

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Earthy Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

**Eugenia Lucas**

# I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea recalled glimpsing a two-paragraph announcement on the sheets of newspaper used to pack boxes of groceries delivered bi-weekly from Dores. The designation “AME” - in her mind, at any rate - related to a Christian denomination. The scheduled festival should have involved processions with lit candles, wooden crosses and hymns on the eastern shore of Loch Ness, not...

She wouldn't have cared, regardless, if the troupe of white-robed women hadn't paraded across Boleskine property in the process of their observances. Returning from exercising Pietra, she dismounted near the barn to find them encircling the Georgian mansion.

“What the hell?” she barked, straightening her red t-shirt and frayed jeans as she approached a buxom, middle-aged figure with flowers entangled in greying locks.

“Join us!” came the invitation. “We celebrate Mother Earth.”

Mustang inhaled slowly, regulating her temper. “That's all well and good, but why here?”

“Because, this is the source.”

“The source?”

The priestess withdrew from the group, chanting gibberish, to explain. “For decades, an unusual power has emanated from this place. More recently, Mother Earth has made her presence known in the manifestations of extraordinary weather...”

“Oh, hell...” muttered Mustang, bowing her chin.

“You are welcome to join us.”

“Who *are* you?”

“Acolytes of Mother Earth, pledged to restore the environment to its natural state.”

The Mistress of Boleskine bit her lip, drawing blood. However this crowd had been attracted to the historic dwelling, she couldn't allow it to be turned into some sort of mystical shrine.

“I must ask you to leave,” she stated flatly. “This is private property.”

An insistent breeze fluttering her voluminous skirts, the leader countered, “I'm sure the owner wouldn't mind.”

“The owner *does* mind.”

Flashing blue eyes scrutinized the younger, tom-boyish figure. “You are the daughter of the house?”

The wind increased exponentially.

“You see?” the protest persisted. “Our beloved Mother wishes us to remain.”

“I think not.”

A violent tremor caused the ground to split open behind the ring of females; three lost their balance and nearly toppled into the chasm. A chorus of screams preceded their mass exodus along the gravel drive.

Mustang watched this flight, the damage repaired as she marched toward the barn to groom Pietra and feed the other horses.

“What nonsense!” she grumbled for the umpteenth time, cleaning her saddle in the tack room. “Why are people so gullible?”

“It is called the internet, I believe,” the tremulous tenor of Mahatma Gandhi replied. “Another example of what modern humans call progress.”

The Father of India, clad only in a linen dhoti on this warm June afternoon, inspected her work through thick, round-rimmed spectacles and smiled his approval.

“In other words, not a font of truth or wisdom, but of ridiculous theories and conspiracies.”

“Transmitted around the globe in seconds,” confirmed the manifested elder.

Mustang tossed the soiled rag on a shelf. “If only they knew...”

“That you could, indeed, repair the environment with a mere thought?”

Solemn green orbs scrutinized the emaciated form. “With the main requirement being the elimination of every living person...”

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh, c’mon, Gandhiji.” She sank on the wooden bench near the door. “You’re an educated man - far more learned than me. You must grasp that human beings, from the time they first walked upright, have violated the natural order at every turn.”

“An intriguing theory. Continue, please.”

“Theory, hell! I wake some nights in a cold sweat because of this... knowledge. Almost as if Mother Earth - as those fruitcakes call her - is crying out for retribution.”

“Fascinating.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“Such is not my intent.”

“I’d hope not. It’s very disconcerting to realize that humans are the one species on the planet who wear clothes, cook their food, build permanent shelters, schools, restaurants, libraries, factories... They feel the need to propagate a legacy

of art, literature, monuments... at what cost? They suck oil from beneath the surface, mine gold, silver and more dangerous substances, destroy trees, pollute the air, wage wars... They haven't a clue how their simplest actions wreak havoc on other creatures, plant life. Over thousands of years, the decimation has continued..."

"You see the end in sight?"

"All too near."

A gnarled hand patted her shoulder. "The irony is how humans belittle animals for having no intelligence, yet the beasts live in accordance with their surroundings, while those who consider themselves superior destroy their own future."

"Amen." Mustang rose, exhausted. "Come to the house. I missed lunch..."

"You must eat something, then rest. Wisdom can be most tiring, especially at your age."

She kissed his hand in parting. "Thank you."

A cheddar cheese sandwich and glass of milk filling the empty cavern, she slept until sunset, roused by oddly familiar voices...

"Oh, hell!" she grunted, springing off the mattress.

Auburn tresses dangling over her face, she jerked them into a pony tail as she raced into the dusk. The white robes had returned, now bearing candles.

From the stoop, she bellowed, "Get out, now!"

Shadows prevented the assembly from detecting more than a vague silhouette; an abrupt microburst of wind sparked by her anger forced them to their knees, shrieking not in fear, but awe.

"Mother Earth, come to us!" shouted a confident soprano.

Another implored, "We, your obedient servants, wish only to serve you!"

That additional phenomena would only further incite their ardor rang clear for Mustang. Teeth grit, she retreated into the house, slamming the steel door and securing the bolt.

The droning faded into background by midnight, though flames from their candles penetrated draperies in the living room, where she sat in the cane-backed rocker trying to concentrate on the chess board between herself and Erwin Rommel.

"Fear not," soothed the German general. "They'll not lay torch to the place."

She toyed with the white queen. "I'm just confused. If they're so determined to restore the environment, why aren't they out planting trees, or protesting strip mining operations?"

“Because, like most humans, they are content taking symbolic steps, not practical ones, leaving the real work to others.”

“Sad, isn’t it?”

Rommel reacted to being placed in check. “You could... prod them to do more.”

“Eh?”

“If they seek a sign from Mother Earth, why not challenge them in that guise to make good on their vow?”

“What do you suggest?”

“There are what, a hundred women out there?”

“More like three or four hundred.”

“Direct them to return to their cities and participate in river clean up efforts, actively promote walking instead of using automobiles or even public transportation... things like that.”

“It’s a futile effort...”

“Nonetheless, something practical to raise awareness of the plight future generations are facing.”

