

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Mediæval Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

Crushed.

Had a five hundred pound boulder fallen atop Mustang from one of the southern California mountains, she would not have felt more broken. Over and over in her mind, the scene replayed itself: Jim Neville walking to the rented Toyota Corolla after paying for a tank of gas, shot in cold blood by overzealous FBI agents, who thought he was reaching for his gun, when he was merely tucking his wallet in his pants.

Instead of being able to stay and mourn beside the bullet-ridden corpse of the man she'd come to love, she'd had to run, to escape capture. She'd hopped on the back of a motorcycle waiting at the traffic light, begging the driver not to protest. Five miles north, she'd jumped off, handing the man a \$20 bill for his trouble. She leapt a split-rail fence and mounted a mare grazing in the field, steering the saddleless animal where government vehicles dared not drive.

Two days later, having avoided cities and well-traveled roads, the teenager approached Pasadena. Ironic she should set foot where Jack Parsons - her grandfather - had lived, worked and supposedly died, but she knew of no other place to find what she sought.

Normally, she would have conjured her desire with the simple utterance of a command. Not so, now. In her severely depressed emotional state, the power she inherited from the rocket scientist/occult enthusiast seemed to have abandoned her.

As much as she yearned to raise Jim from the dead, she couldn't. She'd have to seek help of a more tangible sort.

Finding a length of discarded rope, she tied it to the bridle and left the horse near a ranger station in the Angeles National Forest, walking south into more populated areas. At one point, she crossed Orange Grove Avenue - Parsons' house, aptly named "The Parsonage" had been somewhere along that stretch of asphalt. She continued toward the Cal Tech campus, nonetheless, intent on finding a scientist who might emulate her predecessor's inventive genius.

Although her t-shirt and jeans were ragged and dusty, when she stopped to ask directions, the responses came with friendly smiles. Catalina Avenue then east on California Boulevard brought her to the three-story complex which housed the Downs-Lauritsen Laboratory of Physics.

"That's where most of the NASA research goes on," she'd been told.

That would be where anyone who knew anything about time travel would work, Mustang guessed.

Yes, that was her plan - to travel back in time four days, and save Jim from dying.

By killing every one of the FBI agents, if necessary.

At random, she shuffled into a lab on the second floor. From the chemical fumes and flickering Bunsen burners, she assumed they were experimenting with rocket fuels. Two doors along the corridor, she heard profuse cursing. She waited until the expletives faded, then peered through the cracked doorway.

“Anything wrong?” she queried.

“I can’t get this damned thing to hold a setting!” grumbled a middle-aged figure in white lab coat, bent over a console of dials and levers. “And I can’t be in two places at once...”

“I’ll keep an eye on it. Will that help?” If nothing else, it was a way to strike up a conversation and learn what she needed to know.

“It certainly will! If I can tweak this last problem, I’ll be able to leave for vacation without having to worry...” He adjusted two knobs and waved her forward. “Hold these right where they are.”

“Sure thing.” On the panel, a label read, “Property of Calvin Hartwell, Ph.D.”

He edged between two tables to a framework of wires and circuits. He consulted a computer screen, muttering to himself.

She prodded, “What?”

“Odd. I’ve never seen readings like this before.”

“How so?”

“It’s almost as if the energy source doubled its output.”

Mustang sighed. At least, even if dormant, the power still coursed through her. There could be no other explanation, in her mind, of the current surge. “Will that affect what you’re trying to do?”

“No, it actually might help. Tests using less power failed miserably...” He typed a series of numbers on the keyboard, and the monitor began flashing.

“Good. Good.”

“What’s this contraption supposed to do?”

Hartwell glared at her. “Evidently, you’re not a physics major.”

“Sorry, no.”

“Then, you wouldn’t have heard. The department likes to keep its embarrassments private.”

“Embarrassment? I confess, it looks a bit weird...”

“What it looks like is irrelevant. The final result is what counts.”

“And, that is...”

“A time portal.”

By pure chance, the girl had stumbled on the object of her search. “You mean, the big shots don’t think it’ll work...”

The professor nodded his wild grey mop.

“How close are you to practical testing?”

The “Enter” key clicked, and he grinned. “Now.”

Buzzing, a shudder and a flash, then nothing.

A gnarled fist slammed the desk, rattling the CPU. “Damn!”

“It’s not uncommon to find some bugs the first time...”

“This *isn’t* the first time!” Hartwell shouted. “I’ve been at this for five years!”

Leaving the dials to spin freely, Mustang joined him near the window. She laid a hand on his arm. “Calm down, won’t you? Why not walk me through the process and, maybe together, we can get it right.”

“You’re awfully young to grasp the concepts...” he challenged.

“I’m older than I look, which is why I may be able to assist you.”

Dejected, Hartwell guided her toward the door. One by one, he explained the dials and levers. By forcing himself to be as basic as possible, Mustang pieced together his reasoning, and watched as enlightenment dawned for him, too.

“What I still don’t understand is the fluctuation in power readings,” he remarked, returning to the computer. “If I didn’t know better, I’d check for a short in the wiring, because each time you come within three feet of a console, the meters go haywire.”

“Natural magnetism?” she chuckled.

“It’s no joke. In science, the slightest variable can have catastrophic effects - whether a drop too much hydrogen peroxide, or one degree less heat. If your body is an organic conductor of electricity, your very presence could cause irreparable damage.”

“Brother, you have no idea.”

Hartwell’s steel blue eyes radiated kindness. “I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“What about the free-spinning dials?”

“Repairing them can wait until after...” A rapid clicking from the midst of the wire cage attracted his attention. He grabbed a pair of pliers off the table and stepped toward the noise.

Instinctively, Mustang seized his arms and yanked him backward.

Both were thrown against the wall when a swirling network of sparks converged within the frame and exploded outward.

Pain coursed through the teen's body, for once not originating from her lightning-burned palms. She suspected broken ribs from the force of the impact; Professor Hartwell had slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Flecks of plaster sprinkled the tiles when she pulled herself free of an indentation in the bulkhead. She stared down at the scientist who'd created the machine she'd hoped would fulfill her dream, hesitantly raising her eyes when she saw a pair of leather boots five feet in front of her.

