

The Mustang Chronicles:

Italian Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Every so often, her hands tensed for no reason. A ripple of excruciating pain would immediately course through her arms, causing her entire body to shudder.

The rare occasions it happened in public, Mustang didn't know whether to be embarrassed, or proud. The still-healing scars on both her palms were, after all, proof of her power. Power she'd kept half-way secret the past six months, since her abrupt return to Montana from Scotland via a rogue lightning bolt.

The teenager, who'd earned the nickname Mustang because of her affinity with the wild horses she tamed on her parents' ranch, preferred keeping to herself. She'd made a habit of skipping school long before the strange adventure initiated by her maternal grandmother; the outright danger of attending classes - not just for her, but for others - had recently been proven by a brief return to the halls of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. She hadn't gained sufficient control over the power to prevent herself from potentially incinerating someone who might utter a sarcastic insult in fun.

She'd already done the same, inadvertently, to a few isolated trees on the property, having to then summon spontaneous rainstorms - tracked by the regional weather service, and commented upon by local television meteorologists - to douse the flames.

No intricate rhyming spells or flailing arms were required to manifest these phenomena, like in television sit-coms or films, nor were wands and butchered Latin phrases she'd read in the Harry Potter novels. Mustang learned as much on the rare occasions she employed the power. She need only vocalize the words, and it came to pass.

There were days when she was unsure if she should laugh or cry.

"If you don't complete your classes, you'll never graduate," Maggie Duryea, Mustang's mother, chided one evening over a dinner of steak, corn on the cob, salad, and baked potatoes.

"I can barely hold a pencil," retorted Mustang. "Not with my hands in this condition. I can't type on the computer some days, or carry my own books."

Her father, Joe, interspersed, "The last MRI showed you should have full use of your hands. Doc Winston told me the burns caused no nerve or muscle damage."

"In the greater scheme of things, school doesn't mean diddly," the girl stated. "Have you listened to the news lately? The world is a mess, and me

passing history or acing my geometry final won't affect if the human race survives or kills itself off one degree at a time."

The adults fell silent, glaring at each other. When Maggie did speak, Mustang was reminded of similar frequent arguments.

"She's got your stubborn streak, Joe," snapped the woman.

Her husband countered, "She's not right in the head, like your mother."

Feeling the floor tremor beneath her feet, Mustang threw the napkin on her untouched plate and left the room.

The bedroom door slammed; she wanted to punch a hole in the plaster wall. Taking a few deep breaths, she channeled her anger through the open window in the form of a brief microburst of wind.

"Damn you, Jack Parsons!" she groaned, flopping on the unmade twin bed. Had she not flown to Scotland to see her grandmother's old acquaintance - and lover, possibly making him her grandfather - with whom she participated in a series of outdoor rituals, he could not have transferred his command of the natural elements to her. Her life would be so different. "I should have swapped the plane ticket for a flight to Rome!"

Her lips could not retract the statement. Sensing what would happen next, Mustang knocked out the window screen and vaulted over the sill. She sprinted toward open ground; the last thing she wanted was for the house to be damaged, and her parents injured...

A hundred yards from the dwelling, a fire erupted from bare earth in her path. She stopped short, and waited.

Rain soaked her t-shirt and jeans; she'd had no time to slip into a pair of sneakers. The earthquake almost knocked her off her feet, and then...

Maggie Duryea, stacking dishes on the counter, saw the lightning flash through the kitchen window.

Brother Luigi shifted the lawn tractor out of gear, puzzled by the ominous rumbling. His forté botany, the middle-aged Franciscan could still tell when the three horse-power engine needed a tune-up.

No clogged carburetor, this noise. It originated overhead - a plane flying too low over the Vatican? he wondered.

The strike's close proximity nearly blinded the man. When the brilliance faded, he opened his eyes to see the undamaged statue of a pensive St. Peter casting his fishing net into a small pond.

A prone body lay on the flagstones at its base.

The gardener sprang off the tractor and dashed across the lawn, thinking it one of his confreres, struck while enjoying the spacious garden during the afternoon siesta.

He found instead the girl, red hair framing her youthful features like a halo.

A window on the main building's second story opened and a shaved cranium appeared. "Are you all right, Luigi?" the baritone queried in Italian. "Is Peter intact?"

"Si, Padre." Typical the older man should be worried about the stone image he'd personally restored, sculpting a replica of the vandalized head with his own hands. "But..."

A group of veiled sisters from the guest house rushed up the steps; friars disturbed at prayer emerged from the chapel door. They hovered over the barefoot body, muttering in their native tongues.

"Is she dead?" said one.

Another chimed in, "She's so young!"

"What's she doing here?"

"Was she visiting someone?"

Finally, lean Brother Giovanni squeezed through the gathering. He squatted beside the girl and felt for a pulse on her neck. "She's alive," he announced. "Help me carry her to the infirmary."

Mustang opened hazel eyes to see a crucifix prominently displayed on the white-washed wall above the bed. She recalled a Catholic hospital in Helena, Montana, where one of the ranch hands had recovered from a broken leg years before; could her parents have brought her for treatment after...

From the doorway, a smiling face peered at her. She tried to sit up, surrendering instantly to the resurgent pain originating in her hands. Scar tissue on her palms had been torn open by fresh third-degree burns. "I need to either control this power, or keep my mouth shut," she muttered.

One face multiplied to a dozen on the threshold, conversing among themselves. A tow-headed, trim figure in white shirt and trousers shooed them away, entered the room and closed the door.

He babbled something at Mustang which she didn't comprehend. When he reached toward her neck, she thought he intended to strangle her. She rolled off the bed into an attack posture.

The man held up his hands in a placating gesture; she still couldn't catch the meaning of his words. He might be a doctor, she guessed, but he wasn't

wearing a stethoscope, or carrying a hospital chart. He might be a lunatic escaped from the psychiatric ward - she had direct experience of how easy that could be.

Another stream of unintelligible banter flew at her. "Sorry, friend, I wish I could understand you," she responded.

"I just want to assure you I won't hurt you," came to Mustang's ears in precise, unaccented English.

The teen immediately knew the syllables were being translated inside her own head because, like a badly-dubbed movie, the movement of his mouth didn't match what he was saying.

"Who are you?" she inquired.

It was his turn to be at a loss. She couldn't help laughing at the expression on his cherubic face.

"You don't understand me, do you? I wish you could." She paused before resuming. "Who are you?"

A lightbulb went on in the man's head. "I'm Brother Giovanni, in charge of the infirmary."

"Infirmary?" Mustang repeated. "Not a hospital?"

"No, but San Carlo Hospital is just across the Via Aurelia, if your injuries are too severe for the basic treatment we can provide."

"Injuries?"

"You were struck by lightning. Don't you remember?"

"I remember all too well, and my injuries are minor. You said the Via Aurelia? I didn't know there was a street with that name in Helena."

