still not back where we started," she prompted.

"You need to spend a bit of time appreciating your new outlook. It's similar to going on a retreat. A person can discover earth-shattering insights in the course of a week or weekend, but when he plunges back into his daily routine the following Monday, those insights are quickly overshadowed by the mundane."

"Meaning, I shouldn't return to Boleskine right away?"

"Not necessarily. If you allow me to stay with you for a few days, we can talk more about the breakthroughs and cement them in your subconscious so you don't fall again into old habits."

She extended her hand, giggling. "What's your first thought?"

"My first thought?" He wrapped his thick fingers around the tiny appendage, raising it to his lips. "You're an astonishing young woman."

They strolled through flowers and tall grass in silence for a time. Then, Mustang ventured, "What did you expect to find when you came to Boleskine after 20 years?"

"I expected to find Parsons, still alive. After what he told me, I thought he'd live forever."

"He might have, but he was tired of hiding, I think. My visit presented an opportunity to escape the prison Boleskine had become for him."

"And a chance to pass along what years of communing with the elements had taught him."

Mustang clicked her tongue. "I wish he'd explained it beforehand."

"He probably feared you'd refuse to participate in the ritual."

“That would’ve been better than leaving me to deal with the aftermath alone.”

“Maybe it was his intention to have me be your guide...”

“Six years after the deed?”

“Even the most adept prophet can be off in his timing. Take Nostradamus.”

“Take him? You can have him. I’ll make my own future, if you please.”

As they progressed, the trees became denser, until they found themselves on the gravel drive near Boleskine House. The sun was rising in the east, and Mustang heard Crystal whinny in the barn.

“I’m going to feed the horses, then get some sleep,” she announced, diverting in that direction. “You’re welcome to the guest room.”

“Will you ride with me later?” Rankin suggested.

“The horses will be glad for the exercise.”

They parted and, when Mustang reached her room, she heard Rankin snoring through the walls.

No dreams disturbed her slumber, and she woke - surprisingly refreshed - at noon to the smell of coffee. Pulling on a set of green sweats, she meandered into the kitchen, where Rankin stood over the stove, eggs and bacon popping in a cast iron skillet.

He wore the blue terry robe she had loaned him the previous day while his clothes had dried from the rain, his black hair tousled and his goatee needing a trim.

Lust, she mused. Indeed, why should she insulate herself against the company of such a powerhouse of passion?

She answered herself: it would probably bring the roof down on our heads.

“You cooked for me yesterday, so it’s my turn,” he greeted her.

Mustang shook herself from the reverie and sat at the table. Her guest poured the coffee as she loaded her plate with food.

“You can shower when you’re done eating, and I’ll wash your clothes,” she said.

“That’ll work.”

“Didn’t you bring any luggage with you?”

He answered between heaping bites. “It’s in Edinburgh, at the university.”

“So, you were in country already?”

“I timed my trip to coincide with the date Parsons dictated. I’m guest lecturer for a philosophy class this term.”

“So, you’ll be here...”

“Another two weeks. The term is almost over.” He favored her with that three-quarter glance. “What had you in mind?”

“Cementing things in my subconscious.”

He snatched her hand and kissed it, laughing.

Plates scraped clean, Rankin left Mustang to tackle the dirty dishes. She did more staring out the kitchen window than scrubbing, soap bubbles dissolving in the water before she completed the task.

“Hey!”

She heard the bellow through her unwitting meditation.

“I need a towel!”

Hurrying to the linen closet, she pulled two large towels from the shelf and held them toward the cracked bathroom door.

Instead of grabbing the towels, Rankin seized her forearm, pulling her into the steaming chamber.

His brick-like bulk dripped wet, and he didn't seem to care that he was soaking her clothes. They both ended up in the shower, renewing the passion they had experienced in that alternate dimension.

Oddly - from Mustang's perspective, at any rate - no quakes, storms or winds accompanied their togetherness. For once, she sensed no fear in her soul as she allowed this man to assault her flesh with digits that seemed to burn and tingle.

When the water from the showerhead began to run cold, their ardor only briefly diminished. Rankin dried her and she rubbed him with a second thick towel. He then carried her to her bed, where their wet hair was prevented from soaking the pillows by covering them with a third towel snatched, in passing, from the linen closet.

