

The Mustang Chronicles:

Burnished Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

Dozens of ravens soared over Boleskine House that brisk October evening - not a flock, but an “unkindness” as the locals termed it.

Once nearly extinct in the British Isles, the large black creatures’ numbers had surged over the latter decades of the 20th century, Mustang Duryea learned from her nearest neighbor and fellow horse enthusiast, Glenn MacDonough.

“Lady Elizabeth Neville” - her pseudonym in Scotland’s Loch Ness region - frequently heard the construction project manager’s complaints about the birds’ willful thefts of small tools and supplies from building sites when he called upon her, concerned at her lack of a phone or other electronics to summon assistance in case of trouble.

“Ach, Your Ladyship, they’ll seize anythin’ shiny!” he lamented that very Tuesday, standing beside the idling white pickup on the gravel drive.

Thus, when a roundish object descended from the pastel-hued sky and thumped the soft earth at her feet as she grilled a chicken quarter for her dinner, the impact didn’t really surprise her.

The object itself did.

Coated with moisture - raven spit? Mustang puzzled - the thickly-banded platinum ring bore a Greek-style inlay with an exquisitely cut emerald, surrounded by small diamonds.

Not cheap, this.

Slipping it in her jeans, she finished cooking the meat and carried the platter into the kitchen, where a salad and tall glass of milk waited on the dinette table.

Once she’d cleared the plates - ravenous after a day of exercising her horses and cleaning the barn - she used dish soap and water to scrub the ring and inspect it more closely.

Around the setting, “University of Oxford” was emblazoned, 1911 commingled with the design. An engraving inside the circumference declared it the property of “Peter Dennis Ray”.

Somebody’s great-grandfather, most likely, given the date, Mustang surmised.

From whence had the raven stolen such an heirloom?

Toying with it - even too large for her index finger - in the living room’s cane-backed rocking chair, she contemplated entrusting it to Glenn MacDonough on his next visit, with instructions to pass it along to the constabulary in Inverness. The owner, or his descendants, may have already filed a report.

The last thing Mustang wanted was whoever laid claim to the ring seeking her out, expressing gratitude for her honesty. She definitely didn't need any kind of monetary reward; her surreptitious excursions to the Monte Carlo casinos kept her well in cash, thanks to the power bequeathed her by her late grandfather, scientist and occultist Jack Parsons.

Before retiring to her king-sized bed, she consigned the ring to the night stand's top drawer. A decision could be made in the morning.

An early morning, to be sure. The singular croaking penetrated her slumber, growing in magnitude to a cacophony before abruptly falling silent.

Mustang jolted upright on the mattress, auburn tresses falling, tangled, on her shoulders. She scrambled from beneath the quilt, shuffling to the window. As she parted heavy draperies, she saw ravens assembled on the lawn, bathed in a pre-dawn glow.

In their midst: St. Francis of Assisi, holding a discussion with the bird perched on his arm.

"Oh, hell..." the young woman chuckled.

She shed her plain white tank top and red sweat pants for a blue flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers. Suspecting an autumn chill, she grabbed her parka from the coat rack before opening the steel front door to observe the scene from the stoop.

The Italian, manifested accidentally when Mustang traveled to Rome on a lightning bolt three years earlier, chided "Sister Raven" for her thieving ways. No command to nature proved necessary for the Mistress of Boleskine to understand the black bird's reply. It dipped its beak humbly, begging forgiveness of the man who'd become a household name through his affinity for animals and creation.

Glimpsing the intruder, though, the entire conspiracy of ravens raised their heads in a threatening motion.

"Now, now," Francis admonished the assembly. "She is your friend."

"I take it, they're here to redeem their... lost treasure?" she quipped.

"Indeed, Signorina. I've told them, however, they cannot have it, and must behave themselves henceforth."

"Thanks."

Francis lifted his hand; the lead raven took flight. "Go, get your breakfast, brothers and sisters! Peace be with you!"

A blur of wings obscured the rising sun as the birds dispersed over Loch Ness.

"Join me for breakfast," Mustang invited this periodic visitor as she trudged indoors.

He watched from the metal table as she scrambled eggs and cooked rashers of bacon on the stove, toast popping up, orange juice poured in a tumbler. Then, seated opposite, she dug into the feast.

“Why are the ravens so intent upon retrieving the ring?” she asked.

“It is a matter of... how you say, status?” Francis explained. “What items the birds... acquire...”

“Steal, you mean.”

“Ah, si. Those trinkets are presented to the queen raven, and the one she determines most valuable affords the... thief special honors.”

Mustang scoffed, “Just like humans.”

“Si.”

“Well, they’ll have to do without this one. It belongs to someone and will be restored to its owner in due course.”

“How, if you have shunned interaction with society?”

“I was going to let Glenn take it to the police.”

“Ah!”

She toted dishes to the sink, squirting a stream of soap into the warm water. “Why isn’t that a good idea?”

When she spun from the counter, Francis had vanished.

“Oh, hell...”

Mustang didn’t dwell on the incident, busy feeding and grooming her horses. Ignoring a resolution to tidy the house, she spent the hours before noon riding Pietra, Molly and Sarge in turn, ravens monitoring her progress from trees tinged red and gold.

That sensation of being under scrutiny always raised goosebumps on her flesh. Not wishing to offend Francis, she resisted the temptation to pitch a stone at the lingering birds, or raise a stiff breeze to scatter them.

“There are shiny bits of trash around the loch you can pluck freely off the shore,” she noted. “No need to be so attached to this one...”

The large bird swooped from its branch, hovering above the trail and spooking Sarge, impeding the gelding’s progress. Mustang soothed her mount before reluctantly sliding from the saddle.

“All right, talk to me,” she directed.

Spindly legs settled on the packed earth, glaring up at her. “The ring is no random trinket,” it squawked in an almost human tenor. “It is vital to our ritual...”

“What ritual?” She recalled ceremonies Jack Parsons enacted on the hillock overlooking the Georgian mansion, raising the elements and, finally, ensuring his own death through deceit.

She didn't receive the answer she wanted. "We've searched for the ring more than 80 of your years..."

