

The Mustang Chronicles:

Advocate Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

If Mustang Duryea were the type to sleep late on weekends, she would have been jarred from bed at 7:30 AM that Sunday by the persistent rapping on Boleskine House's steel front door.

As it was, the young woman stacked the last breakfast dishes in the rack before wiping her hands on a tea towel dangling from the utensil drawer. Her flannel shirt damp from errant spray off the sink's clogged nozzle, she plodded through the foyer and freed the heavy panel's dead bolt.

"Lady Elizabeth Neville?" queried a uniformed messenger on the stoop.

Mustang exhaled audibly. Most of her visitors were lost souls needing assistance - a situation of which she had long since tired. The powers transferred by her grandfather, scientist and occultist Jack Parsons, were more a nuisance than a boon, especially when she spoke on impulse and manifested the dead, or wreaked havoc on innocent bystanders. The stress of monitoring every action and utterance taxed her strength.

Which is why she chose to live in seclusion on the eastern shore of Scotland's Loch Ness.

The courier extended a parchment envelope toward Mustang, atop a clipboard requiring her signature. Tipping his military-style cap with a burr-laced, "Ha' a good day, ma'am," the man retreated along the winding gravel drive to where his delivery van idled beneath budding trees.

This left Mustang to stare at the calligraphy adorning yellowish paper. Who would be sending her a formal invitation to anything?

The locals were simple folk, on the whole. The Mistress of Boleskine opted to mask her true identity from them, to prevent any unsavory publicity. The fact America's FBI and the global Interpol periodically might express interest in her activities made her shudder, or was it the April breeze?

Trembling fingers unfastened red, crest-embossed sealing wax securing the envelope. Extracting the sheet within, she read with disdain, "Your attendance is required at Guthrie Manor this evening, 6:00 PM."

The signature sent a chill up her spine. What on earth could Lord Guthrie want? After the debacle involving Ian MacIntosh and the bully Angus Burke, supposed keeper of Guthrie's properties, it could be payment for damage she'd caused. At least four walls and half a dozen family portraits had been destroyed at the refurbished castle.

If his lordship was hoping she'd write a check for \$50,000, he'd be sorely disappointed. He'd been directly responsible for Burke's assault and kidnaping of

the gentle MacIntosh, with Mustang's demolition a result of the rescue effort. She would not pay for his failure to supervise insubordinate hirelings.

She deliberately sauntered beneath the columned portico in the same stained jeans, purple sweatshirt and torn sneakers she'd worn while cleaning six horse stalls that afternoon. Her tousled auburn tresses hung in a loose pony tail. Pietra, one of her roan mares, was tied to a bush edging neatly manicured lawns. A vintage Triumph motorcycle parked nearby didn't frighten the horse in the least.

"Our servants receive their visitors at the kitchen entrance," snarled a tail-coated butler who responded to her knock.

"I'm not visiting the servants," Mustang retorted. "I'm here at Lord Guthrie's invitation."

"And you are?"

At her name, the butler stiffened. "Forgive me, Your Ladyship. Please, come in and I'll announce you."

During her previous sojourn to Guthrie Manor, she'd climbed scaffolding propped against the north wing, then under renovation. She'd seen a small portion of the third level, but not the ornate finery of this high-ceilinged entryway and the green-carpeted central staircase leading to dual balconies. Her jaw dropped at such splendor, and clamped shut when a middle-aged man in shirt-sleeves and corduroy trousers breezed into the hall from what must've been the library. He hadn't shaved that day, she surmised, or a week previous, given the growth of grey-flecked whiskers on his angular face. More there than the half-inch of matted growth on his head.

She didn't recognize him, but he obviously knew her.

"Lady Elizabeth!" he greeted with a non-Scottish accent. Not a native, to be sure. "So grand to see you!"

Best to be honest. "I'm not certain why I'm here..."

"I wished the pleasure of your company."

"The invitation came from Lord..."

"I *am* Lord Guthrie," He chuckled at Mustang's puzzled visage. "You were expecting my uncle, no doubt. I'm startled you don't read the papers, or the obituary on the internet."

"I don't subscribe..." She gulped. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Don't be. He was careless and senile the past few years, and squandered much of the family fortune. Or, should I say, unscrupulous servants embezzled much of that fortune, unbeknownst to him."

"Angus Burke, for instance?"

“Indeed, but not as much as others my uncle mistakenly trusted.” The new Lord Guthrie sheepishly grinned. “I *am* being remiss in my hospitality, but I’ve just taken possession of the estate in the last week. Please, dinner is waiting.”

