

The Mustang Chronicles:

Triple Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Why Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea despised Christmas, she could not pinpoint. On overcast, chill afternoons following rounds of Assisi’s historic sites - tourism enjoying a seasonal uptick due to St. Francis’ creation of the original nativity creche in the 13th century - she sat in the warmth of her favorite trattoria, sipping hot cocoa, pondering her aversion to the lights, carols and commercialism of the season.

‘Twas December 23rd, a blustery day on the circuitous lanes of the hillside city, when the former Montana resident - exiled from the States after her grandfather, Jack Parsons, bequeathed her an unusual command of the natural forces almost 18 years earlier - parked herself near the crypt of Assisi’s most famous son on the lower level of the basilica built in his honor, rather than trudge back to her apartment in a cold drizzle. The stone rectangle, seemingly suspended above the altar, provided no comfort to her tortured soul. She knew the man whose bones rested within, knew he also was not pleased with the current state of this reputedly holy occasion.

Three figures approached in an almost military style, a swift, synchronized marching gait different from most visitors’ often timid, quiet respect. Mustang glanced up from her ruminations. Except for a variation in height, the men might’ve passed as triplets - at least, from her vantage point. The middle one towering over six feet, his companions might have topped out at five-feet-eight. They wore identical black suits, polished black loafers, white shirts and black ties, their black hair longish and slicked back off their foreheads.

The woman’s first instinct: Feds.

She bristled on the wooden pew, biting her lip to maintain a modicum of composure. She’d grown tired of being pursued by old acquaintances, spies, hired assassins and law enforcement eager to make use of her power for personal or national gain. Her auburn tresses darkened to an inconspicuous brunette as she pretended to be rapt in prayer.

When the trio executed a precise about-face, she glimpsed their features. The shape of their lips defied the presumption they’d been born of the same mother; though their eyes were brown, the shape of their noses and ears also confirmed a lack of relation. Yet, Mustang held no doubt they shared a common attitude about life.

Or, at least, their present mission.

Which she had no desire be revealed to her.

She listened as their footsteps faded along the lengthy arched passage, waiting an additional quarter hour before vacating her seat.

The rain, unfortunately, had not ceased. With a frustrated sigh, she trekked along the Via San Francesco, through the nearly abandoned Piazza del Comune and up toward the Piazza San Rufino. Darkness already cast shadows on the winding lanes, the winter solstice having only two days earlier celebrated the least amount of daylight.

In a modest flat on the top floor overlooking the square, Mustang hung her damp parka near the wood stove to dry. She loosed a soggy collection of Euros from her drenched jean pockets onto the stained kitchenette counter: payment from the group of hearty pilgrims she'd guided to various churches and shrines. Enough to keep her in food and lodgings through the new year, she debated remaining in solitude until the holiday festivities concluded.

Empty cupboards would, at minimum, require a venture to the nearby grocery store and, of course, the Gran Caffé bakery. For the night, a can of tomato soup would suffice, the space warmed by ample logs piled in the wood stove. She sipped steaming liquid from a ceramic mug after a hot shower thawed her bones, bundled in a plush yellow terry-cloth robe on the battered loveseat.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve," a quiet baritone stated from behind her. "You don't seem to be..."

"Don't start, Francis. You know my feelings on the matter."

"Indeed, Signorina. You consider the holy day no different than any other."

"I behave the same every day of the year," Mustang stated. "I've never understood why people get generous for one month out of the year, but are stingy the other eleven." She yawned. "I think it must be because they want extra tax deductions before the year ends."

"How ... cynical."

"And no surprise to you, my friend. You've known me too long to think my attitude would change."

"I... had hopes."

"Hope, then, that others change *their* attitude toward me. When they stop craving my favors, I'll begin to trust them."

"Touché."

In the piazza below her window, a group of carolers intoned a song in Italian. Even without her ability to translate any language mentally into English, she recognized the tune: *The First Noel*. She cringed.

"Perhaps, I should call in reinforcements," St. Francis drawled.

"Reinforcements?"

“Some friends who... specialize in softening hardened hearts.”

Mustang snorted, setting aside the empty mug. “What, like the ghosts from *A Christmas Carol*?”

“Not exactly.”

“Damned straight. Dickens missed the mark with that one, even though it’s been made dozens of times as a movie.”

“How so?”

“Scrooge’s transformation is based solely on fear of hell, not a genuine change of heart. Very much like Yuletide generosity: piling up tax deductions for the new year.” She rose, crossing to the sink and squirting dish soap into a stream of water from the tap. “Kindness shouldn’t have strings. It shouldn’t seek rewards. It should do what is needed because it’s necessary.”

“Amen,” Francis concurred, hovering near the wood stove.

“Still, how many people did you encounter - in your own lifetime - who lived up to such a standard?”

“Very few.”

“Even your own brothers... sought comfort when they should have sacrificed readily to help others.”

“True.”

“Then, we’re agreed. Christmas is nothing but an excuse, and if I choose to ignore it because of such hypocrisy, I should be allowed my opinion.”

Francis’ mouth opened; Mustang raised a silencing finger. His shaggy brown hair bent in surrender.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to bed,” the flat’s tenant declared, dishes stacked in the rack to dry.

“Buona notte, Signorina,” the saint replied. “Sweet dreams.”

“Thanks.”

When Francis did not dissipate, as was his norm, Mustang closed the bedroom door while she changed into the red sweatsuit which doubled as winter pajamas. In order for heat from the wood stove to circulate, however, she drew the panel wide before crawling beneath the quilt, to be startled awake by the presence of three vaguely familiar suit-clad men.

“Oh, hell...”

Instinctively, she dropped into a defensive posture, thanks to years of martial arts practice.

“No need for that,” a decidedly American accent announced from the left.

The middle, tallest intruder added, “We’re not here to do you harm.”

