

The Mustang Chronicles:

Penultimate Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Januarys in Assisi tested Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea’s resolve about many of her life’s choices. Not as cold as Montana, perhaps, and not nearly as much snow, the chill in her bones as she trod from the Piazza San Rufino to the Gran Caffè Bakery made it feel like she wore no parka at all.

A slickness to the paving stones made the descent treacherous; her sneakers lacked proper tread to maintain traction. She moved slowly, random beams of sunlight penetrating the overcast to glisten off puddles frozen into ice overnight.

The return journey proved even worse. Quite frustrated by the limited selection in curved glass cases - always an issue in the tourist off-season - making sure she didn’t spoil any pastries by dropping the waxed paper sack tensed her muscles to their ultimate tautness.

Mustang paused to recover her breath on the steep lane as the bells of Cathedral San Rufino chimed the hour. She considered swinging into the grocer’s for a bag of apples and carrots; if the temperature climbed to a tolerable level, she could visit the wild horses up Mount Subasio and impart their expected treats.

She clutched a stone outcropping to maintain her balance as a strong gust of wind whipped along the narrow street, averting her face from sharp pellets of sleet blown off the nearest roof.

Then, she heard a cacophony of shrill screams, quickly drowned out by an ear-splitting combination of mechanical wheezing and groaning.

Whatever the source of the din, it terrified the ancient hillside city’s residents, who fled their domiciles, shops and offices - slipping, falling and tumbling into the Piazza del Comune.

A rather hefty business owner veered toward Mustang, his petrified expression blending fear of the noise and the prospect of crushing this diminutive tour guide. She released her grip on the wall and plunged into the fray, only to have agile fingers seize her right arm as she bounced past an alley and yank her through a recessed doorway.

Not just any doorway, either.

Prominent in the huge chamber: split-trunk tree-like pillars - six total, marking the corners of a platform supporting the hexagonal operations console. A massive, transparent cylinders-within-cylinder configuration emerged from its midst like a growing plant, connected to switches, buttons, levers and screens. The interior wall surface echoed this theme, with circular disks embedded in raised

hexagonal plates, set from floor to ceiling. A grinding of engines heretofore unknown to average humans faded.

Before her on the metal grid floor stood a tall, painfully thin figure in brown pin-striped suit, blue shirt and white high-top sneakers, with a wild brown mop, longish sideburns, lips curled over his gums in a beaming smile.

“Oh, hell...” gasped Mustang, lowering the parka’s fur-trimmed hood.

The pair embraced like long-lost lovers which, in fact, aptly described their relationship. They parted after a barrage of passionate kisses, assessing each other at arm’s length.

“What are you doing here, Doc?” Mustang finally spoke.

“Averting a crisis, I hope.”

“How so?”

He eyed the bag of sweet confections, a delightful British accent prodding, “Breakfast?”

Auburn tresses bobbed sheepishly.

“Are you here because of... of...”

“I moved here from Scotland about six years ago.”

“Of all places?”

“I... know one of the inhabitants.”

He withdrew to the console. “Ah, yes. The great saint of Assisi.”

“Exactly.”

“He’s the instigator of this... predicament.”

Mustang stiffened. “Eh?”

Manipulating a series of dials and switches, the TARDIS vanished from its current site.

Its unwitting passenger couldn’t help but laugh at the flying sparks and spliced wiring that made the albeit brief journey an adventure in turbulence. The operator cautioned, “We need to find safe shelter...”

“Toward the higher elevations, there’s a horse pasture, well surrounded by forest. No one will see...”

“How do you know?”

“I spend... a lot of time there.”

Her playful wink reminded him of the horses she’d cared for at Boleskine House near Loch Ness. “Ah!”

Once the craft, its exterior resembling a blue London police call box, had settled in the clearing, the Doctor invited Mustang to join him on a padded bench near the assembly of jumbled components.

“So, why did you abandon Boleskine?” he queried.

“They wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“Government agencies?”

“People, in general. Every time I turned around, it seemed, someone was knocking on my door, or trying to manipulate me into... into...”

Why she cried, she couldn’t guess. Strong arms encircled her; tears soaked his collar as she sobbed on his shoulder.

“As long as it’s been better for you here...” he soothed.

“In some ways, yes. In others, no.”

“You’ve... never been adept at being inconspicuous.” He fluffed her unruly locks.

She let this sarcasm pass, finally raising her eyes to meet somber brown orbs. “So, what brings you to Italy?”

“An intriguing conundrum.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“In the year 1209, your St. Francis traveled to Rome with his companions to see the Pope.”

“He’s not mine, *per se*...”

“One of those men accepted a small, jewel-encrusted box as a gift from a lesser monsignor and carried it back to Assisi.”

“Okay...”

“That monsignor wasn’t...”

“Authorized to bestow the gift?” speculated Mustang.

“Human.”

“Oh, hell. Even then, there were...”

“You’ve got to remember, Mustang, humans are very young as a species.”

“If you say so, Doc. So, what was in the box?”

“It’s difficult to quantify in terms you’ll understand.”

“Okay, what happened to it?”

“So his associates wouldn’t discover he was hoarding material possessions, the errand friar buried it.”

“And, you’ve come to reclaim it?”

Tentative fingers raised Mustang’s left palm to the light. “These scars don’t heal?”

“Not when they’re periodically re-injured.” She used her free hand to shift his chin toward her. “Don’t change the subject. What do you need with this old box, that’s probably little more than dust after eight centuries?”

“The box, maybe. The contents...”

“Something dangerous?”

“Oh, yes.” He cradled her digits within his. “I’ve come to destroy it.”

“That can’t be too serious.”

“It wouldn’t be, normally, except...”

Mustang felt him shudder. “Something’s wrong.”

“Indeed.”

“From the beginning, please,” she insisted.

His head drooped, though the spikes of brown hair extending over his forehead remained static. “What started as an... object no bigger than an acorn, has steadily increased in size within this mountain to unimaginable proportions.”