Suddenly, Mustang felt guilty about her appearance. “I’m... not dressed.”

“Neither am I. By the way, do you mind if I call you Elizabeth? I despise titles.”

“My... friends call me Mustang.”

“Odd.”

“I grew up on a horse ranch in the States before...”

“Ah, yes. My friends call me Hugh.”

He ushered her into a lavish dining room, where twenty guests could have sat comfortably around the linen-draped table. Rays of evening sunlight filtered through long, narrow windows combined with beeswax tapers to provide illumination. Pheasants, steamed vegetables, chilled green salad, fruit wedges, thick soup and bottles of wine waited on a teak sideboard.

Mustang couldn’t eat, however. She might understand if the elderly Lord Guthrie commanded her presence, even as a fellow land-owner in the district. For his heir - a stranger - to summon her made little sense, and aroused inherent suspicions.

“I have whiskey, if you prefer that to the selection of French vintages,” offered Hugh, noticing her untouched goblet.

“I... ate a big lunch,” she bluffed. Then, to soften the harshness of her refusal, she added, “Also, I’m not accustomed to such... palatial surroundings.”

Hugh smirked. “Nor am I, to be frank. I’m used to a cramped corner room in a Cambridge dorm.”

“You’re a student?”

“A professor, but we double as rectors in the halls. Keeping wild ones in line. I’ll be back there before end of term, once this place is sold.”

“Sold?” Mustang coughed.

“Indeed. It’s quite contemptible, these days, for feudal lords to flaunt their wealth over the less fortunate. Each of my tenants will have an opportunity to bid on their holdings, with the Manor House being auctioned to whoever can afford its maintenance.”

“What if there are no takers?”

“Then, we’ll donate it to some national trust - though none of the historic preservation organizations I’ve contacted really want the additional burden on their strapped finances.” He chewed a forkful of potatoes, then shrugged. “I was hoping you’d want the old place.”

Stunned, his guest blanched. "Why would I..."

"Here, your horses would enjoy roaming endless grassy hills. They, and you, deserve better than those few acres surrounding Boleskine House."

"Forty-seven is plenty."

"Balderdash. And, should you decide to remarry, consider what your prospective husband would think of this fine home as a dowry!"

Mustang tossed her napkin atop the empty china plate and rose. "No, thank you. Though I could raise the money in a matter of hours, I'd have no reason to spend even one night in a monstrosity like this."

Lightning flashed outside; instinctively, Mustang glanced at her scarred palms. Thunder rumbled, rattling the fixtures.

"Actually, you have a reason to spend the night now," joked Hugh. "You can't ride home in this weather."

"If my horse can tolerate the rain, so can I."

"The stable hands have undoubtedly moved her into a warm stall already."

"Next to where that sweet motorcycle is stored?"

"My pride and joy, that bike. Saved my first year's salary to make the purchase." He waved her back to the table. "Come, eat. You need but decide to have a pleasant evening, and it shall be so."

If he was being truthful, and had been a regular working stiff until he'd inherited his uncle's title, he might be worth knowing.

Fat droplets pounding against the windows, Mustang drank water with a selection of delicately spiced vegetables. Following the meal, the pair adjourned to a sitting room where a cozy fire blazed beneath an elegant oak mantle. Mustang curled up on a gold Louis XVI divan, declining Hugh's suggestion of sherry.

"You don't drink?" he mused.

"Rarely. Never really saw a need."

"Your visible tension would ease."

"Sorry, no," she countered.

"Don't you like to relax at the end of a hard day tending your stock?"

"Of course. I do so by reading a good book or playing chess."

Hugh eyed her skeptically. "My sources tell me you seldom have callers at Boleskine. Do you play chess on-line?"

"I don't own a computer."

"How quaint."

Mustang's cryptic smile evidently irritated her host, because he slammed the decanter onto the liquor cabinet so hard, it shattered in his hand. Streams of

red from deep cuts mingled with the fermented alcohol, and he staggered to a chair.

“Ring for the butler,” he instructed.

Mustang leapt up and scanned the chamber, uncertain how this signal was generated. She’d seen old movies where tapestry bell-pulls hung from the ceiling, but nothing like that caught her eye.

“On the mantle... there’s a switch.” His voice weakened rapidly, and his skin paled. He couldn’t be losing that much blood...

Impulsively, she seized his shoulders to hold him upright. “Don’t fade out on me, now,” she pleaded. “You’ll be all right.”