“Then, what the hell’s going on?” she barked, fists still clenched.

The shortest, on the right, answered, "We're here to ease the anguish of your soul."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Those who love you are worried for your well being."

Mustang sniffed skeptically. "Who, for instance?"

Before more could be said, the center figure signaled to his peers. "We should first introduce ourselves."

"Go ahead."

"I'm Mr. Jones. On my right, Mr. Smith. On my left, Mr. Parker."

"Bullshit," she grumbled. "At least, when Ben Espinoza decided to harass me, he used his real name. I have no time - or patience - with Feds who won't divulge their true identity."

"And, if we swear we're not federal agents?"

"The same goes for CIA or Interpol." She strode past them toward the door, the deadbolt secure. Teeth grit to hide her confusion, she nonetheless freed the lock and waved them toward the threshold. "Get out."

As if a wind tore through the chamber, the door slammed shut.

"You'll want to hear what we must tell you," urged Jones, grasping her elbow gently and guiding her to the loveseat.

Her knees stiffened against the suggestion to sit. "All I want is to spend the next few days in peace and quiet."

"You'll know no peace, unless you listen to us," retorted Smith.

"Even before I... inherited my power, I'd been forced to listen to people who have nothing intelligent to say. As a kid, my parents ordered me to respect my elders, to not interrupt even the most dull and inane conversation. After Jack Parsons died, random idiots decided to inflict their so-called wisdom on me, or their cheesy lies to wheedle their way into my good graces. Finding I couldn't trust any of them, I'm done listening."

Parker chuckled. "So much for doing it the easy way."

Ire rising, Mustang shouted, "Be gone, you lot!"

The trio vanished in swirls of glittering dust - an interesting and unexpected phenomenon.

Still, headed for bed, she added, "And don't come back!"

Not that she slept. A gale whipped up overnight, rattling the window casements, noise which annoyed her thoroughly. She stumbled to the kitchenette around three a.m., warming milk for a cup of hot cocoa and sliding two more logs into the wood stove to revive dying embers.

Through grimy glass, she stared at the plethora of stars twinkling in the sky. She loved nature - the scent of crisp country air in her nostrils as she climbed Mount Subasio to visit the wild horses, roaming through the forest on her parents' Montana ranch in her youth, riding her horses around the grounds at Boleskine House near Scotland's Loch Ness. She'd never really been a night owl, though, contemplating the stars not a high priority.

Even the tale of a special star guiding the wise men on their route to see the child Jesus held no fondness for her. Joe and Maggie Duryea had attended Sunday services on a regular basis - unless responsibilities of the ranch precluded the drive into Canyon Creek - while Mustang gave up on such nonsense after her freshman comparative religion class confirmed her suspicions that what some deemed "holy scripture" were actually fictional accounts intended to fool gullible masses.

God, in the general sense of the word, did not exist as an ethereal, unseen, omniscient being. If anything came close, having control over life and death, rain and snow, health and illness, it was she, herself. Even the merest thought spurred nature to do her bidding - and she'd yet to gain full control over the process, causing more harm than good on occasion.

Except, a fine line existed between harm and good - as centuries of war had proven. She'd killed, by accident and on purpose, sometimes those whose continued survival would wreak havoc on the innocent. In unguarded moments, she found herself sorely tempted to wipe the earth clean of humanity and let a new species take the fore.

Glints of dawn painted the horizon with pastel hues, and Mustang succumbed to the knowledge she would sleep no more. Best to dress and hit the shops before they closed for the holiday. Unlike America, in Assisi running out of staples meant suffering through until the next ordinary weekday. The concept of 24-hour convenience stores hadn't been implemented, except in larger metropolitan areas.

Gran Caffè's curved cases displayed half empty shelves, the manager not wanting to bake goods that would ultimately go to waste. Mustang toted a full brown paper sack of treats up the hill, purchasing milk, bread, peanut butter and sausage at the grocer's to provide basic sustenance.

Emerging from that structure, the evasive Mr. Smith fell into step with her.

"I'm in no mood..." she warned.

He countered evenly, "Are you ever?"

"I think you know my answer."

"Have you considered *why* that's your answer?"

“I told you last night.”

“Because you have no faith in humanity?”

“Precisely.”

“There’s a fault in that logic.”

Mustang shoved the bags toward him. “Fine. Prove me wrong.”

Awkwardly, Smith accepted the burden as his companion flexed her fingers to restore blood circulation. She crossed the Piazza San Rufino, where few tourists roamed.

“You see this?” she directed at the mysterious interloper.

Puzzled, he affirmed, “Of course.”

“Describe it.”

“It’s the Cathedral of San Rufino.”

“Have you been inside?”

“Many times.”

“Describe what you saw.”

“A church filled with worshipers.”

“And the floor?”

“What about the floor?”

“Where it’s been excavated.”

“I don’t...”

Mustang, disgusted, continued toward the former residence that had been divided into multiple apartments. “You wouldn’t.”

Smith pursued her. “What’s your point?”

“My point,” she whirled on him, “is that it’s not enough to build one church - money which could feed the poor or shelter the homeless, as the churches claim of importance - they build a new church atop the remains of the old, to keep simple-minded crowds in line with their skewed tenets.”

“Wow. That’s harsh.”

“Harsh, maybe. But, am I right?”

Smith averted his brown orbs.

With a snarl, Mustang reclaimed her bags and burst through the ice-trimmed entrance, kicking the wood shut in his face.

Only to find Mr. Jones lounging on the bottom step of the narrow, dim flight.

“Oh, hell...”

II

“What is this? Tag team stalking?” Mustang Duryea raged.

Jones straightened, his height causing him to tower over the woman. “We have a task to perform and will not be dissuaded from that goal.”

“Fine. Explain your objective, and if it sounds reasonable, I’ll allow you to proceed.”