Giovanni's mien darkened. "Helena? Signorina, you are in Rome."

"Oh, hell..." Mustang collapsed on the bed.

A signal to those eavesdropping from the corridor brought two wiry, robe-clad friars to the bedside. "Luigi, Niccolo, make her comfortable." Giovanni directed the men to elevate her legs to prevent shock, and bring additional blankets, while he fetched bandages and ointment for the burns.

Luigi, feeling responsible for the girl's condition, studied her face. "An angel come down from heaven, I believe."

"Nonsense," spat his sullen companion. "With that red hair, more likely a devil."

Mustang tittered at this exchange. Since childhood, she'd considered the foolishness wrought by religion humorous.

"Why are you wearing those get-ups?" she asked.

“We are Franciscans,” grinned the wispy-haired Luigi. “Vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, following the example of Christ and our beloved St. Francis of Assisi.”

“I’ve heard of Assisi. Saw a documentary about it on television. Built into a hillside, to protect it from attack...”

“In the old days, yes. The city currently welcomes thousands of pilgrims each year.”

“Pilgrims?”

“To the basilica and the holy sites where Francis lived.”

There had to be better reasons to visit a city than ogling fancy churches, Mustang thought.

“He had the stigmata, too, like you.”

At this observation, the other friar hastily blessed himself and kissed his thumb.

“They’re just burns,” affirmed Mustang. “The result of a... rather unpleasant situation.”

Giovanni returned, and the discussion ended. Luigi hesitated before departing, stooping to kiss the girl on the forehead. “Pax et bonum,” he murmured.

“Father Thomas is coming to see you,” Giovanni announced, setting a tray on the night stand.

“Who’s Father Thomas?”

“The general superior of our order.” He stared at her. “You really don’t know where you are, do you?”

“I’m in Rome.”

“You have no recollection of traveling to the city?”

“That part would take a millennium to explain. What I’m hazy about is why I’m in this particular place.”

“The gardens aren’t open to the public. The front gate is only unlocked for the sisters’ visitors, or our own. The only way to sneak inside is to climb the walls, and that’s no easy feat.”

“Can we change the subject?” pleaded Mustang. “One of those men mentioned something called the stigmata...”

Giovanni paused in his ministrations; the roll of gauze bounced on the floor. “Who, Luigi?”

“If that’s his name.”

“He’s a very devout member of the community - a little too devout, sometimes. Always searching for signs of heavenly intervention.”

“He thinks I’m an angel.”

“He thinks everyone is an angel. Refuses to accept people can treat each other horribly. Father Thomas assigned him to tend our garden, to prevent him from spreading his... beliefs to impressionable young souls.”

“If more people believed in the goodness of humanity, it might prove contagious,” Mustang remarked.

The infirmarian broke the seal on another package of gauze and loosely wrapped the burned hands to protect them from infection. He dabbed a soothing liquid on the badly scraped soles of her feet, leaving them open to the air. “Get some sleep. I’ll wake you when Father Thomas arrives.”

The austere, balding cleric breezed into the room an hour later. Mustang’s first impression was that he ate too little and spent too much time kneeling.

“Brother Giovanni tells me you have no identification, no passport,” he began. “We have no contact information to notify your family...”

She’d already decided this mode of travel left a lot to be desired - probably the reason Parsons never chose to leave Scotland. Keeping ID in her pocket in the event of an unexpected journey was not a high priority. Her wallet lay thousands of miles away on her night stand, and her passport had never been removed from the backpack she’d taken to the British Isles.

“No need to contact anyone,” she said. “There’s nothing they could do, anyway.”

“Then, might we know your name?”

She chuckled. “Sorry. My friends call me Mustang.”

“The popularity of unique names has gotten quite out of hand,” commented Giovanni from the foot of the bed.

“It’s not my real name, but it’s the one I’m used to. Officially, I’m Elizabeth Duryea.”

Thomas nodded. “You must consider yourself our guest, Signorina Duryea, until you are well enough to continue your travels. You are welcome to eat with us in the dining room, or one of the brothers will be happy to bring your meals on a tray. The chapel is available 24 hours...”

“Thank you,” she interrupted. “I should be all right after a night’s rest.”

The priest gestured a blessing over her head and made a quiet exit. Mustang glanced at Giovanni, who shook his head doubtfully.

“What?” she prodded.

“You’re an optimist, to think you will be fully recovered by tomorrow.”

“My hands will never completely heal,” she admitted. “But there’s nothing else seriously wrong...”

“Nothing sturdy shoes won’t cure.” He sat on the edge of the mattress. “You must’ve left your hotel in a hurry, to go shoeless through the streets.”

She realized he was concocting a reasonable story to fit his limited comprehension of how nature worked. Parsons had once warned her trying to tell outsiders her secret would only cause trouble. He’d been right.

“If I had any money, I’d buy myself a pair,” she smirked.

“I’m certain Father Thomas will see you’re not destitute when you leave. Until then, there’s half a chocolate cake in the refrigerator downstairs. A fat slice might go well with a tall glass of milk.”

“Chocolate cake? I thought... people like you didn’t eat rich foods and desserts.”

“We give up sweets during Lent, but Easter was last Sunday, so we’re celebrating. I can sneak you a plate after evening prayers...”

Mustang didn’t have to answer. Giovanni recognized the expectation in her eyes.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” he promised, closing the door behind him.

He must not have hung a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door. One by one, curious residents of the sprawling complex paid their respects during the next hour. Some wanted to extend a personal welcome, others did everything short of asking about the “miracle” of her bandaged hands and wounded feet. Luigi had wasted no time spreading the news of this “angel”, she surmised.

“You must come with us to Assisi!” enthused petite, freckled Sister Ursula, of the small community who had moved into the two-story brick guest house, to care for the Franciscans. Attired in black from head to toe - veils, dresses, hose and shoes - they washed and ironed the friars’ laundry, cooked the meals and scrubbed the floors of the main house, while not at prayer in their own cloistered chapel.

Mustang bit back a caustic remark about this lifestyle. She countered, “What will you do in Assisi?”

“Six of us will be privileged to make our annual retreat there. We’ll be staying with the Poor Clares, and Father Benito Hernandez will preach.”

Beyond the religious implications, a retreat sounded appealing to the girl. To roam alone through the Italian countryside - not an opportunity to be missed.

“When do you leave?”

“Monday afternoon.”

“And today is...”

Ursula eyed Mustang skeptically. “Friday.”

“Don’t mind me,” came the rapid retort. “You know how it is, traveling across the Atlantic. You sort of lose track of the time...”

Appeased, Ursula smiled. “I’ll make the arrangements. All you have to do is rest.”

A child with a new doll wouldn’t have skipped from the room more merrily. Mustang relaxed on the pillow, no longer concerned about her injuries or getting back home.