The butler had heard the crystal breaking, and appeared on the threshold, concerned. Seeing the new Lord in distress, he beckoned a maid and chauffeur to assist their injured master to a Rolls Royce limousine.

Thus, Mustang was left in a strangely silent Guthrie Manor, the storm’s violence persisting beyond freshly-painted French doors. Tempted to pour herself a tumbler of locally brewed malt whiskey, she set aside the bottle, still corked. The antique rotary telephone would prove more useful.

She dialed a number her brain had unwittingly retained. “Glenn?”

“Aye,” responded her neighbor with his rich burr.

“It’s... Elizabeth Neville.”

“Your Ladyship, ye finally had a phone installed!”

“No, Glenn. I’m at the manor.”

“Dinnae be kiddin’ me, now.”

“I’m not, I swear. The new occupant invited me for dinner.”

“Hugh Callum? That rascal wasted no time seeking out the most beautiful lass in the district.”

“You know him?”

“I know *of* him. Raised royal hell at Windsor one summer, playing polo with the Prince o’ Wales through the Queen Mother’s prize roses. Then, t’ be caught in bed wi’ the scullery maid...”

“Wasn’t he teaching at Cambridge until...”

“After his father disowned him, he had nae choice. Only inherited the title because the old Lord had no children, and his sister just the one.” A crackling on the line disrupted what Glenn MacDonough said next. All Mustang could distinguish was, “...and I’m surprised he’s staying at the Manor, given his history.”

“Why wouldn’t he stay?”

“The ghosts ha’ never liked that one.”

“Ghosts?” Mustang shuddered.
“Aye. When he visited as a wee bairn, they would scare him from his bed, leaving others in the castle t’ their peaceful rest. Rumor was, he’s the reincarnation o’ the first Lord Guthrie, who tortured and killed his vassals when they wouldn’t agree t’ a rise in their yearly tribute.”

The line went dead at that instant, and Mustang involuntarily dropped the handset, fear raising goosebumps on her flesh.

A softball-sized, translucent pink orb floated past her, pausing near the fireplace as if to warm itself.

“Oh, hell.”

II

The desire to clean spattered blood and shards of glass withered at the prospect of wandering the abandoned, gloomy Guthrie Manor in search of sponges and a bucket. Yet, Mustang ached to retreat as a series of glistening spheres joined the first - almost a family gathering for a quiet evening at home.

No hoax, this. The lights were not projected by any means the young woman could detect. Nor did fishing line dangle from hooks concealed in the rafters. The spectres paid no attention to her, and didn’t disturb the furniture or displays of fine artwork, like a poltergeist might.

Did the sole human in the room hear ethereal laughter after some moments?

If so, she’d missed the joke.

And routes of possible escape - the exit to the dwelling’s interior and the French doors - were blocked by larger, stationary globes, jet black in color.

“I’m not Hugh Callum,” declared Mustang. “I’m not scared, either.”
Under her breath, she muttered, “Not much, anyway.”

The guardians’ size increased.

“Don’t get feisty with me,” she warned.

The orbs hovered tentatively.

Mustang contemplated how to handle this bizarre encounter. Having healed injuries with her power - and accidentally resurrected corpses - she grasped the importance of issuing specific decrees, which the natural forces would obey to the letter. She could content herself she’d acquired a small degree of wisdom over ten years, not spouting nonsense like in the past, when an offhanded remark initiated a world of trouble.

Nonetheless, she licked her lips, anticipating disaster. “Starting with you,” she pointed at the pink orb, “and each in turn, you have five minutes to materialize and justify this intrusion.”

The process of hearing the stories would take over an hour, by their numbers. Mustang plopped onto the gold divan while a prim matron gowned in 16th century lace-trimmed, mauve silk adjusted to her temporary semi-solidity.

From this dowager aunt of the first Lord Guthrie, to a Chinese tinker whose ancestors traveled to Europe with Marco Polo, Mustang gathered an interesting array of facts about Hugh Callum’s forebears. Potentially, some of Angus Burke’s great-grandfathers were included in the tales - or men with similar temperaments and tactics. Those heartless overseers would roust delinquent tenants, even in the worst weather, after years of drought diminished their output of crops. Those who refused to vacate drafty shanties were killed outright.

Just as Burke tried with Ian MacIntosh.

Life for the tenants had been about survival then - as now. Life for the landowners had been about greed. They didn’t care about their fellow human beings’ struggles, only their own comfort and wealth. Pathetic, really, in Mustang’s estimation.