“Your soul has been... warped by deceit and death. We have been charged with facilitating a cleansing so you may experience the true joy of the season.”

She sagged against the wall. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

His expression - oval, smooth countenance framed by heavily pomaded black hair - remained totally serene.

“Why me?” she pressed.

“As we said: those who love you are worried for your well being.”

“Who, exactly? In all my life, I could maybe count on one hand how many people honestly cared about me, and didn’t double-cross me in the end.”

“You’re referring, I suspect, to Peter O’Donnell, Glenn MacDonough, and so forth?”

“The list is pretty long.”

“Including your parents?”

Mustang bristled. “Unless you want to wind up on a coroner’s slab, like the rest of them, don’t go there.”

“Your grandparents?”

“Which ones?”

“You never knew your father’s parents. Your mother’s...”

“Jack Parsons tricked me into committing murder. Sylvia Matthys did little more than aid and abet that... fiasco.”

Jones relieved Mustang of the parcels. “Come, we can discuss this in relative comfort.”

She snatched the bags from his grasp. “No way, buster. Pretty soon, the bells will begin ringing and choirs will fill the churches with song. I want to be well away from all of that... garbage.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

Mounting the stairs, Mustang snickered at Jones’ futile attempts to lift his shoes off the varnished surface. Not the first time she’d glued an annoyance’s feet to the ground.

On the second landing, however, she discovered his compatriot, Mr. Parker, grinning from ear to ear.

“I wish I could do that,” he tittered.

“What, the big guy get on your nerves?”

“We are... inextricably linked so, yeah, I suppose so.”

Mustang squeezed past him and continued upward. “Who are you guys?”

“We are the tangible manifestation of a creative construct developed nearly two centuries ago.”

“In English, please. Even my brain can’t translate gibberish.”

“My advice would be to take a seat.”

“What, you think I can’t handle your...”

Parker smirked, twisting his roundish mien in an unpleasant cast. “People tend to faint when we reveal ourselves.”

“I’m made of sterner stuff.”

“Considering you’ve... materialized the dead, I’d say so.”

Twisting the key in the lock, Mustang negotiated the doorway, depositing her load on the kitchenette table. Shedding her parka, she kicked off her sneakers. She freed the tail of her blue flannel shirt from the jeans and rolled up the sleeves. She spun toward Parker. “All right. Lay it on me.” She inhaled deeply. “But if you tell me you’re the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, I’ll scream!”

His eyes lowered, lips pursed, he spoke not.

“Oh, hell...”

Digits flexing in frustration, she slid the milk and meat into the refrigerator, placing other purchases in the cupboard above the counter. She tasted blood from stifling the expletives by biting her tongue.

Parker stammered, “You can’t...”

“You’ve got about five seconds before I deconstruct you, permanently.”

“That’s... not possible.”

“In whose world?” she spat.

“Our... being does not conform to any known laws of physics.”

“What I can do also defies the laws of physics.”

He plopped on the wooden chair. “You mean...”

“I can end you.”

His beatific smile confounded her.

“What’s up with you?”

“I’d love nothing more than to be done with this... cycle of monotony.”

“What? You guys do this every year?”

“Depending on who summons us, sometimes more than once.”

“Who summoned you this time?” Mustang queried.

“A man named Samuel Clemens.”

She sank opposite this uninvited guest, stunned. "I haven't seen him since I left Scotland."

"He... has kept an eye on you."

"Probably discussed my... failures with Francis, as well."

"Along with a gentleman named Gandhi."

"But, they could have come themselves," Mustang protested. "I never banned them from..."

Parker shook his head, the ebony mane motionless. "They have come to believe you no longer put faith in their advice. They reasoned a different voice..."

"Maybe they're right. I long since quit listening to anyone, my seclusion always interrupted by the manipulators and the greedy."

"Will you permit us to fulfill our charge?"

"What's involved?"

"We will show you just how many people have cared about you in your life."

She murmured, "That'll take five minutes."

"You'd be surprised."

Rising, she preoccupied herself folding the empty sacks. "You've already compiled the list?"

"No. The revelations occur spontaneously as we... infiltrate your consciousness."

"Good luck with that."

Parker stood, his limited height causing him to gaze up at Mustang. He extended his hand toward her; she declined the gesture.

"If you will not allow yourself to be touched, how do you expect to touch others?" Smith ventured from beneath the lintel.

"It's never been my intention to touch others. I just... want to be left alone!"

Mustang shuffled toward the bedroom; a barefooted Jones intercepted her.

"Sit, please," he directed.

"And, if I refuse?"

"We will be compelled to... convince you." This from Parker.

Veering to check the status of the fire in the wood stove, she resigned herself to the ordeal. Another two logs set atop glowing coals, she faced the trio.

"I'm willing to wager you'll be the worse for wear by the time we're done."

The men grinned in unison.

"I could... release you right now, set you free..."

Jones clucked his tongue. "No one has the power to unbind us from this..."

"She does," Parker whispered.

Smith blinked. "She *does*?"

"You read her profile. She commands the elements, nature, the alternate planes. She's bested demons, mages, politicians."

Jones hissed, "Absurd."

Mustang shrugged. "Give it a try. You've nothing to lose."

"We have a deadline," Smith asserted.

"What sort of deadline?"

"Midnight."

"Or, what? You're transformed into toads?"

"Not... exactly." Jones.

She laughed outright. "Fine, then. Give me an hour to... break the bonds linking you to this odious routine. If I fail, I'll submit willingly to your..."

Parker almost leapt with excitement. "Agreed!"

"We... can't," Smith balked.

Jones, like the referee, acknowledged, "It's only fair to give her a shot."

Startled her delay tactic had succeeded, Mustang stabilized her respiration.

"Then, I'll take you in alphabetical order."

"What's that mean?"

"I need to deal with you one at a time," she bluffed, utterly clueless about how to rectify the situation.

