

The Mustang Chronicles:

Festive Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The annual convergence of brown - and grey - robed figures in Assisi during the first days of October reminded Mustang Duryea of geese migrating south for the winter. From her apartment above the Piazza San Rufino, she watched the stream of Franciscan friars - and women in veils of various styles - in and out of the cathedral where St. Francis of Assisi had been baptized.

That much-revered individual peered over her shoulder through the rain-spotted window, chuckling. "The merchants must be pleased."

"Merchants, yes," Mustang concurred. "Hotel managers, yes. Tour guides, no."

"You are low on funds?"

"No, I've got plenty. But, I'm bored. I can't hike up Mount Subasio without running into a crowd, and I don't want anyone to find the horses..."

"You would hide there with them, if you could, eh?"

"So would you, if you couldn't vanish into thin air."

"Si, it's true. This feigned adoration makes me want to spit."

The woman warned, "Not on the floor. I just scrubbed it."

Francis didn't have a chance to swallow his saliva, distracted by one vaguely familiar head near the church's stone facade.

Seeing the emaciated face's altered expression, Mustang followed his gaze, scanning the bustling mass of humanity.

"Oh, hell..."

Tow-colored hair, tall and lean, Brother Giovanni could not be mistaken for an ordinary Italian, or any foreigner, for that matter. The infirmarian had tended her scorched palms and scraped feet after her unexpected journey to Rome... nearly 20 years ago. He'd later betrayed her to an Enochian magickian who called himself Abbondio Carneficina.

He couldn't be searching for her; he didn't know her whereabouts.

When their eyes met over the 100 yards' distance, Mustang doubted her assumption he was a typical Franciscan pilgrim celebrating the founder's feast day.

She recoiled from the glass, pulling flimsy draperies closed.

"You still fear him?" asked Francis.

"I fear anyone who knows so much about my power... and might have selfish need of it." She shuddered, recalling the spies who she'd sent to their deaths the previous month. "You should fear, too. Remember, he knows about you."

“Ah, but he doesn’t know I’m still... here. He saw me... die.”

“You hope.”

Francis nodded his shaggy bronze head.

Had the refrigerator not been devoid of milk and eggs, the peanut butter jar empty and only one slice of bread for a sandwich, Mustang would have sequestered herself until the great exodus of October 5, after the religious festivities ended. A growling stomach prompted her to venture down narrow flights of stairs and attempt to skirt the fringes of these fanatics, ducking into an alley which led to her favorite bakery and the small grocer’s where she bought her supplies.

Every cluster of Franciscans which approached prompted her to hide in doorways, or pretend to admire storefront displays. When she glimpsed Brother Giovanni’s darkly goateed reflection behind her near a busy souvenir shop, she regretted not wearing her broad-brimmed straw hat, or changing the color of her singular auburn tresses - a ploy which had enabled her to blend in on many occasions.

She held her breath, begging nature to blind him to her presence, but the command was not invoked quickly enough.

“Buongiorno, Signorina,” he greeted, which she heard in English.

She didn’t turn, his blue eyes penetrating even at this angle. “Long time, no see, Brother.”

“I’d heard you had returned to Assisi.”

“From who?”

“The cinema screen.”

Mustang cringed. Damn Johnny Rosemont for persuading her to appear in his Francis bio-pic.

“What’s with the chin?” she joked, referencing the scruffy beard.

“I haven’t... shaven in some time.”

“Reminds me of some guys I went to high school with,” she chortled.

“How is Luigi?”

“He has passed on to his eternal judgement,” related Giovanni. “While his doctors were trying to regulate his medication, he thought he saw choirs of angels beckoning him to join them, and stepped off the General House roof...”

The tour guide swallowed hard. She’d been on that roof, seen the beauty of Rome. Despite the fact Luigi had shot her and been troublesome, for him to meet such an end...

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“He is at peace.”

Mustang waited, his inflection suggesting he hadn't finished his statement. When he uttered nothing, she prodded, "And you are not?"

Giovanni gripped her arm with uncompromising pressure, though she could've forced him to release her with a jolt of electric current. He steered her past the Basilica of Santa Chiara toward the downward slope to San Damiano.

They didn't stop at the little church which carried so much significance for Francis and his followers, however. The shrine overflowed with devout tourists. Instead, they continued their trek into the midst of an abandoned olive grove.

"Obviously, you want a word in private," Mustang hissed, shaking free and straightening her rumpled flannel shirt. "We could've used my apartment."

"The walls have ears."

"You've acquired some of Luigi's paranoia?"

He sighed. "No, Signorina. I'm just being cautious." He slowly rotated 360 degrees, ensuring no other human being was within earshot.

"You don't want anyone to discover another miracle?" she scoffed. "If you have cancer, or some other disease..."

"Nothing so trivial."

The woman slumped against a rotting fence post. "Oh, hell..."

Despair clouded Giovanni's usually serene countenance as he sank to his knees before her. "My faith has been shaken to the core of my being..."

Not religious by choice, Mustang had little sympathy for those who looked beyond the tangible for their purpose. Too many encountered in her lifetime ventured down paths which twisted or misguided them.

Initially, she'd thought Giovanni a well-balanced, kind young man. He'd handled Luigi's obsession with common sense and true fraternal concern. For him to tremble, as if on the verge of a nervous breakdown...

"Tell me," she urged, reluctantly mustering a soothing tone.

"Where should I begin?"

"At the beginning."

He sank on his heels. "How much do you know about the Franciscans?"

"I know Francis." She hesitated. "But not much about his followers, other than yourself, Luigi, and a few I've given tours since I moved here."

"Well before Francis died, thousands of men had vowed to follow him, traveling throughout Europe and elsewhere. The numbers continued to increase, until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. After that, many friars left, and few came to replace them. More recently, the Order - along with other religious congregations - has been rocked by scandal, and we are learning what it means to be truly poor, having to pay hefty court settlements."

Mustang drawled, "This is about *money*?"

"No. It's about murder."