“They were laborers,” stated the second Lord Guthrie’s youngest son. “We weren’t required to provide shelter for them, but we did.”

That the conflicting opinions could not be contested, since each ghost stood alone in the room during their brief venture into corporeality, gave Mustang a chance to digest each recital as it was delivered, uninterrupted.

The nobility’s close-mindedness bewildered her. They had access to the written word and schooling, yet they refused to use this acquired knowledge to grasp the equality of humanity.

The same in the modern era, given wars waging around the globe.

The tinker, a seamstress and a farmer’s daughter - all who told of being murdered by Lord Guthrie’s brutes - had been peaceful, gentle souls, consigned to an eternity wandering the grounds because their life’s work remained unfinished. They would not rest until the first Lord Guthrie was justly punished, and their bodies properly buried in consecrated ground.

“Where are these remains?” Mustang inquired of the seamstress.

“Dismembered and abandoned in the forest.”

And not just days earlier, making it possible to recover them intact. No, who could guess what animal had smelled the rotting meat and dragged the bones to a burrow ages hence? Or, whether they had been left to decompose through the rainy season and been scattered for miles by melted snow from nearby mountains?

The Mistress of Boleskine sprawled on the divan as the last spectre vanished. Not her job, this. If Hugh wanted to sell this castle, as descendant of the offending tyrant, he would be responsible for making restitution to the dead.

Wrily, she chuckled. It might be worth sticking around to watch the fun.

She dozed near the dying fire through much of the night; Hugh Callum, right hand thickly bandaged and supported by a sling, didn't arrive at Guthrie Manor until 4:00 AM.

"Two shooting victims took precedence," he grumbled when Mustang regained consciousness.

She queried, "Shootings, around here?"

"Hunters caught in a cross-fire with their drunken friends."

"Stitches?"

"Them, who knows. I heard one had a slug in his ass. If you're asking about me, it took 37 stitches to close up the three deep gashes on my palm. The sawbones wasn't sure, but I may have muscle damage or a severed tendon in my thumb. That'll require surgery at some point..."

"Next time, don't get so upset..."

"It comes from not sleeping properly. No matter how comfortable the beds in this place, I've never gotten a good night's rest..."

"The ghosts don't let you."

Hugh ceased rubbing his sore appendage and glared at Mustang. "How do you know..."

"Glenn MacDonough told me. Besides, they paid me a visit in your absence," she snickered.

"They spoke to you?"

She nodded.

"If they've befriended you, perhaps you can..."

"I can't get rid of them, but you can."

"How?"

"By finding and burying their bones."

Hugh grimaced. "What bones?"

His guest described their ordeal.

"Fulfilling such requirements would be impossible!" he protested.

"I told them as much, but they won't negotiate."

"Why didn't they make these demands of my uncle?"

"I didn't ask."

Hugh sank on a scrolled armchair. His scruffy countenance radiated despondency. "Every time I set foot on the estate, those annoying ghouls follow

me along the halls. They make noises and keep me awake. Mother wanted to return here after Father died, to care for her brother, but I begged her to stay in York...”

“Since centuries of soil have most likely covered the bones, you could declare the forest some sort of nature preserve, so no one can disturb the ground. Then, have it blessed by a priest. That might satisfy their wandering souls.”

“That’s over 200 acres! Do you know how much that will reduce the selling price of this fortress?”

“How much is your peace of mind worth?”

“They won’t bother whoever buys the place...”

“Can you be so sure?” Mustang challenged. “And, if word gets around the place is haunted, no one will be willing to take the risk. It won’t hurt to try...”

“It’ll make me a laughing stock in the lake country!”

“Not if it works.”

“Can you guarantee it’ll work?”

Mustang squirmed on the divan. “No.”

“You’re the one who talks to them,” the current Lord Guthrie scoffed. “Ask them first, then I’ll consider it.”

Groping in his trouser pocket for a pill bottle, he lurched upward and strode toward the door. Two dark guardian orbs simultaneously converged upon the threshold.

“What the devil?” stormed Hugh. “Have they been listening all this time?”

The young woman admitted, “Hard to tell.”

Not difficult to discern the ghosts’ intent when the pink sphere and two others swirled around the sitting room and began nudging her.

“What do they want?” Hugh spat.

“Something I’m not exactly willing to provide at the moment.”

“Which means?”

Mustang rose, glancing at congealed raindrops on smudged panes, distorting a vibrant sunrise. “This is your problem. The rain has stopped. I’ll be going.”

