

The Mustang Chronicles:

Stoned Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Floating.

A strange sensation, disembodied yet conscious, unable to discern the surroundings through a murky haze. Something sharp had struck and caused a ripple of pain.

It pierced the gloom again.

An agonized scream.

Mustang Duryea - Lady Elizabeth Neville to the Scottish locals - heard the cry. She glanced up from repairing a split leg on the dusty sofa, peering through the open Gate Lodge door. The humid June air provided only minor relief from musty indoor odors, but a little ventilation was better than none.

She should have cleaned out this tiny abode the previous year, before winter set in - and mice had burrowed into the abandoned dwelling, desecrating the last tangible evidence her grandfather, rocket scientist Jack Parsons, had spent decades on the property. Not needing these four rooms of furnishings herself, she'd heard about the annual Dores rummage sale, which would raise money for tourist-dependent artisans feeling the brunt of a struggling economy.

Now, she laid the hammer on a wobbly end table, beside a sword in its scabbard, and signet ring. Originally the possessions of James Michael of Salisbury, Mustang had brought them to Boleskine from Las Vegas, and forgotten she'd left them in the Gate Lodge bedroom. They'd fetch a very good price at the sale, if promoted as millennium-old antiques.

The dark-haired teen shuffled to the threshold. Whoever was wailing had tremendous lung capacity, she mused. The noise seemed to penetrate her ears into her being's very core, non-stop.

Quickly growing annoying.

Progressing to where Boleskine House's winding drive veered off the main road, the teen could not trace the sound's origin. It might have traveled miles, across Loch Ness or from a nearby village.

If it continued much longer, she'd have to search, just to silence it.

Even the horses were skittish, when she entered the barn.

"At least, I know it's not my imagination," she whispered to one of the bay mares as she draped a blanket over its back.

The girth tightened and her black hair rubber-banded in a pony tail, Mustang set off through wooded acreage, noticing the volume increase as she headed southwest, parallel to the B852 thoroughfare. She avoided Inverfarigaig,

like she avoided interacting with everyone except Ben MacPherson's feed delivery driver and the youth who brought her groceries from Does.

Past Foyers, she steered her mount due south, toward Whitebridge. A development company from Inverness was tearing up the countryside with bulldozers and front end loaders to create a housing complex.

The shrill cry rose from the site like a fountain.

Mustang tied the mare's reins to one of the few remaining trees and continued on foot to where construction workers stared past mounds of rich loam into a hole. Climbing half-way up the dirt pile, she gazed at the tip of a vertical stone, not in keeping with the volcanic rock formations or mountain ranges common in the region.

She could see the carvings, and didn't need to guess what they symbolized.

Countless tourists and archeologists flocked to Scotland to visit numerous stone circles, erected by Druids thousands of years earlier.

Had someone died working on the pillar, thus explaining the screams when this incomplete monument was unearthed? she puzzled.

The construction crew didn't seem disturbed by the reverberating, endless shout echoing in her brain. To not embarrass herself, or call attention to the powers she'd inherited from her grandfather, she shook long tresses off her shoulders to conceal her face as she muttered, "Shut up, already!"

The sudden quiet raised a sigh in her throat.

"What do you want?" she probed.

An ethereal, genderless reply in Scotland's ancient Gaelic: "Who are you?"

"A seeker of truth. And you?"

"The same. Where am I?"

A stumper, to be sure. "I'm not certain. Describe what you see."

"I can see, yet I cannot see. It's like being in a dark cairn..."

"A cairn?" she countered.

"A burial cave."

"Sealed by a stone pillar?"

A glance to her left confirmed the laborers had retreated, the foreman calling a break. If, somehow, an entity was trapped behind the rock, and she accidentally - or deliberately - released it, better they not witness the event.

How tall the stone might be, Mustang had no way of telling, based on the exposed portion. She'd seen photos of Stonehenge, and this was comparable in width to those massive blocks. A word from her lips would move it; would the displaced soil crash down upon whatever opening lay below and smother the captive?

“What do you remember from... before you were trapped?” queried the teen.

“We were preparing for the summer solstice. The equipment used to move the stones into place had shattered, and the others rushed to manually erect the last, most important marker, while I finished my engravings. We took the rain as a good omen, not ceasing our toil. The lightning struck as I raised hammer to chisel...”

Mustang knew about damage caused by lightning, as the palms of both hands verified. Her command over the natural elements enabled her to travel thousands of miles in an instant - to Japan, Italy, Ireland...

The bolt must've knocked the carver off the pillar into the cave, then the stone had wedged against the opening...

Descending the man-made hill to within inches of the stone, Mustang surmised scraping back the dirt would take hours. Experience made her conscious of safety; too often had she spoken impulsively and wreaked havoc on those she'd intended to help.

Still, it could only be the spirit of the one trapped calling to her. The body would've long since died.

Her fingers traced the deep cuts in the stone where the bulldozer had struck it.

“Are you there?” the voice asked.

Mustang retracted her hand. “Did you feel that?”

“Aye.”

“Did you feel earlier, when metal impacted the stone?”

“Aye.”

The truth made Mustang shudder. There was no cave; lightning had propelled the carver into the stone itself.

No way could the young woman leave the rock, pulsing with life, to the whims of the developer. Nonetheless, what consequences would there be, unleashing someone from past ages on the modern world? She'd had to deal with Francis of Assisi, Mark Twain, Mahatma Gandhi, sending them back whence they came. In this situation, she could not consign even the worst criminal back to a stone prison...

Clamor above drew her gaze upward. News cameras and constables were gathering at the vantage point, peering down at her.

“You, lass! Out of there!” barked a sergeant.

Time for deliberation over, Mustang murmured, “Carver, be freed of your confinement.”

The stone shifted, and thunder rumbled in the clear sky. Mustang pitched sideways, falling onto the loose earth. A slender, calloused hand reached to assist her.

It belonged to a tall, lithe figure, totally naked, crowned by a wreath of exquisite golden hair.

“Oh, hell!”

Rather than straighten and brush off her jeans, Mustang lurched upright and shoved her companion behind the stone, beyond the spectators’ view.

“Why do you handle me so roughly?” objected the stern Gaelic contralto, blue eyes squinting against bright sunlight.