She squinted at the trim military genius. “How much time does the planet have?”

His noncommittal smile irked her.

She resigned the game and trudged to the foyer. Cupping her hands around her mouth, she projected an eerie contralto through the heavy panel, bringing an instantaneous halt to the babbling beyond.

“If you would serve me, dedicate yourselves to reversing the harm to our common home. Clear the waters of waste wherever you live, stop the destruction of natural habitat in favor of housing developments. Stand firm against consumerism that serves no practical purpose and decimates resources.”

A collective gasp rose in the night; Mustang favored Rommel with a wry grin; that noble gentleman nodded his consent from the doorway. Flames bobbed through the trees, restoring darkness to the expanse.

“That’s that!” the young woman sighed, moving along the corridor to her bedroom.

Enjoying peanut butter toast for breakfast the next morning, though, she realized she’d been wrong.

Rumbling truck engines rattled the window panes, and she could smell diesel fumes. Fists clenched, she emerged into brilliant daylight, muttering, “I will stay calm.”

Unsuccessfully.

A pickup emblazoned with a governmental decal had braked near the barn; Mustang heard the horses whinnying in fear. Six men were pulling tools from a lorry, while a semi hauling an excavator on a flat bed trailer idled beside the corral.

“What the hell...” Mustang shouted over the noise.

The supervisor, ballcap bearing the same insignia as his vehicle, hurried to her. “Come away from there!”

“Do you mind telling me...”

Before she could finish her question, she was yanked away from the building by frantic hands.

She shook off the man’s grip. “What are you about?”

“Due to the earthquake yesterday, the stability of the foundation is in doubt...”

“Earthquake?”

Depositing her on the pickup’s tailgate, the engineer scowled. “We received multiple reports of severe tremors and ground fissures...”

“Absurd!” Mustang cursed the Acolytes of Mother Earth under her breath. “I was here the entire day, and felt nothing!”

A pair appeared from circling the perimeter. “Visual inspection indicates no issues,” reported the taller.

“Regardless, we’ll need to perform a series of tests,” their foreman indicated. “Until then, the property is restricted...”

“Not on your life, buddy,” growled Mustang.

“You have no say in the matter, ma’am. My authority supercedes...”

The swarm of bees that descended on the team drove them into their respective cabs for protection. Cognizant they would be unable to complete their task, the convoy eventually departed, Mustang monitoring their movement from the hillock where her grandfather, Jack Parsons - the reason she controlled nature as she did - had practiced his occult rites years prior

No more had their tires contacted the highway, northbound to Inverness, than an high voltage electrified fence constructed itself around the 47 acres.

She would not be disturbed again.

At least, not by any tangible being.

Descending to the barn, it took nearly an hour to comfort the horses.

Tempting them with apples and carrots, she groomed each one with gentle strokes, filled their water troughs and oat buckets. She urged a skittish Sarge from his stall, saddling him for a ride. As they traversed the circuitous trails, she felt his muscles relax.

She spent the rest of the day on horseback, exercising the mares and geldings as she'd once been charged to do on the ranch her parents owned in Montana. Birds sang in the trees, clouds drifted through blue skies, trees offered pleasant shade.

This microcosm of how the world should be resurrected Mustang's angst over conditions elsewhere. How had the situation gotten so out of hand? she mused. Tracing the history of humanity, she envisioned primitive civilizations eating raw meat - like their animal neighbors, who hunted for survival, not trophies to hang on the wall. What prompted the need to cook the meat? The discovery of fire after a chance lightning strike?

The skins of these hunted animals became clothes, providing warmth against the cold. Down the centuries, ways were discovered to weave plant fibers into cloth, sew the sections into fancier and fancier accouterments. As the population grew, so did demand, leading to factories, inventions geared toward "convenience" along with larger and larger homes, cities...

Why couldn't human beings understand that animals had the right idea? Hunt only what can be eaten, sleep, procreate... yes, some animals fought for territory or superiority, but one-on-one, not country against country, with innocents dying *en masse*. They survived in caves, or dug holes for shelter, allowing for nature to thrive unabated.

Was it humanity's skewed sense of superiority that had dragged the planet to the point of destruction? The ability to think and reason - had that been corrupted by a need for indulgence, power, wealth?

Mustang credited organized religion for some of the problem: dictates written in supposedly "sacred" scriptures - such as humans being lords of the earth, able to do as they pleased - eliminated any need for guilt about a myriad of activities.

These reflections tightened her chest as she contemplated the rotting wooden picnic table her grandfather had used as an altar when he'd lived at Boleskine. What had prompted his rituals? He'd been a noted scientist, and didn't give her the impression - during the short time she'd known him - of seeking power.

Or, had he? The very process which had brought together Parsons and her grandmother, the creation of a "Moonchild"...

Leading Crystal down the slope, she wiped beads of perspiration from her cheeks before pulling up short at the sight of a flaxen-haired, floral-crowned, well-proportioned - and naked - female in her path.

One of the stray acolytes, no doubt.

“Oh, hell...”

## II

“Hello, my dear,” the melodious greeting practically floated on the air.

Despite the insanity of the situation, Mustang couldn't restrain her chuckle.

“This is private property, and it's definitely not a nudist colony.”

“In my lexicon, there is no such term as private property.” She bent agilely toward an orange wildflower, appreciating its delicate scent. “You... catch my drift?”

The Mistress of Boleskine wasn't about to admit her befuddlement. Then, from behind her, a familiar baritone: “In your... fits of anger, you've violated what might be designated private property.” Samuel Clemens, ever the pragmatist.

“Shattering windows, dropping engines from automobiles...”

“All right, all right,” she conceded. “Can we, at least, get her in the house?”

“I'm sure, if you invite her...”

Not so much a request as a directive: “Come with me, please.”

The visitor complied, gliding over the ground so as not to disturb an insect or leaf.

Indoors, Mustang offered her a thick terry robe from the bathroom.

“You, who believe as I about the environmental toll of clothes, would insist I cover myself?”

Mustang bristled. “Call me puritanical. It's become the accepted norm.”

“As you wish, then.”

