

The Mustang Chronicles:

Wushu Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Some days, Mustang Duryea felt she still lived on her father's horse ranch in Montana. Six horses of her own occupied a spacious stable and, just beyond her property's northern border, Glenn MacDonough let his two dozen gorgeous animals graze.

This cloudless mid-August morning, the sweatsuit clad Mistress of Boleskine rode her bay mare Crystal near freshly refurbished fences. She noticed, across the pasture, a new face - a stately Palomino, pawing the ground and flipping his blond mane, showing off for his audience. MacDonough had opened the gate, leading a casually attired man and two children among the stock.

The construction project manager glimpsed Mustang and waved. She replied in kind, hesitating when he signaled her to join them.

Her interactions with people didn't usually end well.

Still, the chance to view MacDonough's latest acquisition was a temptation not to be shunned.

Steering Crystal around the fence's perimeter, Mustang dismounted and hoisted herself onto the wood planks while her neighbor introduced his guests to their choices for purchase.

The young woman could see the father's Oriental features at this range. He looked familiar, too, which made her shudder. The last time she'd seen Han Feng, a shaggy-haired Wushu instructor from Beijing's Taoranting Park, he'd been loading her on a vegetable truck to escape Chinese soldiers.

When had he married and had children? she mused. Why had he cut his black mop so short? Then, she recalled, it had been six years since their prior meeting.

He recognized her, for he bowed slightly in her direction, saluting with his left hand cupped around his right fist. One of MacDonough's staff had lifted the cherubic little girl onto the Palomino's back, her flower print dress fluttering in the wind. She squealed with joy.

"This one, Daddy!" echoed Han's son, a miniature cowboy in jeans, tooled leather boots and a Stetson, joining his sister in the saddle.

"You came from China to buy a horse?" Mustang queried, traversing the field.

MacDonough didn't understand her statement. "Ach, Your Ladyship. 'Tis he nae a beauty?"

"Incredible," she agreed. "How are you, Feng?"

Han Feng heard her in Mandarin, while MacDonough's brain registered the words in English, thanks to the power bestowed on Mustang years earlier by Jack Parsons. When Han replied in Chinese, his host's countenance darkened; he couldn't rationalize how someone speaking his native dialect could communicate with another using an entirely foreign language.

Obviously, Han had a command of the British Isles' mother tongue; no interpreter stood nearby to translate his requests to MacDonough. Mustang diffused the situation by insisting her old friend continue the conversation in English.

"I am assigned to the Chinese Embassy in London," Han explained. "My uncle was in the diplomatic corps and... after the incident in Beijing... he saved me from prison by accepting me as his assistant. We left for the West a week later, and I've been in country ever since."

"That's London. You're not in Scotland for the haggis, I hope."

MacDonough injected, "My firm designed Mr. Han's summer home on the loch's western shore."

"You spoke of this place so eloquently during our time together," Han added, "I could not help but seek it out for rest and relaxation."

Mustang chuckled. "No one's ever called me eloquent."

The youngsters, down from their perch, huddled near their father's legs, shy at the presence of another stranger.

"When did you marry?"

"The day before I left Beijing. My parents had arranged the match, and didn't want their only son to..." He shrugged, embarrassed at the racial prejudices still held by his elders. "I'm buying Cindi and Lance a horse to ride while on vacation. When we return to London, we will board him with Mr. MacDonough."

"I'll leave you to the negotiations, then," Mustang said, retreating to where she'd tethered Crystal.

"May I call upon you?" shouted Han.

"Any time. Bring the family. We can ride together."

She never thought she'd regret that invitation. Her memories of Han Feng as an honorable youth didn't include any room for corruption or compromise. Their first ride - three days later - around the Boleskine acreage, however, revealed a side of him she never expected.

"The diplomatic service is like chess. You must not reveal your strategy until the last possible moment, to prevent your opponent from foiling your plans."

“Chess is my favorite game,” admitted Mustang. “But, when it comes to human beings, wouldn’t working together to achieve a common good be more productive?”

“So many naive people believe as you do. This is a world in turmoil, Mustang, and only those who can navigate the dangerous waters will survive.”

“Does your wife agree with your views?”

“No, which is why she divorced me and moved to America.”

Mustang stifled her laugh.

Han sensed her reaction, however, and scowled. “It’s not funny.”

“I know, Feng.” She watched the children romp on the grassy hillock, far from Jack Parsons’ gradually rotting old altar. Their mounts contentedly nibbled tall weeds. “Why did she not take the children?”

“The Chinese government frowns upon defectors. They... only approved her travel permits once she legally terminated her custodial rights.”

“Horrible! What’s happened to change you, Feng?”

“The West happened.” Han swung off Sarge and leaned against a gnarled oak. “In Beijing, I ached for freedom. Having seen the havoc freedom wreaks on individuals and families, I desperately want to return to my homeland.”

“They won’t let you?”

“No. My exile cannot be appealed. And, trying to raise Cindi and Lance with traditional values is difficult in this materialistic culture. They want every gadget advertised on the telly or roadside signs...”

“So, you’re buying them a horse.”

“Better than violent video games and toys meant to line movie makers’ pockets.”

“Amen.”

Han’s head snapped toward her. “You approve?”

“I’ve learned to live with minimal technology. If you come in for tea when we’re done riding, you’ll see no computer, no TV, not even a phone. But, being free to choose that life - rather than have it imposed upon you by a dictatorial government - is essential to appreciating the benefits.”

“There, you are correct. Had I not experienced the West, I would not have seen the value of Eastern philosophy.”

“Then, why not challenge the standard diplomatic mindset, and use your position to press for truly peaceful relations between nations?”

“My position is minor - an assistant to an assistant. The only reason I can afford this summer residence is because room and board is fully paid at the

embassy. I have saved my pennies to retire here someday. You were right; this land is beyond description.”

He had acquired considerable skill in evading straight answers to pointed questions, for sure. She wondered if he had maintained his prowess in kung fu.

Before she could pose the question, Han asked, “This is where you practice?”

“Not as often as I’d like.”

“How’s your horse-stance?”

“As good as your splits.”

He lowered himself to the ground, legs spread at right angles to his torso. Mustang cringed in pain; she’d tried long and hard to mimic the posture, straining muscles and pulling tendons. She positioned her feet wide apart and sank into an exaggerated version of being in the saddle.

“Very good,” Han praised. “You remember the forms I taught you?”