"Oh, hell..."

Jim!

Well, not Jim, she realized almost instantly. The same height, slender build, fiery brown eyes and prominent cheekbones, this man sported a black goatee, mustache and shoulder-length wavy hair. His short sword and scabbard, tunic and leggings dated back centuries - many centuries.

Two theories formed inside Mustang's skull: the time portal had brought him from an alternate universe - an unlikely prospect - or he had indeed been sucked through time and deposited in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

She'd done the same, herself, without the aid of transistors and software, when she brought St. Francis of Assisi from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to modern-day Italy a year earlier.

Regardless of the methodology, she didn't relish the explanations...

"If thou art woman, why art thou clothed as a squire?"

The same voice!

She puzzled if this might have been one of Jim's ancestors, if her power had focused on him in some arbitrary way, given her grief over his death.

"Apologies, good sir," she bluffed, trying to mimic his old English dialect. "I 'twas working to clean up this mess, and did not wish to soil my only gown."

"One as lovely as thou should not spoil her delicate hands with such drudgery. Come, let us away."

He extended his left hand, the pinky displaying an ornate silver ring inset with an intricately carved black stone. She brushed off her fingers and laid them atop his, as she'd seen done many times in classic films. "Let us away - where?" she asked.

"To my father's castle."

What to say, what to say? her mind raced. "Your castle... has been ransacked by marauding thieves. It is not safe to return there."

"Thou hast a suggestion?"

Mustang would've given her teeth for a black hole to manifest.

Professor Hartwell stirred, and she noticed a door to his right. “In here,” she pointed, tugging the time traveler over the threshold.

Inside the tiny office, she twisted the key in the lock until she could determine another course of action.

“Thou art quite precocious, damsel,” oozed her companion. “Will not thy parents think thy virtue compromised by being alone with me, unchaperoned?”

She ignored the observation. “What’s your name?”

“James Michael, eldest son of Duke Armand de Salisbury.”

Childhood tales of Robin Hood came to mind. “Norman?”

“To be sure,” he bowed. “And what art thou called by those who cherish thy smile?”

The girl knew he’d never understand her nickname. “I am Elizabeth Duryea.”

“I am most delighted.” He swept up her dusty hand and lingered over it with a kiss.

He might be delighted; Mustang was frustrated. A grave disadvantage, being in California, where she knew no one, and nothing about the Los Angeles environs. Back in Montana, she could have hidden James in the barn’s loft, or the ranch hand’s bunk house. Her only objective was to flee the Cal Tech lab without being mobbed by curious students.

She peeked through streaked glass at the campus. Late afternoon signaled the end of classes, and a mass exodus from the grounds. If she could only make James appear more normal...

With Francis, she’d donated a pair of jeans and t-shirt for him to wear. She had no backpack full of clothes this time.

James had crept up behind her; his body pressed against hers, and his heat penetrated through her shirt. Inhaling quickly, she struggled to slow her pounding heart.

He looked over her shoulder at the green lawns below. “What shire is this?”

His warm breath on her neck made her shiver.

“Hast thou taken a chill, Elizabeth?”

“No,” she stammered. “No.”

She sidestepped him and knocked over a metal coat rack. Scrambling to gather the scattered items, she held onto a dark blue jumpsuit. Stooped though he was from years of hovering over computers and dials, Hartwell was approximately the same size as James...

“Put this on, and I’ll show you the shire personally.”

“I would be much obliged.”

His back to her, she couldn't help snickering over the strange undergarments worn a millennia previous. He tossed the tunic and leggings on the chair; she left them there, so the scientist would know his time machine actually worked.

The sight of James zipped into the jumpsuit - she'd had to help him with that bit of technology - awed her. He cut a magnificent figure, and exuded the same masculine charm as... his descendant? She backed to the door, and fumbled with the lock. He neared and reached his hands around her trembling torso, ostensibly to assist.

The kiss caused no dramatic earthquakes or spontaneous flames, given her subdued emotions. His lips were insistent, somewhat violent even, as they assaulted her mouth. She envisioned Jim embracing her, but more than Jim. A primeval lust, this, not borne of love. Mustang got the very real impression James nurtured darkness in his soul, disguised by the etiquette common of his era.

Still, he didn't apologize when he released her. In fact, beneath his mustache she saw a satisfied sneer, as if he knew he'd breached the highest walls of an enemy's fortress.

The door popped open; he retrieved his belt and scabbard. “Let us away.”

No way could he carry the sword outdoors without serious repercussions. She scanned the room for anything to conceal it.

She selected a grimy towel someone had probably used to mop up a spill months before. “Wrap that up, if you want to avoid trouble.”

“Aye, my lady.”

The lab beyond lay silent and cluttered; Hartwell was gone. Had he wandered into the corridor, seeking help for his injuries? she speculated. He'd have a mild concussion, at least...

Stepping over debris and toppled consoles, the pair strolled through the Downs-Lauritsen building and into the July swelter. “No furnace in hell burns this hot!” James exclaimed.

“This is California, good sir. The only place hotter is the Equator itself.”

“Thou uses words unfamiliar to me, Elizabeth.”

“I am most humbly sorry, James. Soon enough, I fear, you will grasp the complexity of your situation.”

“Thou dost confound me with thy riddles, girl. Be plain, I beseech thee.”

“All in good time,” she promised.

He added in a sinister whisper, “All in good time, I shall rule this kingdom.”

## II

James Michael, son of the Duke of Salisbury, first had to deal with a severe case of culture shock before he could ascend the throne of southern California. Traversing the Cal Tech quad with long, confident strides - making it difficult for Mustang to keep pace - his eyes widened at girls sunning themselves in bikinis. When a bike sped past, he whisked Mustang from its path, trying to appear gallant rather than scared.

He spoke not a word, however. Surreptitiously, Mustang studied his expressive face, and discerned from his slight squint the plethora of schemes hatching within his head. A master manipulator, this, and if he could bend circumstances to his will, he would stop at nothing to achieve his aims.