Hazel eyes blinked in the glare of the afternoon sun. "You believe the decline in membership is due to murder?"

"In the last six months, yes."

"Have you gone to the Carabinieri?"

"The incidents have happened globally. Interpol agents who've interviewed the Minister General..."

At the mention of Interpol, an agency with which Mustang had previous dealings, she froze. "I can't get involved."

"You must!" Giovanni pleaded.

"Why?"

"The matter is too sensitive to reveal pertinent details to the authorities..."

"What 'pertinent details'?"

"Each of the victims had been censured in writing for breaking his vows."

Through grit teeth, "With children?"

"No. Consenting adults."

Mustang's jaw slackened. "How do you, as infirmarian, know this?"

"Sadly, men gossip more than women at the dinner table. Old friars, especially, when they are offended..."

"I'd heard your sort were supposed to forgive with generous hearts," his companion countered.

"Not the unforgivable sin."

"The only unforgivable sin mentioned in my comparative religion class was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit."

Giovanni managed a weary smile. "In today's world, for many people, it's unforgivable to be gay."

This declaration evinced no adverse reaction from the woman. "How many friars have been killed?"

"Seventeen."

"Using what weapon?"

"Ice pick."

"Close range, then."

"Yes."

"No one has survived the attack to describe the culprit?" continued Mustang.

"He approaches from the rear, in a crowd, and delivers one clean thrust between the ribs. His face hasn't been seen."

“So, there *is* someone...”

“For now.” Giovanni pitched forward, landing unconscious in the dirt.

Half-dried blood stained the back of his robe.

“Oh, hell.”

Kneeling beside the prostrate form, Mustang ripped sticky brown cotton fabric from neck to waist. Having barely passed high school anatomy, she contemplated an oozing wound inches below the man’s left ribcage. It didn’t match his description of the murderer’s methods.

Which might have been why he was still alive.

And would stay alive, if she had anything to do with it.

In quiet tones, she instructed the natural elements to mend Giovanni’s damaged organs, blood vessels and flesh. She gently rolled him over once the deed had been accomplished - fortunately, without any ground tremors, microbursts of wind or spontaneous rainstorms.

Tapping his bony cheek partially roused him. A coughing fit, during which he spat blood into the rich soil, brought him fully awake.

“Thank you,” he stammered weakly, propped on one elbow.

Mustang inquired, “When were you injured?”

“This morning, near San Rufino.”

“Then, when you saw me...”

“It had just happened.”

“But, the strike wasn’t between your ribs...”

“Because I was climbing the Via San Francesco, in front of the assailant, and six inches above him. He should’ve waited until we reached level ground, but I think he panicked.”

“Too many spectators?”

“Possibly.” The friar rotated his left shoulder, feeling no pain. “You should have been a doctor.”

“In my own way, I am.”

She helped him to his feet, and when he dusted off his robe, the cloth gave way. He fingered the tear, concern furrowing his brow.

“Sorry,” apologized Mustang. “I...”

“Don’t worry. I have another at the convento.”

Having been inside the Sacro Convento at the Basilica of Saint Francis, she could imagine his stark quarters. “May I ask you a few more questions while we walk back to town?”

“Si, my friend.”

They moved slowly toward San Damiano, and the steep path beyond.
“You’ve been censured for...”

“Nothing, I assure you. Last summer, one of our collegiate brothers falsely accused me after I rejected his advances.”

“But, you *are* gay.”

“Si. The vow of chastity applies to all friars, whether straight or gay, and I have kept that vow since the day I entered the Franciscans.”

“It’s the existence of a mere piece of paper, inaccurate though the charge may be, that places you in danger?”

“Si.”

“Have you tried to explain what happened to the Minister General?”

“In the current world climate, the truth must suffer to protect the public. The record cannot be expunged.”

“The murderer can be stopped, at any rate,” Mustang affirmed. “He’s in Assisi, roaming the festivities, waiting for another chance...”

Giovanni altered his pace. “I’m not his only intended victim.”

“Eh?”

“Two brothers who traveled from Rome for the feast day are also... under threat.”

“Have you read their files?”

“No. It is not difficult for one gay man to recognize another. We respect each other’s boundaries...”

Mustang guided him to benches at the “rest area” half-way up the hill, sitting beside him. “You don’t need to say more. I’ll respect your boundaries, too.”

His slender fingers patted her scarred hands in gratitude.

That’s when they heard the scream.

II

Jumping up simultaneously, Mustang and Brother Giovanni craned their necks to determine from which direction the sound had originated.

“It didn’t sound female,” the tour guide opined.

The friar agreed. “Sound carries so far in the valley, we might never find him.”

At odds regarding a course of action, they remained immobile.

“When you were stabbed, did you cry out?” Mustang finally puzzled.

“No, actually. The impact felt more like a sharp elbow, so I just kept walking.”

“Which could mean this wasn’t one of your brothers...”

“True, though I would have to suppose everyone acts differently when attacked.”

“You’re right.”

A clamor of voices above drew them to the paved parking area near the city gate. Surrounded by curious onlookers, a man held his right hand under his left armpit and cursed prolifically. Murmurs reached the pair that his wife had accidentally slammed his fingers in the car door.

Chuckling at their misplaced anxiety, Giovanni and Mustang moved toward escalators which eliminated the need to climb further.

“Have you eaten today?” asked the woman as they dodged inattentive pilgrims near the bakery she frequented.

“Not since breakfast.”

“We’ll find a good restaurant...”

“Grazie, no. The other friars will be looking for me at dinner. They don’t know about... any of this.”

“They will, if you walk in looking like a beggar.”

“I’ll change my habit first.”

Mustang paused at a cross street. “Leaving me to do what, exactly?”

“I have no experience of what is involved in finding a murderer.”

“You think I do?”

Running nervous digits through his unruly tow-colored mop, he shrugged. “You have created earthquakes, and raised the dead. I...”

“I’m not your God, Brother. I don’t read the hearts of men... that well.” His own included. The fiasco with Abbondio Carneficina still haunted her. He might be playing her the fool.

