

The Mustang Chronicles:

Warrior Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The Highland's howling winds and lashing rains often kept Elizabeth "Mustang" Duryea awake through the wee hours. Gaps in the window frames created an annoying whistling as forced air bombarded Boleskine House; she lay on the king-sized bed, staring at the ceiling, struggling against bursts of anger that could destroy every structure in a ten-mile radius.

This particular April night, the moaning reminded her of voices - heavily accented Scottish voices - shouting orders, screaming in agony, cursing their oppressors.

Not that she'd acquired a grasp of the thick burr, comprehending little of what her neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, said to her on his infrequent visits. Bits and pieces conveyed to her since she relocated to the Loch Ness region gave her an awareness that linguistic diversity accounted for much of her confusion regarding those who spoke Gaelic, various dialects of Scots - its own tongue - and a muddled form of actual English.

The cacophony that reverberated through her skull fit the latter two options. Burying her head beneath the pillows did nothing to drown out the noise; she bolted upright at one particularly hideous shriek, scanning the bedroom for the man who might have been standing right beside her.

"Oh, hell!" she gasped. "What have I done now?"

Suspecting her own lack of vigilance when it came to commanding nature to perform a variety of functions, thanks to mystical powers bequeathed to her by her late grandfather, Jack Parsons, occurred on a routine basis. Since receiving the unwanted gift at the age of 16, she'd wreaked havoc in Montana and other states, along with countries around the globe. She couldn't trust herself not to accidentally cause chaos through an impulsive thought or word, especially if caught off guard by disturbing dreams or uninvited guests.

A few deep breaths calmed her, though the eerie clamor persisted. She gave up any hope of resuming a peaceful slumber, kicked off the quilts and trudged to the bathroom for a shower.

Mustang poured herself a bowl of cereal for breakfast, daylight bleak through the kitchen casement. Her horses would be skittish in the barn after the storm, in need of water and grooming...

That structure itself in need of a thorough cleaning, after the Arabian decided to escape its stall and damage storage bins and walls.

Not how she'd planned to spend her day.

Still, with her feed delivery due mid-morning, repairs took priority. She fetched hammer and nails from the tack room toolbox, broom and pitchfork, setting to work.

The company of horses soothed Mustang's soul. She held conversations with the animals, not that they responded verbally - at least, not since she'd wished her pinto Heartbeat could talk years earlier. They seemed to find her monologue captivating, poised at the railings, intently listening.

Just as the sun peeked through ominous clouds, another downpour doused the countryside - not unusual in these climes. Sweeping sawdust and straw past the rolling door, the young woman noticed a rainbow to the west.

She felt herself smile, hearing the crunch of gravel beyond the curve of the drive: the lorry from Dores.

"Much damage?" queried the driver when he alighted from the cab.

"Not that I've noticed. What about along the road?"

"Lots of downed trees. The fairy mound across from MacDonough's is completely decimated."

Having encountered the fae since coming to Scotland, Mustang had no doubt the creatures would take the destruction in stride, living more in harmony with the environment than most humans.

She allowed the strapping lad to carry sacks of oats and bales of straw into the barn, cognizant that men hereabouts didn't appreciate independent females, except when they tucked a ten pound note into a callused fist upon completion of the task at hand.

"Will ye be goin' t' Culloden for the memorial?" he wondered before departing.

"Memorial?"

"Aye. Today is the anniversary o' the battle. The clans always gather t' remember the dead."

"Sorry, no."

"Well, ha' a grand day."

"You, too."

Mustang watched the truck trundle toward the main road, tucking the receipt in her jeans after glancing at the date: April 16.

She vaguely recalled mention of Culloden in her high school world history class: the defeat of Scottish forces by the English in the mid-1700s. As punishment, most cultural traditions practiced north of the border were banned, including wearing the kilt, the native language, and even Christmas celebrations.

Retracing her steps to the barn, she halted abruptly.

Had the cries she'd heard in the darkness been those massacred more than 250 years ago, seeking justice?

Without a computer or other means of researching the facts, she might never know.

Unless...

"General?" she addressed the emptiness.

Erwin Rommel, the German tactician who guided the Africa Corps during World War II, had been one of Mustang's initial debacles. She'd met an elderly concentration camp survivor - or, so he claimed - and she'd mistakenly wished to share his wartime experiences, landing herself in the 1940s as the field marshal's aide.

Their connection endured, with him challenging her to games of chess and offering wise - if not entirely welcome - advice.

"Just because I'm a military figure, you believe I have comprehensive knowledge of armed campaign through the ages?" he chuckled, standing at attention beside her.

"Don't you?"

"About Culloden? Very little. It seems the Scots were of insufficient numbers and poorly armed against their foes. Their... arrogance outstripped practical considerations."

"Why would they be... getting inside my head at this late date?"

"Your... affinity with the elements transcends time and space, a situation comparable to a radio receiver tuned to an open frequency."

"Meaning... anyone with the gumption can make contact?"

"Those... seeking vindication for wrongs committed against them."

The Mistress of Boleskine sighed. "Something needs to be done!"

"Options are quite limited. If you read your grandfather's journals, he mentioned being plagued by voices..."

Droplets spitting, she scurried indoors, slumping on the rough-hewn bench. "It's so *unfair*! I didn't have a choice about... this... this... and being left to fend for myself without any warning about what to expect..."

A tender hand rested on her stooped shoulder. "I'm sorry, my dear. You do have us to assist, as we can."

"But, you can't really help me figure out what this lot wants, or how to shut them up!"

"True."

"What I need is a real historian to guide me through what actually happened and how to fix it!"

The dismayed expression on Rommel's weathered visage coincided with Mustang clamping her hand over her mouth.

Too late.