Why hadn't she left him in the lab, for Professor Hartwell to handle? she asked herself.

The obvious answer: because, like always, she was at fault in the matter, and it was her responsibility to find a solution. Had she not been present in the chamber, there might have been a "Snap, Crackle, Pop" when the time portal's creator activated the machinery, but little else.

Emerging from the academic city-within-a-city into rush hour traffic proved another jolt to James' equilibrium. "Hold tight to me," he said, linking Mustang's arm through his.

North on Catalina Avenue, the girl planned to get him away from the hustle and bustle, to the Angeles National Forest and a concept with which he would certainly feel comfortable - a horse. The high temperature and excessive humidity merited a change of clothes for both; more than anything, she wanted a shower and a good night's sleep, but that would come later.

She detoured James into a trendy shop - translation, "overpriced". While she held the towel-draped sword, a salesman fitted him with white lightweight Dockers, a tan Ralph Lauren polo shirt and a pair of Birkenstock sandals. Mustang settled for a Cal Tech t-shirt and new jeans.

All that remained of the funds her mother had given her was enough for a cheap dinner and hotel room.

Could James have looked any more enticing? she mused as they continued toward the outskirts of Pasadena. She saw women walking in the opposite direction doing double-takes as they passed, and wondered what they would do if they knew the truth.

The mare had eaten her fill of grass, still tethered near the ranger station, and drunk plenty of water from the stream. “You can ride bareback, I suppose?” Mustang asked.

“I am accustomed to riding in full armor, which requires far greater skill.” He strapped the wide leather belt around his waist, short sword dangling at the ready.

No denying it: she loved his accent and his noble use of the language. She stepped back to let him mount. He deferred, offering his hand. “The lady rides in front, to prevent her from sliding off.”

“As you wish.” Without his support, she sprang onto the horse. For his size, his agility matched her own; the animal didn’t flinch when he added his weight to hers.

Mustang entwined her fingers in the dark mane. James used the rope as make-shift reins. He lightly tapped the horse’s flanks with his foot, and they moved east at a trot.

Skirting the mountains, they kept to the tree line until they were well past the collection of suburbs which made Los Angeles seem larger than its formal boundaries warranted. A modicum of peace could be found in the picturesque scenery, canyons giving way to tall peaks, greenery cooling the day with its welcome shade.

They stopped in a tiny town called Fawnskin, surrounded by the San Bernardino National Forest. “So many of these names have Spanish origins,” commented James.

“Because the Spanish settled here centuries ago.”

“We are near to Spain, then?”

“Thousands of miles, actually.”

“How came they here?”

“Ships.”

“No sea craft could withstand the storms on the great sea.”

“Not in your time, perhaps. Suffice it to say, ship building became almost an art form, thanks to war.”

“War? Thy people are at war?”

“Somewhere, someone is constantly at war. Thus has it been since long before you were born, and shall be long after I am dead.”

Leaving the horse in the settlement’s only park, they walked to a restaurant on Main Street. Local residents were enjoying dinner, and the aroma of barbeque sauce reminded Mustang she hadn’t eaten since sharing burgers and fries with Jim before...

She and James occupied a booth near the plate glass window facing the street. Up to this point, she really hadn't worried about the FBI, or the folded paper in her wallet. Best to be vigilant, though her concentration faltered remembering a Montana State Police detective's boyish grin.

"Thy frown betrays a heaviness of heart, Elizabeth," James said, having drained the tall glass of ice water a waitress set on the table.

"I mourn the loss of someone... very special."

"Ah, thou art a widow?"

"No. In terms you'll understand, you could say we were betrothed."

"He died in battle?"

"Of a sort."

"For what cause did he fight?"

She toyed with her fork. "For me."

"He was thy champion?"

"More than words can convey."

During the lull in their conversation, Mustang glanced up. James' smoldering brown eyes scrutinized her, to the point of being uncomfortable. No mistaking he was deliberating many facets of his predicament, but there was more...

Mustang had never been a student of history; most of her knowledge of ancient civilizations came from old movies and the few novels she read, sitting beneath a far-flung tree on her father's horse ranch in Montana. With the mention Jim had been her champion - a designation used for a knight who defended the honor of a noble house - did James now believe her the equivalent of a titled lady, in whose service he could win wealth and honor, catapulting himself to a position of power?

It hurt her head to ruminate about the machinations of ambitious men, and she was glad when the waitress delivered a hoagie heaped with meat and cheese. Mustang half expected James to pick up the sirloin steak with his fingers. His familiarity with utensils soothed a bit of her tension.

The check paid, she sought directions to the nearest hotel. She felt safe leaving the horse in the park overnight, since their lodgings would be only two blocks away. If it wandered off, they could decide what to do in the morning.

"I only have a single left," announced the desk clerk when Mustang checked in.

"Why so full?"

"There's a big convention in San Bernardino, and we sometimes get the overflow."

“I’ll take the single.”

Key in hand, the teen rejoined James and led him to the room. If nothing else, the air conditioning was worth the price she’d paid.

James was overwhelmed by furnishings he viewed as luxurious, actually quite tacky. Mustang led him into the bathroom, and explained the toilet as a modern chamber pot, also the shower.

“You’ll feel better once you’re clean,” she advised.

He countered, “Please, take thy ease.”

If she guessed correctly, he meant for her to shower first.

“I beseech one promise from you.”

“Anything, dear Elizabeth.”

“Don’t leave this room.”

“I shan’t leave thy presence for, if thou think me worthy, I shall be thy champion.”

“We’ll discuss that... later. I shouldn’t be long.”

She closed the bathroom door and stripped off perspiration-soaked clothes. Though he could have no idea of her wallet’s most valuable contents - Parson’s zero gravity formula - she tucked it inside a hand towel on the rack, out of ready view.

How good the water felt pouring over her body, she could not describe verbally. Shampooing her hair, she laughed when flakes of plaster dropped into the drain. Her red hair was draped over her shoulders and breasts when she turned to rinse the soap off her legs, to find James - naked - stepping into the tub.

Her jaw dropped.

Here stood no mere gentleman of leisure. His arms, legs and chest bore the scars of numerous sword battles.

