

The Mustang Chronicles:

Hunted Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea - known as Lady Elizabeth Neville in the region around Scotland’s Loch Ness - had discovered the beauty of autumn evenings at Boleskine House, where she attempted to quietly live out her FBI-imposed exile. Riding one of her horses, usually the Arabian, she would pause on the hillock where her grandfather, Jack Parsons, had died at her hand, watching the sunset while deer fed on foliage and grass.

Such moments offered her a tranquility unlike most days, when any number of tourists or curiosity seekers might roam the 47 acres. She pretty much allowed them free access during those hours but, at night, she had created a series of defenses to dissuade trespassers from approaching the Georgian-style mansion or the now-decrepit Gate Lodge.

A full moon was rising one September night, and she remained perched on an exposed tree root longer than planned. The stag, a magnificent animal, bolted from a stand of underbrush opposite, evading pursuit with an intricate pattern.

Within seconds, she grasped the reason for this panicked flight. In the waning light, she glimpsed two men carrying shotguns enter the clearing. They wore camouflage attire, rather than traditional hunting togs of red plaid or orange.

“Sons of bitches,” she hissed aloud. “I despise poachers.”

Auburn tresses blowing in the breeze, she rose just as a load of buckshot was fired. Dismissing the stag into the trees, she uttered a silent command, causing nature to stop the projectiles in mid-air.

The pellets dropped on the ground like stones.

“What the devil!” cried the culprit, a Brit. “I was positive I had him in my sights!”

“What you have is a conviction for trespassing and poaching in your future!” Mustang shouted in response.

She noticed the pair glance at each other before proceeding toward her.

“Apologies, ma’am!” stated the second, clearly American. “We didn’t know anyone was about, or that we were on private land.”

The Mistress of Boleskine bristled. “Bullshit! Besides, it’s not even hunting season.”

“We have special permission,” proclaimed the Brit.

“From whom?”

They hesitated.

“Well? Or should I summon the constables?”

Nearing so she could see their faces in the increasing gloom, Mustang detected the American had a wavy brown mane, high forehead, prominent cheekbones and nose, with full lips and broad shoulders. His comrade, perhaps ten years younger, had longish sandy hair and a sturdy build.

“Confidentially, ma’am,” whispered the American, “we’re on contract for the hunting master at Balmoral Castle...”

The temptation swelled to turn soil beneath their feet into quicksand...

“The Queen’s prize stag trophy, which hangs in her private sitting room, was recently damaged during a thorough cleaning. The antlers broke clean off and can’t be repaired. It’s imperative that it be replaced before the royal family arrives for the Christmas holidays...”

“So, you’d kill that glorious specimen just to have him stuffed and hung on a wall?” she raged.

They both lowered their heads.

“Get off my land.”

She could have predicted one or the other would object, and the Brit did.

“But...”

“But, nothing,” she growled. “As far as I’m concerned, that stag will enjoy sanctuary here for as long as he cares to stay.”

The American barked, “You can’t control...”

The microburst of wind proved him wrong in no uncertain terms.

Mustang watched as they were propelled unwillingly back the way they had come, dropping their rifles in the weeds.

In the silence that followed their combined baritone and tenor protests, the stag emerged from concealment - 18 points, at least - and nuzzled the young woman’s shoulder.

“Yes, my friend. You’re safe now.” She strolled toward where she’d tethered her mount to a bush. “Make yourself at home.”

Swinging into the saddle after collecting the weapons, she rode to the barn, where she fed and watered all six horses before settling in the cane-backed chair for a game of chess inside the house.

Tingling nerves at the base of her skull confirmed she’d not seen the last of the hunters. Uncertain how far they would go to bag their quarry, she considered extending her nightly security measures ‘round the clock.

“That won’t be necessary,” came the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi, appearing on the other side of the inlaid table where Mustang had arranged the carved set. “The slaughter of animals will continue whether you use your power or not.”

“Sad, isn’t it?” she murmured, moving a pawn.

“Beyond sad that human beings cannot be content with what is grown for their consumption. They must also flaunt their vicious natures with pathetic displays.”

“Amen.”

To be sure, Mustang mused, she would rather not ever use the power bequeathed her by Jack Parsons during his last occult ritual. She’d lost count of how many times an impulsive word or unguarded thought had caused trouble which she later had to rectify, often through the same means.

“If those men return, you will have the wherewithal to deal with them effectively and nonviolently,” Gandhi remarked.

“You have more faith in me than I have in myself.”

“Only because your potential warrants such faith.”

“I wish I could agree with you.”

“You will, in time.”

Her thoughts thus distracted, she hadn’t noticed he’d rapidly gained a position of advantage on the board, placing her king in check.

“I think I’m for bed,” she chuckled. “It’s been a long day.”

“Rest well, Mustang-ji.”

The manifested image vanished as she switched off the end table lamp. She shuffled along the hall, stopping in the kitchen to warm some milk for hot chocolate, carrying the ceramic mug with her to the master bedroom.

Sleep she did; rest she didn’t. Bizarre dreams of poachers hunting her as she ran with a herd of deer roused her periodically and, with the clock reading 3:30 a.m, she finally gave up closing her eyes.

Staring at the ceiling, she heard rustling along the hall. The dwelling secured via a steel front door, any intruder would have a difficult task of breaking and entering.

“Who’s there?” she murmured.

What leapt onto the mattress beside her feet, distorted by the shadows, could have been a dog or large cat, but it spoke with a definite Scottish burr. “Just me, milady.”

Mustang shot upright. “What the hell?”

Her first fear that she’d unconsciously directed nature to manifest another deceased individual, switching on the light didn’t assuage her confusion.

“Dinnae be afraid,” insisted the creature. “I’m a friend.”