But, his wound had been very real, and could not have been self-inflicted merely to elicit her pity.

“Do you suspect the murderer is a fellow Franciscan?” she prodded.

Blue eyes betrayed his answer. He had no clue.

Neither did she.

“The best way to solve this problem would be for me to stay with you, or you to stay with me,” she concluded.

“You... cannot stay at the convento.”

Evidence to the contrary, she chuckled silently. The illusion she and the malformed Brit Leslie Steiner had presented...

She didn't want to use her power more than absolutely necessary. That included preventing one man from killing another.

"The shopkeepers have sons who willingly run errands for me, when I tuck a ten-Euro note in their hand. Write your brothers that you met a friend, and will be spending the next couple days away from the convento. I'll have it run down to the basilica before they finish their meal."

"You think I will be safe?"

"I can't guarantee anything."

"You have a spare bedroom?"

"You can use mine. I've spent many nights on the sofa."

"You entertain a lot of guests?" wondered Giovanni.

"No. I'm just... very restless."

He accepted her excuse, and they veered down an alley to the building where her apartment occupied the top floor. She dug a sheet of lined paper from a drawer in the kitchenette, and a blank envelope from a rack above the stove. Giovanni wrote two paragraphs and signed the missive.

Mustang whistled a singular melody out the window, carried on the evening breeze. Two minutes later, footsteps could be heard in the corridor.

The business transacted in hushed tones at the door, she set about preparing supper - with no supplies in the cupboard. She'd been waylaid en route to buying groceries that morning...

"Come on." She grabbed Giovanni's sleeve. "I know a grand little trattoria around the corner..."

"I'll not be seen again in these rags..."

Muttering under her breath, Mustang mended his robe, the blood stain also vanishing.

"Grazie, Signorina."

Her stomach grumbled in reply; they both laughed.

Mirth faded as they traversed narrow stone streets as the last rays of the sunset painted the sky pastel hues. Ordinarily, even at the height of tourist season, visitors to Assisi vacated lanes and byways, afraid of becoming disoriented and lost after dark. St. Francis' feast brought hordes acquainted with the ancient settlement, who now made their way to evening prayer services, pious conferences or festive revelries.

"These Franciscans know how to party," Mustang remarked, watching friars exit a shop bearing two cases of wine.

"This is a time of celebration. The 800th anniversary of..."

"Don't tell me! His birth, or his death, or the approval of his Rule..."

“You mock our devotion?”

She restrained herself from revealing how many times the saint himself had lamented how people took his reputed holiness to extremes. Giovanni didn't need to know Francis still shared her life. Why complicate the situation more?

Pointing to a brightly lit portal, Mustang preceded him into the homey restaurant. The proprietor greeted her cheerily and escorted them to a table near a roaring fireplace.

The friar leaned across the board after perusing the menu. “I came away without my wallet...”

“You're covered. I... recently came into a healthy stake.” Leslie Steiner's money had kept her comfortable this past month.

They dined on antipasto, heaping bowls of pasta, tiramisu and, naturally, chianti. Giovanni consumed most of the bottle, while Mustang sipped her glass. She anticipated he would become more talkative, but not to the extent he confided some of the Franciscan General House's most avidly guarded secrets.

“The infirmarian is very much like a woman's hair stylist,” he explained, when she questioned his knowledge of the events and conversations. “The patients in my beds, when feverish or dreading death, often say things they oughtn't.”

As he was doing now, she snickered to herself.

Rather than the community Francis envisioned as his first companions gathered in the valley below Assisi, Mustang got the impression the men living in Rome were individuals merely sharing the same lodgings. The group's international flavor made adapting their cultures difficult. Thus, they remained veritable strangers...

It reminded her of the tense, distrusting atmosphere she'd experienced living in Montana with her parents, long ago.

If one of the friars erroneously discerned killing his supposedly perverted brothers as God's will...

“Which of the brothers came to Assisi?” she asked.

His words were slurring. “Arturo, Karl and Swen rode with me on the train.”

“And the two who are in danger...”

“Tuong and Lisimba.”

Had he lost his train of thought, Mustang pondered. “You said...”

“They drove down from Florence, after a week's retreat.”

“Ah!” So, three potential victims, and three potential suspects. “Have Arturo, Karl or Swen traveled out of Italy in the last six months?”

“I... don't know.”

Stymied. So much for simple deduction.

Steering Giovanni to her apartment proved an effort in futility, his joints well-oiled by wine, until Mustang summoned additional strength from nature. She never would've guessed him to be so weighty, given the leanness of his face and hands.

They stumbled up the dim staircase, and she almost lost her grip on his waist reaching one landing, avoiding a nasty fall by the fraction of a second. He'd fallen asleep before she maneuvered him onto the ruffled twin bed, despite bumping his head on the doorframe. She didn't bother to remove his sandals, shuffling to the other room and collapsing on the love seat.

"Francis, we've got a problem," she spoke to the stillness.

"Do we?" responded the saint from the shadows.

"That fine specimen of your Order, snoring so peacefully, might've died, if he hadn't found me."

"You continue to use your power toward positive ends, as you always desired. What is problematic about that?"

"The killer remains loose."

"Many such lunatics run free in the world."

"You're saying I should stay out of it?"

He cautioned, "One day, you will place yourself in harm's way, and pay the ultimate price."

"The ultimate price will earn me the peace you so value in death. Then I won't have to worry about why men can't live together and mind their own business, why a fluke of nature makes some gay and others straight, with both wanting to serve your God side by side."

"Sleep, Mustang. You're exhausted, and are babbling nonsense."

She righted herself and stared into brown orbs. "Don't play games with me, Francis."

As his image grew transparent in the moonlight, she mumbled to herself in frustration. The man famous for being humble and poor knew more than he admitted. Just as he'd been aware of Leslie Steiner's five centuries of anguish, he must have insights into the identity of this murderer...

She awoke to the rhythmic noise of Brother Giovanni vomiting in the tiny bathroom. Grinning, she mused how the Italian could not hold his wine.