"You're confessing you lied to Francis?"

If the raven's features could twist into a disdainful expression, that's how it appeared to Mustang. "The ring bears an enchantment that will lift the curse..."

She'd heard rumors - specifically from Glenn MacDonough - about mystical beings roaming the Highlands. She'd freed Brede Carver, a Druid priestess, from the stone where she'd been trapped for centuries...

She didn't want to get involved in any more nonsense, fearing the havoc she could wreak in the guise of being helpful.

"Where did you find the ring?" she queried.

"On the windowsill of a flat in East Finchley, north of London," replied the bird. "This, my faithful escort, accompanied me the entire trip..."

Mustang grasped the massive effort expended in the search. "They are to be commended for their vigilance, but I cannot release the ring until I confirm..."

"Ye dinnae trust us?"

"It's not that." She sank on a rotting stump. "In our world, when an object is found, it is held for 30 days so the rightful owner has time to trace it. Would you be agreeable to me holding the ring for that period and, if no one expresses an interest, you may then have it?"

The ravens consulted among themselves; Mustang didn't want the entire discussion translated to her ears. The dissonance made their lack of consensus clear.

Finally, the contingency's leader silenced the throng. "Enough!" Bowing so its beak touched the ground, it directed to the young woman, "We consent, milady. We shall return in 30 days."

"What if someone..."

A smoldering left eye favored her; she didn't need an audible affirmation of the terror inflicted on such a naive soul. She imagined the ravens shredding a body into tiny bits with their sharp bills...

They ascended into the cloudless sky; she swung onto Sarge's back and steered him toward Glenn MacDonough's property. A casual conversation over a cup of coffee might reveal the history of this alleged curse.

Wisps of white hair disheveled as he doused a mud-encrusted construction pickup with the garden hose, MacDonough hailed his neighbor's approach with a cheery salute - augmented by an arc of water from the nozzle. Mustang reined her horse, avoiding the spray.

“Good afternoon t’ye, Your Ladyship!” the Scottish elder greeted, his burr thick and, often, incomprehensible. “What can I do for ye this fine day?”

Dismounting, Mustang tied leather straps to a fence post. “Have you seen the ravens the past couple days?”

“Aye, I ha’. Does not bode well, them bein’ about.”

Suspecting the forthcoming tale, she restrained outward demonstrations of glee. “How so?”

“Ach, ‘twas that horrible, Your Ladyship.” He dodged puddles on the drive, cranking off the flow of water. Then, he leaned against the bricks, shaking his head. “‘Twas m’grandfather’s time, if I recall. About the same era as the troubles in Ireland. Wholesale pillagin’, violation o’ the wimmin by wild young ‘uns from south o’ the border. There be an old witch livin’ near the loch who heard about their antics, and she lay a curse on any who dared defile residents o’ the region. Turned them into ravens, she did, and they come back, now and agin, seeking their redemption.”

“Oh, hell...”

What she wanted to know, yet not what she wanted to know.

Still, what did the ring have to do...

MacDonough paused to tighten the knob, stopping a drip from the spigot. He glanced at his visitor. “From what m’grandmother told me when I was a wee bairn, the birds must deliver t’ the witch the ring of her true love, which will enable her t’ cast a spell so they will be eternally reunited. Only then will the ravens take human form once more.”

Mustang swallowed her heart. “The witch is still alive?”

He grunted, “There’s nae way t’ tell wi’ that kind.”

“Thanks, Glenn.”

The ride to Boleskine allowed Mustang a chance to meditate on this dilemma, to be avoided at all costs. While she, herself, could be labeled a witch or, more accurately, a sorcerer - if the preciseness of the term really mattered - she’d confronted others asserting magickal powers and didn’t wish to repeat the process.

The countryside might be devastated by the chaos.

Steering Sarge up the incline, she considered the rotting picnic table Jack Parsons had used as an altar for his own strange rites. A century earlier, the notorious Aleister Crowley had resided on the property, drawing who-knew-what types of energy to the area.

Might the witch be one of that fool’s cohort, still alive due to the same phenomenon that preserved Parson’s middle-aged physique into extreme old age?

“I don’t want to know,” Mustang swore, guiding the horse to the barn, where he received plentiful oats and a fresh supply of water.

At least, when she emerged from the structure, sliding the huge door closed on its rollers, the ravens weren’t loitering nearby. She could grab a bite to eat, maybe a nap, and a game of chess with Erwin Rommel before dinner.

Vacuuming and dusting could be done another day.

Mustang acknowledged living in solitude could be onerous; she’d taken up talking to herself when the tangible spirits of Mark Twain or Mahatma Gandhi absented themselves. She’d never craved human companionship, on the whole, frequently skipping school in her teens and spending the hours on horseback, wandering her father’s ranch. On occasions when she tried to assist others, the good deeds backfired - moreso since she inherited these powers over the natural elements.

Boleskine House meant as a haven against such tumult, her very arrival in the vicinity had drawn needy souls to her door, or placed her in the midst of tenuous situations - as when she’d lost her memory after being hit in the head by an errant remote control airplane.

That had ended well: a confrontation with Lord Guthrie over his lackey’s mistreatment of the tenants, replete with shattered walls...

“I mustn’t get angry,” she reminded herself, leading Crystal from her stall after lunch. “I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

Not to mention, when her emotions were aroused. Being kissed by actor Thomas Burton that first time nearly destroyed her cousin’s dwelling. With Jim Neville, the Montana State Police detective she might’ve married - and whose name she used to disguise her true identity - she could have achieved the self-control for which she ached.

The FBI, though, dogged her every step to gain possession of Jack Parsons’ anti-gravity formula, killing Jim outside a California convenience store.

Tears dampened her cheeks at the recollection.

“Oh, hell...”

Crystal, suddenly skittish, yanked at the reins, tossing her head. Mustang scanned the tree line, thinking a small animal might have startled the horse.

Nothing visible... but, audible?

Car tires crunched gravel on the drive.

Wiping her face with her shirt sleeve, Mustang confined the horse in the spacious corral.