Not only did Hugh Callum obstruct her path, so did the orbs.

“Look, Hugh,” she breathed through grit teeth. “You’re exhausted. The best thing for you would be to hit the hay. If you don’t think you’ll get any sleep here, come down to Boleskine and sack out in my guest room.”

“What about them?”

“They’ve waited a few hundred years. Another day or two won’t... kill them.”

Was it a menacing growl they both heard from the guardians?

“I promise,” declared Mustang. “Before the week is out, you’ll be at rest.”

The couple exited that ostentatious chamber unchallenged. The morning was pleasantly cool, with a heather-scented breeze rising from Loch Ness’ eastern shore. Pietra had been well fed in the stables and, as predicted, Hugh’s Triumph motorcycle occupied the next stall. Three fine thoroughbreds also whinnied greetings upon noticing the visitors.

Mustang grabbed her saddle from the tack room. Hugh did not follow suit. “What, you’re going to walk?” she puzzled.

“No, I’ll ride, but my own animal.” Ditching the sling in a water trough, he plucked an orange helmet off a wall hook before straddling the bike’s leather seat and retracting the kickstand with his boot heel. “Meet you down the hill.”

The 1000cc engine’s roar spooked the horses, and Mustang wasn’t the only one whose lungs rejected the dust stirred up by treaded tires. Coughing, she swung onto Pietra’s back and trotted into the sunlight.

She didn’t notice a purplish globe hovering near the corral, neatly tangling itself in the roan’s tail hairs.

As if wishing their comrade well, the other ethereal beings floated near windows on Guthrie Manor’s ground level, causing an eerie luminescence to radiate from the structure.

Mustang avoided the forest, even though the paths were well-worn from years of Scottish nobility riding the property. No sense in dishonoring the ghosts further, she reasoned.

Even the dormant fields might contain bones, given the acreage might’ve been cleared in subsequent centuries for farming.

She spurred Pietra to a gallop around the perimeter, using a service road favored by modern day tractors and, possibly, carriages or dog carts of old.

Hugh Callum leaned against his motorcycle, puffing a cigar, as Mustang arrived at Boleskine House. Securing her horse in the corral, she jerked a key ring from her jeans and strode past him.

“Fixed it up in grand style,” remarked the latest Lord Guthrie.

“I’ll live here ‘til I die, so I might as well be comfortable.”

“Someone so young shouldn’t make such plans. In ten years, you’ll regret the choice.”

She snorted, freeing the deadbolt and pushing the door inward. “I already have a lot of regrets. I don’t think coming back here will ever be one of them.”

“Coming back?” Hugh stood under the lintel, allowing his blue eyes to adjust to dimness within. “You’ve been here before?”

“My... grandfather lived here for many years. I... visited him once.”

“I recall seeing old Jock White when I was a child. Then, that fool musician bought the place. Turned it over to a caretaker, I’d heard...”

How to explain? Mustang mused. The FBI had arranged for Jack Parsons to be known as Jock White. That agency even faked his death in the early 1970s because he’d lived far beyond their expectations and raised suspicions for his frequent rituals on a hill beyond the main house. He moved into the Gate Lodge after an empty coffin was buried in a phony grave in Inverness and, once the guitarist’s interests shifted, reclaimed ownership of it for himself.

He’d maintained the tiny abode as his primary residence while the five-bedroom Georgian domicile fell into disuse.

By the time Mustang agreed to this exile, the Gate Lodge stood in ruins. She decided to concentrate her efforts - and funds amassed by periodic treks to international casinos - on restoring the mansion.

That included a study designed as impervious to law enforcement, should the FBI decide to resume its harassment of her.

Hugh didn’t seem interested in any details she might’ve offered. He poked his head into the living room, then the dining room, settling on the kitchen. His assessment of the refrigerator’s contents disgusted him.

“Not one of those vegetarians?” he accused.

“No. I eat plenty of meat and enjoy every bite.”

“No beer.” He sank on a wooden chair at the kitchen table.

“Won’t alcohol interfere with your pain medication?”

“The way my hand is throbbing, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep without something more...”

Mustang chided, “You shouldn’t have ridden the bike. All that vibration might’ve ripped your stitches.”

“Oh, don’t be such an old mother.” He raised the bandages. “No blood, see?”

Sympathetically, she raised her own palms. “Okay, okay. Would a drop of whiskey help?”

If he noticed her scars from multiple adventures riding lightning bolts, he said nothing. “As long as it’s not that cheap American stuff.”

