

The Mustang Chronicles:

Renaissance Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Unpacking her bi-weekly supply of groceries, delivered by a tow-headed student earning spending money for his Saturday night outings, Mustang Duryea usually tossed wads of newsprint into the kitchen corner recycling bin. A brightly inked advertisement, though, caught her eye this particular day, and she paused to spread the sheet on the dinette table.

Bold type proclaimed a renaissance faire would take place across Loch Ness at Urquhart Castle, a ruined fortress, that coming weekend.

The idea brought a chuckle from the young woman's throat. She recalled high school classmates who delved into the Society for Creative Anachronism, or SCA, gathering each summer at such events, fighting with fake swords and well-padded weapons, wearing supposedly authentic, heavy clothing and sweating like mules.

She preferred baggy tie-dyed t-shirts, like the one she currently wore, and relaxed fit blue jeans.

Mustang had discovered, through her own fault, that past centuries weren't the "good old days", as people tended to suggest. That era's privation and lack of amenities made a week's camping in the woods appear like a luxury hotel.

Crumpling the paper, she tossed it across the room. The melodies of lutes and harps might drift to Boleskine House, if the wind was right, but whether they did or not, she didn't care.

Tramping through a slight drizzle to the stable, she pulled ebony tresses into a pony tail before saddling Pietra. Leading the horse from its stall, she mounted and set off at a trot, only to halt abruptly at the sight of a red pickup truck and trailer bumping down the gravel drive.

"Oh, hell," grumbled Mustang. "Here we go again."

Deliberately blocking the vehicle's access, she signaled the driver to approach. The scrawny, strawberry blonde female crawled from behind the wheel and gazed up at the Mistress of Boleskine.

"You know where I can find Lady Elizabeth Neville?" she queried.

"You're looking at her."

"No way."

"Way."

The doubtful cast didn't vanish from the girl's painfully thin face. "You're not pulling my leg?"

"Why would I want to?" countered Mustang.

"You sound American."

“So do you.”

“But, the nobility around here...”

“All talk with a heavy burr? I know. I... married my title.” Partly true. She would’ve married Jim Neville, Montana State Police, if he’d lived.

“Oh.” The uninvited guest propped herself on the pickup’s hood, placing her almost eye-to-eye with Mustang.

“You here on business? Or just lost?”

“Business.”

“With me?”

“I... guess so.”

“What sort of business?”

“Beautiful horse.”

“Yes, she is.”

“You have more, I understand.”

Mustang’s suspicions grew. “Who told you that?”

“Guy up the road. Glenn MacDonough.”

This mention of her neighbor really didn’t soothe Mustang’s nerves. “How do you know Glenn?”

“He’s... constructing the renaissance village for the faire this weekend.”

“Oh, hell.”

“What?”

“You want my horses for that... fiasco?”

“We were shipping in our own, but there was an accident...”

“What kind of accident?”

“The trailer overturned on the highway. They had to be put down.”

“I’m... sorry.” Mustang recognized the girl’s grief and realized she loved horses. Still, “I can’t let you have any of mine.”

“Mr. MacDonough said the same thing. If we don’t find some, we’ll have to cancel the pageant.”

“Pageant?”

“Where the knights present themselves before the queen, and joust for her favor.”

“Even if these guys had any real experience as riders, I wouldn’t permit it. Too dangerous.”

Obviously, the faire worker had been refused by many before Mustang. She didn’t put up further argument. “Thanks, anyway.”

Watching the trailer turn on the drive and vanish between the trees, Mustang tugged the reins and steered Pietra along a well-beaten trail. She believed the matter settled, and enjoyed a refreshing ride through shaded greenery.

Returning to the stable in time to see a furtive figure slip through the door pulling Sarge and Molly by their halters.

She didn't need to cry out; nature caught the thief's attention by sinking his leather boots in thick mud, preventing his escape.

Controlling her anger, Mustang leapt off Pietra and confronted the grubby offender. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Borrowing a couple of Lady Elizabeth's horses." His tenor voice hinted at British roots, raised beyond England's shores.

"You with that gal who came 'round earlier?"

He nodded an unkempt, shoulder length, sandy mane.

"You've got a lot of gall."

"She won't know..."

"She? She, who?"

"Lady Elizabeth."

"She does know, because I'm Lady Elizabeth."

Cigarette stained teeth bit his upper lip, fringed by a pencil-thin mustache and jagged scar accenting his right cheekbone. "You're... just a kid."

"When the police arrive to throw you in stir, you'll think different."

He released the horses, grey eyes downcast. "I... apologize, Your Ladyship."

"Don't call me that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What's your name?"

"They call me The Magnificent Flynn."

Mustang restrained her laughter with difficulty. "What kind of name is that?"

"I've won the most tournaments on the faire circuit..."

"Well, Flynn, if I catch you on my property again, your record will suffer from ten years' confinement in prison. You get me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, scram."

Leading Molly, Sarge and Pietra into the stable, Mustang didn't see Flynn perform a sweeping bow before scraping muck from his boots on the nearest fencepost and sauntering out of sight.

In her opinion, he should've been kicked into the dirt by the very animals he'd tried to steal.

She filled feed buckets and water troughs before preparing lunch in the modern kitchen. Later, she would clean the stalls and consider installing a deadbolt lock on the massive stable door.

Or, devise other precautions, as she had with the nightly "booby-traps" which frightened nocturnal trespassers. The locals willingly spread rumors the property was haunted, and left her alone for that specific reason.

Somehow, Mustang wasn't surprised when Flynn made a second attempt on the horses within an hour of the first. He stood with his Levi's hip-deep in mud, continuing to sink, as she towered over him.

"Do you want to die?" she hissed.

"I... we... without the horses, there's no show!" he exclaimed. "What the hell goes on here?"

Mustang dropped to one knee, raising his stubbly chin level to hers. "You've got less than a minute to tell me why this show is so damned important to you."

Panicked, Flynn scrambled for words. "Most of us are history teachers or on staff at various colleges. Without these summer jobs, we can't pay our bills between terms!"

"You, a history teacher?" she tittered.

