

The Mustang Chronicles:

Linguistic Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

A pounding rattled not only the tiny apartment's window frames, but the narrow twin bed, as well. Mustang rolled over, auburn hair tangled around her chin, hazel eyes unwilling to open. She'd imbibed a bit too much chianti at a late dinner the previous night with a genial Assisi shopkeeper and his robust Italian family.

Again, the knocking. Who would climb three flights of warped stairs to rouse her at sunrise? she puzzled.

Wearing just undergarments to offset the autumn humidity, the woman stumbled across the wooden floor. Deft hands offered her a dingy bathrobe in passing.

"Thanks, Francis," she grumbled.

The saint chided, "You can't greet important visitors in that state of undress."

"How do you know they're important?"

The emaciated countenance broke into a smirk; Mustang grunted, realizing how stupid to ask the question of one who'd been dead 800 years.

Yanking the burnished knob inward, she tried to smile at the teenaged son of her landlord.

"I paid the rent last Tuesday, Carlo."

"I know, Signorina," came the reply in Italian - though the tenant heard it in English, given the natural powers bequeathed to her by occultist and scientist, Jack Parsons, her grandfather. "This man has offered to pay 500 Euros to the guide who can give him an extensive tour of the city."

Mustang's drooping lids widened. A fat payday for a few hours...

She peered past Carlo into the shadows obscuring the hall. Standing almost on the same spot where FBI agent Ben Espinoza had attempted to hang Johnny Rosemont months earlier, a strangely proportioned individual crowned with a panama hat.

Legs too long for his torso barely filled the gabardine suit. His forehead rose too high and too broad for his other facial attributes. Yet, intense blue eyes met her gaze beneath the stiff brim, and Mustang audibly gasped.

"Oh, hell..."

With the slightest limp, the man approached, extending fingers obviously fractured in a horrendous accident and never properly set. "My name is Leslie Steiner, professor of mediaeval languages, late of Oxford University." His tenor muddled British, Irish and Scottish inflections in a lyrical way.

Mustang grasped the hand gently. "I'm Mus... Elizabeth Duryea."

"Your young friend, here, believed you could be of assistance to me, and I'm grateful. How come you to know Enochian?"

"Enochian?" she repeated. A form of gibberish, she recalled, used by her grandfather - and others - to perform bizarre rites. "I'm not speaking..."

She cut short the sentence and shuddered. Just as Italians or Germans heard her in their native tongues, though she spoke only English, if Steiner's primary form of communication was this Enochian, he would hear her speaking it, unless...

"English only, please," she whispered to the air. Then, she continued, suspicious, "What is your interest in Enochian and, why Assisi?"

She hadn't noticed the shoulder bag he lowered and opened, extracting a thick, custom-tooled, leather-bound volume. Sitting on the threshold, with Carlo watching in awe, Steiner rifled the parchment pages and revealed a gilt portrait of Saint Francis.

"All my research points to 13th century Umbria as the origin of the language," he declared.

"That's nuts." Francis, concealed behind the door, uttered the comment.

Mustang ignored her ethereal guest, countering Steiner's assertion, "My understanding is the local dialect developed from clerical Latin."

"Hogwash!" rebuked Steiner, rising to his knees. His hat fell, rolling past Mustang's feet. His shock of blond hair and undeniably asymmetrical stature surprised her, as much as his uncompromising beliefs.

"I don't see how I can help you."

"The absolute proof of my theory can be found in a certain book, housed in one of the churches within this city. If you are as good as this young man claims, you can obtain permission for me to view the libraries..."

Francis pushed on the door, and Mustang stepped back, allowing it to close. She leaned against it, and shrugged at Assisi's most famous son.

"You're the one who said he was important," she stated.

"He is, in his own country. Something about linking a specific derivative of Gaelic to ancient Arabic."

"What?"

Abruptly, she shot toward the kitchen table, propelled by the force of Steiner shoving the panel inward.

"I'll gladly pay 1,000 Euros, Miss Duryea. If you think me mad, is it not worth such a sum to see me proven wrong?"

Mustang quickly recovered her balance, securing her robe. Carlo, set to eject the intruder, she dismissed with a wave and a 20 Euro note.

Alone, except for Francis hovering in the corner, Steiner refused Mustang's signal toward the battered love seat. She straddled a wobbly chair, her stomach growling. "Professor, I'm not the type who cultivates relationships with the... custodians of Assisi's churches, if you catch my drift. They won't open their secret doors to you at my request."

"I've been here three weeks, Miss, and rumor has it you open many secret doors of your own accord. Including those to the afterlife."

"Oh, hell..."

"Your command of Enochian..."

She shot off the seat. "It has nothing to do with Enochian!"

He scrutinized her with those clear orbs, a disconcerting sensation. "A teenager like yourself is too young to understand."

"I'm not..."

Glancing left, she caught sight of herself in a scratched mirror over the sink. To be honest, she didn't look a day older than when she'd plunged the knife into Parsons' chest on the altar above Boleskine House...

This insight rattled her to her core. Her grandfather had mentioned how, after the FBI staged his death at age 37, he'd stopped physically aging. He'd assumed some government experiment to be the cause.

"Ah!" hissed Steiner. "So it's true."

Mustang cleared her head. "What?"

Awkwardly, the professor lowered himself onto the cushions. Mustang likewise resumed her seat, waiting for his revelation.

"How familiar are you with the history of Great Britain?" he began.

Not what she expected. "A little."

"Henry the Eighth?"

"Obese, had six wives..."

"Basic, but sufficient. After Henry broke with the Roman church over his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, he dissolved the monasteries, scattering their inhabitants. A group of Franciscans, however, remained together in seclusion, guarding their most valuable treasure."

"This book you seek?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think it's here in Assisi now, if it was in England four hundred years ago?"

