

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Universal Mustang*

**A Novella**

**by**

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# I

When it came to clothes, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea cared little about her appearance. For the warm Italian summers, three t-shirts and four tank tops sufficed. Colder weather meant selecting one of a half-dozen flannel shirts hanging in her closet. These, along with two sets of sweats, a few pairs of jeans, sneakers, sandals and a faded, fur-trimmed parka completed her wardrobe.

Growing up on a horse ranch in Montana, she hadn’t developed a fashion sense like most women. Her priorities lay elsewhere.

She would not deny how, periodically, some of the funds she earned as tour guide for pilgrims in the hillside city of Assisi went toward replacing worn or stained garments. As she ascended the Via Dono Doni that brisk November afternoon, she glimpsed the frayed denim hem and sighed.

These particular jeans had seen far better days. They’d traveled with her via lightning bolt to Japan and accompanied her to Boleskine House when she began her exile. The day she’d fled Scotland after being shot and nearly paralyzed, she’d slid her legs into them and pulled on the very shirt beneath her coat.

Traversing the sparsely populated Piazza San Rufino, a loud noise jolted her. She nearly dropped a sack of pastries from the Gran Caffé bakery and, recovering quickly, pondered whether the sound of fabric tearing had been a vital seam.

Nothing so simple.

Raising hazel eyes toward shadows cast on stone walls by the setting sun, she halted abruptly at the bizarre image of a theatrical backdrop ripped asunder. A brown-robed and hooded figure stepped through the gap and strode rapidly past Mustang, the fissure instantly mending to restore a semblance of normalcy.

“Oh, hell...” the American gasped, unwilling to become involved in another situation where the power she’d inherited from her grandfather, occultist and scientist Jack Parsons, could wreak havoc.

Nonetheless, she spun and watched the receding individual, very similar to the Franciscan friars she encountered daily on her rounds of the historic landmarks. The ample hood concealed his head, a cloak billowing in the breeze over the rough, ankle-length tunic.

The detail that confirmed, for Mustang, this wasn’t a resident of the Sacro Convento at the Basilica San Francesco: black leather boots.

“It’s none of my business,” she muttered, resuming the trek to a building where her tiny apartment overlooked the piazza.

Up three flights, she settled in for a quiet evening. The wood stove provided warmth, along with a bowl of chicken noodle soup and hot cocoa. She noticed, while drying the dishes, the left elbow of the blue flannel shirt bore a sizable hole; the lot would be consigned to the trash before she retired to bed.

Early Tuesday, Mustang bundled herself in the parka and hiked up Mount Subasio, taking treats to the herd of wild horses whose ancestors had fled domesticity during various armed conflicts Assisi had experienced over the centuries. Apples and carrots were consumed eagerly by the thick-coated animals as light snow fell.

The woman shivered during her descent along muddy paths and, upon passing through the Porta Nuova, made a beeline to one of the shops that remained open in the tourist off-season. The shelves boasting a wide selection of St. Francis statues - which favored him not in the least - crucifixes and holy candles, she meandered toward the rear, where a limited assortment of practical apparel hung from two racks.

“Hey, Giovanni!” she called to the proprietor, who sipped cappuccino at the sales counter. “Can I try on these shirts?”

She spoke in English but, due to her power over nature, the words were automatically translated into Italian for that man’s ears and, likewise, his response for hers.

“Sure, in the back room.”

Mustang drew aside a heavy green damask curtain separating the public showroom from a gloomy chamber lined with boxes. Not a dressing room, *per se*, but private enough for her purpose.

Except, another customer had already claimed the space.

The short, curly reddish mop popped up from behind a stack of empty pallets. Accusing hazel eyes almost drilled into Mustang’s skull. She grabbed the flannel shirts on hangers she’d hooked to a chair and retreated.

Moving toward the front of the store, she couldn’t shake off the feeling she’d seen that face before. Then, she glanced in the mirror above a display of ball caps, halted in her tracks and swallowed hard.

“Oh, hell...”

“Did they fit?” Giovanni queried when she finally reached the cash register. Long auburn tresses bobbed stiffly.

He punched keys on the machine, a total appeared in LED lights. “Fifteen Euros, Signorina.”

“I... want both,” she stammered.

“We’re having a sale to clear out old inventory.”

Somehow, Mustang didn't believe the rotund shopkeeper. Since her arrival in Assisi more than a year previous, he'd assumed a rather protective stance toward her, even encouraging his young son, Carlo, to seek her out when visitors inquired about multi-lingual tour guides.

She didn't mind so much, and rewarded Carlo with spending money for his efforts.

"Is that girl still back there?" Giovanni prodded as he bagged the items.

"Uh... yeah."

He chuckled. "When she wandered in earlier, I initially thought it was you, with all that lovely hair cut off."

So, it wasn't her imagination! Mustang mused. Those features closely echoed her own...

Paying Giovanni with one Euro notes, from a stash kept in a dented coffee can in her cupboard, Mustang departed the establishment. She crossed the Piazza Santa Chiara and lingered near the stone wall where a tranquil view of the Umbrian Valley soothed her jangled nerves.

A temporary respite, for when that mysterious individual emerged into the chill daylight, wearing a flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers, her other attire stuffed in a plastic bag, Mustang's respiration quickened as she made chase.

If she knew she was being followed, the girl made no effort to elude her pursuer. Oddly, she stopped at the Gran Caffé and purchased a selection of sweets and coffee, then continued along the Vicolo Pallarani, the very route Mustang often used to reach her flat.

Except, her prey opted for the public elevator that eliminated climbing the steep grade, providing access to one of the parking lots around the city.

When she entered the car, Mustang accelerated and slipped between the sensor-controlled doors. Once shut, neither pressed the button to facilitate any movement.

"Who are you?" Mustang demanded, eye-to-eye with this double, the same in every respect except for the length of her hair.