In the kitchen, two glasses of water were filled at the tap. The guest declined, while Mustang gulped hers, more to delay the inevitable than due to thirst. Together, they sat at the modern dinette table.

“Why have you come?” queried the hostess.

“You care not for my name?”

“I think I know it already.”

“Then, you can guess why I am here.”

“A result of the incantations of those... acolytes?”

“No.”

“Then, what?”

A beatific smile lit the chamber. “Those... children grope in the fog for what you have acquired by accident...”

“Control of the natural forces?”

Golden waves bobbed affirmatively.

“Why?”

“To... rectify millennia of defilement.”

“And, you want me to handle the job?” chortled Mustang.

“That... is your choice.”

“Then, I choose not.” Crossing to the sink, the tumbler overflowed with liquid. “Besides, you’re doing pretty well on your own: floods, droughts, volcanos, earthquakes, wildfires...”

“A gradual process, to be sure.”

“Taking out the offenders a handful at a time.”

“When you could wipe them out with a word.”

Mustang glared at the image. “And, you couldn’t?”

“For me to... bring those forces to bear would not only wipe out humanity, but all life on the planet.”

“That’s a bad thing, why? Start over, from scratch. Like what happened when the dinosaurs went extinct.”

“There’s no need to destroy innocent species with the guilty...”

This implication jarred Mustang. The glass exploded, shards slicing her palm and dripping blood on the tile flooring.

Neither flinched as the red puddle spread.

“You expect me to remedy this?” Mustang snarled.

A rhetorical question, no answer forthcoming.

“To do your job for you?”

The shrug sparked a rage the transplanted American didn’t dare repress. Before the emotional upheaval ravaged the dwelling, she rushed outside and screamed - in agony from the deep gashes in her flesh, which rapidly healed - and indignation.

Trees bent double at the force of her temper; those too old snapped in half. On the hill beside the ruined altar, a shaft of fire shot 70 feet toward the sky.

Fingers clutching her shoulders, gently massaging, eased the turmoil. She spun and collapsed in Francis of Assisi’s tender embrace, sobbing.

“I warned her to wait until you’d... gained more control over your outbursts,” whispered the Italian saint.

Mustang stiffened, raising her pale countenance from the soaked cloth of his tattered robe. “You knew about this?”

“What amazes me, Signorina, is that you didn’t.” He led her to a newly exposed boulder, brushing dirt from the surface so they could rest. “You’ve known for years law enforcement and agencies that track weather anomalies have made

attempts to... explain what you've done. Did you not suspect, by your blatant manipulation of the elements, Mother Earth herself would not notice?"

Tucking her knees to her chin on the slanted granite, Mustang hid her face. "I never deliberately..."

"Yes, my dear, you did." The feminine embodiment of the ecosystem chided quietly from the kitchen threshold. "Even a simple command to steer a herd of horses off their course disrupts the orderly motion of the cosmos." She closed the gap, accepting Francis' dual kisses with aplomb.

"So, if I *did* decimate humanity, I'd have to include myself?"

"Would you be so selective? Preserve a few, what you might term 'worthy' individuals? How would you make that determination?"

Her groan echoed through the increasing gloom. "Which is why I've shot down this discussion time and again!"

"You wish to do so now?" Francis challenged.

Taut features conveyed her response.

"So be it."

In that instant, she sat alone on the rock. A gnawing sensation the ordeal had not ended, though, drove her to scramble onto solid ground, disgusted by the streaks of blood staining her black tank top and jeans. Ditching that attire for random pieces, she scurried toward the barn, where the horses needed tending.

"I think I've screwed up royally this time," she spoke aloud, Crystal pacified by the brisk motion of the bristles. "There's no place I can hide from the likes of her."

"She will not force you to take any action which conflicts with your personal ethical code," stated Gandhi, cross-legged on the bench near the tack room.

"You *all* know about this?" scoffed Mustang.

"On the ethereal plane, time ripples like ocean waves, to and fro. We who... reside there... wash constantly in those waters."

"How poetic."

"No need for sarcasm, Mustang-ji. What you do here has repercussions on many levels."

"Oh, hell..."

"It is the price you pay for being... special."

She whirled on him, pitching the brush at the wall. "I don't want to be special!"

"You should have accepted these circumstances after so many years..."

"Years when I could have reveled in a normal life!"

“Denial only augments the pain.”

“You speak from experience?” she scoffed.

“Of course. I could have avoided becoming a proponent of nonviolence in India quite easily, allowing the British to continue their reign of inequity. My soul would have been eaten alive, as yours is now. I took on tremendous responsibility, as must you.”

Mustang preoccupied herself plucking horsehair from tangled tresses. “You were older. You’d lived through... discrimination, opposition...”

“Yes, your path has been different from my own. You’ve not endured beatings, lengthy imprisonment...”

“I’m a prisoner of my own impulsiveness!”

“True.”

“If, in that impulsiveness, I should wish the world wiped clean of humanity...”

“They would dissolve into dust and nourish the soil for new growth.”

She snickered self-consciously. “I... thought there’d be stacks of corpses, like cord wood...”

“That would, of course, depend on how you phrased the mandate. If you merely wish them dead, such would be the case.”

“But, by wishing them gone...”

The serenity of the skeletal mien eased her conscience somewhat.

“Then, I could join you in what some call heaven?”

“If you like.”

“You mean, there are other... alternatives?”

She might have expected the interruption. Her manifested friends weren’t always so open about their existence, their knowledge of past, present and future.

Rommel’s “Say no more!” silenced Gandhi, his jaw closing reluctantly.

“What good are you, if you can’t help me make an informed decision?” she lamented.

“You must trust your own heart,” murmured Clemens.

“To create yet another disaster – one I couldn’t reverse?”

“It’s part of growing up.”

She viciously kicked a metal bucket as she swept into the night.

To be immediately surrounded by a cadre of uniformed police constables, pistols and semi-automatic rifles aimed at her head.

“Oh, hell...”

From behind, two sets of powerful arms immobilized her, while a female sergeant frisked the baggy Pink Floyd t-shirt and sweat pants.

“She’s clean,” rang the announcement.

