

The Mustang Chronicles:

Military Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

The rumbling rattled insulated window panes and shook the rafters. Elizabeth Duryea, known in the region near Scotland's Loch Ness as Lady Elizabeth Neville, suspected an earthquake as she jolted awake, her auburn tresses tangled on the pillow.

For a moment, she wondered if some dream she'd experienced had caused the phenomenon. Her power over nature, bequeathed to her by Boleskine House's former resident - and her grandfather - Jack Parsons, could have easily brought the structure down on her head, or ravaged the countryside.

A few deep breaths calmed her fears, however. The roar penetrating walls of the Georgian-style mansion could not be mistaken.

Trucks, heavy trucks, in a convoy on the roadway which ran along the lake's eastern shoreline.

Southbound, Mustang guessed.

Members of the British Army en route to field exercises, possibly.

Resigned to consciousness, the young woman rose, pulling a blue terry robe over her Three Dog Night t-shirt and sweatpants.

In addition to the noise, an unmistakable December chill permeated the residence.

She shuffled toward the kitchen, hot chocolate a remedy for the freezing temperature. Then, she intended to bundle herself in a parka and boots, six horses in the barn eager for their breakfast.

The screeching of air brakes disrupted that plan.

No snow had fallen to create hazards on the macadam, Mustang knew, and no reason existed for the convoy to halt in that area.

Unless an emergency forced the stoppage.

Leaping agilely onto Sarge's back without bothering to strap on a saddle, she urged him to a gallop and reached the edge of the property in minutes. She reined the horse behind a row of scrubby, leafless brush, able to see while not being seen.

More than a dozen vehicles of various shapes and sizes, painted with green camouflage, idled among a series of burning flares. Men in black garb and facemasks roused soldiers from their seats with semi-automatic rifles.

This pre-dawn raid reminded Mustang of classic war movies or westerns, where the villains hijacked weapon shipments to their own advantage.

Three plain box trucks were parked in the northbound lane, eight men transferring crates from beneath tarps on the flat beds, while their comrades prepared to execute the prisoners.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang muttered as the safeties were released.

The gunfire deafened her, but projectiles fell short of their marks. She saw soldiers staring down at their own torsos, expecting blood to stain the cloth, while the black-clad thieves checked their triggers.

A command shouted from some British officer spurred the platoon to action, rushing forward and tackling the now-defenseless foes.

Another rich baritone, French accent clear, shouted for his men to retreat into the woods.

“Not my woods,” Mustang countered quietly.

Invisible barriers blocked any attempted escape. A handful of the culprits diverted to the lorries, jumping in the cabs and revving cold engines.

Tires punctured with bullets from the soldiers’ sidearms prevented their forward motion.

A rustling of underbrush to her left signaled Mustang that one individual had eluded capture, sprinting along the road in search of concealment. She urged Sarge in pursuit, running the fugitive to ground 200 yards along the previously electrified fence.

Vines tripped him and encircled his ankles and wrists, reminding the Mistress of Boleskine of a hog-tied calf.

Wild, blue-gray eyes glared up at her through a gap in his knit ski mask. She slid off her mount and exposed his face, recoiling at the long, shaggy brown mane loosed from its pony tail, goateed square chin and straight nose.

He did not appear to recognize her, instead peering at his surroundings, a trapped animal.

“Why do you interfere, *Mademoiselle*?” he barked. “This is not your affair.”

“That may be true, but I wasn’t going to let you kill those innocent troops.”

“Innocent? Bah! They were transporting illegal weapons to terrorists.”

“The British Army?” she scoffed.

“*Oui*. They terrorize freedom fighters in countries around the globe...”

Mustang snorted. “And, what would you have done if I hadn’t interfered?”

“Delivered the shipment to those freedom fighters, giving them an equal chance to defend themselves.”

“Bullshit.” Glancing at the activity up the road, Mustang decided not to hail the commanding officer, who was busy interrogating his captives, while his subordinates handcuffed the lot and reclaimed stolen crates. She lifted her prisoner to his feet, lashing him to the nearest tree trunk.

“You will leave me here to freeze?” he protested.

“I should.” She stuffed the red kerchief from her parka’s pocket in his mouth. “I want to be sure you don’t run off. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

Actually, a quarter hour elapsed while she rode to the stable and saddled Molly and Pietra, leaving Sarge to gorge himself on fresh oats. The tall, lean figure shivered against the moss-covered bark; she wrapped a blanket around his shoulders as she loosed his bonds and instructed him onto his ride.

He made a dash for freedom instead, and found himself enmeshed in thorny branches, howling with pain.

“Try that again, and you won’t be so fortunate,” Mustang warned. “Get on your horse, *now*.”

He complied, head bowed, turtleneck sweater and black jeans torn and dripping with blood. “What will you do with me?”

“By rights, I should kill you, but I’m not entirely heartless.”

They rode together along a packed trail, stopping short of the barn when deft fingers abruptly jerked on Molly’s reins. “*Mon Dieu!*” the baritone swore. “I know this place...”

“Indeed you do, Monsieur Desrosiers. Welcome back to hell.”

Gangster and drug kingpin Andre Desrosiers - who Mustang had years earlier prosecuted for his crimes against Kathleen Fitzwalter and humanity in general - shuddered. “Turn me over to that brainless colonel, *s’il vous plait*.”

“Oh, no.” She dismounted and yanked him from the saddle. “Last time you trespassed here, you obviously ignored the lesson I tried to teach you. School’s open once again and, this time, I’ll pound it into your skull with a hammer, if necessary.”

“You mean that mock trial I dreamed?” the baritone grumbled as she jerked him toward the steel front door.

“So, that’s how you rationalized it?”

“*Oui*. You drugged me; I hallucinated the whole thing.”

Mustang snickered as they crossed the threshold. “Believe that, if you like.”

Early morning sunlight illuminated the dusty foyer. Tossing her parka on the coat rack, she guided Desrosiers toward the bathroom, tossing him two large towels. “I’ll get you a pair of sweats.”

“Peasant garb.”