Smith guffawed, "What'll we do in the meantime?"

"Take a walk around the city. Go, have a bite to eat. There's an excellent trattoria open near the Basilica Santa Chiara." She shoved Smith and Parker toward the exit. "Be back in a half hour."

Dejected, they departed, leaving Jones at the mercy of the unknown.

"Hot cocoa?" Mustang offered, waving him onto the loveseat.

"We don't... ingest nourishment."

"Then, you're obviously not the Ghost of Christmas Present who did, in fact, imbibe the milk of human kindness with Ebenezer Scrooge." She set a copper-bottomed saucepan on the stove, measuring two cupfuls of milk into it.

"By your height, I'd say you'd make an imposing Ghost of Christmas Future."

Jones did not respond.

"You have a history prior to that... incarnation, don't you?" she pressed.

"How... could you know?"

Stirring sugar and cocoa into the mix, she smiled.

“We move from imagination to imagination, an uncontrolled series of imagery, dialogue...”

“Writers, artists...”

He leapt off the cushion, agitated. “Yes! Our essence swirls like the ether from brain cell to brain cell, warped by the mind’s eye into the grotesque, the tantalizing, the mysterious, the romantic... Most often temporary - a few days or months, at most - before being recycled by another set of brushes or pen strokes.”

“What Dickens did...”

“His story festered in the minds of playwrights, filmmakers over a course of decades. We’ve been stuck in our current... forms since that twisted Brit slid his original manuscript in an envelope and delivered it to his publisher.”

“Before that?”

“My previous recollections include narrating Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher*, and fumbling about as Mr. Darcy for Jane Austen.”

Mustang offered him a steaming mug, tugging him onto the loveseat beside her.

“It smells... wonderful,” he remarked.

“Try a sip. It won’t hurt you.”

“The warmth on my hands is delightful, in and of itself.”

“Then, be contented with that warmth, Mr. Jones.”

He relaxed. “Can you really... break the bonds chaining us to this... tedium?”

“If you wish to be loosed from them.”

“More than anything.”

“You would no longer enjoy... self-awareness.”

“It’s over-rated, anyway.”

Mustang hesitated. “There’s nothing... you dream of doing while in tangible form? No bucket list, so to speak?”

“Would that prove a hindrance to the deed?”

In the span she’d wielded her control over nature, her impulsive whims had never failed to become reality, whether calling forth the dead, healing mortal wounds or setting bushes alight. Her curiosity tempted her to discover more about these beings...

“It depends.”

Jones’ brown orbs scrutinized her. “I’ve always wanted to feel the heat of passion between a man and a woman.”

“Oh, hell.” She buried her head in her hands. “I had to ask.”

“Did I... saying something wrong?”

Sucking air between her teeth, she struggled to calm frazzled nerves. She gradually straightened and couldn't help but chuckle at his innocent demeanor. Despite the standard depictions of his character from *A Christmas Carol*, Jones qualified as handsome, his youthful features oval and lean in a skeletal sort of way. If the tacky suit could be disregarded, and they'd met under different circumstances, in another life...

"I give you an hour to find yourself a willing female and do the deed," Mustang instructed.

"I'd... relish the experience with you more."

Her arm swung reflexively; she pulled up short, tapping his cheek in a scolding manner. "Not happening."

"You've never..."

"Up 'til recently, my... intimate encounters resulted in... natural disasters."

"How so?"

"Do you understand the concept of emotions?"

Jones nodded.

"When my emotions are... thrown off balance, nature reacts accordingly."

"That's... impossible."

"Think again. For anyone outside this room, *you're* impossible."

He sagged on the cushions. "I suppose you're right."

"No doubt about it." She stretched, exhaustion besting her. "You'd better be off, if you're going to beat the deadline."

"What about... Smith and Parker?"

"I'll deal with them."

"As you wish." Climbing to his feet, tears glistened. He lifted her off the loveseat and embraced her tenderly. "You are, indeed, a compassionate woman."

"Don't confuse compassion with stupidity, friend. Most often, I'm guilty of the latter, not the former."

"Still, I'm grateful for your kindness."

When his mouth assailed hers, she balked. She might've forgiven him had the gesture been a mere whim, but she sensed a calculated maneuver, and it irked her. Recoiling, the punch landed against his sternum, propelling him against the wall.

"We're done here!" she cursed.

The horrified shriek as Jones' body exploded in chunks of blood and sinew nearly deafened her, much like Scrooge's scream - depicted so many times on film - when the Ghost of Christmas Future revealed his name on the tombstone.

Smith and Parker rushed into the apartment, Christmas creche ornaments of blown crystal crushed by their constricted appendages.

“What happened?” Smith heaved.

“Your... associate got his wish.”

Parker quivered. “I... didn’t know it would be so painful.”

“It won’t be,” Mustang predicted, “as long as you cooperate.”

The pair stared at each other, bemused.

“Sit down,” she growled. “You’ve got some explaining to do.”

Obedient children could have been no more compliant, perched on the edge of the cushions, spines erect, faces eager. For her part, yearning for sleep, their host propped herself on the kitchenette table, anxious to be rid of these... spectres.

III

“Parker,” Mustang hailed.

The taller of the two replied, “Ma’am?”

“You strike me as the Ghost of Christmas Past.”

“Aye.”

She’d made the assumption based on his face, slightly more pensive than his companion. Smith struck her as a drinker, be it the milk of human kindness or whiskey.

“Explain the suits.”

“Ma’am?”

“These aren’t the... traditional garments of your ilk. Where’d you get them, or why?”

Running nervous fingers through his black mop, Parker silently consulted Smith, who shrugged.

“Well?” Mustang prodded.

“It was... about 1952, if I recall,” Parker stated. “We realized our clothing was rather... conspicuous and out of style, so we opted for more... common fare.”