“Oh, hell...”

“And, it’s set to detonate.”

“Detonate?” she croaked. “You mean, like a bomb?”

His lips pursed in confirmation.

“You’re here to defuse it?”

“There are... complications. Below the surface, as its mass expanded, tectonic plates were displaced, causing earthquakes...”

“Like the one in 1997 that did so much damage...”

“Precisely. Those natural phenomena... accelerated the device’s timing, which originally had a thousand year gestation period.”

“Knocking 200 years off its...”

“Approximately 50 years,” stated the Doctor.

“What about the other...”

He spoke not a word; his stony mien proclaimed volumes.

“You think... I’m to blame?”

“I should have made the connection sooner, once you told me how you released St. Francis from his tomb with your power.”

“Accidentally!”

“By mistake, or deliberately, the reason doesn’t matter. The consequences do.”

She twisted away from him. “Oh, hell, hell, *hell!*”

He caressed her shoulder. “When we... parted in Scotland, I experimented with my instruments and discovered the TARDIS’ sensors could pick up your... singular energy signal whenever it manifested in... unconventional ways. At least, when I was within ten light years of Earth. I hadn’t noticed the discrepancy in location between Boleskine and Italy, assuming the circuits were misaligned...”

“Again.” She mustered a quiet chuckle. “What do you need me to do?”

“How do you contact... St. Francis?” He ignored her smirk. “What?”

“Look to your left.”

“What!”

Inhaling deeply, the Doctor spun on the cushion to find a diminutive, emaciated figure with a disheveled dark mane and a beatific smile eavesdropping on the conversation.

“You... were here the whole time, sir?” stammered the accented baritone.

“I am always where the Signorina requires my assistance.”

Mustang glanced around the domed expanse. The TARDIS must possess an automatic translator, she mused, similar to the way her brain converted any known language via the power bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons.

Impressive.

The Doctor offered Assisi’s most famous son a seat and rehashed the planetary threat. “Do you remember... any of your associates being in possession of such a box?” he concluded.

“In those early days of our ministry, only two of the brothers entertained regrets about dispersing their personal possessions, and I do not hold their weakness against them. We all had moments of... doubt.”

Staring wistfully at the organic circular wall decor, Francis narrated the tale of a pleasant summer night, when a dozen men slept rough near the tiny restored chapel of St. Mary of the Angels - later enshrined within the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in the valley below Assisi. While Francis kept vigil, he heard one of the men rise and steal toward the woods, and not just so he wouldn’t disturb the others.

Francis followed at a distance, and observed the young man take a makeshift shovel and dig a hole, into which he placed the box, covering it with dirt and mulch.

Neither acknowledged this violation of the vow of poverty to which the group was devoted.

The Doctor extracted a pair of plastic-rimmed spectacles from his suit jacket, perching them on his nose. He brought up a map on the console screen, and Francis pointed out the area where the object would have been concealed.

“The way it’s positioned, it’ll eradicate not only Italy, but Europe, western China and India,” came the calculation.

Mustang groaned, “You’re sure?”

“Give or take a few thousand miles.”

Francis scrutinized the display. “How can this be averted?”

“It... can’t.” The Doctor’s focus on Mustang aggravated her nerves. “Unforeseen mitigating circumstances...”

“She is... quite exceptional in her capacity to reverse damage she triggers by her impulsiveness,” opined Francis.

“That’s why she is the *One*.”

“You’ve... had dealings with her?”

Mustang sneered. “You mean, there’s something about me you didn’t *know*?”

The saint remained placid.

“We... performed a... mutually enlightening... experiment some years ago,” the Doctor remarked, causing the woman to blush.

Francis droned, “I fear her... self-control still leaves much to be desired, but if you give her specific directions, she may be of assistance in preserving the planet.”

“Still the self-control?” chided the Doctor.

She sniffed. “As for that... experiment, I’ve... learned to contain my... enthusiasm.”

“On land *and* in space?”

“On land, anyway.”

“That may serve us well, then.” He was about to beg Francis’ indulgence when he found the manifested spectre had dissipated. “What!”

“He comes and goes at will,” Mustang grouched, fetching the bag of pastries she’d left on the console and taking a bite of a thick chocolate-filled croissant. “Do we have time?”

“I... didn’t plan to find willing assistants so, yes, eat your fill.”

“It’s... rude not to share...”

They sat on the bench and devoured delicacies from the sack, powdered sugar coating their cheeks and laps. The Doctor pulled a linen handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed her face; she commandeered the cloth and did likewise, pausing before completing the task to lick the sweetness from his lips.

Evolving into a kiss; no untoward weather disruptions transpired.

“See?” she beamed.

“Only partial results. We’d have to recreate the original parameters...”

A massive jolt knocked them both onto the metal grid floor.

As they clambered to their feet, their eyes remained wide.

“Delayed reaction?” Mustang puzzled.

The Doctor retorted, “The end of the world.”

II

The Time Lord had once recounted his personal code, including the phrase, “Never cowardly.” Yet, Mustang saw distinct terror in those brown eyes, and felt her own spine shiver at this declaration.

He overcame a brief inertia and clamped his hands on her shoulders. “This isn’t going to be easy. Not even for the One.”

She countered, “Cleaning up a mess never is.”

“I... may not be of much use to you.”

“Remember, I once told you I’d stand with you in defense of this planet against extraterrestrial invaders.”

He scanned the console. “Will you need tools of any kind? Gloves? Protective eyewear?”

“If I knew exactly what I was up against, maybe...”

“Your worst nightmare.”

She snickered. “You’d be horrified by some of my dreams, Doc.”

“Then, *allons-y!*” The wood panel swung open, as if on cue.

She blocked his egress. “I’ll go alone. You get the TARDIS out of harm’s way.”

“But, like you said, you don’t know what you’re up against.”