“Sorry, I don’t own any designer labels.”

She slammed the door, remaining outside in case he decided to bolt. The water running, she heard a series of pain-driven moans. Ideally, a tetanus inoculation would be in order for the thorn pricks, but she wasn’t about to summon a doctor - even if she’d had access to a phone.

Despite the red sweats, brown mop dripping, Desrosiers’ arrogant bearing conveyed the threat of his cunning and strength. Mustang didn’t flinch, ushering him to the living room and depositing him on the green velvet sofa.

“*Merde!*” he swore, his injuries still fresh.

Mustang could have healed them with a word; she resisted.

“You are going to turn me over to the military, or the *gendarmes*?”

Desrosiers pressed.

“Oh, no. They’d go too easy on you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve caused a lot of people suffering in your life, and someone needs to explain the consequences of those actions.”

He guffawed. “You? You scrawny, naive...”

The insults he intended to utter faded as his throat constricted. He gasped for air.

Finally, she released the unseen garotte around his neck. Like a deflated balloon, he sank on the cushions.

“Now, Monsieur.” She yanked him upright. “How many women besides Kathleen did you mistreat since you commenced your ignoble career in the underworld?”

“Dozens,” he croaked, still hoarse. “Hundreds.”

Her hand raked his left cheek, propelling his face into the upholstered arm. When he straightened, blood dripped from his nostrils.

“It’s nothing to be proud of, idiot,” his hostess scolded. “By rights, you should make restitution to each and every one.”

“Never!”

“Typical of your ilk. I suppose your sons have followed in your footsteps?”

“The eldest, *oui*.”

“How many do you have?”

“Five, six. No way to tell.”

“Bastard.”

“*Oui*. I am, as they are.” He rose and strode to the window. “Only now they are in the hands of the British Army.”

“You mean, they came on this raid with you?”

“*Oui*. Jacques and Michel, they are my lieutenants, my trusted right hands. They enforce my proclamations...”

“So, you succeeded in corrupting them?”

“Corrupt? *Non*. They have wealth, respect, their choice of women...”

“Who they treat like property instead of human beings?”

He spun toward Mustang. “Women were created for only one purpose.”

“As Kathleen discovered, to her eternal regret.” Her backhand reddened his other cheek. Such callous disregard for the rights and well being of half the world’s population...

“What about your other children?” she prompted. “Do you support them in any way?”

“The mothers... they... robbed me of my rights as a father, so I do not see them, nor know where they live.”

“Good for them. Who needs a father like you?” Mustang chided, toying with chess pieces on the table beside her cane-backed rocking chair.

This distraction made it possible for Desrosiers to draw an inlaid ivory-handled switchblade from the sweatpant’s pocket and lunge at her.

As his sinewy arm thrust past her midsection, she seized his wrist. Power over nature augmented her grip, so he ended up howling, on his knees, the blade clattering to the floor.

“You’re breaking my arm!” he heaved.

“After our last encounter, you should know better than to make me angry,” she retorted through grit teeth. “I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

Puzzled blue-gray orbs fastened on her pinched features. “Eh?”

“People die when I’m angry. If I read your expression correctly, I think you’re afraid of dying.”

“To kill, you must be heartless,” Desrosiers stated. “I am... you are not.”

She squeezed harder. “Try me.”

“You could no more thrust a knife into my heart than I could... I could... become pope,” He grimaced.

“I don’t need a weapon to kill.”

He squinted at her, his digits paling from lack of blood circulation. “You would use your bare hands? *Impossible!*”

To prove her point, she released him. “Look, ma. No hands!”

The gangster bent double, yowling in agony as a fire ignited in his abdomen and spread through his frame. The plea escaped his lips in a desperate gasp.

“Enough!”

Mustang sank in the rocker, considering chess pieces melted on the board from the force of her will.

“You are a devil!” Desrosiers groaned, gradually straightening as the fiery sensation diminished.

She sighed. “Me? No. More an avenging angel, when faced with unrepentant evil.”

“Now that you’ve had your... revenge, may I go?”

“Are you kidding?” the auburn-haired young woman chuckled. “After that stunt you pulled? Where would you go?”

Elongated fingers retrieved the switchblade and he was retreating toward the door before Mustang could react.

His escape, however, was preempted by the sound of heavy vehicles rumbling along the gravel drive.

“Oh, hell...”

“What is it?” Desrosiers barked as tiles beneath his shoes vibrated.

A glance out the window confirmed Mustang’s suspicions. “The British Army.”

She marveled at her uninvited guest’s abrupt transformation. His bravado and arrogance evaporated like rain in a heat wave.

“You must hide me,” he begged, the steel blade lowered.

She mocked, “Don’t you want to join your sons in prison?”

“You find humor in this...”

“Of course! You’re willing to threaten others at gunpoint, but when you’re threatened with justice, you turn yellow.”

Pounding on the steel front door startled them both.

Desrosiers bolted toward the kitchen, while Mustang composed herself and crossed the foyer.

A squad burst over the threshold before she touched the knob.

“You’re under arrest!” yelled a sergeant as two soldiers grasped her arms.

Three bullets felled the trio from behind her.

II

Mustang whirled on Andre Desrosiers. “You didn’t need to kill them.”

“I just saved you from a fate worse than death,” he countered, marching from the shadows toward the rest of the soldiers, his Glock pistol still aimed.

“Once they got you to their barracks, you would’ve been raped and tortured.”

“That’s not how the world works.”

“In your dreams, *cherie*. You’ve been a hermit too long.”

“I say again, you didn’t need to kill them.”

“And how would you have freed yourself?” Desrosiers queried.

Six more clad in British Army camouflage shouldered their way past dead comrades, semi-automatic rifles at the ready.

Mustang shrugged. “Like this.”

Her lips did not move nor a finger twitch, yet a microburst of wind combined with arcs of electricity to drive the squad from the dwelling. The effect continued as they scurried to their trucks, tires kicking up gravel as the vehicles vanished between the trees.

Desrosiers hovered on the stoop, stunned. “How...”

His hostess drew him inside and secured the deadbolt.