"Death warmed over is prettier than you," he choked when she peeked over the threshold, auburn tresses tousled and obscuring her vision.

"Thanks. You might want to bypass the mirror yourself this morning."

He settled on the chill tile floor. "I feel awful."

“So would I, if I’d chugged the better part of a bottle.”

“You should’ve stopped me.”

“I’m not your keeper.”

“You kept me alive...”

“That’s different. Don’t expect me to cure your hangover.”

She sidled into the bedroom, changing clothes and brushing tangles from her wavy mane while Giovanni’s empty stomach continued to wretch. When he emerged, seeking coffee, his cheeks were clammy and pale.

“Where were you supposed to be today, if your trip hadn’t gone south?” queried Mustang.

“We were on our own until the Transitus this evening.”

The word rang familiar to Mustang’s ears, but she couldn’t remember the context, until Francis murmured, “The chapel where I died, at Santa Maria degli Angeli.”

“Are all the friars gathering there?”

She’d replied to the unseen voice, but Giovanni assumed she addressed him. “The friars, the nuns, the laity. It will be standing room only for those who did not reserve their pews years in advance. There is also a procession, but attendance is optional.”

“Procession?” Her head cleared rapidly. “Where? When?”

“Along the Via San Francesco, through the town. Thousands will gather...”

“Your brothers Lisimba and Tuong?”

“They are young, and this is their first time here. Probably.”

“The murderer will probably be with them.”

Giovanni’s mouth gaped. “I... hadn’t considered that. If they were to be killed in the midst of all the excitement, no one would realize it until the streets emptied...”

“Are they at the convento?”

Consulting his wristwatch, he shook his close-cropped head. “It’s almost noon. They will be sightseeing with the other friars.”

And picking them out from a myriad of tourists would be impossible, especially if they wore secular clothes, as many friars did when vacationing.

Yet...

“The other friars who’ve been murdered. Were they wearing their robes when...”

“Yes. All the attacks took place at official functions, or during pilgrimages.”

Mustang exhaled loudly. “They should be safe, then. We can send a note for them to meet us at the Gran Caffè bakery this afternoon, before the procession. If we stay together, we may be able to avert another disaster.”

“Please God,” her guest prayed.

She bit back a caustic retort, rummaging through the cupboard for the coffee tin.

Sunny and humid, the pair fought their way to the Basilica of St. Francis and the convento porter’s office. A fire-etched wood sign read, “Closed until 2:30” in five languages. With a snort, Mustang shifted deadbolt tumblers and pushed the heavy panel inward.

The balding, Asian friar ceased chewing a forkful of penne, ready to scold the intruders.

He didn’t have a chance.

The woman laid two envelopes bearing the young brothers’ names on his blotter, playfully smirking. “These need to be placed in the hands of their intended recipients within the next 15 minutes, or the entire convento will crumble into dust.”

Giovanni yanked the sleeve of her green flannel shirt.

“Terrorist!” croaked the porter, fumbling for the telephone.

Mustang caught his arthritic hand atop the receiver. “No, Brother. I’m just stressing the importance of these messages. You wouldn’t want their blood on your conscience, would you?”

Stunned, his mouth opened and closed three times; he uttered nothing.

Waving her companion out the door, Mustang followed him into the midday swelter, rolling up her cuffs.

“Why’d you choose such a tactic?” inquired Giovanni.

“I have learned you can tell a person an errand is critical, but they will ignore the urgency unless a real threat accompanies the gesture.”

“Why did he believe you, though? He doesn’t know of your capacity to destroy...”

“He surmised I was referring to a bomb. If you see him later, ask him about a little incident in early September. You may grasp his trepidation once you hear the story.”

“What did you...”

She ignored his prodding, breezing past t-shirt vendors congregating on the fringe of the vast lawn, where bushes spelled “PAX” and bodies jockeyed for space on the grass.

Giovanni yanked her to a halt, nearly upsetting a cart of tacky plastic statues and rosaries. “Would you willingly demolish our hallowed basilica, if you had the opportunity?”

Annoyed at the friar’s attitude, Mustang sent a tiny electrical charge up his arm, and he recoiled. “I don’t give one whit about your basilica, and neither does Francis, if it matters to you. Given what has transpired within those walls during the past eight centuries, it might be better if I did reduce it to rubble.”

This exchange was interrupted by the staggering approach of an African youth, who fell into Giovanni’s arms. The force of contact drove the latter to his knees.

Mustang squatted next to him. “Who is it?”

“Lisimba.”

Inspecting the friar’s robe, she recognized the tell-tale stain. Fingers groped his neck for a pulse.

“He’s dead,” she stated.

III

Women shrieked. Men cowered. A cadre of Carabinieri arrived ten minutes later, given the crush of bodies around the murder site.

Mustang had assisted Giovanni in laying Lisimba on the rough stones, blood still dripping from the wound. “Just as you described it,” she sighed.

“Between the ribs?”

“Straight through the heart.”

“Surprising he got this far,” noted Giovaani.

Which prompted Mustang to abandon him, push through onlookers and trace red blotches along the Via San Francesco to the former temple of Minerva. She overheard a pair of veiled females discussing the prayer service just concluded.

An official function.

Retracing her steps down the bustling street, the tour guide chided herself for leaving Giovanni unprotected. Indeed, a Carabinieri sergeant had him handcuffed, contents of his pockets strewn on the cobbles.

“What the hell...” she protested.

“Away, Signorina,” the official barked. “This man is a dangerous criminal.”

“No, he’s not. We were together when Lisimba...”

At least, he listened. Her story must've verified the captive's alibi, and within moments, he was freed of his shackles. The Carabinieri bowed slightly.

"Scusa, Padre..."

Giovanni disregarded his feigned contriteness, focusing on Mustang.

"What did you find?"

"He was at the temple for a prayer service. He must've been stabbed right outside."

"Let's go."

"Where?" Mustang objected.

"The temple. The murderer may still be nearby."