“I am reminded of bathing as a youth beneath the falling waters of the River Avon near my father’s home,” said James.

“What, all together, male and female?”

“Some prudishly kept to themselves, others cavorted freely, as is common in this culture.”

“We don’t *cavort*,” Mustang protested. “Many, in fact, are far more inhibited with respect to their bodies than in your day.”

His index finger ran between droplets from her chin to her sternum. “Do you share those inhibitions?”

Her startled intake of breath did not preclude a passionate response when he pressed her against the tile wall and smothered her mouth with his.

Wet hair hung over his face, and she could barely see his eyes when she opened her own to regain some control over her tingling nerves. He might have been a flame consuming her, he generated so much heat. She threw her head back, desperate for air, leaving his lips to assail her neck, breasts and waist.

“Is this how they behaved, so long ago?” she cried. “So wanton, so reckless?”

James gasped, “Just like this, and far more.”

“What about prolonged courtship and honorable marriage?”

“Only those under the thumb of the Pope observed such rules. The rest... we lived to the full.”

The water abruptly changed from hot to cold; Mustang shrieked. James lifted her from the bathtub, and wrapped a towel around her. He carried her into the other room, and was just about to lay her - dripping - on the bed, when she stopped him.

“Please, we have to sleep on that tonight, and I’d rather it not be one huge puddle.”

He set her on her feet. She took the towel and began patting her skin; he confiscated it and caressed her with the terry fabric, arousing her anew. In kind, she fetched a second towel, rubbing him tenderly. Shiny beads of water still clung to his sideburns when he cast the cloth away and roughly pulled her onto the mattress.

Had he been a lion, he could have dominated her no less. She objected to nothing he did, and when they fell back on the pillows an hour later, her lungs heaved with exhaustion and contentment.

“Thy skills pleasing a man are considerable,” James praised. “Art thou a courtesan, practiced with many in the king’s household?”

Mustang bristled at the insult. “My *practice* amounts to kissing a total of three men: two from the British Isles, and my... betrothed.”

“I meant no offense, my lady. Many courtesans are respected and influential women, in their way.”

“No offense taken, then.” She rolled facing him. “A question, if you will.”

“If I have the wherewithal to make answer.”

“Who do you think I am?”

His reply rang with certainty. “Thou art a high born noble of unrivaled beauty. I sense about thee a power to dictate the destiny of men, friend or foe. Thou dost hold life and death in thy hand...”

“And if I told you I was merely a farmer’s daughter?”

“I would not be here.”

As she suspected, he craved her magick. She averted her gaze, fresh grief added to old.

“Thou dost misinterpret the answer, my lady.” He boosted himself on one elbow, his face alight with hidden motives. “I did not mean I would abandon thee if thy father were a pauper. Thou couldst not have brought me to this time, this place, were it not for thy power. I am forever in thy debt, and pledge my service to thy cause.”

She softened, a little. “You know nothing of my cause.”

“‘Tis true. Nonetheless, my sword is thine, as are my body and my soul.”

He removed the signet ring from his pinky, and slipped it on her index finger. Then, he raised her head and kissed her lightly.

Neither fell asleep until well past midnight.

With the dawn came reality. Mustang crawled into her t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, and stepped onto the balcony outside the hotel room. Humidity made even the morning air oppressive. Remaining inside with the air conditioning was impossible; only fifty cents in coins filled her pocket. She was considering options when James appeared on the threshold, shirtless, buttoning his trousers.

“Good morrow, Elizabeth,” he greeted. “Whence travel we today?”

She muttered, “I don’t know.”

“I wouldst take thee for a peaceful jaunt in the forest, if there is sufficient time.”

“There is sufficient time, but not sufficient money.”

“Mayn’t thou return home and replenish thy purse?”

“Home is a thousand miles away, where danger awaits.”

“As thy champion, I shall protect thee from every threat.”

“My argument consists of only one word: guns.”

“Guns?” he echoed.

How to explain? “Take a crossbow, and augment its force a hundred-fold. Reduce the arrow to the size of a lead pellet. You can imagine the rest...”

“I wouldst behold such a weapon!”

She glimpsed in his eyes a desire not just to see one, but to possess and use it. “I should’ve kept my mouth shut,” she lamented.

He ignored the remark. “Allow me to finish dressing, then I shall fetch the horse and we shall go forth...”

“Whatever.”

As Mustang watched him saunter up the street, scabbard bouncing on his thigh, her stomach growled. Damn Jack Parsons for giving her command of natural forces, and that power failing when she needed it most! She could’ve

vanished after Jim was killed - literally vanished - and gone anywhere on the globe! Now her confidence was thoroughly shaken, she didn't know if nature would ever obey her again.

Dismally, she stared at her hands. The muscles beneath the burn marks still throbbed off and on, the silver band spun loosely around her finger.

"It'd be nice if the ring fit better," she murmured.

The metal contracted to a perfect size.

She sighed to the breeze, "Thank you, thank you!"

The sound of hoof beats reached her ears; the mare had, surprisingly, stayed in the park. James cut a dashing figure as he rode. He disregarded the curious gazes of the locals, guiding the mount along the solid yellow line, and cars had to swerve around him. One Cadillac narrowly avoided a collision; Mustang shouted, "Activate the brakes!"

The tires squealed, and James passed on, unfazed.

"Come, let us away!" he called, prancing into the parking lot.

"Not before we eat!"

The restaurant where they had dined the previous evening opened early, and they occupied the same booth. No longer did Mustang worry about cash. When the waitress wasn't looking, the paper napkin transformed into a \$20 bill.

James noticed the feat. He hissed, "Thou art a sorcerer!"

She recalled a frazzled gypsy from a World War II internment camp, who had hurled the same accusation. Still, she didn't mind. "I'd give Merlin a run for his money, probably."

"Then my ascent to the throne is assured!"

### III

The napkin *cum* \$20 ignited beside Mustang's plate, reduced to ashes in seconds. The laminate had melted, as well, leaving a charred rut in the table's surface.

James sat back on the bench, masking his fear with a smirk. "Fantastic!"