"No, I'm a fencing coach."

Not the answer she expected. With a sucking noise, a sudden updraft of wind raised Flynn's athletic frame from the impromptu pit and set him on firm ground. "Prove it."

"What, here?"

Two rapiers were retrieved from the stable, manifested by Mustang's silent command.

"Against you?"

She knew nothing about swordplay beyond the classic movies she'd enjoyed growing up in Montana. Still, with a little assistance from the natural forces...

Muscles barely flexing in the stained blue tank top, he had the blade out of her hand in less than ten seconds.

"You do this at the faire?" she prodded.

"This, and compete in the jousts."

"You guarantee my horses won't be injured in any way?"

“I... can’t guarantee there won’t be mishaps.” He sat on a stump and removed his ruined boots.

“Then, I’m coming along.”

“I... we... you mean, to protect your interests?”

“To protect my horses.”

“All we have is a make-shift barn...”

“Fine.”

“But, Your Ladyship...”

“I warned you: don’t call me that.”

“What should...”

“Mustang.”

“Really?”

She grinned. “And I’m not calling you The Magnificent Flynn. What’s your real name?”

“Flynn *is* my real name.”

“Flynn what?”

His countenance sombered. “Errol Flynn.”

Mustang’s hazel eyes widened. For a split-second, she thought she might’ve uttered a stray phrase, prompting the powers which her grandfather, Jack Parsons, had transferred to her to manifest another long-dead individual...

“Blame my mother,” explained her companion. “She had a thing for old film stars. My younger brothers are Douglas Fairbanks Flynn and Charles Chaplin Flynn. At least, they can go by ‘Doug’ and ‘Chuck’.”

Exhaling audibly, Mustang relaxed. “Can’t blame your mother for you being a fencing coach.”

“Oh, yes, I can. Some moms force their kids to take piano lessons, or learn the violin. Mine put a sword in my hand when I was barely old enough to grip the hilt.”

“You must’ve enjoyed it.”

“I can’t deny, thrusting the point into dummies all those years allowed me to release a lot of frustration.” As brown liquid dripped from his jeans, Flynn squirmed. “Is there somewhere I can clean up?”

Mustang preceded him into the house, leaving him in the master bathroom to strip and shower. She supplied him with a pair of her oversized sweats to wear while his clothes were run through the washing machine.

He accepted one of the ham sandwiches she’d been preparing before glimpsing him once more with the horses, and a glass of orange juice. She hadn’t seen an Errol Flynn movie since leaving Montana for Scotland, and tried to recall if

her present guest resembled him at all. The unshaven jaw and long, wet sandy strands spoiled the comparison, though.

“You wear tunics and tights for your renaissance performances?” she inquired, slicing a piece of chocolate cake.

“Leggings, not tights. Everything’s hand-made, very uncomfortable, but after seven years, I’m used to it.”

“You could get a different summer job, couldn’t you?”

“This is a chance for me to travel, meet people, and improve my fencing skills.”

“You... don’t get to kill anyone, so how...”

“It takes more skill *not* to kill someone with a blade, and I have to be very careful that I don’t even shred my opponents’ clothes.”

“Because they’re expensive?”

“That, and most of the kids don’t know the first thing about swordplay. If I come too close, and they move the wrong way, they could be seriously injured.”

“I... thought they used fake weapons.”

“Some of them are. But, our faire is renowned for its realism, so we take the risk.”

“You ever... hurt anyone?”

“Not yet.”

“Lucky you.”

Flynn’s startled expression confirmed for Mustang that she’d spoken the comment aloud. She didn’t want to elucidate on her past mistakes...

“If you’re ready, we can get the horses loaded,” she stated.

“I’ll phone for the trailer.”

“Great.”

II

A quick gallop astride Wench found Mustang at Glenn MacDonough’s, who she asked to mind the remaining horses while she traveled to the western bank of Loch Ness.

“I wouldna allow the young ones to take my stock, because I couldna go with them,” her neighbor remarked. “That’s when I thought of ye, because ye have so much free time.”

She couldn’t sense whether the construction manager meant it as a compliment or insult, and disregarded it entirely. “I’ll be back Sunday evening,” she concluded, retracing her route to Boleskine.

The enclosed trailer sat near the stable, Molly and Sarge balking at the prospect of riding in it. Born on MacDonough's property, and led along connecting trails when she purchased them, Mustang doubted if the horses had ever been thus confined. She dismounted, pushing Flynn and the strawberry blonde aside, comforting the animals.

"You've certainly got a way with them," praised Flynn with a winsome smile as he secured the metal doors.

"I grew up on a ranch, with hundreds of thoroughbreds."

"Wyoming?"

"Close. Montana."

"Better than Detroit."

After the skinny girl departed on the back of a Triumph motorcycle, Mustang climbed into the pickup's cab, pondering, "How'd a Brit get to the Motor City?"

Flynn smirked. "My dad was an automotive engineer with Rolls-Royce, before Chevy made him a better offer."

"Where do you coach?"

"Kansas State."

"With any number of renaissance faires in the Midwest, why come to Scotland?"

"My grandmother still lives in York. I pay my respects to her and the other relations every year, then catch up with the troupe on its northward swing."

Mustang conceded his logic. The drive around the south end of Loch Ness took the better part of the evening, with a stop for dinner in the small village of Foyers. She avoided the haggis, which Flynn consumed with gusto. The horses were fed and watered before they resumed their travels.

"You care a lot for those horses," commented Flynn from behind the wheel.

"They are the closest I have to actual friends."

"How come? A noblewoman like yourself, invited to balls and receptions for politicians and movie stars..."

Mustang sighed. "I... don't flaunt my position. In fact, I prefer to live as a hermit."

"Without even a husband?"

"There are... extenuating circumstances."

"Such as?"

"Just leaving Boleskine could present... serious problems. The least emotional upheaval..."

“Like your anger at me stealing your horses?”

“Yes.”

“Neat defense, those mud bogs.”

She remained silent.

He swerved to miss a rabbit which scurried into their path; instinctively, Mustang righted their course, sliding across the bench seat and bumping against Flynn.