The clash of sword on sword - huge Claymores battering less impressive blades - gunfire and cannon blasts deafened the inadvertent witness, perched in a sturdy oak on the edge of the vast clearing. On an adjacent branch sat a bewildered figure with wild salt-and-pepper mane, round black plastic-rimmed bifocals and a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee.

A colorful array of kilts mixed with red coats in the midst of the fray; Mustang bit her lip, drawing blood.

"What the hell is going on?" screeched her companion. "Who are you, and where are we?"

She smirked. "If you're who I think you are, you should know better than me."

"Dispense with the riddles, child."

"I think this is Culloden..."

Fiery hazel eyes contemplated the scene, before the cultured baritone proclaimed, "You... may be correct."

"I apologize for... dragging you away from whatever you were doing."

He squinted at her. "Eh?"

"Long story. Just explain this to me, and we can get out of here."

"I'm explaining nothing until we get somewhere beyond the range of fire."

Though in his fifties, by Mustang's estimate, he swung to the ground with impressive agility, offering his hand to her.

She accepted the gesture and didn't flinch when he grabbed her by the waist and lowered her gently onto moist earth.

Glancing around, he led her north, past dense underbrush into the forest. A thatched cottage, abandoned, provided shelter and seats.

"First, your name," he stated.

She swallowed her nerves. "Elizabeth... Neville."

"Not *Lady* Elizabeth Neville?"

"You... know of me?"

"I'm an unofficial consultant for the intelligence task force investigating illegal weapons experiments."

"Oh, hell..."

"Witnesses we've interviewed have mentioned you..."

"In what context?"

“They’d either called at Boleskine House or met you riding horseback near Dores...”

Racking her brain, Mustang could not recall anyone whose memory she hadn’t wiped... but that determination would come later. “What’s your name?”

“Adam Sainsbury.”

“What university?”

“Strathclyde.”

“Where’s that?”

“Glasgow.”

“Cool.”

“You’re... American.”

She nodded, tousled auburn tresses falling across her face.

“What’s your interest in Culloden?”

“You wouldn’t believe me. But, please... why would these men be crying out from their graves nearly three centuries after they died?”

“Probably because most of them never received a Christian burial, such honors forbidden by the English after their victory.”

Mustang held up one finger. “They... died in pain?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Two fingers. “What else?”

“Those who fled were tracked and killed, as were any who gave them aid and comfort.”

Three. “And?”

“The warriors’ families were stripped of their land and property and left in abject poverty.”

Four. “Good enough reasons, I suppose.”

“Not that anything can be done to rectify the matter...”

“I don’t know about that.”

Sainsbury’s brow furrowed. “Eh?”

“What would’ve happened if the Scots had won?”

“Bonnie Prince Charlie would’ve taken the throne and... who knows?”

Spying a ceramic jug on the sagging mantelpiece, he retrieved it, pulled the cork and sniffed the contents.

“Whiskey?” ventured Mustang.

He gulped a portion. “Not Glenlivet, but passable.”

She reached for the jug; he tugged it beyond her grasp. “What’s the matter?”

“You’re too young.”

“Like hell, I am,” she asserted. “Besides, I don’t think drinking the water is safe.”

He surrendered the liquor. “You’re probably right.”

A mere sip convinced her it wasn’t worth the risk, the taste awful.

Yet, Sainsbury didn’t seem to mind, draining the container in short order.

Mustang could have predicted what would transpire next.

Sainsbury snoring on the floor, she departed to see how she could bolster the fallen Scottish forces.

The greatest difference between 18th century and 20th century warfare: the amount of bloodshed. Mustang had seen soldiers die in northern Africa’s blistering heat, bullets tearing through flesh. On these lush fields, severed limbs stained the soil, dismembered torsos spilled away life as frightened casualties wept for home, and lengths of plaid flapped in the wind like ragged flags.

The sight nauseated her and prompted actions the consequences of which she did not pause to deliberate.

Her rationale: she’d already seriously fouled up, how could things get any worse?

English forces, toasting their success near an encampment south of the carnage, dropped their tankards and gaped when 1,200 corpses rose and redeemed their weapons, advancing at a sprint. Without an opportunity to swing into the saddle, or retrieve their bayonets, the king’s troops were subjected to the same violence they had previously inflicted on their enemies.

The Scots were... far more vicious in their attack than the tenacious English. Heads cleaved from shoulders, bodies halved with a single stroke...

Or, was it Mustang’s own rage manifested by these hordes?

Not one of the combatants noticed her, poised on a wagon at the conflict’s perimeter. In her grey sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers, she resembled nothing they’d seen before; her blazing red hair may have enabled her to be ignored as just another supporter of their cause.

Until Adam Sainsbury staggered into view, bewildered by his surroundings. A kilted behemoth whirled; his Claymore arced...

Mustang hoisted a discarded broadsword and blocked the blow with equal force, nature strengthening her limbs. At an impasse, she suggested, “The real foe is there,” angling him toward the melee.

As she dropped the blade and spun toward an instantly sober Sainsbury, a bayonet missed her ear by inches. She grabbed the musket borne by an eager royal conscript and flipped him onto his back, impaling him with the forged steel implement.

Sainsbury erupted in a fit of hysterics.

II

“Get hold of yourself, dude!” Mustang Duryea admonished, dragging him by his shirt collar to the tree line. “You’re making a spectacle of yourself!”

“How... how...” Sainsbury’s twitching index finger thrust toward the skirmish. “The course of history has been irreparably altered...”

“Because a few people lived instead of croaked?”

“If the English lose here, Bonnie Prince Charlie might...”

“Who gives a damn about the monarchy? They don’t do anything useful...”

“Maybe now - *our* now - but not here, now. In thirty years, the Declaration of Independence will be written, but not if King George isn’t in a position to force the Founding Fathers’ hands.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Your homeland might still be a British colony!”

“Oh, hell...”