Anger boiled within Mustang. She spoke through clenched teeth, rubbing the black residue between her fingertips. "Whatever your ambitions, my dear James, remember: that could be you, if I choose."

The waitress brought their breakfast platters, casting a puzzled look at the damage.

"I dropped my lighter," Mustang bluffed. "Put it on the check."

The woman snapped, "Don't think I won't."

They ate in silence, each assessing the dilemma. Once again, Mustang had the ability to go wherever she pleased, and nothing to hold her...

Except the man pretending not to glare at her while dipping his bacon in a puddle of catsup.

As with Francis in Assisi, Mark Twain, and Mahatma Gandhi, she could not shun responsibility for the accidents her power caused. She couldn't walk away and leave this mediaeval opportunist to his own devices. One, he'd end up dead in a week; two, he'd be confined to a jail cell, or a psychiatric ward.

Or, if his plot succeeded, how might history be altered?

Simultaneously, they rose at the meal's conclusion. At the register, Mustang was presented with a bill for \$45. She dug in her front pocket, mumbling, "Fifty cents to fifty dollars," and extracting a roll of green.

She told the waitress, "Keep the change."

James held the door open for her; they walked side by side to the alley where the horse waited. The teen mounted, and he raised himself behind her, directing the mare onto the street.

"Are there any limits to thy... magick?" he queried.

"Not that I know of."

"Thou canst kill?"

"Without lifting a finger."

"Hast thou?"

She nodded.

"Thy heart is not timid. Admirable."

His comment brimming with hidden portent, Mustang arrested the animal's gait in a grove of orange trees. She swung to the ground. James followed suit.

"We can end this now, or you can swear to forget your wicked little plan, and enjoy what the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to offer."

"If I refuse the oath, what will thou do?"

The ground tremored beneath his feet, and a chasm opened inches to his left. She flicked her red tresses over her shoulder and tilted her head, the question in her expression.

He postulated, "Without thy champion, who will defend thee?"

"Do I need a champion?" A similar pit yawned on his right.

He would not be cowed; Mustang would've been disappointed if he'd surrendered. "We are meant to be together, Elizabeth! You drew me through time to be with you..."

"Is your father an honorable man?"

The shift in topic confused him briefly. “He... is most respected in the district around Salisbury.”

“Would he be proud of you at this moment?”

“I..”

She caught the reluctance in his accented baritone. “Say no more. You may consider yourself my servant from this moment, nothing else. I will accept your sword as token of your pledge to obey even my most trivial dictates.”

His hand clutched the sculpted hilt, but did not remove it from the leather scabbard.

A microburst of wind from the east forced his feet sideways, and he pitched into the chasm. Frantic hands groped at the ledge; he managed to pull his chin over the edge. “Thou wouldst be so heartless?”

“Thou wouldst be so stupid?” she scolded.

“Raise me from this hole, and I will bend my knee in thy service.”

She did, and he did. He still resisted when handing over the short sword, which she strapped around her waist.

The horse had ambled along a row of trees, so he fetched it back. But Mustang was tired after the mental battle, and sweat trickled down her spine. “Leave her be,” she declared..”There are other means of transportation.”

“Those rolling carts?”

“They are called automobiles - cars, for short. The best are limousines.” She looked west, and a sleek white Lincoln appeared, from the ripples of a heat-induced mirage. It stopped on the gravel shoulder, and the chauffeur came around and opened the rear door.

“Come on,” directed Mustang.

Tentatively, James accompanied her inside the vehicle, jumping slightly when the door slammed shut.

“This is the way thou travels?” he asked.

“The rich do. Personally, I’ve only ridden in one once.”

“Then, why now?”

“Why not?” Taking her own suggestion, the girl had decided to enjoy what the 21<sup>st</sup> century had to offer. “Use it or lose it,” was the old adage. Having recovered her powers, she would employ them to the full.

“Whence our destination?”

“Today, the city of Las Vegas. Tomorrow, who knows?”

“Another Spanish name.”

“So it is in many western states.”

“Are there no English settlements?”

“Far to the east, Virginia is named after an English queen, there is New York, and Plymouth, in New England.”

“Ah, well and good.” James viewed the scenery fly past beyond the tinted window before somberly facing Mustang. “Elizabeth, what shall be my privileges in my role as thy servant?”

“Servants worry less about privileges and more about duties, I should think,” she mocked easily. “Your main duty will be to stay with me at all times. This world is unknown to you, and the slightest misstep can have serious consequences.”

“That shan’t be so much a duty as a pleasure.” His lips twitched between mustache and goatee. “Especially if it means I shall continue to share thy bed.”

His priorities amazed her. “We shall see.”

The drive relaxed Mustang; she munched on an apple and selected a DVD of *Casablanca* to watch on the television. Soon after Peter Lorre’s character died, she fell asleep, James’ brooding eyes upon her.

She woke abruptly, the barrel of a 32 calibre pistol hovering near her cheek. The limousine idled on the roadside; the chauffeur lay dead on desert sand, a bullet through his temple.

“What the hell...”

“Canst thou defend thyself, sweet Elizabeth? Or am I master now?”

She snarled, “Where’d you get that?”

“Whilst thou slumbered, our driver honored my request to make a slight detour.”

“Well, if you want to keep it, put it away, or it will melt all over your lap.”

“Nonsense!”

In response, the forged metal glowed red hot. James dropped the weapon on the carpet, where it congealed in a grey lump.

“Why don’t you accept your fate, and go with the flow?” Mustang chuckled, straightening. “If you but have patience, I will give you the world on a silver platter.”

“Thou jests.”

“You will have wealth beyond measure, be able to go anywhere and do anything, lacking only a formal title.”

“Why not a title?”

“We don’t do things that way in America. Here, money rules more than words. You will be able to sit on a gold-plated throne, if you wish, and order your minions to perform the most menial tasks. They will call you, ‘Sir,’ and kiss your feet to win your favor, or the smallest sliver of what you possess.”

“Incredible!” He reclined on the cushion. “What about thy desires?”

“I prefer a more simple approach. A place to live, food to eat, surrounded by nature in all its beauty.”