She recoiled hastily, blushing.

“Don’t be upset, Your Lady... sorry. No harm done.”

“Yet,” she murmured, staring out the passenger window.

A multi-hued sunset bathed structures occupying Urquhart Castle green in peaceful light, thin fog rising from the waters below. A campfire burned in the central square, illuminating last-minute efforts to hang bowers and arrange displays.

Mustang and Flynn escorted the horses to a shed smaller than most single-car garages. Molly and Sarge didn’t seem to mind the cramped accommodations. Their owner arranged a pile of fresh straw in one corner, covering it with a blanket for her bed.

“You’re welcome to the spare cot in my tent,” Flynn hinted.

“I’m not here to mingle with people, only tend my horses.”

“Well, Colin and I will be practicing our fights for tomorrow over in the glen.” He withdrew. “If you change your mind, my flap won’t be locked.”

Probably Flynn’s biggest mistake, and that of his comrades. No more had the motley crew of historic reenactors settled in for the night, than a handful of contemporary miscreants crept through the makeshift village, stealing jewelry, swords and food, and damaging what they couldn’t move.

An outcry woke Mustang, as the horses snorted nervously. She peered out the stable door in time to see four teens attack a man intent on stopping them.

It wasn’t Flynn but, by the light of a torch, it proved to be Flynn’s opponent in the faire’s daily tournament, thoroughly beaten and deserted in the grassy lane.

Against her better judgment, Mustang had crept from her uncomfortable bed to observe the rehearsed duel between The Magnificent Flynn and an older Scot billed as The Highland Marauder. Excellent technique with the heavy claymore swords made the conflict look quite real.

Now, Colin lay unconscious, blood streaming from a nasty gash on his right arm, and his nose obviously broken.

Flynn glared at Mustang over the others’ heads. “You know who did this?”

She shook her tousled head.

He squinted grey eyes, indicating disbelief.

“I’m a hermit, remember?” she snarled.

He sank on a rough-hewn wooden bench. “In the morning, I’ll help you take your horses home.”

“Eh?”

“Without Colin, there’ll be no show.”

Mustang dropped beside him, feeling a splinter poke through her jeans.

“I...” she shifted position. “What about the college boys?”

“Not enough time to teach one the choreography.”

Ruminating on how nature might be able to assist, Mustang didn’t see Flynn’s orbs acquire an idealistic glow in the dimness.

“Hey...” he breathed.

“What?”

“You could do it.”

“Do what?”

“Take Colin’s place.”

The Mistress of Boleskine guffawed. “You going to bill me as Joan of Arc?”

“In the right clothes, no one would recognize you as a woman.”

“Thanks,” she acknowledged sarcastically.

“You handled that rapier pretty well earlier.”

“I couldn’t even lift a claymore!”

“Trust me. They’re not as heavy as they look.”

She retorted, “Trust *me*. You’re nuts.”

“In the morning, we’ll give it a try.”

“Over your dead body, because that’s probably what’ll happen.”

Suddenly, Flynn knelt before her, a gallant knight wooing his lady. “Please, Mustang. The crowds will expect it.”

“Oh, hell...”

Through her own stupidity, she’d gotten herself into another situation where she felt compelled to give aid, rather than avoid human contact entirely.

How like Errol Flynn’s Robin Hood this man appeared in the moonlight, but for the scar marring his right cheek. Moreso when she acquiesced, and he bent to kiss her calloused hands.

In the distance, sirens announced the ambulance, summoned for Colin by renaissance faire staff. Mustang shook free of Flynn and shuffled to the stable.

She dreaded the coming dawn.

Her consternation doubled when presented with the outfit worn by a much larger man. Weighty, dyed wool nearly buckled her shoulders, adorned with embroidered crests and symbols. Leggings wrapped with leather straps impeded her movement.

Lumbering into the verdant clearing, Mustang tucked her black pony-tail beneath a cloth cap. If anything, she looked like a scrawny squire.

Until she whispered to the natural forces, and her attire miraculously adjusted to proper size.

The claymore, etched with ancient Scottish, its hilt bigger than her hand, presented another challenge. Flynn, resplendent in brilliant silver and red accoutrement, emblazoned with royal insignia, already wielded his blade with an expertise his opponent would never attain. He paused, however, to let loose a prolonged laugh at her approach.

“What shall we name thee, my worthy adversary?” he mocked with a sweeping bow. “The Wee Bairn?”

Mustang hoisted the weapon from its rack, straining every muscle. “How about ‘The Scourge of Boleskine’?”

Flynn ruminated briefly. “Somehow, the title fits.”

“Let’s get on with it, then.”

He ambled through unmown weeds and clouted her roughly on the shoulder. “Relax, Mustang. This is as much about show as about skill. What will happen, at least six times in the course of the day: you’ll be sipping a mug of ale at one of the grog shops...”

“I... don’t drink,” she interrupted.

“Lemonade, to be frank. The barkeeps are in on the gag. They may offer mead and beer to the regular customers; they know better than to let the performers imbibe.”

“Ah.” She did relax. “Go on.”

“I will confront you in the midst of innocent bystanders, accusing you of insulting my father’s house, and summoning you to the field of honor in a quarter hour.”

“Basically, it announces the show.”

“Correct.” Flynn raised his claymore. “Then, the fun begins.”

“Fun?”

“Sure. Hollering, grunting, hurling insults are just as much a part of the duel as the swords.”

“If you say so.”

An hour later, sweat drenched every stitch of clothing Mustang wore, and she felt near collapse. Flynn grasped her by the waist and led her to a bench, fetching a bottle of water from the nearest vendor cart.

“You’ll do fine, my dear,” he heaved, perspiration streaming from his temples. “A quick learner, you are.”

“What... about the horses?” she puzzled, guzzling the liquid.

“They’re used in the alternate shows.”

“Alternate?”

“Between these performances, we’ll joust for the queen’s favor, using the same premise.”

“Molly and Sarge aren’t trained for...”

“They won’t get hurt.”

“It’s not that. They can ride and jump with the best, but having their riders knocked off, through no fault of their own...”