The midnight blue Aston Martin DB4 GT cruised toward the dwelling's entrance as she secured the gate. The figure that alighted from the right-side door stunned her speechless.

II

Jet black hair combed off a wide forehead, a full mustache beneath a Romanesque nose, intense brown eyes topped by thick brows, an elongated face with lips angled upward at the right corner adorned a 30-something lean frame garbed in a grey Gucci suit...

"Wow!" Mustang breathed.

"Yeah, 'tis a stunner, innit?" came the Cockney-accented baritone.

He thought she'd commented on the car.

"Built in 1961," he stated. "Not many of 'em still runnin'."

She had no reason to doubt him. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm lookin' for a bird."

She'd watched enough old movies to know that "bird" was British for girl.

"I'm the only bird here, and I don't think you're looking for me."

"Under different circumstances, darlin', I'd be only too 'appy to oblige," he snorted. "I mean a real bird. Black, with feathers."

The import of his declaration hit home.

"The ravens?"

"Right."

"They've gone."

He grinned, capped white teeth glinting in the sun. "Then, they were 'ere?"

"They passed through yesterday."

He edged back to the car. "Ta. I'm still on their track."

"Their track?" she echoed.

"They stole somefin' o' mine..."

"Must be pretty valuable."

"Oh, 'tis. Belonged to me great-granddad."

Mustang shuddered. "How'd they get hold of it?"

"I'd gone 'round to check on me mum, and set it on the windowsill while I washed the dishes. Damned blighter snatched it frough the open window when I wasn't lookin'."

She repressed her comment.

"'Tis almost like 'twas waitin' for the right moment... like it'd been watchin' me."

“How long have you been tracking them?”

“Eight days. The entire way from East Finchley.”

“Impressive.”

He ducked behind the steering wheel. “I fought it was a waste o’ me time, but maybe I’ll catch ‘em yet.”

He might, indeed, catch the birds, but the ring wouldn’t be found with them.

“What’s your name?” she called as he revved the engine.

Brown orbs squinted at her. “Why?”

“You’re on my land; I’m curious.”

“Ah, right. I shoulda introduced meself.” Leaving the motor idling, he crossed to her, elegant fingers extended. “Peter Dennis Ray the Fourth, at your service.”

The firm grip released, Mustang flexed her digits to restore circulation. This provided a distraction for her to ruminate briefly on another potential disaster.

“I didna mean to hurt you, darlin’,” he apologized sincerely.

“Not your fault. Blisters from the reins...”

He scooped up her hand, halting before he kissed the palm. “‘Tis more than blisters, darlin’,” he proclaimed. “These are serious burns...”

Retracting the appendage swiftly, Mustang hedged, “Ancient wounds, almost healed.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’. No offense...”

“None taken.” She gazed skyward. “If I recall, the ravens flew south from here. You might find them near Foyers.”

“Ta.”

In lieu of kissing her hand, Ray planted his mouth on hers. The briefness of the contact, fortunately, permitted no emotional reaction on Mustang’s part, saving them from being wrenched sideways by a tremor or buffeted by a microburst of wind.

“Take care of yourself, darlin’.”

Shifting into gear, the Aston Martin performed a U-turn and eased past the curve.

“Impulsive sort,” rumbled Mark Twain from behind her. “An impish rogue...”

The Mistress of Boleskine whirled toward the house. “I’ve a premonition we’ll be seeing him again, and that right soon.”

“You’re attracted to him?” the American author prodded.

“No. He’s attracted to the ring, and it’s resting safely beside my bed.”

Unlocking the deadbolt, Mustang's hazel eyes adjusted to the dimness within, proceeding to the kitchen for a tall glass of water.

Twain, white mustache twitching, leaned against the broom cupboard. "You're wondering whether to make the bed a prerequisite to him reclaiming the ring."

"God, no, Sam! Bringing the roof down on our heads isn't my idea of... fun."

"If you had the degree of self-control..."

Running the tap, she eyed him. "You were married, in life. You had children. You know how... passionate a man and woman can be together. The... lack of control in those moments... can't be contained."

"Eventually, you'll learn."

Draining the tumbler, Mustang murmured, "I don't know if I want to."

Meandering to the bedroom, she debated showering before settling on the mattress' edge and plucking the ring from its drawer.

A witch, a raven and a man: all bound to this band by inextricable means. Merely possessing it opened her to unpleasant repercussions.

She could chuck it into the woods and be rid of the problem...

For Peter Ray IV, a sentimental attachment to the ring would eventually diminish. It meant more to the ravens: their very existence, except that they'd committed crimes against the Scottish people and should be required to make amends...

Living in bird form for a century could be constituted as sufficient punishment by some courts.

What of the witch? How had she become separated from the first Peter Ray? How deeply was her soul tormented by his absence that she would use this ploy to restore him?

Mustang knew she only need speak the command - think it, to be honest - and the woman would arrive in short order.

"I'm not getting in the middle of this... mess!" she pledged aloud, snatching her robe off the door hook and marching to the bathroom.

Pulsating water did little to relax her jittery nerves. She half expected the younger Ray to be poised beneath the lintel when she exited the tub. Like James Michael of Salisbury, drawn through time by a Cal Tech professor's botched experiments, she envisioned them on the bed together...

"No!" Not that the image dispelled with the vehemence of the outburst. She wouldn't... she couldn't...

Reclining on the pillows, a towel preventing her wet hair from soaking the sheets, she stared at the ceiling. Another scenario presented itself: the ravens appeal to the witch, informing her of the ring's proximity, and she presents herself in person, without the birds waiting the requisite month.

If the younger Ray resembled his forebear, Mustang could sympathize with the other woman's desire.

Perhaps, bringing the pair together...

Or, had the witch concocted her scheme to just such an end?

Compensating for her lover's absence, would she possess by magick whoever now wore the ring?

Dirty pool, that, Mustang mused.

"You can't interfere in someone else's..." Twain chided.

"Oh, can't I?"

His smirk barely visible beneath thick fringe, he retorted, "Yes, you are - perhaps - the most powerful being on the planet. You have rendered other practitioners... impotent, for lack of a better term. In this instance, nonetheless..."