“Of course.”

He flipped upright; together they performed a series of punches, kicks and blocks, accompanied by nature’s symphony.

“Here, it’s so peaceful,” noted Han. “In Beijing, or practicing on the embassy roof in London, there is noise of traffic, not... bird song. I envy you not having to block out the externals, and being able to merge with the universe.”

Mustang lamented, “Would that I *could* block out certain externals.”

“Which?”

“People. I... don’t get on well with people.”

“Do you have many visitors?”

“Not a constant stream, but enough to cause... problems.”

Han reclined on the grass, running his fingers through the lushness. “I recall, in Beijing, you mentioned being falsely pursued by Interpol. Are you still a fugitive?”

“No. I... it’s tough to put in words.”

“The firing pins?”

So, he hadn’t forgotten that impromptu demonstration of her power.

“Yes.”

“Such a gift could... accomplish much good in the world.”

“Or, when used badly, cause trouble.”

“Ah, I see. You are young, and have yet to learn...”

“Exactly.”

Han rose. "It is no different, Mustang, than kung fu. In kung fu, training is everything. Yet, using that training to fight is discouraged. You must train yourself to use your gift prudently..."

"Not use it at all."

He nodded, aiming his fist at her head.

Instinctively, she blocked the strike.

"See?" he remarked.

"More."

They sparred on the slope, drawing the children's attention away from exploring wild rose bushes and thorny undergrowth.

After ten minutes, both were panting heavily, faces and shirts dripping with sweat. A sudden cloudburst spurred them into action once more, swinging onto the horses and galloping to the stables.

A pile of damp towels remained in the living room when afternoon tea concluded and Han's family had departed. Mustang's exasperation with the polite inanities peppering that final conversation left her mulling whether to accept the offer of Friday dinner on the loch's opposite shore.

One lesson of her misspent teens: changing others' viewpoints was an impossible task. Where she had once fought side by side with this kindred spirit in a Beijing park, Han's embittered attitude made his proximity repulsive now. Best to defuse any conflict...

Except, his presence in the region - even for a month or two each year - might be irksome. He knew where she lived, and could show up on her doorstep at any moment.

After Friday's meal, she would clarify her position that she wished no further contact with him.

That wouldn't be easy, either. A spectacular summer evening meant a picnic at the water's edge, just below the rustic three-bedroom home constructed on the bluff.

Han first gave Mustang a tour of the faux-cottage. Expensively decorated, she mulled whether he had a second source of income beyond saving pennies from his embassy salary. The parlor's fireplace mantle held family photos from happier times, polished medals and trophies from the many martial art tournaments he'd won. In the corner, weapons used in more advanced competitions were displayed.

"Where do you practice?" she queried.

He showed her a deck seemingly suspended in mid-air, accessible through the living room's patio doors. There, he drilled Mustang in kung fu, which she thoroughly enjoyed. The hours she'd spent training alone at Boleskine, she'd had

no one to correct her mistakes. Maintaining ties with Han could have definite advantages...

Two baskets of food and drink were carried down a lengthy staircase as the sun descended. Castle Urquhart was visible beyond the trees. Cindi, the five-year-old, wore red gingham with frills, and might have been an ordinary American girl, splashing in the shallows. Lance, age four, sported a Manchester United football uniform and chased butterflies.

“The children aren’t named after your parents,” Mustang observed.

Han muttered, “My wife demanded I allow Western names. Knowing we’d never live in China, she didn’t want the children stigmatized, fodder for bullies.”

“Understandable, in a way.”

“Is it? If we so quickly bow to Western mores, what becomes of our culture?”

For that, Mustang had no rebuttal. The pair fell silent, entranced by the youngsters giggling and playing.

Until Cindi slipped off an exposed, mossy rock and tumbled into the waves.

Han panicked. The girl was foundering; a sudden drop-off gave her no foothold, and she couldn’t swim. He rushed into the surf, but Cindi’s head had vanished beneath the surface.

Screaming in desperation, Han repeatedly dunked himself to search for the child.

Mustang restrained Lance from jumping in to aid his father. Seconds ticked like hours, and she knew the longer Cindi remained submerged, the greater likelihood a tragedy would occur. She mumbled a quiet command; the wind obeyed, generating a thirty-foot waterspout which raised the girl from the depths.

II

Deposited on the sand, gasping and spitting brackish liquid, Cindi would recover. Han, conversely, seemed frozen in place, waves lapping around his thighs. His eyes didn’t believe the phenomena they’d just seen.

Nor did hundreds of tourists on Urquhart Castle’s parapets, or scanning the lake for signs of Nessie.

That didn’t matter to Mustang at the moment. “Call a doctor,” she ordered Han.

He shook from his stupor and climbed the steps to the house by twos. Mustang shook plates and cups off the picnic blanket and wrapped Cindi in it.

Herding Lance ahead of her, she carried the groggy child slowly upward, soon stretching her on a pink canopied bed in a Minnie Mouse-themed room.

“Will she be all right?” her father pleaded.

“I’m positive of it.”

“What caused that...” He twirled his index finger in a circular motion.

Mustang grasped his meaning. “Nature. Is the doctor coming?”

“He’s finishing a call in Drumnadrochit. Some woman tripped over her laundry basket while hanging out the wash. Sprained her ankle.”

More than one car labored up the steep macadam drive fifteen minutes later. From the second floor bay window, Mustang watched police vehicles, news satellite vans and a pickup truck bearing the crest of the Scottish Meteorological Service turn off the main road.

“Oh, hell.” She whirled to where Han gently towed lake water from his daughter’s hair. She saluted him as he’d taught her. “Feng, I must go. Be wise, and do not mention my name to the authorities.”

His tear-stained cheeks saddened her. “Are you a criminal, after all?”

“Depends on who you ask, I suppose.” With a bow, she fled.

Her Arabian maintained a gallop two miles south, through underbrush and over exposed roots. She finally slowed from a canter to a trot near Invermoriston, the long ride to Boleskine House an opportunity to calm her nerves and belittle herself for her impulsiveness - again.

“I couldn’t let Cindi drown,” she spat, her auburn tresses tangled by the breeze.

Justified or not, she had placed Han Feng in a precarious position. He would be questioned at length about the water spout, and he wouldn’t be able to satisfy the government officials. Journalists would add their own spin to the story, broadcasting it throughout Great Britain and, potentially, around the globe.