“Five hundred, actually,” Steiner corrected her. “One of the king’s men, diligent and loyal, discovered the friars in hiding. The squad of soldiers he summoned murdered all but two, who were locked in the cellar with the book. When they emerged that night to find their slain brothers, they vowed revenge. While they made this prayer, the king’s man - who’d remained behind, suspecting just such a ploy - confiscated the book.”

“Stole it, you mean.”

“Semantics. The friars gave chase, capturing the supposed miscreant. They beat, tortured and left him for dead in the brambles, before making the journey back to Assisi.”

Though the scenario sounded like a fairy tale to Mustang, the way Steiner flexed his deformed right hand, struggling to clench it into a fist, made her shudder.

“You are that man, still on the king’s business,” she whispered.

“Indeed.”

“Oh, hell...”

“The reason I have suffered this fate lies in those pages. You see, the moon was full that night, and I stopped - thinking myself safe - to peruse the manuscript, with its gilt edged pages and hand-written lettering. I did not comprehend the words as I read a snippet aloud, but something... happened...”

“I’m... afraid I can’t help you, professor,” said Mustang, rising. “I’m afraid, some days, I can’t even help myself.”

“But, you know the language!” he protested.

“No, I don’t. Your... mind is playing tricks on you, because you want the book so badly.”

“Hogwash! Enochian is the language of the angels, imparted to St. Francis during his many ecstasies on Mount Alverna, before his stigmata. Many of his orations, dictated to Brother Leo, were spoken in Enochian, only later translated into Latin and Italian. The original documents, however, were bound into this book...”

Mustang glanced at Francis, avidly listening. Solemnly, the saint nodded once.

Still... “What about John Dee and Edward Kelley? I have... read they invented the language, as a ruse to gain favor with the first Queen Elizabeth.” Kelley - “Old Ned”, near Steiner’s age though more frail - had implied as much when he visited her at Boleskine House, desiring to train her in the proper use of her power.

“Kelley was a defrocked Franciscan, with knowledge of the book. He... adapted that knowledge in a quest for financial gain.”

Her arguments in vain, Mustang queried, “If you find this book, will you destroy it?”

“Of course not! I will study it, until I determine the formula which will grant me a peaceful and lasting death.”

“Are you in pain?”

“The pain has been such a constant since... It is part of my very being.”

She pitied the man in that instant. Without so much as a gesture, she could heal his disjointed bones...

“Don’t!” cried Francis aloud.

Both spun toward him, but only Steiner slumped back in a faint.

“Marvelous, Francis!” Mustang stormed. “Mind telling me how I’m going to explain you when he wakes up?”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t let you act on impulse, because the consequences would be too terrible for mere human sight.”

“What are you talking about?”

“His broken bones fused in their present shape centuries ago. They are not fresh - or recent - injuries, as you normally heal. You would have done more damage...”

The woman sighed. “Then, I suppose I should thank you. It’s still going to be tough for me to get out of helping him, given...”

“Perhaps you should.”

“You know the kinds of disasters that occur when I get too involved with people, and you have the nerve...”

“It would be a way to make amends for the harm done him.”

“I didn’t harm him.”

“Nor did I, but my overzealous brothers...” Francis lamented.

“So, I’d be acting on your behalf?”

“Out of kindness.”

Reluctantly, Mustang acquiesced. “Where is the book hidden?”

“I don’t know.”

“You who know all? Give me a break.”

“When it was first returned to Assisi, it was locked in an armored case, never to be viewed. The Poor Ladies living at the Basilica of Santa Chiara were entrusted with its safekeeping, since no men were admitted through their doors, and the women were mostly illiterate and lacking in curiosity.”

“Why the fuss?”

“When my dear Brother Leo transcribed my utterings, he didn’t grasp their supernatural source, nor that they might be judged heretical by the Church hierarchy. I insisted he translate them into common Latin, and burn the originals. He disregarded my wishes and kept them. Upon my death, Leo wanted to exhibit them in San Rufino, but Brother Elias - wisely - forbade it. They fell into Bonaventure’s hands when he was assigned to write my definitive biography, and most of his more theological treatises are based upon them.”

“Who smuggled them to England?”

“They weren’t smuggled, in that sense. A few copies were made, and select brothers took them on their missions. They were all to be destroyed, however, when Cardinals in the Roman Curia chanced upon a volume and denounced the contents. The message never reached the British contingent.”

“You still haven’t answered my question about its current whereabouts.”

“As the last extant copy, it is probably locked in the deepest, darkest vault in the convento.”

“You mean the basilica friary?”

Francis didn’t need to respond.

Mustang grabbed a cloth from the sink, dousing it in cold water before bathing Steiner’s twisted countenance. “You’d better scram, Francis, No need to complicate matters further.”

A slight bow preceded the saint’s dissipation.

She didn’t like lying - she avoided conflict where the tactic might be necessary. She couldn’t avoid this.

At close range, she distinguished numerous scars on Steiner’s cheeks, neck and shoulders. When he didn’t regain consciousness, she jiggled his arms, feeling the misshapen humerus. She cringed.

“Pity me not,” Steiner croaked, eyelids fluttering.

“It’s not pity.”

“Then, disgust?”

She bit her lip in affirmation.

“Imagine me whole, young and handsome, with a pretty wife and infant son, going off to perform my duty and never coming home. I saw her once, after I’d spent three years relearning how to walk, and she didn’t recognize me, wanted nothing to do with me. She told our son I’d died in battle.”

“In all these years, there’s been no other?”

The professor wrenched upright. “How can you mock me? Not even the most desperate spinster would look twice at this... this...”

A single tear escaped his eye. Mustang's sole thought was how the prayer of those vindictive Franciscans had been so brutally answered. Their supposed enemy had suffered for five hundred years...

Nature augmenting her mental vision, she imagined Steiner as a youth, pleasant of demeanor and mien.

"You smile, why?" he prodded.

"I accept your proposition, Professor. When would you like to start?"

"Now."

"Why not tomorrow?"

He snorted, "There have been an endless succession of tomorrows, Miss Duryea. I desire no more."

"Give me a minute to get dressed."