“We could play 20 questions, and I’d still be clueless. Just tell me: is it organic, artificial, alive... hit the highlights.”

“I’m not certain.”

She scowled. “If you were going down there, how would you handle it?”

“The sonic screwdriver, as I’ve modified it, could record the mass, energy output and vital signs, for starters.”

“Would that be enough to defeat it?”

He shrugged.

Mustang clutched his shirt collar and kissed him swiftly. “If I’m not back in an hour, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

“Good luck.”

“To hell with luck.”

As she jogged down the mountainside - an activity her joints resented - the TARDIS dematerialized, an emergency beacon fastened to the roof pulsing. She skirted Assisi and continued to San Damiano, then veered toward Santa Maria degli Angeli.

If the core of the damned alien bomb were sealed beneath the basilica’s foundation, she’d be forced to blow the works.

Reminisces of the initial event, when she had yet to comprehend the extent of her power over nature, flooded her brain. She'd traveled from Montana to Italy after inadvertently verbalizing the wish, then nearly reduced this shrine - and others in a ten mile radius - to rubble with a desire to meet the man who'd dwelt in a tiny hovel, trusting in Providence for his daily bread.

Called forth from his tomb in the Basilica San Francesco, beneath both the main and lower chapels, Francis had caused an uproar with the city's occupants, his own friars, and international media. Nearly 18 years later, she still hadn't mastered the spontaneity that wreaked such havoc.

Nonetheless, she exercised command of nature as the cold chapped her nose. Piles of dirty snow, scraped from the roadways, could lay a track for her to the box's burial site...

The instruction given, she waited until flecks of frozen muck rolled along the concrete and around the rear of the baroque structure. Behind arched iron grilles erected to reduce vandalism, statues and altars significant to the Franciscans sported tourists' mementos, coins and prayer requests on the ledges.

Ice collected below the middle set of stones, unable to penetrate the surface.

"Oh, hell..." Mustang contemplated this dilemma, fingers absently combing her auburn locks. If she razed the building, averting humanity's decimation, what would be different than that previous fiasco?

Still...

A second directive roused the snow to spin itself into an auger, boring through flat stones into the soil below.

Within seconds, a fracture emanated from the drill point, creating a sinkhole 80 meters in diameter.

Not that it swallowed nearby objects. Dirt and rock buckled, exposing reddish-yellow liquid roiling beneath a transparent casing.

An egg, but not an egg, Mustang determined.

She knelt as close as she dared and laid her palm on a pitted layer, retracting her arm immediately.

A heat source - of volcanic proportions?

Was that what the Doctor meant by its growth? A fissure in the fault line had permitted molten lava to build up beneath the crust...

She recalled periodic news coverage of geysers in Yellowstone National Park, described as pressure release valves that preempted lava below from shooting miles into the air and eradicating the entire western half of the United States.

For once, Mustang wished she'd paid more attention in her freshman Earth Science class. She must've been muttering to herself, and nearly jumped out of her skin when the Doctor's voice reached her ears, "No matter how adequately trained your instructor would have been, he wouldn't have been able to explain this."

"Can you see it?" she inquired. "And, if so, how?"

"Look at your wrist."

When she had been otherwise distracted in the TARDIS, he'd clipped a metal band around her arm - a communication device with advanced technology.

"Sneaky, dude."

"I wanted you to have an out, in case of calamity."

"Thanks." She exhaled slowly. "So, what do you think?"

"No idea."

"Should I... drag it into the open to get a better look?"

"You'd be dragging it for miles."

"Then, what?"

The Doctor rationalized, "Compressing it will amplify the pressure."

"Like squeezing a water balloon?"

"Precisely."

"What about piercing it and releasing... whatever that muck is?"

"If you want to flood the town."

"I could..." - she forced her brain into overdrive - "funnel the excess into a reservoir of some type..."

"Is there a natural basin deep enough in the vicinity?"

"No, but I can create one."

"That might interfere with subsurface dynamics..."

"Then, I'll just make it gone."

She heard the Doctor sucking air.

"What?" she pressed.

"I'm calculating the extent of the collapse when that much mass is eliminated."

"The void could be filled with liquid rock and allowed to harden."

"Simultaneously?"

"A split second between one and the other."

The Doctor whistled his admiration. "You're undeniably the One."

"You've known that for awhile," Mustang chortled. "Give me a tick; let me figure this out."

"Time is short."

"If anything detonates, I can absorb it into myself."

“You’d,, die.”

“Better me than billions.”

A pregnant pause. “Do what you have to do.”

The ominous silence raised an ache in the woman’s heart. How had she lived without him for the past seven years; how had she let the memory of their intimacy dwindle?

Again, she placed her digits on the gritty skin, actually penetrating the barrier. She quieted her soul and projected, “Hear me.”

What responded froze the blood in her veins: “Humanity shall be exterminated.”

“Why?”

“As I have grown, I have witnessed no signs of intelligence. Those species who respect life and each other will now be given an opportunity to steward resources that have been so brutally wasted.”

“Oh, hell...” Teeth clenched, she persisted, “What are you?”

“You could not pronounce my name in your limited tongue. Suffice it to say, I am Doom, and I am unstoppable.”

The throbbing of what might have been a pulse grew louder, like a timer counting down the last seconds of life.

“Wait!” she shrieked inwardly.

The noise ceased. “What?”

“How did you get here?”

“Ancient history.”

“I... like history,” she bluffed.

“You... hope to delay the inevitable.”

“Not at all. Please, tell me your story.”

She listened to what was translated in her brain as a gravelly hiss. As a kernel, deposited on the planet by a migratory shape-shifter posing as a member of the Christian hierarchy in Rome, this equivalent of a judge, jury and executioner had not lain dormant through the centuries. It... melded with Earth’s elements, cognizant of what the plants and animals experienced, from birth to extinction. Wars wounded its veneer, pollution contaminated its fluids - that would otherwise have nourished creation well into the future.