Mustang sat upright, damp strands dangling over her shoulders. "I'm fully aware you have knowledge of past and future, Sam. If the raven hadn't dropped the ring, if she'd gifted it to the witch and the spell had been cast... who would become her consort, Peter Dennis Ray, the deceased, or his great-grandson, now living?"

The author truly named Samuel Clemens averted his gaze.

"Oh, hell..."

So much for a nap.

Mustang pulled on fresh jeans and an orange sweatshirt, brushed her hair vigorously and bound it in a ponytail. En route to the front door, she shouted, "Where will I find this witch, boys?"

The knob yanked inward; she almost collided with Peter Ray IV, fist raised to knock, that sweet Aston Martin parked behind him.

"What are you doing here?" she growled.

"I..."

She pushed past him. "I've no time for small talk. I'm on my way out."

"The weather forecast is callin' for rain within the hour."

Tugging the corral gate open, she hesitated. "So?"

"You and your horse will get very, very wet."

"And?"

"I'd be honored to drive you wherever you were headed."

The Missouri accent ringing inside her skull, Twain advised, "Trust the flow of the energies."

"Except, I don't know where..." she whispered as Ray waited.

"West side of the loch, the road marked with a huge rock painted yellow."

With a dejected sigh, she secured the padlock on the hasp. "I'd appreciate it," she directed to Ray.

Detouring long enough to lock the mansion's steel door, she allowed the Aston Martin's owner to hold the passenger door for her. She'd not ridden in vehicles much since being exiled to Scotland, and being on the left - where American drivers usually sat - still petrified her.

More so when Ray pressed the accelerator to the floor, roaring down the highway like his own personal racetrack. The right corner of his mouth curled in a broad smile, she realized she might be at the mercy of a bona fide lunatic.

"I like to enjoy life with all my senses, darlin'," he boasted when he detected her flushed cheeks and wide eyes. "The engine hasn't even hit top speed."

At least, he had the good sense to decrease their momentum when droplets of rain dampened the windscreen just north of Foyers.

"Do you mind if we grab a bite to eat?" he ventured. "I've had nothing since breakfast."

In no hurry, she acquiesced to the request. A tiny bistro on the main street offered gourmet coffees and sandwiches, sparsely populated at that hour. Ray's gaze seldom left the car parked at the curb, rain marring its pristine appearance.

"What would happen if a lorry kicked up a bunch of rocks, scratching the paint?" Mustang puzzled.

"I'd sue the company, and trade the car for one without blemishes."

"That's nuts!" She let it slip, biting her tongue.

"To some, maybe."

His features sported a distinctive glow as he caressed the classic with his eyes, like a mother doting on her favorite child. Only, no mother would discard a child who'd scratched an elbow or knee because of an imperfection.

"You felt that rush when she took off, darlin'," he rationalized. "There's no more exhilaratin' sensation on the planet!"

Boy, could I teach him a thing or two! Mustang mused.

The server delivered their sandwiches and soft drinks; Peter Ray devoured his in six bites and threw a 20 pound note on the table when he noticed the downpour had ceased. Wiping crumbs from his mustache, he hustled toward the street while his companion sipped from a plastic tumbler.

Content to wrap half the chicken croissant in a paper napkin, she scurried after him.

“No eatin’ in the car!” he warned, pitching the food in a trash bin on the sidewalk.

The rumbling caused nearby pedestrians to freeze in their tracks. Two severe tremors buckled macadam at the intersection; utility poles swayed ominously.

“Damn!” Ray spat. “Let’s get out of ‘ere before...”

She could’ve opened a gaping hole in the road to swallow the Aston Martin, deflecting her anger at the last second so every shop window shattered along a two block stretch.

Francis of Assisi would not be pleased, she scowled, dropping onto the seat.

Rear end loose on the wet pavement; Ray compensated for the fish-tail maneuver, easing the car forward at a snail’s pace.

Mustang presumed he was afraid the wheel wells would get muddy.

“Get on with it!” she hissed, moisture evaporating from the surface ahead.

The yellow rock jutted from the earth exactly across Loch Ness from Boleskine, the young woman calculated. The lane beyond dirt, Ray yanked the parking brake. “‘ere you are,” he announced.

“What, you’re going to drop me and take off?”

“Sure.”

“You need to come with me.”

“Are you barmy?”

Mustang coughed an unintelligible response.

“‘ow far is it?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

He slumped against the leather. “I’m not soakin’ my shoes with that muck, then scrapin’ ‘em clean when we get back...”

“Trust me.”

“Why? I don’t even know your name.”

She clucked, “That’s right. You told me yours...” Still, she resisted. “You want your ring, don’t you?”

“The ravens dropped it out ‘ere?”

“Trust me.”

Ray popped the brake and edged the car behind a stone outcropping to shield it from passing traffic. He pocketed his keys and stretched, nose-to-Romanesque nose with her. “If you lead me on a wild goose chase...”

They tramped through thick underbrush, over toppled logs, Ray's suit spoiled and torn, his baritone uttering the most vile expletives.

"I'll replace it, I promise," Mustang declared.

"You don't look like you could afford your next meal," he scoffed. "You don't own those fancy digs, do you?"

"Does it matter if I'm the caretaker or the lady of the manor, so long as you get that confounded ring and leave the district no worse for the wear?"

He deliberated. "I s'pose not."

"Then, shut the hell up."

Parting a dense curtain of branches, a rustic cabin nestled among rose bushes came into view. On a rocker cut from rough-hewn logs, an aged, golden-haired figure with round, wire-rimmed spectacles basked in the sunset. The sight of newcomers prompted her off the chair, smoothing her plain, floral-print house frock, clutching a sturdy hiking stick.

Mustang sensed the ravens' ominous presence in the trees.

Ray pulled up short, clasping her arm. He drawled, "Oh, my God!"

"What?" she wondered.

"That's..."

A thin, tinny soprano interrupted, "Peter?"

Befuddled, Mustang viewed Ray's tentative advance toward the resident. "Sophie?"