II

Her straw hat hiding much of her auburn tresses and keeping the autumn sun from burning her nose, Mustang looked frumpish in Pink Floyd t-shirt and jeans beside Steiner in his panama and tan suit, the leather pouch hanging from his shoulder. She had difficulty keeping pace with him down the stairs, too; he compensated well for his infirmities, through decades of practice, no doubt.

"You know where you're going?" she inquired.

"My research indicates the book is within the church walls."

"Which church? There are many within the city, and beyond."

"We will search each of them, beginning with your neighbor, San Rufino."

Mustang muttered under her breath at the futility of this prospect.

Nonetheless, Francis had not been certain of the book's location...

Three days into the "tour" - sleepless nights curled on the love seat while Steiner stretched comfortably on her bed - they had nothing to show for their efforts. Through Santa Maria Maggiore, San Crispino, San Pietro and San Quirico, they hadn't bothered to approach the priests or guards. Mustang used her power to detect any manner of concealment within the marble walls, finding nothing.

She did become well acquainted with her employer of sorts. He'd started as a foot soldier in Henry VIII's ranks, promoted and, eventually, given special duties. His wife had been a distant cousin of Anne Boleyn. Their son had died in his twenties, aboard one of Elizabeth I's naval vessels.

"In all this time, you never came to Assisi?" Mustang queried during the trek from Santa Coletta to San Stefano.

“At first, I had not the means, nor the stamina. My... injuries drained my strength after a few small steps, and travel was arduous. Besides which, I hadn’t the necessary education. I spent eighty years at the best English universities to acquire it.”

“What kind of education?”

“Linguistics. I became so proficient in the Latin derivatives, I could translate any phrase without thinking.”

“Enochian isn’t based in Latin, is it?”

“No, and I wasted aeons before I understood that, because there were no texts in Enochian, until Kelley’s tripe was published by 19th century occult enthusiasts.”

“To use in their magickal rituals.”

He halted before the doors of San Stefano. “Indeed. Nonsense, every bit of it. Especially the charades enacted by that fool Crowley.”

“Crowley?”

“Aleister Crowley. Brilliant chap, but egotistical and selfish. I tried to enlist his aid while he was living in Sicily, but he was too far gone on drugs and alcohol to be useful, even if he’d agreed.”

“Was he the only person...”

“I got wind of a few others, including Crowley’s erstwhile protege, living in the States. He vanished before I could arrange transport across the Atlantic.”

“Jack Parsons?”

“Yes, that was his name.”

“He was my grandfather.”

Steiner asserted, “I never believed the tale of his death in a chemical explosion.”

“Rightly so. He lived a long, if not full, life, exiled to Scotland.”

“Ye gods! Scotland? On my very doorstep...”

“I endured a similar exile, in the same house.”

“Not Boleskine?”

“How...”

“Crowley’s old haunt. Very ironic.”

San Stefano hid a variety of tomes beneath its roof, but none of value to Professor Leslie Steiner. They gained access by distracting the withered librarian, seeking directions to a good restaurant.

“We have not yet visited Santa Chiara,” declared Steiner upon their exit.

Mustang gauged the sun’s position. “The doors are already locked.”

“That will not stop you.”

“Oh, yes, it will! I live here, remember, and I don’t wish to be arrested or disgraced.”

“I pity any policeman who tries to shackle you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your friend, in your flat, who advised you against... doing what the other morning?” chuckled Steiner. “He was no figment of my imagination.”

“To be sure.”

“Had you intended to mercifully end my life?”

“No, your pain.”

He inclined his head almost imperceptibly. “The rumors I heard in my wanderings were accurate, and I shall always be indebted to you.”

“What rumors?”

“Of the little... miracles which take place in your proximity, your generosity to those less fortunate...”

“Don’t make me out to be some kind of saint.”

“You looked the part in a film I saw at university this spring.”

“The biography of Francis? I read it bombed at the box office.”

“It did. A special screening was held at Oxford, to benefit worthy charities. The subject matter naturally intrigued me, Candida Donato.”

Mustang blushed. “The purpose of the pseudonym was to preserve my privacy.”

“It did, until I stood face to face with you. Your eyes are unmistakable.”

The redness of her cheeks deepened, and she hurried along the stone lane.

The Basilica of Santa Chiara teemed with tourists the following day, yielding nothing to Steiner’s quest. He urged Mustang to infiltrate the adjacent Poor Clares’ cloister.

She resisted initially. “Pray tell, how? Should I mug one of them and steal her habit and veil?”

His smirk conveyed more than words.

She disappeared, and he rested on a bench near the city wall, awaiting her return. Three hours ticked away, and he grew more and more nervous.

He noticed Carabinieri patrolling the piazza, keeping him under surveillance, it seemed. He rose and entered the Gran Caffè bakery, where Mustang had earlier treated him to pastries. Fortunately, crowds prevented him from being served. He felt trapped, though, with the Carabinieri posted beside the door.

A trill of whistles echoed along the street, summoning police to a crime scene, supposedly. A number of the bakery’s customers abandoned their place in

line to step outdoors, including Steiner, who took advantage of the confusion to limp toward San Rufino and Mustang's apartment.

Climbing the stairs winded him; he sank on the love seat, chest heaving.

"She's a fool to leave her door unlocked," he scoffed aloud. "But, I'm glad she did."

"I don't, normally," came Mustang's feisty contralto from the shadows.

His head whipped around, and his guide heard bones crack. She flinched.

"Where are you?"

"Here." She materialized, sitting on the kitchenette counter, as if a curtain had been drawn aside. "I was ahead of you by two steps all the way from the piazza."

Steiner bolted to his feet. "You think you can toy with me?"

"No, I saved your bacon, Professor. I was able, upon exiting the Poor Clares' monastery, to eavesdrop on the Carabinieri's radio transmissions. They wish to bring you in for interrogation."

"On what charge?"