“Why don’t you have any clothes?”

“We labor naked on our circles, to better infuse the stones with the proper energies.”

“You infused this particular stone with energy, all right. Yours.” Mustang peered around the pillar’s corner. Had videographers captured the manifestation? she pondered.

She’d fouled recording device circuits more than once in the past...

An additional distraction was required, however, to pull the mob away from the hole until the pair could make good their escape. Years of trying to use her power in positive ways, bringing harm to none, seldom brought success. She could explode one of the construction vehicles, or cause an earthquake...

The capped pipe she’d passed near a freshly poured concrete foundation would prove more appropriate.

The water spout shot fifty feet in the air, propelled by unseen forces. All bodies turned from the stone to marvel at the phenomenon.

“Run!” Mustang spat.

The pair scrambled up the opposite slope and ducked behind a muddy pick-up truck parked near the supply shed. Peeking through smeared windows, Mustang saw men fighting to secure the water pipe, while the others watched - and filmed.

“They’ll think this place is cursed, pretty soon,” she chuckled.

“It’s very blessed.”

“In your day, perhaps. Not anymore.”

Something else she noticed: a sweat-drenched t-shirt slung over the steering wheel, to dry, she supposed. Opening the door gingerly, she yanked the blue fabric off the molded plastic.

“Put this on,” she instructed the carver.

The blonde recoiled.

“If you want to get out of here alive, *put it on!*”

Mustang ended up draping the shirt over the woman’s head, and manipulating her arms through the sleeve holes. The owner must’ve been a large, beefy sort, because the hem hung to the woman’s thighs.

Some mini-skirts were shorter, Mustang admitted mentally.

She pointed toward trees fifty feet to their right. “They won’t see us, and we can work our way around to my horse.”

By the time officials and curiosity seekers returned to the stone pillar, they’d forgotten about the two mysterious figures. Thus, Mustang and her companion mounted the bay mare unnoticed, except for the middle-aged driver of a white Smart car, bearing the insignia of Heritage Scotland.

Extra weight a factor, Mustang kept the horse at a trot and off the roads. She knew what lay ahead - descriptions of modern transportation, housing and indoor plumbing. Best to get this woman’s story first.

“What’s your name?” she inquired.

“Brede, priestess of the western lands.”

“Priestess?”

Brede snickered. “I’m not surprised you don’t recognize the term. As the Roman invaders have violated the countryside, they’ve wiped out the Druid clans.”

Mustang searched latent memories from high school world history. Roman soldiers had taken the British Isles 2,000 years ago, give or take a century.

“If you were a priestess, why were you carving the stones?”

“I was also an artist. Three others from our village were laboring on the other points of the circle when the storm hit. Have you seen them?”

A pensive hesitation preceded Mustang’s reply. “They’re long dead.”

“How say you?”

“You’ve been trapped in that stone for many, many years.”

“Impossible!”

“Nothing is impossible,” chuckled Mustang. “I’ve learned that, first-hand.”

“You may be right. Wind, rain and fire do as they please, as they’ve often proved.”

The two fell silent as they bounced toward Boleskine House. Approaching two thick posts marking the drive, Brede leapt from the saddle, enchanted.

“What a delightful home you have!” she gushed, rushing through the open Gate Lodge entrance.

If she thinks that about this shack, Mustang pondered, what will she say about the main house?

She, too, alighted, glimpsing a note tacked to the warped door. The truck to pick up her donation had come and gone, she discovered. She'd have to contact the rummage sale organizers to arrange a second trip.

Without a phone, that would be difficult. Her mute debate about choosing to live without external forms of communication was interrupted when Brede emerged holding the leather scabbard and signet ring.

"Are these your husband's?" she ventured.

"I have no husband. They're just remnants... of another life."

"The craftsmanship is exceptional; the blade keen and sharp."

"If you like them, you may keep them."

"Thank you."

The woman retreated into the inner shadows; Mustang waved her toward the horse. She slipped the padlock on the hasp and locked the caretaker's dwelling for another year.

Brede's quizzical expression amused her host. "You do not live here?"

"No." She laced the horse's reins through her fingers, and they strolled up the gravel drive.

"Are you a queen?" gasped Brede when they rounded the last curve in full view of the sprawling Georgian dwelling.

"Just a kid from America."

Brede mouthed the word uncertainly. "Am... erica?"

Hot and hungry, details could wait. "Never mind. How about some food?"

"I *am* famished."

"First, we'll get you some real clothes." Mustang unlocked the deadbolt on the steel-reinforced door, and led Brede across the dim main hall to her bedroom. A good bit taller than she was, Mustang still estimated her oversized t-shirts, cut-off jean shorts and sandals would fit the statuesque female.

She left Brede to change, moving through the rooms to throw wide the windows. The breeze over Loch Ness could be felt, easing the mid-day swelter only slightly. Some days, Mustang regretted not having Glenn MacDonough install central air conditioning when the renovations to Aleister Crowley's former sanctuary were completed the prior summer. Better, though, to preserve the ozone and reduce global warming, even a fraction.

Ten minutes later, her guest appeared in the kitchen doorway. Not particularly disconcerted that Brede believed the appliances to be demons, Mustang prepared tossed salads and poured apple juice into two glasses. Druids evidently enjoyed some level of culture, because she didn't have to demonstrate how to use the fork.

Their appetites sated, the “grand tour” began, and a lively round of twenty questions. Mustang did her best to provide Brede with simple answers about electricity, clothing styles and the bathroom shower. They were about to head outdoors when a car rumbled along the drive.

Mustang’s sole idea: a chariot without horses.

Brede grasped the concept, tentatively.

The Mistress of Boleskine signaled her into the living room, emerging alone into the afternoon sun. She’d become accustomed to lost tourists seeking directions to the Nessie museum, or Crowley enthusiasts anxious to poke around his old homestead. The shaggy-haired individual who stepped from the Smart car didn’t impress her.

Until he spoke.

“Lady Elizabeth Neville?” His voice a rich tenor, it lacked the harsh Scottish burr traditional in the region.

“Yes.”

“I’ve come to talk to you about the Whitebridge stone.”