“You talk as if they were human beings.”

“Maybe not, but they’re intelligent animals. I’ll... have to talk with them.”

Flynn snorted. “You... do that. And bring them to the tents, so we can practice our presentation.”

Cramped in the tiny stable, the horses were more than ready to enjoy fresh morning air. Mustang guided them around the perimeter of the faire, thinking the strange attire of the actors and vendors might make matters worse.

Two colorful tents had been erected - one at each end of a grandstand surrounding the “royal box”. There, the combatants would dress for their battle, in authentic armor.

“You’re not getting me into that, and not putting the added weight on the saddle!” objected Mustang.

“It’s for your own protection...”

“Not in a million years!” Turning Molly and Sarge 180 degrees, she drew them away.

Flynn intercepted her. “Okay, okay. We’ll do it without the armor.” He hesitated. “The routine will have to be altered...”

“Alter it, then! You can break me into little pieces, but if you hurt my horses, I’ll kill you.”

Grey eyes betrayed Flynn’s genuine fear at this declaration. “I... believe you would.”

The jousting lances amounted to ten-foot long poles, brightly painted and tipped at the end with a thick foam cap. Still, the potential to be knocked to the

ground remained real, and Flynn confessed two performers had broken bones on the tour in recent weeks.

“Were they insured?” spat Mustang.

“It’s a risk we all take.”

“Is that how you got your scar?”

He glared down at her, simultaneously struggling to rein in the skittish Sarge. “That resulted from a real duel.”

“I didn’t think such things were allowed.”

“It was well concealed as fencing practice at the college.”

“Eh?”

“One of the seniors suspected me of trying to steal his freshman girlfriend. He... violated the rules of competition with a wild attack. I was caught off guard.”

“So, The Magnificent Flynn doesn’t always win.”

“My opponent wins, on average, once a day.”

Mustang’s nose crinkled. “Your pride doesn’t require an undefeated record?”

“The bookies give me a cut of the profits to keep things interesting.”

The young woman’s jaw dropped. “Bookies? Betting?”

“In Britain, it’s possible to wager on just about anything, not only sports. There’s a booth near the main square where those who are so inclined can venture a few pounds...”

That very instant, Mustang determined to shed this heavy costume and take her horses back to Boleskine. Silently, she dismounted and stroked Molly’s neck.

“What, you’re giving up?”

“No. I’m trusting my instincts. If you’d told me gambling was involved, I never would’ve agreed to letting you use my horses.”

“I would’ve stolen them.”

Her contralto rumbled, “You would’ve died an extremely agonizing death.”

With a shudder, Flynn surrendered Sarge. When his hand-sewn leather boots hit the ground, they immediately began to sink in soft earth. He cringed.

“I’m... truly sorry. If you’d take a moment to walk the lanes, you’ll see card games, dice, and other games of chance. It’s how most of the profits are made.”

“You mean, the games are fixed?”

“No, but most people don’t know the first thing about gambling. They’d lose their shirts, if we didn’t impose a strict limit on the amounts.”

“What kind of limit?”

“Twenty pounds.”

“While I’m here, it’ll be ten, or I’ll not be party to this foolishness.”

“That’s ludicrous!”

“Making me angry is not a wise course, Mr. Flynn,” she proclaimed through grit teeth. “I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

Disdain clouding his features, Flynn bowed. “I’ll inform the management, Your Ladyship.”

“Just for that…”

“What?” he pressed.

She strode toward the stable, muttering, “You’ll not win while on these shores.”

III

Crowds converged on Urquhart Castle by mid-morning. Incognito in purple tank top and jeans, Mustang perched on a wooden fence post, chuckling inwardly at the degree to which some people enjoyed playing “dress up”.

She watched the faire’s queen, garlands of flowers adorning the diminutive strawberry blonde head, and her consort parade past, rose petals strewn along the way by eager attendants. Their jester made merry with bystanders, and the high sheriff quickly imposed law and order.

This involved deputizing squads of men to “arrest” offenders, usually at the request of a friend or significant other, to embarrass or just prank the individual. Mustang recognized the tow-haired youth who’d delivered her groceries the day before, being dragged in “shackles” to a row of stocks, where he would await his “trial” before the sheriff.

A backlog had already formed for the “court”. Charges ranged from disturbing the peace to sagging trousers. The fine, from one pound to five and paid in very modern currency, would be donated to local charities.

Giving Mustang an idea, as she mused about the situation with The Magnificent Flynn.

She’d decided to project an image for the spectators while wearing her costume: an ox of a man, six-feet-four, 250 pounds, with ample beard matching flowing red hair. His biceps would be as large as her waist, his bass voice a veritable roar.

Flynn, however, would still see her.

Without the renaissance garb, she could freely place bets, her winnings to benefit the honest employees of the faire, whom she’d overheard were sorely underpaid and overworked.

At odds of 50-to-1, ten pounds would net a tidy bundle.

Opposite the “gaming house”, filled to capacity with men all too willing to lose their hard-earned cash, enthusiastic youngsters learned from “knights” how to use pikes in defense of the castle. Others taught archery, using foam-tipped arrows which bounced off the targets. Music accompanied couples dancing near the food booths, where Mustang found whole turkey legs being sold, haggis, beef sandwiches, boiled potatoes and ale in wooden steins.

She dawdled along the main thoroughfare to admire the weapons, jewelry and souvenirs being sold in open-air “shops”. Glimpsing Flynn on the prowl for her, though, she hustled to the stable and draped the uncomfortable outfit over her shoulders.

“Hoy, thou scurvy lout!” shouted Flynn over the heads of a small establishment’s seated patrons.

Mustang, pint of frothy lemonade ignored, didn’t acknowledge him.

He sauntered to the bar and seized her arm. “Thou didst insult my father’s house and ravage the countryside. Now, ‘tis time to meet thy maker!”

A hand-tooled glove raking her face the young woman did not expect, and it raised her temper immediately. The thatched roof would have buried them all, had she not controlled herself. “Name the place,” she hissed.

“On the field of honor, in ten minutes!”