Their energies completely spent, they slept entangled in each other's arms. Rankin didn't even snore.

IV

That evening, Edward Rankin and Mustang Duryea watched the sunset on horseback from the hillock where Jack Parsons died.

Mustang wanted her visitor to see the burnt fragments of the picnic table/altar, and the still-charred ground where fire had spontaneously ignited.

“How would your power manifest?” she asked, as Molly grazed on some weeds.

“I'm... like a microscope, I guess. I focus the minds of others, allowing them to see more clearly.”

“So, it really wasn’t me lighting the fire in the grate, but you focusing my mind to do it.”

“To prove a point, yes,” Rankin boomed, a sound which echoed across the clearing.

“Is that what got you in trouble with the Church?”

“After a fashion.” He steered Sarge along the ridge. “Especially in the confessional, I could see when a penitent was lying to me - which defeated the sacrament’s purpose. When I called them on their omissions or elusiveness, some came clean. One woman, who had stolen her elderly mother’s jewels to buy a new car, resented my... forthrightness.”

“Were you a good priest?”

“I tried to lead the people to God.”

Mustang shifted in the saddle. “And, now?”

“As you came to see people as hopeless cases, for the most part, I came to see their prayers were a waste of words. There is no God.”

“Amen, brother.”

His face colored with pastel hues as the sun descended, Rankin scrutinized Mustang’s youthful features. “You claim Francis of Assisi as a friend.”

“If you had a chance to speak with him, you’d see he’s... not what his biographers made him out to be.”

A silence, eventually broken. “I remember, some years back, reports from CNN about hysterical sightings of Francis in Assisi. Saint Mary of the Angels Basilica was damaged by an earthquake...”

Mustang thumped her chest. “An accidental trip on a lightning bolt, and a few unthinking remarks.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “Oh, you marvelous beauty! With a word, you could destroy humanity...”

“I’ve been tempted. Nature is working on that, herself, with all the volcanoes, tornadoes and earthquakes that happen with increasing frequency, without my help.”

“You could feed the hungry, house the poor...”

“It all comes back to letting people be free to act like morons, or making them slaves,” Mustang drawled. “I could prompt the wealthy to donate their millions to charities, the administrators of those funds could pocket the profits, and the poor would never benefit. I won’t be responsible for the actions of six billion - seven billion - people.”

“Then, why have the power, if you won’t use it for good?”

“Don’t ask me! I never wanted this. My dream was to take over the horse ranch from my father and live with the finest animals on the planet. I’ve been advised to use my power to positive ends, but the idea is arbitrary. My idea of good could be devastating for someone else.”

“For instance?”

“Okay. Back in the day, a plane encountered engine trouble in a snow storm. I made sure it landed safely and no one was hurt. Then, I accidentally manifested Mahatma Gandhi - in front of witnesses.”

Rankin raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Say no more.”

“Even healing someone’s injuries, which normally might seem a kindly act, can trigger... complications.”

“You’ve not healed the wounds on your palms.” He bent to kiss the scars.

“I want a constant reminder of the prospect of disaster. Every time I water the horses, or repair the corral fence, the twinge of the damaged nerves keeps me on my toes, so I don’t...”

“Very wise, in a humble way.”

“Aren’t the wise naturally humble?”

He smirked, a strange expression in the dwindling light. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never met anyone truly humble, until now.”

“The Church is supposedly ripe...”

“The Church is a hypocritical assortment of perverts and malcontents.”

Mustang swung Molly toward the barn. “How ‘bout steak for dinner?”

“Real steak?”

“Cooked on a grill, like back home.”

Rankin’s full smile showed straight, white teeth. “Heaven!”

They groomed and fed the horses, promising to take a different pair out in the morning. At the house, Mustang pulled an old kettle grill from storage, along with a battered bag of charcoal and lighter fluid.

“You don’t need...” Rankin chuckled.

“Shut up.”

Preparing a marinade from spices in the cupboards, the former cleric rubbed it into the filet mignon before placing them on the slightly bent metal. Mustang retired to concoct a green salad and boil some sweet corn.

“Where do you get sweet corn around here?” Rankin wondered through the window screen.

“My grocer has a standing order, and delivers when it’s available.”