The inspector in charge - Mustang assumed, given his plain clothes attire - ordered, “Search the house.”

“Over my dead body,” their captive hissed.

Gruffly, in her ear, “That can be arranged.”

“We have a duly executed warrant,” proclaimed the inspector.

Mustang grunted, “On what grounds?”

“Suspicion of illegal weapons.”

The hysterical laughter emanating from the young woman froze those closest. She presumed the construction crew dispatched to secure Boleskine after the reported earthquake had, their task foiled, used the excuse that the damage and its subsequent repair had been caused by testing of unidentified nefarious machinery.

Trickling through the governmental system, some bright bulb twisted that failure into an opportunity to solve a mystery plaguing officialdom since the arrival of Jack Parsons decades earlier - and, possibly, even the occupancy of occultist Aleister Crowley at the beginning of the 20th century.

Unsolved cases involving bizarre activities never sat well with those holding positions of authority in police departments, regardless of the country.

The same had transpired in the States, with FBI agent Ben Espinoza repeatedly promising to delete his files on Mustang’s exploits, only to pop up at some inconvenient time and place to harass her. Interpol agents likely felt a similar annoyance, after trailing her around the globe while being unable to pin any crime on her.

A squad skirted the mansion to enter by the kitchen; a separate detachment approached the steel front door. Digits placed on the respective knobs abruptly glued to the metal as electrical charges coursed through their frames, yowls of anguish resounded through the darkness, reminiscent of mournful wolves.

The inspector shook her roughly. “Turn it off!”

Innocently, she countered, “Turn off what?”

“The security system!”

“There’s no security system. You can check for yourself. Or, consult Glenn MacDonough, my neighbor whose company renovated the house for me. He never installed any alarms. But, you knew that before you left Inverness.”

“Arrogant bitch!”

The mitt that raked her cheek reddened the skin and ignited a fire in Mustang’s soul. The demise of two dozen officers imminent, their terrified orbs

flashing with nocturnal illumination, she suspended her retribution at the sight of a beneficent, naked Mother Earth above the trees.

“All right, all right,” she acquiesced. “They live, but they forget the warrant, the journey down here, and...”

“So be it.”

A cowed stream of bodies holstered their sidearms or shucked the chambered shells, shuffled toward randomly parked vans and sedans, loading up and maneuvering along the gravel drive toward the highway.

“Who breached the electric fence so they could get in here?” Mustang puzzled, approaching the house.

“They did,” replied Francis, seated on the bottom step. “It was a fairly... basic configuration, as well you know. They have experts in the field...”

Extracting a keyring from her pocket, she inserted the largest in the deadbolt. “Bastards.”

“Perhaps.” He accompanied her to the kitchen. “You must agree, however, your impulsiveness directly caused this confrontation.”

A loaf of bread and package of Swiss cheese slices landed on the counter. “How so?”

“When you scared off the Acolytes of Mother Earth, Signorina, the building crew became involved and, in rebuffing those men, you brought the law down on you.”

“Fear and curiosity.”

“Precisely.”

“What a shallow, foolish species.” She sank her teeth in the sandwich, chewing meditatively.

The Italian saint clucked his tongue. “And, thus, Mother Earth continues her quest.”

A severe storm commenced, with baseball sized hail, howling winds and torrential rains. Newscasters in their various studios interrupted scheduled programming to report tornado warnings, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis.

Mustang had no means to track these broadcasts, without television, radio or computer - and, in short order, no electricity due to downed power lines. By candlelight, she and Samuel Clemens focused on the chess board, as roof shingles shred from their nails, branches tore from their trunks, and animals scrambled for shelter in burrows and crevices.

“Sam, be honest. You were widely traveled in your day. Was the world any different than it is today?”

“When Halley’s Comet made its return trip to fetch me, technology was still in its infancy. Automobiles were a rarity, the telephone a luxury. People craved more and more, better and better... so, I’d have to say, beyond the types of devices, no.”

“Then, should I give in to Mother Earth’s request?”

“You must make that decision on your own.”

“Why? Can’t you share your insights and wisdom with me?”

“No.” Nervous fingers stroked his signature white mustache. “I can only advise you...”

A crack of thunder drowned out his words; he dematerialized as if snatched away against his will.

### III

Mustang Duryea slumped on the cane-backed rocking chair. “They all want to tell me something, but keep stopping each other.” Agitated digits drummed the darkly varnished arm. “As if the revelation would cause an irreversible catastrophe.”

She half expected one of their disembodied voices to endorse that theory; pounding rain drowned out other sounds.

Toting the candle in its blown glass holder, she navigated the dim hall. A detour into the kitchen soaked her socks, rivulets washing beneath the doorjamb. Instinct compelled her to inspect each room in turn, including the three unfurnished spare bedrooms. The two at the rear of the structure boasted water sloshing above the baseboards.

“Oh, hell...”

Any ordinary property owner would have ventured out to secure a tarp over the gaping holes in the roof.

Not Mustang.

Good thing, too.

Gusts in excess of 80 miles an hour would have propelled even the hardest repairman off the sturdiest ladder. Nature in the throes of Mother Earth’s vendetta against humanity, though, preempted immediate adherence to Mustang’s command. Shingles retrieved gradually slid into their rows like cards being dealt for a poker game, mitigating the leaks.

She relied on a mop and bucket to clean the interior mess.

Well past midnight, she fell on the king-sized mattress. Shutters outside the window banged rhythmically, the intensity of the onslaught diminished not one iota.

For 48 hours.

Loch Ness overflowed its banks, the highway to Inverness impassible to the north and south. The village of Dores, from whence Mustang secured her supplies of groceries, straw and oats for the horses, issued an evacuation order.

Not that their cars could travel through three feet of sewage-tainted muck.

Boat owners offered transportation to their neighbors, an equally treacherous endeavor with choppy waves and scattered debris impeding progress.

If not for communication satellites orbiting the stratosphere, citizens of one country would never have been apprised of the tragedies endured by those beyond their borders. Nonetheless, batteries soon drained, generators sputtered for lack of fuel, and the world fell silent of artificial noise.