Their gentle embrace defied comprehension, ravens taking flight in a thunder of wings.

III

This tiny wraith didn't resemble any witch Mustang Duryea could recall from television, fairy tales or movies. She might've been made of paper, her limbs seemed so brittle. Yet, watery blue eyes flashed with life - and joy - at Peter Ray's company.

The pair glided toward Mustang, Ray beaming with satisfaction, his mouth angled up at the right corner.

"Welcome, dear," came Sophie's voice, little more than a gasp. "I'm so grateful you made this reunion possible."

"Reunion?" Mustang repeated.

Ray gushed, "Why didn't you tell me you knew where Sophie lived?"

"I... didn't..."

"She looks just like her portrait..."

“Portrait?”

“Great-granddad commissioned it, and hung it in the den of our family’s estate before...”

Mustang prompted, “Before?”

“My great-grandmother’s jealousy got the better of her and she tore into the canvas with a butcher’s knife.”

“Then, how...”

“My father had it restored, and it’s looked down from above the parlor fireplace since I was little.”

“I still don’t...”

Recognizing the young woman’s confusion, Sophie led her to a primitive stool constructed of discarded wood. “Sit, please.”

Ray dropped onto a swatch of carpet that doubled for a welcome mat beside the pair.

“That’s not very comfortable,” Mustang admonished.

“I... don’t care.”

One hell of an astonishing alteration in his attitude...

“It’s not unusual, when you finally find the object of a life-long search,”

Sophie cackled.

Mustang countered, “He’s searching for a lost ring...”

“His great-grandfather’s ring, which I originally bought on the occasion of that marvelous gentleman’s graduation from Oxford.”

Hazel orbs studied the cabin’s resident. “Then, you *are*... more than 100 years old?”

“Indeed.”

“I don’t mean to be nosy, but... would you mind explaining?”

“Not at all.” Sophie leaned toward her guest, almost conspiratorially. “You see, Peter’s great-grandfather - the first to hold the name - was prevented from marrying me by the... conventions of the Edwardian age, though he loved me with a passion beyond words.”

“Ah!” Mustang noted.

“The portrait was completed before his father dissolved our engagement, and my Peter vowed to never let it out of his sight.” She drew a faded, hand-colored photo of the John Singer Sargent artwork from her skirt pocket. She had been quite lovely in her youth. “After returning from his military service in World War One, he wed the daughter of a noble house and I never saw him again.”

“I’m... sorry.”

“No need.” Sophie’s gnarled fingers gestured toward the younger Ray. “He’s here once more, the twin of his incredible forebear.”

Mustang rose. “I still don’t...”

“Yes, I think you do, dear.” Beside her as the last glimmers of daylight faded, the soprano murmured, “I placed an enchantment upon the portrait, so the men of Peter’s family would always see me in that guise and... not as I am in my dotage.”

“Oh, hell...” The Mistress of Boleskine bristled. “You plan to keep him here as your... consort?”

“I’m not certain. I’d been hoping to recoup a certain item...”

“The ring.”

“Indeed.”

“Is that, too, enchanted?”

The feeble head nodded.

“Why go through the trouble; why wait so long?”

That high-pitched laugh drove a chill up Mustang’s spine. “True love is not limited by time or space, dear. You’ll learn that someday.”

Sophie shuffled toward the open doorway. “Would you like some tea?”

Every instinct confirmed Mustang should neither eat nor drink anything this woman offered. “No, thanks.”

“I would,” said Ray.

Already under the witch’s spell, Mustang presumed, she could do nothing to free him. His adoring puppy dog expression brought a lump to her throat.

She felt Sophie at her elbow once more. “Are you a threat to me, child?”

“No. Why would I be?”

“You want him for yourself.”

Mustang snorted, “Not in a million years.”

“Why not? He’s handsome, rich...”

A tightness in her chest signaled rising anger at these accusations. No utterance necessary to create a protective shield around her against whatever machinations this witch intended, Mustang spoke without emotion. “The one man I dared love died because of my stupidity. I’ve closed myself off to such... possibilities.”

“Love is but one attraction between a man and a woman. Lust, though...”

“For me, it means death.”

Sophie’s turn to be perplexed. “You suffer from a terminal disease?”

The guffaw frightened the sparrows and other wildlife settled in the surrounding forest. “If only it was that simple!”

The elder retreated from her guest, assessing her critically. "You... didn't mention your name."

"Must I?" Auburn tresses flipped off her shoulders, Mustang's face might have been illuminated with ethereal candles.

Shock evident in the bulging eyes, sallow cheeks and quivering lips, Sophie withdrew toward the trees. "You're..."

The young woman smirked.

"I've been pondering who'd come to Boleskine with such magick," Sophie breathed. "Lightning, earthquakes, winds... It's been you all this time?"

"To my shame."

An instant transformation, not unlike Mustang had witnessed in those who craved a share of her inheritance. "What shame? You could have anything - anyone - your heart desires..."

"It's not that..."

"I remember ol' Jock White talking about how the Moonchild would sweep the earth clean of the wicked and the greedy..."

Mustang sucked air. "You... knew him?"

Crooked teeth shown when Sophie sneered. "Him, and his predecessor."

"Crowley?"

"Indeed. Charlatan that he was."

"Charlatan?"

"His solitary goal was to achieve power and wealth. A confidence trickster of the worst sort." She settled on the rocker, obviously weakened by the excitement. "I attended a few of his supposed rituals, which ended up being little more than disorganized orgies. I wrote him off long before he abandoned Boleskine for other climes."

"And, Jock..."

Critical eyes scrutinized Mustang. "You favor him a bit." She gazed beyond the immediate locale. "He was sincere in his pursuits, though rather naive about human nature. Are you of his blood?"

"Yes."

"Then, you *are* the Moonchild, and he imparted to you the secrets..."

"I wish he had!" Mustang lamented. "Then, maybe I wouldn't... make such a mess of things."

"Oh, child! You possess the potential to recreate this crazy world in your own image..."

"My own *warped* image..." She glanced at Ray, who hadn't heard a word the women said, gaping senselessly in the dark. "What about him?"