“Hell is right. It’s anybody’s guess what we’ll find when we return... *if* we’re able to return...”

“Hold, there!”

The order in a bass register froze the pair’s blood.

“Raise your hands.”

They complied.

“Identify yourselves.”

Mustang nudged Sainsbury. “Do me a favor and keep your trap shut,” she whispered. “Let me handle this...”

The historian’s response, in an undertone: “He won’t listen to a woman.”

“Trust me.”

What the English soldier saw when the couple stepped away from the gnarled trunk put him at ease, which flustered Sainsbury.

“Are you hurt, mate?” the redcoat prompted Mustang.

She bluffed, “Tripped over a root is all. Twisted my ankle.” Feigning a limp, Sainsbury took the hint and wrapped his arm around her waist to support her.

“The... medical tent is in tatters, but if you head east, there’s a cadre of harlots nursing the injured...”

Both Mustang and Sainsbury realized in that moment this was a deserter, who'd only stopped them on the chance they were traitors and their capture would redeem him with his superiors.

"Thanks, friend." Mustang touched her fingers to her forehead in a faux salute as the fleeing youth bolted toward the wilderness.

Sainsbury released her no more had the soldier vanished, glaring. "What *are* you, some kind of witch, or a hypnotist?" He paced in a circle. "Is any of this real, or am I still in my classroom, waiting for my students to finish their pop quiz?"

"Oh, it's real," she sputtered, jerking him from the path of an incoming cannonball. Watching it bounce past, she snickered. "I always wondered how they aimed those contraptions, but I suppose it's just a matter of luck whether they hit anything."

Recovering his balance, Sainsbury interspersed, "Establishing the proper trajectory involves complex calculations. Very few actually possessed the knowledge..."

"So, luck."

He conceded, "Aye."

"What say we get out of here?"

"And go where, exactly?"

"Back to that cottage, if nothing else, so I can think..."

"About what?"

"This phenomenal mess I've created."

"Grand idea." Clutching her fingers, he preceded her through a maze of budding trees, his sense of direction faulty. When they finally arrived at the primitive dwelling, their feet hurt from exertion.

Mustang unlaced her sneakers and wiggled her toes. "God, I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since breakfast..."

Sainsbury scanned shelves beside the fireplace. "Either the soldiers raided this place hunting for food, or the family who lived here was quite poor."

"What about lamb, or chicken?"

"You gonna kill it?"

She sneered. "I've had my fill of killing for one day - for a lifetime."

"I'm a vegetarian," he retorted.

"Good for you." Against the wall, she detected a cot. "At least, I can get some sleep..."

He restrained her. "Oh, no, you don't. Solve the problem first, then bed."

"And, if I refuse?"

“I outweigh you by four stone, at least.”

The jolt of electricity that shot through his limbs negated his presumed advantage.

“Damn, woman!” he protested, massaging tingling muscles.

She sank on a wobbly chair at the crooked table. “Who’s to say the future isn’t ten times - fifty times - better after this... this...”

“Who’s to say it isn’t fifty times worse?” Sainsbury countered. “Lady Elizabeth...”

“Don’t,” she chided. “I hate that name.”

“Then, how should I address you? Liz? Beth? Eliza?”

“Mustang.”

“Eh?”

“Long story.”

He sat opposite. “Well, if no remedy can be found for this dilemma, your narrative may prevent us from going stark, staring mad.”

“You think we’re stuck here?”

“Indeed.”

“What if I told you we could go anywhere, anytime...”

“I’d say you’re *already* stark, staring mad.”

Mustang’s patronizing smile rattled the historian. On the grate behind him, flames spontaneously erupted, warming the room as the sun descended.

He leapt off the woven seat. “What the devil!” Instinctively, he snatched a scythe off its wall hook, leveling it at her. “You *are* a witch!”

“Did you see me wiggle my nose, or hear me speak some cheesy incantation? I didn’t wave my arms around, and have no wand, like in the Harry Potter novels...”

“Look, woman, I live by logic, and this is... is... totally illogical!”

“No, it isn’t. It’s... well, let’s write it off to beyond your field of study.”

“You have no concept of the myriad subjects I’ve studied.”

Mustang grunted, “Oh, don’t go all pompous on me. I’ve dealt with too many pompous gits, and their overconfidence usually lands them six feet under.”

She recognized fear in his hazel eyes.

“Look, you can either go and try to snag us a rabbit for dinner, or let me rustle up some food... as only I can. Once our stomachs are content, we can discuss how to... reverse my latest - possibly greatest - mistake.”

Defeated, he muttered, “As you wish.”

They dined on roast chicken, baked potatoes and salad, the origins of which Sainsbury could not trace as he devoured the greens. Another bottle of

whiskey was discovered in the larder, and he drank himself into a stupor before berry tarts could be served for dessert.

Pompous drunks were the most unpredictable types, Mustang knew, harkening back to when Irish actor Thomas Burton, seriously intoxicated, kissed her and nearly brought the roof down on their heads.

Fortunately, Sainsbury didn't appear the least bit attracted to her - and she had no beef with that.

As much as she longed to stretch out on the lone cot, she ushered her companion toward it and, no more than he crumpled into a horizontal position, his snoring drove her from the dwelling.

She needed silence to think. Swinging onto the back of one of her roans, or her Arabian, would have been the perfect way to stimulate her brain cells; instead, she leaned against the rock wall and listened to the breeze.

For all the misadventures she'd survived, this qualified as a whopper.

But then, she reasoned, how is it my fault? If men want to hack each other to bits over some land, or a throne, or for other ludicrous excuses, isn't it right that I stop the carnage and send them back to their families?

She half-anticipated one of her ethereal counselors - materialized from their graves - to list the flaws in her argument, urging her to devise a plan to restore order.

Nothing.