If the FBI’s Ben Espinoza heard the report, who knew how he would react.

Her bi-weekly delivery of oats and straw for the horses merited her a wealth of gossip Monday morning. The burly driver related how Nessie had been designated a divine creature for rescuing Cindi. The “Miracle of the Loch” was destined to draw more tourists in the coming months. Already busses of spiritually-minded visitors had descended on the beach near Han’s vacation retreat.

“They clamor to see the wee bairn who was saved,” he droned in the thick burr which so irritated Mustang’s ears. “The poor Chinees can’t even open his windows for a breath of air without hearing their shouts.”

Mustang made her decision that instant, not pausing to consider additional consequences. Simultaneously, six water spouts shot skyward along the length of

Loch Ness, shifting the interest of these curiosity seekers away from Han Feng and his children as the days passed.

Except for a single, fanatical teen who rejected media-reported scientific interpretations of the marvel. He camped on the edge of Han's holdings, 'round the clock, hurling insults and bible passages at the "godless" Oriental whenever he neared. Complaints to the police went unheeded; their own prejudice against foreigners in evidence.

Hand-painted picket signs were erected along the A82 berm, with slogans such as, "This site should be a shrine, not a haven for atheists," and "Give God His due!" Some passersby honked in support, others veered to the opposite lane, skirting the man's incendiary tirade.

Before dawn that late August Saturday, Glenn MacDonough brought the message to Mustang, cleaning stalls in the barn. Han Feng begged her for assistance.

"Ye may use me mobile, Your Ladyship," the neighbor offered. "I ha' his number handy."

"There's nothing I can do," she demurred, pitchfork spearing a fresh mound of straw. She'd dealt with extremists imagining miracles where none existed before, getting shot in the process. The groom's father at a Missouri wedding had branded her a Satanist. The missionary, Mason Church, refused to leave Bangkok despite death threats, so intent was he on converting the heathen. Necessary to treat those in such a mental state delicately, and she possessed no kid gloves for such endeavors.

"Ye are his sole friend in country," urged MacDonough, wispy white mop standing on end in frustration. "I'd go m'self, but I've got a meetin' in Inverness."

A lame excuse; Mustang commiserated with his reasoning. If the zealot wouldn't listen to a fellow Scot, why would he heed her words? Or, did Han's request originate from his suspicions of her involvement in creating the waterspout?

She realized MacDonough would nag until she acquiesced. He didn't need Han ringing him every hour; she didn't need a daily harangue. When push came to shove, he'd done her so many kindnesses over the years, including renovating and modernizing the Georgian-style mansion in which she dwelled...

Pitchfork prongs buried themselves deep in the tack room wall when she hurled the tool in a fit of rage. "Dial the blasted phone."

The exchange terse and short, she accepted transportation from her neighbor around the long, narrow lake, without pausing to replace her soiled jeans and purple tank top.

Not a smart idea, angering Mustang Duryea. Her personal mantra since inheriting a power over the natural forces from her grandfather had become, “I mustn’t get angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

She’d thought the picturesque drive might compose her. Unfortunately, by the time she alighted from Glenn MacDonough’s company truck at the base of Han Feng’s drive, fury smoldered within her chest, needing but a spark to detonate a horrendous explosion.

Vernon Barnstable supplied that spark.

He railed something about grapevines withering as she ascended to the cottage; she spun, hazel orbs blazing.

“Did you ever stop to think what your fate might be if you were subjected to the curses you spout so eagerly at others?” she growled.

“The righteous need not fear...”

“A sincerely righteous man would mind his own business!”

“Ye shall burn in hell!”

Flames erupted from the gravel, licking his feet and reducing his signs to ash. He leapt around like Native Americans dancing at a pow-wow, hollering obscenities rather than prayers. His melted sneakers left a trail of smoking pine needles as he worked his way toward the water, dousing his feet to relieve the agony.

Before Mustang could knock, Han Feng jerked open the front door.

“He’s gone,” she announced.

“Thank you, but that is not why I wished so desperately for you to come.”

He practically dragged her upstairs to Cindi’s room, where the girl babbled deliriously, her skin chalky.

“The doctor said the lake water she swallowed contains a bacteria which could kill her. There are no drugs which can treat it.”

“That’s nonsense. I know local people who regularly swim in the loch. They’ve never been sick a day in their lives.”

“They have a natural immunity, so the doctor told me. We of the East... there is a gene missing, or some such abnormality...”

“I can do no more than a professional...”

“I believe you can,” countered Han. “What you did with the soldiers’ firing pins altered my life forever. You are a wizard...”

If she’d been a bear with its foot caught in a metal vice, she would’ve been no more trapped. While she despised the fact so many who’d known about her power had died, those living could use the knowledge against her.

Had Han Feng kept his knowledge of her confidential - as she'd advised for six years?

Mustang ruminated whether he may have built his vacation home purposely to be near her. If he'd exposed her to Chinese officials during the questioning before his deportation...

Worse, having changed his mind about living conditions in his homeland and freedom in general, could he be a spy for the communist regime? Was he here to recruit her to their cause, and might this be a test of her abilities?

Difficult to fake a fever, she acknowledged, laying a scarred palm on Cindi's forehead. Her temperature had to be at least 103 degrees. Whatever the source of the infection, the girl remained at risk.

"Have you forced fluids, and tried a cool bath?" she prodded.

"Every day, without improvement."

Healing wounds was one thing - nature required specific directions to mend damaged flesh. Curing an illness of uncertain origin...

If the Scots had an immunity to the disease, why hadn't an antidote been manufactured from their blood? "Ring the doctor," she instructed.

Han activated the memory on his cell phone. Within seconds, Mustang was discussing the case with the physician, jotting the results of his tests on a cartoon bunny notepad from the night stand.

Nothing is ever simple, she sighed silently, restoring the mobile to its owner. The name of the bacillus was unpronounceable for her lips, but Cindi had, basically, swallowed a poison accumulated through centuries of waste being dumped in Loch Ness.

"Feng, you must swear to never say a word about this to anyone."

His expression altered for the merest fraction of a second; Mustang detected it, disappointed. He *did* have an ulterior motive and couldn't be trusted.

Still, she couldn't let a five-year-old die. She would deal with Han later.

The father displayed genuine joy when Cindi opened her eyes. "Daddy, I'm hungry," she moaned.

Han glanced from his daughter to Mustang, relief weakening his knees. He sank on the bed and began to sob.