Oddly, his plan made sense. She followed him up the incline, slowing when he confronted an elderly, stooped friar, resting on the base of an ancient Greek-style column. He supported himself with an intricately-carved, goldknobbed hickory cane, and could've portrayed the Grim Reaper, his visage skeletal, vacant, rheumy eyes peering forth.

"Karl, was Lisimba with you?"

No response.

"Karl?"

Mustang inched closer. "He's quite pale for a German..."

"He's in shock," diagnosed the infirmarian. "Help me get him inside."

Together, they guided the older man into the church, seating him on the last bench. Mustang took only a second to glance at her surroundings, where the debacle of the Francis bio-pic had begun with Johnny Rosemont.

"Fetch some water," Giovanni instructed her.

"Right."

Slipping past lingering tourists, she commandeered a water bottle reserved for use by the priests, stored in the sacristy vestment closet. Unscrewing the cap upon rejoining the friars, she shifted her gaze from the plastic to the cane.

Giovanni tenderly urged his confrere to sip the liquid. Mustang, meanwhile, examined the designs etched deep into sturdy wood: names and phrases in German.

"He inherited it from his great-uncle," supplied Giovanni, as Karl's breathing eased. "Heinz belonged to Kaiser Wilhelm's personal guard, and was lauded as a hero during World War I. He joined the Franciscans after peace was declared."

"And his great-nephew followed his example?"

“Karl is widely known for his piety and wisdom. He’s 92, and still teaches homiletics to the collegiate friars. When he’s not in the classroom, he fasts and prays...”

The gold knob spun counter-clockwise in Mustang’s palm. Pulling it toward her, she discovered a shiny blade attached. She glared at Giovanni. “Perhaps he’s praying to overcome some latent fascist prejudices?”

Squinting blue eyes appraised the tempered steel. “This isn’t the murder weapon,” Giovanni declared.

“What makes you...”

“Wrong shape.” He ran his right index finger along the sharp edge. “It’s flat. The holes in the victims were round...”

Mustang surrendered the cane to him. “Don’t tell me, you saw the autopsy reports?”

The tow-colored head nodded.

Gradually recovering his senses, Karl snatched the two pieces from Giovanni’s grasp. He defensively screwed the knob into the threads, and clutched it to his chest.

Giovanni settled beside him, spoke in a soothing baritone. “Karl, was Lisimba with you at the prayer service?”

“He came in late,” whispered the old friar. “Sat with me and the Finn.”

“Swen? What about Arturo and Tuong?”

“They went to rehearsal.”

“Rehearsal?” echoed Mustang.

“For the Transitus,” Giovanni clarified. “I’d forgotten. The Minister General sent them as his representatives this year. They’ll be in the procession...”

“Oh, hell.”

“What?”

“It’ll be impossible to protect Tuong...”

“Protect him why?” demanded Karl. “Someone should’ve protected Lisimba!”

“We wanted to,” Giovanni assured him. “What did you see?”

Karl contemplated in silence before relating, “After the final blessing, the priests filed out in orderly fashion, but the people weren’t so polite. I was bumped and jostled... Swen saw friars from his home province, and stopped to chat them up. I fell behind, and when I reached the door, Lisimba was lurching down the street, blood trickling onto his sandals.”

“You didn’t see who did it?” pressed Mustang.

When he shook his lowered head, she thought it might snap off, so brittle the cracking bones.

“We’d better get him to the convento, where he can rest comfortably,” the infirmarian advised.

Delicately lifting the senior friar, they shuffled toward the exit, where a panting, flustered friar nearly collided with them.

“Arturo?” hailed Giovanni. “Aren’t you supposed to be...”

“I ran all the way from Santa Maria degli Angeli. Lisimba rang me on his mobile, to find out if we’d have time to eat before the procession, and then I heard him gasp and the connection was broken...”

Giovanni passed Arturo the half-empty water bottle. The younger friar guzzled it greedily.

“Where’s Tuong?”

“Still at the basilica,” Arturo heaved. “He was having difficulty with his reading. I’d been polishing censers with the others, and didn’t have time to tell him...”

Mustang interspersed, “Tell him what?”

“That I was leaving.”

“You ran three miles in less than a half-hour?”

Karl patted his student’s shoulder. “He’s run marathons, this one.”

Unconvinced, the woman swallowed her sarcasm.

Arturo reached under the wide collar of his capuche - the hood of his robe - and extracted a handkerchief from... where? Mustang puzzled.

“Are you a magician, too?”

Giovanni chuckled at her bemusement. “No, Signorina.” He pulled back the brown cloth to reveal how layers created secret pockets in the wide sleeves, which opened at the shoulder seam. He kept a small rosary in his, and the key to his guest room at the convento.

The revelation served to augment Mustang’s suspicions. How easily an ice pick could be concealed, and the Carabinieri would never search...

“Are all friars’ robes sewn this way?” she queried.

“Depends on the tailor,” replied Arturo. “The inexperienced ones haven’t mastered how to cut the pattern, at least, in our province.”

She ruminated on that information. “We’d better find Tuong, don’t you think? I’m sure Arturo can take Karl to the convento, since he obviously needs a shower, himself.”

“You’re right, Señorina,” said the Spaniard. “It would not be fitting for me to join the procession soaked in sweat.”

He offered Karl his arm, the elder brushed it aside, relying upon his cane.
“By the way,” Arturo added, before commencing the downhill trek,
“where is Lisimba?”

Mustang interrupted Giovanni’s tactful rejoinder with, “He’s on a slab in the Assisi morgue.”

Not a flicker of sadness, not a solemn Sign of the Cross, nor a “God rest his soul” from the athletic friar, which the tour guide found very interesting.

“You shouldn’t have...” scolded Giovanni, heading the opposite direction.

“Did you notice his lack of grief?”

“Si.”

“As if he already knew...”

“You can’t possibly believe...”

“If it’s a friar who’s committing these murders, why not him?” Mustang speculated.