She blinked three times and pinched herself, to confirm she wasn’t still dreaming. Approximately two feet tall, the figure appeared human, attired in a

tattered brown hooded cloak, leggings and hand-sewn shoes, with long black hair tied in a ponytail, lean features, mustache and goatee.

“Friend or foe, how’d you get in?” she demanded.

He countered, “How do ye perform the feats for which ye ha’ become famous in these parts?”

“Famous? I’m not...”

“Among my kind, ye are.”

“Your kind?”

“Sometimes known as ‘wee folk’ or fae. Both Celtic and Germanic origins have many names for those of us who protect both wild and domestic. I prefer ‘brownie’.”

“Is that some sort of elf?” Mustang trembled.

“Indeed.”

“But, why...”

“We appreciate what ye did for the stag last night. I’ve been appointed representative to reward your kindness.”

“I don’t want any...”

“We are capable of providing many services, ye know. Housework, for one. Building furniture, perhaps t’ fill your empty rooms...”

The young woman ran shaky fingers through her hair. “No, that isn’t necessary. Those bedrooms are never used...”

“Whatever the heart desires. Diamonds, jewels... money...”

Sliding to the edge of the bed, Mustang’s feet searched for her slippers.

“Oh, this is ridiculous! No one comes ‘round offering rewards for...”

He dropped to the boards, his face level with her thighs. “Nae one travels by lightning bolt, or shatters glass two miles away when angry.”

“Don’t remind me. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“That anger, most times, ‘tis justified,” reasoned the brownie. “Ye ha’ done many times what we wished to do, but could nae.”

“Like save the stag?”

“Indeed. We dinnae ha’ the ability t’ stop bullets, as ye did.”

“Could you not have raised a fog to prevent those poachers from seeing the stag?”

Tiny feet followed Mustang toward the kitchen. “Perhaps. Our combined efforts could have transformed the dew...”

“But, I beat you to it?”

The brownie nodded. “The power ye wield far exceeds ours.”

“How about this,” Mustang decided, rummaging aimlessly through the refrigerator. “You keep watch over the stag. If you see any sign of those poachers - or any others - fetch me at once, so I can convince them to abandon their mission.”

“Agreed.” A diminutive hand extended upward.

Two of Mustang’s fingers were grasped in the gesture of accord before the elvish entity dissolved in a sparkle of what she presumed to be fairy dust.

The sudden urge for a shot of whiskey to calm herself led her to the pantry, where a bottle of Jameson sat, unopened, on a shelf. She resisted, however, and trudged back to bed.

Three police vehicles braked on the winding gravel drive at dawn. Mustang, despite the lack of rejuvenating slumber, had risen at her usual time in order to feed the horses and prepare for her morning ride.

From the barn’s threshold, she watched a team of eight constables surround the mansion, another two approaching the door. They knocked and, tired of waiting for an answer, prepared to breach the entrance.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” Mustang called as she crossed the expanse. “If you explain your presence, I’ll unlock it.”

“Who be ye?” barked the tall, lean uniformed sergeant, his accent making the question almost unintelligible.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Lady Elizabeth Neville.”

“Speaking.”

Stepping off the stoop, he closed the distance, a folded document waving in the breeze. “We ha’ a warrant t’ search the premises.”

“Why?”

“Suspected weapons violations.”

Mustang couldn’t restrain her laugh. “Me? Weapons?”

That’s when she noticed the second officer’s longish sandy hair and sturdy build.

“Oh, hell.”

Reaching into her jean pocket, she expected the men to draw their sidearms. The potential of melting the metal in their hands seized her; she resisted.

“Just my keys, gentlemen,” she noted, extracting a circular ring.

As she unlocked the deadbolt and allowed the pair to precede her into the dim foyer, she patted the erstwhile poacher on the shoulder.

“Get any sleep last night?” she quipped.

He pretended not to recognize her. “Nae a lot.”

“Neither did I.”

Instructed to sit in the living room, Mustang listened as the pair - and their associates, summoned from outside - inspected every nook and cranny in the structure, except one.

“Will ye unlock this, please?” the sergeant requested, after escorting her to the private study.

“I don’t have a key for that room. Never been in it.”

A lie, yes - and she despised lying - but no one would ever be granted access to that room.

The team leader pressed, “Ye ha’ lived here how long?”

“About three years.”

“And ye ha’ never wondered...”

“I didn’t say *that*. I said I don’t have a key for the door. I’ve never bothered to have a locksmith come out from the city to take care of it, because I don’t need the space.”

“Ye own this house?”

“I... inherited it.”

“From whom?”

“My grandfather used to live here.” No lie there.

“What about your husband?”

Of Jim Neville, who might’ve become her husband: “He’s dead.”

The sergeant consulted a small notebook. “When did he die?”

“Shortly before I moved here.”

The squad gathered in the narrow hall, reporting no contraband. Defeated in his attempt to have her arrested on false charges, the constable/poacher scowled as the group was dismissed to their cars.

Mustang pursued him to the threshold. “Too bad your plan didn’t work,” she taunted, though he didn’t turn to acknowledge the statement. “The stag will be safe from the likes of you.”

II

Plans for a decent night’s sleep didn’t pan out - again - for Mustang, even though she retired early, exhaustion draining the last of her energy.

Miniature knuckles tapping on her bedroom’s lower window pane roused her around 10:00 and she rolled toward the sound involuntarily.

“What is it?” she grunted.

The brownie’s tenor penetrated her stupor. “The boys are on the prowl.”

“Oh, hell.”

Rising and pulling on a set of blue sweats, the Mistress of Boleskine gazed at the darkness beyond the glass, her messenger pacing the ledge. “Where are they?”

“Follow the torches,” he advised.

Squinting, she saw flickering lights creating a trail through the forest. She turned confused features toward him.