If Sainsbury weren't so devoted to the bottle, he might be of some use but, at this rate, he wouldn't wake until morning, plagued by a tremendous hangover, to boot.

How did he come to join her in this temporal disturbance? she puzzled. They weren't acquainted in any way; because he'd heard her name in conjunction with that task force established no link between them...

From those first days when she experimented with her power, she'd learned that precise details when instructing nature ensured the best results. Random variables seldom entered into the mix...

Sainsbury being sucked from his University of Strathclyde classroom... couldn't be a coincidence.

Unraveling that mystery would have to wait. What started as a faint, rhythmic thumping had gained intensity: a battalion of weary Scots, bound for their camp.

Not wishing to be discovered, Mustang slipped inside the cottage and eased the door closed; Sainsbury's loud snoring penetrated the panel - probably audible in the next county!

The Mistress of Boleskine pondered whether he'd been diagnosed with sleep apnea.

"Maybe there's a wee dram in here," came a gruff baritone, prior to planks shattering.

If they glimpsed her in the shadows, they'd see a traditionally clothed Scottish girl.

"Ach, lass, your father makes a hellish din!" spat a near giant, unkempt beard and full head of hair redder than her own.

His partner in the scavenging raid caught her wrist and whipped her into the last shafts of light from the setting sun. "A bonnie wee thing," he oozed. "Firm and ripe for the plucking."

"Pluck me, and you'll regret it!" she sniffed.

"Feisty, b' gad!" roared the giant.

"She'll suit us, and a few others, easy."

Fighting would only excite them, Mustang deduced and, with only a word necessary to render them immobile, she'd let them spend their energy on the preliminaries.

One, like for many of Celtic blood, being plentiful libations.

"Ha' ye a wee bottle about?" hinted the smaller of the pair.

"As much as you want."

They confiscated two dozen jugs from a larder where, ten seconds earlier, there'd been vacant shelves.

Each drained the contents of their respective selections with little effort. Given they hadn't eaten all day, and their size and weight, Mustang quietly counted off two minutes before they folded like accordions on the packed dirt floor.

"Men!" she mocked.

Triple the nasal cacophony negated any chance to sleep beneath that roof, and when rain pelted glass-less windows, she had one alternative.

A cozy hut, temperature comfortable despite the exterior chill, sheltered her until dawn. Rested, she contemplated how her horses were faring more than 250 years in the future - or if five minutes had elapsed since she'd uttered that inopportune statement...

Curious about the aftermath of the previous day's battle, Mustang set off through the woods. The clearing abandoned, the sole indication of any activity was five mangled cannons along the perimeter.

Better the loss of those than hundreds of lives, in her mind.

She settled in a half-yoga posture on trampled, damp grass. The breadth of Jack Parsons' gift should permit a look into the future, if she concentrated...

Relaxing her muscles, she inhaled deeply through her nose, air escaping her lips. When the images congealed, she equated the experience to being in a movie theater, scenes in larger than life format.

No American Revolution, no United States. New England remained a small section of the continent, with France and Spain fighting over southern and western territories. Indigenous tribes were driven to extinction, slavery flourished, industry and innovation lagged...

Because no war took place across the Atlantic, Great Britain grew complacent about holding onto their empire, and all hell broke loose in Europe. Victoria never crowned queen, her children did not marry into the noble houses of Russia, Germany and other countries, so World War I never happened.

Hitler was never born, the Nazis did not rise, the Jews were not exterminated in concentration camps.

Man never landed on the moon.

Mustang recognized nothing of the late 20th century that flashed before her. "Oh, hell..."

Groggy and cross, Adam Sainsbury's harangue shattered her meditation. "You want t' be killed, woman? The soldiers will be here in less than ten minutes!"

She untangled her legs, elbows rested on her knees. "Why? The battle ended yesterday..."

"Come evening, this time period required an unspoken cessation of any offensive, it being impossible to see in the dark. With the Scots still posing a threat, the English are adamant the Pretender be routed."

No movement, no preparations. Bird song and wind stirring leaves on the trees gave the lie to Sainsbury's warning.

"How 'bout we pass on that?" she grumbled, straightening.

A musket ball whizzed past her shoulder; the historian had discreetly retreated.

The truth evident, Mustang rushed him. "You convinced those plastered Scots to renew the fight, then cut a deal with the English to ambush them..."

He averted his gaze.

"Look to your left," she advised.

Swiveling his head, he witnessed an ancient pine spontaneously combust.

Her right hand raked his cheek. "That could have been you."

"You haven't the slightest inkling..."

"Get out of my sight."

Mustang had lost count of how many firearms she'd reduced to molten blobs, and the astonished howls of a thousand English when theirs disintegrated raised a laugh in her throat. She set off westward, Sainsbury southbound.

A traitor befitting the definition, if he didn't make it back to their own time, she'd have no regrets.

Troubled by what she'd seen of the centuries ahead, the absence of Erwin Rommel, Mohandas Gandhi and Samuel Clemens - aka Mark Twain - made sense. If they were to be born at all, their existence would be vastly different...

Only St. Francis of Assisi would still be around to hound her, having lived more than 500 years in the past.

The drone of bagpipes affirmed Scots were on the march and would make short work of the English...

If she allowed it.

Both armies emerged from the forest, stunned to see a winged, auburn-haired angel in brilliant white robes hovering above the battleground, wielding a blazing sword.

III

"If you would be saved, go to your homes and repent your sins!" As with so many wars through the millennia, the supposed superiority or authenticity of one religion over another played a huge role, Mustang Duryea recalled from books she'd read and classic films she'd watched. Here, both factions were Christians: one side loyal to the Catholic pope, the other bowing to the English king as head of the church.

Their tenets basically the same, they should have known better than to take up arms and wantonly murder each other.

"The commandments of God are not open to interpretation," she boomed. "'Thou shalt not kill' means precisely what it says!"