"Get her some broth and toast," the Mistress of Boleskine suggested.

"Once she's eaten, sleep will be the best way for her body to regain its strength. We'll talk once she's comfortable."

"Talk?"

No reply forthcoming, neither his voice nor his tanned countenance effectively feigned innocence.

She waited in the first floor parlor. Studying the framed portraits, she saw Han's wife never really smiled in any of the shots. Dates on the medals and trophies were old, as well. No doubt Han remained in excellent condition; had he given up his kung fu practice for... other interests?

"She ate two bowls of noodle soup," Han declared, drying his hands on a tea towel as he entered the room. "She could barely hold the spoon herself. Have I your word she will recover?"

Mustang swallowed a defensive impulse. "Nature must take its course. There are no guarantees."

"Losing her would be... too much."

"Then, why use her as a pawn in your diplomatic game?"

"I... you think I made her slip off that rock and nearly drown?" he snorted.

"No, but you added some lake water to her drink shortly afterward, so she would get sick, and I would have to..."

"That's insane! I would never..."

"Before your wife divorced you, no. My guess is you struck a deal with the Chinese government after she left, to prevent them from terminating *your* parental rights and transferring Cindi and Lance to China for proper indoctrination."

"Only a paranoiac would propose such an outrageous idea!"

"I'll be the first to confess I don't trust people, and with good reason." She strode toward the door. "Keep this in mind: if I can heal, logic dictates I can also kill."

As she departed, she puzzled at the precise clicking audible over her footsteps. A security system?

Easy to determine. Hopping one of the tour cruises, she disembarked at the village of Dores on the lake's eastern shore, strolling past Glenn MacDonough's on her way home. He sat on his porch, relishing the afternoon breeze, a cup of tea in hand.

"There's plenty in the pot, Your Ladyship," he greeted her.

"No, thanks. I meant to tell you last week what a marvelous job your crew did on Han Feng's house. It fits right into the countryside, and has all the amenities..."

"He wanted the best, and sturdy, too, so the winter rains wouldn't do damage while he was in London."

"Looks like you installed cameras?"

"Ach, he added those a few weeks ago. That's when we got t' talking about horses..."

"Any particular reason?"

“He dinnae say. I s’pose he wanted t’ catch any burglars on tape.”

Or, capture proof of random “miracles” to show his superiors, Mustang breathed despondently.

Superiors who better not attempt to visit her during the night, unless they desired to be frightened out of their wits by *her* version of a security system.

Trudging to Boleskine House, she pondered how good people could compromise their ethics for money or, worse, political favors. No doubt, oppressive regimes made use of the basest methods to coerce their citizens into behaving abhorrently - among them, seizing youngsters from loving parents. Her memories of Han Feng as a valiant soul, willing to stand beside her against trained soldiers, crumbled into dust.

Better off to not marry, not have children. Then, no one could hold hostage what a person held dearest.

Fitful slumber, disturbed by bizarre dreams, left her fatigued Sunday morning. She fed and watered the horses, then chose Pietra to go riding. Every path of the 47 acres, she perceived herself stalked, not by wild animals, but men wielding binoculars.

Paranoid, definitely, she chided herself.

Constantly striving not to use her power, she nonetheless requested the trees to signal if intruders were present.

Signal, they did.

Shaking one camouflage-clad, masked miscreant off a low branch into the brambles, startling the horse and unseating Mustang.

Pietra bolted for the stable, leaving her rider to square off with the trespasser, who aimed an ice pick at her head.

She ducked. The kung fu Han taught her in the Beijing park had been intended mostly to increase her focus and self-control. Defending herself against another human being, she momentarily doubted herself.

Until he thrust the weapon at her abdomen, which she deftly blocked.

Her side kick propelled this opponent into a tree trunk, knocking him unconscious. She yanked him vertical and ripped off the ski mask, stunned to see curly blond hair and Western features.

She’d expected an Asian.

Aware of his comrades in the area, she dropped him on the packed earth, his skull bouncing twice. Scanning the forest with each step, she jogged to the corral. Pietra nuzzled her shoulder, anticipating a grooming; the roan would have to wait a bit longer. Mustang led her into the barn, checked each stall was secure, then rolled the door closed and fastened the padlock on its hasp.

She locked herself in the house, too, additional protection provided by the study's three deadbolts. Confusion reigned; she craved only solitude, yet she was being hunted by parties unknown, like a tiger escaped from the zoo.

The blame rested on her own shoulders. Had she ignored Han's presence at Glenn MacDonough's, had she not called upon nature to draw Cindi from Loch Ness... No differently than she had rushed into a classroom years before, thinking herself aiding an injured teacher, when Wilfrid Bailey was actually a psychopathic killer. She'd disobeyed her father, thus being the lone witness to horse theft. The tumult which ensued in the following months...

Her legs tucked beneath her on the love seat, she shuddered as the list of impetuous mistakes filled her mind. She'd taken responsibility for each, though the conclusions could not always be considered successful.

How many might perish in this instance, if her temper flared?

How many, and who?

Mustang had never paid much attention to current events. Even living with her parents, the network news blaring through dinner, she'd ignored tales of political strife and scandal. High school history class had mentioned post-Cold War friction between Russia and the United States, with China's vast population consuming more and more resources; it meant little to the young woman.

If, however, Han had communicated with his government, and intelligence agencies with an interest in Chinese activities intercepted the phone call or e-mail...

Dozens of covert operatives could be wandering her estate, anxious to hustle her off to some remote military base.

The prospect redoubled her tension.

As a precaution, she expanded her nocturnal booby-traps to daylight hours. Shrieks penetrated insulated walls, fading as unwelcome visitors abandoned their posts.

III

Mustang slept well that night, serenaded by a lullaby of birds and wildlife. She resumed a normal routine with the sunrise, tending her horses and enjoying lingering summer warmth.

These animals could sense her inner turmoil, and behaved skittishly in the corral. The Arabian, especially, exhibited his high-strung personality in all its glory.

Meaning he bit through his feedbag, kicked a hole in the water trough, and frightened the others so badly, they huddled together at the fenced enclosure's far end.

She grabbed handfuls of his white mane and immobilized his head a foot above hers. "Listen, boy. There's no call for this. Everything will be..."

A pop, then an anguished whinny. The impact shook Mustang; inches from her right hand, a tranquilizer dart had embedded itself in the Arabian's neck. Whoever had fired the projectile was too far to hit his mark. A second dart bounced off an invisible barrier, as the young woman steadied the stately beast sinking to the ground.