Sophie dismissed her concern. "He'll recover in short order. Without the ring, I cannot complete the spell..." Then, enlightenment dawned for the aging witch, propelling her to her feet. "You have it, don't you? The raven told me..."

"I will gladly restore it to you, if you free the ravens from the curse..."

"Ring first, then curse."

Mustang held firm. "No."

A grand game of occult chicken, and the young woman knew who would flinch first.

"I can't turn you into a toad, can I?" Sophie admitted.

"Not likely."

"But, you could torch me like a twig."

"Without batting an eye."

"What I wouldn't give to have such power for five minutes!"

Mustang exhaled loudly. "You'd need to get your priorities straight first."

"How so, child?"

"Using... this for personal gain is... unwise."

"You've learned from practical experience?"

"No, I... learned by trying to help others and creating chaos, even death."

"As with that man you loved?"

Pursed lips uttered no sound.

Sophie lowered herself on the rocker. "I still want the ring. I've waited more than a century..."

"You're willing to ruin this man's entire life..."

Her chuckles grew more frail. "Oh, not him, dear. The original Peter..."

"Raised from his grave?"

"Indeed."

Hazel eyes rolled skyward, a derisive contralto snarling, "You don't need a ring for that!"

"What are you saying?"

"How long would you want the... spell to last?"

"I'd be satisfied with a day, maybe a week..."

"I'll give you an hour."

Sophie stiffened. "What?"

"Free the birds, and you'll have Peter Dennis Ray the First to yourself for an entire hour."

"You can't be serious? Even with the ring, there were no guarantees the incantation would be successful..."

"I don't need trinkets or nonsensical poems..."

“What will you do with the ring, then?”

Mustang deliberated. “Don’t you think he should have it?”

“If you think it best,” Sophie concurred.

“I do.” She met the witch’s gaze. “Once you’ve... lifted the curse, send the leader to me at Boleskine. Then, I’ll arrange for your... rendezvous.”

Agile digits seized by bony hands were kissed by cracked lips in gratitude. “You’ve made me very happy. I’ll be able to die contented...”

Mustang doubted she’d meet the same fate, extricating herself, tapping Ray on the shoulder to rouse him from his trance and trekking toward the highway.

The sight of the Aston Martin restored the middle-aged reprobate to reality. He - physically - shook off the effects of being in Sophie’s presence, grimacing at Mustang. “What ‘appened?”

As always, she despised dishonesty, but her foul mood preempted the truth. “We had a puncture.”

Expert eyes inspected the metal, and the rubber. “Everythin’ in perfect condition!” he gushed.

She did not respond.

The journey around Loch Ness’ perimeter passed without further incident, Ray exhibiting the good sense not to speed on the ill-lit roadway. Steering between rusted gate posts at Boleskine, tires stopped on the gravel.

“Again, you make me walk?” Mustang quipped, immediately realizing her mistake.

Ray didn’t catch the error. “I’ve got to get back to town...”

“You’re bunking here tonight, remember?”

“Since when...” He jostled his ebony mop, as if clearing his brain. “All right.”

Not that Mustang relished having a house guest, but keeping him close would ensure the successful conclusion of still another fiasco.

The car positioned near the barn, Ray stroked the bonnet with tender affection before joining his hostess as she unlocked the front door.

“Don’t you have any luggage?” she asked.

“I been buyin’ what I need along the way.”

Mustang understood the need for a hasty departure; she’d done so on quite a few occasions, thanks to the FBI and Interpol. “I’ve got some sweats that should fit you, if you want to shower and clean up.”

He scanned the Gucci suit. “Yeah, it does need a good brushin’, innit.”

“We’ve had a hell of a day,” she conceded, leading him to the one bedroom, besides her own, that contained adequate furnishings.

Though she would've much rather crashed on her king-size bed, she left him in the bathroom to prepare a simple meal in the kitchen. Grilled chicken was sliced into strips and laid atop a mixture of green leaf lettuce, spinach and shredded carrots.

As she placed the bowls on the metal dinette table, Ray appeared on the threshold, wrapped in her blue terry robe, hair and mustache wet. "No sense dressin' if we're just goin' to sleep," he reasoned.

"True."

The silence Mustang hoped for as she ate lasted only moments, then the questions commenced.

"Since we've been frown togefer like fis, what do I call you, darlin'?"

"In these parts, I'm known as Lady Elizabeth Neville," Mustang stated.

"Aw, go on, darlin'. Who made fat up?"

"You don't think it suits me?"

"It suits some old bird in a high lace collar and long skirt."

Her nose twitched at the depiction.

"C'mon, now, what's yer real name?" he pressed.

Why she was reluctant to divulge her identity to Ray, she couldn't deduce. A line from Jack Parsons' journals popped into consciousness: knowing a person's true name gives a magickian power over that individual.

Few had known her grandfather's birth certificate bore the moniker "Marvel Whiteside Parsons." Hers read "Elizabeth Candida Duryea."

"My friends call me Mustang."

"Because you're a wild filly?"

"Good guess."

He leaned across the board and kissed her. "I like it."

She dropped her fork, covering her face with her hands. This wasn't what she intended...

If the clock on the stove hadn't displayed 1:30 a.m., she would've ejected Ray from the premises. His lack of familiarity with the region, though, might see him - and his precious Aston Martin - in Loch Ness long before he drove half way to Inverness.

"I'd say you're a decent cook, if this wasn't a cold plate," Ray remarked, laying aside his silverware.

She cleared the dishes, leaving them to be washed in the morning. No more were her hands free than his arms encircled her waist, twirling her toward him.

Wing Chun instincts kicked in; she resisted the impulse to lay him out on the floor. She did break his grip, sending him stumbling into the refrigerator.

“If you didn’t expect to... why invite me to stay?”

“Because I didn’t want you to wind up dead!” she stormed.

He chased her around the table briefly. When she hoisted one of the chairs to use as a weapon, he laughed outright.

“Oh, c’mon, darlin’! It’ll be enjoyable for both of us!”

“What, you think you’re God’s gift to women?” she challenged.