A number of customers swiftly drained their mugs and made to follow Flynn, to get good seats in the grandstand, Mustang surmised. Others waited for the Scourge of Boleskine to make his way to the site, detouring to wager en route.

The forces of nature must have enjoyed the skirmish, wind whipping through the trees, birds chirping loudly on all sides. The added strength Mustang acquired from a whispered command drove Flynn steadily backward, his outbursts bordering on the profane. Cat-calls from the enthralled audience drowned out his curses and, prolonging his defeat to make it a good show, Mustang finally had him pinned on the grass, her blade at his throat.

“Capitulate, varlot!” she hollered.

His scar livid against reddened features, Flynn nodded. Mustang withdrew her weapon, spun toward the royal box and saluted the queen.

Flynn gradually regained his feet, growling in his opponent’s ear, “Beginners luck.”

She bowed to the cheering masses, then retreated to the shadows.

By chance, she heard one of the teenaged “knights” query, “Where’d that big man come from?”

Shedding the disguise, Mustang collected her winnings and bet on upcoming jousts, the odds still inflated, since the bookie believed this was Flynn's one loss for the day.

By nightfall, he'd realize his mistake.

Or, sooner. By late afternoon, odds on the Scourge had fallen: 10-to-1. She'd cleanly removed Flynn from his saddle each time they met in the lists, and he couldn't counter her technique - or lack thereof - during the swordfights.

"I can understand the horses giving you an advantage, since they're yours," he accused between contests. "But, if you don't stick to the choreography with the claymores, you could wind up wounded or permanently maimed."

She shrugged and went to feed Molly and Sarge.

Watching the sunset by torchlight, Mustang couldn't hide her smirk as an irate cadre of bookmakers surrounded Flynn and berated him for losing them thousands of pounds. His grey orbs glared at her through a gap in the assembly.

"If any of these other yokels were capable of handling a sword, I'd replace you."

"I'd gladly *be* replaced," she replied cheerily. "Every bone in my body is sore."

Discouraged, he sank beside her on the wooden bench. "You're not the only one. If I didn't know better, I'd think you the devil incarnate. You have the strength of ten men, and everyone else sees some lumbering behemoth hacking away at me, as if mass hypnosis..."

"It makes for better entertainment if the hero is unjustly beaten by an imposing villain."

"Then, you admit..."

"You must be awfully dense not to get the picture by now, or so narcissistic, you simply don't see..."

"Don't see what?"

"Put it this way: I'd fit right in over at the witch's potion stall, enchanting the kiddies with spells and love charms."

"You're a... a..."

"An anomaly."

"You mean, like Harry Potter..." Flynn made a motion like waving a magic wand.

"No. The idea some are born with magical power, and others are completely human is absolute fiction. I... was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I don't believe it."

“I could prove it, but I’m too tired,” Mustang yawned.

“Prove it, how?”

“Spontaneously combust you.”

Flynn’s adam’s apple betrayed his involuntary gulp.

“Or, cause a thunderstorm or earthquake, just by kissing you.”

His countenance lit with awareness. “My grandmother in York warned me against coming here this summer. Told me to avoid the area at all costs. Said the weather had gone mad near Loch Ness, because of the monster.”

“Some have called me that.”

“I didn’t... she didn’t...”

Mustang patted his knee. “I know. But, I do feel like a monster when I can’t control myself, and accidents happen.”

“What you’re doing here... is no accident.”

“No. It’s deliberate. The high sheriff’s men arrest people for charity. Your associates taking the bets are lining their own pockets, and you’re an accomplice to their greed.”

“So, it’s revenge against me?”

“Yes.”

Flynn stared into the torch flames, his mind calculating. “This one weekend, since you won’t be accompanying us on the rest of the tour...”

She swiveled his chin to meet her gaze. “I can make it permanent, favoring whoever your opponent might be.”

“You wouldn’t.” He shook free of her grip. “I’d... be out of a job.”

“Why should I pity you? You’re making out like a bandit, while the kids who are really struggling to earn a few coins to support themselves through the fall term at college are breaking their necks!”

“They knew what they signed on for at the beginning of the season.”

“They didn’t know they harbored a bunch of cheats.” She rose, grimacing in pain. “But they soon will.”

An unyielding hand restrained her. “If you tell them now, I’ll be lynched.”

“I’ll advise them to sell tickets, and keep the profits from the show.”

“Can’t we agree on some arrangement?”

“I think not, Flynn. You’re... dishonoring your father’s house by stealing, cheating and then lying to cover your personal weaknesses. Tomorrow, on the field of honor, remember that.”

His arm dropped, and Mustang retired to the stable.

She didn’t fall asleep easily on the bristly straw mattress. Staring through a gap in the temporary roof, she concentrated on her breathing, hoping to dissipate

her rage. Too many men like Flynn in the world - out to grasp what they can, and to hell with others. They didn't care if their co-workers were ill-treated, so long as they got ahead.

No different in Montana, or elsewhere on the globe, as she'd discovered in her travels. An increasing temptation to wipe out the human race and start over sparked a strange pleasure in her soul, as if nature concurred with the notion.

"Mustang?"

The tenor, slightly accented murmur reached her ears. She ignored it.

"Are you awake?"

She couldn't refrain from snapping, "That has to be the stupidest question on the planet. If I *was* asleep, I wouldn't answer, and you'd repeat it until I woke up and did say something."

Flynn squatted beside her. "You're right, I suppose."

"You've come to apologize and beg my forgiveness. I'll not change my mind."

"What if you came on the rest of the tour, so I could prove my reformation?"

"Come Sunday evening, I'm taking my horses home, and you can go to the devil."

She felt his hot breath on her cheek, though she could barely see his frame outlined in the gloom. "You don't mean that," he stated.

"If you want to die in the next five minutes, feel free to stay."

"You're... too beautiful to be capable of murder."

"Oh, hell..." She shot upright on the straw, propelling Flynn backward. "Do you know how many men have died because of me?"

On his knees, Flynn's tone altered. "You're serious."

"What stunt were you going to pull? Seduce me into commuting your sentence?"

"One kiss..."