“You know they’ll be back,” he warned.

“Naturally. Men don’t know when they’ve been bested.” As the three corpses disintegrated before his eyes, she relieved him of the pistol. “How ‘bout something to eat?”

Mustache quivering, Desrosiers cocked his shaggy head. “Again with the misplaced humor?”

“Not at all. I’m hungry.”

“Ten minutes ago, you were ready to kill me outright. Now you want to feed me?”

“We’ve got to keep up our strength if we’re going into battle.” The young woman led him to the kitchen, raiding cabinets for plates, glasses and utensils.

“Battle?” He echoed from the doorway.

“Soldiers are taught one thing in basic training: to kill their enemies, real or imagined. You may be their real enemy, but they imagined me one, too. There’s no way to reason with them once they’ve received their orders, so we fight.”

Desrosiers sank on one of the metal dinette chairs. “And die.”

“You surrender too easily,” she scolded. “We won’t die, because I can’t be killed.”

“Nonsense! Everyone dies...”

Mustang paused reaching for a skillet and patted the gangster’s stubbly cheek, giggling when he shied away. “You just don’t understand.”

The conversation lagged as she cooked bacon, eggs and potatoes. She felt him studying her, but could only laugh at his failure to accept the truth.

“Once, I accused you of being a retired illusionist,” he finally spoke when she presented his meal. “My error was in underestimating your skill.”

“Where you made your mistake is believing my deeds are illusions. Look at your wrist.”

He rolled up the right sleeve of his red sweatshirt. Along with numerous puncture wounds from the thorn bushes, sickening black bruises darkened his skin.

“*Mon Dieu!*”

“Indeed.”

As he stared, the deeply tanned flesh healed.

With a gasp, Desrosiers collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

“Some mob boss,” Mustang snorted, resuming her place at the stove. In that instant, she realized she would be the instrument of his death, sooner rather than later, to protect her own existence.

If the British Army captured and questioned him, and he revealed what he’d seen in her company, they would brand him insane, yet launch an investigation that would risk her peace and solitude.

She reprimanded herself for not riding away when she saw Desrosiers’ gang hijacking the trucks.

“You are intrinsically a good person,” came the quiet tenor of Mahatma Gandhi. “If you had not intervened, those innocent soldiers would have been shot.”

“Gandhiji, please. If he wakes up and sees you, things will only get more complicated.”

With a slight bow, the emaciated, bespectacled manifestation dissipated.

A German-accented baritone replaced the father of Indian independence.

“Going against the British Army, my assistance may prove necessary.”

Mustang confronted the noble figure, his military haircut intact though he’d been dead over 60 years. “General, I am very capable of handling any intrusion. In fact, the perimeter has already been secured.”

Erwin Rommel bowed slightly. “I leave it to your... impulsive instincts.”

“Insult noted,” she sniffed. “I plan to be very careful.”

“You’ve taken that pledge many times, my dear.”

“And failed, I know. My intentions, though, have been honorable.”

As the debate continued, Desrosiers roused from his faint. He saw Rommel and swallowed audibly. “*Mon Dieu!*”

“Oh, hell...”

Rommel gazed on the prostrate figure and instantly disappeared.

The gangster slowly regained his feet, supporting himself on the metal tabletop. “That... spectre spoke in German, while you replied in English.” He deliberated silently. “I have spoken to you in French, and you have understood me and responded the same. It makes no sense.”

“Does any of it make sense?” Mustang muttered, using a spatula to load her plate with fried eggs and bacon.

“How can you eat?”

She sat and grasped her fork. “You may think the apparitions unusual. I’m accustomed to them and they don’t bother me.”

“They should! You commune with the dead as with the living, and think it not odd?”

“It’s... my own mistakes that raised these spirits, now my sole friends and steady companions in my solitude,” she mumbled as she chewed.

“Are your other illusions mistakes?”

She grunted, “Most of the time.”

“Then, taking me prisoner was also a mistake?”

The orange juice Mustang gulped spewed onto the floor. She grabbed a paper napkin and dabbed her mouth as she glared at him. “Play this game at your peril, dog. If you attempt to open any door leading out of this house, you will drop dead like a stone.”

Trembling fingers ran through Desrosiers’ brown mane. He pondered the young woman’s statement, lips pressed into a thin line.

“Sit down and eat. Your food’s getting cold,” Mustang instructed.

Plates scraped clean, Desrosier soon found himself idling while the Mistress of Boleskine swirled abundant soap bubbles in the kitchen sink.

“Why didn’t you just leave me to the soldiers?” he prodded.

All motion ceased as she stiffened, sunlight playing on her auburn tresses through the window. “Captivity at their hands would be a lark compared to what I have in store for you. Before you experience freedom again, you will learn how it felt to be imprisoned against your will, abused and humiliated, as you treated Kathleen and so many others.”

“I already know,” Desrosiers confessed. “My uncle... when I was a child...”

“So, instead of breaking the chain, you chose to perpetuate family tradition?” she spat.

“It was the one way to get what I wanted...”

“Idiot!” A tea towel hung from a drawer dried her hands. She smiled with forced compassion, the floor trembling slightly.

“An earthquake?” His baritone quavered with genuine panic.

In lieu of a verbal response, tiles shattered beneath his feet and congealed into hideous claws that crept up his legs, rending his flesh and raising screams from his throat.

“Make it stop, *s’il vous plait!*” he shrieked.

Levitated above the floor, her hazel orbs met blue-grey eyes radiating terror. “How many times did Kathleen beg you to stop, and you ignored her? How many others, you bastard? *How many?*”

A familiar hand jerked her back to ground level and reality. “*Signorina*, this is not how your power is meant to be used,” Francis of Assisi admonished.

“Stay out of this!” she raged. “This repugnant excuse for a man used *his* power to torture and beat women, making it nearly impossible for them to escape...”

“Then, consign him to the authorities, and let justice take its course.”

Desrosiers’ sarcastic grin confirmed Mustang’s appraisal of the situation.