“Nae, only ye can see them, thanks t’ your...”

“Okay, okay.”

As she’d done many times growing up in Montana, Mustang Duryea avoided use of the front door, instead climbing out the window and jogging along the trail. The stag, well concealed among the trees, bowed his head to her as she passed.

“Stay put, my friend,” she hissed. “I’ll deal with these... jerks.”

Ahead, she heard branches rustling without the aid of wind. One cracked, eliciting a “Damn you, Ike,” from an American-accented baritone.

The Brit retorted, “It’s not my fault. I can’t see a bloody thing.”

“You were supposed to case the grounds when you showed up this morning...”

“I didn’t have a chance. Sarge kept a close eye on me...”

“Does he suspect?”

Mustang interrupted their exchange. “No, but I do.” A silent command illuminated the area more brightly than high powered bulbs. “Let’s put a little light on the subject, shall we?”

The poachers, their camouflage ineffective, froze.

“Shit!” cursed the wavy-haired American.

“If that’s what you just did, you’ll have to clean it up yourself,” the young woman scoffed.

The Brit growled, “How’d you know...”

“A little elf told me.”

From a vantage point on an oak branch, the brownie corrected, “I’m not an elf.”

“I know,” she responded. “Sorry.”

“Who are you talking to?” prodded the American.

“It shouldn’t matter when you’re facing criminal trespass charges.”

Mustang relieved them of their weapons, propping them against a nearby tree trunk. Then, she gazed accusingly up at the Brit. “I know you’re a constable in the daytime.” She spun on his companion. “What are you? FBI? CIA?”

The American squirmed under the scrutiny, yet said nothing.
A tangle of vines slithered across the dirt, ensnaring both men's ankles.
Suddenly going taut, the pair were wrenched into the air, dangling face-down.
"What the devil!" shrieked the Brit.
"I want your names and your real purpose immediately, or you can hang here until the rush of blood to your skulls makes your brains explode."
Petrified orbs consulted each other silently; Mustang recognized expressions of surrender.
"My name is Gene Wilson," confessed the American. "I'm not with any U.S. government agency."
"Then, what do you do in the States?"
"I'm the head of international sales for a rifle manufacturer."
Mustang sighed. "When I let you down, you'd better have proof of that."
"I do! I do!"
She sidestepped to the Brit. "And, you?"
"I'm Isaac Fitzwalter of London's Metropolitan Police, on special assignment with Police Scotland."
"Convenient that you're also here hunting a stag for the Queen..."
"It's a confidential mission!" he pledged.
Mustang queried, "Which you secured how?"
"There's a hunters' only social media group which lists... specific requests..."
"You mean, if the Duke of Throckmorton wants a grizzly bear for his living room..."
"There is no Duke of Throckmorton," stated Fitzwalter.
"You get my point."
Wilson supplied, "The contract would be posted on the site, with the amount to be paid..."
"What's the price for the Queen's stag?"
Both men swallowed audibly.
"Well?"
"Five thousand quid," answered Fitzwalter.
"Pathetic!" muttered the brownie.
Mustang agreed.
"Who *are* you talking to?" Fitzwalter demanded.
"Never mind." She retreated three paces. "Mind your heads."
Vines gave way and the men toppled to the ground. Wilson accidentally kicked Fitzwalter in the mouth with his hiking boot, drawing blood.

“Idiot!” shouted the latter. “Watch your feet!”

Wilson rolled vertical and assisted his partner into a seated position, offering a linen handkerchief to soak up the red discharge from his already-swollen lip.

“You’ve five minutes to vacate the premises,” Mustang directed. “If you ever return, I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” challenged Wilson. “You’ve no dogs to loose on us, no security guards...”

A cacophony of animal cries rose from the underbrush.

“Say again?” Mustang chuckled.

Fitzwalter stood, forgetting his injury, and backed along the trail.

“What about our guns?” Wilson remonstrated.

The young woman snorted, “You’ve got ties to the manufacturer. Have them send you new ones.”

The noises closing on the site, both men scrambled into the gloom. As she returned to Boleskine House, their rifles melted into the earth.

The brownie chased her, his cloak flapping in the breeze. “Very tactfully handled, milady.”

“Tact isn’t one of my strengths,” Mustang admitted. “If I had my way, they would’ve both been reduced to ash and blown away by the wind.”

“Still, ye should be proud...”

“Don’t try to flatter me... By the way, what’s *your* name?”

“Ye may call me Alex, milady.”

“I’m Mustang, not ‘milady’.”

The brownie increased his pace to match her long strides. “Whether ye legitimately hold the title or not, ye ha’ a definite nobility of soul...”

“I wish I could take that seriously.”

“Ye may. We o’ the fae dinnae lie aboot such things.”

“What about other things?” she wondered.

Alex did not reply.

Reaching the half-open window, Mustang lifted her leg onto the ledge. “Good night, Alex, and thanks for helping the stag once again.”

“Ye charged me wi’ his protection, and I will honor that bargain.”

“Of all the people I’ve met since... acquiring my grandfather’s power, you may be the most honorable.”

He bowed, ponytail flopping over his shoulder. “Thank ye, milady.”

The house secured, Mustang shed the sweats and fell into bed, the clock reading 12:14. “Oh, hell,” she grumbled, closing her eyes.

The aroma of cooking bacon reached her nose as daylight drifted through oddly clear glass. Not much of a housekeeper, she rarely broke out a bucket to clean - carpets, floors, windows or furniture. Yet, the rays from the sun nearly blinded her, and she pulled the quilt over her face and rolled onto her left side.

That delightful smell puzzled her more than the sparkling panes. Gradually, she roused herself, not bothering to pull a robe over her rumpled t-shirt and gym shorts.

