

The Mustang Chronicles:

Metaphysical Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

Of all the days to oversleep!

Mustang Duryea chided herself as she shrugged on her parka and rushed out Boleskine House's front door. The horses needed food and water, and by ignoring the alarm clock, she'd neglected them.

At a jog, she crossed to the newly reconstructed barn, now accommodating only three animals. The young woman heaped additional guilt upon herself for the many times she'd resolved to never leave the grounds, then broke the vow. The fire - ironically started by a lightning bolt - was the result of her latest lapse. She'd let John Barrymore coax her to Marrakesh and the Continent for a week...

Her pace faltered upon glimpsing a stick-thin figure in black denim jumpsuit standing near trees casting eerie shadows on the gravel drive. She was accustomed to tourists roaming the grounds in daylight hours, but not usually so close to the buildings.

The way he stared, eyes sunken in a hairless cranium, disturbed her, as well.

"There's nothing here worth seeing. Why don't you move along?" she challenged.

"So, you're the one."

Oh, hell, Mustang grumbled inwardly. Another needy soul seeking a favor...

He moved toward her, with a liteness belying his fragile appearance. She retreated, knowing deadbolts on the steel-reinforced door would keep her safe.

"Look, Mister. I've neither the time nor the energy to help you, or rescue you, or finance repairs to your car. Technically, you're trespassing on private property..."

"Your grandfather welcomed me frequently as a guest."

Not what the redheaded American expected.

"My grandfather?"

"Jack Parsons."

"You *knew* him?"

"It might not have been considered a friendship using the common definition of the word. A better term would be 'associates'."

This aroused Mustang's suspicions. "Business associates?"

"If you can call... occult pursuits business." His path converged with hers a few feet from the mansion's threshold. "I'm surprised you don't recognize me from the description he recorded in his journals."

Rocket scientist Jack Parson's private journals were hidden in Mustang's study, protected from the likes of FBI or foreign agents. She hadn't cracked the covers since Peter O'Donnell returned them to her after... her father died.

"Sorry, it's been awhile..."

Thin lips parted in a toothy grin. "I believe he used words like 'scarecrow' and 'skeletal', among others. He called me 'Old Ned'."

The reference was vaguely familiar. "My grandfather's been dead nearly ten years."

"I know."

"Then, why..."

"I came to warn you about impending trouble."

"That's not news. It seems every day..."

His spindly fingers clutched her shoulders with astonishing strength. "That's not what I mean. I've been... monitoring your activities since... Jack's final ritual. I realize you didn't have any formal training, but few enjoy that luxury. It's mostly experimentation and, I must admit, your experiments have been reckless and catastrophic."

There had to be more.

"Carousing with Jack Barrymore could've exposed you to unsavory elements..."

Mustang bristled, trying to wriggle free of his grasp. "How'd you..."

"I saw the two of you in that small Lisbon café, just before he... transported to alternate realms."

"But, no one recognized him..."

"Fact is: I knew him personally, decades ago in California. His astrologer and I... consulted on many aspects of his chart."

"Then, you must be really ancient," remarked Mustang.

"A tremendous understatement, my dear. If I told you I'd visited this domicile long before Jack Parsons occupied it, would that surprise you, too?"

The name of Boleskine's most infamous owner popped into her head. "Crowley?"

"Indeed. His endeavors amounted to little more than a child playing with dynamite, and historians rightly denounce him as a scoundrel."

"How old *are* you?"

"Four hundred fifty, give or take."

Mustang sank on the stoop, her knees suddenly gelatin. Insistent hands raised her upright and led her into the Georgian-style dwelling, where he settled her on the living room's green sofa and inspected his surroundings.

“I can’t say much for your taste in decor,” he commented.

She grimaced.

“I haven’t come to educate you regarding the finer things in life, however. I’ve come to ensure you don’t continue along your present path.”

“The best way to accomplish that is to relieve me of this power...”

“Oh, no, young lady. When the moment comes for you to pass along your heritage, it will be for you to determine. No one can deprive you of your gift.”

“Damn!”

“But, I *can* teach you how to use it properly.”

“Barrymore tried to convince me living as I chose would solve the problem. Peter O’Donnell gave me the best advice in the world: do positive things with it. I’ve tried everything, but can’t control my impulsive tongue.”

Recessed brown orbs glared at her. “You will learn. If it takes the next century, *you will learn.*”

“I’m... willing, as soon as I tend to the horses.”

“Admirable you are taking responsibility...”

“I *always* take responsibility,” snapped Mustang, rising. “Even for my mistakes. I’ve expended more energy rectifying errors than causing the problems in the first place.”

“Believe me, I’m fully cognizant of that fact. And, yet, the balance is never completely restored.”

“I’m fully cognizant of *that* fact,” she echoed, venturing into the chill October air.

Old Ned observed her activities from the window. The Mistress of Boleskine sensed a mastery of the arts once practiced by Aleister Crowley and Jack Parsons, far surpassing either. As she scooped oats from the bin and dumped buckets of water into the troughs, she patted each horse’s neck and promised to exercise them later in the day.

Mustang shed her coat and preceded the elder into the kitchen, offering him breakfast - or lunch, given the hour.

“A slice of toast and juice will suffice,” he replied.

“A bird couldn’t survive on that,” Mustang objected, selecting a cast-iron skillet off the rack. “You’ve traveled far, you need something more... filling.”

“Thank you, no. Heavy foods diminish the efficacy of magickal endeavors.”

She got the hint, replacing the cooking implements. Four slices of bread browned in the toaster, she presented them on a plate, with butter and jam, filling tumblers with orange juice.

They ate in silence, Mustang extremely uncomfortable. Ned exuded an aura of knowledge and power unlike any she'd previously encountered. His ominous demeanor also rattled her.

Wiping crumbs from his withered chin, he then propped his elbows on the table. "You mentioned earlier wishing to achieve positive goals with your power."

"True."