"Theft of rare antiquities from the Oxford University Library." Mustang saw him swallow hard. "Interpol has issued a warrant, describing you as impersonating a retired professor. Who are you, really?"

Her guest fell silent.

"Don't press your luck. When I get angry, I do horrible things, and I'm moving in that direction fast."

Disjointed digits ran through his blond mop. "You can grasp my predicament, can't you, Miss Duryea?"

"Not really."

"You should, considering your... situation. I've been alive for centuries. My... physical attributes make it onerous to periodically change my identity, as might some immortal depicted in novels or film. I 'retired' from Oxford - at the dean's insistence - in 1873. I continued to make use of their libraries and facilities..."

"When you should be long dead."

"Indeed."

"This rare antiquity you stole..."

He drew the leather-bound tome from his shoulder bag, gingerly laying it on the kitchen table and opening the cover. "The first known publication of St. Francis' writings in Latin. Evidently, Brother Leo wasn't well versed enough in Enochian to make accurate translations of everything Francis said, so he left some words in their original form."

Mustang dropped off the counter to admire the ornate text. “Which supports your theory...”

“Yes.”

“But, why steal the book?”

“I didn’t. I checked it out, according to university protocol. It’s not due until the end of term.”

“Except, they don’t know you’re not dead, so they think the person who checked it out forged your name.”

Steiner pulled his wallet from his hip pocket. He presented Mustang ten 100 Euro notes. “I cannot in good conscience put you in further danger. As you Americans say, I’m screwed. Necessity will drive me into seclusion for another fifty years, at which point I shall resume my search.”

She refused the money. “You’re not screwed, if they don’t recognize you.”

“Eh?”

“Turn around.” She pointed him toward the mirror.

He saw himself whole, yet, running his fingers up and down his torso, still felt the remnants of every shattered bone. “How...”

“It’s an illusion, the same as me being invisible. You’re safe as long as you stay with me.”

“And when we succeed in our quest?”

“You’ll be dead, so it won’t matter. I can send the book back to Oxford anonymously.”

The professor perked up. “Shall we go?”

“Why don’t you... leave the book here?”

“Grand idea.”

Tucked in the cupboard, if the Carabinieri decided to pay an unexpected call, they wouldn’t be able to connect Mustang with any illegal activities.

The Basilica of San Francesco, its pink marble hideous in Francis’ opinion, was preparing for the annual feast day celebration in early October. Housekeeping staff were scrubbing floors in the moments before the doors were locked for the day and the last tourists were escorted from the lower levels.

Steiner and Mustang strolled past this crew as if they owned the structure. Standing before the main altar, the professor sputtered, “How do we get into the convento?”

“Hell if I know,” chuckled Mustang. “I’ve never been back there. If you’re not a friar, you’re not welcome.”

“I’m not a friar, either.”

“But, you can look the part.”

“What, we mug one and take his robe?”

“No, the clothes we have, they will see as robes.”

“You, too?”

“You want to go in by yourself?”

“Thank you, no.”

Concentrating a brief second, Mustang shifted her gaze to Steiner, who resembled the perfect friar, in brown habit, sandals and knotted cord. His jaw gaped as he studied her, in similar guise.

“I’d be hard pressed to guess you’re a woman,” he admitted.

“As it should be. Let’s go.”

They trailed a real friar, bald and plump, descending circular stairs behind a partition. Half way down, he stopped. “Welcome, brothers. Have you a reservation?”

“Yes, brother,” bluffed Mustang. “We’re the friars from New York.”

“I don’t recall...”

“Please, check the guest master’s calendar. I’m sure he has us listed.”

“Very well. Follow me.”

They emerged in a long, dark corridor, pausing while the cleric verified entries in a logbook on the porter’s desk. “Here it is: Brother Mark Sylvester and Father James Leslie from St. Bonaventure Friary in New York. This way, please.”

“Where’d you get those names?” mumbled Steiner as they continued to a row of guest rooms.

She sniffed. “I instructed the ink already written to rearrange itself into American-sounding names, and a corresponding residence.”

“Which one’s which?”

“Does it matter? We won’t be here long enough...”

“Where’s your luggage, brothers?” puzzled their host as he ushered them into cramped, simple rooms.

Steiner’s chance to lie. “In the car. We didn’t want to carry it all over Assisi.”

“Where are the bathrooms?” chimed in Mustang.

“At the far end of the hall,” was the answer. “Prayer is at 6:00, and supper follows in the main dining room.”

Retracing his route to the porter’s cubicle, Mustang wondered if he spoke anything other than Italian. Better to wait until he went about his business and, in the interim, she could attune herself to the place and possible vaults of which Francis had spoken.

Three elderly friars passed them, and nodded in greeting. Steiner and Mustang mimicked the gesture, forcing smiles.

“Let’s get moving,” insisted Steiner, his discomfort plain.

“Patience, Professor. Or, have you none left?”

“I warned you once about mocking me.”

“I’m not mocking you,” she clarified. “And, keep your voice low. The acoustics in this building are phenomenal.”

She set off toward the depths of the convento, corridor upon corridor of identical cells, as the friars called them. Finally, they found the kitchen and the dining room, and a series of locked storage closets.

“Where’s the library?” spat Steiner.

“We can always ask directions.”

“You’re not serious in the least about this, are you?”

“On the contrary. I could have the walls of this hole down on their heads, and bring out the book in a minute, but I’ve done enough damage to this city since...”

“The newspapers carried reports of a spontaneous earthquake, which were subsequently retracted...”

“I was seventeen. But, I cleaned up my own mess.”

“Ah!”

Mustang inhaled slowly. The scent of old parchment reached her nose.

“This way, Professor.”

Except for shelves containing more recent publications, the majority of the convento’s library holdings were locked in cases designed to maintain constant temperature and humidity, and thereby prevent deterioration of the tomes. Dim lighting did little to help in reading the titles, so Mustang added some artificial illumination.

“What are we looking for, exactly?” she inquired, sounding out the Latin syllabically.