Creeping along the hall, she peered into the kitchen, alive with activity. Alex stood on a metal kitchen chair, flipping bacon in a cast iron skillet with a fork, while moving hash brown potatoes on the other burner with a spatula.

Five other wee folk scurried around the chamber, pouring freshly-squeezed orange juice into a tumbler, setting the table and buttering toast.

“What goes on?” she ventured.

The sextet hurried to line up at attention near the cabinets. Alex spoke on behalf of all. “A small reward for your kindnesses.”

“Unnecessary, to say the least.”

Their faces fell.

“But, thank you.”

Two sets of surprisingly strong hands pulled out her chair, the others delivering a piping hot breakfast.

“The horses ha’ been watered and fed,” Alex announced timidly.

“A problem?”

“We o’ the forest dinnae always get along wi’ horses,” he explained. “They sometimes mistake us for... rats.”

Mustang snickered. “Awfully large rats.”

“Not yours, though. They are very well behaved, and were grateful for the attention.”

“I... overslept.”

“Ye needed the rest, after...”

“Thank you, then, for that.”

“We also tidied the house,” Alex added.

A female of the diminutive group - or what resembled one in a shapeless dress and cloak - clicked her tongue in disgust. “And badly ‘twas needed.”

“The only bits not wantin’ for dustin’ was the chess set,” observed their leader.

Mustang noted, “That’s because it is frequently used.”

“By whom? Ye live alone...”

“Just as you come and go at will, I have friends who do likewise.”

The brownies consulted each other in silence, flustered.

“‘Tis so how?” Alex voiced for them. “Neither the living nor the dead can...”

“Not on their own, no. With a little... accidental assistance from nature, though...”

“Are ye saying ye can...”

She nodded disheveled auburn waves.

“Miraculous!” gasped the female.

“Troublesome,” Mustang countered, clearing the plate. “You’d best be off, now, so I can shower and dress...”

“There’s much t’ be done,” Alex proclaimed. “Weeds t’ be pulled from the drive, tendin’ the corral...”

“No. You’ve done enough.” The last thing she wanted was a troupe of elves - or their ilk - hovering nearby, performing every little task she neglected. The female burred, “Ye are... dismissin’ us?”

“For now, yes. You must have things to do... out there.” She gestured vaguely toward the kitchen door.

“We are pledged t’ your service, milady,” Alex informed her.

“That’s... not...”

The female chirped, “But, your need o’ us is obvious!”

“That well may be, but I don’t want...”

Alex ushered his companions toward the exit. “Be off wi’ ye for the moment. I shall endeavor t’ detail our agreement...”

As Mustang deposited dishes in the sink, the brownie hopped onto the marble counter.

“Allow me,” he said, plucking up the scrubber.

“I... *can* take care of myself, you know.”

“‘Tis our honor and privilege t’ serve the one who controls such phenomenal power.”

“It’s no honor to have that power, I can tell you.”

She permitted Alex to wash and dry the dishes, the skillet and utensils already being returned to their original hooks and drawers.

“Ye can raise the dead?” he speculated, folding the tea towel.

“I have.”

“Your power is limitless?”

“Pretty much, though I - fortunately - haven’t pushed those limits... yet.”

“Could ye break an ancient curse?”

Mustang scrutinized the two-foot-tall figure. “What kind of curse?”

Alex leapt to the floor, landing agilely. "Let us talk in comfort."

Leading her to the living room, he climbed onto the green sofa near the chess table. She sank on the cane-backed rocking chair.

"Do you play?" she asked.

"Quite well, not t' brag. I learned a century or more ago, though I ha' nae met a worthy opponent for some decades."

The young woman deferred to him, and he led with his queen's knight.

"Unusual opening," she commented, moving her king's pawn.

"We are... unusual beings." He contemplated his next tactic, continuing to speak. "Three hundred years ago, we were simple farmers in these parts. The deer ravaged our crops on a regular basis so, against the dictate o' the local magistrate, we killed most o' them... including the king stag's mate and twin fawns."

Mustang could predict where his tale would end. "The king stag..."

"Cursed us. The populace o' our entire village was reduced in size and bound t' wander the countryside until such a one as ye could intercede for us..."

"Intercede?"

"Ye are protectin' the king stag from those poachers. He will grant ye favors..."

"I don't..."

"Or, ye can break the curse wi' the power ye wield..."

To Mustang, that smacked of controlling the weather, something she never consciously did. "If I violate the king stag's strictures, he might curse me, too."

"Ye would be impervious t' such magick..."

"I wouldn't want to risk it."

Alex shoved his queen diagonally across the board, declaring, "Checkmate."

Mustang sensed he'd cheated, manipulating the pieces while they chatted. She didn't press the issue, however.

"Will ye, at least, speak t' the stag for us? Express our... remorse and willingness t' reform?"

"If you promise not to clean, cook or do my chores for me."

Alex smirked. "Ye *like* living in a pig sty?"

"It's not a pig sty... exactly. It's just... homey."

He stood on the cushion and bowed gallantly. "As ye wish, milady."

Hurrying as fast as his short legs could run, Mustang heard him open the kitchen door and inform his cohort of successful negotiations.

"By tonight, we may be free!"

They cheered, sounding to Mustang's ears ever so much like cartoon chipmunks.

III

"Everybody wants something."

Mustang Duryea exhaled slowly as her gelding Sarge cantered along a packed trail that sunny autumn evening.

As if concurring with her statement, the stag paralleled her course, dodging trees and thickets, until they reached the clearing near Jack Parson's ruined altar.

The young woman dismounted, her head level with the stag's, though his antlers extended well over seven feet into the air.

"What may I do for you?" she inquired, tethering her mount to a low branch.

The voice thundered inside her brain. "You have no qualms about speaking to animals?"