Not even the screams of those trapped by mudslides, buried in volcanic ash, or drowned when their vehicles were swept off roadways as hurricanes bombarded the landscape were audible over the cacophony of nature asserting its superiority.

Possessing neither a rain slicker or umbrella - not that any metal frame would survive an outing in the gale swirling around Boleskine - Mustang slogged her way to the barn in murky daylight. With or without power, sun or snow, the horses required her attention.

She'd opted for a green tank top and cut-off jean shorts, the less cloth to be drenched. Auburn mop twirled into a tight bun, her lack of practice with such a style brought a chuckle to her lips when dripping locks fell over her eyes as she forced the massive door along its rollers until it latched.

Towels used to dry her skin smelled of horse; she didn't care. The animals themselves behaved in an oddly tranquil manner, considering the weather.

They could sense the cause - and the effect.

Bolstering her resolve to retrace the route to the house two hours later, Mustang recoiled when the door whisked aside.

Glenn MacDonough sat atop an Arabian stallion, a chain of bays and roans in tow.

"What the..."

"Forgive me, Your Ladyship," the nearly incomprehensible Scottish burr reached her ears, referencing her *nom de plume* in the region: Lady Elizabeth Neville. "M'stock is threatened, and wi' ye on higher ground..."

Practically thrown backward by the wind, she bellowed, "Bring them in!"

The structure large enough for her own mounts, adding another ten proved an exercise in logistics. Instead of enjoying their own stalls, six had to be tethered to columns in the middle of the floor.

“Ha’ ye heard the news?” MacDonough huffed, accepting a towel to wipe the dampness from his white-fringed cranium.

“I’ve no clue what’s been happening.”

“‘Tis global armageddon, accordin’ t’ the political types. The end o’ the world.”

“Hogwash.”

“Glaciers in Siberia ha’ completely melted. Along the equator, the oceans are boilin’ temperature. Islands ha’ sunk wi’ their entire populations, and coastal cities ha’ disappeared. Ships and planes are missin’ wi’ those aboard.”

Mustang sucked air. “You’ve got me beat,” she mumbled to the entity she suspected lingered nearby. “I wouldn’t have bothered to be so dramatic.”

“Pardon?” wondered MacDonough, hauling water buckets from the tap.

“Nothing, Glenn.”

“If I dinnae know better, I’d compare this t’ a dog tryin’ t’ shake fleas off his back.”

She tittered, “A very accurate description.”

Troughs filled and oats available to the equine guests, their owner was invited to the house for coffee, a peanut butter sandwich and a comfortable bed.

“‘Tis a shower I’m really needin’,” he countered.

“That can be arranged.”

“Ye dinnae ha’ hot water.”

“You’d be surprised.”

He was, to be sure. She’d not considered that Boleskine might be the lone structure in the whole of Scotland with electricity, the very lightning strikes splitting ancient oaks and snapping utility poles harnessed via her instructions.

No sense wasting the energy, she rationalized.

The aging project manager snored through the day, exhausted by his efforts to protect his horses. That reason alone prompted Mustang to tolerate his oft-unwanted attention. Any man who loved these noble beasts so deeply had a compassionate heart.

As he slumbered, she locked herself in the inner chamber where no average human could reach her. She settled on the loveseat, crossed legged, breathing steadily.

“All right, Mother Earth, you’ve made your point. The way you’d do it is too painful - the death throes of your victims create a terrible imbalance in the

cosmic cycle. And, while other species watch and wait, they too are placed in danger. The toll on plant life is horrendous, valuable nutrients flushed from the soil...”

“The eradication has begun,” rumbled ominously. “I’ll not stop it.”

“Then, I will.”

“You have not the means.”

“Don’t I?”

“You threaten all life with a civil war between the natural forces.”

“When standing in the face of tyranny, war is sometimes the only recourse.”

Mustang recognized defeat in the ethereal tone. “As you wish. It will... take time for the upheaval to be reversed.”

“That’s to be expected.”

Slender features wore a feeble smirk as she remained in her *sancto sanctorum* for another hour. The implications of being able to not only command nature, but intimidate those forces off their dictated course could not be easily assimilated.

She’d always made a point not to interfere with normal weather patterns, such as negating blizzards during cold Montana winters, dispersing oppressive humidity prevalent during Scottish springs, or realigning the jet stream. Since inheriting her grandfather’s power by thrusting a knife through his chest during an incomprehensible occult ritual, she’d struggled to maintain a modicum of universal equilibrium...

Failing miserably.

“You’re too hard on yourself.” General Erwin Rommel shook his head sympathetically, seated opposite in a battered leather armchair.

She’d come to respect the German strategist after spending almost two years as his aide during World War II - another inexplicable adventure caused by a random comment. His military-style haircut, shaved on the sides and longer on the top, would have fit in some modern circles. His intense orbs studied her; she flinched.

“You’re nervous about... what this confrontation entails?” he speculated.

She retorted, “You’re all making me edgy, knowing what happens and not telling me.”

“As so often written in fiction, and based on truth, there are many possibilities, many time lines. A scant fraction of a second’s hesitation can change the future.”

“So, you’re implying what I do - and when I do it - could...”

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

“If I wait too long, some lunatic could launch scores of nuclear missiles, obliterating not just humanity, but every living creature...”

Before Rommel could reply, Samuel Clemens materialized, gripping the uniformed shoulder in stern warning.

“Oh, not again!” Mustang lamented.

“Our existence is not immune to your... vicissitudes,” remarked the famous author.

“So, it’s self-preservation preventing you from...”

The mustache twitched.

A persistent knocking interrupted the discussion. “Lady Elizabeth?”

Mustang didn’t need to ask the men to vanish; they dissipated before she rose from the cushions.

Glenn MacDonough, rested but bewildered, hovered in the corridor.

“Forgive me, Lady Elizabeth. I heard voices...”

Futile trying to convince him he’d been dreaming. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

He accompanied her to the kitchen, where the rattling of window panes had eased. As she scooped aromatic grounds into the filter, he observed, “The worst ‘tis done, I’m thinkin’.”

“With a lot of clean up needed.”