“An order in the name of Lady Elizabeth Neville?”

She nodded.

“What would happen if your secret came out?”

In that instant, Mustang detected the slight rise in Rankin’s left eyebrow, and a twitch of his lips.

“They don’t burn witches anymore,” she murmured. “Besides, they might suspect already.”

“Really?” He flipped the steak with steel tongs, and flames leapt as grease dripped onto the coals.

“Shortly after I... killed Parsons, I was locked in the Inverness jail. My confinement didn’t last long, to say the least. I also escaped from the psychiatric ward, and have caused a number of unusual incidents around Loch Ness...”

“Still, you stay?”

“I live quietly. Keep my hair black, so those who may have seen the red-haired girl don’t equate her to me.”

“Your hair’s red now.”

“I try not to use my power, unless absolutely essential.” For his benefit, her mane darkened.

“Where do you get the money to live, or do you just... conjure it?”

“Casinos on the Riviera.”

“Eh? Do they mail you a check?”

“The occasional... vacation.” She raised her soap-covered hands.

“So, independently wealthy, secluded... companionship of some of history’s greatest figures...”

“I should be happy, shouldn’t I?” she grunted.

They consumed every bite of the meat, salad and corn, enjoying chocolate pudding for dessert. Before Mustang left the table, Rankin engulfed both her hands inside his massive paws.

“Elizabeth, what are your plans for the future?”

She avoided eye contact. “I’ll probably live here ‘til I die, like my grandfather.”

“Content with food, shelter, your horses and a good game of chess?”

“Why not?” She extricated her fingers. “And, don’t tell me I’m wasting my powers. I’ve heard it before.”

“What about the possibility of a normal life?”

“Normal? What, take a job, pay bills, raise a family?”

He snorted, embarrassed. “It doesn’t sound like much, after what you’ve created for yourself here.”

“Edward, what’s your game? You’ve been most helpful to me, and I’ve already thanked you, but there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Rankin leaned back on the chair. “When I visited your grandfather in this house...”

“He was living here, and not the Gate Lodge?”

“It was a grand palace at that time. I guess he hadn’t had anyone to talk with in a long time, so he divulged more than he should.”

“About what?”

“Everything. We got drunk one night, and he set the forest ablaze...”

“Oh, hell...”

“He promised me, if I’d keep his secrets, when I returned in 20 years, I would find fulfillment of my dreams.”

“How old were you then?”

“Nineteen.”

“And you thought, what? A buried treasure?”

“No, I wasn’t grass green. I’d read his journals in the evenings, after he went to bed. Even though he didn’t look old, he was, and he needed his sleep.”

Mustang had those journals, tucked in the bottom drawer of a desk in what might have once been Jack Parsons’ study, secured with a steel door and multiple locks. “So do I,” she yawned. “What about discussing this in the morning?”

Reluctantly, Rankin agreed. Together, they washed the dishes in silence, and he made sure the coals were extinguished before storing the grill.

In the study, Mustang perused the small, hard-bound volumes of her grandfather’s writings. Finding the section covering a period two decades earlier, she eagerly scanned paragraphs of cramped script.

“A youngster from MIT arrived today,” she read under the assigned date. “A *wunderkind*, from every account.”

Parsons’ personal impression of Rankin included terms like “open” and “frank”. He found no deceit in the college student and predicted a bright future for him.

One genius could well recognize another, Mustang knew. She would trust the occultist and scientist’s assessment of the man, especially since Parsons himself had been instrumental in the creation of solid fuel rocket boosters, long before NASA’s space shuttle required them.

One page, however, disturbed his granddaughter. “Rankin wants access to the Moonchild who, if already born of my daughter, would not yet be a teen. He has an overriding passion for a comprehensive knowledge of the universe.”

Parsons had implied, elsewhere in the journals she’d consulted over the years, that anyone seeking union with the Moonchild could attain to such knowledge.

If her grandfather had promised Rankin such a union would occur when he next visited Boleskine...

She slammed the cover. "Damn you, Jack Parsons. I'll not honor a pledge you made without my consent."

Confusion muddled her thoughts, nonetheless. Why would Rankin suggest an ordinary, normal life, if he craved the summation of knowledge?