"Why do you not succeed?"

"I... don't know. Every positive action seems to trigger negative results."

"But, you don't comprehend the underlying reason."

"Underlying... It never occurred to me there could be an underlying reason."

He flipped the plate upside down, tracing the base with his fingertip. "Imagine this is Earth."

"Okay," she agreed hesitantly.

"How extensive is your knowledge of science?"

"I was lucky to graduate high school."

Ned sighed. "Then, we'll begin with the basics. The atmosphere surrounds the planet, correct?"

She nodded.

"The layer closest to the ground is the troposphere. It's the largest of five."

"Okay."

"Next is the stratosphere."

Mustang had heard the term before.

"Like the troposphere, negative energies - being generated at an amazing rate by creatures inhabiting the planet - lay like a pall atop every living thing. Positive energies must fight their way from the upper levels through this veritable fog, in order to achieve the intended ends."

"I... never considered that aspect of it."

"Few have. There are so many sources of negative energies: greed, ego, ambition, laziness, organized religion..."

The young woman chuckled at the last.

"You don't agree?" he prodded.

"Oh, I do. I do. If some clergyman heard us talking right now, he'd call us children of Satan, or some such nonsense."

"Precisely. Their scope is very limited, and what they don't understand, they automatically condemn. That condemnation only reinforces the negativity dragging enlightened beings into the dust."

“So, when I tried to save a man from falling off a ladder, for instance, that positive act was hampered by the negativity of those nearby?”

“Indeed. It’s like throwing a ball at a brick wall. No matter how hard you try, the ball will not penetrate, due to the wall’s density.”

“So, how do we fix it?”

Ned inclined his head slightly. “I shall teach you.”

The opportunity to curtail the disasters wrought by her inadvertent mutterings, based on this bizarre individual’s explanation, intrigued Mustang. Monitoring every utterance didn’t work - an inconvenient phrase always managed to slip out. Meditation calmed her, but only temporarily. Martial arts focused her concentration, also for mere moments. Living full-tilt, as she had in her travels with John Barrymore, had dispersed the constant nervousness experienced when away from Boleskine - and, occasionally, in her own house. She’d paid for that indulgence, as if the negative energies sought revenge for her enjoying innocent amusements.

Restoring some degree of normalcy to her daily existence would be a welcome respite from the continual anxiety and near fright whenever tires crushed the gravel on the drive, or a knock rattled the door. Not having to suspect every man of having ulterior motives would be a definite relief.

“Are you ready?” Ned wondered.

“I think I am.”

Steadying himself against the table as he stood, he growled, “You must have no doubts about the course on which you are to embark. You must *know* you are ready.”

“I want to be ready, but I know I’m not... book smart. If this training will involve reading textbooks and taking quizzes...”

“There are many texts, to be sure. Book stores in every city are rife with such trash, authored by those capitalizing on youngsters’ interest in anything to which their parents object. Better those trees had been left to mature...”

“What about the ancient writings my grandfather claimed were so helpful in his quest?”

“Ah, good ol’ Jack. He came closer to absorbing metaphysical truth while toying with explosives in the Arroyo Seco than in those prolonged rites. I’ve seen many through the centuries delude themselves, as he did, that reciting Enochian formulae, lighting candles and wearing embroidered robes would transform the world.”

“If you believe that, why is it he... was able to transfer his power to me?”

“He transferred nothing, my dear. You already possessed the power. You must’ve guessed as much after meeting that pirate Sean Forbes, the Parson. Like musical talent, or artistic tendencies, an affinity with the natural forces is hereditary. Jack simply... introduced you to the elements, and nature has responded in kind.”

“You mean, even if I hadn’t... killed him, I would’ve ended up like this?” Mustang shuddered.

“The gift might have lain dormant until adulthood, but it would have manifested eventually.”

“Wreaking even more havoc?”

“Potentially.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Occultists are habitually secretive with non-initiates,” Ned answered. “He was also quite old, though his body didn’t show it. He was tired, having waited fifty years to see the fruits of his most sacred endeavor.”

“The Moonchild.”

“What he called the Moonchild. Crowley’s ambiguous records spurred many crackpots to mimic his follies. As I said, Jack discovering a means to propel rockets into space was, by far, a more successful ritual than spending nine days locked in his bedroom with that idiot Ron Hubbard and whatever women appealed to them.”

Mustang contemplated this revelation. That the power hadn’t been forced unwillingly upon her - instead unwittingly sparked into action - might make a difference in how her life progressed from that point. Still...

“One more question, if I may,” she ventured.

“The more questions, the more you will learn.”

The prospect had haunted her, kept her awake nights. “Am I responsible for those who’ve died since this... awakening?”

II

Ned croaked, “Be analytical, and decide for yourself.”

“It’s... too painful.”

“Honesty with oneself is the foundation of positive magick. Far too many have deceived themselves they were noble and righteous, when they were only seeking fame and power.”

Mustang bowed her head contritely, fighting tears. Lyndon Bixby’s untimely fate had never been far from her mind. She could not deny responsibility

for the knife plunged into his torso. Had she not naively attempted to prevent his injuries from the fall off the ladder at the Helena, Montana library, he would still be alive.

Rick Shimoto... she couldn't be so sure. Had she not accidentally transported him to Japan, he might've finished his blacksmithing at the Duryea ranch that same day, gone on his way, and never blown the tire which caused his accident. Or, not. News accounts hadn't detailed why the tire had blown - whether a nail punctured it, or the tread was just worn. The former might be tied to the time frame of their trip; he wouldn't have run over the nail on that particular highway if they hadn't made the journey. The latter was pure chance, and could've happened any day.

If she hadn't antagonized bank robbers in a Canadian restaurant, Cal Simmons wouldn't have leapt in front of her, taking the bullet which she otherwise would've stopped cold.

The psychotic Wilfrid Bailey, aka Jonas Fairchild, had to be her fault. If he hadn't escaped from custody and sought her out, the authorities wouldn't have had to chase him through the wilderness...