II

The slab of chocolate cake - made with real chocolate, not the artificially flavored mixes common in the States - was a treat Mustang would’ve flown to Italy in the traditional manner to savor. It delighted her palate and filled her stomach, but wasn’t quite enough to satisfy her. The body, after all, needs nutritious sustenance: meat and potatoes.

Treading on tender feet, she crept along the cool, marble-floored corridor bathed in darkness. She had no idea of the time, guessing it must be late, because few lights burned beneath the doors. The elevator would take her up or down, she reasoned, but make too much noise. A wide staircase proved a better choice.

Down two flights, she located the dining room, brightly decorated and accented with vases full of roses. The small kitchen lay beyond a swinging door, where the refrigerator was well stocked with drinks and leftovers.

The language barrier plagued the girl once again. Orange juice containers were identifiable by the pictures on the labels; where were the gallon jugs of milk? Surely, these men didn’t neglect their calcium intake!

Tucked in the shelves inside the door, small boxes marked “Latte” drew her attention. Not being a coffee drinker, she couldn’t be positive - perhaps latte had something to do with milk. She pulled one out to examine more closely.

And dropped it when she heard a door creak open. Milk, indeed, the liquid splattered on the tiles, congealing with droplets of blood in the shape of her footprints.

“Oh, hell...” she lamented.

Desperate fingers snatched a package of shaved meat before she bumped the refrigerator door closed with her hip and scurried from the chamber.

Giovanni found the empty wrapper and trail of footprints Saturday morning. “Did you find what you were looking for last night?” he queried, checking her feet for additional damage.

“I found the food.”

“You should have told me you were still hungry after the cake. I could’ve saved you the pain, and Brother Andrew the trouble of mopping the halls.”

“Sorry.”

“There’s a wheelchair, if you want to get around while you’re healing. In fact, I thought you might want to get a bit of fresh air before lunch.”

“Out in the garden?” Mustang ventured.

“Exposing your feet to the grass might not be a good idea. I was thinking the roof.”

“The roof?”

“It’s the fifth floor of the building, open to the air, but covered. You’ll have a magnificent view of the city.”

“Cool.”

The friar guffawed. “Sister Ursula volunteered to give you a sponge bath, and Brother Paulinus donated a t-shirt and jogging pants which should fit you. Or, I could send to your hotel for your luggage...”

“What you see is what I brought with me, this trip.” She sighed. “I really hate to inconvenience everyone.”

“No inconvenience. The Benedictines might make a big deal of providing hospitality to visitors, but they’ve got nothing on us.”

“Thanks.”

Soap and water and clean, albeit baggy, clothes made Mustang feel 100% better. Giovanni steered a wheelchair into the infirmary, and she was surprised how easily he lifted her from the bed onto the seat. His leanness belied the muscles beneath his white shirt.

“You guys have a weight room?” she asked.

He replied, “Hard work builds a strong body more readily than barbells.” He guided the chair toward a second elevator she hadn’t noticed the previous night and, once inside, pressed the button marked “5”.

“How many people live here?”

“Between the generalate administrators, the graduate students attending university in the city and their advisors, about ninety.”

“All men?”

“Yes.”

“And no knock-down, drag-out fights?”

Giovanni bubbled with mirth. “No fights. We do our best to live in harmony, though there are days...”

The lift doors slid aside to reveal a flock of pigeons pecking at crumbs on the concrete surface of the sheltered roof. Mustang’s gaze followed Giovanni’s

outstretched arm, and she gasped. Above the red-tiled rooftops of smaller buildings, St. Peter's Basilica - shown so many times on television - rose less than a half-mile to the east.

"Too bad the sun isn't out," he apologized, as if he could disperse the thickening clouds. "The mountains to the east are still covered with snow. Besides, the light illuminating the dome is most inspiring."

Mustang realized there was much to see in this city, besides churches. She pointed to the southeast, at two tiny figures perched atop a row of pillars. "What's that?"

"That's the monument to Emperor Victor Emmanuel the Second."

"Why would they put squirrels on a monument to an emperor?"

Again, Giovanni could not suppress his amusement. "Those aren't squirrels. Up close, they're angels, wings unfurled, driving chariots with four horses."

"You're kidding."

"Afraid not."

A flash of lightning on the western horizon caused Mustang to involuntarily cower in the wheelchair. The subsequent rumble of thunder redoubled her fear.

Empathizing with her fright, Giovanni noted, "Come, I'll take you downstairs before it rains."

"No!" she protested, relaxing a bit. "I like when it really rains."

"When it *really* rains?" he repeated.

"Never mind. Please, can we stay? Nothing is more beautiful than a city in the rain."

He acquiesced, freeing a woven lawn chair from a stack near the elevator and sitting beside her.

"Tell me something," she said.

"If I can."

"What's this stigmata your friend Luigi mentioned yesterday?"

Giovanni hesitated, pondering. "The stigmata is the five wounds of Christ, imprinted on the body of a human being."

"You mean, the nails in the hands and feet..."

"And the spear thrust in the side."

The teen contemplated her hands and bare feet, her eyes growing wide. "And Luigi thinks..."

"Unfortunately, yes. Very few people have genuinely experienced the stigmata. St. Francis was one. Padre Pio, a Franciscan priest who died about forty years ago, was another. There are some, psychologically unstable, who mimic the

phenomenon as a result of mental hysteria. The Church thoroughly investigates each alleged case, and rarely reaches a positive conclusion.”

“You know that’s not what these are.”

“Of course. Try telling Luigi, though. He’ll be talking about his encounter with an ‘angel’ for years.”

“Good thing I’m going to Assisi on Monday. Maybe he’ll forget about me.”

“You’re going to Assisi?”

“Ursula invited me to join the sisters on their retreat.”

The rains fell in earnest then, accompanied by the occasional, non-threatening lightning and thunder. Mustang had never felt such peace, watching historic Rome washed clean by nature itself.

“Will you be coming back to Rome after the trip?”

“Probably not,” Mustang responded.

“You must let me show you the city before you leave, then.”

“What, pushing me around in this contraption? There’s no way...”

“Your feet should be able to tolerate sandals and a bit of walking by tomorrow afternoon.”

She didn’t tell him evidence of the cuts could be eradicated at the mere utterance of a word. She was determined to control her power, giving the semblance of normalcy in the presence of others.

One rectangular table in the dining room buzzed with excitement that evening - the table where Mustang shared the friars’ simple repast. Luigi managed to sit to her immediate right, protecting his treasure from the doubtful. Thomas occupied a chair across the board, with his fellow administrators jockeying for seven other places.

They marveled at her linguistic skills during a wide-ranging discussion of philosophy and theology. Whether they spoke Italian, French or Vietnamese - as happens in international religious communities - she responded in their respective tongue.

Mustang didn’t want to consider their reaction if they discovered the truth.