“Makes sense.” She pulled one of the kitchen chairs close. “Why did you visit the basilica yesterday?”

Smith grinned broadly. “Mr. Clemens advised us to check in with St. Francis before...”

“He wasn’t there, of course,” Parker added. “Because you... extracted him from the stone.”

Mustang lowered her head to hide the guilty blush. Thus, she didn’t grasp why the pair crashed to their knees and shielded their faces.

“A futile effort, I see,” the saint of Assisi sighed over her shoulder. “The hope was to soften your heart, but you still managed to get the upper hand.”

She glared at the diminutive image, bathed in sunset hues. “It’s not my fault they’re tired of their existence, and I’m the only one who can release them.”

“Tired is a relative term. They... have no permanent solidity, therefore do not feel the ravages of time or depletion of energy.”

“It’s all semantics, Francis,” Mustang grumbled. “They don’t want to be caught up in this perpetual cycle of... hypocrisy.”

“Hypocrisy?”

“I told you yesterday: Scrooge didn’t change because of what the ghosts showed him about his past, or his present. He changed because he feared eternal punishment. His subsequent kindness had nothing to do with sincere feelings of compassion for the poor or the sick. It could be said he was balancing his ledger to merit a more comfortable afterlife.”

The guests rising from their obeisance, Francis squatted beside Mustang’s chair. “Signorina, we’ve interacted for quite a few years. You know I’ve wanted nothing but the best for you...”

“That’s why you enlisted Sam in this endeavor?” she challenged.

“He, too, cares deeply about your welfare.”

Smith snickered. “He got us out of dealing with some boneheaded publicity agent in Hollywood this season.”

“Possibly, time better spent than here,” Mustang remarked.

“Not so,” Parker countered. “If you free us...”

Francis scowled. “Only after you complete your task.”

The woman slumped on the wobbly seat. “Okay, okay. Parker, give me the list of the people you claim loved me so deeply in my life.”

Put on the spot, he hedged. “It’ll take a minute.”

“Take an hour,” she mumbled. “Take a day. Take forever.”

Francis’ emaciated frame convulsed. “You could, at least, be receptive.”

Over his voice, the sound of singing in the Piazza San Rufino renewed itself, a procession to the cathedral’s Christmas vigil service in progress.

“Ah, the mood is set, as if in some old movie,” Mustang quipped. “So be it. Let the show begin.”

Very much like a holographic film projector, scenes flickered before her, translucent yet real.

Initially, a long, narrow block of steel was drawn from a red-hot forge and painstakingly beaten flat, then bent to leave a U-shaped gap in the middle. Another length of metal - this one with a lower carbon concentration - had been formed to

fit that gap. The two merged, resulting in a blade both flexible to withstand the impact of the strongest blows, yet hard enough to hold a sharp edge.

Standing to one side, supervising his apprentices, swordsmith Kiyoshi Shimoto, the revered grandfather of Rick Shimoto, who'd died years earlier in Montana making his rounds of the ranches to shoe horses.

She'd traveled with that young man to Japan via lightning bolt, by accident, in those early days when she'd failed to control her impulsive utterances. Visiting Kiyoshi in the city of Sakurai, she'd watched the elder fashion a katana as a gift for her - among other adventures over the course of four weeks.

"Is this like Dickens' story, where they cannot see or hear me?" she asked Parker.

"No. You may interact with them as you wish."

She stood and bowed in oriental manner toward Shimoto. "Honored one, it is good to see you again."

"You are well, Mustang-san?" A serene smile brightened the lined countenance framed by wisps of white.

"Well enough. And you?"

"At peace."

"I never had the chance to apologize for what happened to Rick."

"You were not at fault. He and I... have enjoyed many long conversations in the garden of eternal delight since that day."

She felt dampness on her cheek. "I'm glad."

"You will join us soon?" he queried.

"I... don't know."

"It will be my pleasure and distinct honor to welcome you when the time comes." He bowed toward her. "I shall have a katana waiting for you."

"The honor will be mine."

As she mirrored Kiyoshi's gesture, the vision dissolved into a forest touched by spring. In the midst of all the green, however, one tree shown yellow. On a branch above her head, a blonde child, wearing a pink Strawberry Shortcake t-shirt, blue jean skirt and yellow shoes, squealed in delight.

Bonnie Thompson.

Mustang shuddered.

Kiyoshi Shimoto may not have loved her, *per se*, but he'd respected her for her power and her struggle to understand her capabilities. Little Bonnie, who'd gotten lost while on a school field trip to the Duryea ranch, adored her for the spectacles she caused.

The seven-year-old had told her parents about trees turning colors; they thought their daughter tainted by some unrealistic fantasy. They accused Mustang of filling her head with nonsense. When it became necessary to intervene after Bonnie ran away, the teenager had taught the mother a valuable lesson in parenting.

She'd also had to babysit the girl, who'd contracted chicken pox, while the rest of the family went to San Francisco. Healing the illness no problem, finding ways to entertain a girl for five days had drained her.

"Are you happy, child?" Mustang puzzled.

The high-pitched voice declared, "Mommy is happy now. She's a nurse, and she lets me help her!"

"You like playing nurse?"

"I make sure all my dollies and stuffed animals are healthy."

"Good for you."

"We even have a puppy!"

"What kind?"

"A golden retriever. He's so soft and cuddly. He sleeps on my bed."

A definite change from what Mustang recalled of the Thompson household - that is, before Irina, Bonnie's mother, made the break from her husband. If the youngster had been given a chance for a more stable future because of her interference, perhaps it wasn't all bad.

The sight of Bonnie rolling on the living room floor with the dog transformed into an elegant room at the Hotel del Coronado near San Diego.

"No!" Mustang whimpered.

Parker disputed, "But, he loved you."

"Yes, and his misplaced devotion got him killed."