Then again...

"Don't try to justify or make excuses," Ned admonished.

The young woman retorted, "I'm not. There are so many factors..."

"You must determine whether, had you not interacted with these people, they would still be alive."

"Who can say as much?"

"Don't concern yourself with others."

Mumbling between grit teeth, Mustang envisioned Jim Neville's singular features, the lock of ebony hair which flopped over his forehead, his smile. Every bullet which riddled his body outside the California convenience store had her name written on it.

Another tenuous case: Peggy Escovar. Already a senior citizen when Mustang and Francis of Assisi crossed her path, had the Mistress of Boleskine not offered her use of the horses, she might not have expired in the barn, the saddle too heavy for her aged frame. Yet, as active as she'd been, Peggy might've died moving furniture in the small cabin she'd had constructed on a vacant stretch of property.

Scottish First Minister Sloan MacIntosh. No contest, there. If they'd not met, his golf clubs would've remained in storage, and he'd never been struck by lightning on the links.

Not so with Jerry Richards. The dancer/vaudevillian would've been on the plane to Belfast with his fellow performers, regardless of their engagement.

The last Lord Guthrie, Hugh Callum, wouldn't have been clubbed to death in prison if Mustang hadn't flushed the manor's ghosts, and exposed his uncle's murder, resulting in the nobleman's arrest.

"Not a laudable track record," lamented Ned.

"Which is why I've isolated myself..."

"Ineffectively." He shuffled to the kitchen door. "Do not dwell on the failures; work to eliminate them. Come."

Mustang hurried to Ned's side, offering him her parka. "You'll freeze out there."

"Thank you, no. My body reacts neither to heat nor cold."

"How is that possible?"

"By maintaining personal equilibrium. Air temperature increases and decreases as nature responds to the influx of negative energies near the planet surface. Thus, the proliferation of violent weather in recent decades."

"That... actually makes sense."

"Of course, it does. So few grasp the concept, however, the dynamic cannot be changed until humans engage in a wholesale mindset conversion."

"Not any time soon."

"Sadly. In the interim, establishing unshakable inner balance insulates the mage against these fluctuations."

"Like wearing a coat."

"Exactly."

Mustang followed Ned into the blustery October afternoon, locking the deadbolt while he hiked toward the trail leading to Jack Parsons' rotting altar.

"Why here?" she puzzled, climbing the windswept hillock.

"Your grandfather knew why, though his... ridiculous strutting would've made an audience laugh. When training, or doing serious workings, the area closest must be clear of idle spectators or dangerous obstacles."

"Ah."

A multi-colored pebble flew to his hand from the underbrush. Flipping his palm skyward, he released the object; it slowly levitated to a height of ten feet. He directed it down the slope and back, eventually depositing it at her feet.

"Can you do as much?" he probed.

Confidently, she replied, "Sure."

When she extended her arm, he gripped her wrist, studying the still-fresh burns from her last trip on a lightning bolt. “Do you realize the damage you do traveling in this manner?”

“How... do you travel?”

“Originally, by horse, then boat, car and, lately, jumbo jet.”

“The horses, I get, but the rest - makes me sick to my stomach.”

“You’re making yourself ill doing this.” He thumped the wound; she flinched. “These burns are more than skin deep. Your muscle tissue, blood cells and bone marrow have been scarred...”

“I... never imagined.”

“Consciousness of the consequences of every action is imperative, my dear. Even unseen, unimagined consequences.”

“I’ll... remember that.”

“Now, pick up the stone.”

Her entire body tensed; the rock fragment might’ve weighed a ton. It did not budge, no matter how she strained. Finally, she sank on the frosty grass, exhausted, glaring at Ned. “What’s the big idea?”

“I’m not hampering you in any way.”

“But...”

“The stone does not move because negative energies hamper your commands. With that awareness, your control must increase.”

“If that’s the case, even without that awareness, I shouldn’t have been able to do what I’ve done...”

“Your spur of the moment directives cut through the negativity like a knife. Once they regrouped, they combined to undo the good. Now that you’re concentrating, the brick wall will not so easily be subdued.”

“So, if I randomly lit that old maple tree on fire...”

He clamped his fingers over her mouth. “Yes, yes. Impulsive magick has an immediate impact, with severe ramifications; true magick comes more slowly, without the lingering aggravation.” He retreated two paces. “Try again.”

In Mustang’s estimation, raising the pebble amounted to swimming a lake of thick, cloying mud, or hoisting a 300-pound barbell. “How do you... offset the resistance?” she gasped.

“You don’t. You can’t. You must merge with it, feel its ripples and flow and, like sawing wood with the grain, execute a precise maneuver.”

Visualizing Ned’s example was simple for a young woman who’d grown up splitting logs and watching ranch hands cut planks for corral fences, or posts on

which barbed wire was tacked. She'd witnessed trunks shatter when the blade missed its mark.

No proud smile claimed her lips as the chunk moved an inch before rolling back to the brambles. Mustang might've been a washrag completely rung dry. "I don't know about you, but I need some food," she concluded, her shirt cuff mopping rivulets of sweat from her face.

"You may be right," admitted Ned. "A body must gradually adapt to aescetic customs."

Together, they returned to the house, where Mustang fell asleep on the living room sofa before eating anything. She didn't awake until after sunset, exasperated at a second incidence of neglecting the horses in one day.

"I've taken care of them," the mage announced, toying with chess pieces on the inlaid table beside the cane-backed rocking chair.

"Thanks."

"Do you raise the dead because you are lonely?"

The blunt inquiry startled her. "I... suppose."

"Once you have mastered the theory and use of magick, you will need not play the hermit. You will pass freely through cities and villages, without the residents recognizing you."

"You mean, the... external manifestations every time I... screw up will stop?"

"Firstly, you won't 'screw up'. Secondly, you will no longer be fighting against the negative energies, so - yes - the winds and rains and tremors will cease."