In her heart, she accepted she had violated that statute through her own recklessness, but she didn't publicly claim a faith in any god or their regulations.

She'd been accused, on occasion, of thinking herself a god.

The concept of deity, popularly cited, created a being omniscient and all-powerful, attributed with other super-human traits. When it came to controlling life and death, the elements, she definitely qualified - though she kept that admission to herself. She could have wiped the plain clean of every creature, had she chosen to do so...

But, she tried to believe humanity could overcome their base urges and act positively for the good of all.

Cannon fire disrupted her reverie - how stupid could these dolts be to assault a heavenly messenger? she mused.

To place their comrades in such danger...

The iron sphere soared toward her, circled her thrice, then streaked toward its source. English forces scattered, while the Scots cheered.

A skinny, kilted lad approached, presenting a bouquet of hastily gathered wildflowers to this apparition. "We ask forgiveness and guidance, O holy one."

"Look not to kings for wisdom. Love and care for those dearest. Trust your heart and live by what is right."

"Impostor!" Sainsbury's yelp echoed across the clearing; he charged Mustang, a raging bull, batting the floral offering from the young man's fist and kicking his backside. "She's a fraud, and you're a fool!"

The Scots did not take kindly to mistreatment of their own. A squad of burly warriors rushed the historian, and he might have been drawn and quartered through sheer force if Mustang hadn't intervened.

"Pity the simpleton, do not harm him," she admonished. "Can you not see, by his strange clothes, he wanders as one homeless and lost?"

Sainsbury lunged toward her, "Why, you..."

Muscular arms encompassed him; his glasses flipped off his ears, smashed beneath his shoes.

"Feed him, give him a place to rest, but heed not his words, for his addled brain serves him ill."

Lifted off his feet, he was carried toward clansman, guffawing at his ridiculous posture.

"You speak prudently, herald." A high-pitched tenor, with an Italian inflection, issued from a wee figure of noble bearing, who dipped his chin almost scornfully. "I would dispute your caution against those of regal birth, however."

Mustang sneered at his pretense. "You say that, after you've convinced these men your cause is worthy, only to watch them slaughtered from a safe distance?"

"It is their lot to protect those of titled destiny."

"Bullshit."

Bonnie Prince Charlie's rather squashed face compressed with befuddlement. "You dare assert me a liar?"

"Watch it, dude," murmured the faux angel, flicking the fiery blade. "Unless you want to die where you stand."

The air oddly still, the pair's quiet exchange could be heard by his supporters 50 yards off. An awed moan rose from the throng at the threat to their leader.

This would-be king acknowledged their concern with a glance and a cursory wave, before shifting his attention once more to the shimmering vision. "You must see: my quest is just."

How did the male mind get so warped, they forgot the difference between right and wrong? lamented Mustang silently. She could yammer on forever, and this stubborn nitwit would not be swayed from his course.

"Your quest is over," she declared. "Resign yourself to defeat, disperse your troops and find something useful to do with what's left of your life."

His spine stiffened. "If I refuse?"

Searing pain in his left hand distracted him: his fingers shriveled and blackened.

"No, please!" he pleaded, dropping to his knees. "I freely confess my sins and beg absolution..."

The sight of their figurehead cowering before an agent of the divine demoralized the Scots. Well before he trekked toward them, they'd sheathed their blades, packing their scant belongings for the march to their villages.

Satisfied she'd averted another confrontation, Mustang plopped on the grass for another appraisal of the future. That individuals historically recorded as deceased continued to breathe meant she hadn't mended the timeline, but the Pretender's ambitions had been thwarted, so the monarchy would remain intact...

Close, but no cigar, as she realized.

Spectacular how Scots took the fore with technological innovations, inventing television, pneumatic tires, bicycles, and more. Descendants of those who should have died at Culloden multiplied the contributions exponentially so, by the end of the 20th century, humanity was traveling beyond the solar system.

From one extreme to the other.

"Oh, hell..."

Exhausted, she reclined on the sun-warmed earth and slept.

Bolting upright when she remembered Adam Sainsbury's ignoble fate.

To her relief, armies move at a snail's pace. Tents where the Scots had dwelt were still in place when she burst onto the site, though the majority of men had departed. Those referred to as "camp followers" - women of questionable repute and assorted lackeys - milled about, collecting abandoned possessions and leftover food.

Sainsbury had been bound, wrist and ankle, to a slender sapling, pelted with berries and mud, abandoned to his own devices.

“You need a bath,” Mustang quipped.

He snarled, “You need a good thrashing.”

“It was the only way to keep them from killing you.”

Jaw hard, he nodded his matted head.

Prickly vines fell from his limbs, blisters indicating an allergy to the plants.

He scratched the irritation; she cringed.

“So, did you throw another log on the fire?” scoffed the historian.

“Imagine a see-saw that has pivoted the other way.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

He grabbed her shoulders and roughly shook her. “Why did you interfere? Why did you bring me here?”

“Because the cries of the dead... I couldn’t rid myself of them without... without...”

“Ach, you’re insane, woman.” He cast her toward the tents.

“You think I don’t know that? If you were in my situation...”

“Situation? You’re a wee, spoilt bairn who takes nae responsibility...”

“What you’ve already seen, and you doubt...”

“What I ha’ seen was brought on by an excess o’ whiskey.”

She grit her teeth. “Are you sober now?”

“T’ my great misfortune.”

The reddened skin healed instantly; he gaped.

“Need more proof?” she prodded.

Hesitantly, “Aye...”

His stained shirt and trousers might have come fresh from the laundry.

“How do you *do* that?” Tentative fingers ran along a crisp crease.

“Have you studied much American history?” she queried.

“The traditional stuff, no. I’ve been interested in their space program for years, though.”

“Then, you’ll be familiar with Jack Parsons.”

“Co-founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory?”