“Nine of ten witnesses would refuse to testify against him, afraid of retaliation by his thugs. Conniving, high-paid shysters would play the jury like a harp and gain ‘not guilty’ verdicts, or bribe them to the same end.” She scrutinized the Little Poor Man and sucked air. “No, Francis. This is the only way to teach him a lesson.”

Not a split second elapsed before her captive’s screams resumed.

Francis vanished, disappointment evident.

This strange emotion firing Mustang’s ire generated a bizarre pleasure. Desrosiers bones could be heard cracking, augmenting his anguished cries.

“What the hell?” A distinctly British voice as the door leading to the yard burst inward.

Desrosiers bellowed, “Jacques! Shoot her!”

The frazzled young man, roadside dirt staining his clothes and matted into his black hair, raised his hands helplessly. “The soldiers confiscated my pistol before I fled.”

“There!” his father directed, gesturing to where Mustang had set the Glock on the kitchen counter.

Jacques reached for the weapon; his hands transformed into useless pulp.

“Jesus Christ!” he swore.

She raised a cautionary index finger. “None of that, now. None of that. Just tell your dad how you managed to escape the Brits.”

“Simple. As they were herding us to the police transport, I ducked under one of the lorries and hid in the bushes until they were gone.”

“What about Marius?” asked Desrosiers.

“I always said he was a fool, Dad. He saw you run and ratted you out to save his own skin.”

Mustang approached the gangster, suspended above the floor, his legs and arms shattered and lifeless. “That’s why the soldiers rushed the house,” she muttered.

“Let me go, *Mademoiselle*,” Desrosiers almost wept, cheeks wet.

He landed on the floor, little better than a lump.

“What about... healing?” he struggled, in vain, to move.

“Oh, you’ll need at least six weeks in traction, then another year of physical therapy, I’m guessing,” she predicted.

“You can’t...”

“The torment will remind you how you hurt so many far worse than this.”

He moaned, “How do you expect me to get to hospital...”

“Jacques can carry you.”

The younger Desrosiers scoffed, “Are you barmy? My hands...”

“Are fine, idiot,” Mustang snarled. “Pick him up and get him out of here.”

Glaring at his suddenly whole appendages, Jacques objected. “Fifty meters in any direction, and we’ll be snatched up like rabbits in a trap.”

Desrosiers allowed his offspring to lift him upright, though his legs could not support his weight and he crashed onto the metal dinette table. “I’d rather be captured than stay here.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, son. There are horses in the barn. We can ride cross country, then steal a car...”

Mustang bristled. “You’re not taking my horses...”

“Try and stop us,” threatened Jacques, adjusting his grip around Desrosiers’ waist.

She slapped his hands away. “Your beloved father can’t even climb into the saddle in his condition.”

“Then, do for him what you did for me.”

“No.”

“If I promise to never harm another woman...” the Frenchman hinted.

Mustang smirked. “It would be a convenient lie, just to win my favor.”

“I’ll pay you a million pounds...”

“Typical. First, I don’t need your money. Second, you obviously haven’t learned anything if you believe money can buy your way out of this.”

Jacques caught his father as the latter slid to the floor, weak and despondent.

“Is there nothing I can say or do...” Desrosiers wept.

The young woman feigned deep thought before answering, “Nope.”

“Elizabeth, a word, if you please.”

She whirled to see Mark Twain, his bushy white hair and mustache impressive, in the doorway. Refocusing on Jacques, she uttered a silent command to nature, sealing the dwelling against escape.

Desrosiers flailed uselessly like a dying fish.

“If you attempt to move,” she warned the son as she followed Twain, “you’ll end up in worse shape than your old man.”

Reaching the living room, Mustang met four solemn faces. She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Once again, you have lost control,” began Gandhi, near the dormant fireplace.

She countered, “I’m fully in control. I can abide just about any behavior, but when a man builds his life on violence against women... He needs to suffer as he made them suffer.”

“You’ve already determined he won’t learn his lesson,” offered Rommel, propped on the arm of the green sofa.

“Then, he will die.”

“Another death added to your total?”

“Those were accidents.”

Francis of Assisi admonished, “Not all.”

“If not accidents in the strictest sense, then necessary,” she justified.

“You know that’s not entirely true,” Twain ventured. “If you won’t learn the lesson we and others have tried to teach you, how can you expect this man...”

“Sam, c’mon. There’s a huge difference...”

“Is there?” Rommel puzzled.

Gandhi shuffled toward her, his voice tremulous. “Mustang-ji, the course on which you have set yourself will warp your soul until it is unrecognizable.”

“My soul, as you call it, was warped the day Jack Parsons fooled me into killing him on that damned altar up the hill!” she whined. “If I could go back and relive that day... relive my life...”

“Would you? And still be true to yourself?” wondered Francis.

“My true self would be living in Montana right now, tending horses...”

Rommel interspersed, “You have horses here that need tending.”

“That’s not what I meant. I wouldn’t be in Scotland, living in a house too big for most families, dealing with needy, stupid people...”

“What about your parents?” asked Twain.

“Why are you trying to confuse me?” the young woman squeaked, sinking on the cane-backed rocking chair.

“You are already confused, Mustang-ji,” observed Gandhi. “We are merely trying to help you acknowledge that confusion, so you may choose your future path wisely.”

Twain extracted a white linen handkerchief from his trouser pocket and passed it to Mustang, quietly weeping into her hands.

In the distance, a whistling noise drew their attention to the window. Rapid footsteps along the hall preceded Jacques Desrosiers’ appearance on the threshold.

“RPG... gentlemen?” he gasped.

Three peace-loving spectres shifted their attention to General Erwin Rommel. “Rocket propelled grenade,” he clarified.

The explosion rattled the walls and sent dirt pounding against panes of glass.

III

While five men dropped to the floor, Mustang leapt from her seat. “The horses!”

She ran from the house before anyone could detain her. Overhead, another projectile left a trail of smoke as it soared toward the buildings.

“Damn you!” she shouted.

The metal casing hit the ground with a dull thud, rendered harmless by her silent command.