“‘Tis true. After a quick bite, I’ll be headin’ home t’ inspect the damage.”

“You’re welcome to stay a few days, until the waters recede.”

“I canna spare the time. I can only imagine how many calls we’ll be gettin’ at the office. We’ll ha’ t’ hire extra crews t’ make good on the contracts.”

Once the brew was poured in a ceramic mug, MacDonough drained it in a single gulp, gobbling two slices of jelly toast before fetching his shoes from the bedroom and setting off in the fading daylight.

For herself, while valuing him as a neighbor, Mustang was glad he’d departed. Having others in her space presented difficulties, her conversations overheard, her random uses of power inadvertently witnessed.

Besides, he’d return eventually, reclaiming his horses.

That left her to ruminate on what Rommel and Clemens had inferred by their cryptic statements.

She risked opening a few windows since the winds had diminished, circulating fresh - albeit moist - air through the domicile. Hopping in the shower, she found bits of straw tangled in her auburn locks and snickered. That she seldom

bothered to glance in a mirror, not worried about her appearance, ragged at best, contrasted her with most twenty-something women.

A tie-dyed blue t-shirt and sweats would serve as she tended the crowd of horses. Minor repairs to the corral fence enabled her to lead MacDonough's stock outdoors, giving them room to move. She saddled Molly and toured the 47 acres at a leisurely gait: a dozen older trees had succumbed to the storm, blocking trails, branches stripped of their leaves as if already autumn, nests were dislodged from their perches.

Mustang sensed, for many, the devastation included homes, businesses, lost loved ones.

Integrating the awareness of her influence over not just earthly realms, but the universe, time and space, could not be completed in an instant. She couldn't wrap her mind around the concept.

She'd not previously registered how her actions had greater ramifications beyond her insulated little circle. What did it matter, for instance, if St. Francis of Assisi defeated her at chess? The engine of Jim Neville's car being strewn on a remote Montana roadway meant employment for some local mechanic, that's all.

Whether she preserved a life - Kanti Gandhi Dinn and her pilot, en route in a private jet across the States - or ended another, like murderous Wilfrid Bailey/Jonas Fairchild, how did that really matter in the greater scheme of rampant political ambition, religious rivalry or economic turmoil?

When microbursts of wind, sparked by her temper, blew out windows or reversed the tide on Loch Ness, did anyone care, beyond the meteorologists sitting at their radar screens in some research facility?

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth at the prospect of uttering one word and annihilating every atom of matter.

Dismounting on the hillock where, strangely, the rotting picnic table/altar remained a landmark, the Mistress of Boleskine hoped wildflowers ringing the clearing would unbend and offer passing butterflies sustenance.

"I never asked for this!" she sighed. "I would've been content helping my father raise horses on the ranch..."

"Even though he and your mother annoyed you with their... inattentiveness?" Gandhi.

"It forced me to learn young not to rely on human affection."

Clemens spouted, "You isolated yourself from others, afraid of being hurt..."

"I... came to see people as selfish, shallow... I refused to play their games."

“You denied yourself even the innocent experiences teens enjoy, the building blocks of maturity,” interspersed Francis.

“What if I did? What could I learn in school that you haven’t taught me?”

No more had she mouthed the words than the predicted answer echoed among the gathering: “Self control.”

“Thank you, General,” she sniffed at Rommel, positioned to the east, her other three companions on the remaining compass points, as if creating a ritual circle. “Is this the time, the place, where I must end this debacle? Summon what some might term the angel of death, to wipe out the fickle, flawed creatures we’ve become, like the firstborn in the Bible?”

The only sound, a tentative breeze.

Aggravated by their sudden lack of input, she persisted, “What about those thousands of nuclear warheads? I could explode them in their silos, on their submarines. Render the planet a void.”

Four pairs of eyes averted from her pacing, fists clenched.

“What about recreating a scene from some old science fiction movie, where a mad genius channels energy from the atmosphere in a laser beam, turning his enemies to dust?”

“You’re ranting, Signorina,” opined Francis.

She wept, “What else can I do? I don’t know what to do! I am a god more real than any myth concocted since humanity needed someone to blame for their problems, and you want me to be rational?”

“A god would show compassion...” Gandhi’s wise advice.

“So, snuff them instantly, without a two-minute countdown to put their affairs in order?”

Clemens’ Missouri accent. “Not necessarily.”

Trembling hands hid her face. “Go away! All of you!”

Molly nickered a moment later, the hillock deserted.

“Sorry, girl,” Mustang apologized, stroking her mane. “The pressure is... overwhelming.”

Swinging onto the saddle, she jerked the reins and descended to the barn.

MacDonough must’ve have come in her absence to collect his stock, the corral empty as dusk fell. She fed and watered her friends - her only friends, with simple needs and affectionate demeanors. The lone burden they placed on her was providing regular care.

People, conversely, sought a share of her power, or control of her as she used it to their advantage. So warped by ambition, they ignored the consequences of their actions. Even those posing as “good Christians” - soliciting donations from

the gullible to line their pockets, or buy luxury cars, expensive jewelry, massive homes - could not claim immunity from the blanket judgment.

Why shouldn't they be turned to dust, as their scriptures purported, in favor of a civilization evolved from horses, crows, or bees?

The mansion's doors bolted, she yearned for a tasty meal, lacking the strength to prepare meat, salad and dessert. A cup of hot chocolate sufficed before she collapsed in bed.

## IV

Mustang's waking thought, rolling onto the floor at dawn that Friday: she'd need to launder the bedsheets, which had absorbed the sweat and grime from her clothes. Her tangled mane required a thorough shampoo before she even attempted to brush it, as well.

Blue skies signaled a fine day ahead, but more a chance for those whose livelihoods had been wrecked to drain flooded basements or salvage flipped vehicles.

Her stomach growled.

Refreshed by hot water and soap, she tied herself in the same terry robe worn by Mother Earth less than a week previous and cooked bacon and eggs for breakfast, swallowing a tall glass of orange juice with three slices of toast.