“He was my grandfather.”

Skepticism renewed, Sainsbury’s hazel eyes rolled skyward. “He had no children.”

“No... legitimate children. My mother was his daughter by one of his... collaborators in various rituals...”

He surveyed her features. "I did read about his association with a bloke named Aleister Crowley, renowned for drug-fueled orgies at Boleskine House near Loch Ness." His lips quavered. "Where you live now."

"That task force you're part of has done their homework."

"That task force is charged with gathering evidence you're a terrorist developing miniaturized weapons that will be used to topple governments."

"And you've been tapped as advisor because..."

"My interest in rockets extends to their computer components and engine designs."

Mustang's stomach growled; she grinned sheepishly.

"I'm starving, myself," remarked Sainsbury.

"Let's go inside."

Within the nearest tent, a modern folding table and metal chairs awaited, a veritable feast laid with bone china plates, crystal goblets and silverware. They devoured beef, sauteed carrots, rice and red wine, reinvigorated.

"So, you practice these... arts in which your grandfather indulged?" the historian inquired, dabbling his mouth with a linen napkin.

"Not at all. I... inherited his affinity with nature, and make use of it when necessary."

"That's... quite extraordinary."

"Exasperating would be a better word."

"How so?"

"I was sixteen when he... died, without a clue about how to live, much less how to deal with..." She shrugged. "I would say things, and nature would immediately respond. An overzealous FBI agent was thrown into Loch Ness from a hundred yards away, for instance. I've raised the dead. I've traveled on lightning bolts. I spent the early 1940s with General Rommel..."

Sainsbury's eyes flashed. "Eh?"

"I'm a walking disaster, which is why I exiled myself to Boleskine House. I never planned to see another human being again - but people keep finding me, and I cause more trouble."

He debated her sincerity. "So, you expressed an interest in Culloden, and that's how we..."

"Pretty much." Reluctant to share every detail, such as having Rommel and the others as constant confidants, she toyed with her fork.

"Then, you should be able to conduct us to the point where we..."

"Ideally, yes."

He echoed, "Ideally?"

“I’ve thoroughly mucked things up, haven’t I? If we leave now, we’ll be strangers in our own homes.”

Trembling hands scooped up hers. “Then, you *must* make things right.”

“Let them die, and be dumped in mass graves without the rites that will... comfort their souls?”

“Do you hold with such nonsense?”

Mustang didn’t flinch under his intense scrutiny. “I don’t, but they *do*. Their eternity depends on the fulfillment of their expectations...”

“What utter bollocks! You cannae know...”

“Remember, I’ve raised the dead?”

He released her and slumped on his seat. “You’ve... experienced the afterlife?”

“No, but I’ve dealt with those who have.”

“And, you’re reluctant to consign the unshriven to death?”

“Their deaths to advance that... that... narcissist’s ambitions were... meaningless. Should they not have a chance to make something of themselves before they’re taken from the earth?”

“It’s not for us to judge.”

“And in that lies my predicament. I *am* judge, jury, executioner. Whatever sentence I impose is carried out.”

Tents being dismantled nearby hastened their exit, furnishings and dishes vanishing. They parked on a broad stump, observing the demolition.

“Do you never attempt to... control yourself?”

“All the time. All the time. My... friends constantly remind me that I’ve failed in this regard...”

“Friends? But, you said you’re a recluse...”

She’d put her foot in it, for sure.

“Let’s focus on... retrieving the irretrievable,” she hinted. “Fact: the Scots who perished in battle were denied their well-earned rest for lack of a proper funeral, and the prayers and blessings that would cleanse them of their perceived sins.”

“If you say so.”

“Fact: because of my interference, those men still live.”

“Aye.”

“In order to bring order from chaos, those men must die.”

“Aye.”

“For them to die in peace, they must... they must...”

“Confess their sins and perform the assigned penance.”

“Which requires a priest.”

“Aye.”

“Were there any about...”

“No mention is made in the preserved records, but there must’ve been,”

Sainsbury ventured.

“What about in the nearby towns?”

“Undoubtedly. This part of Scotland held onto the Catholic faith well after the English outlawed it.”

Mustang detected a rustling beyond the underbrush, and a tentative nicker.

“How are you on horseback?”

The question startled Sainsbury. “Eh?”

A Clydesdale poked its muzzle into the sunlight.

“If you ride north, you should catch the men on foot. Once you tell them they should avail themselves of the sacraments, the word should spread quickly. By tomorrow, things should be in order...”

He balked. “They can’t just... drop dead.”

“Why not? People contracted all sorts of weird diseases and... expired without notice before there was any type of real medical care.”

“You’d... do that? Snuff them like midges with a snap of your fingers?”

“I don’t need to snap my fingers,” she grumbled.

No saddle to be had, Sainsbury climbed onto the stump, then straddled the massive horse. Mustang passed him the reins, and he set off at a trot.

She didn’t envy him the bouncing of his internal organs.

“What be your purpose here, lass?”

She spun toward a broad shouldered beast, wrapping a wide leather belt around the nine yards of green plaid that comprised his kilt. Blue eyes clouded, she surmised he’d missed the morning’s excitement due to an abundance of whiskey the previous night.

“Just... curious. I ha’ ne’er seen men gone off t’ war.”

Vice-like digits clasped her biceps. “I warrant a wee beauty like ye ha’ ne’er seen a man other than yer father or brother.”

He yanked her close and bent to assault her mouth with his, when lightning flashed and thunder cracked. He recoiled as a microburst of icy wind caught his sporran.

That’s when Mustang learned what Scots wear beneath their kilts.

IV

“Oy, Angus!”

Another straggler from the Scottish contingent hailed his friend, further disrupting the attempt at an amorous interlude.

“Off wi’ ye,” the aggressor dismissed Mustang.