Men in camouflage uniforms, positioned equidistant around the perimeter of Boleskine’s property, started dropping, lifeless, into the underbrush.

“Stop it!” bellowed Rommel from the front stoop.

Mustang spun toward him. “Why? They’re trying to kill us!”

“That’s not...”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t that the point of war? One side kills the other?” She strode toward the barn. “This way, no one wastes their precious bullets or weapons!”

The German general who had honed his craft during World War II pursued her, with Gandhi, Francis and Mark Twain on his heels.

As Mustang opened the stalls and shooed six animals from the structure, they waited to confront her.

Rather than deal with their diatribe, she ordered them to vanish as the horses fled into the forest.

Jacques watched from the gravel drive, nearly collapsing in a faint - as his father had done.

“Oh, grow up,” she chided, disintegrating another three incoming RPGs in mid-air.

Directing her undivided attention to the soldiers, explosions could be heard along the fence line.

She’d mistakenly erected a vertical barrier, preventing the British Army from encroaching on Boleskine land, but had done nothing to create a protective ceiling, which allowed the RPGs to be fired over the invisible wall.

Now, the glorified grenades were exploding as soon as they were fired, having nowhere to move.

Jacques jogged toward her. “Heal my father, if you can, so we may protect ourselves!”

“No.”

He clutched her shoulders, to his eternal regret. An electrical shock shot him across the clearing.

Once he recovered his senses, he rose. “What is wrong with you?”

“More than you could comprehend.”

Shrieks from dying soldiers reached their ears. She marched toward the sound.

Jacques dogged her steps.

“Return to the house, unless you want to spend the rest of your life in a military prison,” she stated.

“You’ve made this place impervious to their bullets, their grenades...”

“It’s not a permanent situation. As soon as I can negotiate a peace and get them to leave...”

“You think you can?” the youth queried.

“Any commander worth his salt will wish to preserve the lives of his soldiers.” She pointed through the trees. “Look, there. Already, they’re gathering the dead onto the trucks.”

“How many?”

“A dozen, maybe more.”

“You... are responsible?”

“No, they are responsible. They should not have attacked an unfortified target, thinking their superior strength would force a surrender.”

“You sound like you’ve spent time in the military.”

“No,” Mustang snickered. “Only with a military genius.”

“That... man in Nazi uniform I saw...”

She nodded, auburn tresses falling across her face. “We play a lot of chess.”

“What you plan to do has nothing to do with a game,” Jacques muttered.

“Amen, brother.”

Emerging near the point where a metal gate used to hang from rusty hinges, long since removed by Mustang herself, the Mistress of Boleskine faced down a half-dozen nervous, beefy men aiming semi-automatic rifles at her.

“Where’s your commanding officer?” she demanded.

“Colonel Bainbridge!” one of them yelled, his voice cracking.

The tall, red beret-crowned figure took his time responding to the hail.

“What is it, Corporal?” he barked, irritation obvious.

The younger man waved his weapon toward Mustang, Jacques barely visible behind a thick pine ten yards distant.

“What are you doing on this property?” Bainbridge snarled. “We’re hunting two fugitives...”

She replied, “This is *my* property, and I don’t think your superiors would be willing to pay for the damage you tried to inflict.”

“You mean...” Confused brown eyes squinted at her. “My men don’t miss...”

“Perhaps not, but what they’re firing needs to reach the target first.”

“You mean, we fired short?”

“No...”

A wiry lieutenant stood on tip-toe to whisper in the colonel’s ear.

“What?” the man roared.

Retreating, the junior officer confirmed, “Yes, sir. Some manner of barrier...”

“That’s straight out of science fiction! No one has the technology for a deflector shield of such...”

Mustang felt herself grin. “Can we get down to business?”

Bainbridge scowled in her direction. “What do you want, young woman? I’ve serious matters to discuss...”

“Such as the fugitives who escaped?”

Two strides closed the gap. “You know where they are?”

“If they are turned over to you, will you leave?”

“I... there’s an investigation to be conducted here. Evidence to gather, prisoners to interrogate...” He extended his massive paw and searched for the edge of Mustang’s invisible barrier. “A generator to be located.”

“If I tell you her secret, will you free my father and myself?” Jacques left his concealment, a wicked sneer lighting round features.

Before any answer was forthcoming, he found himself shackled wrist and ankle. “You won’t escape this time!” promised the corporal.

“But... but... she’s the source of this shield!” He struggled valiantly to regain his balance, four soldiers restraining him.

“Her?” guffawed Bainbridge. “That scrawny, little... wisp of a girl?”

Mustang remained silent, aware Jacques’ story sounded absolutely ludicrous, though quite true.

“Where’s Andre Desrosiers?” the colonel huffed.

Jacques averted his gaze, lips pressed together.

“Bring two men, unarmed, and come with me,” Mustang offered.

“Unarmed? Are you barmy?” cried the lieutenant. “They’re terrorists of the worst sort...”

She retraced her route toward the Georgian mansion. “Have it your own way.”

Her rapid gait propelled her from their sight when, suddenly, Colonel Bainbridge signaled the lieutenant and two sergeants to drop their rifles and catch up to her.

“I’ll let you take him, as long as you leave the area immediately,” she said.

The officer sniffed, “I... can’t guarantee that. The investigation...”

“Investigation, my eye. You’ve got all your crates back, and your prisoners. They can be questioned in Inverness, Edinburgh, or anywhere you choose.”

“Why are you so anxious to be rid of us?”

“I’m a solitary sort. I don’t like... intruders.”

Rounding the curve on the gravel drive, the lieutenant halted. “My word! What a gorgeous house!”

“It is what it is,” Mustang sighed.

“You live here alone?”

“I prefer it.” Horses milling at the edge of the clearing distracted her.

“Lend a hand here, won’t you?”

The six restored to their stalls, fresh water and oats available, the group continued toward the steel door, left ajar when Jacques had abandoned his father. From within, a stream of French and English curses could be heard.

Mustang laughed, despite the serious nature of the debacle. She imagined Desrosiers flopping on the tile, pain claiming his muscles and limbs.