“You have done this to yourselves,” it droned. “Your eviction is imminent.”

“Is there no bargain to be negotiated?”

“The vows, the treaties, have no value, as your species eschews honor. You may make excuses until every drop of water is contaminated; you are no longer masters of this planet.”

“Oh, hell...” She withdrew her hand, flesh scorched by the boiling morass. “Doc,” she directed at the communications disc, “we’ve got a problem.”

“Stalemate?”

“Oh, no. Nothing that simple. We’re done.” She listed the alien’s complaints. “It claims to have another species in line to take possession of Earth once humans are annihilated.”

“What!” the Doctor grunted. “What!”

“That’s what it said.”

“Do you know how to put the creature in stasis? And conceal it so no one sees?”

Mustang had forgotten the Doctor’s quirky sense of humor. Yet, in a scenario when a person could either weep profusely or cackle hysterically, the offbeat lightened the mood.

She joked, “You want me to spread a bunch of tarps?”

“You could always... make it look like an excavation site.”

She gazed into the hole. “All it takes is a word.”

“I’ll be there to fetch you once I pull records from an obsolete database.”

A stack of orange cones, commingled with assorted maintenance supplies in an easily unlocked shed in the rose garden, were placed at regular intervals along the basilica wall, yellow caution tape stretched between them. Mustang also directed eight-foot sections of temporary metal fencing to assemble in front of the cones to prohibit access.

The scant number of tourists would be safe... for the moment.

The TARDIS materialized outside a ladies’ restroom, where Mustang had ducked to run cool water over the third degree burns on her right arm. She couldn’t help but laugh when she emerged from the building; without the lighted “Police Call Box” lettering, the craft could have passed for a portable toilet.

“I’m glad you’re amused,” the Doctor scoffed when she entered without his assistance.

She’d been able to bypass his security measures since their initial meeting in Scotland.

The TARDIS soon in orbit, he set the auto-pilot before glimpsing her mutilated limb. His grin faded. “You...”

“Not that I like to show off.” She rested her appendage on the central console and let him marvel as skin cells produced a fresh layer - except for the scars caused from traveling by lightning.

He inspected the supple epidermis, awed. “You... still refuse to heal these?”

“We’re supposed to learn from our mistakes, eh? Those were my first, unless you count throwing Ben Espinoza into Loch Ness.”

The Doctor’s brown eyes widened, the sclera visible on all sides. “I’d love to hear *that* story, after we get this... settled.”

“What did you find?” Mustang wondered, adjusting her parka sleeve.

Clasping her left hand, he led her to the opposite side of the console, where a brittle parchment had been smoothed and anchored at the corners with odds and ends. He pointed to a spot in the upper right quadrant.

“What’s that?”

He replied, “It’s Na’aan.”

“A star? A planet?”

“A planet inhabited by a non-humanoid species.” The Doctor related how the race resembled flatbread, with a decent level of intelligence and insatiable greed. Their discovery and mapping of the galaxies only intensified their avarice; they became the original interstellar real estate brokers.

Mustang’s nose twitched. “That... thing I conversed with is one of them?”

“It’s... a variant. You’ve eaten flatbread, haven’t you?”

“Once or twice, sure.”

“There’s no yeast in flatbread, so the dough doesn’t rise. In like fashion, the Na’aanians remain the same thickness from the day they’re born until they die.”

“But?”

“These... versions have been genetically modified to ferment, infused with a type of yeast. For more than ten thousand years, the Na’aanians have strategically placed these mutants as younglings on planets they eventually offer to the highest bidder. The beings grow - albeit slowly - transmitting life cycles and major developments to potential buyers.”

“What if the current residents don’t want their planet sold?”

Removing two items to his right, the map rolled into a cylindrical shape. “In rare instances, the Na’aanians will take a planet off the market, if they judge the inhabitants deserve to remain.”

“They’ve decided humans aren’t worthy and will summarily remove them?” snorted Mustang.

“Indeed.”

She plopped on the bench. “Fine. We’ll have to make it perfectly clear that humanity intends to stay put.”

“Once the explosion occurs, there won’t be much of a reason for any survivors to stay.”

“There’s not going to be any explosion. This bastard’s going back where it came from.”

He settled beside her, scooping up her hands. “Mustang, don’t be impulsive.”

“What alternative is there?”

“We’ve bought ourselves some time with the stasis. I can compute the amount of mass that will need to be replaced...” He leapt up and rushed to the console. “First, I’ll have to determine its exact size.”

His companion joined him near the screen. “How will you accomplish that?”

“Scanning its heat signature...”

“Like satellites do with wildfires?”

“Clever girl! Very similar.”

Dials and toggle switches configured, the image might have been magnified more than 300 percent. Adjustments allowed the pair to view what resembled a huge, misshapen pizza crust beneath the surface, extending from Iceland south to the Democratic Republic of Congo, east to Mongolia and west past the Azores.

“How deep?” gulped Mustang.

“Best guess, given the limitations of the sensors: thirty thousand feet.”

“Oh, hell... Oh, *bloody* hell!”

III

The Doctor slumped on the bench, elbows on his knees, head resting on his palms.

“How did it get so huge, and scientists didn’t notice?” spat Mustang.

“With a growth rate that gradual over the centuries, the earthquakes and volcanos it caused would not have garnered their attention as being aberrations...”

Hazel orbs flashed. “You’re a Time Lord; reverse time, so it shrinks at the same rate! Then, we can pull it out and squish it like a bug.”

“If only...”

“Why not?”

“To reverse time on the planet, we’d warp history. All knowledge acquired in the interim would be lost. This generation and previous ones would...” He

gestured vaguely, but she caught his inference that such a scheme would have devastating results.

“Okay, bear with me for a minute. I don’t know anything about physics, but many of the... escapades I’ve had defy science, anyway.”