"You would've married him, had he asked."

"Definitely, but..."

"Then, see..."

On the king-sized mattress, Jim Neville snored quietly, a lock of his black mop dangling over his forehead - as she recalled so vividly, and so painfully.

A dream woke him; he rolled toward her. She retreated two steps.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

The sound of his voice, which had haunted her thoughts for many years, completely unnerved her. She collapsed on the floor, sobbing.

Parker crossed to her. "You asked me to show you those who loved you, numbering more than a handful. If you concede the point, and will fulfill your part of the agreement..."

Swallowing hard, she raised reddened eyes. “You’ve shown me only three. I doubt you can hold up your end of the bargain.”

“Then, we move on?”

“Please.”

Neville vanished in a swirl of mist, leaving Mustang in the living room of her cousin Bryan Duryea’s Idaho mansion.

“Not Thomas Burton?” the woman lamented.

Parker snickered. “Mr. Burton... lacked the wherewithal to love in the truest sense of the word. He... lusted after you, there’s no doubt, but the amount of alcohol coursing through his veins made conscious choices... um...”

“Implausible?”

“Correct.”

Mustang slowly regained her feet. “I never suffered from intoxication, and my conscious choices weren’t always...”

“Intelligent?”

“I could think of other terms.”

“Be that as it may, this isn’t about him.”

“Good.”

As she watched, Rachel Duryea appeared in the room: a beautiful soul, sometimes tortured by visions over which she had no control. That first meeting, the cousins had shared their respective burdens, with Rachel even projecting her visions onto a television screen with Mustang’s assistance.

Seeing the hidden cache of beer kegs and cases of liquor ahead of Rachel’s step-mother’s machinations, allowed the young woman to avoid prosecution for crimes she hadn’t committed. She’d gone on to study for a degree in Ireland and married in Australia, quietly raising her family after Mustang had cured her of Lou Gehrig’s Disease, eliminating the visions.

The lithe brunette hailed her cousin, embracing her enthusiastically. “I’m thrilled to see you!”

“You look well,” Mustang commented, unable to determine the time frame.

“Because of you. I’ll be graduating from Trinity College in a few months...”

“Then, what are you doing...”

“Thomas and Kristi are vacationing in the Bahamas, so I’m spending my summer in Dad’s house.”

Mustang had never known about... that visit. She always believed Rachel had left to study in Ireland after Bryan’s funeral and never returned to Idaho.

“We can have an old-fashioned slumber party!” Rachel giggled. “Catch up on all the family gossip.”

How wonderful that would have been, had the two cousins been able to behave like ordinary humans, sitting up all night and chatting. Neither, though, enjoyed the plight of normalcy, given their respective gifts.

“You’ve had a vision?” Mustang prodded.

Rachel nodded reluctantly.

“About me?”

The same response.

“Can you tell me?”

“It’s not... pleasant.”

“Very little about my life since we met has been pleasant, except knowing you.”

Rachel hugged her tight, then dissipated in a flash of light.

Glaring at Parker, Mustang barked, “What the hell was that about?”

“It’s not... within my purview to allow... predictions about the future.”

She grunted, “If that was the past, and she was relating one of her visions, it could have been something that already transpired!”

Parker averted his gaze.

“Or, was it something that hasn’t happened?”

Silence.

“Oh, hell...” She sank on the wooden chair. “Let’s get on with it!”

Amidst strains of a piano concerto, a roundish countenance with high cheekbones and shaggy, sun-bleached light brown mane materialized, gazing down the hill near Loch Ness at two shattered instruments.

Another of Mustang’s failures: Stuart McKay.

She’d tried to assist him by mending the damage caused when the lorry he’d been driving dumped his prized possessions. She’d wiped his memory of the incident, as well, only to meet him later at a concert and misspeak.

He’d tracked her back to Boleskine House, eager to play his new composition for her. She’d provided a piano, courtesy of her power, but its abrupt disappearance raised unwelcome questions.

She’d hoped to erase his memory a second time, ending up vacationing with him on the Isle of Man instead. In the course of the holiday, during which he started composing another musical piece to be submitted for a competition, she’d been compelled to reveal her secrets to him - even healing his sister of injuries from a car accident in Rome via long distance.

He’d died in an accident, himself, days later.

In this tiny apartment above the Piazza San Rufino, a polka commenced, with McKay grabbing her waist and whisking her around the floor.

He'd taught her the dance, as he'd imparted a greater appreciation of creativity and music to her.

The melody ended, McKay did not relinquish his grasp. "In your kindness, you took pity on a distraught soul. You have no reason to reproach yourself."

"If not for me, you would still be alive," Mustang panted.

"But, my music lives, along with my abiding love for you."

Tender fingers brushed her cheek and, in mid-stroke, the palm thickened with the callouses of a hard-working craftsman, performing the same affectionate gesture.

Pedro Jenaro Ricardo Merino y Gonzalez, his long white mane rustled by an unseen breeze, smiled from the rooftop above a tiny Nevada town. "Señorita, are ye mad?"

That odd combination of Spanish and Scottish accents made her chuckle. She'd reunited him with his wife years after his father-in-law had reported him for a crime he hadn't committed and he'd fled to Scotland. She'd then prevented FBI agent Ben Espinoza from causing further trouble for the family.

She'd also provided him with a substantial nestegg, thanks to the Las Vegas casinos, to rebuild their lives. Oddly, presenting the money, she'd wished him, "Merry Christmas."

"Ye canna go. Ye must celebrate with us," Pedro urged, seizing her hand.

She remembered his plea from the restaurant his wife had made such a success in his lengthy absence. Their daughter had grown to join the U.S. Marines...

"It is good to see you, amigo. I hope you are well and happy."

"Very well. Very happy."

"No one has... bothered you?"