"I'm Eliza Duryea."

The admission stunned Mustang. Eliza, a variation of Elizabeth she'd never considered using, herself. People had called her Lizzie, Beth, Liz, but Eliza sounded quite dignified.

Still, "No, you're not."

"You... don't understand."

To be sure, Mustang chuckled silently. "I... don't want to understand. I just want to know why you look like me."

“Because I *am* you.”

The elevator lurched upward, summoned by those waiting above.

“That’s... nuts. The only time I... duplicated myself, she wound up dead at the hands of Jonas Fairchild.”

Eliza’s turn to be flustered. “You... *deliberately* duplicated yourself?”

“Accidentally.”

“Then... you possess the power...”

The doors opened; the conversation ceased as a family of six jostled for space as the occupants alighted.

Eliza marched along the cavernous stone passage, Mustang on her heels, snatching a handful of sleeve to arrest her progress.

“Where are you going?”

“Far from here.”

“Why?”

“If Lucius should find me...”

“Who’s Lucius?”

Eliza met her unwitting twin’s gaze. “In our realm, he is master of the power, a tyrant who makes those he deems unworthy subservient to his wishes.”

Tossing her purchases aside, Mustang gripped Eliza’s collar in her fists, causing the larger bag to spill its contents on the carpet: a voluminous brown cloak.

Recognizing the garment, the implications of this interloper’s words struck home. “You’re... from a parallel universe?” Mustang stammered.

“Yes.”

“You... cut through space yesterday afternoon near the cathedral...”

“Yes.”

“How?”

From beneath her shirt, Eliza revealed a hammered golden sunburst pendant on a heavy filigree chain. “This concentrates Lucius’ power. I stole it while he slept, to stop him from decimating humanity...”

“While he slept?”

She nodded.

“You’re his wife?”

“His slave.”

Mustang gulped. Knowing herself all too well, she could never have tolerated being anyone’s slave.

“If he’s such a... bastard, why didn’t you use the chain and strangle him?”

“He... cannot be killed.” Eliza shuddered. “Or, so he has claimed.”

Collecting scattered clothing, Mustang hoisted the clear garbage bag over one shoulder and signaled Eliza to accompany her into the murky afternoon. They veered toward the Piazza San Rufino, pausing at the apartment building's entrance, scrutinizing massive church doors.

"If he were here now, I'd prove him wrong," Mustang grumbled.

Eliza stuttered, "You... possess the means?"

"Come upstairs. We can be comfortable, at any rate, while we figure out this mess."

Once the wood stove had been replenished with logs, her parka hung on its hook, Mustang set about preparing hot cocoa. Eliza positioned herself next to the window, as if on sentry duty.

A steaming ceramic mug warmed her hands and soothed her spirit in short order. She accepted a spot on the battered loveseat, Mustang beside her.

Trying to dispel the disconcerting sensation of being in close proximity to her very self, yet not herself, the flat's tenant savored the sweet chocolate taste for a prolonged moment. Then, she plunged in against her better judgment.

"Okay, start at the beginning."

Eliza set the empty mug on the coffee table and tucked her feet under her, something Mustang had never done. Alike, but different, she breathed.

"I grew up on a horse ranch," Eliza declared, easing a bit of her host's tension. "My father's stock was known far and wide, so it wasn't surprising when Lucius sent his minions to purchase the best of the lot."

"Who *is* Lucius?"

"He is... the leader of the clans."

"Clans?"

"The most influential families."

"How many of these families are there?"

"About three hundred."

"In your country?"

"In the world."

Mustang inhaled slowly.

"Because he wields the power, his edicts hold sway..."

"What is this power?"

"His slightest utterance is fulfilled by unseen forces."

"You mean, like this?" Mustang suspended her mug in mid-air and directed it to float to the kitchenette counter.

Eliza bolted over the loveseat arm, half-crawling to the wall and cowering there. "You... you..."

Calmly, Mustang approached and lifted her guest off the floor. When her knees buckled, she supported Eliza at the waist, depositing her on the cushions.

“How did Lucius acquire his power?”

“It passes from the one who possesses it to the one who...”

“Kills him?”

Eliza’s lips trembled.

“And, how did Lucius succeed in killing his predecessor?”

“I... don’t know. It was before my parents wed.”

“Okay, never mind. That he did it points to a nasty streak...”

“To put it mildly,” Eliza concurred. “When one of the horses Lucius bought from our ranch threw him, causing him to break his leg, he not only shot the horse, but had my father and mother executed, and confiscated all the horses and land.”

“So, that’s how you became his slave?”

“Precisely.”

“That sucks.”

“At first, it wasn’t too bad. I was only eight years old, and I think he wanted to get his revenge by twisting my soul into something selfish and greedy, after seeing how kind and generous I was toward the horses, and even polite to him. When I resisted his influence, he charged me with the most menial tasks and, eventually...”

Mustang didn’t have to guess. “Took you to his bed?”

“He... used me in the worst possible ways and, when he tired of me, forced me to watch when he brought other women...”

“Savage brute!”

A rumble of thunder, uncommon in winter, drew both Mustang and Eliza to the window. The fabric between universes being ripped in twain nearly deafened them; a dozen tourists scattered. Eliza collapsed in a terrified heap as her companion watched yet another brown-robed figure - this one taller and broader - step from the gaping hole across the Piazza San Rufino onto the stone pavement.

“Oh, hell...”

## II

Twitching digits seized a chunk of flannel and hoisted Eliza upright.

“That your boy?” Mustang growled.

“Yes.”

“How old?”

“He’s sat on the throne since before I was born...”

Mentally calculating, Mustang estimated his age at 50 or more. She didn’t care if the concept of years in the parallel universe matched how the calendar ran for her.

When Lucius threw back his hood, she knew she’d guessed correctly. Shoulder-length, wind-blown dirty blond hair was flecked with grey, as was his full beard. He resembled a crazed friar, not a leader of nations.