Perhaps he'd changed his mind in the intervening years, and would be content to settle for domestic bliss.

She slept in the study, sprawled on the loveseat, locks secure. Rankin was up and out early, tending the horses.

"Edward, you asked me yesterday how I see my future. How do you see yours? You lost everything when you were defrocked and, while you have considerable education, do you have a career besides contracts as guest lecturer?"

He poured a bucket of oats for Molly and straightened. "I... was hoping this trip would decide it."

"The union with the Moonchild promised to you."

"Yes."

Tentatively, she pressed, "If you had that knowledge, would you use it to serve the scientific community, or further efforts at space exploration?"

"I... don't know. It would depend on the scope and breadth of the concepts."

"You would expect me to be with you?"

"Jack promised me the union. That means..."

She held up her hands, silencing him. "You are thinking of union in terms of the church you once served. In magickal practice, a union could be a ritual performed together, or..."

"Sex?"

She shrugged noncommittally.

"Nothing permanent?"

"No. According to what he recorded of the rituals back in the 1930s, the energies raised during the interaction are transferred, one to the other, over and done."

"Are you willing to... take that chance?"

Mustang perched herself on a stool she used to clean the tack. "I witnessed my grandfather's rituals up on the hill in the days before... His power raised fires, wind, rain and earthquakes. A union of this sort could - would - decimate the countryside."

He crossed the barn in two strides, hands clamped on her biceps. “You must! He swore an oath, and I’ve been waiting...”

“He made you wait, believing your life’s journey would make you forget, or reconsider.”

“He was *wrong!*” the man roared.

A mild electrical shock forced Rankin to release her. “Do you want your brain to explode?”

“Human beings use only two percent of their mental capacity,” he stated, scowling down while rubbing his hands against his trousers to alleviate the pain coursing through his nerves. “To fill the other 98 percent...”

“Would drive you mad, or kill you outright.”

“I’m willing to risk it.”

“You’re positive?” she persisted.

“Absolutely.”

Mustang retreated, pretending to prepare herself. She made a show of inhaling deeply, hands pressed together in a prayerful pose. Then, she held them out, palms upward.

“Place your hands upon mine,” she directed solemnly.

“What, now? Here?”

“You hesitate?”

“No, but... I thought there would need to be garments, sacred vessels...”

“Only for your Mass. The universal energies know not time or place, but serve those who summon them with pure intent.”

Staring into her hazel orbs, he believed her. Tenderly, he laid his palms atop hers.

She twisted her palms, entwining her fingers through his. She envisioned a sort of circuit between them, and ran the charge up his left arm, through his chest and down his right.

As his muscles tensed, his arms straightened horizontally, nearly lifting her off the straw-laden floor. He bent to kiss her, compelled by the intensity of the moment.

He wrapped her in an embrace that might have shattered her ribs, had she not responded with equal force.

What she imparted to Rankin in that quarter-hour amounted to a tenth of what Jack Parsons had promised him. Blood poured from his ears and, as Mustang felt it drip on her flannel shirt, she released him.

Edward Rankin fell to the ground, his breathing labored, color pale.

She knelt beside him, as the horses shuffled nervously in their stalls. “I tried to warn you.”

“I should have listened. You have a wisdom uncanny for your years.”

“After what you saw of my subconscious, I’m surprised you didn’t run the other direction, all the way back to Edinburgh,” she muttered wistfully.

“You... are a beautiful soul. Just... don’t let fear dictate your actions.”

His hand reached and clutched her neck, drawing her down for one final kiss.

She felt wetness on her cheeks when his form went limp.

“Oh, my dear, I wish that was possible,” she addressed the deceased. “But, I will always fear what I might do, what others might do, and the unknown consequences.”

Saddling her Arabian, she rode to her neighbor Glenn MacDonough’s property, using his phone to notify police of a dead trespasser on the Boleskine House grounds.

“I think he was hungry. I found him in the barn, where he must’ve been stealing oats,” she told the constable.

Rankin’s corpse was transported to the Inverness morgue, and local papers reported his death due to a cerebral hemorrhage.

Mustang saw the account when she received her next grocery delivery. The sheets had been used to cushion bottles and cans in the cardboard boxes. After loading the cupboard shelves with supplies, she crumpled the paper and tossed it in the trash.