"That's good to hear. You want me to be honest, though, so I might as well confess: I prefer living alone, away from people."

"As your training progresses, you will realize how your gift is of value to the world, and must not be held in reserve."

Mustang sagged on the cushions. "I've lost count how many have told me that!"

"You didn't heed them?"

"Deep down, I knew they were right, but I feared the... chaos."

"Rightly so. That situation can be rectified with diligence and focus."

"How... long will it take to master this... gift?"

"A lifetime. A century or more."

She shivered, drawling, "A... century?"

"A faint speck in the chronologic scheme. Those who perfect their skill can live a millennium or more."

“Why would I want *that*?”

“It may take that long to achieve your goal.”

“What goal?”

“Eradicating the negative energies by encouraging humans to better themselves.”

“If it hasn’t happened in your lifetime, it won’t happen in mine, I guarantee.”

“You just added to the negative energies.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a pragmatist, which is why I agreed to leave the States. Human beings must come to terms with their own shortcomings, and evolve under their own power, if you will. No one can do it for them, or force them to do it themselves.” Mustang snatched the black king from Ned’s reach. “The Buddha knew as much, so have the genuinely wise men who’ve popped up throughout history.”

“Francis of Assisi?”

Mustang sensed her cheeks blushing. “He’s a good man but, like so many Christians, his intention was to convert the world to a single philosophy. He led by deed, not words, still expecting the same end.”

“Humanity is a stubborn race, granted. How many could you touch in a hundred, a thousand years? Wouldn’t that positive influence cascade across continents?”

“Not unless you can promise them untold wealth and eternal happiness.”

“Wealth is elusive and happiness a fallacy.”

“Amen, brother,” she murmured.

Ned abandoned his seat and strode to the foyer. “If you see no future in this, the training shall be suspended...”

A last burst of adrenaline propelled Mustang after him, snagging his sleeve before he reached for the doorknob. “I’m... sorry,” she huffed, fighting for air. “I’ll shut up, I swear. This is the best chance I’ve had to... fix myself, and I’m not going to let it slip away.”

He scrutinized her; her skin might have been singed by a flame. “Very well. We’ll begin anew in the morning.”

She ushered him to the guest room, bringing a nightshirt and robe from her closet. Retiring to the kitchen, she cooked herself a plump chicken breast, consuming it with a salad and fudge brownies left over from the previous weekend.

Back in the living room, she added another log to the fire Ned had started on the grate. She then settled in the rocker to think.

How much different would the past decade have been if Jack Parsons had trained her before... leaving so abruptly. Conversely, if what Ned said was accurate, Parsons' methods weren't effective, and she would've been trained wrong, potentially initiating more problems than she had wandering like a blind man through a china shop.

The conundrum she faced with Ned: she wasn't a stage magician, pre-planning illusions or stunts. For magick to be the least bit useful, it had to be available spur-of-the-moment. Bullets or assailants wouldn't wait until proper preparations had been made.

If immediate demand could be merged with willful effort - increasing the saw's speed as it sliced the wood, to employ Ned's metaphor - she might be able to master the technique sooner.

She neither wanted to live a century, or have it take so long to become an adept.

She broached the subject with her companion at breakfast, where both ate a hearty bowl of cereal.

"Why is it young people want to rush everything, as if they have no time?" lamented Ned. "You have an eternity of days. There is no hurry."

"I was only trying to... rationalize it in my head."

"And I commend you for that. You must trust my experience, however, and open yourself to the wonders of your gift."

"Okay," Mustang conceded meekly.

"The first lesson, given your... history, is to shield yourself against external interference."

"Huh?"

Ned smirked between bites of shredded wheat. "Just as I am impervious to changes in temperature, because personal equilibrium creates an almost tangible barrier between my flesh and the air, that same barrier separates us from others' negativity, in every form."

"Every form?"

"A mage is in the world, but not of the world, thus we are not touched by the world."

"That's a sentiment espoused by some religions."

"Not in the same context. The religious connotation involves self-denial. For us, again, it's like a saw passing through wood, or a sleek yacht cutting through waves. What occurs beyond our immediate sphere has no impact."

"You're speaking hypothetically?"

“No. If you were to hit me with your spoon, or even your chair, it would not harm me.”

“Bullets? Explosions?”

“You’ve had to repel both, eh?”

“Sometimes not fast enough.”

“Your emotions were in turmoil?”

“Being shot at? Hell, yes.”

“Emotional upheaval brings a mage to ruin.”

“What, we aren’t allowed to have feelings?”

“You’ve tried not to, especially when it comes to men.” Ned slurped the last milk from the bowl. “Unsuccessfully.”

“To put it mildly.”

“Our emotions are as balanced as everything else. We don’t depend on good sensations or avoiding ‘bad vibes’, as they used to say. Besides, what transpires when two people are... intimate is chemically motivated. Once the body is attuned to the balance, those chemicals won’t rage so dramatically, and nature’s expression of them will be muted.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard in ages.”

“Get your coat, now, and we’ll get started.”

III

Ned and Mustang rode Sarge and Molly to the hill, leaving the Arabian to be exercised later. The weather fair and wind calm, Mustang’s cable knit sweater and jeans served. She still swore Ned looked chilled in the black jumpsuit.

“Distraction is a mage’s enemy,” he stated. “You, being expert in martial arts, should know about focusing the chi - this is the same. For instance, if I asked you to kick my hand, how would you go about it?”

Mustang aimed for his extended appendage, her foot contacting it lightly at the culmination of the spinning kick.

“Excellent,” he praised. “Now, compare that process to your mindset when doing sincerely positive magick, not the accidental type.”

Searching her memories, the young woman stood silent.

“What are you thinking?”

“About when I healed Rachel of her ALS and, another time, saved a little girl from drowning. I freed the Guthrie Manor ghosts of their bondage, contained shrapnel from a bomb at the British Museum, and safely landed a private jet which

would've otherwise crashed, killing those aboard... Too few to outweigh the damage I've done."