After a sumptuous dessert of strawberry tarts with home-made ice cream, Giovanni wheeled her back to the infirmary. She fell asleep listening to shrill sirens and traffic beyond the walls which shielded the buildings from the Via Aurelia, only to be jolted awake in the wee hours by a chorus of murmurs.

Raising herself on one elbow, she was astonished to see a row of votive candles flicker, casting shadowy light on six faces, deep in prayer. Inches from her pillow, Luigi fingered a circlet of round wooden beads.

No argument would shake the gardener's beliefs; Mustang didn't try. She listened as they finished their repetition of the formulae, quietly extinguished their candles and departed. Luigi hovered over her longer than his brothers.

"You know they think you're crazy," she whispered.

He smirked. "When I prove them wrong, they will show me proper respect."

"How do you plan to prove them wrong?"

"You will answer our prayers with a miracle. Pax et bonum, and buona notte."

The door closed and she bit her lip. A miracle, he wanted!

Giovanni let Mustang sleep late Sunday morning, unaware she'd dozed fitfully after the nocturnal prayer vigil. He laid out a pair of sandals, a fresh blue t-shirt and navy sweats - someone had gone shopping, because they fit this time - and went about his other duties.

Standing on her feet redoubled the agony throbbing through her body caused by her burned hands. She'd hoped to refrain from using the power, but she wanted to see Rome. There might never be another chance. "When I walk, I wish to feel only twenty percent as much pain."

A jaunty stride carried her down the marble staircase, past a niche holding a stone statue of a robed man with a bird perched on his shoulder, and a small parlor near the monastery's back door. Outside, Giovanni was pouring gasoline in the tank of a green Vespa.

"We're riding *that*?" Mustang chortled.

"If you don't mind riding pillion."

"Pillion?"

"Behind me on the seat."

The teen recalled a fleet of Harley Davidsons passing through Helena one summer, women clinging for dear life to the midsections of their men. "Back home, we call it 'riding bitch'. No offense."

"Riding bitch," he mimicked. "Unusual term."

"Anyway, I don't mind."

She straddled the leather seat, grabbed his shirt and off they sped past the clay-colored stucco main building. One of the sisters, returning from a shopping trip, held open the gate for them. They were joined on the road by compact cars - Mustang soon realized large vehicles could not navigate the narrow Roman streets - and numerous other *motorini*.

Dodging traffic at high speed, she hoped the contraption had good brakes. "Don't you have any rules to driving here?"

“Only one,” Giovanni yelled. “If you see empty space, occupy it.”

Fortunately, they completed their journey unharmed. Along the Corso Victor Emmanuel II, they stopped in front of the monument, where Mustang confirmed the “squirrels” weren’t animals atop the broad steps and colonnade. Giovanni showed her the circular fortress Castel Sant’ Angelo, the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps and the Piazza del Popolo. Hieroglyph-engraved obelisks, throughout the city - bearing the names of popes with crosses affixed to the apex - struck her as incongruous.

Parking the Vespa, they strolled through arched ruins of the Forum - some currently being excavated - to the Coliseum, where actors costumed as ancient emperors and centurions posed for photos with tourists. Even more exciting to Mustang, anyway, the sunken ruins where hundreds of stray cats basked in the sun, fed by a group of women who raised money for the food by selling cat-related souvenirs.

Former government buildings designed by Michelangelo were nestled beneath a centuries-old church; the duo passed more consecrated structures than found in thriving American metropolises. Even the Pantheon, a domed pagan temple, had been converted into a Catholic church.

A meal of pasta and wine at a cheery sidewalk café preceded their trek to the Vatican Museum. The main doors locked, they used an employee entrance, where a plump man in white robe and black - “It’s called a scapular,” Giovanni explained - waved them inside.

“What, we’re getting a private tour?”

“Not exactly,” the friar replied. “The museum is closed on Sunday, but Father Leon agreed to give us a couple hours to look around.”

Egyptian mummies, priceless works of art, and a history crafted by the dominant influence in the Renaissance lay before the girl. She felt sort of sick at the excess, yet in awe of the beauty.

Especially the Sistine Chapel. Frescos sixty feet in the air, the details were hard to see - which is why such a fortune is made every year on books with close-up views. Nonetheless, Mustang admired the talent which had wrought the masterpiece, and the silence.

Their final stop after walking beside the muddy brown Tiber River was a bustling open-air market in the Campo dei Fiori. Vendors selling vegetables were set up under awnings beside others selling ball caps and, remarkably, the most gorgeous long-stemmed roses Mustang had ever seen.

“How much?” she inquired of the youth protecting the cash box.

“Two Euros.”

Cheaper than in the States, but she still didn't have any money. She nodded her thanks, and turned away. Giovanni slipped a five-Euro note in her hand, and winked. Grinning ear to ear, Mustang selected two delicate cream-colored blooms, not thinking how they would survive the ride back to the monastery.

They did, as did she. Giovanni scrounged a vase from the kitchen, and carried it to the guest house, where Mustang would spend her last night in Rome.

"The sisters are leaving early for the train to Assisi," he said. "It makes more sense for you to be near at hand, so they can rouse you in time."

"Good idea."

"Father Thomas had his assistant deliver a care package to your room, as well."

The door unlocked, Mustang crossed the threshold into the tiny cubicle. A brown backpack, bearing an embroidered Tau symbol - the same insignia worn as a pendant by a few of the friars - rested on the chair beside the plain desk. She would rifle its contents after taking advantage of the private bathroom and shower stall. Sponge baths were fine for a day or two; she wanted a good soaking.

Giovanni delayed her, performing one more examination of her injuries. "If you promise to be careful, we can leave the bandages off your hands, and your feet seem no worse for today's exertion."

"Thanks," she breathed, emotion suddenly overwhelming her. "Thanks for everything."

"It's been a pleasure. You are... one of a kind, to be sure, even if you aren't an angel."

They laughed together, then he was gone.

III

Swaddled in a voluminous towel a half-hour later, the room scented by the roses, Mustang sat at the desk and emptied the backpack on the blotter. A Rome t-shirt, an Italian flag t-shirt, and one bearing the Vatican crest had been neatly folded with two pairs of jeans. White tube socks and underwear were still in their packages. She drew one hundred Euros from a small white envelope tucked in the side pocket. Thomas had penned a note in Italian; roughly translated, she guessed he was wishing her a good journey.

A good journey it was, and exciting. One thing about traveling with those who don't get out much: everything fills them with wonder, like children seeing their first Christmas tree. The group drove to the Rome terminal in the Piazza di

Cinquecento before the sun rose, crammed in a Toyota station wagon like sardines. An initial prayer was followed by non-stop chatter about what sites they could visit in Assisi before their retreat began in earnest that evening.

The train sped across the countryside; the sisters' faces were glued to the windows, watching farms and towns appear and disappear. Less than an hour's layover in Foligno, and they were on their way again.