"I've done so in the past."

"You wish to intercede for those who call themselves brownies?"

"In part."

"And, the rest?"

"As I said: what may I do for you?"

The stag cocked his head slightly. "You... have already done it, by ridding me of the poachers."

"Then, would you acknowledge your indebtedness?"

"I suppose."

Mustang grinned. "But, there is more?"

"Yes."

"You, too, are cursed?"

"You are very perceptive."

"I... guessed." She leaned on the pile of decomposing wood. "Tell me."

The gentle voice transported her back to the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots in the mid-1500s. He'd served as a guard at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh. "I loved the queen," related the stag. "Yet, I was plagued by one of her ladies in waiting, a promiscuous French hussy who claimed to love me and wished to marry me. When I refused her advances, I discovered - to my horror - she practiced the dark arts. She bound me in my present form with a golden cord invisible to the human eye."

"Could you not change your mind and have her free you?"

“My sole recourse, I sadly believed, was to gore her with my antlers when she visited the glen to torture me with her wiles. I thought her death would break the curse, but the cord only tightened around me. Thus have I been nearly five hundred years.”

“You yourself cursed, why curse the brownies?”

“I’d grown accustomed to life as a stag, and cared for a succession of mates and offspring - all of which I outlived. When the brownies began killing the herd simply for eating the crops, my temper got the better of me.”

Mustang scraped the soil with the toe of her sneaker. “I understand well how a hair-trigger temper can cause trouble.”

“Will you end my agony, dear lady?”

“I...”

“Milady! On your left!” Alex’s voice penetrated the stillness from high in an oak.

The Mistress of Boleskine spun to see Wilson and Fitzwalter hunkered down in the bushes, weapons aimed at the stag.

“Persistent bastards, aren’t you?” she cried. “Freeze!”

First, she hailed Alex for alerting her. Then, she bid the stag excuse her momentarily.

Hiking to the clearing’s edge, she confronted the pair, their eyes begging for assistance.

“You’ve been warned twice about returning to my land,” she snarled.

“Wilson, you should be familiar with the phrase, ‘Three strikes and you’re out.’”

Hazel and blue orbs simultaneously reflected abject terror at the prospect of their demise.

“Let this be a day of amnesty for all,” the stag recommended, having strode closer. “They will be no danger to me once you grant my request, and the brownies shall be restored to their rightful place for having provided invaluable assistance.”

“But, if these two see...” Mustang reasoned.

“Allow me.”

Thawed from their icy bonds, Wilson and Fitzwalter straightened, their rifles abandoned. The stag lowered his antlers within inches of their chests and advanced.

Shouting obscenities, the poachers sprinted through the brush. The stag gave chase while Mustang created another puddle of molten metal in the dirt.

Alex joined her as she listened to the sound of a car's body being mutilated by powerful hooves. She imagined the bonnet, doors and boot sustaining sizable dents, with the men having to concoct some explanation for the rental agency.

The sun descending in the west, shadows engulfed the clearing before the stag returned to the hillock.

"All is well," he announced. "They have fled to the city."

Mustang directed him to stand on the crest, where rays of light were coaxed to illuminate the golden cord holding the guard in animal guise. She admired the shimmering, glowing rope, wrapped so tightly it might have choked him under other circumstances.

"Do not touch it!" the stag declared. "Anyone who does is also bound in animal form."

"So, anyone who attempted to free you in decades past..."

"Suffered my fate."

"How many?" Mustang queried.

"A handful. Kind souls long since killed by the likes of those men."

A command to nature unraveled the cord, dissolving it into dust at her feet. The transformation of deer to human elicited screams from the cursed guard, having existed on four legs for half a millennium.

Alex and his comrades retreated into the trees, having emerged in anticipation of their own liberation. Instead of recoiling, Mustang neared the man, extending her hand to offer support.

He grasped it with sweat-drenched fingers, holding on in desperation as his torso reshaped itself, his face lost its snout and antlers cracked and crumbled.

The sole difficulty: he wore no clothes.

Mustang hurried to where Sarge contentedly munched weeds, removing his saddle and confiscating the blanket. She draped it over the man's shoulders, both for modesty and warmth.

He'd sunk to his knees, weak from the exertion.

"We'd best get you to the house," his savior remarked. "You need water, food and a good shower."

"Thank ye, dear lady."

Speaking with his own tongue, the Scottish burr irritated her ears.

They strolled together down the hill, Mustang leading Sarge by the reins. She left the gelding in the barn, rushing to unlock the front door and guide her guest indoors.

"What about us?" pressed Alex, at the head of his clan.

“Give him an hour to recover from what must be a traumatic experience,” she replied. “Then, it’ll be your turn.”

Beneath the kitchen light, Mustang got a good look at the former guard while he drained two tumblers of water in quick succession. Dark, dank hair hung from a furrowed forehead, his nose hooked and shoulders narrow. Compared to some who’d visited Boleskine, he wouldn’t be considered handsome in this century, but in his own era... who could judge?

“While you shower, I’ll fix you something to eat,” she said.

“Shower?”

She led him to the bathroom and activated the faucet in the frosted glass stall, pointing out the soap and shampoo.

“Ah! I must wash m’self.”

Nodding, she withdrew.

How many others had worn her oversized sweats, she didn’t want to count. The guard meandered into the kitchen, red garments hanging from his slight frame. He sat down to steak and potatoes, ignoring the fork and using the knife to shovel portions down his throat as if starved.

“Being confined t’ eating vegetation these many years, this repast ‘tis a delight,” he praised, wiping his mouth with the napkin.

“I’m glad.” Mustang refilled his water glass. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Ach! ‘Tis Oliver Ross.”

“Mine is... Elizabeth.”