"That will change," Ned assured her.

"Damn, I hope so."

"If it helps to integrate the martial arts philosophy..."

"It may, at that."

"I envy your prowess in this area. Precise movements, nothing elaborate. Unlike some calling themselves magickians, who wildly flail their arms or rely upon amulets and gimmicks. Constrain their hands or remove their trinkets, and they are powerless."

"I never saw a need for any of that. The day I said something about a pair of my grandfather's jeans fitting better, nature obeyed, and I've gone from there." As an afterthought, "Except once."

"When your anger flared, and you agitated the negative energies over an eight mile radius."

"How'd..."

"Having visited Boleskine on numerous occasions while Jack was alive, I've... checked back periodically, to see who took ownership."

"You just happened to be here then?"

"News reports in London of unusual activity near the loch piqued my curiosity."

"Sure you aren't FBI?" Mustang chuckled.

His brow furrowed.

She sobered. "Anyway, lately, I haven't even had to speak, just form an idea in my head, and the deed is done."

"Admirable. One less obstacle."

"There are still plenty."

"Indeed. Realizing the power originates in the mind only scratches the surface of the immense depths of your gift."

The pebble reappeared from the underbrush. Mustang cringed.

"You have a concern?" asked Ned.

"I'm... trying to wrap my head around this. Martial arts discipline advocates training in order not to fight. If this is the point of what we're doing here, when would it be appropriate to use my power?"

"It is for each to decide."

"That's no help."

"Much depends on the reason. Attempting to stop a killer would be unwise, but you could protect the victim from harm."

Mustang cited, "Because no one can change another's mind."

"Good. Even protecting a victim, or healing someone's illness or wounds is questionable. The fine line between life and death, and what an individual would accomplish with the extra time, is tenuous. If someone you save goes on to commit murder, would it not have been better to let that person die?"

"Like the old puzzle whether Hitler should've been aborted."

"How would the world have been different had those millions of Jews lived?"

"No one can say."

"Best, true, not to use your power," stated Ned. "Better to have the proper insight so, if you choose to use it, you do not make horrendous errors in judgment."

Not with a light heart did the Mistress of Boleskine proceed with the exercises under this elder's tutelage. Over the course of days and weeks, she drilled, making little progress. As winter gripped the loch country, they moved into the barn, horses nickering in confusion at the pitchfork hovering in mid-air.

When it crashed to the floor, they stomped their hooves nervously.

Ned displayed the utmost patience throughout. It exasperated Mustang more, because she had little patience with herself.

Which is why the stall gates started vibrating ominously, the Arabian rearing on his hind legs in protest.

Mustang abandoned her efforts to soothe the animal. She wanted to cry, herself. "Are you sure this is how you got started?" she queried, gaze averted from her teacher.

"I got started by chance, working with a man who claimed to have esoteric knowledge valuable to Queen Elizabeth I. He believed he could see visions, and I interpreted the images and the supposed angelic language."

"Enochian?"

"Yes."

"It sounds like gibberish to me."

"It is. In those days, to gain royal favor - especially the favor of those with superstitious leanings - hoaxes were rampant. Astrologers were popular, as was anyone who could talk a good game and give his sources mysterious origins."

"Your... collaborator did this?"

"He was a master of deception," Ned confirmed. "I rode his coattails for awhile, reading the ancient tomes he claimed had been written by Greek oracles. Fraudulent, all. Only one text on alchemy made any sense and, then, in an unexpected way."

“How so?”

“Greedy men saw the ability of turning lead to gold as a way to increase the weight of their purse. In fact, human beings are the lead, and the gold results from the mundane self transformed using one’s innate talents.”

“Yours being...”

“Not dissimilar to your own.”

Mustang sighed, “Next, you’re going to tell me mine are greater, and must be used for greater things...”

“I have never shaken the earth, but I also never saw the need.”

“I only saw the need once. The other times were... mistakes.”

“I know. Come, you must eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I just heard your stomach grumble. If you are to continue training, you must keep up your strength.”

“Why should I continue?” She sank on a bale of hay, auburn locks dangling over her face. “If the density of the negative energies could be filtered...”

“Only as humans change their hearts and minds.”

“What’s the sense in fighting against it, then?”

“As you advance, the reasons will become clear. Come, now.”

Submissively, Mustang followed Ned toward the house.

A buck and three does darted past them, pursued by a yapping beagle. Two shots reverberated through the trees; the bullets clattered at Ned’s feet as if they’d hit concrete.

Distant, terrified screams sent birds - huddling for warmth on bare branches - airborne.

The dog circled Mustang’s legs, tail wagging. “You’d better get home,” she warned, “before your master is arrested.”

“Arrested?” repeated Ned.

As the dog raced along a partially frozen path, she diverted in the direction of the continuing clamor. “Damned poachers. There’s a season for hunting, and designated forests...”

“What did you do?”

“Come and see.”

Swearing in their best Scottish burr at the approaching couple, two camouflage-clad illegal hunters fought against thorny bushes which had ensnared their limbs. Rifles lay on the ground. Mustang emptied them of ammunition.

“Release them,” instructed Ned.

“No. I’ll not have my property endangered by such idiots. Casual tourists, I don’t mind. Fools like these aren’t welcome.”

She realized, in that instant, Ned should’ve been able to free them himself, as she’d once extricated Thomas Burton from the magick of an insane Abbondio Carneficina. Contrary to the fictional code promoted in old television series like *Bewitched*, one mage *could* undo the work of another.

Unless he lacked sufficient power.

“How long will you confine them?” pressed Ned.

“Until the constable arrives.”

“You didn’t ring...”

“Glenn MacDonough will have. He feels the same as I about these low-lives.”

“Beware, lassie!” threatened the bearded captive. “We ha’ friends in these parts...”