Intrigued, the Doctor straightened. “Go on.”

Mustang suggested a two-pronged tactic, wherein Earth’s current cycle would be maintained at her behest, and the Doctor could create a protective “pocket” around the Na’aanian where time could be reversed at an accelerated rate, the creature shrinking to the size brought illicitly from Rome in the early 13th century.

“It won’t work,” he commented.

“It *will*, Doc,” she pledged. “No matter how preposterous the theory seems to you, once I issue the command, nature will fulfill it. Just write the instructions in concise language.”

“To quash any... impetuous deviations?”

“You wouldn’t want England to fall into the sea, would you?”

He mulled this premise. “One of my favorite countries.”

Describing on paper a process not previously attempted took longer than the Doctor anticipated, with multiple revisions, deletions and insertions. When Mustang read the upright script, she rejoiced at not having to memorize the sheet of technical terminology and chronological jargon.

“Where will you park the TARDIS, so you’re sure the time pocket will hold throughout?” Mustang asked.

“Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Italy. Do you foresee a problem?”

“No...”

“Speak now, if you do. Once we commence the procedure, it’ll be too late to compensate for any inaccurate calculations.”

“The sole variable is the Na’aanian itself. If it detects our meddling...”

“If the stasis field holds, it shouldn’t.”

Mustang gazed at the console screen, not registering more than nebulous pixels. “When this is over...”

“We’ll have a proper chat and you can catch me up on your adventures.”

His tone emitted a false levity that soured her stomach. She’d stress over this inconsistency later.

“Let’s do it,” she declared.

Chronometers on adjacent panels were synchronized and activated, allowing the pair to monitor the process. The left would show unaltered seconds,

minutes and hours on the Earth's surface; the right would - ideally - run backward as the reversal within the time pocket compelled the Na'anian to shrink.

The TARDIS wheezed and groaned, its engines supplying sufficient energy to envelop the subterranean creature. At optimum output, Mustang uttered her instructions to nature.

Respective second hands moved clockwise and counter-clockwise.

The pair gave each other a high five.

Within 20 minutes, the reverse clock hands were racing around the dial so fast, they amounted to a blur.

"How much time has passed?" the woman prodded.

"Fifteen years."

"This will take forever!"

"It's still accelerating. At full speed, it'll be four years per minute."

Nearly two decades since she'd used any practical math skills, it took Mustang a few seconds to compute the answer. "So, about three hours?"

"And a half."

"Do you have a chess set?"

"Of course." Digging through a crate of miscellany beneath the nearest panel, he glanced up at her. "I *am* owed a rematch, after your wily blend of the traditional with Truth or Dare."

Mustang relieved him of the board. "Yeah... that wound up taking us in a direction I never would've anticipated."

The pieces in this magnificent set ran translucent cobalt blue and ruby red. Their shapes were unusual, to say the least.

"Where..." Mustang queried.

"A little shop en route to Alpha Centauri."

"Beautiful."

Between moves, they kept an eye on the screen as the Na'anian's heat signature contracted, and the chronometers confirmed the time divergence. The Doctor was poised to take Mustang's knight when an arc of electricity shot from the console.

"Not good," rumbled the Doctor.

"What is it?"

"The circuits are overloaded. The TARDIS hasn't had to... exert itself this much in aeons."

"So, the time pocket..."

"Is collapsing."

"Oh, hell..."

The second hand on the designated instrument slowed to a crawl. The Doctor fiddled with toggles and jury-rigged transistors, desperation pinching his features. Inhaling steadily, Mustang seized the crackling wires in her left hand, and extended her right toward him.

“What!” he muttered. “What!”

“Trust me.”

“I’m supposed to say that.”

“Just do it!”

They entwined their fingers and, to complete the loop, the Doctor jammed his free hand into the heart of the console.

Current coursed through them, and the watch resumed its motion. Not being human, the impact on the Time Lord’s system did not harm him; he registered how Mustang’s aura emanated a glow of ever-brighter, blinding proportions as the minutes elapsed.

“What!”

Incited to force a disconnection, he knew interrupting the cycle would rouse the Na’anian from stasis and trigger Earth’s prompt destruction.

“Mustang, are you all right?” he shouted over an unfamiliar din.

“Talk to me, Doc,” her contralto scarcely audible. “Tell me about life on Gallifrey.”

Mentally scrolling through his personal annals, he rambled about the rare occasions he’d returned to his home planet. The woman seemed to concentrate on organic matter dotting the walls behind his head, though she did bark a kind of laugh when he mentioned falling in a mud puddle and losing his shoe.

After 83 minutes, Mustang’s shoulders stooped, her adrenaline reserves tapped. She fought for air, diaphragm in spasm.

“What!” the Doctor spat, perplexed. “What?”

“On three,” she panted.

“What, on three?”

“Stand clear.”

Dread gripped both his hearts. The screen showed the Na’anian’s size had decreased exponentially, confined within the boundaries of the Italian peninsula. If only they had ten more minutes...

“One, two...”

On three, the Doctor retreated from the console, hands raised like a physician preparing to use a defibrillator on a patient.

That’s - pretty much - what occurred.

Mustang plunged her arms, up to the elbows, into the heart of a spider's web of wiring, screaming expletives into the ether. The Doctor recognized this wasn't merely the natural elements channeled through the components, but an extraordinary woman draining her own life essence for the sake of the masses.

The last five minutes, the Time Lord firmly believed he'd be left with a toasted corpse at his feet. Her auburn mane created a halo encircling her skull, the fabric of her t-shirt and jeans singed, her sneakers ruptured, the soles a shapeless blob of melted rubber.

When the heat signature disappeared from the screen and the chronometers ticked to a halt, he jerked Mustang away from smoking transistors and cables, laying her on the well-worn bench. Squatting beside her, he checked for a pulse: nothing.

Wrenching with sobs, he collapsed on the grid flooring.