“Aye, I’ve heard the locals speak both well and ill o’ ye, dear lady. I had nae believed their tales until our first meeting, when ye saved me from those poachers.”

She squirted blue liquid into the sink to scrub the dishes.

“Ha’ ye any ale?” Ross hinted.

“Afraid not. There is whiskey...”

“Scotch whiskey?”

“Irish.”

He spat on the floor.

Mustang restrained an outburst. “I... don’t know what to do about shoes for you, Oliver.”

“I’m used t’ bare feet, so it shan’t bother me t’ roam about wi’out.”

“When you leave, though, others may think it strange...”

“I can nae leave.”

Auburn tresses whipped toward him. “What?”

“I’m nearly 500 years old, dear lady. Now the magick is done, I shall die within a day or two.”

“Oh, hell...”

He rose and stretched his limbs, groaning in pain as his left shoulder popped.

“Careful,” she advised.

“Aye. A deer’s legs do not bend this way.”

“Let’s go set the brownies free, shall we?”

“Ye better bring a stack of blankets. Those wee clothes will not grow wi’ them.”

Mustang paused. “Good idea.”

Not only blankets, but sheets from the linen closet, bath towels and a few vintage table cloths were gathered into a bundle and hauled to the barn.

“All of you, inside!” she directed, holding the door until two dozen diminutive individuals filtered beneath the portal.

Oliver Ross poked his head through the gap as the panel slid shut. “I forgive your offense,” he declared. “Be as ye were.”

Light shot between wooden slats, a minor display compared to some of the reactions Mustang’s impulsive utterances generated.

Ten minutes later, a line of farmers and their wives, all over 300 years old, emerged from the structure wrapped in make-shift togas.

“I don’t have enough real clothes for everyone,” Mustang lamented.

Alex soothed, “No matter, milady. When we realized how ye would be able t’ help us, we collected an assortment o’ garments in what ye call the Gate Lodge.”

“You... stole them?”

“When brownies are about, things go missing on a regular basis,” Oliver interspersed. “The locals expect it and don’t hold it against them.”

“Come in, please,” their hostess invited, sidling to the house. “We’ll have a real feed.”

Alex and seven men ambled to the Gate Lodge to retrieve shirts, trousers and frocks, while the women shooed Mustang from the kitchen, cooking every piece of meat from the freezer, along with vegetables and pastries.

“The only thing missin’ is ale,” complained Alex, who appeared in a green plaid flannel shirt and baggy jeans. With long, dark hair, chiseled features and goatee, he surpassed Oliver in looks.

“There’s whiskey in the pantry,” Mustang responded.

“Scotch whiskey?”

“Irish.”

Eight men spit on the floor.

Mustang dreaded scrubbing the mess in the morning.

The women provided that service, however. Sated by the meal, the group settled wherever space permitted for a night’s sleep. Oliver laid claim to the bed in the spare room.

Mustang recalled the only slumber party she’d ever attended in grade school.

This was far worse, with the snoring and noise.

Alex stumbled into her bedroom well past midnight. He plopped on the mattress’ edge, watching her until she sensed his presence.

“What is it? Something wrong?” she slurred.

“I... just wanted t’ thank ye again for what ye ha’ done...”

“The best way you can thank me is by letting me sleep.”

“Aye, and by warmin’ your bones?”

Mustang caught his drift. “No, Alex. That’s... not necessary.”

“The women can cook in your kitchen and clean the house, while the men tend your horses, but I...”

She sat upright. “Alex, you and your... people cannot stay here. There isn’t enough space, for one, and I’m used to living alone, for another. There has to be a village somewhere you can... create a new life for yourselves...”

“Except, ‘tis as Oliver told ye: we shan’t live long, now we’ve been restored t’ our rightful... size. Our true age will get the better o’ us and, one by one, we shall die.”

Mustang envisioned two acres of Boleskine property converted into an impromptu cemetery. None of these wayward souls could be transported to Inverness for burial without a lot of questions.

“Here’s what you do,” she decided. “Tomorrow, go into Dores and buy all the tarps available. You can set up tents on the acreage furthest from the road, and live there quietly until...”

“Ye are most kind, milady.”

“But, there’s one stipulation.”

Alex halted as he leaned toward her. “Which is?”

“Your women do not clean and cook for me; your men stay away from the horses.”

“Aye, it shall be so.”

She rolled onto her left side before he could express his gratitude with a kiss.

That she didn't need, for certain.

Come first light, Mustang crawled from beneath the quilt to find the house seemingly deserted. She felt a burden lifted from her shoulders as she jumped into the shower, letting hot water unkink tight muscles in her neck and lower back.

She didn't really mind that the kitchen had been put in order before the Scots departed, nor the furniture dusted, linens washed, folded and restored to their shelves.

Riding Molly around the estate, she detected the stirrings of a settlement to the east, but avoided the site. What she didn't know, she couldn't admit to any constables or other officials who might object to the homestead's legality.

Grooming the horses relaxed her further and, heading indoors for lunch, she realized her cupboards and refrigerator were almost empty. Her bi-weekly grocery delivery wasn't due until Friday, either.

She would have to ride into the village of Dores for supplies.

The idea aggravated her.

A knock on the kitchen door redoubled that emotion. She yanked open the panel to see four men holding large boxes.

"What's this?"

"Ye provided us a feast yesterday, so we are obliged t' restock your larder."

She pointed to the table, where the men set their loads.

"Where'd you get the money to buy so much?" she puzzled, scanning the meat, canned goods and cereal.

They would not meet her gaze.

Being the receiver of stolen goods could get her in serious trouble, but who would ever know? she mused.

She thanked and dismissed them, not in the mood to unpack more than the perishable items.

A melodic humming from along the hall drew her attention as she stuffed a roast into the freezer. "What now?" she grumbled, shuffling toward the living room.