"You mean, the FBI? No. They questioned us briefly after... that incident, but we were able to convince them of our ignorance about you and your... grandfather."

"I'm glad."

"That's six," Parker gloated.

Mustang exhaled, relieved the flashbacks ended with Pedro evaporating into the ether. "We're done, then."

The Ghost of Christmas Past, his black suit and tie so uncharacteristic, vibrated with an unseen charge of energy, then contracted into what resembled a sparkling tree ornament before bursting into a cloud of smoke.

IV

“Two down, one to go,” Mustang Duryea stated.

Smith grumbled, “There’s nothing I can do for you.”

“You can answer a few questions.”

“Is this an interrogation? We’re not criminals, you know.”

“I don’t think that. It’s... just curiosity.”

“All right, then.” He relaxed on the loveseat.

She settled beside him on the cushions, scrutinizing his rather mischievous countenance. “Ebenezer Scrooge really didn’t change his attitude about Christmas - and people, in general - despite what you and Parker showed him, did he?”

“These are your questions?” choked Smith, stunned.

“Like I said: curiosity.”

“To be frank, past and present meant nothing to Scrooge. Yes, he had regrets, but his overriding obsession with wealth buried those deep in his psyche.”

“It wasn’t until Jones showed him his future that he caved.”

“Out of fear of an eternity in hell.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mustang moved to the kitchenette, grabbing the saucepan from the dish rack. “Hot cocoa?”

“Have you nothing stronger?”

“Not even a bottle of Jameson whiskey.”

Disappointed, he agreed, “Cocoa, then.”

As she blended the warming milk with sugar and dark powder, she continued, “Who else have you tried to convince over the decades that their... lifestyle needed adjustment?”

“Too many to count.”

“Successes?”

“Some.”

“But, not all?”

“No. As the years have passed, concepts of kindness and generosity have been supplanted by greed, selfishness and prejudice.”

“Thanks to the rise of a consumer society, sparked by incessant advertisements for material goods no one really needs.”

“You’ve noticed?” Smith postulated.

“That’s one reason I don’t have a television. Or, if I did, I’d only use it to watch old movies, but I don’t even have those anymore.”

“You are... an extraordinary person.”

“I’ve been told that.” Mustang removed the pan from the burner and poured steaming liquid into two ceramic mugs. She carried them to the coffee table. “So, all in all, this limbo you’ve been caught in has been rather... boring, eh?”

Smith accepted the mug, warming his hands. “There aren’t words to describe the ennui. Year after year, waiting to be summoned to...”

“Beat your heads against a brick wall?”

“Apt metaphor.”

She sipped, hesitating.

“You have more questions?” he prompted.

“One.”

“Go ahead.”

Mustang wiped her lips on the sleeve of her flannel shirt and cleared her throat. “In Dickens’ story, the Ghost of Christmas Present was able to look a year into the future and see Tiny Tim had died. Given what some of Parker’s apparitions said to me, where will I be this time next year?”

“He is bound not to answer,” interspersed Francis from behind her.

She whirled on the saint. “Just as you’ve always refused to provide insights into what’s happened?”

A slight inclination of his shaggy head confirmed her assertion.

“That’s absurd! Why should he be restricted...”

“Because, Signorina, you are different from others they’ve encountered. You can take knowledge of what is to come and... use it against humanity.”

She bolted upright. “I would never...”

“You think that,” Francis’ cajoled. “Your impulsiveness remains a threat, nonetheless. A chance word, or thought...”

“I’ve... done so much better!”

“You have, but life is a never-ending journey, with progress a constant, not some goal to be attained, then rest on your laurels.”

Hazel eyes rolled ceilingward. “As if you, Sam Clemens, General Rommel and Gandhiji haven’t harangued me about that for years!”

“Then, let this poor being go, and be content with the mystery of what tomorrow will bring.”

Mustang considered Smith, whose brown orbs pleaded for release.

“I’m sorry to say, your efforts were in vain,” she apologized.

Smith countered, “Didn’t seeing those who genuinely loved you touch your heart?”

“I laud Parker’s diligence in finding the few who honestly cared about me. That he couldn’t show me my mother, or my father, or even Jack Parsons, who burdened me with this power I never sought, only solidifies my view the very traits that have hindered your work are destroying the fabric of society.”

He rose, taking her in his arms. “You’re tired of dealing with them, same as me.”

Wet cheeks soaked his shoulder. “Yes.”

“We’ll find our due rest...”

Smith vanished mid-syllable, leaving Mustang to teeter and pitch forward onto the loveseat before sliding to the floor.

“Oh, hell...”

Glaring up at Francis, she righted herself slowly, rubbing her right elbow, which had clipped the coffee table, aggravating her funny bone.

“I’m sorry, Signorina,” the Italian said. “I couldn’t allow...”

Harshly, she growled, “What do you *know*?”

“Come, it is Christmas. We shall join the crowds in their hymns...”

Mustang withdrew her hands from his reach. “No! I want you gone, once and for all! You’ve done nothing but mislead and torment me since I moved here, concealing the truth to throw me in the middle of untenable situations, where I had no choice but to kill or be killed!” She squinted at his thin countenance. “I think you get your jollies watching me wreak havoc on the descendants of those who abhorred you, then wasted a fortune building a basilica you never wanted!”

Francis didn’t have an opportunity to reply. She snatched her parka off its hook, yanked it over her arms, jammed her feet into her sneakers and stomped from the apartment, along the corridor and down the narrow stairs.

Bitterly cold air hadn’t dissuaded the crowds in the Piazza San Rufino from continuing their celebration, leading up to the traditional midnight Mass. Mustang had no idea of the hour; she’d never worn a watch. She meandered through the throng, aiming toward a lane that would take her out of the city where she could be alone, as she’d always wished to be.