The air rifle snapped into fragments, its owner arcing through the air, landing with a nose full of dirt at Mustang's feet. This Chinese assailant couldn't pretend not to comprehend her questions once she rolled him onto his spine and smashed her boot heel into his ribs.

To the untrained ear, though, his Mandarin would've sounded like so much gibberish. Mustang dreaded the implications of his recitation: a veritable army had infiltrated Scotland's borders in recent weeks, their assignment to capture and transport her - alive - to Beijing.

Cyrillic lettering on the grenade, catapulted from an unseen source, registered a millisecond before the blast.

Shrapnel would've killed the horses; Mustang diverted the discharge downward, driving jagged shards into the earth.

She longed, in that instant, to drive a selection of foreigners into the fertile soil, beginning with Han Feng.

Years had passed since she'd been so enveloped by rage, nothing could contain it. Her captive petrified, she stretched out both arms and yowled. A microburst of wind responded to the screech devastating the countryside for eight miles in every direction.

Tour boats on Loch Ness tipped precariously when a miniature tsunami washed over them. Trees lost leaves and branches; uprooted hundred-year-old oaks toppled into houses. Windows shattered and drivers strained to keep their cars from veering off the roads.

The release wasn't enough for Mustang. Harming her was reprehensible; endangering her horses was intolerable. Fists clenched, she kicked the Chinese spy across the corral. "Unless you want to die, you'd better run."

He did. Others ran *toward* the disturbance - constables, medics, news crews. Bumps and bruises were treated, witnesses interviewed - on camera and off - yet no one set foot on Boleskine property. Mustang soothed the five alert horses; her Arabian might sleep for eight hours or more, she guessed. She stood vigil at his side until he awoke, well after sunset.

Difficult to lead a disoriented horse in a straight line. Mustang guided him gently to the barn, he balked at entering his stall, so she moved his food and water into the center of the floor. Patting his flank, she shuffled to the house, exhausted.

Any expectations the Chinese or Russians had been dissuaded in their quest by her... show of force would have been foolish. She pined for the days when being foolish merited no dire consequences. A fragrant breeze wafting through the bedroom screen, she stared at the ceiling, attempting to outthink the world's most devious minds.

One advantage: her existence had been erased from the FBI database and, because her command had lacked specificity, every other computer system operated in the U.S. That meant her mother couldn't be traced, nor her cousin Rachel in Australia, or any other relatives. She claimed no "old friends", no "significant other". Therefore, no leverage existed for them to use against her.

Creative, non-violent strategies might be beyond their capabilities, Mustang surmised. Trained in stealth and high-tech gadgetry, the spies envisioned themselves the next James Bond. By narrowing the scope of their venture to subduing the enemy with superior equipment, the possibility of a frank and open dialogue vanished.

"Bring me the leader of the Chinese contingent," she whispered to the night. "Alone, at 8:00, in his car, unarmed."

She rolled onto her side and dozed.

Early rains dampened Mustang's enthusiasm for the meeting; at least, the Arabian had recovered from the tranquilizer and cooperated with being groomed and fed. Breakfast dishes washed, she answered a tentative knock.

Disappointment clouded her visage at the sight of Han Feng on the threshold.

"Did you bring a fresh supply of lies?"

Being caught in his deception hadn't changed Han's demeanor. "You roughed up those boys pretty well yesterday. I've come to make peace."

"You came because I sent for you." She led him into the living room, waving him toward the green sofa.

Easing onto the cushions, he refused tea or coffee. "Mustang, if I told you everything the soldiers did to me after I put you on my brother's truck for the coast, your blood would curdle."

"Do you want bodies stacked like cord wood on the drive of that lovely cottage, where your children can see?"

"No, I.."

“Then, curdle my blood, if you can.” She settled on the cane-backed rocking chair.

His brow furrowed, expression drawn, Han Feng recounted his arrest in Taoranting Park an hour after he and Mustang had defeated twenty Chinese infantrymen in hand-to-hand combat. Thrown in a musty, rat-infested dungeon, he saw light over the next three days only when his interrogators dragged him out for questioning. He was beaten, starved and denied contact with his parents.

“I couldn’t give them an answer why the firing pins malfunctioned,” he whimpered. “They suspected sabotage, and wanted me to disclose my membership in a subversive movement targeting the military.”

“They *did* release you in the end.”

“They caned me until I told them about you. Then, they devised a means for me to travel West, with my uncle and a new wife of their choosing. She ensured I obeyed the conditions of my probation, which meant locating and recruiting you.”

“Are you really divorced, and are the kids really yours?”

“Mai Ling was transferred to the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. to begin her next mission. We are husband and wife on paper only. Cindi and Lance are mine, by my mistress, a London barmaid.”

That final detail completed what Mustang deemed a ludicrous narrative. “I’m sorry, Feng, I don’t believe any of it. It’s... too convenient.”

He rose, stripping off his polo shirt to display gruesome scars criss-crossing his back. “I’m not into self-mutilation, Mustang. Nor risking my daughter’s life.”

“How do you plan to fulfill your obligation to your government?”

“We were going to sedate you and fly you to Beijing...”

“Not likely.”

“So I discovered. What... measures have you taken to protect your land?”

“That’s my secret.”

“You know, the Russians and the Arabs are willing to spend billions for those secrets.”

“Arabs? I haven’t seen any...”

“I have. Agents from many nations have sworn to impede every avenue of escape.”

Mustang contemplated her mutilated palms, the price of traveling via lightning bolt. “Not all.”

“If you could manage to evade the planet’s top mercenaries, I would gladly tell my government to...”

“Take a hike?” she hinted.

“Not so politely.”

Tramping to Boleskine’s highest point and disappearing while Han watched did not appeal to her.

This whole fiasco wasted time and energy.

“I’ll not be taken alive, and I can’t be killed,” she pledged.

Han grew cocky. “You may believe that...”

“I don’t believe it. I know it to be fact.”

“Even so, until the day you die, everywhere you go, you’ll be looking over your shoulder to see who’s trailing you.”

Those might have been the first honest words he’d spoken, and Mustang didn’t like their import.

She stood, eye to eye with the former Wushu instructor. “Help me stop this nonsense, and I’ll guarantee your safe passage to any destination you choose.”