She bit her bottom lip. Another major error in judgment, its consequences evident too late. “Oh, hell.”

II

Not one to blatantly lie, Mustang Duryea preferred to flee confrontation. She strode toward the barn, to refill the troughs for the five horses stabled there.

The unwanted visitor dogged her steps. “If you don’t talk to me now, you’ll talk to me later,” he stated.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Heritage Scotland is an organization dedicated to preserving ancient artifacts in their original condition, to prevent companies like that housing developer from running rough-shod over our history. Your testimony may be vital...”

“What testimony?” Mustang sloshed a bucket of water from the spigot toward his designer shoes, forcing him to leap backward. “I don’t know anything worthwhile.”

“I think you do.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Then, why were you at the site, and on horseback?”

Mustang glowered, “I don’t own a car.”

“Who was the girl with you?”

“A friend.”

“Is she here?”

“None of your business.”

One chore complete, Mustang grabbed a pitchfork to move bales of straw into the stalls before cleaning them. She waved the prongs dangerously close to the man’s torso.

“If you love this country, it’s in your best interest to stand up for what’s right,” he pleaded.

She retorted, “It’s in your best interest to leave and never come back.”

Resigned, he complied. Mustang watched his departure from the edge of the corral, before returning to the house.

“Did that man bear ill tidings?” prodded Brede, studying Mustang’s grimace when she appeared on the living room threshold.

“Nothing I shouldn’t have expected.” She exhaled loudly and feigned a smile, plopping into the cane-backed rocking chair. “Tell me about how you lived... in Roman times.”

Her guest settled on the green sofa. “Nature guided our actions, from the rising of the sun to its setting over the western shore. Children were born and raised to cherish the Druid traditions, praised by the Bards in poetry and song. The priests decided disputes, and offered advice when needed. We grew grain on the open land, and reveled in the beauty of the earth.”

“It would amuse you, I think, to meet modern day Druids,” Mustang chortled.

“The Druids survived into the present age?”

“Only faint copies. They are trying to escape conformist ideas of organized religious sects, but won’t give up their computers, cell phones or cars to really live in tune with nature. The most they do is hang out at Stonehenge on the summer solstice. At least, that’s what I read in the textbook used in my high school comparative religion class.”

“I sense neither you nor I belong in this time,” lamented Brede.

“Not... out there. Here, on this property, yes.”

“The powers of nature run very strong around this loch. That is why we were constructing the stone circle in an auspicious place. The priests wished to draw upon that potency to augment our crops and increase the health of the community...”

“But it was never finished?”

“I... don’t know. What I saw when I... escaped the cairn leads me to believe not.”

Mustang grit her teeth. "It wasn't a cairn where you were trapped."

"What, then?"

"Somehow, your being merged with the stone which you'd been carving."

Brede's pale countenance darkened as she contemplated the possibility.

"What reason..."

"Nature needs no reason."

"You... don't believe in destiny, fate?"

"I believe in taking responsibility for my actions, even when they're impulsive. Others I have... brought forth, I've restored to their... previous condition. In your case, I can't do that, which creates one hell of a dilemma."

"You mean, you could return me to the stone?"

Mustang shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not going to try. No one should spend eternity confined to cold rock. You deserve to live out your life, and I must teach you what I can about the current age to help you take care of yourself."

"I... am grateful."

Brede's host toyed with a black pawn from the chess board on the inlaid gaming table to her left. "If I were you, I'd be afraid."

"Pray confide in me. Why?"

"The 21st century has far worse than the Romans, Brede. Soldiers today need not engage in hand-to-hand combat, they can launch rockets from hundreds of miles away and destroy entire cities. They kill with guns, not swords or lances. And those who aren't at war are consumed by unbridled greed, lust for power and sheer stupidity."

"The weapons and methods may have changed, but the hearts of men do not," grieved the blonde priestess. "I do not need another thirty summers to learn that." She rose and stretched. "I will allow you to show me your world, then I will decide if I wish to remain."

"And, if you don't?"

"Druids have... means of bringing an equitable end to a difficult situation."

Mustang didn't press; she didn't really want to know what the woman meant. Rising from the rocker, she led the way outdoors. "We'll ride, if you don't mind."

"I love horses. In fact, though it was not my duty, I often took care of the horses stabled in our village. I felt I could touch their hearts, and they mine."

"Same here. That's how, back home, I earned my nickname."

Brede echoed, "Nickname?"

"A... name which better describes a person than the one given by their parents."

“Ah. What was this nickname?”

“Mustang.”

“The meaning?”

“A type of horse where I grew up.”

“Where was that?”

“A land far from here, of which your people were not aware.”

“The fairie lands?”

“No, across the western ocean. I mentioned it earlier. America.”

“Ah.”

Inside the barn, Mustang described modern leather tack, Brede being unfamiliar with the style. The latter caught on quickly, though, and soon the pair were cantering north toward Does.

The settlement’s buildings didn’t startle Brede, being homey and quaint. The contents, however, made her shudder. In the grocer’s, cans of vegetables, slabs of meat, milk jugs and soda bottles displayed in refrigerated cases, and Loch Ness souvenir t-shirts made her blue eyes widen.

She fingered the cotton-blend cloth tentatively. “What manner of creature is this?” she gaped at the cartoonish rendering of the famous monster.

“A creature said to live in the lake,” replied Mustang.

“They do not resemble this in the least!”

Mustang’s own jaw sagged. “They? More than one?”

“Of course. Their colonies interact freely with our people.”

“Are you certain we’re talking about the same... animals?”

“They aren’t animals, really. Nor are they fish. They have intelligence, gentleness, and appreciation for nature.”

The notion the Loch Ness monsters had existed for millennia took Mustang a few minutes to assimilate. She’d heard of turtles living two centuries, and parrots surviving their octogenarian owners. So long as the supply of food remained constant, anything could be possible for the mysterious lake inhabitants. Mustang next led Brede to the shoreline, where motorized water craft were docked.

“No oars?” the woman sniffed.

“The same concept as motorized chariots.”

“Like your visitor’s small white box on wheels.”

Which, had Mustang noticed, was parked near the Does Inn.