Before Steiner could reply, an unfamiliar voice barked, “What the hell is going on here?”

Instant blackness enveloped the chamber, and Mustang commanded, “Run!”

III

“Are you barmy?” Leslie Steiner objected. “Not only can’t I see my hand before my face, but I haven’t moved faster than a snail since 1534.”

Mustang apologized, "Sorry, Professor." She gripped his wrist firmly and led him past the friar-librarian and out the door.

In fact, the entire convento had been immobilized in darkness. No emergency lights activated, either, leaving everyone frozen in their tracks.

"Is it you putting off that infernal, damned glow?" rumbled Steiner.

"If you want to get out of here, shut up."

"I want that book!"

"Then, tell me the title."

"It's in Enochian."

Mustang's aggravation escalated. "Fine. Tell me."

"You're the one who speaks Enochian."

"No, I don't. Through some quirk of nature, when we met, you heard me in Enochian. I had to force your mind to hear me in English."

They rounded a corner - more doors and no idea of direction.

"Undo what you've done, and I'll be able to hear you say it in Enochian."

Steiner wasn't as dense as Mustang thought. If he heard the words in Enochian, he could repeat them, and she could summon natural elements to locate the book.

"What's the title, in English?"

"*The Divine Manifesto of Holy Brother Francis.*"

The ploy worked. As soon as Mustang verbalized the phrase, swirls of marble dust congealed from walls and floor, spiraling toward the forbidden text.

"Miraculous, how they shimmer," breathed Steiner, taking the lead.

His companion glanced back to ensure they weren't being followed, reiterating, "Shut up."

Along endless corridors, up and down stairs, Mustang became totally disoriented. They might have been in the bowels of earth, as far as she knew. The air grew more dank with every step; Steiner coughed.

"A good sign, I suppose," he remarked. "No one's been through here in ages."

"Maybe because there's no ventilation."

She fell silent as the flecks of stone flickered brightly once and settled on a flat surface.

"Well?" queried Steiner.

"Well, what? Strike a match."

"I don't carry..."

She puffed, "Never mind."

Four candles in gilded stands blazed to life, ignited by nature's command.

They stood in a stark chapel hewn from rock, their heads inches from the ceiling. The flat surface coated in many layers of dust proved to be a carved altar, far more impressive than the wooden picnic table Jack Parsons had long ago used for his rites.

“Oh, hell...”

“What is it?” pressed Steiner.

“I’m not a religious person, in any sense of the word. But, dismantling an altar...”

“Dismantle, hogwash! If they sealed the book inside the stone, you’ll have to shatter it.”

Incredulous, Mustang glared at the professor. “You’re kidding, right? Without tools? The impact could cave in the entire wing, and we’d be trapped.”

“Not for long. I have complete faith in you.”

Sensing a bench behind her knees, she plopped on the rotted wood. “Why is that? What did you hear about me from the locals?”

“This is neither the time nor the place...”

“There’ll be no other, because I’ll not budge until you clarify why you put such stock in me helping you.”

“Miss Duryea...”

“Not much wax left to those candles. I estimate five minutes before we’re back in the black.”

“How can you be so calm, when the truth lies inches away?”

“Are you that anxious to die?”

She observed Steiner’s blue orbs expand and redden. “Yes, damn you! I’m so exhausted, and I despise this world absolutely! You’ve not experienced the horrors, the wars, the constant cycle of idiocy, greed...”

“Trust me, I have, and I feel as you do, most days. You have no concept, though, of the consequences if I’m not specific in my instructions. I’ve gone off half-cocked before, and the results aren’t pretty. I’ve caused many deaths because of my stupidity.”

Steiner’s head drooped. “Your humble servant, Miss Duryea.”

She squeezed behind the slab, running her fingers around the edges to check for fractures or seams. Solid. Or fused by some technology unknown.

“Go, wait in the hall,” Mustang directed.

“Can’t I watch?”

“Watch what? You think a laser will shoot from my fist, like special effects in a movie?”

“I...”

She shoed him out, needing every ounce of focus.

A pulsation from within the altar, nonetheless, briefly distracted her. She pondered whether she had awakened a dormant entity through her contact with the stone.

“The language of angels was not meant to be consigned to parchment,” murmured Francis. “Neither Brother Leo nor I realized this at the time.”

“Did the Cardinals? Is that why they ordered the other copies burned?”

“No. They weren’t that... insightful. They saw the devil’s hand in the strange script, and would have suppressed the brothers’ right to preach if they hadn’t complied.”

Mustang stepped away from the altar. “What is it about Enochian that stops people from growing old, or dying a natural death? Old Ned, Grandpa Jack, me... and now Steiner.”

“Those who speak the language of angels become angels themselves, even when it’s done unwittingly. Angels don’t die.”

“I’m no angel.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself.”

His statement jarred her. An angel? Eternal life? “Has this been a wild goose chase? Will Steiner die once he possesses the book?”

Francis sank on the bench. “The night he confiscated the book while the friars prayed for vengeance, he read one sentence of a prayer for a peaceful death. Roughly translated, ‘Lord, almighty God, you have blessed me with long life.’ Such a prayer, in an ordinary tongue, would have no ill effects. But...”

“If he is able to read the rest of the prayer, he will die in peace?”

“Yes.”

The chapel walls began to vibrate. Shards of marble rained on Mustang’s head; Francis vanished.

She hurried from the room, grabbing Steiner’s hand and yanking him down the corridor, until she tripped in the dark and landed prone. Steiner bounced atop her, before rolling further into the gloom.

“What... happened?” he gasped.

“I warned you, didn’t I? We’ll have to dig our way out...”

Staring upward, a feeble laugh emerged from the professor’s throat.

“It’s not funny,” chided Mustang.

“Oh, indeed, it is.”

She pushed herself into a sitting position among the rubble. Brushing pebbles from her auburn tresses, she glimpsed sunlight overhead.

She’d split the mountain.

“Oh, hell...”