Humanity had been saved, but at a horrific cost.

How many hours slipped by, he had no idea. He must've dozed from exhaustion and, in that indistinct realm between consciousness and sleep, he lost track of his whereabouts. A gentle ruffling of his hair woke him.

"You've got to move quickly," croaked Mustang.

Astonished, he pondered. "What do you need?"

"The Na'aanian - that bastard - put up quite a fight. You need to crush the kernel before it... reactivates."

"But, I don't know where..."

Her fingers wiggled toward him. "Trust me."

He did, clutching her hand and, a moment later, regretted the decision. A lightning bolt tore through the TARDIS, disabling all mechanisms, and transporting the pair to the rose garden behind Santa Maria degli Angeli.

"What!" Beneath a full moon, the Doctor retched on a leafless bush with no thorns - remnants of a miraculous encounter with St. Francis 800 years prior. He examined his palms: scorched, mutilated flesh.

Mustang straightened her posture, but not without a great deal of anguish. "It... takes a few trips to get accustomed to the effect."

"What about these?" He displayed his wounds.

"First things first, Doc. I promise they'll be back to normal when we're done here."

She pointed to the temporary fencing and orange cones; her companion knocked the barriers aside and surveyed the sinkhole, soon sighting a pulsating object the size of a peach pit. He held it above his head. "This?"

"Bravo!"

He consigned it to her as she sat on a snowy tree stump beneath a statue of Assisi's famous son with the legendary wolf of Gubbio.

"All life is sacred," came an Italian accented baritone on the chill wind.

"If this *is* life," she retorted. "By its own admission, it planned to wipe us off the planet."

"You are confident in your decision?" the Little Poor Man pressed.

"I've killed before, and probably will again."

As her fist closed, the scored casing shattered with an ear-splitting crack that reverberated around the snow-dusted piazza. A yolky substance oozed onto ice-flecked grass, instantly reduced to ash. Mustang rubbed her palms on her jeans to eliminate flecks of what definitely appeared to be some kind of raw dough.

Meanwhile, the Doctor finished his inspection of the trench where the Na'anian had been secreted. "The proper mass has been restored," he announced. "All you need to do is..."

"Once you've removed that... clutter."

"Me?" he erupted.

"Unless you want to watch a magic show."

He gushed, "Actually, I'd love it."

"It's on you, then."

Despite her fatigue, nature responded to her request with ease. Fencing stacked itself neatly, construction cones waddled to their corner and jumped atop each other. Yellow tape rolled itself in a ball and bounced away. Beneath the Doctor's high-tops, soil merged into a smooth surface, the grotto-like row of shrines again intact.

"What!" he muttered, overwhelmed. "That's brilliant!"

Mustang didn't hear his compliment. She'd toppled to the ground in a faint.

That left the Doctor in an awkward predicament. With the TARDIS damaged by lightning, it could not be summoned via the Gallifreyan equivalent of remote control. Mont Blanc lay hundreds of kilometers north, eliminating the possibility of walking and, without money, they couldn't hop a train.

Realizing his own extremities had been subjected to minor burns during the ordeal, he nonetheless hoisted her off the frozen lawn and draped her across his lap on a nearby granite bench.

Her eyelids fluttered in due course, and hazel orbs focused on his worried mien. "Are you okay?" she sputtered.

His laugh dispelled their mutual apprehension. "You're asking *me*? You're the one who's barefoot and groggy."

Raised into a sitting position, she rested her head on his bony shoulder for a prolonged moment. "That... was worse than running a marathon," she drawled.

"Agreed."

"Let's go home."

He stroked her brunette curls. "I wish we could."

Mustang straightened. "Eh?"

"Your little... stunt trashed the TARDIS."

"Oh, hell... I never thought..."

A smirk. "From what I recall, that's the key flaw in your quest for self-control."

"Now you sound like certain others..."

Hastily, he lifted her to her feet. "For now, we need to find you some shoes, shelter for the night, then engineer a way back to the TARDIS in the morning."

"You're welcome to crash at my flat," she offered, guessing his height. "You might not be comfortable on the love seat."

The Doctor rotated his feet. "Probably not."

Santa Maria degli Angeli, the town that grew around the basilica of the same name, featured a number of hotels. They strolled past the magnificent church, illuminated by flood lamps, and bore left to the commercial enclave.

A very perplexed shopkeeper would wonder why his clearance rack was minus a pair of size 8 sneakers when he opened the next day, despite no signs of a burglary.

Not until they approached automatic glass doors of a two-story brick structure did they realize how awful they looked. Mustang tugged the Doctor from ready view, ruminating on his pin-striped suit.

"What?" Not an exclamation, but an actual question.

"The clerk will see two respectable people, not a couple of vagrants."

"What about money?"

She patted her hip pocket. "When you grabbed me off the street yesterday morning, I had my wallet on me."

Ready cash totaled only 18 Euros, an amount augmented by her powers - in the clerk's eyes, at any rate. Trudging along the ground level corridor to their assigned room, a key card unlocked the door and they each fell on a queen-sized bed, soon snoring.

IV

The sun poured through uncurtained windows by 9:00, the short January days allowing the pair to recoup missed sleep. The Doctor discovered Mustang gone when he jolted upright on the mattress, a thumping on the door stirring him to peer through the peep-hole to see her carrying a selection of breakfast fare and cups.

“I was frightened for a bit,” he admitted.

“I figured we both needed food. We haven’t eaten anything since the pastries I bought.”

Arranging cereal, bowls, juice and coffee on a dwarfish square table, they consumed the meal in silence. When Mustang muffled a chortle, the Doctor’s left eyebrow arched in confusion.

“You’re a right mess,” she stated.

“Thanks.”

“Go, take a shower, and leave your clothes with me. I’ll mend them...”

He scowled. “Without needle and thread?” Then, he reconsidered. “Oh, yeah.”