“He’s highly regarded, both in the Spanish provinces and in Rome. He holds a trusted position in the Holy Office at the Vatican.”

“‘Holy Office’?”

“The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Formerly known as the Inquisition.”

Digesting this statement, Mustang suddenly broke out in an raucous guffaw. “No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!”

Offended, her companion - and many passersby - glared at her. “What?”

She swiftly regained her composure. “Sorry, Brother. I lapsed into Monty Python mode. Classic British TV.” They resumed walking. “But, dammit, it fits.”

“What fits?”

“Arturo is a Spaniard who works for the office of the Inquisition. You, Tuong and Lisimba, being gay, fly in the face of what is considered orthodox Catholic practice. Could not his devotion to preserving the Faith drive him to...”

“No! I won’t hear of it! Arturo and I have traveled together to the poor provinces, ascertaining how well they care for their aging members, and how they are fulfilling the mandates of the General Chapter...”

That summer’s international meeting where nearly 150 friars had been murdered, Mustang recalled.

“The delegates were replaced, with the gathering held last month in Rome,” Giovanni clarified.

“Ah.” She inhaled pensively. “Did the murder of the other seventeen friars occur in the provinces while you were visiting?”

Defiantly, Giovanni barked, “Only two of them.”

They doubled their pace to catch a shuttle hauling tourists from the center of Assisi to the valley below. Mustang squeezed in a final jab before the bus lurched forward: "Did Arturo make any side trips without you during those journeys?"

She recalled the reason she avoided most forms of commercial transportation, as well. Her stomach churned each time the vehicle squealed around a hair-pin turn, or hit a bump. Speeding up and slowing enhanced the risk of succumbing to overwhelming nausea.

Giovanni noted her peaked complexion when they disembarked before the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli - which unintentional tremors, caused when she'd brought St. Francis from his tomb, had ravaged - and chuckled.

"It's not funny, Brother," she hissed. "Who knows what damage might take place if I start vomiting?"

The friar gulped in horror, catching the implications.

Breathing in fresh air calmed Mustang's sickly disposition, but not locating Tuong generated a pounding headache.

"Good thing Arturo's not with him," she commented as they paced the piazza near the baroque structure.

"It wasn't Arturo!" stormed Giovanni. "I'll guarantee it with my life!"

"You may have to. Who else among the Franciscans knows you're here, or would have the opportunity..."

"We left Rome on Monday. Any of a hundred might have taken the train on Tuesday, or even yesterday morning..."

"Fine, I'll grant you that, and we can continue this wild goose chase."

"If you mean we'll ride back to Assisi, and meet Tuong as the message we left him ordered..."

"*If* he got the message," Mustang sniffed.

"Amen."

That prayer didn't ascend heavenward, as the friar would have wished. A hysterical woman in white veil and long brown dress shot out the basilica's main entrance at that moment, yelling that a body had been found at the feet of St. Francis' statue in the Rose Garden.

"Oh, hell..."

His age notwithstanding, Giovanni outran Mustang into the building, only to be prevented access by two friars who'd taken up posts blocking the passage to the crime scene.

"No one can enter until the Carabinieri..."

“I’m from the General House in Rome,” the infirmarian proclaimed, to be waved through the barrier.

Doves observed the fracas from their nest in the statue’s unfeeling hand; Mustang marveled briefly how the sculptor had gotten Francis’ features wrong. Blood had splattered the carved robe - the blow had been far more violent than previous victims.

“He struggled,” deduced Giovanni, dislodging black, wavy strands from the wire-bespectacled Vietnamese’s clenched fist.

“He must’ve heard Arturo coming from behind...”

The friar reared up and pointed at the growing crowd beyond the self-appointed guards. “Look at all the people with the same color hair, Signorina. It could have been any of them!”

“Be at peace, Brother. Think about it. Arturo didn’t run up the hill to find Lisimba, he’d been running *away* from killing Tuong.”

“I’ll prove you’re mistaken. Someone had to see him polishing the censers. He said he was with others...”

Who were, conveniently, departed from the basilica’s sacristy.

“So much for Arturo’s alibi,” Mustang gloated.

“You just wait. After the procession tonight, I’ll verify Arturo’s story. Then, you’ll owe him an apology for defaming his good character.”

“Honestly, Giovanni, I hope your faith in Arturo is well placed. I’ve read enough mystery novels to know the apparent suspect is usually framed by the real culprit, to throw detectives off the scent. It doesn’t sound feasible that any friar would be so conniving... but if he has sinned so heinously by killing, it wouldn’t take much to set up an innocent party to be punished in his place.”

Carabinieri and medics from the ambulance crew arrived; Mustang and Giovanni watched them photograph the corpse then load it on a gurney. Tears trickled down the friar’s cheeks as his friend was wheeled past curious spectators, blood staining the sheet which hid his face from view.

Simultaneously, the pair spoke aloud. “The strike came from the front!”

Employing every ounce of patience, they slipped into the front pew.

Giovanni knelt in prayer - or pretended prayer. Mustang wondered how he could concentrate amidst such distractions. Bells struck 4:00 before they could again get near the saint’s statue with the pure white birds.

“Would he have had time to leave a clue?” Mustang ventured.

“We can only hope. Miracles do happen...”

But, not in this case.

Or, so it seemed, until Giovanni spied an object wedged in the cuff of Francis' dangling sleeve, mixed with twigs fallen from the dove's nest..

IV

"Watch the hall," Brother Giovanni commanded.

The Carabinieri must've cleared the church, or the prospect of trodding over ground where a dead man had lain, left nothing for Mustang to watch. Her companion carefully lifted himself onto the statue's base, frightening the birds, who flapped their wings in his face. He would've fallen, if she hadn't advised the timid creatures their anger was unwarranted.

He came down holding a plain gold wedding band - the type worn by men who bothered with the tradition.

"That's fantastic," scoffed Mustang. "All we have to do is find the guy who lost it..."

"The *friar* who lost it," Giovanni corrected, wiggling his ring finger, to display the sign of his vows.

"Not all friars..."