Steiner was already climbing over piles of rock toward the chapel and, behind Mustang, voices of terrified friars could be heard approaching. She scrambled upright, an ominous twinge in her left ankle signaling a sprain.

“Not now!” she declared, and the pain dissipated as she pursued Steiner.

He sat on a boulder, tears streaming from his eyes. “We’ll never find it,” he chanted.

“I thought you had complete faith in me,” chortled Mustang.

“I... did.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“I...”

“Fine. I’d rather be home, eating breakfast.” She seized a hunk of rock and made to ascend the debris toward the rising sun.

He tugged her t-shirt. “I... apologize, Miss Duryea. You gave me fair warning, and I thought I knew better. Please, help me.”

The clamor of angry men increased, from both above and below. Mustang assisted Steiner onto firm ground, where partially clad residents of the town had gathered on the basilica lawn.

“The Carabinieri will surely arrest you,” predicted Steiner.

Grinning, she faced the crowd. “Go back to sleep!”

One problem solved, others remained.

Mustang concentrated on raising the book from the crumbled altar, too late. A dozen Franciscans, examining the destruction to their hallowed convento, shot through the air like missiles in every direction.

Fortunately, she cushioned their landings, with one minor injury among the lot.

“What will they be thinking?” puzzled Steiner.

Mustang snorted, “Spontaneous levitation.”

The *Divine Manifesto* lay at her feet. She reached for it; Steiner snatched it away.

“Oh, no, you don’t! It’s mine, finally!”

Keeping her tone even, she said, “Professor, be very careful. Remember, it was your own foolishness that got you into this mess, five centuries ago. Foolishness borne of impulse may compound your difficulties.”

He hugged the worn leather volume to his chest, like a child refusing to relinquish a new Christmas toy. He tossed 100 Euro notes at Mustang with his deformed right hand. “You are paid in full, Miss Duryea. Go home and eat your breakfast!”

Steiner limped between bodies of sleeping locals, while Franciscans converged on a resigned Mustang. Some people would never learn, she mused. He'd witnessed her put an entire town to sleep, and he thought he could escape?

"Signorina," greeted a portly friar. "Are you a terrorist, intent on destroying our most famous shrine?"

"You have no idea," Mustang retorted, gazing after Steiner.

She let them drag her to the basilica's front steps, where St. Francis had preached before news cameras, just one of many "accidents". Beneath their feet, rumbling anew and - very much like special effects in a movie - the marble walls restored themselves without so much as a crack to show the rupture.

Befuddled, they released her and she strolled up the Via San Francesco to her apartment.

Where Leslie Steiner paced at the bottom of the staircase, still holding the book.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" she hailed.

He raged, "I can't open the cover."

"Of course, you can't."

"Why not?"

"You're not ready."

"How dare you..."

"Don't be insulted, Professor," Mustang advised. "You don't have the key."

"Key?"

She thumped the leather near a miniscule indentation. "They were very protective of their secrets, these Franciscans. I'd say, by the shape, they used a small San Damiano cross."

"Where will I find one?"

"That size? Who knows?"

"You're mocking me..."

"I'm being honest. The friar responsible probably wore the cross on a cord around his neck. It disintegrated along with his bones, most likely."

"Damn, damn, damn!" As much of a fist as Steiner could manage hit the wall. When he retracted it, blood dripped past bone fragments penetrating the skin.

Mustang shook her head, amazed. "Upstairs," she ordered.

"You can do nothing..."

She countered, "I can do everything, but if you don't shut up, I'll leave you this way."

"What about the key?"

She shoved him ahead of her, ignoring the question.

Reclining on the love seat, Steiner panted; the ascent had taxed his strength. Mustang didn't bother with the stains on the cushions, or his suit. She debated restoring the hand to its original condition - his pain couldn't be any worse than at present.

"What about the rest of him?" ventured Francis, filling a bowl with water at the kitchen sink.

"If he's just going to die..."

"It would make it easier to fit him in a coffin."

"It won't come to that, will it? He'll..."

"Very perceptive of you. He's already dust, merely held together by supernatural forces."

Mustang soaked a towel in the cool water. "What about the key?"

"Your supposition was accurate."

"I sense a 'but'," she urged.

"Professor Steiner hasn't the strength to press with his thumb, which also releases the catch."

"So, I can open it for him."

"Or, he can do it after you heal these fractures."

"I'll tell him, after breakfast. I'd hate to see another man die on an empty stomach."

"What will you do with the book, after..."

"What *should* I do with the book, Francis?"

"Replace it in the stone altar."

"Wouldn't your Church look more kindly on it today..."

"Now, as then, the men of the hierarchy are by no means angels. They would neither understand nor appreciate the text's value. Like the professor, they would find themselves in a predicament beyond remedy, and seeking your assistance would not be an option. Their hearts are far harder than stone."

Steiner's screams when Mustang repaired his hand roused the entire piazza. Mass in San Rufino halted in mid-sermon, and children rolling hoops across the square abandoned their play and scurried home.

IV

Plates of eggs, bacon and toast, accompanied by mugs of steaming hot cocoa, contented Mustang and Leslie Steiner - for the moment. The latter's gaze

kept shifting to the Enochian tome on the kitchenette counter, and his host felt guilty for not revealing the truth about the key.

She'd been debating about a suitable site for Steiner to read the prayer and... expire. Sweeping his ashes off the carpet into a garbage bag and tossing it out for collection wouldn't be respectful. Anywhere public would be... embarrassing and, not to mention, require awkward explanations.

Down the hill to San Damiano would be, ironically, appropriate, or up to the Eremo delle Carceri, near the ilex tree where Francis preached to the birds. Beyond that, where her favored wild horses grazed, the professor would mingle with the winds for all eternity...

"You're very distant, Miss Duryea," the object of her deliberations noted. She took another bite of bacon. "Sorry."

"First, you mock me, then you fret for me. You are a very changeable woman."