At the station of Santa Maria degli Angeli - Saint Mary of the Angels - the women disembarked, buying bus tickets from a news stand for the three mile ascent into Assisi proper. The road snaked up the mountain, and Mustang was surprised to see people making the climb on foot. The group stopped at the Poor Clare monastery first, depositing their suitcases in the visitor's parlor, rather than carry them all day. Hands freed, they roamed narrow by-ways peppered with stone stairways, Mustang bringing up the rear.

Ursula hooked her arm through the teen's on the Via San Francesco, as they descended toward the Basilica of St. Francis. She gushed how construction on the church began even before the little man from Assisi had been officially declared a saint by the Catholic pope. By the time the last pink marble slab was mortared in place, it was the fourth largest shrine in Europe.

Primitive, faded frescoes lined the interior walls of the upper basilica, ground-breaking in their depiction of scenes from Francis' life, unlike other sacred, icon-like paintings of the thirteenth century. Down a flight of stairs, the lower level lay, dark and hushed. Below that, the tomb of St. Francis himself lay under tons of rock. Prayerful exclamations accompanied every step of the tour. If Ursula had known Mustang could bring the entire structure down around their feet, she might not have been so exuberant.

"To each her own," the girl conceded, dispelling the destructive inclination.

Except when one's own eradicated the beliefs of others. Such was the case with the Temple of Minerva which, like Rome's Pantheon, had been transformed into a Catholic church. In passing, Mustang wished the countless dead pagans of olden times could rise up and show present-day society the merit of their existence. The words remained unuttered, however.

Hundreds of milling bodies in the church of San Pietro separated the visitors from Rome and, despite her conspicuous red hair, Mustang was left alone. No problem, she decided. She knew the general location of the monastery where the sisters would be staying, and yearned for a chance to revel in Umbria's natural beauty.

Up she climbed to the Rocca Maggiore, a sprawling stone fortress built above Assisi proper. The afternoon sun sparkled on the fertile black soil of the farmland beyond the bustling shrines; there she sat until her stomach grumbled.

Rather than return through town, she skirted the settlement and eventually wound up back in the small town of Santa Maria degli Angeli, itself an important site in the lives of Franciscans. The baroque, domed church housed a smaller chapel, completely intact, called the Porziuncola, or Little Portion. St. Francis had used it as his base of operations, Mustang learned, before his followers grew in numbers.

Standing before the painted icon crucifix in the cramped hovel, its humble ambiance impressed her. "Too bad modern humanity isn't satisfied with this kind of simplicity," she vocalized. "I'd love to meet the man who contented himself living here."

A pause, a rumble, and screams.

Mustang spun to make a hasty exit, colliding with a ragged specimen on the chapel's threshold.

"Scusa, Signorina." He bowed deeply.

Gallant manners from one who... Mustang studied his appearance intently. A tattered brown linen robe - so unlike the professionally sewn garments worn by modern Franciscans - covered a short, emaciated frame. Shaggy dark hair framed burning eyes, an aristocratic nose, and thin, smiling lips. He exuded a serenity in this place, so different from the frantic pace of tourists and pilgrims... like he truly belonged here.

Then, he raised his hand to brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead, and she saw the wounds...

"Oh, hell," Mustang lamented. "Francis?"

"Si, Signorina. Your servant, and servant of the Most High God."

She seized his sleeve; the cloth ripped - not surprising, Mustang thought, considering it's 800 years old. A firmer grip on his bony arm enabled her to move him from his former sanctuary into the piazza stretching west in front of the basilica, where a throng stared upward at a widening crack in the facade.

"An earthquake, with no warning!" Mustang heard a hyperventilating woman tell a news crew, already on the scene. They commented on the likelihood of a repetition of the catastrophe of ten years earlier...

She hustled her companion away from the basilica, past rows of shops and into the train station. As he puzzled over the railroad tracks and the strange clothing of passersby, she struggled to catch her breath, slumped against the wall near the news stand.

“Are you unwell?” he asked in a gentle and melodic baritone.

“I’ll... be okay in a minute.”

“Bene, bene. You will be able answer my questions. I have many.”

Mustang snorted, “I don’t doubt it for a second.”

Could she do naught but take responsibility for the destruction of a historic monument? And one viewed as sacred by millions, at that? Through the window, she saw vans of carabinieri screech to a halt near the church entrance, to barricade the doors and prevent further disasters or injury.

They would come looking for her, she predicted. Someone had probably seen her exit the building, and the police would want to interrogate her about what she’d seen. They might already be suspecting an act of terrorism - unfortunately, a valid assumption in this crazy era - that she planted a bomb...

She had to hide and, more importantly, she had to hide Francis. In his present state, he stood out like a sore thumb. Getting him into a less outlandish outfit, though, might involve lengthy explanations...

“My friend, do you trust me?” she ventured.

“Of course.”

“Please allow me to share my clothes with you.” She chose the Italian flag t-shirt and relaxed fit jeans - Thomas had bought men’s sizes, which didn’t bother her - from the backpack. “If you go in there,” she pointed to the men’s room, “you can change into these.”

“As you wish.”

“I wish I had blond hair,” she snickered, and her long tresses bleached themselves.

When Francis emerged from the restroom ten minutes later, Mustang covered her mouth with a trembling hand, to hide her giggles. He obviously didn’t understand the concept of zippers... She pantomimed to him; he grinned, nodded and imitated the motion.

“Such lavish garments are ill-suited to my vows,” he protested as they left the train station.

“If I understand what you’re saying, you’re wrong. These are a poor man’s clothes. Rich people only wear them when they go slumming.”

“Slumming,” he repeated, uncertain.

“I apologize for confusing you. It means to go places and mingle with a lower class than your own.”

“Ah, so when I abandoned my home and parents to live with the beggars, I was slumming.”

He caught on quick, Mustang realized. “You could say that.”

Avoiding the piazza and thick crowds near Santa Maria degli Angeli, Francis nonetheless insisted on surveying the basilica, with its gold Madonna of the Angels high in the air. “Why did they construct this travesty?”

“To honor you, I suppose,” speculated the teen.

“I sought no such attention.”

“I know that, and you know that. Those who came after you, however, lost sight of your simple vision.”

Horrified, Francis murmured, “They own property?”

“Lots of property. These days, it’s seen as a necessity, as part of their mission.”

“They used the same argument to me, and I challenged them to live on faith alone.”

“Good for you,” Mustang praised. “Too bad their faith wasn’t enough to satisfy them.”

The pair walked the three miles uphill to Assisi - Francis obviously accustomed to foot travel, and Mustang’s appendages causing her little discomfort. The man gazed with affection on the city of his birth, until he passed shops selling plastic images of himself, cheap cross pendants and bottled water.

“What have I become?” he moaned.

“From what I’ve been told, you are an inspiration to millions - of all religions and walks of life. Modern environmental movements hail you as a trailblazer...”

“Trailblazer?”