Unfortunately, she’d also become very much aware of how appearances can be deceiving. Few who’d crossed her path since Jack Parsons bequeathed her this control over nature took her for more than a naive teenager.

“He searching for you?”

Eliza squirmed against her hold, tapping the pendant. “For this.”

“Give it to me.”

The visitor bristled. “What... will you do with it?”

“Any number of things.” Tucking it in her jeans, Mustang moved to the sink, squirting dish soap into a stream of hot water. “I could melt it, for starters. That would... diminish his power, don’t you think?”

“I... don’t know,” Eliza confessed. “I thought, if I took it, he wouldn’t be able to find me. That he’s here... now...”

Mustang snickered. “I’ve learned that objects, as a rule, have little to do with... use of this sort of power. It’s not like the characters from the Harry Potter novels, who needed wands, or the old television series *Bewitched*, where she wiggled her nose to cast spells.”

Unfamiliar with the references, Eliza’s brow furrowed.

“Never mind. If your dear Lucius purported the medallion was key to his power, it was a ploy to intimidate his subjects.”

“Meaning, we’re quite gullible,” countered Eliza, miffed.

“No. The power is all too real.” Drying her hands on a tea towel, Mustang returned to the window. “If anything, he wanted someone to steal it, so he’d be able to punish that person as an example to others of what would happen if his authority was challenged.”

“You’re... very wise.”

“Not really.”

The scene in the piazza below brought a smile to the Assisi resident’s lips. A squad of elegantly uniformed Carabinieri had converged on the site, weapons drawn. She’d already encountered members of that law enforcement agency since moving from Scotland, managing to avoid their puerile interrogation by commanding the elements to shield her from their view.

They didn't know what they were up against and, though she'd lost count of those who'd died due to her own impulsiveness, she had no intention of letting this... being from another realm wipe them out.

Eliza watched in awe as Lucius crashed to his knees, helpless. Two officers shackled his wrists against his spine, then raised him and dragged him in the general direction of their headquarters in the Piazza del Comune.

"What... happened?" she burbled.

"He's on my turf, where nature obeys *me*."

"You mean..."

"It's like a cat. It'll cuddle its owner all day, perfectly content. Someone new walks in the room, and the cat will hiss because he's a stranger. Takes time for him to gain the animal's trust."

Astonished, Eliza visibly relaxed.

Mustang retrieved her parka from the wall hook. "Stay here. You'll be safe until I get back."

"But..."

"No arguments, Eliza." The deadbolt snapped; she threw wide the door. "With luck, I can convince him to return to your universe, without this little bauble and without causing any more trouble." Hinges squeaked as the panel closed, then reopened. "There's food in the cupboard, if you're hungry, and a few books in the bedroom, if you like to read."

Eliza's "Thanks" did not penetrate the warped wood.

Mustang didn't need the faint illumination from overhead fixtures to navigate the narrow stairs. She burst into the winter evening, pausing to zip her coat, before tramping winding lanes to the city's center.

Not that the stretch of open space bustled with life, as it did during the humid summer months. Sidewalk cafes had stacked up their chairs and tables, and some even shuttered their indoor dining rooms for lack of patronage. Mustang rounded the corner as a remnant of the Carabinieri resumed their patrols, Lucius confined in a holding cell within the ancient structure converted to administrative use.

Easy enough to slip through the gap before the metal door slammed shut, especially being invisible. As was their wont, the supervisors had ordered the captive be strip-searched; he secured a black silk shirt with a wide leather belt over matching trousers as two subordinates carried the heavy robe and his polished boots from the cramped chamber.

"No weapons?" asked a sergeant in the corridor, Mustang automatically hearing his Italian in English.

“None.”

“Then, what charges...”

“The captain wants to question him about his lack of passport or visa.”

“A waste of time.”

The duo continued toward the office, leaving Mustang to free the hasp and join an enraged Lucius, pacing the tile floor.

“How dare they!” he grunted to himself. “They will feel my wrath...”

“Not on this plane of existence.”

Mustang’s sarcastic contralto startled him; he tripped and stubbed his toe on the metal chair leg. Recovering, he spat, “Who’s there?”

Natural concealment dissipating, she greeted the prisoner with a mock salute. “Welcome to my world, Lucius.”

Penetrating blue orbs registered her presence, framed by a weathered countenance and bulbous nose. “Eliza?” He shuffled toward her. “What have you done with your hair?”

“I’m not Eliza – at least, not as you know her.”

Lucius squinted. “You are her... counterpart in this universe?”

She bowed slightly.

“She will come to me now!” the baritone roared.

Mustang countered in a quiet tone. “Not likely.”

“Who are you to...”

“I’m the fly in the ointment, the perfect storm, your worse nightmare.”

“What sort of nonsense...”

A plume of fire shot from the floor toward the ceiling; Lucius stiffened momentarily, then a smirk skewed his features.

“So, you are master here.”

“And you’re not. Best for you to return where you came from and leave us in peace.”

Lucius guffawed, “Not without the seal.”

Puzzled by the reference, Mustang soon realized he meant the sunburst pendant. She yanked it from her pocket and tossed it on the table. “You talking about this hunk of junk?” she scoffed.

As his plump fingers extended, the gold liquified into a bubbling puddle.

“You fool!” he shrieked.

“Lighten up, old man. If you believe that had anything to do with... your tyrannical reign...”

Desperation deepened his voice. “I may not have power in this realm, but I have the strength to end you!”

She dodged when he lunged at her, unwilling to call upon nature to counteract his offensive. Side-stepping as the door crashed into the wall, she avoided a collision with two Carabinieri, who'd heard his outburst and came to investigate the disturbance.

Mustang vanished as they struggled with Lucius, who lashed out and knocked one unconscious. His partner drew a taser and fired, the electrical charge rendering the prisoner helpless.