"I... fret for myself, Professor. Because of you, I have wreaked havoc once again. Long after you are gone, I'll have to live with the disfavor of the people."

"Nonsense. When those sleeping sods awoke on the grass, they believed it a false alarm fire, nothing else. The friars... they'll never confess the truth." He flexed his mended digits, smiling. "You do know, don't you, when we find the key, you will not be able to be present when I..."

"Enochian has already ruined my life. I don't need further exposure."

"When shall we get started?"

"I'd like to wash the dishes."

Steiner snickered. "I'd like... to help."

He dried the plates and silverware without dropping one, clearly pleased. "My wife and I enjoyed dancing, before..."

"They dance differently now. The music isn't so... refined."

"I couldn't if I wanted to, with my legs still..."

Mustang drained the sink. "We'd better be going."

Steiner left the volume from Oxford University, replacing it in the leather shoulder bag with the *Divine Manifesto*. Mustang had removed the blood stains from his suit, so he wouldn't resemble a walking corpse as they traversed the city to the hill.

Even though, technically, he was little more than that.

Entering the oddly vacant piazza near the Basilica of Santa Chiara, the pair were suddenly surrounded by a troop of Carabinieri. Mustang grit her teeth; in the process of tending Steiner's hand, she'd forgotten to sustain the illusion of him as a young, healthy man.

Him, they ignored for the moment. “Signorina, a word,” said the commandant.

“As you wish.”

“There is a small matter of a gas attack...”

“Gas?” She bit her lip to keep from exploding with laughter.

“This morning, outside San Francisco. A hundred people collapsed from the effects.”

“Did you find a canister, or the device used to disseminate the toxin?”

“No, Signorina.”

“Why detain me, then?”

Sweat beaded on the lean, middle-aged police officer’s brow. “You are known...”

“I hope I’m known,” interrupted Mustang. “I’ve been living here and leading tours for years.”

“Your knowledge of this district is admirable, as is your knowledge of... other...”

“Come, come, commandant, get to the point.”

“The point is: you are under arrest.”

Steiner barked, “What charge?”

“If nothing else, aiding and abetting a wanted felon - namely, yourself, Signore.”

The squad unholstered their pistols and aimed them at Mustang and the professor.

“Well?” grunted the latter as the handcuffs appeared.

And promptly melted into a puddle on the commandant’s boots.

“I would suggest you cooperate, Signorina,” he admonished.

“I would suggest you march your men back to headquarters.”

“Resisting arrest is another charge...”

“I’m resisting nothing. You haven’t seen me move, have you?”

She’d never had to move to call upon nature to do battle for her. When initially “cursed” with these powers, she’d been confused at not having to use incantations or gestures to perform the “magick”. Life did not always imitate fiction, she’d discovered.

Many days, she’d wished it had. Having to think before taking action would have prevented many disasters wrought by her impulsive tongue.

A second set of shackles bound Steiner’s wrists, after a junior officer commandeered the leather shoulder bag. “Miss Duryea, they can’t...”

“Oh, si, we can,” countered the commandant.

Mustang muttered, "Only if you want your flesh to melt like those cuffs."

Her brashness gave the group pause. Half the cordon retreated three paces, while the rest shivered in their shoes.

"Attention!" bellowed their leader, but they failed to comply. Imposingly, he towered above Mustang. "Such a small one causing fear in Italy's finest?"

"Hilarious, isn't it?"

"I see not the humor."

"Too bad."

She reached for Steiner and, together, they evaporated in the sunlight.

"Fire!" ordered the commandant.

The hail of bullets hit empty air. When the din faded, the second pair of handcuffs clinked on the cobbles.

"You had me worried, Miss Duryea," whispered Steiner as they proceeded, unseen, toward the path to San Damiano.

"I find it oddly gratifying to harass authority figures. It's a fault I may never overcome."

"I, personally, would not risk it."

"Awareness they can't harm me, and they know it but still badger me, ticks me off."

Steiner's pace lagged.

"Even though we are safely out of sight, hanging around isn't the best idea," commented Mustang.

"They have the book."

"Oh, hell..." She peeked past the arches of Saint Clare's Basilica at the befuddled Carabinieri. Striding purposefully to the youth who held the shoulder bag, she unfastened his belt, dropping his trousers, and snatched the strap as he fumbled to recover.

For good measure, she kicked his backside in parting.

Once restored to him, Steiner clutched the bag as some women might hold onto a diamond ring. Mustang ushered him down the steep slope to the little church where St. Francis reputedly heard Christ's voice. "You don't fear the Carabinieri, but won't they continue to pester you, even after I'm gone?"

Mysteriously, she intoned, "They'll forget all about me."

She'd escaped similar dilemmas with Interpol and the FBI employing the same method. She couldn't escape the warm sun, though. Her straw hat remained on its hook beside the apartment door, and her fair skin would be well burned before this trek concluded.

“Professor,” she broke the silence, “what will be your fondest memory of your years on earth?”

“My wife and son.”

“Nothing else? No trifle of wisdom found among the stacks at the Oxford Library, or a chance encounter with a wandering actor...”

“Are you fishing for compliments, Miss Duryea?”

“No, not me. You see, I’ve tried to grow in self-control and benefit from the interaction I’ve had with the people who’ve intruded on my seclusion, rarely succeeding. I’ve justified my failings with the excuse that I’m still relatively young.”

“Because I’m much older, you think I should have a head filled with platitudes and wise advice.”

“I... hoped.”

“In vain, sadly. This preoccupation with ending my life left me little opportunity to gain peripheral knowledge or wisdom. I dedicated every minute to researching potential shortcuts and, when those proved futile, I set out to find Francis’ manifesto. Are you sure the key is at San Damiano?”

Mustang gulped. “The key is in your hand.”

“Eh?”

They relaxed on curved benches at the “rest stop”, as Mustang called it, en route to the valley. A lack of shade frustrated Mustang; Steiner graciously placed his panama hat atop her tousled mop.

“I won’t need it anymore.”