“Thou art truly a farmer’s daughter,” he guffawed. Then, more quietly, “But most comely and alluring.”

He leaned over and laced his fingers through her hair, pulling her forward into an embrace. In the distance, sirens pierced the air.

“This isn’t the time,” Mustang remarked. “Come on.”

She crawled over the seat and settled behind the steering wheel. James positioned himself beside her. “What art thou going to do?”

“Get us out of here. You don’t want to go to prison, do you?”

“No, indeed.”

Her only experience driving being riding her father’s lawn tractor around the ranch as a kid, she studied the controls, then pulled the shift lever to from “P” to “D”. She stepped on the gas pedal, and the limousine shot forward, tires kicking up sand and blanketing the chauffeur’s corpse.

“Buckle up and hold on!” she warned as the speedometer climbed over 80 mph.

James ignored the first command, complying with the second by seizing an armrest on the door. Fortunately, his terror was unjustified - few cars passed them on the highway, and no major obstacles required Mustang to execute tricky maneuvers.

Crossing the state line into Nevada, the teen lessened her pressure on the accelerator. If the California Highway Patrol had been pursuing them, they would have to give way to Nevada authorities, and none had converged on the border.

Soon, the Las Vegas skyline shimmered on the horizon, a glorious playground for gamblers and optimists. James’ countenance glowed with anticipation; Mustang’s stomach unknotted.

The long Lincoln coasted up to the entrance of the pyramid-shaped Luxor and halted with a jerk. A valet opened the rear door, perplexed when no one alighted. Mustang climbed from the vehicle with a cheery wave. “Our driver got sick on the way, so we dropped him at the hospital.”

She opened the passenger door for James, unaware as he was of the handle’s function. Together, they walked into the reception area, Mustang pausing only long enough to stoop and retrieve a penny from a crack in the cement.

“From a mere copper coin shall grow our fortune,” she joked.

The joke proved prophetic, though. Passing through opulence based on human greed, they entered the casino. Thousands of people played poker, black jack and Texas hold 'em, or occupied seats among rows of slot machines. Music blared overhead, and a din of chatter deafened the pair.

“What is this place?” James shouted.

“A den of iniquity, in biblical terms,” quipped Mustang. She noted the bewilderment clouding his features, and made a second attempt. “Have you ever bet... er, wagered on a horse race?”

“We use horses in battle or for travel.”

“What about the tournaments so famous in ancient lore?”

“Tournaments train us for battle.”

“Fine. Did you ever wager on who would win a tournament?”

“Of course.”

“Multiply the concept a million-fold. Every game of chance you could dream of can be found in this room.”

“The devil, thou sayest!”

Taking his arm, she drew him to a line of penny slots. She inserted the coin and yanked the arm. Her winnings amounted to \$100.

James beheld a streak notable in the history of the Strip: with five pulls on a series of progressively more expensive slots, Mustang collected jackpots of more than \$36,000. Satisfied, she told the attendant to cash in the tokens.

“Couldst thee not continue?” James urged.

“I could, but not now. Casinos are notorious for tracking big winners, and banning them if it's found they cheated, or used a system to augment their triumph. If need be, we'll come back tomorrow.”

“Ah, excellent strategy.”

“I thought you might approve.” Parading to the check-in desk with a debit card, the girl told the clerk, “We'd like one of your better rooms, with a good view.”

“Our tower luxury suites start on the twenty-second floor, with full-length windows to see the city and beyond.”

“Perfect!”

A bell-hop answered the summons; the couple had no luggage.

“We came away on the spur of the moment...” Mustang hinted.

A lot of couples did, to be sure, marrying in one of a hundred wedding chapels, then rushing back home.

Another plastic card in hand - this one a key - they boarded an elevator for the journey upward.

James cringed as the lift ascended. “What contrivance is this?”

“Calm yourself. Just a bit of modern ingenuity. Eliminates the need for stairs.”

“Ah!”

Larger than the Duryea home, the suite was excess at its finest. A huge living room stood separate from the bedroom, where a king-sized bed dominated the decor. Two bathrooms with showers and a spa tub would make bathing a treat. The breakfast nook and wet bar rounded out the amenities.

Mustang didn't want to think how much the tiny bottles of alcohol cost.

Then again, money was no object. She glimpsed her reflection in the lighted bathroom mirror and grimaced. A boutique could supply a closet full of clothes and, as for James...

He stood, transfixed, at the window, gazing down upon a myriad of lights, marquees, buildings, and the desert stretching west. But for his height and his hair, he might've been a wee child taking his first look at a new toy.

Affectionately, she caressed his cheek. “Awe-inspiring, isn't it?” she whispered.

“Like standing on a mountain.”

“From such a vantage point, it is possible to put life in perspective.”

“Indeed. And to see the benefits wealth and power bring.” He lifted her off the carpet in a jubilant embrace. “My gratitude is thine, my lady.”

She wriggled free. “I don't want your gratitude, just some dignified behavior. For starters, what would you say to a shave?”

“A shave?”

“Is being clean-shaven a crime in your day?”

“No...”

“Let me call the barber, then. A haircut wouldn't hurt, either.”

“As you wish.”

A flurry of activity commenced in the suite. Mustang had the desk send up not only the barber, but a tailor and an array of food. No more had James been measured for an assortment of Armani slacks and shirts, than his neck was wrapped in a sheet while scissors and shaving cream revamped his face.

After the barber toweled dry his skin, Mustang regretted her choice. The resemblance she had initially perceived between this time traveler and Jim Neville was even more pronounced in the absence of facial hair. When an untamed black strand flopped over James' forehead, she choked back a sob.

“You are not pleased?” he questioned.

She bit her lip and signed the barber's voucher, adding a generous tip. That employee bowed his way to the door, leaving Mustang to regain her composure.

James knelt before her, kissing her hands. "Do not cry, my lady. If I have offended thee..."

"It's not that," she sputtered. She tugged at her t-shirt. "It's just... you look so handsome, and I look horrible."

A compulsion to escape consumed her. "You stay here," she directed. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He did not release her fingers. "Where are you going?"