“You did things long ago we’re trying to do again now - protect endangered animals, conserve natural resources, and preserve the forests.”

Inadvertently, he kicked a soda can discarded on the pavement. He stooped to retrieve it, eying Mustang curiously.

“The message doesn’t resonate with everyone,” she shrugged.

A firmness crept into his voice. “It must. It must.”

In that instant, Mustang knew exactly what to do. Hang Benito Hernandez as retreat master. These women would hear the authentic message from Francis of Assisi himself.

She guided him along steep streets to the Poor Clare monastery near the church of San Rufino. Secretly, she hoped they were in time for dinner; the latest crisis had dulled her appetite up to this point.

When she raised her hand to knock on the heavy wooden door, Francis snatched her fingers, brown orbs wide. “My sister, you also bear the wounds of our Lord?”

“No, my friend. They are merely burns.”

“The only source of such horrendous burns would be the hot iron of a smithy...”

“In today’s world, there are many causes for burns like these. A welder’s torch, for one, a variety of chemicals and liquified gases, even scalding water.”

“Ah, I see.”

A wizened portress opened the door in response to the summons, ushering the visitors to the chapel, where the six women from Rome were preparing to begin their retreat. Ursula glanced up at Mustang as the latter’s hair faded to its original color.

“I’m so glad you found your way back,” she whispered in relief, rising from her knees. “I feared we lost you permanently.”

“No such luck,” chuckled Mustang.

“We are waiting on Father Hernandez. He has not yet arrived.”

Do I dare? the girl debated. “His flight was probably delayed. He may have missed his connection.”

(In the main terminal at London’s Heathrow Airport, at that exact moment, a Franciscan priest flying from Chicago to Rome watched his connecting flight blink “Canceled” on the overheard monitor.)

She continued, “It was a fortunate happenstance I ran into Brother Francis, from right here in Assisi, who expressed an interest in meeting you all. I’m sure he would be delighted to lead your retreat.”

Ursula went to find the Poor Clare portress, to arrange for Francis’ accommodations. He, in turn, slipped into a pew and bowed his shaggy head in prayer. Mustang sidled to the rear of the chapel, observing his tranquil features.

The next few days were oddly busy for the retreatants. Early morning prayers and Mass were followed by conferences - talks given by Francis - on which the women later meditated. Lunch preceded the traditional siesta, then another conference, more prayers, dinner and an open discussion of the Franciscan charism, before night prayers and bed.

Ursula only saw Mustang during the conferences. The teen enjoyed listening to Francis. His philosophy of living totally free from material encumbrances appealed to her. “The traditional question we should ask ourselves,” he proposed at one session, “is what we would try to save, if our house caught fire.”

His audience pondered the question. He answered for them, “If any article of clothes, or a favorite book or picture, or the money in your purse comes to mind, there is still much to do.”

Mustang recalled reading a pamphlet in the Basilica of St. Francis, recounting how the saint had been tapped to “rebuild the Church” in the thirteenth century. His efforts had been compromised while he was still alive. Human greed, the need for security and power, tainted his dream. An identical situation existed in the 21st century.

By the third day, the conferences shifted to the Poor Clares’ public chapel, open to all. Word had spread of the engaging preacher, and Mustang watched hundreds of robed figures pack the pews, side by side with casually clad tourists.

If only they would embrace the message, take it home with them and spread it in the spirit intended, she mused.

Rather than lounge through the daily siesta, Mustang and Francis strolled the quiet streets of Assisi, many of the shops closed at that hour. This atmosphere reminded the man of his childhood, though he commented how the Rocca Maggiore - in its present form - had not been built in his lifetime. “The people of Assisi warred against the Germans who occupied it when I was young,” he recalled. “It was left in ruins.”

The heights of Monte Subasio were familiar to him, except for roads boasting dangerous hair-pin curves and the pink stone complex called “Eremo della Carceri”. On the densely wooded slopes east of Assisi, the shrine preserved the cave Francis often used as a hermitage. Mustang, stooped in the low doorway, saw conflicting emotions cloud his features upon finding an altar jammed in the tiny chamber with the rock bed where he had slept.

“Why would they waste the stone to build this?”

Mustang reiterated, “They saw it as a way to honor and remember you.”

He thumped his chest. “Here is where they should remember.”

In disgust, he bolted outside. Mustang chased him. He stopped beneath a centuries-old ilex tree, iron supports holding the branches aloft. He stroked a leaf lovingly.

“You know this tree?” she inquired.

“It shaded me from the summer heat, and the birds would sit above me and listen to my words.”

They used a well-traveled path to climb higher. Rustling among the trees made the teen nervous, not thinking wild animals might pose a threat, but that curious onlookers might be pursuing them. She squinted around the massive trunks, and distinguished the shapes of horses.

“They graze at this elevation?” she mused.

“If I were to wager, I would bet they fled here for safety when those motorized carriages claimed the roadways.”

They approached two dozen magnificent animals, some with hints of Arabian blood, if Mustang guessed correctly. Neither she nor Francis feared them, despite a return to their original untamed nature.

“These creatures trust you,” remarked Francis.

“Because I, like you, trust them.”

“Bene, bene. When you wed, your husband should make you a gift of many horses.”

Mustang chortled, and the horses shied away momentarily. “Life doesn’t work that way anymore, my friend. A girl may decide not to marry, without having the only other choice be a convent. If I want to, I can buy my own ranch, and my own stock.”

“Without the permission of your father?”

“More than likely, with his blessing. Men in the 21st century - most men, anyway - hold women as equal.”

“Incredible!” Francis mumbled.

A pat on the stallion’s nose in farewell, they ascended Monte Subasio. Francis lingered on the summit, and Mustang made a point not to interrupt what appeared a prayerful meditation overlooking the gorgeous vista. When his feet left the ground, she watched him hover near the tree line, seemingly oblivious to the marvel.

This man had powers equaling - if not exceeding - her own, yet his unobtrusive use of them only served to confirm his inner peace and wholeness of spirit.

“I can do that, too, you know,” she joked later, trudging back to Assisi.

He retorted playfully, “Ever lift an entire building off its foundation?”

“No...”

“It’s not pretty when the stones decide they’re not going to hold together, and it comes crashing down in a heap of rubble...”

“Ran and hid, didn’t you?” she hooted.

A broad grin lit his countenance. “All the way to the Holy Land.”

Their Friday sojourn to the Basilica of Saint Clare on the south edge of the town pleased Francis more than any other building they visited. He stood on the lower level, before the life-sized image of the woman encased in glass above her tomb. “She deserves this. Truly holy, modest and humble, with faith beyond

measure. I wish they hadn't wasted the sweat constructing so many churches in my name, but I'm glad hers reminds so many of Christ's love."

"I'm glad you're glad."

"You need not feel remorse for bringing me to this period of time..."

Mustang swallowed hard. "To be honest, I didn't do it deliberately."

"I know. You are too young to grasp the consequences of such actions."