"Get in here!" the corporal shouted.

Reinforcements rushed the room, kneeling on Lucius' prone form until both his wrists and ankles were fettered.

Mustang restrained her laughter as they led the inmate across the threshold toward a formal cell.

Hearing the chuckle, the corporal scolded, "It's not funny," thinking his comrades were responsible.

They, in turn, glanced at each other, perplexed.

As she passed through the lobby, the woman exulted at the prospect of assault charges being processed against Lucius.

For the present, Eliza could enjoy her freedom.

Or...

Mustang deliberated options on the jaunt to her apartment. Her innate cynicism concocted a scenario that Assisi native St. Francis, Mark Twain, Mohandas Gandhi and even General Erwin Rommel – her constant companions in Scotland – would find offensive, possibly even citing the Prime Directive from the *Star Trek* canon.

Yet, the temptation so great...

She grinned as she entered the hovel she'd called home since arriving in Italy. Eliza leapt from the loveseat, wrapped in Mustang's terry bathrobe, a towel around her neck.

"I hope you don't mind..."

"Of course not."

"I've never... had an experience like that." Eliza pointed toward the bathroom.

Astounded, Mustang's smile widened. "You've never had a shower before?"

"Never."

"Is your universe so... technologically backward?"

"We have hot and cold running water, but Lucius and his predecessors limited the use of metals and piping in construction of our domiciles. They

prefer... elaborate fountains and monuments honoring their supposedly benevolent glory.”

“Good thing he’s in the can.”

“The can?”

“Jail. Prison.”

Eliza blinked hazel eyes. “You’re kidding!”

“Nope.”

“How did they...”

“He could not defend himself against their... overwhelming brawn.”

Dancing with glee, Eliza beamed. “If only I could tell the others...”

“Others?”

“A group who objected to Lucius’ continued dictatorship formed a... resistance. We weren’t very successful in our efforts until...”

“You believed stealing the medallion would give you an advantage,” Mustang reasoned.

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s a moot point, because it’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Destroyed.”

“What?” Eliza squealed.

“In front of Lucius’ eyes, it dissolved into a shiny blob.”

“Then he... thinks himself powerless.”

“Not at all. If he possessed the power to breach space from one universe to another, he knows the medallion was just a symbol. What caught him off guard is that his power is useless here.”

“Will it remain so? If, as you said, it only takes time for a cat to become accustomed to a stranger...”

“I have... made certain he can’t use it.”

“How?” Eliza prodded.

“The cuffs that bind his limbs also bind his soul.”

A pregnant silence, then an awed, “Wow.”

“So, you can go back to your life and dwell in peace...”

“The resistance can take over...”

“And undo the damage.”

Eliza pondered. “There’s so much to be done, and so few of us...”

“That’s what I suspected.”

“Huh?”

Mustang sank on the loveseat. “There are those who will condemn me for what I’m about to do...”

“Condemn you?”

“I’m going to fix things in your universe.”

“Can you do that?” an amazed Eliza gulped, dropping beside her. “Lucius has armies of thugs at his command...”

“Willing volunteers, or drafted under threat?”

“They... fear his power, knowing the least mistake merits immediate death.”

“Then, once they realize he’s finished, they will disband and resume their former lives.”

“What if they don’t?”

“They’ll get mighty bored, having no one to push around.”

“When do we start?” Eliza giggled, a girlish sound.

Mustang scowled, wondering if she’d ever looked so young and innocent. “No sense in procrastinating.”

Eliza hurried into Mustang’s room, pulling on her clothes. The veritable twins then marched, in unison, from the building. The cold and darkness of a November night eliminated the need to clear the Piazza San Rufino of curious bystanders. Mustang made a circuit of the area, mentally ensuring shades and curtains were drawn in the residences around the cathedral, so the phenomenon of their unconventional travel would not disrupt anyone’s dinner.

Eliza shivered. Mustang removed her parka, offering it to her counterpart.

“It... won’t make a difference. As soon as we arrive, we’ll be targeted as enemies, because of how we’re dressed.”

“Are you saying, we need the robes?”

“Most definitely.”

“Where’d you leave yours?”

“By the wood stove.”

Mustang groaned. “Fine. You fetch it, and I’ll get Lucius’.”

“How?”

“The Carabinieri aren’t the most... thorough crew. It’s probably stuffed in the supply closet near the front door.”

Her assertion proved correct; within ten minutes, both women were shrouded in bulky cloaks, ready to venture through space.

“We can’t do it without the pendant,” Eliza lamented.

“Explain exactly how you created the rift when you came here.”

“What, then we reverse the process?”

“Why not?”

Footsteps approached from the general direction of San Rufino’s bell tower.

“Hurry up!” Mustang urged.

“I... extended the pendant in my right hand and requested to be transported to a universe where Lucius held no sway.”

“Smart girl.”

Doubtful, Eliza quipped, “Really?”

Clearing her throat, Mustang clasped Eliza’s left hand, instantly releasing it due to a spasm of pain from the wound on her palm.

“Anything wrong?” Eliza asked.

Mustang exposed the scar in the moonlight. “I’m used to traveling another way.”

“You... have mastered the lightning?”

No reply necessary, she again intertwined her fingers with Eliza’s.

“The one occasion when Lucius summoned those forces, he nearly fried himself whole,” Eliza proclaimed.

“Then, I’m one up on him.” Her face hidden within the voluminous hood, she lowered her gaze and concentrated on specific criteria. The stone wall before her transformed into a painted canvas, split in a jagged line down the middle.

Mustang and Eliza strolled through, as if on a leisurely outing in a park.

### III

Two women glided across a marble floor, surrounded by Doric columns supporting a ceiling three stories high. Gold trim adorned the balustrade of a curved staircase to their left, with hand-carved chairs and tables scattered around the grand hall.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang hissed. “Where are we?”