Its rump, brown-haired driver had noticed them, to be sure, and traversed the main road toward them. No escape now, Mustang sighed, except to throw him in the lake, *a la* the FBI’s Ben Espinoza.

Too many spectators on hand for that.

“I got the impression you never left your precious estate, Lady Neville,” came his biting baritone.

She snapped, “I do as I please.”

He bowed slightly to Brede. “May I have the pleasure?”

“This is my... cousin,” conceded Mustang. “Brede... Carver.”

The blonde smiled thinly. “And your name, good sir?” she asked in the Gaelic she had continuously spoken, though Mustang heard in English, due to her powers.

The Heritage Scotland official displayed his amazement openly. “Where did you learn the ancient dialect?”

Mustang’s ears registered English, but she could tell by Brede’s astonished mien, he’d uttered the phrase in Gaelic.

“No *ancient dialect*. It is the language of my birth,” she snarled.

“Then you must live far from civilization, because even the variant linguists are struggling to preserve isn’t half so... vibrant.”

“She asked your name,” interspersed Mustang.

He shifted his gaze toward the teen. “You understood her?”

“Of course.”

“She’s not really your cousin, is she?”

“What makes you think so?”

“I don’t see a family resemblance. You’re dark as night, with a touch of recklessness about you, and she is a ray of sunshine, serious and steady.”

“I’ve known fraternal twins who looked nothing alike,” Mustang stated. “Just answer her question.”

“I’m Kyle Bowie, of clan MacDonald.”

Mustang deduced he still intended to interrogate them about the Whitebridge stone. She grasped Brede’s right arm and tugged. “We best be off.”

“Don’t go,” protested Bowie, clamping thick fingers around Brede’s other arm. “May I buy you a cup of tea, or coffee?”

Mustang let Brede make the call. The Druid would have to learn, soon enough, to read the hearts of men...

“A gracious offer, but no,” Brede declined. “There is much we must do.”

“May I offer you a ride, then?”

That idea brought a laugh from Mustang’s lips. Bowie’s Smart had only two seats.

Brede demurred. “We have our horses.”

“May I call at your home?”

“That is for... Lady Neville to decide.”

“All this politeness is making me sick,” Mustang snorted. “If I tell you we know nothing about the stone, will that satisfy you, Mr. Bowie?”

“Then, why did you come to the construction site?”

“Curiosity. Watching human beings destroy the countryside for sheer profit intrigues me.”

“And, if I agree that such is a horrendous travesty, and I work to preserve Scotland as it should be?” Bowie persisted.

“I would commend you, and bid you good day.” She ushered Brede toward the horses.

He called, “But, you won’t assist me?”

Mustang spun. “How?”

“There’s a court hearing Monday in Inverness. The magistrate will decide whether to order an injunction against the contractor, to stop the housing project in favor of designating the site a historic monument. Your... inspection of the stone and its carvings will add weight to our case.”

“I don’t know a damned thing about the carvings.”

“Yet, you understand ancient Gaelic without being able to speak it.”

“That’s... an anomaly of my brain.”

“Maybe that anomaly includes being able to decipher the engravings.”

“For that, you’d need to ask the one who carved them.” Inadvertently, Mustang glanced at Brede.

Bowie did likewise. “Can you...”

“They are praises to the wind, water, fire and earth,” Brede summarized.

“You mean, there are four stones?”

“More than four, if the circle was completed.”

“Are you an archeologist, too?”

Mustang stepped between them. “You don’t want to go there, Mr. Bowie.”

“Kyle, please.” He glowered down at her. “Don’t you get it? This could make our organization a viable force against the commercial developers. Having a consultant familiar with the symbols and language...”

Scarred hands raised in a gesture of surrender, Mustang allowed him clear view of Brede.

Who glared at the marks on her companion’s palms. “You have been tortured by the Romans?”

Mustang’s chin fell to her chest, as Bowie’s brown eyes refocused on her, as well.

“Oh, hell.”

III

At a full gallop, the two women raced toward Boleskine House. Brede didn't comprehend why her host had panicked, but would not abandon her to her fears. Mustang, on the other hand, realized it was only a matter of time before Kyle Bowie drove up the winding gravel track and confronted them once more.

He'd have a lot more questions.

One advantage: he wouldn't come at night. After her world tour, Mustang had no qualms about people wandering the property in daylight, but she'd used her powers to set up a series of unpleasant and unseen traps to discourage nocturnal visitors.

Locals believed the grounds to be haunted.

She didn't refute that assumption.

The sun dropped low over Loch Ness as the pair stabled the horses, grooming and feeding them after their hot outing. Mustang would welcome a quiet evening, after a cool shower and hearty sandwich.

Brede mirrored those sentiments, though she peppered Mustang with questions of her own, seated at the dining room table.

“You'll face more important lessons in the coming days than you could learn listening to my tales of foolishness,” remonstrated the Mistress of Boleskine. “Besides, quite a few people I've told have ended up dead.”

“I pray you tell me: what manner of torture did you endure to sustain such wounds?”

“It wasn't torture in the sense you mean. Besides, you mustn't refer to events from your own era as if they happened in the recent past.”

“Those events did happen in my recent past.”

“I know that, and so do you. No one, like Bowie, will understand.”

Brede acquiesced, biting into her sandwich. The pair retired early, windows open to let in a cool breeze and assorted animal cries.

Dawn found Mustang on the grassy hillock near a pile of rotting rubble - Jack Parsons' altar - practicing the blocks, kicks and punches she'd learned from a young Wushu master in a Beijing park. Brede ascended the rise, intrigued by the swift movements and perspiration soaking the teen's hair and t-shirt.

“This is a place of great power,” she observed, caressing the lightning-shattered wood shards. “Are you calling upon air, or fire with this ritual?”

Her concentration broken, Mustang stumbled to a halt. “Neither, though I have seen them manifest here. I come up here a couple times a week to exercise.”

“You look like you’re battling a thousand invisible adversaries,” Brede observed.

“I didn’t learn this as a fighting method, though some cultures have used it as such. I don’t need to raise a finger to defeat those who stand against me.”

Mustang massaged a cramp in her right thigh. “I could explain the philosophy behind the martial arts, but it’d be easier for you to read a detailed account by someone who lived and studied in the East. Good introduction to English, also.”