"You *are* a narcissist if you believe one kiss would do the trick!"

"Never know until you try."

"What I *do* know is this entire enterprise will be reduced to rubble if you so much as touch me!"

"On purpose?"

"Does it matter? You'd still have one hell of a clean up job."

"True. True." Flynn crawled nearer. "Mustang, I'm sorry. As a fencing coach, I don't make much money. If I had my druthers, I'd spend summers in the

Bahamas, or California. The more I earn here, the less I have to worry the other nine months of the year. It was... a mistake of ignorance..."

"Your mistake was never imagining you'd meet someone like me, who could put you in your place!"

"Indeed."

"Two days from now, we'll go our separate ways, and you'll forget your resolve to change, and I'll..."

"I could never forget the Scourge of Boleskine!" Flynn chuckled. "And, you won't put me out of your mind that easily."

His lips brushed hers, and a cloudless sky poured down rain upon Urquhart Castle green, dripping through the roof onto their heads.

Flynn's laugh jarred Mustang's nerves. "God help the man who truly loves you!" he chortled.

The Mistress of Boleskine lay on the straw and faced the wall. "He's dead."

In the silence which followed the storm's cessation, a stunned Flynn crept from the stable. Molly bent and nuzzled Mustang's ear, licking salty tears from her owner's cheek.

Saturday's dreary start matched Mustang's mood. Clouds and a dense Scottish fog precluded much activity around the renaissance village, though the arrival of a police cruiser and two unmarked official vehicles created a stir during breakfast.

Colin, the Highland Marauder, found himself hailed as a hero, despite two black eyes and a bandaged nose. His right arm tucked in a sling brought gasps of concern from the females in the welcoming party.

"Just a sprained shoulder and a few sutures. I'll be fit as a fiddle in a couple days," the middle-aged Scot assured them.

Sooner than that, Mustang decided.

The police brought news that the vandals who'd ransacked the stalls Thursday night had been apprehended. They needed the vendors to identify their wares, in order to complete their report.

This distraction left Colin alone with Flynn and Mustang. "In hospital, I had the nurse switch on the telly," said the former. "Where'd ye dig up the big oaf who bested ye, laddie?"

"I wouldn't... call her an oaf," Flynn remarked, dumbfounded.

"Her?"

As Flynn opened his mouth to explain, Mustang raised a warning finger to her lips.

“You’d better rest yourself, Colin,” advised Flynn absently, leading Mustang toward the glen.

“Aye, by our next stop on the circuit, I’ll be ready for you to defeat me once more!”

Brusquely, Flynn shoved Mustang against a tree trunk. “What kind of fool have you made of me?”

“No more than you already are.”

“Even the television cameras record you as...”

“The Scourge of Boleskine.”

“Well, you’ll not emerge victorious this day!”

Expend what energy he would, Flynn could not make his prediction hold. Every bout with the swords, he hacked and slashed at Mustang, grunting and howling like a rabid dog. She deflected the blows, not without agony to her limbs, and always managed to take advantage of an opening as Flynn tired himself unnecessarily.

In the jousts, Sarge and Molly had grown accustomed to the routine, and Flynn tumbled from the saddle at the appropriate moment, whether Mustang impacted him with her foam-tipped lance or not. The faire queen forced a smile when presenting the laurel of honor to her “champion”; Mustang sensed the girl had a crush on Flynn, and would have rather accepted his bow and a kiss to her hand.

The odds shifted in Flynn’s favor, and his opponent guessed he’d mentioned the change in fortunes to his compatriots in the gaming stalls. They would continue to amass their ill-gotten gains, regardless of her best efforts.

Or...

The last confrontation of the day, those in the grandstand saw Flynn in the guise of the Scourge, and Mustang as the magnificent long-shot. Her ten pound bet earned her the benefits of 99-to-1.

And Flynn never grasped what had transpired.

Until he saw Mustang tucking a wad of bills into a secret pocket in Sarge’s saddle.

“Who’s cheating now?” he demanded.

“Cheating the cheats is merely retribution.”

“You... witch!”

She smiled playfully, stroking the horse’s flank.

“Whatever trick you pull tomorrow, you’ll feel my wrath!”

Even a Sunday morning non-denominational worship service - which Mustang avoided - didn't soothe Flynn's temper. He let fly with the claymore in vicious attacks during the noon show, slicing Mustang's costume into shreds.

She barely blocked a powerful blow, the force of which bit deep into her upper arm.

Her shriek of anguish was echoed by nature: lightning, thunder and ground tremors causing the humans to seek immediate shelter in their cars or the nearest ditch.

IV

"Flynn, you bastard!"

Mustang Duryea fell off the claymore in a heap on the shifting earth, her adversary too petrified by the overwhelming natural phenomena to retract the blood-soaked blade. She tore her tattered wool sleeve off at the shoulder seam, using the cloth to apply pressure to the gushing wound.

The crowds and "royal attendants" having fled the scene, shouting for someone to phone for an ambulance would be futile. Thus, Errol Flynn was the sole witness to this serious laceration vanishing as the muscles, nerves and flesh knit themselves together when Mustang muttered instructions to unseen forces.

"I should kill you this instant for practicing sorcery!" swore Flynn, as the sky overhead cleared and stones from the Urquhart Castle ruins ceased tumbling off the walls.

Mustang remained seated. "I thought that's what you were trying to do."

"I..."

"You've been taking out your anger on me, Flynn, when you're really mad at yourself for giving in to greed. You're basically a good man, but you've buried your better impulses beneath a mask of bravado. It's time you grew up."

"You're one to talk," he scolded. "Look at what you've done!"

"So, the faire ended a bit early. You'll have that much more time to think about your dilemma before you pack up and move to the next site."

Mustang was proven wrong in short order, when the fire brigade, paramedics and constables descended on the wreckage. A formal investigation commenced, with those present first assessed for injuries, then lined up for interrogation.

Names, addresses, and statements were jotted in notebooks, but before being escorted to the parking lot, each person was requested by faire management

to sign a release form, to prevent any lawsuits from what was seen as an “act of God”.