“Lucius’ palace.”

“Nothing like jumping right into the fire.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Brushing off the hood, Mustang glanced around. “Where are his guards?”

“When he’s gone, they... take advantage of the servants.”

“Meaning...”

Eliza grumbled, “Just what you think.”

“When the cat’s away, the mice will play.”

“You have a thing about cats, don’t you?”

“I never really liked them,” Mustang admitted. “In my world, they’re frequently used as examples of human behavior.”

Insistent digits tugged her toward arched double doors. “We can flee this way.”

“Why flee? We can... tackle the problem head-on.”

“But... the guards are armed.”

“So am I.”

Confounded, Eliza retreated toward the exit. “You... carry no sword, no knife...”

“Would you feel safer with one?”

“Definitely!”

The mere thought caused a jewel-encrusted rapier to sail from its mount on the wall, landing at Eliza’s feet.

“Goodness!”

The clatter of forged steel on stone roused the dwelling’s occupants. Three half-naked men, their scantily-clad females in tow, appeared at the rear. Recognizing Eliza, they composed themselves, snarling.

“You!” shouted one. “Lucius ordered you to be held in his private chamber if you returned before he did.”

“Take your best shot,” taunted Mustang.

Shifting their focus to this visitor in their universe, she detected their befuddlement and bit back a chuckle.

Another pair of guards, uniforms partially buttoned, joined their comrades, swords drawn.

“Take her!” the senior ordered.

Eliza slunk along the wall, Mustang standing her ground as the cadre advanced. When they increased their pace, they found themselves sliding on the marble and crashing into the furniture.

Unable to recover their balance, the men slithered toward the stairs, straining into a seated posture as they glowered in defeat.

“You have a choice,” Mustang announced. “Disregard Lucius’ instructions and resume your... sport, or face a fate worse than death.”

The squad leader barked, “Threaten us as you will, but when Lucius arrives...”

“Who’s to say he will? Who’s to say I didn’t... eliminate him and seize his power?”

The detachment contemplated this possibility.

“If you are master of the power, you will have the medallion,” challenged a lanky youth.

That damned pendant! Mustang cringed. Reaching beneath the cloak, she revealed not the sunburst on a chain, but her entire fist, shining gold with blinding light.

Eliza genuflected, stupefied.

The guards saluted in a style similar to Roman centurions, hands over their hearts. “At your command!” they chanted.

“Get up, then, and dress yourselves,” Mustang chortled. “Report to your...”

She shrugged toward Eliza.

“Brigade,” supplied the latter.

“Report to your brigade: Lady Elizabeth of Boleskine has assumed the throne.”

“At your command!” they repeated, scurrying toward the servants’ quarters to gather their clothes.

Self-satisfaction lit Mustang’s countenance when she faced Eliza, whose mien remained pinched with fear.

“Lady Elizabeth of Boleskine?” the native queried.

“If I were to use my proper name, the same as yours, it would... confuse matters unnecessarily. When I lived in Scotland, my residence was called Boleskine, and I was known as Lady Elizabeth by the locals.”

“Ah, I see.” Eliza ventured closer. “What I don’t see is how you can use the power from your universe in ours, when Lucius couldn’t use his in yours.”

“I think it has something to do with intention. Lucius’ plan had nothing to do with promoting the good of the people, only himself. I’m here to... rectify his evil, if you will, so nature responds to my orders.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Either that, or my power exceeds his across all universes.” Mustang aimed for the door. “C’mon. Let’s mingle with the people.”

Her first reaction to the expanse beyond the vast portico: disappointment. A parallel universe this might be, but it lacked even basic 21st century technology. No motorized vehicles, no buildings taller than two stories, garments reminiscent of what had been described in her high school history texts as the Victorian era. The women wore ankle-length, simple frocks while men shrouded themselves in trousers, shirts and those voluminous cloaks.

Ensuing chaos reminded Mustang of news reports broadcast in Rome when she traveled there by chance years earlier. The Pope held what they termed an

“audience” each Wednesday, where throngs converged on St. Peter’s Square, taking insane risks to get close to him and seek his blessing.

Her arm hooked with Eliza’s, they paraded along the expansive boulevard leading from Lucius’ palace - actually, an ancient castle similar those in rural England - to the public forum, a spacious amphitheater where citizens brought their concerns and petitions.

“Ages ago, before the masters of the power took control,” Eliza explained. “Once that transpired, the common folks’ voices were silenced.”

Members of Lucius’ personal retinue, now properly attired, were directed to usher the people onto bleacher-style seats carved in the side of a hill. Mustang and Eliza migrated to an open-air stage, allowing the semi-circle of bodies full view of them.

Bemused chatter drowned out the erstwhile twin’s conversation.

“How will you speak to them? There are thousands...”

“And no microphone or amplifiers?” Mustang breathed. “Watch and learn.”

When she lifted her hand, silence immediately enveloped the gathering.

Flustered, Eliza stepped aside, leaving Mustang the center of attention.

The volume of her words no more than a casual exchange between friends, every ear heard as if she were standing right beside them.

“The reign of fear is ended. The dominance of the influential families is shattered.”

Cheers welled forth like lava from a volcano, sustained for a full five minutes - which provided Mustang time to formulate her plan.

“Eliza,” she whispered, “who’s the most honest person in each town?”

“There’s no answer to that. Everyone has an angle...”

“Even here?”

“Yes, sadly.”

Mustang ruminated for a scant second. “What’s your birthday?”

“The sixteenth of Lucian.”

“Your calendar is different?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see your calendar.” Eliza scanned the crowd. “One of the old science manuals, banned by Lucius and his predecessors - though a few copies are held in secret collections - told of the original calendar. The masters, after abolishing the government and judicial system, altered the configuration to thirteen lunar cycles, named after themselves.”