He gloated, “My long line of conquests can attest as much!”

“Oh, hell...” Frankly exhausted, Mustang set down the chair and sank upon it. “You’re a piece of work, Peter Ray.”

Squatting beside her, he cupped her chin in his left hand. Light kisses elicited no adverse reaction - such as shattered plaster or melting appliances - and his mustache tickled her skin. Lowering her defenses, she let him scoop her up and carry her to his bedroom.

IV

Mustang awoke to persistent knocking, and brilliant autumn sunshine. A glance at the clock on the night stand prompted a shudder: 10:30!

“The horses will hate me!” she babbled as she leapt off the mattress, confiscating the robe Ray had worn the previous night.

“Eh?” he gurgled, still groggy.

She ignored him, shuffling to the foyer and pulling the knob inward.

An unfamiliar, shaggy haired figure waited on the stoop, clad in clothes more suited to the early 20th century.

Then, it struck her. “Oh, hell...”

“Milady? I’ve come to express our gratitude...”

“Come in, come in!” Hastily, she dragged the man into the living room. “Are you all right? Is... everyone all right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What... are your plans, now that you’ve...”

He settled on the green sofa. “We held a confab about that in the wee hours. Rather humorous, to be honest, re-learning to talk. A lot of squawking went on, and no lie.”

To steer him back to the topic, she interspersed, “And, the decision?”

“We’d like to move on. Our families are gone, and their... children’s children’s children won’t know us. We’ve served our sentence and want to rest.”

“You don’t expect me to... to...”

“The witch said you have the means...”

Mustang yearned to punch a wall. “Oh, hell...”

Black, almost raven-like orbs focused on her. “You won’t...”

“How many...”

“Originally, there were sixteen of us. Two died, shot by angry farmers...”

“So, fourteen?” She doubted his count. “There seemed to be a lot more...”

“Oh, a few score real ravens joined us for the fun of it.”

“They thought it fun?”

“They’re natural born thieves, that lot.”

“Ah!” Mustang contemplated her limited options. If she’d not plucked the ring off the ground, the ravens would have retrieved it, surrendered it to Sophie, and she would’ve been well out of it.

She’d stuck her foot in it - again.

“All your... people are in agreement about this?” she prodded.

“All.”

“No exceptions?”

“None.”

“Because, if I do this, I don’t want anyone coming back on me...”

He raised his hand in compliance. “Not a-one, I swear.”

“Go, then. Enjoy a picnic on the shores of the loch. By nightfall...”

He pumped her arm enthusiastically. “Oh, thank you, thank you!”

His departure reminded Mustang of her other task: materializing Peter Dennis Ray I for his tryst with Sophie.

She fetched the ring from her night stand.

Ray intercepted her in the hall, prying the band from her grasp.

“Where’d...”

The electric shock that ran through his torso forced him to recoil.

“The raven dropped it flying over...”

“It’s mine!”

A five-year-old would’ve behaved better. “I know, I know. I just need it for a minute, then you can have it back.”

“You *need* it? What for?”

“Like they say in old movies: If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.”

She might wind up doing that anyway, inadvertently.

“What bollocks!”

“Go, fix yourself some breakfast. I’ve got to feed the horses, then...”

“I’m comin’ with you!”

“In your boxers?” she chuckled.

Ray assessed his appearance - the trim, hirsute frame that had so tantalized Mustang hours earlier. "Oh, right."

He shut himself in the guest room; Mustang froze the door knob with a silent command. She yanked on a U2 t-shirt, jeans and sneakers before tramping to the clearing near Parsons' rotting altar.

Any adverse effects to summoning Paul Dennis Ray I would be less likely to bring harm this far from buildings, roads and people.

She placed the platinum band atop a fallen oak. The wind increased exponentially, ground trembled beneath her feet.

The ring levitated, as if held by invisible fingers, flesh and blood congealing around it.

A veritable duplicate of his great-grandson, the elder Ray glanced around in wonderment.

"Why..."

"Your Sophie awaits," was Mustang's reply before he was transported on a gentle breeze across Loch Ness.

As she descended the rise, Ray's horrified mien halted her pace. Attired in grey sweats, he'd lost his posh demeanor. "What the devil..."

"Look, Peter. Your suit has been mended, cleaned and pressed" - via a wordless directive to nature - "and you're free to head for East Finchley. I've got to tend the horses."

"What about the ring?"

Oh, hell, she moaned inwardly. "You got the time?"

Tugging his sleeve, he revealed a Patek Phillippe wrist watch. "It's half-noon."

Hazel eyes wide, she gawked, "How much did *that* cost?"

He shrugged off her awe. "Five million quid."

"Do you realize you could've fed most of the London homeless population for a year with that money?"

"They can fend for themselves."

If he dropped dead on the spot, she'd be left to explain the Aston Martin... She dispersed her fury into the trees, dying autumn leaves singed by the heat.

"Your ring will be returned at 1:30, then you can go and we'll never see each other again."

"But... after last night..."

She continued down the hill. "Last night, I gave sway to pure, unadulterated lust. In daylight, you're just another arrogant git whose priorities are misplaced."

Ray pursued her, clasping her biceps and drawing her close. “You don’t mean that, darlin’. I saw the ecstasy in your eyes. Once will never be enough for you...”

Though she felt his heat through her clothes, and knew he’d fathomed her secret, she couldn’t risk prolonging such a relationship.

She broke away, concentrating on the horses as the seconds ticked past.

The animals didn’t seem to mind when Ray hustled her into the tack room, closing the door. Clean straw clung to their shirts and hair when they emerged, pulses still racing, lungs heaving.

Mustang detected the stern expressions of Francis and Mark Twain in the barn’s shadowy corner, sensed their disappointment.

Her own self-recrimination caused muscles to spasm as she filled the oat buckets and water troughs, a grinning Ray watching from his perch on the wooden bench.

“These are magnificent beasts,” he commented. “I wish I knew how to ride.”

“You’d benefit from learning, but it’s not for me to teach you. You’d find the real world in the saddle...”

“Meanin’ what, darlin’?”