“So, now I’m God,” Mustang snickered, packing Molly’s tack into the trailer for the journey to Boleskine.

“I’d genuflect to ye and pray for forgiveness,” declared Colin, bandage removed from his face and eyes no longer sporting black and blue swelling.

In the course of healing herself, Mustang realized, her phrasing must have inadvertently encompassed his damage.

“Good as new, eh?” she bluffed, failing to sound nonchalant.

“I haven’t felt this good in ages. Like a 20-year-old.”

“Perhaps you can beat some sense into your friend Flynn, then.”

Colin leaned against the trailer door. “It’s agreed I win one match per day.”

“Losing can still be winning, if it’s done judiciously.”

“How so?”

Noticing the queues stalled as the questioning persisted, Mustang slipped her hand through the crook in Colin’s restored right arm, leading him toward Loch Ness’ shore. “Let me explain.”

Flynn located them sharing a rock, enjoying the gently lapping waves.

“So, here be the conspirators who arranged for all the bookies to be cuffed and dragged to Inverness.”

Two pairs of eyes glared at him, the setting sun casting him in darkness.

“What are the charges?” wondered Colin.

“Running games of chance without a license, supposedly.”

Mustang sighed, “I, for one, am glad.”

“You engineered it, you... you...”

She elbowed Colin lightly in the ribs. “See what I mean?”

“Aye, lassie. I’ll have a time of it, keeping him on the straight and narrow.”

Bristling, Flynn neared. “Keeping me... What the devil are you talking about?”

“Nothing ye haven’t heard before, laddie.”

“Colin, don’t listen to anything this... this...”

“Witch?” Mustang supplied.

“Exactly! She’ll cast a spell on you, and you’ll be her undying slave...”

“What nonsense, laddie!” scoffed Colin. “She’s as sweet as new-mown hay.”

Trembling digits ran through Flynn’s sandy mane. “Ach! It’s done already!”

Rolling her hazel orbs heavenward, Mustang scrambled to her feet.

“Nothing’s done, Flynn, except your little scheme. Now I’m leaving, Colin will

monitor your activities, and if he catches you chatting up any bookies, anywhere, he knows what to do.”

His grip on her biceps made her cringe. “Why, Mustang? Why torture me this way?”

“He still doesn’t understand,” she directed at Colin, wresting free. “You won’t have it easy.”

“By summer’s end, I promise ye, lassie, he’ll get it through that thick skull, if I have to thrash him within an inch of his life!” They clasped hands, Colin raising her fingers to his lips. “Fare thee well.”

“Safe travels.”

Flynn caught Mustang as she climbed to the horse trailer. “What tricks have you got up your sleeve now?”

Arms bare in the purple tank top, she fixed him with a pitying smile. “There’s nothing up my sleeves, because I have none. You’re only suspicious because the guilt is getting to you.”

“I’ll be relieved when I get you to Boleskine, and you’re out of my life forever.”

“Every time you pick up your claymore, I’ll be standing beside you, prompting you to do the right thing - whether it’s my voice echoing inside your head, or Colin’s.”

“Damn you for a meddling harridan!”

“Damn me now, but someday, you’ll be grateful.”

Sliding behind the wheel of the pickup, Flynn jammed the stickshift in and spun the tires leaving Urquhart Castle, sending a shower of gravel into the night.

Mustang warned, “Remember what I told you: if you hurt my horses, I’ll kill you.”

“Why don’t you do it, and have done?” He braked on the deserted highway. “You think me such a wretch, you’ll only be happy if I’m in the grave.”

“I’m not the least bit concerned with you, Flynn. Your overblown self-interest makes it unnecessary. I *am* concerned with your co-workers, and my horses, which don’t seem to take up an ounce of your time. Someone has to see they’re treated with respect, since you won’t.”

“If the means present themselves for me to get a little ahead, why shouldn’t I seize the opportunity?”

“Because you’re not the only one who needs to get ahead. You’ve lived in America too long, I guess, to understand that those who are less fortunate should be given a leg up, and not be left behind to fend for themselves.”

“I’ve had to fend for myself...”

“As have I.”

“Bull. You married nobility...”

“I’ll not go into that with you, Flynn. Suffice it to say I realized what a danger I pose to the public, and isolated myself to avoid situations like this. Even so, insensitive jerks like yourself always manage to interfere with my peace and quiet, and then are amazed when I wreak havoc.”

Flynn’s mouth opened to speak, closed, opened, and closed again. He stared through the windshield into the blackness, confusion twisting his features by the dashboard lights.

“What are you, Lady Elizabeth Neville?”

She exhaled audibly. “I’m just a kid from Montana, the victim of a cruel joke, a curse I’ll have to endure until I die.”

“I’m... a second rate fencing coach, whose contract expires next January, without prospects for another job. I was trying to save a little nest egg, so I could go into business for myself...”

“Doing what?”

“Sporting goods, maybe. Bait and tackle. I don’t know.”

“Sounds reasonable. Why didn’t you mention this Thursday?”

“Is it so terrible for me to keep my failure private?”

“You’re not a failure, Flynn. Colin thinks quite highly of you.”

His sarcastic chuckle bewildered Mustang.

“Colin is half-owner of the faire. He plays the Marauder because it’s a good workout. He’s the one who brought in the bookies and arranged for them to... make those hefty profits.”

“What?”

Flynn switched off the pickup’s engine. “Why do you think I hailed you as conspirators? If he hadn’t gotten beat down by those punks, he would’ve been in Inverness first thing Friday, acquiring the gambling licenses. None of this would’ve happened...”

Boiling, Mustang exited the cab. She retraced the route to the castle, lit by torches of the packing crew.

Regretting his confession, Flynn pursued her. “What... are you going to do?”

“Are all men liars?” steamed the young woman, fists jammed in her jean pockets.

“When it comes to money and women, yes.”

“Then, Colin had no intention of dividing the money I gave him among the employees...”

“Not likely.”

“Bastard.”

Flynn reached for Mustang, she dodged his grasp. The trees behind her seemed afire, flames dying her ebony locks her original auburn. The macadam beneath their feet began to melt from the heat of her anger.