"Consequences?" she repeated.

"One will come who will recognize my true nature and, as the modern saying goes, we'll be knee-deep in trouble. You will be subjected to great adulation and tremendous derision."

"That's nothing new."

"I can say the same, since I faced both during my life. It is not easy to remain placid in the wake of violent criticism, or humble when people bow to you in the streets and kiss the hem of your clothes."

"It's ludicrous things have changed so little in eight hundred years..."

Mustang risked the question: "What's it like to be dead so long?"

"Peaceful. There is awareness, but no anger, no sorrow, no extremes of any kind. Utter serenity."

"Cool."

Their promenade along the sloping Via San Francesco was marred by crowds lining the thoroughfare, blessing themselves and lowering their eyes as Francis passed. One arthritic old woman hobbled from the ranks and dropped to her knees in his path.

"See what I mean?" he said. Mustang remained silent as he laid his hand on her snowy white head. "Go in peace, my sister."

An eleven year old gymnast couldn't have risen and cavorted along the cobbles with greater agility. Her shrieks, "I'm cured! I'm cured!" echoed between the houses.

"He has come," Francis muttered, resisting the sudden crush of bodies.

Mustang queried, "Who?" holding tight to his shirt, in order not to lose him.

"The one who believes you are an angel."

"Luigi?"

Francis nodded.

"I swear, he's got a better communications network than CNN."

A bottleneck like Chicago rush hour traffic developed, and Mustang grew frustrated. She'd gotten him into this; she could get him out.

"Back off, everybody!"

The street cleared, devout pilgrims restrained - unwittingly and unwillingly - against the stone buildings. Mustang motioned Francis forward; he refused to walk ahead of her. He linked her arm through his, and they continued up the steep incline.

IV

Luigi welcomed them at the cloister entrance, holding a new brown robe and sandals. "Brother Francis, I have brought you clothes befitting your honored station," he drawled.

"Grazie, no," countered the saint. Slender fingers almost caressed the "Save the Whales" t-shirt Mustang had bought him from shop run by a local environmental group. "These garments suit me quite well."

Stung, Luigi glared at Mustang. "An exceptional miracle, my angel."

"A horrendous accident," she corrected.

"No matter. He can now restore the Order to its original purpose..."

Francis declared, "If that is what you truly wish, then cast off your robes, abandon your arrogant demeanor, and join me living with the poor, in simplicity."

Luigi didn't appreciate the rebuff. His miracle stood before him, and wasn't what he expected. Mustang loved the exasperation twisting his mien into a vengeful mask.

"You do not understand, my brother..." he pleaded.

"I understand all too well. Too many rifts have developed, among my brothers, and within the Church as a whole. Would I could wipe the scourge from the surface of the earth..." He turned to Mustang, as if prompting her to act.

She bent to his ear. "I could, but I won't."

"We must start afresh, then," decided Francis.

That evening, he preached on the grassy expanse before the basilica named for him, to countless souls jammed around bushes spelling "Pax". Some had even climbed atop a statue of the dejected man on a horse, to get a better view.

"You must renew yourselves!" he cried. "You must begin to really see life around you, to think about every action you take. If you are scared to leave behind all you have acquired - be it social position, possessions, or even your family - you have not yet progressed on the road of faith."

Mustang noticed cameras perched on hastily-erected scaffolds; the sermon was being broadcast live to millions around the globe. International news analysts would dissect the message *ad infinitum* in the days to come. She recognized the situation could escalate rapidly, with more devastating ramifications than the worst

volcano or tsunami. Everyone from the pope and world leaders to victims of genocide in Africa and those oppressed by the Chinese communist regime would seek the help of this gentle man, succeeding only in ripping him apart.

Glimpsing Luigi on the fringe of the gathering, in hushed conversation with Carabinieri, tightened the girl's chest. He gesticulated wildly, trying to convince the uniformed police of the urgency of his request. The nature of that request became evident as Francis concluded by blessing the people, leaving them in contemplative silence.

Four officers surrounded Francis before Mustang could reach his side. They marched him, visibly confused, toward a van, windows tinted black. Luigi discreetly brought up the rear.

Maggie Duryea had bought a t-shirt a few years before, with the PMS slogan, "I go from zero to pissed in 3.2 seconds." It didn't take Mustang that long to react. "If you want to die on the spot, keep walking!" she yelled.

The quartet stumbled and halted, wordlessly seeking advice from Luigi. "She may be dangerous," he admitted. "Taking her into protective custody could be difficult."

"What do you suggest?" demanded the man with three stripes on his coat.

The gardener conceded his ruse. "Release him."

"You could be charged in court for wasting the time of the Carabinieri," Luigi was warned before the squad dispersed, leaving Francis free.

Mustang hustled him off the street, into a cozy café down a flight of steps along an alley, where she peered cautiously through the window. "We'll wait here until things quiet down."

"Have we time for a bite to eat?"

She whirled to see him perusing the menu. "Sure. Order anything you like."

"It's Friday, and I must have fish..."

Details from her high school comparative religion class floated around Mustang's brain. "Not anymore. Those restrictions were eased during the Second Vatican Council."

"Really?"

"Lent is the only time Catholics go meatless on Fridays."

"Ah... bene." A waiter approached the round table. "I'll have the ravioli al forno, and red wine."

"Make it two," added Mustang from her observation post.

Five minutes later, no police or other officials had followed them into the restaurant, so the girl slid onto a chair and relaxed. “Where were those guys going to take you?”

“I heard one radio the driver to prepare for a journey to Rome. They were trying to prevent a repetition of an assassination attempt involving someone named John Paul?”

“That stinking bastard, Luigi!”

Francis’ head tilted inquiringly.

“Sorry,” she apologized, patting his hand. “You do realize things are getting out of hand, don’t you?”

“Si, Signorina. When first I shared Christ’s message, it took a decade before half as many people would listen. This time, in less than a week...”

“Blame technology.”

“Technology?”

“In the last one hundred years, scientists and engineers have devised ways of transmitting messages and news around the world in a heartbeat. Anyone with cable television, a cell phone or computer already knows your name...”

“Amazing!”

“And problematic. I’m surprised a myriad of publicity agents, corporate executives and talk-show hosts haven’t descended on Assisi yet, offering you millions for appearances and endorsements.”

“You mean, money? I don’t want material wealth.”

“Which is why you must go back...”

Steaming plates of pasta arrived, with a bottle of chianti and two glasses. Francis savored the aroma. “You can do this?”

Mustang laughed through a mouthful of bread. “Six hours ago, you wanted me to purge the planet of those who’ve destroyed your Order...”

“Scusa, Signorina, a stupid question.”

“The question is: how to do it? I can’t kill you, like I did Jack Parsons...”

The prospect his companion was a murderer made Francis pause with the fork half-way to his lips. “You have taken human life?”