She waited until the soldiers had a firm grip on the gangster before healing his broken bones. As he regained strength in his legs and flexed his arms, he realized he could not escape a second time.

“You are a witch, *mademoiselle*,” he grunted, allowing himself to be led toward the exit. “You shall yet feel my wrath...”

A gentle hand on the lieutenant’s arm paused the group. “May I have a moment?”

“I... don’t recommend...”

“Trust me.”

Doubt marred the officer’s countenance, but he signaled the detail to release Desrosiers.

“You want revenge?” Mustang taunted. “Fine. Take it now. It’ll be your only chance.”

“What? Here?” he scoffed.

“As they say in old movies, let’s step outside.”

The lieutenant protested. “There’s too much a chance he’ll make a break...”

“He won’t be able to move any farther than the gravel,” she assured him. “And, in the highly unlikely event he wins this little contest, you can easily recapture him.”

“How...”

“Trust me.”

The sun obscured by incoming rain clouds, neither combatant suffered a disadvantage of being in direct light. They squared off on the drive, Mustang fully content to let Desrosiers exhaust himself.

The butcher knife, from the set on the kitchen counter, slid from his sweatshirt sleeve into his grip. He slashed at her midsection; she didn’t move.

One of the soldiers lunged toward Desrosiers.

Mustang waved him off. “Let this be a fair fight.”

“Fair, how? He outweighs you by 5 kilos,” noted the lieutenant, “and you have no way to defend yourself.”

A spinning roundhouse kick knocked the knife from her opponent’s fingers. It lodged in a nearby tree. “Don’t I?” she snickered.

With a gesture of surrender, the soldiers withdrew.

Desrosiers’ left fist arced toward her nose. She dodged easily.

“You have some fighting skills,” he praised sarcastically. “In my line of work...”

“You see where your line of work has landed you.” A coffee-grinder kick flipped him on his back, lungs heaving. She hinted, “Had enough?”

“You’re dead, woman,” came the thickly-accented baritone through grit teeth. “To trick me into believing... you drugged my food!”

“No need for artificial stimulants.”

Pea-sized hail rained upon them, causing Desrosiers to shield his face. As he scrambled to his feet, the soldiers sought shelter beneath the eaves of the house.

Moist cloth failed to wipe moisture from his cheeks. “Damn you!” he squealed, attacking like a madman.

She side-stepped and he crashed, nose down, on the stone surface. Rising slowly, blood dripped from his torn flesh.

“I’m waiting for you to do something intelligent,” Mustang prompted.

Pebbles flew at her; she diverted them without so much as a flick of her wrist.

That merely riled Desrosiers more, and he leapt at her.

It required no command of nature to avoid the assault. Again, he slammed to the ground.

“Some people never learn,” Mustang concluded, offering the prostrate form to the soldiers.

“How so?” puzzled the squat sergeant, inching forward.

“In addition to being what you chaps would call a right scoundrel, Monsieur Desrosiers has an abusive nature when it comes to women. He thinks violence is the only way to keep them in line, including causing black eyes, bruises and broken bones.”

“Bastard!” hissed the lieutenant.

The trio plucked Desrosiers from the dirt, proceeding to lay into him with their fists and knees until he could not stand on his own.

Mustang studied his face, twitching with anguish and derision.

“So, in the end, you let others fight for you?” oozed from his bloodied mouth as the soldiers held him upright.

“Not at all. They looked eager to have some fun, to give a criminal back some of his own. Why shouldn’t I let them?”

“If they hadn’t been here...”

Mustang breathed, “You’d already be dead.”

The soldiers practically dragged Desrosiers toward the road, where truck engines revved. Mustang, having retrieved her parka from the foyer, accompanied them, if only to ensure they left the vicinity, restoring her tranquility...

Until the next trespasser disturbed her tenuous idyll.

A sense of déjà vu washed over her when three shots popped and the soldiers dropped in their tracks. Desrosiers, too, fell due to his weakened state.

“Oh, hell...”

A lithe youngster swung off the branch. Clad in stolen military camouflage, his shaved head gave Mustang the impression of a tattooed cue ball. The designs ranged from runic letters to a coiled rattlesnake.

“Marius!” Desrosiers gurgled as he rolled onto his spine. “Jacques said you...”

“Jacques is dead,” came the pronouncement with a hint of Irish accent. “I wanted a word before you join him.”

Desrosiers hoisted himself on his left elbow to gaze at his son. “Then, you did...”

“Of course, I rolled you over, Father,” snapped Marius. “This whole operation was a trap to eliminate you and Jacques, so I could take over in London.” He squatted by his father’s side. “You ignored the changing times, the myriad of opportunities to diversify and increase the cash flow. I couldn’t sit by and let you waste...”

“Traitor!” The elder relaxed, defeated, sinking onto the ground and staring at the clear sky. “Do what you must do, and may you choke on all that money.”

Marius straightened, aiming the pistol.

It melted in his hand.

Stunned, he released the weapon as it dripped onto the ivy-covered ground. Furtive blue eyes glanced toward Mustang.

“You! What the devil...”

“No devil,” chuckled Desrosiers. “An avenging angel.”

“Nobody’s killing anybody... else, until I get to the bottom of this,” she declared, confronting Marius, whose glove had burned through to flesh due to the heat of the liquified metal.

His attention returned to his father. “You’re no peeler. You can’t do anything...”

“Never assume,” Desrosiers advised.

“Father, you’re not saying...”

Despite his wounds, the man shrugged.

“Now, just how did you set this trap to catch your father and brother?” Mustang queried.

“Once the plan was set, I paid a discreet visit to Colonel Bainbridge. He arranged for the crates to be loaded with explosives on electronic fuses. I would be ‘captured’ while the rest of the team escaped with their booty. Then, I would detonate the charges at the appropriate moment, wiping them out.”

“Clever,” praised his father.

Mustang silenced him with a glance. “But, something went wrong.”

“To say the least! The soldiers got the advantage of us through some... fluke...”

Desrosiers interjected, “No fluke.”