Others checking out paid no attention to them as they crossed the lobby. The train station a block away, the Doctor hinted at purchasing tickets north...

“Be a sport, Doc. It only hurts for a minute.”

Selecting a vacant parking lot, the lightning bolt swept them from the town and deposited them less than 20 meters from the TARDIS, in hip-deep snow. Invisible shovels cleared a path for them to the battered blue door, the inert beacon ominous; Mustang didn’t wait for him to pluck his key from his trousers. One touch and the panel swung inward.

“I’ve got to upgrade my security,” he grumbled, latching the door behind him. A twinge of agony upon using his hand reminded him of Mustang’s promise. “Hey, young lady...”

She, however, had been distracted by her parka, lying on the bench where she’d shed it before undertaking what might have been the most serious challenge of her life.

She’d periodically considered ridding Earth of its human inhabitants, allowing the environment to repair itself and flourish, but had always repressed the urge. Even during the Doctor’s visit to Scotland, years earlier, she’d bared her soul in this regard, yet volunteered to stand with him against any non-terrestrial race that threatened her species.

She wrapped herself in the coat, shivering with cold.

He joined her, drawing her onto the seat, embracing her for added warmth.
“That... outfit doesn’t protect you against the weather,” she muttered. “Or, don’t you need that kind of protection?”

“Not to the same extent.” Gently, he flipped her charred palms up, resting them on her thighs. He then placed his blackened appendages atop them. “Please?”

Observing how his own flesh healed, cells multiplying before his eyes, stunned him. The woman could have duplicated the feat, but her scars remained.

“Thanks,” he said.

Suddenly aloof, she rose and leaned on the center console. “Do you have any schematics for these gizmos?”

“Somewhere.”

“Dig them out. Let’s get this fixed.”

“Not even a top-flight electrical engineer could complete these repairs, and you’re nowhere close to...”

“If you insult me, I’ll leave you to do this by yourself, and you’ll be stuck here for years,” she quipped.

In a gesture of submission, he knelt on the metal grid flooring and sorted through piles of detritus beneath the console.

He’d been right, of course. Mustang knew nothing about electronics, except that plugging a cord into a wall outlet allowed the current to feed into whatever equipment required power.

A dusty, hard bound volume of intricate drawings - notes not even written in English - only complicated matters. Yes, her brain could have automatically translated the bizarre lettering; she saw no point.

“Has the TARDIS ever been fully functional while... in your possession?” she queried.

“You mean, since it was presented to me new?”

“New?”

He nodded, smiling broadly so his upper lip curled above straight, white teeth.

“Like a car built to custom specifications?”

“Exactly. Every Time Lord...”

“Ah!”

“But, given the range of our travels, they don’t come with fifty million kilometer warranties.”

“So, you perform periodic maintenance yourself?”

“As necessary.”

“Oh, hell...”

“What?”

“How do you feel about starting over?”

“What?”

“Pull the whole console and rebuild from the floor up.”

“That’s... not feasible.”

Their eyes met, and he read the sarcasm in her hazel orbs.

His chin drooped. “Anything’s better than being dead in the water.”

Unzipping the parka and tossing it on the bench, she moaned, “I’m going to need a month’s worth of sleep after this...”

Intent on her task, Mustang never uttered a sound, though the Doctor noticed her every muscle tense. Eyelids closed, she didn’t see how the hexagonal console split apart, each length of wire and assorted components arranging themselves near her feet identical to how a technician stripped an engine.

Within the cabinet where these mechanisms fit, the level of rust and corrosion confounded the Doctor. “What!”

A team of what might have been imperceptible maids soaked rags in pungent chemicals to scrub metal sheets, piping and conduit.

“Remember, Doc,” scolded Mustang without altering her stance, “chemical reactions will foul the efficiency of the engines more than any other factor. You’ve got to keep the damned thing clean.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A giant puzzle might have assembled in similar fashion, the Doctor mused, as parts levitated and tools tightened them into position. With only the outer plates unattached, the activity ceased; Mustang stumbled backward and landed on the bench.

“Take it for a spin,” she coughed.

“Are you... okay?”

“I will be. Good thing it’s not tourist season. I won’t be able to give any tours until March, at least.”

“I’m... sorry I dragged you into this,” apologized the Doctor.

“Not to brag, but I’m the only one you *could* drag into this without causing mass panic.”

“True.”

Flipping a series of switches and flicking toggles, the transparent cylinders inched into motion. The Time Lord beamed as indicator bulbs signaled standard operational performance.

“She hasn’t sounded so sweet in ages!” he thrilled.

Mustang's lethargic response, "I'm glad." From her seat, she saw Mont Blanc blur on the screen as they ascended into the atmosphere.

"Home?" he hinted.

"Please."

Though the journey would take only a few minutes, given the relatively short distance, the Doctor paused their trek south without his passenger's knowledge. He positioned himself beside her on the cushions. "Mustang, I need to explain something to you..."

"Go ahead, just don't make it too complicated. My temples are throbbing."

He sandwiched her right hand between both of his. "You... know I'm not human."

"Of course."

"In the event I'm... seriously injured, I don't die. I regenerate."

She raised her face to him. "Meaning?"

"Like you did with the TARDIS controls, every cell is rebuilt - though my body and face come out different."

"That's... wild."

The Doctor grinned at her tranquil grasp of this notion before sobering once more. "During that interval when my existence is in flux, I sometimes see things..."

"Visions?"

"That's as good a term as any. People who I'm able to assist, conflicts on planets in different solar systems or other dimensions..."

"You're worried for me, Doc. Why?"

"You... tend to live on the edge."

"And you *don't*?" she guffawed.

"I have... unique advantages."

"So do I."

The pressure he applied to her fingers made her squirm.

"Except, you're human. Someday, you'll die, and it won't be a... painless transition."

Ineffable sadness permeating her tone, she recounted, "I've lost track of the bullets I've deflected, the weapons I've melted, the blows I've sustained in fights..."