"To buy some new clothes of my own!"

Like fleeing a burning house, Mustang ran across the threshold and half way down the corridor. Elevator doors hissed open; instinctively she concealed herself in the recessed doorway of the housekeeper's closet.

Rightfully so. Ben Espinoza passed within inches, carrying her old backpack, never suspecting her presence. He hesitated before knocking on the suite she'd foolishly taken in her own name. Too late, she recalled Jim's words: "I know how to cover my tracks and protect my... accomplices."

Would James respond to the knock? she wondered. If so, what would he do?

Flouting her safety, she peeked around the corner and waited.

The doorknob turned; all Mustang could see was light filtered through the gap onto Espinoza's tanned face. "Neville!" he exclaimed. So, she hadn't imagined the resemblance.

"I'm sorry, no."

The FBI agent regrouped himself. "I beg your pardon. I'm looking for Elizabeth Duryea."

"My lady is not here."

"When will she be back?"

"It is her prerogative to return in her own good time."

Damn, James was good, thought Mustang. If he could read Espinoza's intent that quickly, keeping him with her might not be a bad idea, after all.

"May I wait?"

"Don't let him in, don't let him in!" she chanted.

James didn't hear her, however, so the visitor was allowed into the suite. Well, if he was waiting, let him wait. She strode toward the elevators and descended to a row of boutiques.

Disdaining dresses, Mustang selected a few elegant blouses and slacks from the collections. She permitted the saleswoman to convince her to add a few items of lingerie to her purchases, along with more feminine shoes than her ratty sneakers. She hoped Espinoza would have abandoned his quest, so she and James could enjoy a quiet evening...

No such luck.

Lugging two large hemp-handled bags from the elevator, the girl nudged the suite door open with her hip. The scene inside baffled her; she dropped her load, scattering parcels on the floor.

Ben Espinoza was trussed to a leather armchair, hands cuffed behind his back with his own hardware. James had split the cord from some electrical appliance - Mustang couldn't tell immediately which one - and taped the exposed wires to the agent's ear lobes. He was about to insert the plug in the wall socket.

## IV

"James!" she yelled.

He wasted a second to glance at her.

"Don't!"

"Why not? Is this man not thy enemy?"

She rushed forward, knowing she couldn't subdue him with physical strength. "Sit, and don't move!" she ordered.

Unseen forces propelled James into the matching armchair, where he struggled to free himself. At a more leisurely pace, Mustang unfastened the wires from Espinoza's ears and threw the cord into the bedroom.

She demanded, "What the hell happened?"

"This varlet claimed he was sent to kill thee!" replied James.

"Be that as it may, ordinary people don't torture their enemies in this country." She grinned sarcastically at the FBI agent. "We leave that to the CIA, don't we, Ben?"

He glowered at her.

"All right, where's the key?"

"In my pocket."

She groped in his trousers and located the small chunk of metal which would loose his bonds, taking an extra moment to empty the shoulder holster under his jacket. At liberty once more, Espinoza rose and stretched.

"You were foolish to come here alone," Mustang chided.

"I didn't want to put my men in danger."

“Smart boy.”

Hotly, James interspersed, “Thou wouldst treat with this lout?”

“He’s not a bad sort, just misguided.”

“Thanks,” snapped Espinoza.

“You come to take me into custody?”

“Not if you give me the formula.”

Laughter erupted like a fountain. “I think you know my answer.”

“Look, Mustang, I’ll let you get away unimpeded, but I need that document. I’ll tell my supervisor I stole your wallet while you were taking a shower.”

The proposition intrigued her. “Why?”

“We’re both aware no form of incarceration would hold you. Besides, I’ve seen what you can do when you get pissed.”

“All the more reason your bosses want me under constant surveillance. It won’t let up ‘til I’m dead, will it, Ben? Like with Parsons...”

“Parsons was a botched job. Blame Hoover, if you blame anybody. He was nuts. These days, we like to close our cases when the steps have been taken to ensure public safety.”

“In my case, what kind of steps?”

“Putting that formula under lock and key.”

“That’s all? The past two years have been about a crumpled sheet of paper?”

“We knew, eventually, you’d find it.”

“Not if you hadn’t given me Parsons’ will!” she stormed.

“We weren’t sure if another copy was tucked into his journals. When you stole them...”

Dared she tell him another copy *did* exist, on Jim’s brother-in-law’s cell phone and/or computer in Livermore? Not likely. “I didn’t steal them! They were mine - like Boleskine is essentially mine, as Parsons’ sole heir, unless your boys have sold it.”

“No, it stands empty, waiting for disposition.”

An idea flashed before her mind’s eye. “You have a Blackberry?” she inquired.

The agent pulled the device from his inside jacket pocket.

“If I erase my file in the government’s database, would anyone try to reconstruct it?”

“As overworked as the computer geeks are, probably not.”

“If I moved to Scotland, would you get off my back, too?”

“One of the stipulations of our security program is periodic monitoring...”

“It wouldn’t be as part of any program. You’d be the only one who knows - and if you ever tried to tell anyone, I guarantee, your head would explode.”

Espinoza favored her with a skeptical glare. “You serious?”

“If you recall your little dip in Loch Ness...”

He exhaled loudly. “The first time the weather service reports some mysterious phenomenon, the agency will know right where you are. How do think we found you this time? That mini-earthquake in the San Bernardino orange grove was a dead giveaway.”

“I *can* control myself.”

“Okay, okay.” At least, this defeat didn’t involve taking a bullet. “You *will* give me the formula, right?”

“Not in a million years.”

“That *has* to be part of the bargain.”

She tugged her wallet from her hip pocket. With the folded sheet, the sole other content was the casino-issued debit card. Two fingers plucked out Parsons’ legacy, holding it like bait for a trout. She knew Espinoza would try to make a grab for it, and when he did...

It burst into flames.

“Damn you!” he cursed.

“It’s for the best, and you know it, Ben. Over and done, no loose ends. Fare thee well, forever.”

“What will you tell your parents about your... trip?”