Clad in a grey tank top and cut-off jeans, the horses tended and content, she hiked toward Loch Ness, the ground too mushy to risk injuring one of them. Her sneakers soon soaked, she paused briefly near the four-room Gate House where Jack Parsons had spent his final years - now a crumbling shell, unfit for habitation.

Traversing the macadam roadway, oddly deserted at an hour when most workers should be driving to their places of employment, she descended the uneven incline until further progress was impeded.

She estimated five feet of water remained above the normal shoreline.

Boats ranging from canoes and private yachts to pontoons and double-decker tourist craft cluttered the landscape, heaped haphazardly like some child's rejected toys, a total loss.

In her heart, Mustang sensed the scene amounted to just the tip of the iceberg.

"Your little stunt may have killed thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions," she griped to the air. "The cost is probably incalculable, leading to

poverty, famine, and who knows what else.” She kicked a stone, backing from the splash. “If it was meant as a taunt, to convince me to act...”

“You’re not thinking what I hope you’re not thinking,” that familiar Southern twang assailed her ears.

She avoided Samuel Clemens’ piercing gaze, framed by his shaggy white mop. “Thinking what?”

“You can reverse this.”

“Hell, Sam, I could evaporate this entire lake in a fraction of a second without blinking, but Nessie and her fish friends wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“I’m not saying you *can’t* do it. I’m saying you *shouldn’t*.”

“But, so many people have lost everything... on a grander scale than any time in history.”

“I know, I know, but... it’s a cyclical phenomenon. You learned about the flu epidemic of 1918...”

She snorted, “Sophomore year, United States history class, most of which I missed.”

“One set of germs decimated families, towns, cities, countries. Periodically, it’s necessary, and the greater the number of people, the higher the casualties.”

“So, you justify the deaths of a certain percentage of the seven billion people on this planet?”

Clemens bristled. “What’s done is done.”

“Bullshit. Take any movie filmed in the last century, the plots dreamed up by minds who see no boundaries to what’s possible. They render turmoil via special effects, with the heroes surviving to build a better future. Their only fault is that they don’t realize such fantasies could be frighteningly real.”

“If you wish it to be so.”

Sneering facetiously, Mustang trudged uphill; her companion witnessed what amounted to piles of kindling restored to seaworthiness. He pursued her with an ease belying his age, caught her bare arm and tugged.

“My dear, weigh your decision carefully. Don’t succumb to impulsiveness...”

“If it’s the right thing to do...”

“Is it? You’re well aware of the fallout when you’ve raised the dead...”

Her resistance against his grasp lessened; she leveled hazel orbs on his wizened features. “That would be the ultimate fiasco,” she acknowledged. “The homes, the debris... those can be rendered...”

“You can’t send lava flows back to their origin, or reshape crumbled mountains without a plethora of questions!”

“Sure, but how would anyone know about me, standing in the midst of the Scottish Highlands? They’d deem it a miracle wrought by divine hands, since they’re praying like mad for deliverance from the travesty.”

Erwin Rommel joined the pair. “The people have already experienced significant trauma; why subject them to yet another?”

“Fine. They’ll go to sleep tonight and wake tomorrow believing it’s all been a horrible nightmare.”

“And, their loved ones who died?”

“The scientists will suspect a new strain of virulent disease; military types will theorize some experimental gas was accidentally released during an unannounced test...”

“In other words, you’ll do nothing to clarify the cause?” Clemens prodded.

“Correct.”

“What about the various time zones?” queried Rommel.

She guffawed outright. “Do you really think such a detail would hinder me? Well before those in Beijing wake, those in more westerly locales will be heading for bed. With communications down, they won’t be able to exchange information until much later...”

The general swallowed audibly. “You won’t fix the internet?”

“It’s a damned nuisance, at best. If they want it back, they can do it themselves.”

The two spectres faded suddenly; Mustang’s confusion lasted only a moment. She turned to the lithe, naked Mother Earth hovering above a boulder not ten feet away.

“You understand your intended course will put us at odds?” the soprano drifted on the breeze.

The Mistress of Boleskine shrugged.

“We both want the same end: the preservation of the planet.”

“Sure, but your methods are way too harsh.”

“I have no alternative, given humanity’s stubbornness and ignorance.”

“I can clean up the environmental mess, so we can start over fresh,” offered Mustang. “Your... tactics only add to the problem.”

“How so?”

“Take those boats. Left to rot, the paint and fuel would leech into the ground water, polluting the whole lake...”

“Good point.” Settling on the rock, Mother Earth contemplated the horizon. “How would you... reverse the damage?”

“Not that I’m any scientific expert,” she chuckled, adding, “though we could call on Albert Einstein or Carl Sagan to confirm my hypothesis. Take the offensive matter and render it into energy...”

“You mean...”

The granite beneath her dematerialized without Mustang twitching a finger. Mother Earth floated to the ground, not amused.

“What are your conditions?” the latter pressed.

“Conditions?”

“What must I concede for you to... bring the environment into balance?”

Mustang pondered the prospect. “For one, scale back the natural disasters.”

“If you do as you say, there should be no need for... such events. Anything else?”

“Nope.” She continued toward the highway. “If I did want anything for myself, it would take but a word.”

Mother Earth caught her up on the berm. “You are far too flippant about your gift.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Don’t you ever... regret your actions?”

Crossing the macadam, the auburn head shook solemnly. “All the time.”

Especially when she didn’t choose her words with care, or allowed random thoughts to become reality.

Parked on the cane-backed rocking chair in the living room, Mustang jotted points on the back of an old grocery receipt. The ozone layer must be repaired, various harmful gases transformed into less toxic alternatives. Areas despoiled by wildfires must have their natural habitats and trees regenerated.

The list went on into the night - her sole break to feed and water the horses - every detail calculated to prevent further chaos.

Gandhi, St. Francis, Samuel Clemens and Erwin Rommel perused the draft before she dared take any action. Some minor revisions preceded their departure.

“Aren’t you going to stay and watch the fun?” she taunted.

Rommel responded for the quartet. “We... trust you to do what’s right.”

Not that there’d be any real spectacle to the process, as when her grandfather, Jack Parsons, would conduct elaborate rituals near the altar on the hillock, wearing flowing robes and jabbering Enochian formulae.