"If you come with me, that can... be avoided."

Mustang's free hand caressed his cheek. "I think I've always known I wouldn't live to a ripe old age, but I appreciate the offer."

"You wouldn't be hunted by government agencies..."

“Aren’t you?” she probed. “I remember those creatures called Judoon.”
He flushed. “Well... sometimes. But, you’d see things you never dreamed possible.”

“I already have, thanks, and it wasn’t an... uplifting experience.”

They chuckled together; the Doctor released her and circled the console, disengaging the TARDIS’ brakes.

Joining him, Mustang’s caressed his arm, mending a split seam on his sleeve she’d missed at the hotel, her contralto less than a whisper. “Doc, we never finished that experiment we started in Scotland.”

A pensive, “No, we didn’t.”

“I... don’t like to leave projects hanging.”

“Neither do I.”

“Is there time?”

The Doctor activated the auto-pilot - without any sparks - and led her toward the craft’s interior.

When the TARDIS landed near the Rocca Maggiore above Assisi, afternoon sun bathed the hillside city in light, albeit lacking any real warmth. The Doctor and Mustang emerged on the steep incline, a variable breeze the only sound to disturb the stillness of their souls.

She tugged her parka close. “If you want to pop down to the Gran Caffè with me, I can buy you a stash of pastries... for the road,” she suggested, gazing up at his solemn visage.

“No, thanks.”

“It’s great to know... my emotional upheaval no longer torments the universe.”

“Definitely.”

“I hate sentimental good-byes.”

He murmured, “I don’t want to go.”

“Funny thing,” she sighed. “The few people I’ve actually wanted to keep in my life since... if I don’t unintentionally kill them, they die by other means before we can bid each other farewell.”

His arms encompassed her, brown eyes moist. “How tragic.”

Her face against his chest, she wept.

Long digits lifted her chin. “Mustang, I don’t want to go. The very fact that I’ve let you call me ‘Doc’ since the day we met - something I’ve not tolerated from anyone else - must be proof of...”

“If I asked you to stay?”

He averted his eyes. “I’d refuse.”

“Isn’t life just too damned unfair?” she lamented.

“You have nothing to hold you here.”

Within his arms, she spun outward to admire the ancient city. The Doctor held her tight at the waist, afraid she’d break free.

“Nothing to hold me here, yet this is the place that called to me when I fled Boleskine. When I made that first, ludicrous mistake, and raised St. Francis from his tomb, his wisdom, his stories of living here, touched me in a way no one else had. I’ve been accepted by these people, even if they don’t know my name. I’ve made peace with myself - sort of - and that counts for a lot.” She turned. “Kiss me once more, Doctor, then go your way, with all my love.”

That kiss stirred the birds, farm stock and wildlife, so a symphony of animals’ voices swirled around them. Mustang forced herself to thrust him away in the end; he stepped through the TARDIS’ door and, seconds later, the blue police call box disappeared.

Traversing winding lanes to the Piazza San Rufino, she was glad the sun had melted slick ice on the stones. Her trek less stressful, she purchased apples and carrots from the grocer, along with a jug of milk to wash down sweets from the Gran Caffè.

The temperature in her flat evidence of leaky window panes, she revived the fire in the wood stove with the last log. Her hopes of getting some much-needed rest evaporated; the practical always took precedence.

Still, flopping on the battered love seat, she resisted performing her chores. Every fiber of her being tingled with the Doctor’s last touch; his plea, “I don’t want to go,” rent her heart.

She deliberated on his cryptic mention of her death, after they’d almost perished eradicating the Na’aaian. Though the skin appeared undamaged, her right forearm ached from contact with the alien, as well as thrusting her hands into the heart of the TARDIS and enduring an electrical charge that would’ve put an elephant on the ground.

Over the years, she’d established that she couldn’t be killed, unless taken entirely unaware. Being assaulted from behind was one example. If she saw death coming, in whatever form, she could avoid it.

Not so for those whose lives she’d terminated, consciously or on impulse. The Doctor had emphasized her humanity; she wondered if his assessment had been accurate.

Might she no longer be truly human?

“The anguish in your heart makes you very human,” remarked St. Francis, hovering above the love seat in his patched robe.

She whipped toward him. “Do you accept any responsibility for the past 24 hours?”

“I could excuse my brother for his ignorance, for his avarice in wanting to receive tribute from those in the church’s hierarchy who he believed owed us respect and attention... But, yes, the blame falls on me. I should have dug up the box he’d buried behind Santa Maria degli Angeli and destroyed it...”

“Even if you didn’t realize its potential?”

“We placed no value on material possessions; they were as so much dust to us.”

“Or, should have been.”

“Si, Signorina. In that, we failed.”

“You include yourself with your brothers?” she asked.

“Si. While not of major importance, or able to cause scandal, I, too, let myself become attached to specific friends and locations. Nobody, after all, is perfect.”

“You are as close as they come,” she praised, moving to the kitchenette to prepare a saucepan of hot cocoa.

“I sense your opinion of me has changed in the past day.”

Warming milk on the stove, she entertained a minuscule grin. “You mean, the Doctor? Yes, he’s perfect, but he’s not human. I’m going to have to remind myself of that a lot going forward.”

By the time she’d poured the steaming concoction into a ceramic mug, Francis had vanished.

Well before she drained the contents, the mixture was rendered unpalatable, diluted by her salty tears. She dumped the liquid in the sink, and headed for her bedroom.

She’d reversed the damage to the Doctor’s suit, neglecting her t-shirt and jeans. A glance in the bathroom mirror shocked her. No brush could untangle her auburn mane without an hour’s effort.

A shower aided with her physical recovery, thawing her bones. She crawled into a set of purple sweats and, emerging from the tiny chamber, yearning for sleep, she sank beside a yellow rose mysteriously positioned on the pillow.