“Nothing. Mom already knows I’m not coming home, and Dad likely wasn’t upset by the news, after your team tried to shoot him.”

He detected tragic sadness in her voice. “When do you want to go? I’ll reserve the airline ticket.”

Mustang exhibited her still-healing palms. “Sure, then your supervisor tracks the reservation, and we both end up in hot water. I’ll go my own way, if you don’t mind.”

“What about him?” asked Espinoza, wagging a thumb toward James, who’d been listening to the exchange with increasing rage.

“He’ll be long gone by then.”

“The most I can give you is 48 hours...”

“Done.”

“What about money?”

“I can win what I need here in the casino. Is my passport still in the backpack?”

He nodded and surrendered the Blackberry. Her lips moved as she held the compact assembly of components, but he couldn't make out the exact words. The screen blinked and scrolled a list of data, then went blank. She tossed it back to Espinoza.

"Now, scram," she concluded.

He spun toward her, hand on the doorknob. "It's been... an experience I'll never forget."

"Just don't forget what'll happen if you divulge the secret!"

Touching his forehead in acknowledgment, he departed.

"Damn thee, woman!" James barked, his complexion as red as the setting sun through the window. "Undo thy sorcery!"

She dropped to one knee beside the armchair, stroking his smooth cheek and hair. "I ask your forgiveness, James. Better the man go on his way, than his comrades descend upon us *en masse*."

His roar lowered to a confidential undertone. "Thou lied to him?"

"No, I did not lie."

"Thou struck a deal with which I could not live, to leave home and country..."

"People leave their homes and countries every day. It's quite common."

Gauging him sufficiently calm, she dispersed the invisible restraints holding him fast to the cushions. He stood and embraced her. "I shall be with thee every mile..."

No way could she tell him. Then again, he would never know what transpired - the whole ordeal would be a hazy memory lingering through time and space.

The teen didn't have a chance to gather the scattered purchases and slip into a new outfit. They didn't make it to the bedroom, for that matter. Passion reigned, Mustang resigned this phase of her life would be gone with the dawn.

For all intents and purposes, it was Jim Neville making love to her that night - his face, his body, except for the multiple scars.

She traced the white lines on James' chest lightly with her finger, while they rested on the sofa, cuddled together. "Have you no doctor, no physician to tend your wounds?"

"The Saxons 'round about my father's castle put their faith in folk remedies. In the heat of battle, there is no time for that idiocy. We bind the gashes with linen and hope they do not fester."

"It's a hard life, isn't it?"

“For the Saxons, I suppose. We Normans have servants to perform the arduous tasks within the walls.”

“How do you spend your days?”

“Bedding any wench I please, spending my father’s gold on the finest clothes, and losing vast sums at cards.”

Her incredulous gaze brought a chuckle from his lips.

“If I understand the phrase correctly, I would’ve been called the ‘black sheep’ of the family. Were I not the eldest son, heir to my father’s title, he would’ve disowned me long since.”

“What was going on in the casino wasn’t that foreign to you, then?”

“No, only its magnitude.”

“Would your father have preferred you to wed and sire the next generation of heirs?”

“Thou art perceptive, Elizabeth. In fact, though it cannot be proven legally, I fathered no less than six bastards in the past decade.”

So, the mediaeval era wasn’t what history books implied.

He took her silence as a rebuke. “Thou thinks less of me for my rakish ways?”

“There are men in this very hotel, I’ve no doubt, whose behavior far outstrips yours. Nothing surprises me anymore.”

The topic was forgotten when he bent his mouth to her naked breast. She arched her back and suppressed a scream.

There was something to be said for unadulterated lust, Mustang determined, lying awake once James drifted off to sleep. It fulfilled a physical need, yet didn’t impact the emotions. The past two days with James hadn’t obliterated her grief over Jim’s death, nor her love for him; it numbed her to a level where she could function rationally, as with Ben Espinoza, and save her tears for later.

Experiencing lust eradicated much of Mustang’s naivete, also. Novels and old movies didn’t emulate reality, as much as directors and writers claimed, “Art imitates life.” Her eyes were opened, and she didn’t like what she saw. Her choice to return to Boleskine had been a chance inspiration, but she believed it the wisest decision she’d made since inheriting her powers from Parsons.

James stirred and rolled off the sofa. Landing on the carpet, he grunted to consciousness. “What...”

“You were dreaming,” she soothed, looking down at his tousled black hair and trim physique.

“Of thee, in a bejeweled gown, on my arm before the king’s own knights....”

“And did they scoff at you passing off a farmer’s daughter as nobility?”

“They bowed to thee, accepting thee as the great lady thou art.”

He jerked her off the cushions and they playfully tussled on the floor. Their final coupling took place in the shower, as the sun rose, then both dressed for breakfast.

They strolled along the Strip, not totally deserted, despite the hour. An enticing aroma drifted with the breeze from a donut shop; they indulged themselves with sweet pastries and hot chocolate.

There would be no last kiss for this man who’d provided her with an education in basic psychology not to be equaled in any school. She’d already rehearsed the words which would send him back through the centuries, and envisioned the moment she would utter them.

Winning another \$150,000 on the casino slots preceded their return to the suite. James unlocked the door and thrust it wide...

“Be thou, James Michael, restored to thy rightful time and place in the house of Duke Armand de Salisbury, thy father.”

A rippling sensation - the same as had transported her from a high school government class to a time sixty years in the past - enveloped the man, and his image pulsed and faded. Mustang picked up the phone on the end table. “I’m checking out,” she informed the desk clerk.

She turned to the window, where James’ sword sparkled in the sun, suspended from a wall sconce.

The belt and scabbard buckled around her waist, his ring still adorning her finger, Mustang snatched the backpack Espinoza had left beside the armchair and descended to the lobby. Her bill settled, she ventured into the July sun, not caring whether anyone questioned the lightning strike which would take her... home. It didn’t matter, either, that the entire Las Vegas Strip went dark for 30 seconds after the bolt reverberated between the buildings.

She had won her independence in the worst possible way - with death, mayhem and destruction. The best thing about the future would be not having to deal with society, living on her own terms in quiet isolation along Loch Ness.