Mustang sucked air through grit teeth. “The same thing happened with us when they threw in months named for Julius Caesar and his nephew, Octavius Augustus Caesar.”

Enthusiastic clamor diminishing, she faced the thousands.

“Spread the word: those born on the sixteenth of Lucian are hereby appointed primary representatives during the process of forming a democratic government, where all those aged eighteen or older will vote to elect officials and reinstate a constitution detailing the rights of citizens and laws of the land.”

At minimum, three dozen in the assembly must’ve shared Eliza’s birthday, jumping from their seats with cries of surprise and joy, accompanied by rousing applause.

“What’s today’s date?” Mustang mumbled to her companion.

“The eighth of Florian.”

To the crowd: “On the eighteenth of Florian, the qualifying representatives will convene here to nominate candidates for the general election.”

“And, until then?” bellowed a male voice.

“Resume your lives with hope for the future.”

Mustang and Eliza remained on stage as the multitude dispersed.

“Now what?” Eliza demanded.

“You lead your people forward.”

“You mean, you’re not staying?”

“Lucius still must be dealt with. I’d prefer handling him in my own universe.”

“Where his power is...”

“Minimal.”

“I... have no leadership skills,” protested Eliza.

Her double retorted, “You spent your childhood raising horses. Dealing with humans is very similar. Treat them with respect, encourage them to cooperate...”

“And, if... or when they disagree?”

“Charge them, as adults, to work out their differences in nonviolent ways.”

“That could be... nigh impossible.”

“Not for those who have been freed from oppression for the first time in their lives.”

“I hope you’re right.”

The amphitheater deserted, Mustang retraced the route to Lucius’ palace.

“What say we find something to eat and get some sleep?”

“I’m up for that.”

A feast had been laid in the massive dining room: roasted fowl, broiled fish, assorted fresh fruit, steamed vegetables, rich desserts and jugs of wine. Two place

settings struck Mustang as ironic amidst so much food. She shambled the length of the hewn table, shoving aside the kitchen door.

“All of you, bring plates and utensils. This is a party!”

Timid servants managed to trickle in, growing bolder as they filled their stomachs. Lively chatter pleased both Mustang and Eliza, who’d known only ominous silence in this bastion of slavery.

Mounting the stairs well after dark - the time indeterminate, for Mustang’s part, due to a lack of clocks - the main bedroom more than dwarfed her entire apartment in Assisi. A king-sized, four-poster frame was adorned with purple velvet curtains laced with gold thread, the mattress covered with a version of silk sheets common to this universe.

“See you in the morning,” Eliza stated from the threshold.

“You’re not leaving? There’s room for six...”

“I... have my own...”

“Nonsense. Once I’m gone, this will be yours, as head of state.”

“Head of state?”

“As liberator of the people, you’ll serve as prime minister, president, or however you choose to title it.”

“If I’m elected to the post.”

“You will be,” Mustang affirmed.

“How can you be so sure?”

A firm finger thumped Eliza’s shoulder. “Because, deep inside, you’re me. Circumstances may have prevented you from... asserting yourself, but you’re now loosed from those bonds and can’t but help be who you are.”

“I... pray you’re right.”

“Prayer has nothing to do with it.”

“For you, perhaps. You have the power...”

Mustang exhaled loudly. “The only power you need is your own determination. Trust yourself to do what’s right, and to help others on the path to equality and - more important - equity.”

“How did you acquire such wisdom?”

“The same way you did: experience.”

“Me?”

“Enough talk. Frankly, I’m exhausted. Get some sleep, wherever you’re comfortable. In the morning, we’ll finalize the details.”

Resigned, Eliza padded over a fringed, woven area rug to a darkly varnished chest. She extracted two sets of satin-like pajamas from the third of five drawers, tossing one to Mustang.

Changed from the flannel shirts and jeans they'd worn beneath the cloaks, they nestled beneath plush quilts and plumped their respective pillows.

"Good night," said Mustang.

Eliza responded, "May your rest be tranquil."

While the visitor to this realm lay awake, pondering how her ethereal friends would criticize her latest actions, Eliza snored quietly on the opposite end of the mattress. Obviously, she was accustomed to a small bed, curled in a fetal position to take up the least space.

"There, we're different," she murmured, soon drifting off to sleep.

A notoriously early riser, Mustang watched the sun ascend over eastern mountains as she explored countless spaces in the palace. The upper floors boasted a plethora of bedrooms, each featuring bathrooms with gold-plated fixtures, including tubs. Larger chambers were fitted with double doors opening onto the parapets, where guards patrolled in silence.

Seeing her, they snapped to attention and saluted.

"As you were," she acknowledged, a memory from classic war movies.

Along the structure's southern face, a river ran through a grove of trees. This peaceful venue reminded her of her father's ranch in Montana, where she would ride her pinto Heartbeat instead of attending school.

To see the lush landscape unexpectedly split wide startled Mustang. Only one person could manage the feat, and she'd left him bound...

But, then, she recalled instances where her slumber negated commands to nature... more than a decade prior. She'd solved that problem, or so she thought.

Scrambling down uneven stone steps to the castle's gate, she sprinted toward the fissure, speed augmented by a microburst of wind. No more did Lucius appear, than she slammed into him, propelling him backward and landing atop his prone form in the heart of the dawn-lit Piazza San Rufino.

The portal linking parallel universes sealed instantaneously.

Lucius shoved Mustang off his chest and rolled onto one elbow as walls hardened again into stone. "No!" he yowled.

Panting from the atypical exertion, Mustang sneered at the thwarted dictator. Beyond him, an emaciated being in tattered Save the Whales t-shirt and jeans glared at her.

She rose, brushing dirt from torn pajamas. "Oh, hell..."

## IV

Mustang Duryea's fists clenched as she stared at the sole witness to her deed. "You're not taking his side in this?"