Hope twinkled briefly in his brown orbs. “With my children?”

“Of course.”

Reality wouldn’t permit the dream. “They will find me, wherever I go.”

“Not if they think you’re dead.”

“Ah!” His lips twitched in a grin.

He followed her into the kitchen, where she brewed a pot of coffee. They sat at the dinette table and discussed strategies until noon. A knot in the pit of her stomach was a constant reminder she didn’t entirely trust Han; she remained mute on her plan of last resort .

The initial step in avoiding a “cord wood” scenario involved Han contacting his associates - the communication monitored by who knew how many wire taps. The news Mustang would lower defenses around Boleskine to meet negotiators at midday Wednesday would bring every interested party out of hiding. The call concluded with the warning, “No weapons. If any manner of weapon is detected, we’re all dead men.”

So the grand “capture the flag” contest - with Mustang the prize - - commenced.

She anticipated a small number of those in attendance would smuggle knives or pistols inside their clothes. When an electrical current running the Boleskine perimeter was disrupted by the various alloys, those reprobates were battered by tree branches, their access to the forest barred.

From her vantage point on the mansion’s roof, Mustang counted eighty men of diverse shapes and sizes roaming the grounds. She’d transferred the horses to Glenn MacDonough’s pasture temporarily, so the foreigners could ransack the barn and the house to their hearts’ content.

Greed and competitiveness spurred them to combat each other when their routes intersected. Techniques from street fighting to judo eliminated one by one during the six hour marathon. The losers found themselves restrained at the clearing's edge when Mustang ambled up the grassy hillock to battle three "finalists": an Arab, a Russian and Han Feng.

She assumed he would be among the elite, his kung fu skills unrivaled. He would be last to fight and, if he defeated her in an honest contest...

"Why are you doing this?" snarled the swarthy Arab. "We of the oil producing countries will pay you more than you could spend in five lifetimes..."

"On whom would you wage this war you'd wish me to win for you?" she prodded.

"Our enemies."

"Why not talk to these enemies, to see if you can live peacefully together?"

"They wish to impose their form of government upon us, and ban us from enforcing Islamic dictates..."

This argument chilled Mustang, given her opinion of organized religion - whether touted by a teenaged Christian extremist or a Qu'ran-abiding Muslim. The pair clashed; a rapid succession of punches and kicks on the humid afternoon raised beads of sweat on their temples. This opponent outweighed the young woman by fifty pounds, yet she held her own. Blocking one forceful strike felt like her arm had broken; she laid him flat with a leg sweep and a backhand to his skull.

"Excellent," Han praised. "The student makes her teacher proud."

Panting, she retorted, "Reserve your pride for the day I won't need to raise a finger against such jerks."

The Russian could have been a member of the Bolshoi Ballet, for all his grace and agility. He managed to get Mustang in a choke hold; she used his own strength against him, tossing him into a patch of thorny weeds.

"You would deny my country the resources and wealth to rebuild, and an opportunity to again achieve global domination?" he drawled with a heavy accent, plucking needles from his backside.

"I deny your country nothing. Your country would deny others those same resources and their freedom. Better to be equal and peacefully coexist."

Rifle shots resounded - not tranquilizer darts, this time. A tour helicopter approached at low altitude from above Loch Ness, commandeered by agents pointing their weapons out the rear windows.

Mustang spun on Han. "Did you coordinate this?"

He dragged her behind the shattered altar as a second hail of bullets strafed the loam. “Those are American guns.”

“Oh, hell.” Peering past fragmented lumber, she recognized a different set of tactics than Ben Espinoza and his FBI cohorts. CIA? she wondered.

Spy-spectators fled from the assault into the woods. The Arab lay unconscious in the open; the Russian cowered in the underbrush. Han struggled to push Mustang’s head lower behind their make-shift shield.

“Firing pins, or melted barrels?” she asked, resisting.

Her nonchalance relaxed Han. “I saw the firing pin stunt. Melting the barrels would be new.”

Blobs of gelatinous metal plopped a short distance away, charring the greenery. The pair heard one horrified assailant shout, “Get us the hell outta here!”

The chopper dipped and swung west, back to its landing pad, Mustang assumed.

“You could’ve killed them with a word. Are you so afraid to use your gift to the full?” inquired Han, stretching.

“If you’d ever caused someone else’s death, you would feel as I do. I took steps only to preserve our safety...”

“They may return. Had you taken more drastic action...”

No matter how she phrased it, Mustang realized Han wouldn’t understand her viewpoint. The Russian conceded his claim to her, still shivering in his boots. He debated officiating the match between the two kung fu proponents.

“Does observing outdated rules matter when the loser will be dead soon enough?” Han protested.

Mustang stated, “If you fear the outcome, go your way unchallenged.”

“I was referring to *you*. My orders are to kill you, if you refuse to submit to Chinese authority.”

“Would you? Could you go home afterward and kiss Cindi and Lance good night with my blood on your hands?”

“The government purports if you are not on our side, you pose a threat to our national security.”

“You honestly think I would consent to annihilate innocent people as part of some misguided political power play?”

“Every window in my house has a crack down the center from... your outburst the other day.”

“The Foyers Inn lost electricity for eleven hours...” added the Russian.

Han and Mustang chorused in their respective languages, “Shut up.”

“Get lost,” the latter instructed; her eyebrows arched menacingly.

The Russian bolted past the tree line, hallucinating rabid beasts in pursuit. The discussion ended, the two saluted - left hand draped over right fist. This wasn't like weeks earlier, when they'd spared for fun, or Taoranting Park, where Han taught Mustang the proper forms for dodging strikes and unbalancing an opponent's attack.

IV

Han Feng flexed his muscles beneath the skin-tight red t-shirt. "Quit channeling Bruce Lee," quipped Mustang, her plaid flannel shirt loose.

She could've let him spend his strength pummeling transparent armor surrounding her slender frame; despite not trusting him, her respect for his teachings outweighed a disdain for bruises.

And bruise her, he did. So swift were his blows, she couldn't discern if tiger, mantis or snake accosted her. He robbed her lungs of air and knocked her flat more than once, but she scrambled to her feet after each combination.

She bruised him, as well. Twice, she landed roundhouse kicks to his head, thwarting his rhythm. He recovered immediately, pouncing with increased fervor.

A whirling dervish could have rotated no more rapidly, fists battering her upper body. More astounding: the barrage continued from his knees, with the speed of a toy top.