“Like so much of what I’ve done, it was an accident. I was blindfolded, and told to thrust the knife into an altar. He tricked me, laying himself between the blade and the wood. He was very old, and wanted to die.”

“A form of ritual suicide,” Francis commented. “I could not be party to such a rite.”

“That much, I know.” She resumed eating, periodically raising her hazel eyes to meet his solemn gaze. Whatever statement she voiced to magically solve

this dilemma, it could not be vague. “Go back where you came from,” wouldn’t work; he could return to the thirteenth century, or five days ago at the Porziuncola.

The Porziuncola.

“You died at the Porziuncola, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Si.”

“Do you mind recreating the ordeal?”

He dabbed sauce from his chin with the cloth napkin. “No.”

“Then, I think it best we go there... tonight.”

“As you wish.”

“What I wish,” Mustang grumbled, “cannot be spoken aloud.”

She tucked her last fifty Euros into the stunned waiter’s hand before they set off through the dusk of the again-silent city. The moon had risen by the time they descended the hill to Santa Maria degli Angeli, concrete barricades blocking access to the church.

“Can’t you do something about that?” Francis asked, contemplating the disfigured structure.

“What, for example?”

“Complete the job.”

Mustang proposed, “You want me to demolish it entirely?”

“The outer shell only. Leave the Porziuncola unharmed.”

“You know full well that would raise a royal stink...”

“I suppose so.”

The lights of an approaching car startled Mustang. “We’d better get inside.”

“The doors will be locked.”

“No, they aren’t.”

Both heard the tumblers of deadbolts shift, and the thick panel creaked open.

“They will say your... skills come from Satan,” noted Francis, stepping into pitch darkness.

“I don’t care what they say.”

“Molto bene. You have great wisdom for one so young.”

“Oh, stop.” She groped along the wall, growing anxious. “I wish the lights were on.”

Bulbs sputtered to life.

A deep breath calmed Mustang’s nerves while Francis skirted rows of chairs to another structure set off from the Porziuncola - the Transitus Chapel,

where he had drawn his last breath. “These walls were rough stone, not painted like this. All around was open country,” he reminisced. “I did not want to be confined within four cold walls. I wanted Sister Death to take me from among my brothers and sisters of the wild - the birds, the foxes, the rabbits...”

She noticed his solidity fluctuate. His own yearning for the peace of the afterlife provided an impetus for the transformation...

The gunshot reverberated though the church, deafening Mustang. A bullet ricocheted off the Porzuincola facade and lodged in the floor.

“Don’t move!” bellowed Luigi from the center aisle. He held the 9mm Beretta aimed at Francis’ head.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Mustang challenged.

“He cannot leave us. We need him too desperately.”

Francis growled uncharacteristically, “Is that why you would have the police kidnap me and transport me to Rome?”

“Only so the pope could meet you in person, and believe...”

“You’re a fool, Luigi,” interspersed Mustang. “Didn’t you see the cameras this evening? Don’t you know what would happen if he stays? The media would distort his message, use his popularity merely to improve their ratings. He wouldn’t be able to accomplish the reform you seek, because they’d make him a puppet, and destroy his spirit.”

“You lie!” Luigi spat, training the weapon on her.

“Go ahead and shoot. If I’m really the angel you think I am, I won’t die...”

“Signorina, no!” objected Francis.

Abruptly, the gun clattered on the floor, discharging a bullet which tore into Mustang’s flesh. Giovanni had Luigi’s arms pinned, while two white-clad attendants secured him with shackles on wrists and ankles.

Mustang sank to her knees; Francis rushed to her side. Blood pumped from a gaping hole in her left shoulder. He ripped off the lower half of his t-shirt and applied pressure to the wound.

Leaving the hospital orderlies to drag Luigi from the church, the tow-headed infirmarian crossed to the wounded girl.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Mustang murmured through gritted teeth.

“Father Thomas never gave Luigi permission to come to Assisi. That he did so was seen as evidence of his insubordination and deteriorating mental state. I was sent to fetch him back to Rome, where he will finally receive the treatment he needs.”

“Are you going to tell Thomas what happened?”

“That he tried to murder Saint Francis of Assisi?” Giovanni glanced from Francis to Mustang. “They would commit me for treatment, as well.”

“Smart man,” she rasped, allowing him to remove the saturated fabric and inspect the damage.

His diagnosis, “The slug must come out, so the artery can be sutured, or you’ll bleed to death..”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Francis snickered, patting Mustang’s arm tenderly. Giovanni squinted at him.

The deformed metal chunk popped out and bounced on the marble. As the young friar watched, the bloody hole shrank and vanished.

“A miracle!” he hissed.

Mustang giggled, “Luigi wanted one.”

Francis helped her upright; she embraced him. “Thank you.”

“It is the least I could do. You have shown me a world not so foreign from my own, and taught me valuable lessons.”

Reverently, Giovanni dropped to one knee. “Father Francis, your blessing, please.”

“My son, you are already blessed with insight and knowledge. May you always be awed by the beauty of nature and bask in the splendor of Christ’s ever-present love.”

“Amen,” said Giovanni, rising.

“I must go,” Francis concluded.

The teen concurred. “Peace be yours, my friend.” She grasped his right hand; their almost identical scars pressed together. A wave of transcendent joy enveloped her briefly, more intense than any emotion she’d ever felt.

Gradually, he faded into incorporeality, leaving Giovanni speechless. She smacked the friar’s cheeks to rouse him from his stupor. “Come on, we’d better get out of here.”

They fled the building, across the piazza to a bakery. “You know, a few inches lower, and you could’ve borne in your body our Lord’s fifth wound, along with the other four.”

“Shut up,” she admonished.

The pair observed lights dim inside the church and the fissure marring the baroque edifice mend itself. Giovanni gasped, “Who...”

“In a month, this’ll all be forgotten,” Mustang assured him. “The tourists who record it on their internet blogs will be accused of falling victim to mass hysteria, brought on by unusual spring heat in the district, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless they ever open Francis’ tomb.”

“Why?”

“If they find half a ‘Save the Whales’ t-shirt and jeans covering his bones, well...”

Neither tried to suppress their glee, hugging each other to keep from collapsing on the cobbles.

When Giovanni sobered, he asked, “What about you?”

“I, too, must go,” replied Mustang.

“Have you enough money for your ticket?”

“Trust me, I’ll be okay. You get Luigi back to Rome, and do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Tell him... I’m sorry I wasn’t his angel.”

The Franciscan pondered her statement, and shrugged. He set off toward the Toyota station wagon, idling near the bus stop, where Luigi’s irate screams penetrated the glass.

Mustang steeled herself for what was to come. She moved to the center of the piazza, with a clear view of the starry sky. “I want to go home,” she called.

Staring out the rear window of the vehicle as it passed Santa Maria degli Angeli, Luigi was the only one who saw Mustang disappear when the lightning bolt struck the ground.