"My intention was to restore the natural order," responded St. Francis of Assisi.

"Natural order be damned, especially when it includes slavery, injustice and egocentric self-indulgence!"

"He does not belong here."

"He doesn't belong there, either! Don't those people deserve a chance to determine their own future, not have it dictated by a... a..."

Lucius tried to rise; Mustang leveled a backhand strike at his face, knocking him flat.

"Who do you think you are?" he protested, dabbing a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth with the soiled black shirt sleeve.

"I'm the one who will determine whether you live or die."

Francis objected, "You can't!"

"I have no choice."

"You'd jeopardize this place, this time, your very soul..."

"To save an entire world? Of course!" Mustang cried. "No matter how this is resolved, mass destruction is inevitable!"

"Signorina..."

A warning finger flashed. "Enough, Francis. We'll take it outside the city, if that will ease your conscience."

The shaggy bronzed head bowed in submission. "May God have mercy on you," the saint muttered.

Mustang waved Lucius to his feet; he stood a mere two inches taller, yet outweighed her by at least 50 pounds. Without her power, he could've readily pounded her into mulch.

She detected trepidation in his blue eyes, however. From years of raising horses, she grasped that frightened animals were the most dangerous and unpredictable.

"With me," she drawled, setting a quick pace toward the Via Dono Doni. Not sensing Lucius behind her, she paused and turned. "Move!"

His legs not under his own control, they shuffled toward her and soon mirrored her gait.

“How dare you!” objected the gravel-laced baritone. “First, you allow a bunch of witless apes to shackle me in a cell, then humiliate me on a public street...”

Mustang chided, “No more than you’ve done to others.”

“Those who deserved it.”

“Because they were inferior or offended you somehow?”

“Indeed. A race can only survive if those who are superior take the fore.”

“Bullshit.”

The expletive meant nothing to Lucius, who failed to react. “What is Eliza doing... stripping the gold from my palace and distributing it among the poor?”

“Oh, we threw a grand party last night and trashed the place,” the woman joked.

“You... did what?”

“And, elections will be held in ten days to create a fair and honest governmental body, with a formal constitution.”

“No!”

His roar drew the attention of passersby near the Basilica Santa Chiara.

“Quiet, idiot!” Mustang warned.

Though his mouth continued its motion, Lucius emitted no sound.

They passed through the arched Porta Nuova and descended the steep incline to San Damiano. Secretly, Mustang dreaded the uphill slog – if she survived this battle of wills.

The church where St. Francis had reputedly heard Christ speak from a Byzantine-style crucifix and, later, his early female followers had lived teemed with tourists off a bus idling on a circular drive. The pair continued their trek through dormant olive groves toward Rivo Torto, another small enclave connected to local history, halting in the midst of what may have been a wheat field well away from buildings.

Lucius flopped on the ground, muscles spasming from the exercise. He glared up at Mustang, rubbing his sore thighs.

“You’re more heartless than I, by far,” he accused.

“Consider it your comeuppance.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Justice.”

He flinched. “In whose world?”

“Mine, and yours.”

“So, what other tortures have you in store for me?”

His pathetic weakness, well-hidden by the false bravado sparked by his power, irked Mustang. If he didn't present such a threat to his own people, she would've let him go without a second thought. Her own experiences, failures, using the power she possessed – even attempting to help others - negated that option. He could not be trusted to do right.

“Get up,” she directed.

“I can't...”

“If your... minions were here, would you admit such frailty?”

“But, they aren't.”

Auburn mane rustled by a gentle breeze, she rolled her eyes. “What if I arranged it so they could see?”

“You... aren't capable...”

“Maybe, maybe not. But, they witnessed my power, up close and personal, so even if you could return there, they'd know you for the fraud you are.”

“And die, as a result.”

“The entire population?”

“If required to ensure my continued reign.”

Unseen hands lifted Lucius to his feet. “You are a fool,” Mustang lamented. “It's you who will die.”

“I can't be killed,” he asserted.

“Did your predecessor make the same claim?”

Lips pursed, he said nothing.

“So much for that lie.” Though, she recalled, she had periodically boasted in similar fashion.

As if triggered by the memory, knives of ice formed in mid-air, aimed at her from every point of the compass. She glimpsed Lucius' crooked sneer beyond the ring of weapons, which melted before ever touching her.

“Nice try,” she praised, sarcasm dripping.

He sobered immediately. “Admirable defense.”

“One thing I've learned: being attentive in the moment is key.”

“True.”

“Anybody ever sneak up on you?”

“Eliza, the night she stole the medallion.”

“A man in your position, so despised by the masses, didn't arrange invisible defenses to protect you while you slept?” Mustang quipped.

“I... didn't know that was possible.”

“Thus, your contingent of guards.”

“Indeed.”

She laughed outright. “You know their loyalty extended only as far as their fear.”

Furrows on Lucius’ wrinkled brow deepened.

“It took a minor display of my power and a promise of good things to come to turn them.”

“They shall die, one and all!” he raged.

“At whose bidding?”

“When I...”

Remnants of wheat stalks and dead branches rose from the soil, braided into an impenetrable cage which surrounded Lucius’ abruptly enlarged frame.

Hazel orbs widened as he swelled to over seven feet, stooped within the confines of this conjured prison. Shove as he did against the barrier, it did not give an inch under such tremendous pressure.

“Never pulled that stunt, myself,” Mustang clucked. “I could see where downtrodden citizens would shrink before a giant.”

Lucius ignored the remark. “Let me out!”

“I advise you to reverse the technique because, in a matter of seconds, those bars will squeeze you to death.”

“You can’t!”

She tired of his arrogance. The conical cell constricted; his massive bulk shriveled to that of a six-year-old child. Trousers lay in tatters beside boots split at the seams as he’d grown. He clutched the black silk shirt around him in faux modesty, an ill-tailored dress. The beard and greying hair, along with his weathered flesh, more resembled a dwarf.