Managing to pin his arm with a unyielding grip and send him airborne, tumbling into the fire pit, gave Mustang a few moments to regulate her breathing. He rejoined her slowly, the exertion far exceeding any tournament.

"If you want to stop..." she proposed.

Han muttered, "You will be pleading for mercy in due course."

"Dream on."

The skirmish resumed, amidst muffled groans and sharp elbows. Mustang bent double when a stabbing pain denoted cracked ribs; Han's impressive spinning kick, aimed a few inches higher, could've sent shards of bone into her heart.

He'd begun favoring his left leg, after she clipped his hip with her boot. Impossible to find a gap in his defenses to take out his right knee. He'd snatched a thick branch off the ground and swung it in wide circles.

Estimating the length, she clamped onto the limb. His momentum abruptly halted, he pitched sideways into the dirt.

Gazing skyward, he raised both hands in submission. “While their cameras are on us, fulfill your promise.”

“Cameras?”

“High powered lenses, monitoring every move. Let them think you victorious, so my children and I can resettle in Canada and be done with intrigue.”

“How dramatic do you want my grief?”

“Sufficient for them to believe I’m dead.”

“Won’t they... retrieve the body?”

“If confronted, they will forswear knowledge of my activities. Being caught with my corpse would compromise their denials.”

“They’d leave you to the buzzards?”

Han nodded as she hovered, executing a fatal knife-hand strike which missed his nose by a fraction of an inch. He plummeted down the hill, landing in a stand of heather.

No stage performance of *Romeo and Juliet’s* final scene could’ve been more emotional than Mustang’s expletive-laced rant, damning every tyrannical bureaucrat to perdition. For good measure, she collected some of the bullets from the American rifles, launching them at the unseen surveillance teams.

No humans were hit, but three zoom attachments cracked upon impact.

Plodding toward Boleskine House, Mustang couldn’t be certain the harassment by foreign governments would cease. Deleting whatever electronic or paper records were maintained in their files might derail future efforts, but too many knew her whereabouts to just accept their next assignment.

Previously, she’d made people forget her presence. She didn’t feel so inclined. By purging their memories, they would also lose the lesson they so urgently needed to learn. She and Han - who sneaked into the dwelling through the kitchen door an hour later - might devise an “out” for her, as she had done for him.

“How will we get to Canada?” he queried, sipping ice water at the dinette table.

“Leave that to me.”

“When will we pick up the children?”

“They’re on the way here already.”

“Really? How?”

“Glenn MacDonough. He wanted to check about repairs after the... wind damage, and they begged to see his horses.”

“How do you...” he saw her wry smirk. “Never mind.”

Cindi and Lance scurried in at that moment, flushed with excitement and yearning for their father. The hugs and kisses touched Mustang’s heart. Were Han

Feng not a good man in the depths of his soul, the youngsters would withhold their affection.

They prattled about the horses; Han hadn't made up his mind which to purchase and, now, the sale would not occur. Her neighbor regarded the scene from the stoop, mopping his wispy white hair with a plaid kerchief.

"The energy o' these wee bairns!" MacDonough declared. "Never having any o' me own, I'm unaccustomed t' chasing after them!"

Mustang brought him a glass of orange juice.

He drained it in two gulps. "Thank ye, Your Ladyship."

"I know you've heard me say this many times," she murmured conspiratorially, "but I need a favor."

"Anythin'."

"I need a plane to take this fine family to Canada."

"T' visit relatives?"

"No... a permanent relocation."

"They'll need passports..." the construction project manager noted.

"This would be... an unofficial move, for their safety. Do you have any connections..."

He considered. "Me cousin runs a charter service out o' Inverness. His jets fly t' Toronto twice a week."

"Perfect! Do they take passengers?"

"Nae, 'tis freight, but there's room for off-duty crew t' bed down..."

"Ring him, please, and make the arrangements. I'll pay whatever he requires."

"No, Mustang!" Han leapt from the wooden chair. "I won't allow it."

MacDonough withdrew, not wishing to interfere in a friendly dispute.

Cindi clutching his right hand, and Lance embracing his sore left leg, Han's tone conveyed his angst. "If you're going to be this generous, you must come with us. You're no longer safe here..."

"The important thing is to get you out before our ruse is discovered. I'll worry about myself... later."

The children fell asleep during the journey home in Han's Volkswagen. Curled on their beds, the youngsters never stirred while Mustang and their father packed assorted suitcases with their belongings.

Through the night, Han periodically resurrected the subject of Mustang accompanying them. She cut him off without elaborating.

Rousing Cindi and Lance in the wee hours, the group ate a somber breakfast of oatmeal and juice. Attired in dark colors to not draw attention, they loaded a brick layer's utility van and squeezed into the cab.

Han clutched Mustang's fingers. "Please," he insisted.

"No."

"I won't ask you to use your gift..." he chuckled. "Or why, especially with the helicopter and the gunfire, local police didn't investigate our little... party yesterday."

"That, I can't answer." Yet, putting the pieces together... "Unless those American guns were in the possession of British intelligence, who'd warned off the constabulary."

Han's eyes rolled, a suitable summation of the chaos. Mustang tousled Cindi and Lance's uncombed mops, saluting Han before beating a hasty retreat to Glenn MacDonough's pickup.

"Are ye all right, Your Ladyship?" the older man queried, noticing a stray tear.

"If the Chinese ever catch up to him, he won't survive the torture..."

"He'll ha' nae trouble in Canada. Nae countries bother t' spy on the provinces, because they don't have any secrets t' trade."

"True." She patted MacDonough's arm. "Let's get going."

Mustang didn't have the luxury of catching up on lost sleep as dawn broke over Loch Ness' eastern shore. She had six horses to move from the neighbor's back to their own stalls. Not easy in a summer rain, when hooves stuck in the mud, and trees dripped in their faces.

A veritable walking corpse stumbled into the kitchen to reheat the half-pot of coffee left from... when? She couldn't remember, her brain so taxed.

The stagnant brew didn't get drunk, as it was, because she dropped the ceramic mug on the living room floor, two black-suited, middle-aged men lounging on the green sofa.

Outside the picture window, on the gravel, a silver sedan, the Queen's crest painted on the passenger door.

"Oh, hell..."

"We've been waiting for you most of the night, Lady Neville," said the sandy-haired senior with a Cockney inflection, rising and extending his hand. "I'm Stanley Wilson. This is Bob Fiennes."