"True, in America. In Europe, the majority do. In Rome, it's required."

"Still, with the procession, there'll be so many..."

"I have faith in you."

Mustang smirked. "I thought you had faith in God."

"And the gifts given to those He loves in a special way."

"Oh, shut up."

The next shuttle full to capacity, the pair trudged three miles to Assisi, where the Via San Francesco already boasted five layers of revelers jammed against buildings on either side of the street, waiting for the sunset procession.

"Rabid believers, aren't they?" quipped Mustang.

"Will you turn me to stone if I tell you to shut up?"

"No. You'll understand, however, that I get nervous around crowds. Besides, we need to find a vantage point where we can see the players, and a pair of binoculars to get a close view of their hands."

His tow head tilted, resembling a confused puppy. "Can't you..."

His conjurer's motion exasperated Mustang. "Sure, I could. Lightning would be involved, probably an earthquake, too, and someone would end up dead."

"I beg your forgiveness, Signorina." The infirmarian retreated two strides.

“Don’t worry, I don’t fly off the handle so readily anymore.” Scrutinizing nearby landmarks, she led Giovanni into a souvenir shop, signaling the proprietor as she mounted the stairs. The stout Italian touched his forelock in acknowledgment.

The youngest son’s bedroom overlooked the procession route, and a telescope he used to star-gaze was positioned on its tripod at the window.

“Perfect!”

Giovanni admired her resourcefulness. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think...”

“Don’t say it!”

Manually focusing the lens might have precluded catching the friars who followed the cross-bearer, but the line of participants moved at a snail’s pace. Delegations from each country on the planet, it seemed, jockeyed for prominence in their liturgical vestments.

“Are all these people going to fit into the basilica for the Transitus?” puzzled Mustang.

“No, most of the laity will go to dinner, and attend the feast day Mass in the morning.”

“Some of them could afford to skip a meal. The friars, too.” Concentrating on the telescope momentarily, she added, “Let me see the ring.”

“There is no inscription.” Giovanni fished it from the concealed sleeve pocket.

She inspected it. “No, but it’s not sized for a thin finger. Try it yourself.”

Larger than the circumference of his thumb, the friar tucked it away once more.

“Our murderer is either short and fat, or tall and beefy,” stated Mustang. “Eliminates the skinny guys.”

She monitored Arturo’s progress along the cobbles, his ring visible as he swung his gold censer, pungent smoke swirling in clouds.

She wanted to trust her gut and pin the murders on him; still, the evidence wouldn’t stand up in court.

If the culprit had come from Rome, that left Karl - too frail - and Swen, whom she had not met.

“Do you see Swen?” she asked.

“He wasn’t scheduled to be part of the procession. He’s most likely saving our seats at the basilica. Or drinking with his fellow Finns.”

“Does he have an alcohol problem?”

“Many friars do.”

“To the point of liver damage?”

“He’s never gone to a doctor for it.” Giovanni blocked the telescope’s view. “You can’t suspect him. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“No friar should, if they’re true to what Francis taught.”

“Francis conceded his humanity, his temptations, and his failures.”

“He wouldn’t condone murder as a ‘failure,’” argued Mustang.

“Yet, he would forgive the weak soul who saw it as his only recourse.”

“Think again.” Francis snapped, abruptly manifesting next to his chess opponent.

Giovanni’s amazement would’ve landed him on the floor, had Mustang not used the telescope to avert the collapse. “Blessed Father, you...”

“Have heard every word, and can tolerate no more of my Rule being twisted. Any friar who robs his brother of life should be barred from the community permanently.”

“I implore your forgiveness, dear Father,” bumbled the infirmarian.

“Oh, shut up and do what you can to stop this lunatic.”

“We are trying...”

“You should be down at that travesty of a basilica, scanning each person who enters with a metal detector.”

Both Mustang and Giovanni eyed Francis with new respect. “I should have thought of that,” the woman admitted.

He stroked her cheek lightly. “You rely too much on your power, when you should depend on this exceptional brain.”

With that, he vanished.

The pair abandoned their perch and rushed from the structure to join the procession.

“Where will we get a metal detector?” cried the friar over the din of singing and prayer.

“A decent magnet will do the trick!”

“Again, where...”

“Nature, of course!”

A cylindrical rock leapt into her scarred palm, charged to attract one particular ice pick. She slid it in her jean pocket and, for the moment, enjoyed the sight of swaying candles descending into the valley, accompanied by old sacred hymns.

The press of bodies in the basilica offset the October evening chill. Designated ushers guided Giovanni and Mustang up the aisle, to places near the

frescoed Porziuncola. Swen greeted them heartily, dabbing his Nordic features with a red bandanna.

The Transitus service, commemorating St. Francis' death in 1226, started late, and lasted well into the night, a combination of readings, chanting, a lengthy sermon, and more singing. Mustang grew restless after 15 minutes, but maintained outward equilibrium in deference to both her companion and her friend, whom the ceremony honored.

Her magnet had not exposed the friar holding the murder weapon; hands sweating, she laid it beside her on the pew. Retrieving it toward the festivities' conclusion, she noticed its absence.

Hazel eyes surreptitiously searched the floor near her sneakers and the immediate area. Beyond Giovanni's robe, she glimpsed the rock rolling slowly across the aisle.

A plump, middle-aged, female sat on the end, with friars beside her. Stuck on the bolts holding the pews in place, the magnet could move no further.

Nonetheless, it narrowed the field of suspects.

"Do you know any of the friars directly opposite?" whispered Mustang to Giovanni.

"Next to Sister Agnes Marie?"

The tour guide hadn't really paid attention to the dark-haired figure. "If that's her name."

"She's one of ours," the infirmarian explained, leaning to her ear. "You know, living on our grounds."

"Why isn't she wearing a veil and habit, like the first time I was here?"

"The Sisters voted at their last Chapter to make secular clothes an option, the same time they elected Agnes Marie one of the Councillors. She used to be our Minister General's secretary. Now, she travels too much to do her old job. She was lucky to catch the train with us."