She snorted, “They should’ve told you about me, then.”

On that note, Mustang tramped back to the house, Ned keeping pace. “I don’t see how you could do *that*, but not control the pitchfork...”

“Emotions and impulse,” she explained. “To use your analogy: a carpenter may use his saw skillfully to slice through wood with the grain; I can be equated to the villain in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, hacking away randomly. Such a one isn’t likely to wind up crafting fine furniture.”

“Ah.” Ned’s disappointment was clear.

“My question: why didn’t you stop me?”

Entering the mansion through the front door, he paused on the threshold. She detected a glint of fear in his sunken eyes, as if he might turn and flee.

“Are you who you say you are? Or just another... opportunist hoping to gain from my friendship?”

“Would you qualify your little exhibition as propitious use of positive energy?” he countered.

“What would you call saving lives?”

“The demise of a few deer to put meat on the table...”

“Those guys wanted trophies for their walls, and you didn’t answer my question.”

He shrugged.

“You’re stalling.”

“If you cook dinner, I’ll replenish the fire. Then, we’ll talk.”

Plates of sauteed pork chops, baked potatoes and steamed broccoli cleared in the kitchen, they adjourned to the toasty living room with bowls of chocolate pudding.

Ned set his dessert aside, leaning forward on the sofa, fingers entwined, resting on his knees. “Only a handful of true mages, considerably older than yourself, live on the planet at present - in Zaire, Uruguay, Kasakhstan, the Philippines and Costa Rica. They intend to unite forces at midnight, Greenwich time, on New Year’s, repelling the negative energies, so the positive can better influence the direction of history.”

“Won’t work,” said Mustang flatly.

“If you lend your skills to the effort...”

“You’ve detailed, yourself, how humans’ negative behavior is the source of the problem. Until they change, that sort of an endeavor would succeed for, maybe, a minute or two.”

Dejected, he acknowledged, “I know it, but they insist on making the attempt. Doing nothing would mean a continued descent into death and destruction...”

“So, that’s why the long hours of training.”

“Yes.”

“They can forget it.”

“I realized that a couple weeks ago,” Ned admitted.

Mustang gulped, “And you pushed me to continue those ludicrous drills?”

“I hoped there’d be a breakthrough.”

“Sorry I disappointed you.”

“You... intrigued me. In over four centuries, I’ve never seen your like. You never missed a beat, though I switched from speaking in English to French, German and Arabic.”

“I didn’t notice.”

He beamed, “That’s it, exactly! You handle your power no differently than most people do breathing or eating.”

“You see that as an asset?” she prodded.

“Initially, no. Now, I can’t deny the advantages.”

“*Dis*-advantages. Are you saying you must stop what you’re doing in order to use your magick?”

“There is a... deliberate shift of consciousness.”

Snickering, Mustang licked her spoon. “Maybe I should be training *you*.”

“You have an impressive weapon to combat the negative energies. It should be shared...”

“But, I don’t *wish* to share it.”

“Others would benefit immensely...”

“No.” She rose and collected his untouched bowl. “Besides, my tactics are no secret. You could do likewise now, if you let yourself get worked up about something.”

“Worked up?”

“Never mind. You prefer a non-violent approach, which is, essentially, useless.”

“Non-violence is an expression of personal balance...”

“Nature is *unbalanced!*” she stormed. “Nature is the most violent force on the planet, killing without weapons beyond its own resources.”

Ned stared at her, stunned.

She exhaled, resigned. “Tomorrow morning, I think you should be on your way.”

“I’ll go tonight.”

“You don’t want to do that.”

“Why?”

“The grounds...”

“I can find my way.”

“That may be, but my guards will find *you*, and you won’t like it.”

“Guards?”

“I don’t mind people meandering around during the day, but at night...”

Ned crossed to the window and drew aside the curtain. “What kind of guards?”

“The trees, the rocks...”

“Incredible!” He spun. “You put these in place each evening?”

She replied as she exited the living room. “I put them in place years ago.”

“Bloody hell, woman!” The old man hurried to catch her. “It is essential for a mage to draw upon nature, but to command it even while asleep, or occupied with other matters...”

“That’s nothing special. Months into this... experience, I figured out any command given had to last until I specifically ended it. It’s not that way for you and the... others?”

He reluctantly confessed, “Once the concentration is broken, the magick ceases.”

“You *do* need more training. What I thought was natural evidently isn’t.”

“No, it isn’t.”

While Mustang cleared the dinette table, Ned sprayed dish soap into water filling the sink. "You could do it all by yourself," he muttered.

"Hmm?" she queried.

"Nothing."

They finished washing the pots and cups, and Ned retired to the guest room, speaking no more.

IV

Mustang sat up late in the study, perusing Jack Parsons' journals. Previous reads had focused on clues to locating his secret anti-gravitation formula, and background on various rituals. She'd skipped most of the day-to-day accounts, including sporadic paragraphs about Old Ned.

Their first meeting - Pasadena, 1937 - Ned had been bearded and robust. "I recognized him instantly," Parsons wrote. "Artists renderings of his singular visage captured the wise eyes and broad nose."

He didn't look anything like that now.

Parsons rebelled against Ned's ideas, calling them "outdated", "puerile" and "naive". He persisted on his own path, and an argument at Boleskine in the late 1980s permanently ended Ned's visits.

Given Mustang's limited exposure to her maternal grandfather, she thought Ned's view of magick made more sense than Parsons' elaborate rituals. The concept of separating oneself from the ordinary, spouting incomprehensible poetry to accomplish some uncertain goal with unseen results...

Was it the quest of an inferior mage, trying to convince himself he possessed powers actually lacking? she mused.

Or a difference in personal style?

It struck her: each human being had a unique style, no two the same. Whether it be spiritual beliefs, food preferences, cars or houses...

Had Parsons mistakenly criticized Ned, and vice versa, disrespecting the other's individuality?

Was Ned doing the same with her, mired in a "my way is the only way" attitude?