“Control yourself, Mustang!” he pleaded.

The words were ripped from her throat. “A wise man - a good man - once told me I should use my power to positive ends. To this day, I ask why... Why, in a world where men treat each other like dogs, kicking and biting for the choicest bit of... what?”

Her companion stood, contrite and silent.

She faced him, eyes reflecting distant flames. “Why shouldn’t I lay waste to the countryside, and destroy their ill-gotten gains?”

“Why sink to their level?”

“Because it’s the only level there is on this abused rock of a planet. I’ve locked myself away, shunned humanity, and still... they drag me into their conflicts, into the midst of their stupidity. They want me to rescue them, secretly hoping I’ll obliterate them entirely!”

“That wasn’t why...”

“Consciously, no. But, you wanted more than my horses, once you suspected something unusual when I captured you in the mud bog. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have made a second attempt.”

His downcast mien, scar pale, confirmed her allegations.

The contralto grew ominously quiet. “Flynn, you’ve got five minutes to find Colin and urge him to keep his deal with me. If he refuses, I won’t be responsible for the body count.”

“If I do convince him?”

“Get the faire queen - Katie, is it? - to drive me home. I never want to see you again.”

A sweeping bow preceded his retreat.

While she waited, Mustang checked on Molly and Sarge, calming their jangled nerves and her own. She whispered to them of the grooming they’d get when back in their own stalls, along with ample oats and cool water.

The thin strawberry blonde jogged toward the trailer ten minutes later, beaming.

“What are you so happy about?” queried Mustang.

“Ol’ Col gave everybody a bonus! Nearly 100 pounds for each of us!”
The passenger hoisted herself onto the bench seat. “How will you spend it?”

“On my tuition for next term. I really thought I wouldn’t have enough to return for my final year...”

“What are you studying?”

“Social work.”

“Admirable. Is it the same for most of the kids?”

The pickup pulled gingerly onto the highway. “Pretty much. Some are paying back their parents for advancing the money...”

If only the young people could avoid falling into the same trap of cynicism and greed as their elders, Mustang mused. She paid little attention to the passing scenery, and spoke no more until they arrived at the drive to Boleskine House.

“Katie, if you or your friends need any... financial help for the coming term, I want you to let me know.”

“That’s awfully nice of you, Your Ladyship, but...”

“Promise me.”

“Sure. I just don’t...”

“You haven’t met many people willing to help you without asking favors in return, or repayment of the loan, I know. I’ve got far more than I need, and if it means a few worthy souls have an easier time of it, and the chance to make the world a better place, I’m willing to part with some of my... wealth.”

Katie led Sarge by the halter into the stable, where the other horses seemed happy to see him. Mustang followed with Molly, eliciting a similar reaction.

“Thank you, Your Ladyship. I’ll be sure to tell the others.”

“Good. And, it’s Mustang.”

Securing the trailer, Katie departed with a pleased grin and friendly wave. Mustang suddenly felt exhausted. “Tomorrow, my friends, we’ll celebrate the end of another insane adventure.”

She closed the rolling door and tramped to the house, falling onto her bed fully clothed.

To be roused by a clamor unlike any she’d heard in her life.

Stumbling along the corridor, she yanked open the steel front door, startled to see the renaissance faire troupe celebrating in full regalia.

“What goes on here?” she wondered.

Two hefty knights lifted her onto their shoulders, parading her to where the royal box had been erected. She was lowered onto the throne, and Katie placed a garland of fresh flowers on her tousled head.

“What...”

“Long live the Queen!” the group chorused repeatedly, until Katie gained their attention.

“We have come to hail our most generous Queen, who has showered kindness on her subjects and offered us a future of hope and prosperity! In gratitude, we wish her to accompany us throughout the shires, so we may proclaim her generosity to every corner of this land!”

More cheers, before Mustang quieted them with a royal raised hand.

“I take it you passed along my news,” she addressed Katie.

“None of us slept, planning this.”

“After yesterday’s... debacle, you needed your rest.”

“We can rest well, now that our oppressors have been ousted, thanks to you.”

“Ousted? Who’s been ousted?”

“That scurvy Highland Marauder, and his accomplice, The Magnificent Flynn.”

“Eh?” Mustang prodded.

“We of the company pooled our money and bought them out, just as the constables arrived to arrest them. The renaissance faire is now an employee-owned cooperative, where no gambling shall be permitted.”

The revelry resumed.

Over the fray, Mustang bellowed, “You knew all along?”

“I’ve personally been part of quite a few faires, in the States and here in Britain. No other rents stalls to professional bookies. Henceforth, we earn our wages honestly, and fight solely for the Queen’s honor.”

Moved by the display, Mustang embraced Katie. “You are their Queen, and rightly so. A true leader. I’ll support you in whatever way I can, but I belong here at Boleskine.”

Katie curtsied low. “So be it. May we have leave to refresh ourselves and prepare a meal before departing for Glasgow?”

“My shower is yours, as is my kitchen and pantry.”

By evening, the young people had rinsed weeks of dirt from their bodies and clothes, filled their stomachs with real food, and napped beneath shade trees. Some assisted Mustang exercising and tending the horses, who delighted in the treatment. Then, they packed their trucks and trailers and rumbled down the gravel drive to their next destination.

A few had left notes and addresses, requesting funds to meet their college expenses. Surprise at their augmented bank account balances at the beginning of term satisfied them Lady Elizabeth Neville rated the title “Queen”.

Queen of Hermits, Mustang chuckled to herself a sunny summer morning, riding Pietra around the perimeter of her 47-acre “kingdom”, resolving never more to leave its confines.

A promise renewed when she glimpsed a headline in the packing of her next grocery delivery: Renaissance Gamblers Dead.

The article recounted how Errol Flynn had hung himself in his cell while awaiting trial on multiple charges. Colin Leach, former owner of the faire, had been knifed during a meal in the prisoners’ dining room by the bookies who’d been sentenced five years each for fraud.

More corpses added to the long list of people ruined by her power.

The newsprint burst into flames on the dinette table; extinguished by copious tears.