“Thanks.” She felt a tear trickle along her cheek.

“Now, about the key...”

“Press with your thumb.”

He did, and a distinct *pop* freed the embossed cover. He’d been holding his breath, and exhaled in relief.

“In these, my last moments,” he prayed, warily manipulating the parchment sheets, “I beg forgiveness of my sins, and profess belief in an eternity spent with those I love always and forever.”

Mustang grumbled, “Amen.”

“You’d best be going,” Steiner announced, rising.

“I’ll be honest, I’m tempted to read those words with you.”

“Don’t let your foolishness take the fore, my dear Miss Duryea.” He scooped up her fingers, squinting in trepidation at the scars on her palms. “Take care in all your dealings, with men *and* angels. Fare thee well.” He bent and kissed her hand in the gallant style of the 16th century.

Mustang didn't wander far, needing to retrieve the book once Steiner had passed into the beyond. She didn't need to steal a glance, either; a cloud of fine dust cascaded into view and wafted above the olive groves before dispersing to the four winds.

Out four days and 1,000 Euros, the woman trudged back to where the book had fallen in the dirt. She didn't bother to decipher the calligraphy, slamming closed the volume. "Wouldn't it be better if..."

"No, Mustang."

"Francis, you're a harsh task master."

"I'm no harsher with you than I was with myself."

"But, that was 800 years ago. Things have changed."

"You mean, people have grown lazy?"

"Sure," Mustang drawled.

"They were lazy then, too."

"And vindictive."

"Humanity will always be subject to its weaknesses."

Collecting Steiner's gabardine suit, she stuffed it in a convenient trash bin. "As much as I despise their weaknesses, why do I always end up helping them?"

"As much as you'd like to think otherwise, you are, essentially, a kind and loving individual," proclaimed the saint. "You want to help the world in positive ways..."

"As Peter O'Donnell recommended."

"Him, and others. You *do* shine like a beacon, and those desperately seeking the truth are drawn to you."

"Oh, shut up."

"Off with you to the convento."

She hesitated on the incline. "I've no idea how to get this inside the altar without... wrecking the place again."

"Wreck the place. I'd not mind one whit. If they'd built it while I lived, I'd have banned them from the Order."

"I'll go tonight."

"You'll go now."

"Why the rush?"

"Should the book fall into the wrong hands..."

"What, are there others who need release from the angelic realms?"

Ominously, Francis muttered, "You have no idea."

"Why not give them one crack at it, before it's tucked away for another five centuries?"

“You’d never have a minute’s rest, if I did.”

“Oh, hell...” Adjusting the panama hat, she veered across a jammed parking lot to escalators transporting tourists to the city gate.

When the aging, wiry porter responded to the bell at the Basilica of San Francesco, wiping remnants of antipasto from his lips, he cursed the youngsters who pranked him on a recurring basis. A gust of wind prevented him from slamming the door too rapidly, and permitted an uninvited guest to slip indoors.

The maze of corridors might have gotten the best of Mustang, except she heard a distant, animated conversation between a friar-architect and the community guardian. She followed the voices, soon detecting their torch lights.

“Did you *see* the rubble?” persisted the architect.

A frustrated bass spat, “No, I returned from Rome an hour ago.”

“There is no evidence of any fissures, and the foundation is perfectly intact. You’ve been victim of a cruel joke, Brother.”

“If this is the case, why is there no dust in a chapel which hasn’t been used in three hundred years?”

“Perhaps one of the housekeepers has been cleaning...”

“This wing is off limits to everyone except the Minister General and myself. The padlock is so rusted, the tumblers cracked when I inserted the key.”

Padlock? What padlock? speculated Mustang. Engrossed in trailing the marble dust, had she disregarded the barrier, which had automatically yielded?

Ah, well, she sighed, bumping past the men.

“Who’s there?” called the squat, bearded guardian.

His confrere snarled, “You’re imagining things. You and I are...”

Mustang’s hideous cackle raised their hair on end, and sent them racing from the corridor.

The echoes reverberated as she ducked into the chapel. She addressed the solitude, “I’m sorry, Francis, but your boys can be so sanctimonious sometimes.”

“You don’t need to rub it in so dramatically,” he whispered.

Tracing a line across the marble, she ordered nature to split that specific stone - and no other. Fitting the book, which seemed thicker for having been unbound of its confinement, into the slot required perseverance and challenged her skill. The altar melded itself into its original form readily enough, however, and she prepared herself for the journey through the dim halls.

Lingering to toss a handful of dust onto the surface, in which she scrawled, “Mustang was here.”

“Let them figure that out in 300 years.”

The door sealing the restricted area had been secured by the friars; Mustang slammed into it at full speed. A firm push sent it banging against the wall, hinges squealing.

Two men feared the invisible spectre pursuing them, and set off running anew.

“Here’s a message from Brother Francis!” Mustang bellowed. “Don’t bother rebuilding churches, rebuild yourselves!”

Mentally apologizing, she reached the porter’s desk draped in cobwebs, jeans ripped at the knees from stumbling on jagged rocks.

The elderly friar glared at her. “Who... How... Why...”

She thumped his arm in friendly fashion. “It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it?”

Before he could detain her, she’d slipped outside.

The fresh evening air filled her lungs; she reclined on the cool grass near an unsightly iron statue of an armored soldier dejectedly riding a horse. Digging in her pockets, she mirrored that emotion - her assets a one Euro coin.

“No dinner tonight,” she grumbled.

The panama hat flipped off her head, spilling its contents in her lap. Leslie Steiner had tucked his payment in the silk lining. And, not 1,000 Euros, but twice that amount.

With a note. “I’ve no need of it where I’m going.”

A plate of ravioli carbonara at her favorite trattoria satisfied her hunger, chianti soothing her frazzled nerves. In her dreams, she envisioned Steiner reunited with his wife and son, the trio embracing and at peace.

Oxford would receive their stolen text in due time. And, never again would she take the risk...