The young woman didn't deny her methods needed to be honed. She had exerted every ounce of strength to comply with Ned's instructions. His notion of piercing through a dense layer of negative energy to reach the positive "stratosphere" didn't mesh with hers.

The energy itself neutral, encompassing all, positive or negative outcomes were dictated by the intention of the person directing their flow. In her case, the intentions were mostly positive, but the flow amounted to more of a bulldozer clearing an entire forest, rather than a saw slicing a single wooden plank. Thus the external manifestations of wind, rain and tremors.

She fondly recalled years on her parents' Montana ranch, watching the hands saddle break wild horses. The animal didn't change, it merely learned control.

Her magick wouldn't change, if she could just control it.

She'd been trying for a decade.

If a horse couldn't be broken after the first *week*, it was considered a lost cause.

The numerous resolutions, promises, vows she'd made - never to leave Boleskine property, to stop using her power, to shun contact with people... By the light of the single lamp, she scolded herself for ongoing weakness of will.

It might be a strength, she pondered.

She'd always nurtured a soft spot for foals born prematurely, or deformed. Heartbeat, her pinto, had nearly died moments after birth; she stayed at his side until his heart beat stronger than any horse she'd known.

Helping the disadvantaged, the suffering, happened without a second thought, she realized. Brede Carver's soul had cried out from the stone, and she'd instinctively responded to free her. Abused and traumatized, Kathleen Fitzwalter had knocked at her door, and Mustang had protected her from the violent Andre Desrosiers. Barney Kerr yearned for a sculpting teacher; she'd inadvertently summoned Michelangelo.

Men had paid her compliments about her beauty, the "light shining from within"... inherent goodness of heart? Hell, she'd even rescued Wilfrid Bailey after he'd mutilated Canyon Creek High School students, thinking him a victim.

Closing her heart to the pleas of desperate people... an unrealistic goal, she knew. Peter O'Donnell had advised her to use the power in positive ways - as did Ned. The latter wanted her to share her insights with the other "true mages" around the globe...

Would that serve any purpose? They might be able to raise the poor from their slums, or battle political injustice, but the violence, the wars, would simply erupt elsewhere.

She laid her head on a floral throw pillow, closing heavy eyelids. In a few hours, Ned would be gone, she would have her solitude, and could order some books from the local library to read on cold winter days.

Rain commenced before dawn. Mustang couldn't let inclement weather keep her house-bound; the horses needed food and water, regardless of conditions.

The barn warm, scented with hay and leather, she leaned against the partially open doorway, moved by the way bare tree branches were bent by the force of the droplets. If the temperature dropped a few more degrees, that moisture would freeze, causing some limbs to snap.

In the spring, they would grow anew. Since childhood, nature's ability to mend itself had awed Mustang. Animals of every species replenished their numbers, flowers bloomed and spread their pollen, orchards sprouted tender green leaves. Humanity, too, renewed itself, though hostilities spurring this need far exceeded the aftermath of any hurricane, tornado or volcano.

Ned emerged from the house, pausing on the stoop. He remained completely dry, and the Mistress of Boleskine could almost see the protective aura which shielded him from external influences.

She removed her parka, strode across the gravel, quickly drenched through her sweatshirt and jeans to the skin. Auburn tresses dripped in her eyes, but she didn't mind a bit.

"This is your problem!" she shouted to her guest. "You don't let anything touch you! You're balanced in an unbalanced world, which isn't natural. You can't be what you call a mage unless you feel what others feel and get your hands dirty with the mundane."

"The negative energies..."

"Are in your own heart! You're afraid what might happen if you risk being spontaneous, manipulating the neutral forces to your own purpose!"

"Neutral?"

"Of course, neutral! If that much negativity were really trapped so close to the surface, we'd all be trying to kill each other. It's the individual's own actions which twist the neutral energies to positive or negative."

"You truly believe this?" Ned challenged.

A pebble jumped to Mustang's hand, before swirling around the corral and thumping against a post. "I bet, if you let yourself get wet, you won't be able to perform the feats you demanded of me."

"At my age, exposure to a chill could be fatal."

"How long do you *want* to live?" she guffawed. "Haven't you noticed how nothing changes from year to year, century to century?"

A hesitant, "Yes," escaped his lips.

"Why go on, if what you're doing has no impact on others?"

"The New Year's rite..."

“Will fail, if the others are anything like you.”

“You’re not.”

She led him into the house, a puddle forming on the foyer tile. “No, and I never will be. I may be impulsive and careless sometimes, but I do take responsibility for my actions and try my damndest to clean up my messes.”

“Even when it means people die?”

“You could leave this minute, and slip on a patch of ice along the drive, hit your head and die. Would I be to blame for it? People die - young, old and in between. Who dictates the time or circumstances is a mystery.”

Ned’s countenance clouded. “I thought you’d accepted the foolishness of your ways.”

“I thought I had, too.” Shivering, she squished her way into the living room, poking embers on the grate back to life. “I re-read the journals, though. My grandfather didn’t agree with your philosophy...”

“I told you: he didn’t see how his particular magick was better expressed in creating solid rocket fuel than through those absurd rituals.”

“Maybe because he dared to blend science and imagination, or thumbed his nose at society’s rules.”

“Perhaps.”

“For me, everyday items contain magick, and I can draw it out with a word.”

“That is not the proper...”

“Proper?” Mustang choked. “Weren’t there sorcerers or mages, or country witches in the 16th century who used their power according to their own dictates, without regard to propriety?”

“Yes, and many were burned at the stake.”

“Why weren’t you?”

“We had the favor of the queen.”

“If she’d rejected you, would you have been subject to execution?”

“Possibly.”

“Because your... talents lay in the metaphysical realms, you would’ve been persecuted. Like science, though, metaphysics has many different specialties...”

“So said Jack.”

“So said Jack,” confirmed the young woman. Her clothes dry, she crossed to Ned, hand extended. “Truce?”