Gossip could come later, mused Mustang. "But, none of the men..."

"She's come to me many times to help control her diabetes. In third world countries, it's difficult to eat a healthy diet..."

Chaos erupted in that moment, the main celebrant inviting thousands to wish each other peace. Hugs and handshakes abounded, with cheery, "Pace e bene," or "Peace be with you," in a deafening cacophony.

In the instant realization dawned for Mustang - as secretary, Agnes Marie would've typed the letters censuring various friars - Giovanni had stepped from the confining seats into the aisle, where Sister Agnes Marie, in plain clothes, extended her arms toward him.

The miniature magnet jumped from the floor, clinging to her skirt. Making it impossible for her to pull out the ice pick and jam it into Giovanni's ribs, though her swollen fingers attempted to do just that.

Her enraged squeal would've garnered more attention, had not so many been occupied circulating among their fellows.

"Get her into the Rose Garden," advised Mustang.

Giovanni grasped the woman's arms firmly, affection for her years of service to the Franciscans evaporated. Once able to breathe in the corridor near the latest crime scene, Mustang erected an invisible blockade, barring others from the area.

Deft fingers drew the gold wedding band from Giovanni's secret pocket, and slipped it on the murderer's third finger.

"Why, Agnes?" the tow-headed Italian whined.

She sagged against the wall. "I... have prayed many years to the Lord who made me, begging Him to unmake the hatred in my heart. I couldn't..."

"It's not about why," said Mustang. "Our predicament lies in what to do with her."

"Eh?" Giovanni queried.

"If we turn her over to the Carabinieri, there could be... unpleasant consequences for both you, Brother, and myself. And more scandal for the friars."

"True. True."

Mustang contemplated the doves in their statue-nest. "We can't release her, either."

"I agree."

"Is there a way for her... Sisters to handle this? Place her under some kind of house arrest..."

"I would have to meet with their leadership team when I return to Rome."

Sister Agnes Marie's face blanched, but not from fear. Her knees buckled, and she crashed to the tiles. Giovanni bent to check her pulse, and shrugged toward Mustang.

"What?" prodded the tour guide.

"A diabetic coma. She's had them before."

"Can you do anything?"

"Her blood sugar is too high, and the stress of... all this..." He straightened. "We've got to call for an ambulance."

"She'll die without treatment?"

"Sooner rather than later, si."

"Then, our problem is solved."

Giovanni stormed, "How can you..."

"If you're going to call for anyone, call a priest. Isn't that what your sort do?"

"This callousness... this insensitivity..."

"On the contrary," Mustang remarked. "Shouldn't you view this as God's will? I'm sure Francis would."

"Francis would want her brought to justice!"

"He's already chastised you once today for misinterpreting his words. Let your God judge her eternal fate."

Giovanni bit his lip, suddenly a baffled child. "For one so young, your wisdom outshines the great theologians."

"Then your theologians must not have been very practical."

Squatting beside Agnes Marie, the friar murmured, "Pray an act of contrition, Sister, if you are sorry for your sins."

Her lips formed silent words, whether prayer or curse, Mustang didn't care. Violet eyes fell shut, and all was still.

"Now, we can call the Carabinieri."

Scowling, Giovanni rushed from the Rose Garden. Mustang ducked through a door into a maze of corridors, pushing through a rear exit into the windy night.

She didn't expect him to track her down for prolonged farewells. The Feast of St. Francis amounted to another day of irksome traffic on Assisi's narrow lanes and byways, packed restaurants and constant ringing of ancient bells. Finally able to buy groceries, she was eating a lunch of chicken noodle soup and warm bread, when she heard footsteps on the stairs.

Not waiting for the knock, she pulled open the door. Giovanni, in green knit sweater and black slacks, smiled sheepishly.

"I came to thank you," he greeted.

She returned to the kitchen table, not offering him a share of her food. "No need."

"I thought you'd want to know: Tuong and Lisimba will be transported to their home provinces for burial."

"Cheaper to fry them here and scatter the ashes over the city wall - Franciscans in the land of Francis."

"We have our traditions."

"Nonsense, most of them."

He drew out the second chair and dropped on it. "Why are you being so disrespectful?"

“Nineteen men are dead, and you’re worried about traditional burial, when you should be working for peace!”

“You have killed!”

“By accident, or in self-defense.” She slurped broth from her bowl. “I may have made many mistakes in my life, but I’ve never compromised on trying to do good in the world.”

“Neither have the Franciscans...”

“Their individual members are shallow, self-absorbed and hypocritical. As Francis told you, they don’t follow his Rule as he intended.”

“He should have stayed, then, to reform the Order, as Luigi wanted.”

“It is up to each individual to change himself.”

“In today’s society...”

“Excuses, excuses!” she mumbled, chewing bread.

“If that’s the way you feel...”

She did not respond.

Giovanni rose and moved toward the threshold, pausing with his hand on the knob. “When you next see Francis, tell him I’m sorry.”

“He knows. But, like any apology, an effort must be made to rectify the situation.”

“Like you rectified destroying a wing of the convento last month?”

She didn’t flinch when the door slammed.

“You spoke rightly, but in the wrong tone,” chided Francis from the love seat.

“I have no patience...”

“You’ve overcome other obstacles to controlling your power, why not this?”

“Because I can relate to what Sister Agnes Marie said: I can’t unmake the hatred in my heart - mine being for the greedy, ignorant phonies of the world.”

“Yet, you helped him.”

“If I hadn’t, he’d be dead, too.”

“In many ways, you’re still the teenaged girl who called me forth so many years ago.”

“Don’t I know it!”

“Come, let’s enjoy the day.”

She carried her dishes to the kitchenette sink. “How...”

“I know a secluded path up Mount Subasio. I’m sure the horses will be glad to see us.”

Mustang pulled a quilted jacket over flannel shirt and jeans. “Later, we’ll have a quiet game of chess.”

“Indeed.”

Arm in arm, they left the apartment, comfortable in each other’s company.