“English?”

“You hear me in your own tongue, Brede, but I’m speaking a totally different language. You need to learn it to survive in this country.”

“But, if your words are translated inside my head, then why...”

“Because, I won’t always be with you to... facilitate that gift.”

“Ah.”

Mustang muttered a hushed command, then pointed to the trail. “We better get back to the house for breakfast.”

Brede’s confused expression proved her ears were now registering gibberish.

A first grade teacher needed patience, and Mustang admittedly lacked that virtue. Yet, she meticulously identified every item along the trail for Brede - the types of trees, wild flowers, soil, clouds and sky. Within the five-bedroom dwelling, she corrected the Druid’s pronunciation of the harder words, watching her gradually become comfortable with the vowels and consonants.

Translating the verbal into the written would be tougher, given how the spellings of some sounds were not uniform. Mustang opted to delay that effort for a few days, at least.

She let Brede cook eggs and sausages, to familiarize herself with how the electric stove functioned and dispel any fears. “Less dangerous than an open fire,” commented the woman - in Gaelic - setting two plates on the dining room table.

Mustang nodded her response. She could still understand the ancient verbiage, a distinct advantage. She deliberated taking Brede to Inverness, the nearest real city, to give her a true taste of modern civilization. That, too, could wait.

Kyle Bowie, nonetheless, would not wait. His fist pounding on the front door caused Brede to splash soapy water on the kitchen floor in the midst of washing the dishes. Mustang tossed her towel on the counter and marched into the main hall.

The steel panel slid back an inch. "You, again?"

Enough for his fingers to slip into the gap. "Until I convince you to speak for what's right, it'll be me, again and again."

"Right, like wrong, are subjective ideals. What's right for me - and Brede, at the moment - is being left to our seclusion."

"What, you some kind of nutty religious hermits?"

"Religion has nothing to do with it. It's called self-preservation."

"Then, we're talking about the same thing," Bowie confirmed. "I'm intent on the self-preservation of Scottish history and culture."

An idea crept into Mustang's brain, and she grinned, opening the door wide. "Come in, Mr. Bowie."

"Kyle, please," he remarked.

"Have a seat in the living room, Kyle, and I'll get Brede."

In the kitchen, Brede was drying her hands after draining the sink.

"Brede, I think I left my mug of cocoa in the living room. Would you..."

The priestess comprehended "living room" and "mug", and moved in that direction.

Kyle Bowie could become her teacher, and Brede would open his eyes in unsettling ways.

The benefits would be mutual, and leave her in peace.

Except, she discovered them chatting in Gaelic when she peered around the corner fifteen minutes later.

Give him time, she decided. He'll figure it out when he urges her to testify in a court filled with old Scots who barely speak proper English themselves.

Mustang was folding a load of laundry in her bedroom when Brede flopped on the mattress, a somber frown clouding her features.

"What's wrong?" queried her host.

Her English flowed slowly. "Kyle... wants to... take me... to see the stone. I... am... afraid."

"Afraid you might again be trapped?"

"Yes."

"No need for that. My advice, if you choose to go: be careful what you tell him about... your life."

"He... thinks I am... at university."

"Good. You don't have to lie, nor do you have to tell him everything."

Mustang grabbed a stack of towels and headed for the linen closet. "Do you think you'll be back for dinner?"

"Kyle said... there's a little... restaurant in... Whitebridge?"

“A place to eat,” Mustang clarified.

“Ah.”

It was the teen’s turn to be hesitant. “Have you ever... dealt with men... as... as...”

Brede chuckled. “I presided at many... joinings. I see in Kyle’s... eyes... he desires more... than my... knowledge of the... stone’s carvings.”

“I just wanted to be sure.”

“He would make an interesting... husband.”

“He’d drive me crazy,” countered Mustang. She passed Brede two 50-pound British notes. “While you’re out, have him take you to buy some clothes.”

“Why? These are... fine.”

“You’ll be needing some that fit right. Shirts, slacks, shoes, underwear.”

“I... will try to remember.”

“I’m sure Mr. Bowie will be very helpful when choosing the underwear,” Mustang snickered.

Brede left her tucking matched socks in a chest of drawers and Mustang was, frankly, glad to have her out of the house. Her relationship with her mother had been strained, and she’d seldom spent much time with other females, except a few days with her cousin, Rachel - a kindred spirit when it came to the supernatural. Living in close quarters with anyone, for that matter, made her edgy.

She spent the afternoon on horseback, the humidity less oppressive than Friday. Ample shade from the property’s countless trees made the ride more pleasant. Reminded of her father’s Montana ranch each time she navigated narrow trails her mount’s hooves had created in the months since she’d permanently left the States, she felt homesick not for the people, but the 2,000 acre expanse she had roamed over the course of 18 years.

Misuse of the power Jack Parsons bequeathed to her had forced the abrupt departure, combined with the death of Jim Neville and the discovery of Parsons’ anti-gravity propulsion formula. The tenuous truce with the FBI - and their ignorance about Neville’s brother-in-law being sent the formula shortly before rookie agents gunned Jim down outside a California convenience store - permitted her a semblance of peace, when her mind let the memories recede into semi-oblivion.

Mustang heard the engine before she saw it, and remembered it was the Saturday Ben MacPherson’s driver delivered the regular load of oats and straw for the horses. She veered along a side path and returned to the corral in time to sign for the order and slip the wiry young man a generous tip.

“There’s a message for ye, ma’am,” he announced, pulling an envelope from the pocket of his baggy shorts.

Humorous to hear herself called “ma’am”, when he was older than she. Being known in the region as Lady Neville, though, she knew it to be a sign of respect.

The slip of paper inside the envelope startled her.

Block lettering reminded Mustang of Jack Parsons’ script; the letterhead, however, declared the note to be from her neighbor, Glenn MacDonough.

“Whitebridge developer planning retribution for your interference with the stone. Bring your horses to my stables, and plan to spend the night in my guest room.”

Did the construction crew at the housing site believe her an associate of Bowie’s, intent on stopping their work? If nothing else, it would make for a fun evening, watching burly carpenters and cement masons scared out of their wits prowling Boleskine’s grounds.