An opportunity, nonetheless, to rectify her misdeed. “Storm’s comin’. Best get t’ church and make your peace.”

“Aye,” the second warrior, thinner and smaller, approached. “Where’s yer horse, man?”

Angus scanned the area. “I tethered him to the tree behind m’ tent, but he’s gone. One o’ those English bastards must ha’ stolen him.”

“Ach, ye eejit, there’s ne’er been an Englishman north o’ the line. Ye must ha’ not tied the reins, and he’s wandered int’ the forest.” A playful shove propelled the man forward. “Go on, find him, or we’ll ne’er be away b’ nightfall.”

Angus tramped past aging trees, leaving Mustang and his comrade alone.

“Who might ye be, bonnie lassie?”

“Storm’s comin’,” she repeated. “M’ father will be that worried...”

“Aye, ye are safe wi’ me...”

This spoken as he ran thick fingers tenderly along her arm.

Why did men only think about one thing? she wondered. “Ye’ll be wantin’ t’ get t’ church...”

“Church? ‘Tis nae Sunday.” His awkward foreplay persisted.

“Ye would nae want t’ die unshriven if the English were t’ catch ye on the road...”

“Those sods are far south, where they belong.”

A musket cocked and discharged; the Scot ducked an imaginary projectile.

“I see what ye mean!” he gasped, yanking her behind him.

“Where are ye...”

“There’s a wee cottage on the other side o’ that rise. We’ll be safe there.”

“Safe to do... what?”

“Ach, lassie. Ye cannae withhold your favors...”

“Ye would risk your very life for a wee dalliance?”

“I dinnae ken.”

“By sunset, the storm will ravage the countryside. See the gatherin’ clouds?”

“Ach, aye. Ye may be right. But, ten minutes...”

Lightning. Thunder.

He retracted his grip. “Away t’ your hearth, lass. May a good lad make an honest woman o’ ye.”

Finally! Mustang exhaled audibly, the field around her abandoned.

Adam Sainsbury hiked toward her mid-afternoon, left eye swollen and black, clothes muddied from a tussle.

“What happened to you?” she greeted, crossed-legged on the stump.

“An irate Scot collared me for stealing his horse and would’ve beat me to a pulp if his mates hadn’t pulled him off.”

She bit her lip, contrite. “Did you... pass along the message?”

“Aye. The chapel in Nairn was already overflowing with penitents, even before I came abreast of the laggards, so I was told.”

“Then, it’s time.”

“How will you distinguish between who survives and who dies?”

“It’s all in the details,” she expounded. “Those I revived to fight again will simply...”

“Aye, and those of the English forces who died at their hand?”

“Miraculously cured by their quack physicians.”

“So, all should be as it was before you... wreaked havoc.”

“Indeed.”

Except, when she arranged herself in a half-yoga position and closed her eyes, she viewed a much more familiar landscape with a single alteration.

She rested her face on scarred palms. “It’s still not right.”

“How so?”

“There’s a different president.”

“Meaning?”

“I have no idea.”

Sainsbury dropped beside her on the rough surface. “Could someone have died who shouldn’t have? Or someone lived who should have died?”

“I was very precise in my instructions, so that’s unlikely. The only variable...” She shuddered as the erstwhile caress of the randy Scotsman raised belated goosebumps on her flesh. “If any of those men made it home and... and...”

“Shagged his wife?”

She snorted, “Well put.”

The historian grasped her implication. “If she got pregnant and delivered a child never meant to be born...”

Mustang inhaled cautiously.

“Are you positive all has reverted to the norm?” asked her companion.

“More than a thousand futile deaths.”

He genuflected before her, a petitioner beseeching his god. “Then, please, get me the hell out of here!”

“Back to your classroom?”

“Aye.”

“Do you want me to heal your injuries first?”

Hazel orbs moistened. “You can do that?”

She tapped his cheek condescendingly. “Think about the last twenty-four hours, dude...”

“Ach, aye.” He rose. “Will I arrive minutes later, or hours?”

“You’ll never know you’ve been gone.”

Sainsbury bristled. “You’re saying I won’t remember... any of this?”

“Do you want to?” she tittered. “Who would you tell?”

“I... see your point.”

“Besides, you could use it against me on that bloody task force.”

“They... would nae believe me.” He indulged in a last visual inspection of the area. “There’s... another problem.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“The burial mounds.”

“What burial mounds?”

“The whole reason you’re here, I suppose. The Scottish dead were dumped into pits and covered with dirt...”

Mustang’s fists clenched. “And, there are no bodies and no English to dig the holes... Oh, hell! I wish I’d kept my mouth shut!”

Tremors beneath their feet preceded a gut-wrenching phenomenon. Like some eerie computer-generated graphics, corpses spiraled over their heads from all points of the compass. Moses parting the Red Sea paled in comparison to the trenches wrought by unseen shovels into which the deceased tumbled by the hundreds.

Sainsbury clutched Mustang in an unyielding embrace, on the premise of protecting her, while himself petrified.

She squeezed his arm reassuringly. “It’ll be over soon.”

“How can you watch?”

“It beats any horror movie I’ve ever seen.”

“Ach, you’re heartless.”

“I can’t afford to have a heart. I can’t afford to show emotion. You wouldn’t want to be around when I’m angry. If you think this is nuts, you should see the horrible things I do when I’m angry.”

He stared down at her. “What about...”

“Shagging?” she supplied. “No can do.”

“Never?”

“Not without extensive collateral damage.”

“Damn!”

“That’s why I prefer to be alone.”

“But, by your own admission...” His features softened. “You’re a natural magnet, attracting the desperate, the confused, the lost...”

“Bingo!”

“Ach, I feel sorry for you, even if you can... conjure delicious meals and travel through time.”

“At least, you can *feel*.”