The bald head whipped around. “You mean, you double-crossed...”

An elegant index finger waggled toward Mustang.

“What have you to do with this?” Marius prodded.

The young woman’s chin drooped. “You’re trespassing on my property. I don’t...”

“You mean, our guns misfiring - though I loaded the magazines with blanks - the foul-ups, those soldiers mysteriously dropping dead while they fired the RPGs...”

“And, she won’t let you kill me, either,” Desrosiers remarked. “She’s reserving that privilege for herself.”

“What!” Marius stormed.

The buck knife practically leapt from beneath his shirt, slicing the air in her direction. A second later, he lay on the ground beside his father, trussed up with thorny vines.

IV

A British Army platoon burst through the trees, rifles held at port-arms. They halted at the sight of their fallen comrades.

Colonel Bainbridge brought up the rear. He removed his beret upon noticing the dead.

Mustang Duryea could tell he was praying by the way his lips moved.

“Who did this?” the officer inquired, staring at her through moist eyes.

She nodded toward Marius Desrosiers.

“What about the others?”

“Which others?” Mustang replied.

“The men on the highway, and the three who went to the house...”

“If you’re referring to the soldiers who were firing on an unarmed position... they died from their own foolishness.”

“I ordered the strike!” Bainbridge barked.

“Then, you should have known better.”

“This man” - he indicated Andre Desrosiers - “escaped our custody after attempting to steal our weapons. We had every right...”

“Bullshit.”

He exhaled audibly. “And the three?”

“They were shot by the man you were pursuing.”

“Where are their bodies?”

The elder Desrosiers guffawed. “She cremated them.”

The prostrate gangster recognized fear and doubt in Bainbridge’s wrinkled features.

“I’m not kidding. The bodies are gone.” He attempted, unsuccessfully, to straighten. “Without a trace.”

“Their ID tags?” the colonel whispered.

“Melted into dust.”

The attention of all present shifted to Mustang.

“You need to leave,” she instructed, retreating along the trail. “Take these bastards with you.”

From her concealment behind a stand of oaks, she observed the dignified way in which the soldiers lifted the corpses, and the undignified way they shackled the two Desrosiers and dragged them through the underbrush.

Trudging to Boleskine House, Mustang tried to ignore the niggling sensation she hadn’t seen the last of them.

The sound of boots on packed dirt reached her ears. At the front door, she waited for Colonel Bainbridge to reach her.

“What is it?” she puzzled.

He saluted casually. “I have a few questions.”

“More than a few, I imagine.”

She led him indoors, shedding her parka on the floor. They settled in the living room, with Mustang in the cane-backed rocker and the battalion commander on the green sofa.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any coffee on the stove, would you?” he began.

“Don’t drink it, as a rule.”

“I haven’t had any since yesterday.” He fidgeted on the cushions. “We were supposed to be in Glasgow for breakfast. You can see how that worked out. Bloody idiots.”

“Your questions?” his hostess urged.

“What happened to my men?”

“They died.”

“But, how?”

“The three you sent here were shot by Andre Desrosiers. The others...”

Fumbling with his beret, Bainbridge muttered, “Is it true, what he said, about you cremating them?”

“If they’d been left where they dropped, the stink would’ve been horrendous.”

“You could have summoned the coroner...”

“Look, Colonel. I’m not into dealing with people. I live in blessed isolation - for the most part - and shun the company of anyone with an agenda.” She rose. “You should be on your way.”

He didn’t budge. “Not yet. There’s something going on...”

“Of course, there is. It’s plain and simple. Your convoy was ambushed by a group of London thugs, you captured them thanks to one of them ratting out his own father, but then things went south very quickly.”

“That’s what I can’t figure out.”

“And, if I have a say in it, you never will.”

For that matter, she had just dictated how the British Army officer would remember this day, along with the surviving members of his command. As for the deceased: they would be lauded as heroes.

She escorted him from the mansion and kept him under scrutiny until he vanished past the curve in the gravel drive. From that point, he would recall nothing of her interference.

Her thoughts turned again to Desrosiers and his son. She could wipe their memories, as well...

Better they should die now than remain an enduring uncertainty.

“That would truly make you a murderer,” came Gandhi’s voice from the foyer.

“I could, technically, be convicted of quite a few murders,” she countered, dodging the blockade.

“This is no time for a debate.” Erwin Rommel seized her arm and pulled her outside. “Listen.”

Gunfire, shouts and curses reached her ears.

She gulped, “You don’t mean...”

“They are quite ingenious, that pair,” he commented.

“But, they despise each other.”

“That kind of emotion falls by the wayside in moments of desperation.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang resisted the temptation to investigate the noise.

“What if I simply blow up the trucks, and let the Inverness constables find their bodies washed up on the lake shore?”

“How heartless!” remonstrated Mark Twain.

“Andre and his son are the ones with no hearts. They dragged me into this...”

Rommel smirked. “No one dragged you into anything. You ran into it, your eyes wide open...”

“The secret to preserving your safety and solitude is to ignore the world around you,” Gandhi philosophized. “Let human beings go about their awful business, stealing, killing, *ad infinitum*.”

“You dare say such a thing, the Father of Nonviolence?” the young woman murmured.

“I addressed the needs of my own people. I never tried to change the whole world.”

“I’m not...”

Francis of Assisi appeared beneath the kitchen lintel. “Even trying to change the heart of that one man, you violated the very tenets to which you ascribe after each misadventure.”

“He abused Kathleen, and how many other women? By rights, he should be in prison...”

“And, not just for those crimes, but for importing and distributing illegal drugs,” noted Rommel, “among numerous other crimes.”

“Then, his demise is justified, since any jury worth their salt would convict him and sentence him to death,” Mustang rationalized.

Francis protested, “You cannot presume...”

“Setting yourself up as judge, jury and executioner...” Gandhi stated.

“Go away!” Mustang squealed, ducking into the living room and flopping on the sofa.

More than an hour, she lay with her face in her hands, sobbing, confused. Yet again, she’d created chaos and had no real idea how to rectify the mess.