“No need for expensive trifles or fast cars...”

“If you have the money, why not spend it on the best?”

“Fifteen dollars would buy the same accuracy, and an old Ford runs as well as that... that...”

“I beg to differ,” Ray protested. “I’d wager the rest of my fortune you couldn’t find a Ford that would best my Aston in a race.”

“It’s a moot point, regardless,” sighed Mustang. “You’ll be gone soon.”

An explosion compelled both from the barn, a mushroom cloud rising into the atmosphere from Loch Ness’ western shore.

“An accident?” Ray speculated.

“Nothing accidental about that.”

Mustang strode toward the house, Ray on her heels.

“What, then?”

“Time!”

“Twenty minutes past one.”

The consummation of a century-long quest had ended in a blaze of glory, the Mistress of Boleskine realized. At least, the meteorological services would divert their attention from the anomalies she created... albeit temporarily.

Ducking inside, Mustang rummaged through a bin on the linen closet's bottom shelf: a collection of Jack Parsons' detritus from the Gate Lodge and items found on the property after she'd installed her nocturnal security system. She extracted a worn baseball mitt.

"What the devil..." Ray shouted as she brushed past him en route to the hillock.

Anchoring herself against one of the picnic table legs, she raised her left arm, mitt encasing the fingers. A faint whistling grew louder, then the glinting projectile slammed into the web with such force, it knocked her onto the grass.

Ray lifted her upright, marveling at the spiral of smoke rising from the leather. "Do you mind tellin' me what just 'appened?"

Flipping the mitt, the Oxford signet ring lay in the depression. Ray reached for it.

"Don't touch!" Mustang squealed. "Unless you want third degree burns!"

He clasped her right wrist, exposing the palm. "Like this?"

"Worse, probably."

"Ow'd..."

"You... wouldn't understand." She retraced her steps to the mansion, muttering in an undertone, "Besides, you'll forget all about this once you get home."

Such was the sole means to protect herself against his inevitable return.

She doused the ring in a stream of cold water from the kitchen sink, drying it on a tea towel before presenting it to her guest.

"I still don't get it..."

Since he would remember nothing, she could satisfy his curiosity. "Sophie was a cauldron-stirring, proper witch. She'd loved your great-grandfather for more than a century and wanted to be reunited with him. I... helped her achieve that goal."

"Which is why you needed the ring..."

"Exactly. Peter was able to be there during Sophie's last moments on earth, and then..."

"The ring flew back to you?"

"To you, actually. It's yours, by right of inheritance."

Slipping it on his middle finger, left hand, he admired the workmanship. "If we're to be together, this will someday be yours," he oozed.

"You'd best be on your way."

He tugged her close and kissed her. She resisted, breaking his hold.

His laughter irked her. An arrogant git, definitely.

From the stoop, she monitored the Aston Martin vanish along the curve. A week of his life would dissipate in his brain, from the moment the raven snatched the ring off the windowsill, and Ray would be none the wiser.

Glenn MacDonough's pickup rumbled up the drive before dinner, the construction project manager animated as he joined Mustang near the grill, steaks sizzling.

"What's wrong, Glenn?" she greeted.

"'Tis the hot topic on the news," he proclaimed in that annoying Scottish burr. "Did ye hear the explosion?"

"Yup."

"The firefighters ha' nae discovered the cause, but what they did find has the constables mystified."

Through grit teeth, Mustang queried, "And what might that be?"

"A crude cabin well off the road, blown t' bits, and a dead body..."

"Amazing!"

"One o' the old caretakers at Urquhart Castle recognized the corpse as the witch who used t' roam these parts."

Mustang smothered her levity with a feigned cough from the smoke rising off the meat.

"She must've been well over a hundred years old," MacDonough droned.

"That seems rather impossible, doesn't it?"

"Proves she really was a witch."

If only he knew, she mused. "Would you like to stay for dinner, Glenn? I have plenty."

"Oh, nae, Your Ladyship. I just thought ye would like t' hear..."

"Thanks, Glenn."

She loaded steaks onto a platter and toted it into the kitchen, settling at the table for a tasty meal. Four pairs of eyes drilled into her soul as she chewed.

"What?" she prompted.

Francis spoke for the contingent. "Again, you've caused a disruption of the normal routine..."

"That wasn't my doing!" she retorted.

"In what way not?" General Erwin Rommel grumbled.

"The union of those two souls... spontaneous combustion..."

Mark Twain grunted, "You facilitated the coupling."

Fists clenched, she ended the debate. "If I hadn't... taken any action, Sophie would've acquired the ring and cast her spell..."

“Which never would’ve succeeded,” Francis said. “Just as none of Crowley’s rituals ever brought about his desired ends.”

“You’re saying, that generation hadn’t the power...”

“No, that type of practitioner wastes their energy, like spitting in the wind.”

Her fork speared another piece of juicy beef. “Interesting.”

“You still accept no responsibility...” Francis pressed.

“Since the deed is done, there’s nothing I can do to rectify the damage.”

“Except learn from it.”

She smirked. “The same lesson I’ve been trying to learn after every chance encounter with other human beings: to remain in isolation.”

“No,” noted Twain. “To gain the requisite self-control so you might interact with people yet cause no harm.”

“If only.” She toted her dishes to the sink. “Who’s up for a game of chess?”

All four shook their heads, dismayed at her callousness.

“Fine.” Abandoning them, she aimed for her bedroom. “I need a good night’s sleep.”

The open door of the guest room, though, distracted her. She’d need to strip the mattress and do laundry...

Burying her nose in the pillow, she smelled Ray’s delightful muskiness.

A sudden eruption of rage propelled the rectangle into the wall; thunder rattled the window panes.

“Calm yourself, child,” Twain soothed from the threshold.

“He’s a selfish...”

“There’s a vast difference between love and lust. You could never love him, as you did Jim, but...”

“Doesn’t that diminish my feelings for Jim, though, to jump in bed with such a cad?”

“It confirms your humanity.”

“A weak, gullible human.”

Bushy white fringe twitched. “In our day, aren’t we all?”