Addressing her by her Scottish pseudonym alleviated her anxiety to a degree. He hadn't contacted Ben Espinoza of the FBI.

Fiennes, slightly younger and gaunt, took longer getting to his feet; Mustang noticed the shoe-like cast protecting a swollen appendage. She also recognized him as a minor participant in the previous day's "festivities". A double agent?

"You get spiked playing rugby?" she inquired.

Wilson replied, "A stray bullet caught him during a training exercise."

"Involving a helicopter, maybe?"

Fiennes' scowl affirmed Mustang's supposition.

She gestured the uninvited guests to their seats. "What do you want?"

"Our... agency tracked numerous foreigners into this sector over the past couple weeks," began Wilson. "Their convergence around Loch Ness indicated certain news reports had been blown out of proportion..."

"You mean, the talk of Nessie and miracles?"

"Secret weapons, more precisely. The department which... intercepts certain phone calls notified us of chatter about an individual..."

"Quit beating around the bush, Stan," Mustang spat. "You mean me, and you know it."

"No way you engineered the defeat of the best black op teams east of the Atlantic," grumbled Fiennes.

She shrugged.

Wilson silenced his partner with a glance. "Most of the foreigners have been taken into custody, some gravely injured. Their stories have been transcribed for future reference, and they're in process of being deported. The situation is being discounted as a case of mass hysteria - one chance remark initiating an absurd chain reaction. During the same period, however, the meteorological service forwarded data on weather anomalies..."

Why make excuses? Mustang deliberated. "I'm the world's smallest doomsday device."

Wilson chortled, catching the enigma. Fiennes scoffed at the notion.

"The official consensus is that drilling on a North Sea oil rig triggered seismic tremors off Scotland's coast," said Wilson. "That caused the other phenomena, resulting in broken windows and downed trees, which were misinterpreted by several governments as weapons being tested. We wanted to apologize to you for the inconvenience, and the danger in which you were inadvertently placed."

Mustang could tell Fiennes didn't concur with his associate; she couldn't conceal her own amazement. "Excuse me?"

“We ask that, next time you invite American scientists to conduct atmospheric experiments on your property, you notify us prior to their arrival.”

“Sure,” she gulped. They strode toward the foyer; she called after them, “Does this mean I don’t have to worry about any more... trespassers?”

The senior agent grinned. “Not bearing grenades or dart guns. We’ll be patrolling the estate until Sunday, in case any... slippery characters eluded us. The... wind generator has been disassembled?”

Wind generator, Mustang echoed internally. Then, “Yes. We shipped it back to the States this morning.”

“Good.”

Mustang opened the front door, and Fiennes couldn’t wait to exit. Wilson dawdled, shaking his head in mute chastisement.

“Don’t let it happen again, Lady Neville,” he warned. “I won’t always be around to oblige cousin Glenn and cover for you.”

“Cousin Glenn?”

“My brother owns the charter company shipping your wind generator to Canada. I was bunking at his flat when Glenn rang last night. We’d been scouring the countryside for more spies than I’ve tracked in twenty years of service...”

“You know Bob is one, don’t you?”

“Indeed. How do you know?”

“He was here yesterday. The bullet which fractured his foot came from a helicopter...”

“Shhh,” Wilson hissed. “A Royal Air Force flight lieutenant from Kinloss ordered that strike. When the General finishes with him, he’ll be lucky to scrub pots in the officers’ mess the rest of his tour.”

“Saying thanks isn’t sufficient, Mr. Wilson...”

“No thanks necessary.”

This had been far too expedient a solution to her problem. “Aren’t you... curious about the truth?”

“Glenn says you’re a special young lady. He’s right. Dealing with lies and deception every day, I’ve learned to read evil in a person’s eyes. There is no evil in you, merely... youthful...”

“Stupidity?” she supplied.

He caressed her cheek, then crossed to the Audi where Fiennes leaned against the boot, smoking a cigarette.

“Tell the Libyans they’ll have to send a better man next time!” she hollered, laughing.

The pistol emerged so quickly from within his suit, she hadn't time to slam the steel door. His shot embedded in the lintel.

Wilson relieved Fiennes of the Luger and slapped cuffs on his wrists. "We've been feeding you rope these last few months, and you finally hung yourself," he gloated, shoving the prisoner through the car's rear door.

"Conniving bitch!" Fiennes bellowed at Mustang.

Whatever agency employed Wilson outstripped her at her most conniving, fabricating tales of earthquakes and science experiments to defuse a tenuous situation. Once the silver vehicle disappeared down the meandering gravel drive, Mustang jogged to the stable, saddled Sarge, and rode to Glenn MacDonough's.

"Ye look done in, Your Ladyship," he commented, ushering her into the cozy sitting room. "Ye should be abed."

"Believe me, that's my next stop," she assured him. "I have to know why Stan Wilson came calling this morning."

"Ach, because 'tis his job. I dinnae tell him anythin' he didn't already know when I rang the charter service. The scores o' men toting lethal weapons, crossing me property in your direction. The ghostly manifestations..."

"Ghostly..." she repeated.

"Aye. Rumors o' Boleskine being haunted have circulated since that divil Aleister Crowley owned the place a hundred years ago. While Jock White occupied the place, I saw the loch freeze in mid-summer, and fires ragin' in a relentless downpour. These past six years, I ha' feared for ye, with the stray lightning bolts and destructive winds from nowhere. Ye are a bonnie wee lass, and I dinnae want t' see ye hurt."

So, she chuckled quietly, MacDonough believed nature's response to her commands - and the bizarre rituals held on the hill by Jack Parsons, known locally as Jock White - were manifestations of departed spirits. Of course, Wilson wouldn't abide by such nonsense, so he employed scientific theories to rationalize the inexplicable.

Only Han Feng had been privy to the truth, having witnessed her power first-hand. She wondered if his superiors had put any stock in his accounts, or presumed she utilized a tangible secret weapon.

The answer would remain a mystery; contacting him in Canada would place him in fresh danger.

She thanked her neighbor, who again recommended she get some sleep, and gave Sarge his head to take her home.

The slow ride gave her a chance to see how much damage the foreign spies had done to her estate. Attempts to climb trees for a clear view of the house had snapped limbs; wild flowers and plants were crushed.

“Bastards,” she rumbled, vowing to avoid even the most innocuous human contact to preserve both her estate and her own sanity.