She borrowed the feed driver’s pen, flipped the sheet over, and scribbled on the back: “Thanks for the invitation and the warning. All will be well.”

The young man carried her response back to town, while she finished stacking straw bales in the barn’s store room. Such strenuous activity invigorated the girl, as did cleaning the water troughs and refilling them for the horses.

She had little choice but to jump in the shower and wash off the day’s perspiration.

Water streaming down her face and hair soothed tight muscles and gave Mustang a chance to think how to best observe the forthcoming attack. Brede had hung James of Salisbury’s sword in the guest room, after finding it at the Gate Lodge. A light enough weapon to employ in her own defense...

There was a better way.

Toting the aluminum step ladder from the barn took longer than she expected, especially juggling a sandwich and juice bottle. The martial arts exercises weren’t doing enough to keep her in shape, she surmised. Seated on the Gate Lodge roof to watch the sun set over Loch Ness, she ate the light supper. She lounged on the slanted tiles as stars claimed the sky, keeping vigil for the intruders.

Night birds trilling helped her relax, until a pair of headlights veered off the main road past the old gate posts. Mustang swore under her breath: Bowie’s idiotic Smart car.

She leapt like a tigress from her perch, directly in the vehicle’s path. Bowie slammed on the brakes, sending a spray of gravel in every direction.

Passenger and driver scrambled from the compact, flustered.

“What’s wrong?” Brede panted.

Mustang’s jaw dropped at the sight of them in matching blue and gold rugby shirts - not what they’d been wearing when they’d left hours earlier. “What on earth are you two supposed to be - clones?”

“You told me to buy clothes.”

“For you, not him.”

Bowie snapped, “I’ll pay you back, if you’re that much the miser.”

“Forget it. Park that thing behind the Gate Lodge and get out of sight,”

Mustang instructed him.

“We spoiling your party?”

“Not yet.”

The Heritage Scotland representative complied with her request, and the Smart tucked nicely beneath two gnarled pines. The pair followed Mustang up the ladder, Bowie unsure about the roof’s steep slant. His protests ended when a horde of flashlights and fiery torches lit weird patterns between the trees.

“What the hell...” Bowie hissed.

Mustang related the contents of Glenn MacDonough’s note. Brede froze when two score men slunk within five feet of the Gate Lodge.

“What have they in mind?” whispered Bowie.

Mustang muttered, “Burn the place, most likely.”

“Don’t you intend to stop them?”

She reclined on the shingles. “Oh, they’ll be stopped soon enough.”

Stillness broken only by the crunching of steel-toed boots on dry twigs, incorporeal howls rose like a symphony crescendo, punctuated by shouted expletives and terrified shrieks.

Mustang hushed Bowie with a glance. Below, rotund laborers discarded their torches, awkwardly sprinting toward the row of trucks.

Brede almost lost her footing when a crackling torch bounced against a tender oak, and the tree’s own branches bent down and beat out the flames.

“Sorcery!” she squealed.

“Shhh...” cautioned Mustang.

The construction foreman, last to reach the gate, nonetheless heard the cry. He halted and waved his flashlight beam in a full circle, illuminating nothing but the Gate Lodge facade and thorny underbrush.

“Your actions have convicted you of trespassing and attempted arson,” Mustang droned, her voice disembodied in the darkness. “Your sentence is to be forever mindful of what you saw here, to forsake greed and remember your Scottish heritage.”

Horrified, the man bolted to where his comrades had pulled their pickup closer to the drive. He hoisted his bulk over the tailgate as the vehicle sped into the night.

Mustang let mirth reign, though Brede and Bowie descended the ladder somberly.

“What *did* those men see?” pondered Brede, brushing dirt off her jeans.

“Your English has improved,” dodged her host. “You two must’ve done a lot of talking today.”

Bowie growled, “What did they *see*, Lady Neville?”

“Walk ahead thirty or forty paces, Kyle, if you’re an adventurous soul.”

He contemplated the prospect, and his courage faltered. “What about the car?”

“It’ll be there in the morning.”

“You mean, I’m stuck here for the night?”

“Only if you want to be.”

Brede laid her hand on Mustang’s arm. “Please, tell us.”

“They saw their deepest secrets exposed, their worst fears manifest,”

Mustang sighed, striding toward the first curve. “Roaming the woods at night has that effect on people.”

The couple trudged behind her toward the main house, exchanging muffled comments in ancient Gaelic.

“None of that, now,” Mustang chided. “She needs to practice her English.”

“English be damned!” roared Bowie. “If I didn’t know it was impossible, I’d think you orchestrated everything that’s happened since they found the stone at Whitebridge.”

The Mistress of Boleskine meant to keep her mouth closed, but the words escaped her lips. “Depending which events, you’re probably right.”

IV

Mustang Duryea didn’t hear any footsteps except her own. She imagined the couple’s shock, and grit her teeth before turning.

“Brede,” she consoled, “with your background, you should understand the affinity some people have with nature.”

“I...do. But using it to bring harm...”

“What harm occurred here tonight, other than frightening a bunch of overgrown children who were throwing a dangerous tantrum? I could’ve notified

the police and had them all arrested! As it is, maybe they'll think twice about taking the law into their own hands next time."

Kyle Bowie glared at both women. "What are you two talking about?"

"None of your business."

He marched toward Mustang and reached to grip her shoulders, receiving a nasty jolt of electricity through his fingers. Cowering, he moaned, "What are you, a human lightning rod?"

She spun and continued toward the Georgian dwelling. "If you knew the half of it."

They pursued her into the house, but she was in no mood for a quarrel. She yanked sheets and a pillow from the linen closet, shoving them at Bowie. "You can sleep in the living room. Good night."

Brede started, "But..."

"But nothing. Tomorrow, we'll spend the day prepping you for Monday's hearing, so your testimony will make the desired impact. Beyond that, don't count on me for any more help, or explanations."

She left the pair to consider her statement.

And heard them murmuring into the wee hours.

If she continued to have guests, something would have to be done about the thin walls between the bedrooms.

Mustang rose at 6:00, not bothering to change from the shorts and t-shirt which doubled as pajamas. Shuffling to the barn, she fed and watered the horses, leaving the doors open to allow a morning breeze to freshen the air.