Seated on the highest parapet of the Rocca Maggiore, a waning moon cast diffused light over the Umbrian Valley. She contemplated the Giotto murals being projected on the Basilica San Francesco and lights twinkling in windows along twisting Assisi streets.

She’d never liked Christmas. As a child, her parents had dragged her to holiday services, the minister preaching against those who held no belief in the Christ. The sight of Santas in malls, or bell ringers soliciting donations at the grocery store irritated her. Assistance for those in need being confined to one

month a year, how did the poor survive the other eleven, when individuals with sufficient funds to support themselves returned to being ignorant of their fate?

Hypocrisy! she wept.

“Don’t I know it,” came Smith’s lyrical baritone. “Every year, it’s the same.”

Mustang stiffened. “I thought Francis had...”

“No, he only banned me from your flat. He can’t... negate my existence. Only you have that power.”

“He banned you from telling me my future, as well?”

“Only for that moment. Though, Jones could have done it better.”

“I’m... sorry about that. He...”

“Made a pass at you?” Smith chuckled, easing onto the stone beside her.

“How’d you know?”

“He’s what is termed a ‘hound dog.’ Most years, it was all Parker and I could do to keep him focused on the task at hand, especially if he saw a pretty girl.”

“That’s... strange.”

“Not really. In the early days, after Dickens created us, things were fairly straightforward. As decades passed and we grew accustomed to our lot, finding some sort of diversion became a game to us.”

“Jones’ diversion was sex?”

“Not the physical act, but the sensation of lust, the craving...”

“What about Parker?”

Smith sniffed air scented by wood smoke. “He liked to gamble. Whenever our assignment took us to Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Monte Carlo... he loved the roulette tables.”

“I prefer craps, myself.”

“Ah! Easier to manipulate the dice without being discovered.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Parker got caught a couple times, but when security came looking for him...”

“He’d vanished?”

“A perk of our... situation.”

“And, you?”

“I’m an avid birdwatcher.”

“Really?”

“Sure. While Parker and Jones were, by rights, night owls, I spent my days awake. On walks through the parks - wherever we happened to be - I enjoyed the

bird song and, eventually, the birds themselves. If I kept an actual log, I'd probably outdo the most obsessed human in the field."

Mustang snickered. "Isn't that a bit of pride showing?"

"Sure, and why not? I may not have a perfect record converting hardened hearts, but when it comes to my knowledge of birds..."

"Congratulations. At least, you chose a positive hobby, not a vice."

"What about you? Don't you have a hobby?"

"I... was never good at anything, except caring for horses."

"And, there aren't any around here," Smith sighed.

"Oh, yes, there are."

"Where?"

"Wanna see?"

"Sure."

"How good are you in the dark?" When Smith bristled, she blushed.

"Sorry. C'mon, then."

Together, they navigated toward the exit of the Rocca Maggiore, then up Mount Subasio to where a herd of wild horses roamed freely. The animals didn't immediately recognize their visitors in the pre-dawn gloom, but when they caught Mustang's scent, they converged on her.

"I usually bring them treats," she announced, stroking a mare's tangled mane.

"They're magnificent!"

She explained how their ancestors had wandered up the slope after escaping the confines of Assisi, during various battles fought within the walls.

"And, they've survived all these centuries?" Smith gasped.

"Horses are... meant to be independent. So long as they have a stallion to protect them, and grass to eat, they do just fine."

"You *are* an expert."

"Had my... past been different, I would still be in Montana, raising them by the hundreds."

"Your one regret?" Smith speculated.

"One of many."

"All the dead?"

"Some deserved to die. A few wanted to die. Others... I should've been more careful."

"Do you believe in forgiveness?"

"I believe in justice."

"Meaning?"

Mustang leaned against a rock outcropping as Smith nuzzled a bay mare. “Those who died trying to kill or capture me received their just reward, so to speak. Those who asked for death are enjoying their rest. The ones I killed through impulsiveness or anger...”

“Remain a blot on your soul?”

Auburn tresses obscured her face, head sagging. “A long time ago, a man I believed could be trusted advised me to use my power for good. I have failed so miserably...”

“Unlike the average teenager, you had no one who could teach you about those powers, and how... readily they react to the slightest whim. Your life has been a grand experiment, a road previously untrodden. You have no reason to reproach yourself.”

Smith’s brown eyes met her hazel orbs. “Truly?” she whispered.

“Truly.”

“Then, you really don’t see a need for me to change my attitude, in line with what you did for Scrooge?”

“My only recommendation would be to curb your temper a bit. When you get angry...”

“I do horrible things.”

“To put it mildly.” Smith extended his hand toward her; she grasped it. “You’re like a skunk spraying an enemy.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

“I’ve seen far too many over the years.”

They strolled down the mountain as dawn broke over Assisi, clouds obscuring the sun. Snowflakes stuck on bare branches and rooftops, brightening the dismal landscape.

“May I go now?” Smith asked when they passed beneath the arched stone gate at the edge of the city.

“With my gratitude,” Mustang pledged.

Smith raised her scarred right palm to his lips, kissing it lightly. Then, a fluttering of wings caught his attention. “Ah! A cardinal!”

The bird might have whisked him away, he dissipated so quickly.

Mustang trudged to her apartment, snow creating slippery spots on the pavers. She paused in the heart of the Piazza San Rufino - midnight Mass long since dismissed, and the early morning Masses still to come - listening to the silence, so rare and so peaceful.

Up the dimly lit flights, she stripped off the parka and her flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers. A hot shower warmed her bones, then she plopped onto the bed.

She slept through Christmas, undisturbed. Awaking the next morning, she felt not a twinge of guilt. She hoped for tranquility with the coming new year, a chance to remain anonymous and content as a tour guide, her power dormant with no old friends or new acquaintances to disrupt her idyll.

Watching snow fall through the ice-crusted window, the wood stove crackling with warmth, she relished hot cocoa and breathed easy.