Having not arrived in this mid-18th century venue via lightning bolt, Mustang wasn’t sure if they’d be transported to their original locations by that or some other method. She led Sainsbury into the middle of the field, as a precaution, and stepped apart from him.

“What’s this?” he muttered.

“We’re... going to different destinations, so I bid you good fortune and hope never to see you again.”

He closed the gap, cradling her fingers atop his. “May I offer *you* a bit of advice?”

“Sure.”

“Nurture your self-control. You have the capacity to destroy the planet on a whim, and that terrifies me.”

“I’ll... try.”

“Please. Try hard.”

“May I make a suggestion to you?” smirked Mustang.

“You may.”

“Not that you’ll remember what I say, but maybe your subconscious will... Ditch the task force. I suspect they’re up to no good, wanting to rope me into whatever scheme they’re devising to get a one-up on other countries...”

“You’re probably correct in that assessment... Mustang.” He bent over her hand and kissed it lightly. “Farewell. I wish you peace in your solitude.”

“Thanks.”

Adam Sainsbury’s physical form dissipated without so much as a puff of smoke.

A rather dull departure, in Mustang’s opinion.

Her lids shut; when she opened them, she sat in the cane-backed rocking chair of her own living room, no worse for the wear.

“You’ve had... quite the escapade,” drawled Erwin Rommel, assembling hand-carved pieces on the inlaid chess board.

“How long have I been away?”

“Not thirty seconds, but a lifetime for some.” He moved his queen’s pawn forward. “I’ve never seen history mauled in such careless fashion. You should be ashamed.”

She cocked her ear toward the ceiling. “The voices are gone from my noggin, so why should I be? Putting souls to rest is a mercy, isn’t it?”

“Many of my troops were left to rot where they lay; it’s a part of war.”

“War is an abomination. In any century, no matter the justification.”

“You... have the wherewithal to stop armed conflict around the globe. Why do you choose not to do so?”

“It’s not that I don’t choose to do it... I’m not aware of where such things are happening.”

“Then, subscribe to the paper, buy a television. Keep abreast of current events.”

“You *want* me to plunge into world affairs and... and...”

Rommel shook his close-cropped head. “Perhaps this has been a learning experience, after all. If you keep your nose out of other people’s business...”

“Hey, when those people bring their business to my doorstep...”

“Lock the deadbolt and throw away the key.”

She eased off the woven surface. “I may have been gone less than a minute, but I need a shower.”

Trudging along the corridor, Mustang glimpsed a figure in the kitchen, disoriented. Sainsbury examined stainless steel appliances with admiration and confusion.

“Oh, hell...” the Mistress of Boleskine croaked. “You should be in Glasgow...”

“Unless you deliberately waylaid me for your own nefarious purposes.”

She clucked her tongue. “More likely, you preferred to remain with *me*. You described me as a magnet for drifters, the troubled... What’s *your* trouble?”

“I’m... bored with academia. That’s why I agreed to consult on the task force. I need excitement in my life.”

“You’re still... young enough to switch careers. Find something else to do.”

“I have.”

“Well, then, what’s stopping you?”

“You.”

“Eh?”

He leaned against the granite counter, despondent. “I want to travel through time. I want to *see* history being made. But, I can’t do that without you.”

“You’re crazy. You honestly think we could pop in and out of places and I wouldn’t foul things up again? Or, is that what you really want? Me, roaming about, altering the outcomes of key situations?”

“We could... recreate the world according to the highest standards of behavior. Thousands of years of peace and prosperity...”

“At what cost? Where to start? When we were still apes, just beginning to walk upright? In Egypt? Greece? Rome?”

General Rommel appeared on the threshold. “My dear, I thought...”

Sainsbury’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God...”

The German scowled. “I’m sorry...”

“You weren’t lying about... about...” the historian collapsed on a metal dinette chair.

“How’d he get here?”

Mustang filled a tumbler with water from the kitchen tap and offered it to the uninvited guest. “I have no clue.”

“You mean, your power has gone rogue?”

“He... wanted to stay with me and, as we’ve seen periodically, if a person’s will is strong enough, nature can’t... override their wishes.”

She squatted beside Sainsbury. “Listen to me, and listen well. Anyone - *anyone*, you hear? - who gets close to me dies. Plain and simple. Dies. Whether on purpose, or by accident, they *die*. I’m going to send you to Glasgow and, from there, you’re on your own.”

“Please, no.” He grabbed both her hands. “I’d rather die than plod through life trying to teach students who’d rather be elsewhere.” His arms encircled her waist, his face resting on her neck. “Let me stay. I’ll do anything...”

Mustang winced at Rommel. “See?”

“Let me try.”

Crossing the tile, deft digits extricated Mustang from Sainsbury’s embrace. The tactician signaled her toward the door; she withdrew, but remained just beyond their view, eavesdropping.

“You are an educated man, obviously well-read and experienced in the ways of the world. In the midst of an otherwise ordered daily routine, you encounter a young woman of such beauty and purity, you are blinded to reality.”

“I...”

“Please, hear me out, mien herr. I know this, because it happened to me. During the war, my aide underwent an inexplicable transformation when that fraulein took possession of his body, thanks to a chance remark she made in a classroom sixty years in the future. I sensed her presence, though she never revealed it directly. Only after resuming her own life, when she came to Berlin, was I manifested as you see me, and I understood the truth. She is a beacon not only on this earthly plane, but across the universe and even alternate realms. As moths attracted to flames, though, those who gravitate toward her light are singed, or worse.”

“Then, I can’t... she won’t...”

“No.”

Sainsbury righted himself, clasping Rommel’s hand in gratitude. “Thank you, General.”

Both men simultaneously vanished.

Mustang proceeded to the bathroom, confident her companion to Culloden would forget the entire debacle.

She resolved - again - to monitor her thoughts more diligently, to avoid a repeat of this fiasco.