Pouring herself a bowl of cereal, she acknowledged her own grumpiness, and how it could well be more of a threat than the actual anger she'd tried to suppress in days past. "I mustn't be grumpy," she sniffed. "I could do really awful things when I'm grumpy."

Brede soon ventured into the kitchen, scrubbed and smiling. She selected a glass from the cupboard and the carton of grape juice from the refrigerator, whistling quietly.

"Why are you so happy?" growled Mustang.

"Kyle is a... kind man. He cares much for this country, and for me."

"Because he doesn't know the truth."

"I don't think that would make a... difference."

Mustang slammed her spoon on the counter. "Do you know what's going to happen tomorrow when you take the stand to testify? You want to see the stone preserved, but you'll end up locked in a padded cell..."

"Padded cell?"

“First, some be-wigged barrister will ask you to swear an oath to a deity in which you don’t believe.”

“What is a... barrister?”

It took a moment for Mustang to concoct a simile. “In your community, was there not someone who officially mediated disputes?”

“Those at odds would usually seek out one of the priests.”

“And he would ask both parties to state their cases?”

“Cases?”

“Tell their stories,” huffed Mustang.

“Yes.”

“Barristers do the same, except they aren’t always polite or reasonable. If you refuse to take the oath, that’ll be the first sign of trouble. Then, they’ll throw questions at you, phrased so they could have any number of interpretations. For instance, what if you were asked how you know the meaning of the engravings on the stone?”

“I’d tell them I made them,” stated Brede.

“Call in the men in the white coats.”

“But, it’s the.. truth.”

“You know that, and I know *why* it’s the truth, but you can’t tell a room full of narrow-minded Scots you were alive 2,000 years ago! You’ll ruin Bowie’s chances, and throw the city into chaos!”

“Then, what do I say?”

“You could respond that you’re familiar with the language, which is equally as truthful.”

Brede considered, and nodded in resignation. “Much thought must be given to every answer.”

“You ain’t kidding, there,” Mustang agreed. “I’ve learned the hard way. I don’t want you to endure what I have. Just think before you speak, be aware of how they’ll try to trick you, and you should be all right.”

“And if I have problems, you’ll be there to...”

“No, I won’t. I won’t risk being called to the stand, because me telling the truth is just as risky as you doing so.”

“What have you to hide?” wondered Brede.

“My... affinity with nature doesn’t sit well with modern Scots - modern humans. My grandfather lived fifty years in exile because of it, and passed it to me without my permission. There are governments who would pay well for my services, as they tried to do for his, or kill me to prevent others from making use of them.”

“Then, you did... cause those events to occur?”

Kyle Bowie stood in the doorway.

Mustang’s irritability redoubled. She jammed a spoonful of corn flakes in her mouth. “Eavesdropping should be a crime.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“If you’re lying, I’ve always wanted to explode someone’s head...”

“I was hoping you’d let Brede and I ride two of your horses,” Bowie said.

“Have you ridden before?”

“Many times.”

She shoed them out, content in a way Brede had found herself a willing protector. So long as the woman didn’t reveal her past, she could have a successful and happy life in the 21st century.

The couple headed into Inverness that afternoon, to stay in Bowie’s hotel room. The preservationist believed the hearing would be broadcast on both television and radio; Mustang owned neither. The Whitebridge stone’s fate no longer concerned her. The screaming which had drawn her to the site had ceased, and would never be heard again.

Curiosity nagged at her, still. She’d never fathomed how greed could dominate people’s existence to the extent they destroyed their own history in favor of buildings which wouldn’t last two decades. Who had the money to make such purchases, anyway, with the economy in such rotten shape and millions around the world unemployed and starving?

Glenn MacDonough was startled to find Lady Neville on his brick home’s modest doorstep that evening. She came, ostensibly, to once more express her gratitude for the forewarning about the ambush, and to request a ride into the city the following day.

“Aye, lass. Me driver will take ye wherever ye wish t’ go.”

His invitation to share dinner was declined, and as she mounted the sorrel she’d been exercising, he called, “There’s an auction of racin’ stock next month. Will ye be interested in addin’ t’ your stable?”

“Not this year, Mr. MacDonough. Keeping the five you sold me last summer takes all my energy.”

Dressed in a beige silk blouse and tan corduroy slacks left over from her world trip, Mustang slid onto the Bentley’s passenger seat at dawn. The chauffeur discouraged what he viewed as uncharacteristic familiarity, but she smiled. “I get sick riding in the back.”

“Ach. ’Tis the same wi’ me daughter.”

Tourist traffic not yet clogging the main roads, the car reached Inverness well before 9:00. Mustang spent the extra time reveling in the delightful scents of a bakery, purchasing a bag of scones and cakes to munch during the court hearing.

For, indeed, the courthouse gallery held assorted spectators who made monitoring proceedings below a daily routine, bringing their lunch and tea to sip, so long as officials didn't see. Mustang joined them, her black hair far more inconspicuous than her formerly red tresses. From the last row, she could barely distinguish faces on ground level, but heard every inflection of the harsh Scottish burrs.

Kyle Bowie shared a table with the Heritage Scotland barrister, a stooped elder Mustang guessed provided his services *pro bono* or as a tax write-off. Even from this distance, the teen could tell the developer's legal representative had a cocky, confident air, and presupposed their cause the victor.

Opening arguments didn't impress the jury, a mix of men and women, middle-aged and older. The idea Heritage Scotland had planted the stone on the property, to impede what the developer deemed "progress" struck Mustang as ludicrous. Bowie testified the pillar was buried at least twenty feet, and weighed ten tons.

"Without a skilled crew and heavy equipment, it could not have been done overnight!" he declared from the stand.

"But you *are* saying it could be done," pressed the opposition barrister.

"Well, yes."

Mustang grimaced behind her hand. She'd seen what lawyers could do - during the trial for the psychotic murderer Wilfrid Bailey/Jonas Fairchild, and later the rabid animal activists who'd made it their mission to free domesticated horses on ranches from Texas to Montana. She despised those professionals as much as she mistrusted law enforcement.

They would make mincemeat of Brede, unless...