He refused. “You tell me four centuries of experience are worthless, and you want me to make peace with that?”

“Not worthless. Your magick is your own; mine is mine. The two aren’t compatible, but the desire to use it wisely is.”

Sunken orbs studied her. “Your ideas... contain a profound depth. I will give them due consideration as I continue my journey.”

“Not until you have breakfast.”

“As you wish.”

Eggs, bacon, toast and juice filled them both. Mustang was stacking the dishes on the counter, facing away from Ned, when she asked, “You have enough money for your travels?”

Receiving no reply, she guessed he’d been offended. She turned; he was gone.

Peering out the living room window, she saw him standing near the barn, head thrown back, jaw agape. Rivulets of water ran down his neck; his clothes were soaked. Nestled in her parka, she jogged out to him, and heard his delighted laughter.

“Are you okay?” she wondered.

“Never better!” A curious tongue licked his chin. “Do you know how fantastic this tastes?”

“As good as life, on the whole. Aren’t you afraid of pneumonia?”

“I could be hit by a car; the end would be the same.”

“Good for you,” Mustang grinned.

They shook hands in parting. “You have my abundant thanks for an... education the most noted mages could not provide.”

She waited in the downpour until Ned vanished from view. Sloshing to the house, an ominous knot claimed her stomach, as if she’d just loosed an untamed tiger on the loch region.

Without computer, phone or television, she’d never know his fate.

Unless, of course, Glenn MacDonough brought the news.

Her neighbor, en route from Inverness Monday fortnight after a long day’s work, parked his construction pickup near the corral. He poked his wispy white pate into the barn, hailing Mustang as she cleaned the Arabian’s stall.

“Ach, Your Ladyship, you would nae believe the havoc in court today over those ruddy poachers!”

She rested on the pitchfork. “What happened?”

“Six o’ their cronies testified they were playing poker in the mayor’s basement!”

“I hope the truth came out.”

“Aye, the scratches from where they got caught in your brambles proved their lie. The judge fined them a hefty sum.”

“Good. If they, at least, learn to stay off my property, I’ll be satisfied.”

“How be the horses farin’ after the fire?”

“They’re fine, Glenn. A bit more skittish during storms, I’ve noticed.”

“Understandable.”

A tense pause prompted her question, “Is there anything else?”

“Ye had a visitor some weeks ago.”

“How’d you know?”

“I saw ye both on the hill...”

“And?”

“I ha’ a crew gutting an old hotel in the city. Your... friend must ha’ come in t’ escape the cold this past weekend, and...”

Mustang’s teeth clenched.

“He’s dead?”

“They took him to hospital, but nothin’ could be done. He’d frostbitten fingers and toes, and lungs clogged wi’ fluid.”

Pneumonia. She’d predicted it.

Knees failing, she collapsed on the bench near the tack room. “Oh, hell...”

“I told the doctors ye could identify him. They’re hopin’ to release him tomorrow for burial in the churchyard.”

“I... don’t think he’d appreciate that.”

“Was he nae a Christian man?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Will ye come wi’ me t’ the hospital?”

“I don’t have much choice, eh?” She managed a wry chuckle. “It’d be a shame to drop him in an anonymous grave.”

Plagued by the awareness she’d been instrumental in another man’s death, Mustang paid little attention to the passing winter scenery during the journey north. Escorted to the morgue on the hospital’s lower level, she steeled herself when the gurney was wheeled forward. An attendant wearing surgical gloves folded down the sheet, revealing Ned’s oddly robust features.

MacDonough prepared to support her if she faltered, he patted her shoulder when she stood firm.

“He carried no identification,” explained the pudgy employee. “We need a name for the death certificate.”

She'd read his name in Jack Parsons' journals: "I recognized him immediately. Edward Kelley." Further research would show his year of birth as 1555. She'd be subjected to prolonged interrogation if she revealed that fact.

The date was amended to 1955, and MacDonough had her home before dinner.

Not a proponent of the nonsensical funerals popular among the masses, Mustang politely declined the project manager's offer of a ride to the church on Tuesday. No one attended Ned's services, she later discovered, except the stooped spinsters who attended every wake and wedding. No stone would mark his grave; Mustang suspected a monument existed to him somewhere, given his collaboration with John Dee advising Queen Elizabeth I. Better not to dispel the myth with facts.

A stack of books, including Rolf and Greta Steckling's latest novel, fortunately arrived with the regular delivery of groceries. Plenty of firewood split and stacked, she settled in her cane-backed rocker to pass Scotland's coldest months - distracted from an increasing depression over the lengthening list of dead bodies - with riveting fictional adventures.

Frequent rains, however, reminded her of Ned's sudden break with centuries of asceticism, his euphoric expression as deprived senses overwhelmed his equilibrium. If she'd complied with his instructions and excelled in the training, he wouldn't have...

Tracing patterns on the icy window, she saw a squirrel scuttle up a tree, searching for its stored nuts. A hawk saw it, too, and swooped down to make it lunch.

Such was life. No one knew when - or why - their physical existence came to an end.

Flipping to where the page was marked with a torn feed store receipt, she resumed reading.

She'd be perfectly content if no one knocked, or trespassed, until spring. Three months of peace might heal her soul, her heart and her mind.

If not, she could repair and re-electrify the barbed wire fence in shambles around Boleskine's perimeter. A forced isolation was better than the periodic incursion of strangers.

Recollections of her travels with John Barrymore, reveling in the sights and sounds of northern Africa, Spain and Portugal tempted her to summon him and accept his offer of ceaseless indulgence.

She recalled the fate of three horses, and bit her lip.

Consigned to never finding a workable balance between her ache for normalcy and nature's sensitivity to her emotions, moist hazel eyes no longer registered the typeface.

“Damn you, Jack Parsons.”

She tossed the paperback on the sofa, opting for the kitchen. She made and drained a mug of hot cocoa before going to bed.