When she sat up, the sun cast its final rays through the window. She hoped the British Army and their trucks had long since departed Loch Ness for whatever destination they saw fit, their fake cargo reclaimed by whatever agency organized such ruses.

Erecting round-the-clock barriers around the perimeter of the 47-acre Boleskine property might serve as the necessary deterrent for any future trespassers...

She could not, however, deny the fact her own curiosity had triggered this fiasco.

“I’m the one who should be dead,” she sighed aloud.

From the shadows, an Irish-accented baritone offered, “I can arrange that.”

“Oh, hell...” She strained to see the camouflage-clad form. “Marius?”

“Indeed. I have placed my father in the bedroom on the left. He is seriously wounded and, if you refuse to render him aid, I will kill you.”

“You’ll kill me anyway, if I guess right.”

“Very possibly. Should you allow us to borrow horses for our escape, once he’s well enough to ride, I may be lenient.”

“Bullshit.”

Nonetheless, Mustang preceded the young man to the guest room, where a make-shift bandage around Desrosiers’ torso failed to stop profuse bleeding.

“He was shot?” she asked, dropping beside him on the mattress.

“That damned colonel. He came raging through the woods, ordering his men onto the trucks, and when Father refused to be loaded into the ambulance...”

“How did you escape the handcuffs?”

Marius laughed. “Father taught Jacques and me that trick when we were children. Both he and I had our hands free well before we reached the road...”

“And you commandeered a rifle and shot the remaining soldiers?” she ventured.

“Most of them. The last survivors fled toward the town we drove through this morning.”

“And your gang?”

“Headed to London in one of the lorries.”

“Do they know you betrayed them?”

He sneered, his shaved head reflecting faint light from the bedside lamp.

Andre Desrosiers moaned piteously. Mustang couldn’t suppress her chuckle, equating his agony to that he’d inflicted on so many women.

“Can you help him?” Marius queried.

To let him be, death would be a long time coming, she realized. And messy, with blood already seeping through the bandage onto the quilt. She could hasten his end, or heal his ravaged organs...

What happened next, not even Mustang anticipated.

Marius’ own buck knife, with which he’d earlier threatened the Mistress of Boleskine, sailed through the air and lodged in its owner’s chest. As the younger Desrosiers sank to his knees, Mustang whirled toward the door, where Jacques, his shirt drenched in blood, clutched the wood frame to prevent himself from collapsing.

This unholy triumvirate would die together, thanks to their dark ambitions.

“You could heal them,” suggested Gandhi.

“No way in hell,” she answered.

Andre lingered barely five minutes; Mustang refused to relieve his pain, allowing every last twinge to imprint itself on his memory.

For, given her dealings with the four manifestations who kept her company, she knew he would take those memories with him into the afterlife and, perhaps, feel some remorse for the anguish he'd caused others.

Boots in the hall shuffled to a stop outside the bedroom. Colonel Bainbridge's beret brushed the lintel as he entered, assessing the corpses.

"We've been trailing these fugitives," he stated, no recognition of Mustang in his blue eyes. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes." She feigned fright, allowing a tear to trickle down her cheek. "They burst in on me, wanting me to tend this man's wounds..."

No lie.

"We'll take them off your hands." Six men filed in from behind him, pairs scooping up the bodies and lugging them from the house.

Mustang accompanied Bainbridge to the door.

"You're safe now, ma'am. Do you need me to notify anyone, to come and stay with you? This must've been quite an ordeal..."

"I'm fine, sir. Relieved that it's over and done."

As she shot the deadbolt and moved into the living room to monitor the solemn procession along the gravel drive, she felt herself smiling. No truer words had she spoken in ages.

"You were fortunate," said Francis, arranging chess pieces for a new game.

"How so?" She sank on the cane-backed rocker. "Fortunate that I wasn't directly responsible for killing those men?"

"They're dead, regardless of your actual responsibility. From the first, you wished them dead."

"Then, why fortunate?" she pressed the emaciated Italian saint.

Erwin Rommel supplied the answer. "That the entire British Army didn't overrun the property and raze it to the ground."

"That wouldn't have been my fault. If Andre hadn't..."

"Blaming others is a failure to acknowledge one's own culpability," said Mark Twain, lounging on the green sofa. "You are like a magnet, attracting trouble with every step."

She bristled. "Are you saying I should never again exercise my horses, locking myself away..."

"You need to learn self-control." Francis.

"I know."

Rommel knelt beside the chair. “Ideally, from a strategic standpoint, what you should have done when you heard the rumpus...”

“Is mind my own business,” the young woman supplied.

“Not necessarily. When you saw Desrosiers escaping, you could have tripped him up, certainly, then attracted the soldiers’ attention with a whistle or outcry.”

“And spent the rest of the day being interrogated by that colonel?”

“Better than fending off grenades and gunfire.”

Francis moved a white pawn. “If you wish to refrain from using your power, then you must avoid situations where... you feel it is necessary.”

Frustrated, she cleared the board with a swipe of her arm. “Then, cage me in a tower like Rapunzel, so no one can reach me!” she wept.

“No need, if you learn to say no - both to yourself and others,” said Gandhi.

Rising, she scanned the four ethereal faces before stomping from the dwelling in favor of the barn.

With horses, saying no wasn’t an issue, she mused as she refilled oat buckets and water troughs. After wandering through the forest during the barrage of grenades, each of the six needed a good grooming.

Tending these gentle creatures’ needs took her until well after sunset.

She didn’t mind her muscles aching or the overwhelming weariness. Being nuzzled by Pietra or Sarge, gently brushing her Arabian... this was the ideal life.

For a brief moment, she missed Montana or, better, the horses on her family’s ranch in Montana. Heartbeat, her pinto, and the wild herds Joe Duryea’s hired hands broke in the corral each spring...

Yet, she grasped that some human beings mistreated animals, just as others mistreated women and children.

With a word, she could make it stop.

She didn’t need the wise companions to advise her against such actions.

As she kissed each horse before parting, Mustang hoped she would one day be able to develop that self-control she so severely lacked, and live alone, in peace.