A brief recess was called when a juror experienced a prolonged coughing fit just as the bailiff was summoning Brede into the courtroom. Mustang passed her bag of pastries to the youngster seated beside her, and headed for the stairs.

Where she completely vanished.

In a stark alcove, Brede sat on a plain wooden bench, sipping a cup of tea. Though nervous, the sky blue shirt-dress suited her coloring and height. The jurors would be taken by her very presence, Mustang knew.

"Brede," she whispered, invisibly dropping beside her.

"Mustang? Do you speak on the wind?"

"No, I'm here. Now, listen..."

The juror recovered from his inexplicable lung malfunction; Brede slowly paraded past the judge. A bible was presented, and she squinted at the plump clerk.

“Put your hand on it,” came the intangible directive.

The clerk whipped her head left, but saw no one.

Brede complied with Mustang’s instruction; the clerk recited the oath - fortunately, a version omitting, “so help me God.”

“I do,” affirmed Brede, climbing two steps to the witness box.

“State your name,” the clerk droned.

“I am Brede... Carver.”

Mustang reminded her of the surname, from a position wedged against the paneled wall.

The Heritage Scotland barrister began, “Are you an expert on Druid civilization?”

As if Brede had a hidden earpiece, she mimicked everything Mustang told her in answer to the rapid-fire inquisition. “Yes.”

“And ancient Gaelic?”

“Yes.”

“Would you please say something in that language?”

“Objection!” cried the opposition. “Who will be able to translate?”

Kyle Bowie pointed into the gallery, and the barrister noted, “We have another expert on hand to verify Miss Carver’s testimony, if required.”

“Objection overruled,” proclaimed the robed, sallow judge.

What Mustang would’ve liked Brede to say, she refrained from suggesting. Instead, the woman declared in her native tongue, “I grew up speaking this language on the western shores of the island.”

The bespectacled figure in the third row authenticated both her pronunciation and exact words. Her answers to additional questions about the stone and its markings impressed the jury.

Then the developer’s counsel commenced his cross-examination. “You told this court the *stones* were erected during the era of the Roman invasion. You mean, there is more than one stone in that area?”

“Last I saw, there were four.”

She’d spoken without prompting from Mustang, and stuck her foot square into the muck.

The hawkish barrister seized on the statement like an eagle snatching a squirrel off a tree branch. “Last you *saw*? Have there been previous excavations at Whitebridge?”

Brede on the verge of fainting from fright, Mustang slipped an arm around her waist to hold her upright. She spoke over Brede's shoulder, "Not that I'm aware, sir. I was referring to my review of preliminary soil density tests performed some months ago, before construction started."

The barrister glared at Bowie. "Who authorized conducting such tests?"

"The British Government's office of geological studies."

Defeated, the developer signaled the lawyer to cease his inquiries. Brede was dismissed, and barely managed to keep her feet en route to the exit.

"You lied!" she stormed weakly, collapsed on the alcove bench.

"No, I didn't." Mustang, again visible, flexed her fingers, cramped after supporting the tall blonde. "I saw the file in Bowie's car. I simply guessed at its contents."

"Well, you guessed correctly," praised Bowie, bursting through the swinging doors and scooping Brede into an affectionate embrace. "Proving the developer knew about the stones before moving the first shovel of dirt put him in violation of long-standing local codes. The project is done, and we can start digging out the circle."

"Another monument added to thousands of others," Mustang scoffed. "Do you think it'll bring more tourists to the area?"

"Perhaps not, but it will mean those who wish to study our history will have one more chance."

"What about... the present?" queried Brede. "Will you be going back to Edinburgh?"

"For a few weeks, yes. When the arrangements are made, I'll be supervising the crew working at the site." Bowie eyed Mustang. "I'd like to use Boleskine House as a base..."

Her response: "No way in hell. You're better off renting a place in Inverfarigaig or Foyers." She added through pursed lips, "And I'm better off without the noise."

She half-expected what came next. Bowie gently clasped Brede's hands. "Come with me, Brede. We don't have to get married, but I need you in my life."

Blue orbs swiveled toward Mustang, apprehensive.

"Don't look to me for advice," the latter chuckled. "Look to your own heart."

Bowie persisted, "Brede, your laughter brings a joy to my days unlike anything I've ever experienced."

"All right, all right!" she conceded, caressing his unshaven cheek.

"I may be ill," choked Mustang.

She left them, wading through assorted plaintiffs and solicitors milling in the court lobby, waiting their turn before the bench. She meandered through the city, locating Glenn MacDonough's contracting firm by late afternoon.

"Ye heard about the rulin'?" the squat, solid project manager asked, when he emerged from his office for the drive home.

"Does it affect your business at all?"

"Not really. We're always very careful before we accept a job t' check for... old bones and broken bowls."

"Very wise." She slipped onto the Rolls' leather bucket seat as he held the passenger door open.

The key turned in the ignition, muffling his statement: "That's one reason I never tried t' buy Boleskine."

"Eh?"

"There's been talk for years about it being built on a Druid burial ground, or some such. I wouldn't want t' bring down the wrath of the ancients on me head."

Mustang grabbed the panic handle as he cut through traffic. "That should be the least of your worries."

Kyle Bowie's Smart car idled on the gravel drive when she hiked around the last curve near the house, MacDonough having dropped her at the edge of the main road.

"Brede's packing," he greeted, nodding toward the open door. "She wanted to see you before..."

Plastic bags crammed with clothes in hand, scabbard fastened around her waist and signet ring on her finger, Brede appeared from the guest room as Mustang crossed the threshold.

"You've given me a grand gift," said the woman. "I want to thank you." "Nature gave you the gift. You were stuck in that rock for a reason, and this is your chance to discover why."

"I'm not worried about why. I'm going to do what I was doing before it happened: make the world a better place."

Mustang, jaded while still a teenager, smirked. "Good luck."

The two embraced, and Brede scurried to the waiting chariot without horses.

A muttered command ensured she would soon forget the millennia trapped in stone, and the gate posts leading to Boleskine House.

No accidental mention of Lady Neville would bring uninvited callers to Mustang's door.

All she wanted, to be sure, was a peaceful existence with the horses her sole companions.