Alex sat at the chess table, pieces arranged to start a new game. Already, the aging process marred his features and added streaks of white to his dark mane.

"I told you..." she remonstrated.

"A rematch is in order, milady. Last time..."

"You cheated?"

He smiled, erasing years from his brow. "Aye."

IV

The chess game lasted well into the evening, with both Alex and Mustang deliberately calculating their moves. Alex's unconventional tactics stumped Mustang, who had become familiar with the gambits of Mark Twain, Gandhi and Erwin Rommel.

He managed to get her in check three times, before she saw an opening and maneuvered him into checkmate.

Grinning, he leaned back on the sofa cushions. "Well played, milady! Ye are truly a worthy opponent."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I also enjoy music. Do ye?"

Mustang rose from the cane-backed rocker. "Some types, yes."

"Beethoven, Bach, Mozart?"

"Once in awhile."

"What about these... modern forms?" Alex queried.

"How do you know..."

"In our wanderings, we heard... recordings? Melodies and harmonies described as rock and roll and, more recently, hip-hop."

"I... haven't had much chance to listen to the current stuff."

"'Tis... quite interesting. On the way back from Dores, I heard some generated by a passing automobile. It inspired some lyrics..."

"Lyrics?"

"For ye, as a tribute to your kindness."

Mustang chuckled. She recalled the late Stuart McKay, who'd composed a concerto in her honor before his untimely death. No one had ever put words to music for her, though.

"Will you sing it for me?"

Alex straightened. "Melodically, 'tis not much. Hip-hop, from what I understand, is more beat-driven."

"Then, perform it however you choose."

Two index fingers tapped a syncopated rhythm on the end table, prior to the tenor voice intoning what amounted to a poem.

"I'm not gonna blow my chance
to have myself a dance
with the girl of whom I dreamed
who broke the curs-ed scheme.

“Three centuries we hovered,
using trees for cover,
waiting for the day
good luck would come our way.

“Then a girl who owned some horses
stepped up to change our courses.
So now I won't blow my chance
to share with her one last dance.”

Mustang applauded the effort, humbly permitting him to kiss her cheek.
“Will ye walk wi' me to the camp? One o' the boys commandeered
bagpipes, and we could ha' that dance...”

She shuddered, despising bagpipes more than any other instrument. Yet,
realization the man and his companions were not long for this world, she could not
refuse his last wish, especially when so eloquently expressed.

“Perhaps I'll take a turn with Oliver, as well,” she proposed.

“Oliver? He's not wi' us.”

Mustang stiffened. With Alex on her heels, she strode to the spare
bedroom, opening the door.

The sole trace of the former guard was a smattering of dust commingled
with red sweats beneath the sheets.

“Ach, bless him,” Alex mourned. “Five hundred years caught up wi' him
quickly.”

At least, she was saved the trouble of disposing of the remains.

The same might hold true for the other Scots.

If Alex wished his dance, time was of the essence.

“C'mon,” Mustang insisted, tugging him toward the hall.

They didn't get far. On the gravel drive, Gene Wilson and Isaac Fitzwalter
confronted them at the base of the stoop, anger seething.

“As I live and breathe,” Alex gasped.

Mustang sniffed, “Oh, hell.”

“Be on your way, old man,” Wilson told Alex. “Our business is with this...
lady.”

Alex stood his ground. “I'll not leave her t' the likes o' ye.”

Fitzwalter attempted to shove Alex aside, only to have his wrist nearly
broken by a deft block.

Impressed, Mustang nonetheless dismissed the Scot. “I'll be fine.”

“Are ye sure?”

She nodded.

He didn't move beyond the tree line, monitoring the scene as he'd done many times in smaller form.

“Because of you, we lost a half dozen custom-made rifles and that stag cost us thousands in repairs to our rental,” Wilson complained.

Blood pounded in Mustang's ears. “So, you want money?”

“We want the stag,” clarified Fitzwalter.

“He's dead.”

They frowned, doubt evident.

“Last night, of old age.” No lie.

Wilson deliberated briefly. “Then, we want the carcass.”

“It's gone.”

“You gave it to other hunters?” stormed Fitzwalter.

Mustang spoke through clenched teeth. “Enough of this nonsense. I'm busy.”

When the men seized her arms as she passed, they received a shock of electric current that stunned them.

She rejoined Alex for the jaunt to the camp, only to hear the sound of a round being chambered in a shotgun.

“What good will killing me do you?” she shouted without turning toward the poachers.

“Not kill,” stated Fitzwalter. “You're under arrest...”

Alex grasped Mustang's fingers, concerned. She patted his hand to reassure him.

“On what charge?”

The constable quipped, “Whatever I feel like putting in my report.”

“Let me give you some suggestions: trespassing, illegal hunting, assault with a deadly weapon...” the young woman ventured.

Wilson interrupted, “I was thinking more along the lines of threatening public officials with bodily harm...”

“Oh, no. The report you'll be writing will be on *your* infractions, not mine, because you'll have to explain the loss of a second vehicle and the condition of your clothes.”

Flames burst from the stones beneath the pair's feet, igniting not only their shoes but their trousers. Rather than stop, drop and roll, they fled at full speed, the fire pursuing them to the red Mini-Cooper past the curve, which promptly exploded.

As Mustang and Alex continued into the forest, the sound of sirens converged on Boleskine. From a vantage point on the hillock, they viewed the poachers' apprehension by Fitzwalter's fellow officials.

"How'd ye know..." Alex prodded.

"I didn't, honestly. But their actions on any normal day would've raised suspicions among conscientious police officers, prompting an investigation."

As they proceeded along the moonlit trail, Alex's pace faltered. His companion sensed more than saw his rapid deterioration.