After downing a glass of milk and peanut butter sandwich in the kitchen, she placed her lightning-scarred right palm flat atop the paper smoothed on the

dinette table, speaking quietly. "Over the course of the next 24 hours, as the people sleep in each successive time zone, complete these tasks."

She entertained no worries about whether the elements would heed her bidding. More practical tasks awaited her: washing the linens she'd neglected - both her bed and the one in the guest room, where Glenn MacDonough had rested after the tumultuous storms.

Sheets folded in the wee hours, she showered and pulled her damp tresses into a pony tail. Jeans and a green t-shirt sufficed for performing a deep cleaning of the barn, the horses enjoying cool morning air in the corral.

By noon, humidity had increased along with the temperature. Mustang saddled Wench, a fiesty roan, for a canter along the trails. As birds twittered overhead, leaves rustling with currents of warm air, her memories turned to Montana and the hours she spent meandering her parents' horse ranch, instead of riding the bus to Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School. She relished the peace of nature, the innocence...

Unlike dealing with human beings, often fractious, foolish or misguided by greed. She'd sought isolation at Boleskine, yet people managed to find her - accidentally or on purpose.

Someday, some way, she would attain the self-control required to keep off official "radar", as when aberrant weather triggered the interest of the meteorological services. She might even manage to find a soulmate, a confidant...

But, not when she couldn't even kiss a man without causing an earthquake.

On the edge of the property, Glenn MacDonough worked with a crew to repair a series of downed fenceposts. He waved to her, and she steered her mount toward him.

"Everything well wi' ye, Lady Elizabeth?" he greeted in that irritating Scottish burr.

"Yes, thanks for asking."

"'Tis been a bizarre week, by all accounts."

"How so?"

He recounted tales of apparitions, mysterious deaths, wide spread cable television, radio, telephone and internet outages. "Folks in Inverness swore they saw buildin's collapsin', cars thrown through houses..."

"What do the authorities have to say about it?"

"'Tis probably the oddest part. Nae one from the government has uttered a syllable." He steadied a metal pole as the younger men poured concrete into the hole. "'Tis not just hereaboot, either. If I dinnae know better, I'd guess we'd been invaded by aliens."

Mustang bit her lip to repress the laughter. As good an excuse as any for the upheaval... She ventured, "But, things seem okay today."

"'Tis true. Buildin's and vehicles are in perfect order, only communications remain out o' commission."

"Then, what happened to the aliens?"

"I canna speculate. Maybe they dinnae like what they found, or..."

That MacDonough's theory wouldn't hold up, even in his own mind, didn't bother the young woman. Conspiracies would abound, no doubt, and make for lively conversation at pubs around the globe.

"Thanks for the update!" she stated, reining Wench between the trees.

Two weeks of quiet solitude allowed Mustang a chance to catch up on lost sleep, enjoy chess with her ethereal visitors, and regularly exercise the horses. The scheduled delivery of oats and straw occurred the following Tuesday, the middle-aged driver from Dores eager to share the latest gossip.

Not that his customer wished to listen.

"The newspapers are reportin' weaponized satellites caused the disruption; some prototype malfunctioned and bombarded a secret laboratory, releasin' deadly chemicals that killed millions and caused drug-induced hallucinations for even more."

"What about television?"

"Nae of those services are functional yet. Technicians ha' been workin' 'round the clock, but can't trace the cause o' the damage."

Signing the delivery slip, she waited until the pickup receded along the gravel drive to shake with glee.

The human mind could - and would - dream up outrageous explanations for every occasion.

Too bad they wouldn't accept their own fault in the matter, and learn to treat the planet with respect, so future generations would have a secure place to live.

Hauling straw bales and 50 pound sacks of oats into the barn taxed her. She sank on the wooden bench near the tack room, inhaling the scent of horse flesh and saddle soap.

"Maybe I should have let it go," she mused aloud. "Maybe they would have learned from their mistakes..."

Still, a massive collection of discarded plastics, floating in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, would no longer endanger fish, whales and other seafaring mammals, or birds. The sheets of newsprint stuffed in the box with her order of meat, milk and other staples that arrived on Thursday afternoon contained notices

- conveyed by old-fashioned Morse code via telegraph - of scientists' perplexity at the inexplicable absence of toxic chemicals in the air and waterways, the pristine appearance of beaches, enlargement of previously-melted icebergs...

The back page listed dozens of failed efforts to reconnect the internet. Each time technicians believed they'd solved the problem, the system crashed anew.

"Good riddance," murmured Mustang, sipping a mug of hot chocolate that evening.

Local television stations, at least, returned to broadcasting on a limited basis. Let the world listen to their music, rehash the daily chain of events, as long as she was left alone.

"I don't recall seeing the deactivation of the satellites on your list of instructions to nature," General Rommel huffed as he placed her king in check late Saturday.

"I... added it at the last minute."

"Why, pray tell?"

"Why not?" She moved a rook between his bishop and her king. "Instant gratification has been the motivation for many of society's ills. Maybe, if they slow down, stop and think before they rush from one distraction to the next, they'll take better care of the planet."

"Interesting that you should claim such mastery of impulsive behavior."

"You know I try my best not to..."

"You could switch them back on," hinted the German strategist.

"Why, when you're going to tell me that astronauts from six countries have been launched to do just that?"

His brow furrowed. "How'd you..."

A sad smile accompanied her resignation of the game. "I've come to know you quite well, General. You may not be willing - or allowed, in my case - to predict the future, but you never hesitate to remind me how my mistakes impact the present."

He touched his forelock in mock salute.

"Besides, think how much electricity those devices use, when there are countries where people still can't light their houses. When I... did what I did, I didn't intend for coal mining to resume, just so people can watch cat videos on their phones."

"So be it." He rose and glared down at her. "Just don't let it happen again."

“There’s still always the potential for me to wipe out humanity entirely,” she warned. “They’ve been given not a second chance, but their last chance, to make good.”

He mocked, “So proclaims Elizabeth Duryea, the one true god.”

As she shuffled toward the bedroom, she breathed, “Amen.”