Diminutive hands rattled the bars. “Don’t leave me like this!”

“I will, until you divest yourself of the powers you claimed by right of murder.”

“You know that’s impossible!” he squeaked. “Unless...”

She did know – and regretted – the fact she could not forego her own powers without being killed. There had to be a way...

“He cannot do what you ask, and you cannot change his heart.” St. Francis joined the couple, having followed at a leisurely pace.

“Wait a minute,” Mustang stated. “Neither of us has been in this situation before. Let’s think about it.”

Francis studied her youthful features; Lucius squatted on the chill earth, dejected.

“A person lacking this power cannot forcibly take it from one who possesses it without committing murder.”

“Correct,” Lucius grunted.

“A person who possesses the power cannot willingly divest himself of it to one who does not possess it while he lives.”

Francis sighed, “So it seems.”

“But, if one who possesses the power wishes to transfer that power to another who already possesses it...”

“I won’t!” shouted Lucius.

“It’s the one way you can go home.”

“And be executed for my supposed crimes by this government you’ve sanctioned?” he whimpered. “What would be the difference? Kill me now, or be killed later?”

“Fine, then.”

Mustang retreated ten paces, the saint of Assisi swiping at her pajama sleeve but missing.

“Signorina, more blood on your hands?”

“He made his decision.”

“So, what, you explode him like a grenade?”

As they debated morality, Lucius took advantage of the distraction. A small tunnel dug by nature at his behest beneath the cage allowed his escape. Resuming normal proportions, he didn’t waste time reclothing himself, instead sending a globe of fire straight at Mustang’s head.

Her peripheral vision registered the projectile at the last second. She ducked, avoiding impact, and commanded the puddle of water from the liquified knives to quench the flames.

Better than summoning a freak rainstorm from the cloudless sky.

The last thing she wanted was to alert the local meteorological service of peculiar weather activity, with someone making the connection between those events and others from Montana and Scotland.

“Damn you!” she cursed, the gust of wind manifested by her heightened emotions throwing Lucius into a nearby irrigation ditch.

She jogged to the site, Francis vanishing in dismay. Towering over Lucius’ prostrate, mud-soaked limbs, she relished the image of the deposed despot.

“I’ve had people tell me, over the years, I should do positive things with my power,” she droned. “At least, I’ve made an effort toward that goal. You... are a selfish bastard.”

Lucius pleaded, “Come back with me, and we could rule together...”

“Like hell.” She averted her gaze, disgusted. “How many men have made me the same offer, regarding their own particular circumstances? Why are you all so shallow?”

Rearing up, his left arm encircled Mustang’s throat, crushing her windpipe, while his right hand thrust a discarded iron spike toward her ribcage.

A moment’s panic prompted the desperate instruction: a surge of electric current broke Lucius’ hold, he tripped backward into the gully and cracked his skull on an exposed rock.

Once her respiration slowed, Mustang gazed toward Assisi. “You see, Francis? It’s a dog-eat-dog world!”

Edging down the slope, she squatted beside Lucius’ body, blue eyes open and non-responsive. Digits pressed against the carotid artery confirmed his death. As she straightened, his right hand lashed out – a reflex action? she wondered – and gripped her ankle.

When Jack Parsons’ power had transferred to her, after she’d plunged a knife into his chest as he lay on a picnic table *cum* altar on the grounds of Boleskine House, she felt nothing unusual. The addition of Lucius’ power to her own – perhaps because it was drawn from a parallel universe – rushed through her like a tsunami, landing her flat on her back.

Dazed, she remained horizontal for nearly a quarter hour before the earth’s cold penetrated the pajamas’ thin material. She crawled back to the ditch, summoned the elements to disintegrate Lucius’ corpse – why give the Carabinieri another reason to suspect her of criminal activity? – then began the arduous hike back to the hillside city.

A taxi would’ve been a welcome luxury, except her current apparel lacked pockets where she could’ve stashed a bit of cash, had she carried any to that other realm. She contemplated whether Eliza would worry about Lucius’ eventual return, hindering the progress her people made with their elections.

“Don’t even think about it, Signorina,” Francis scolded when Mustang emerged from a hot shower and wrapped herself in the terry robe, prior to warming a can of tomato soup and preparing a grilled cheese sandwich.

“Why not?” She curled up on the battered loveseat. “It would only take a minute.”

“You’d manage to... get involved with whatever difficulties they’re having and cause additional chaos...”

“You don’t trust me to use my powers... properly?”

His strained expression provided the answer.

“Gee, thanks.”

“You didn’t listen when I…”

A sizable bite of bread and cheese in her mouth, she bumbled, “It’s not like I went looking for Lucius, or Eliza. They came here. I dealt with the matter as I deemed best.”

“You’re still too young to know what is best in such… situations.”

“You know that’s a crock! I’ve come a long way since…”

“And, you have a long way yet to go.”

She swallowed, sipping hot cocoa to wash down the crumbs. “Life is a never-ending journey, I know that, just as I know that lessons learned from mistakes are the most important.”

“What have you learned from this mistake?” Francis prompted.

“What I did wasn’t a mistake. Lucius… wasn’t about to relinquish his authority, and I merely defended myself against his…”

“You’re saying, he’s responsible for his own death?”

“Absolutely.”

With a clucking of his tongue, Francis dissipated.

Frustrated by the lack of sympathy from a man she considered a friend and confidant – despite being inadvertently summoned from his crypt years earlier – Mustang finished her meal, washed the dishes and moved toward the bedroom. She paused to replenish the logs in the wood stove and glanced out the window, where heavy snow had begun to fall.

Amidst swirling flakes, she recognized Eliza’s face – her own, albeit with that curly auburn mop – smiling in contentment.

Maybe these parallel universes were more closely linked than she thought.