"Another hour," she instructed nature.

Gnarled digits squeezed her arm. "Thank ye."

"You have a right to that last dance."

The temporary camp boasted only seven remaining Scots, with piles of clothes scattered where their occupants had met their respective demises. Alex signaled to the piper - still youngish in appearance - who played a waltz.

Twirling Mustang adeptly around a dwindling bonfire, the former brownie wore a smile as wide as the starlit sky above. "We will be eternally grateful t' ye, milady," he whispered.

"And I to you, for brightening my life the past few days."

"Even if it meant losin' sleep?"

She chuckled, "The cause was just."

"Ye believe those men will see justice done?"

"It's hard to say. Perhaps they would learn better from their mistakes if a curse were placed upon them..."

A woman, well wrinkled and grey, muttered, "That can be arranged!"

"No need," Mustang instructed. "It will be handled in due course."

"Are ye certain?" queried Alex.

"Positive."

Abruptly out of breath, the man stumbled and sank on a large rock. "Fare thee well, milady," were his final words.

The Mistress of Boleskine retraced the route to the mansion as a stiff breeze dispersed the dust across remote acreage. She would collect the garments and tarps in the morning, and have her neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, eventually haul them to a thrift shop in Inverness.

A mug of hot chocolate in tow, Mustang crawled into bed before 10:00. Another incident resolved without wreaking havoc on the countryside, she told herself as she dozed.

Not completely resolved, though.

A brilliant dawn found her in the barn, pouring oats into buckets for the horses and filling troughs with fresh water. Tires crunching gravel disrupted her thoughts, and she strode toward the door.

“I will swear: she set us on fire!” bellowed Wilson, handcuffed between two uniformed constables.

The sergeant leading the squad noted, “That may well be, but how?”

Fitzwalter joined the assembly from a second black car. Sandy hair hung over his eyes, with shackles preventing him from brushing it aside.

“She... she...” he stammered.

“Anything ye say will cast this entire case into question,” his superior advised. “We’ve found falsifications on your reports for the past six months, causing dozens of prosecutions to be reversed by the courts.”

Attention returned to Wilson. “Ye say this woman, this Lady Elizabeth Neville, assaulted you, stole your possessions and chased ye off the property?”

“That’s not exactly true,” Mustang addressed the group as she approached. “These two assaulted *me*, were repeatedly caught poaching on my land and were ordered on each occasion to leave or face the consequences.”

The sergeant blinked against the glare of light off Mustang’s auburn locks. “Those consequences being?”

“Security measures installed on the grounds.”

“Causing spontaneous fires?”

“If appropriate.”

The constables muttered their approval.

“What company created such... innovations?” asked the sergeant.

“Because they were provided on an experimental basis, I’m not at liberty to say.”

Wilson blurted, “If they were security measures, there’d be gas lines, ignition switches... Do you see any scorch marks on these stones?” He kicked at the gravel.

“By chance, might ye have surveillance camera footage of Wilson and Fitzwalter trespassing?”

“I’ve never seen the need for cameras.” For obvious reasons, especially recording her own use of Jack Parsons’ powers anyone might later view. “I can show you the rifles they used, which should have ample fingerprints for verification.”

Wilson and Fitzwalter squirmed at this announcement.

Mustang guided the sergeant into the barn, where the guns were propped against a post. Examined by a trained eye, he unloaded both and safely toted them to his associates.

“Amazing what a little fake post on social media brings out in men,” he chuckled at the prisoners.

Fitzwalter shrieked, “Fake?”

“A collaborative effort by various agencies t’ catch such as ye, out t’ make some fast cash while ignorin’ the law.” He inclined his head toward Mustang.

“Thank ye for your assistance, your ladyship.”

“Glad to help,” she replied, biting her lip against a smile.

Fitzwalter and Wilson glowered at her as they were maneuvered onto the rear seats of the police vehicles.

What Mustang had dreaded about law enforcement occurred immediately after the cars circled the drive and headed for the highway. The sergeant tore a slip of paper from his notepad and placed it on her open palm.

“We’ll need ye t’ come t’ the station in Inverness t’ give a statement,” he directed.

“I... have no way to get there.”

“Aye, I noticed ye ha’ no car. That’s rather odd for one of your prominence, ‘tis nae?”

“I’m a bit of a hermit.”

“Ah, I see. Well, we can set a time, and I can send my men t’ fetch ye...”

Mustang considered. “If I don’t make a statement, will the charges against those two be dismissed?”

“The trespassing and attempted assault, most definitely.”

“The poaching?”

“Others ha’ made complaints about them huntin’ illegally in recent weeks, so that wouldn’t matter as much.”

“Then, by all means, use those complaints. I’d rather not... have any publicity.”

The sergeant scrutinized her features closely. Finally, he empathized, “A grieving widow, of course. I understand.”

Not able to discern whether he was sincere or lying, Mustang determined not to take any chances. As the sergeant steered the black cruiser between the trees, she ensured he would forget ever meeting her, and information on the minor charges would vanish from all reports.

That weekend, Glenn MacDonough loaded his construction pickup with bags of clothes, at the same time Mustang’s bi-weekly groceries were delivered.

Newspapers stuffed in the boxes to prevent damage gave her an overview of the region's latest events and crimes, including the arraignment of Gene Wilson and Isaac Fitzwalter, who would be occupying cells in the Inverness jail for the foreseeable future, their bail set at one hundred thousand pounds each on multiple poaching charges.

"These men have been a blight on the Highlands," commented the prosecutor to the reporters. "After six years, we finally caught them, thanks to the willingness of local citizens to report their activities."

Mustang wadded up the sheets and tossed them in the trash.

In future, she'd have to be wary of even the creatures of the forest, and the wee folk - everybody wanted something!