A bottle of Jameson Special Reserve gained his approval. She filled a tumbler and he gulped the contents.

“Damn!” she exclaimed, awed.

“Never sip whiskey. It’s not... dignified.”

“I don’t. But I’ve never... chugged that much at once.”

“You’re a lightweight, that’s why.” He rose and yawned. “Now, where’s my bed?”

She guided him to the guest room, preparing the king-sized mattress with fresh sheets and a thick quilt. “I can loan you a pair of sweats, so you don’t have to sleep in your clothes...”

“No, thanks. I’ll be fine.”

She hadn’t yet departed before he flopped onto the bed, covering his head with a goose-down pillow.

Bemused, Mustang returned to the kitchen, where she halted in her tracks. The purplish orb had shrunk to fit inside the whiskey glass, and a prism effect on the walls flabbergasted her.

Could the entity be soaking up the last drops of liquor?

Apparently.

“All right,” commanded Mustang. “You have three minutes to account for these actions.”

It worked well, this setting time limits on spectral manifestations. She wished she’d realized as much years earlier, when she brought forth the likes of St. Francis of Assisi and Mark Twain from beyond the grave.

The Chinese tinker bowed low, and hiccupped.

His host chortled in spite of herself. If the resurrected Gandhi could relish a fine meal, couldn’t a simple tradesman seeking his eternal rest get intoxicated?

“You make promise to us,” he sputtered in broken English. Generations of his family living in Scotland, and they still couldn’t properly articulate...

But, then, to Mustang’s ears, the Scottish locals didn’t properly enunciate their words, either.

“Go on,” she urged.

“The Guthrie aunt say you best hope for us in many decades. She say I protect you from... from...”

His broad, wrinkled mien displayed an inability to translate the term.

“Protect me from harm?” hinted Mustang.

“Yes, but no.”

“Falling off my horse?”

“Oh, no. The stable boy know you have great affection for horses.”

“How would he know that?”

“Many years he at Guthrie Manor, with their race horses. I hear him tell cook he would saddle prize mare for you.”

She sighed. If he hadn't been sent to protect her from being thrown by Pietra, then why?

The answer presented itself in horrifying clarity, when the Oriental thrust his finger toward the corridor, and Mustang whirled to see a petrified Hugh Callum gripping the frame with every ounce of strength.

"I was awoken by voices..." he stammered, before slumping to the floor.

With a grunt, Mustang faced the tinker. "Get corporeal and give me a hand here."

Blood and sinew hoisted Lord Guthrie off the boards and carried him - at Mustang's insistence - into the living room. Laid on the green sofa, his feet dangled over the arm, shorter in length than he was in height.

"You may go," Mustang instructed the ghost.

He countered, "I stay. You make good on promise."

She could've slapped herself for her impulsiveness when, only moments before, she had congratulated herself on the wisdom of limiting a spirit's time in human form. Now, she was not only stuck reviving Hugh, but dealing with the source of his unconsciousness.

"Oh, hell."

III

Once again burdened with an uninvited guest, Mustang Duryea clenched her right fist and pressed it into her left hand. The tinker had mentioned protecting her - could she protect herself from him?

Perhaps. The kung fu she'd learned in Beijing during her world trip years earlier had stood her in good stead during other fiascos. If it came to forcing the ghost to comply with her wishes, could she prevail?

Probably not. Equal to her in height, he outweighed her by 70 pounds, minimum, and that muscle, considering his trade. Still, he might not expect her to attack using techniques from his ancestor's native land.

"Me, you need not fear," he murmured. "It is Lord Guthrie who threatens you."

He had indicated Hugh in the kitchen, just before the latter fainted.

"Why is he a threat to me?" she puzzled.

"No regard for life has he. Cares only for money."

Mustang countered, "That doesn't make him dangerous, just foolish."

"Very foolish, the Lord Guthrie of my day. He cause many to die."

The other ghosts' tales remained fresh in the young woman's memory. That man had, indeed, been a fool. If those haunting Hugh recognized in him similar traits, who was she to dispute their assessment?

"All right... Richard, wasn't it?"

"Richard Yang, yes. My honored father name me for the Lionheart king."

"What must we do, Richard?" she prodded.

"When he wakes, he must leave this house."

"He's in no condition..."

"Condition or not, wrath of many restless souls will descend if he does not make recompense for fathers' crimes. And upon you, if you harbor him, and because you make promise to fix."

If Hugh decided not to set aside the forest and fields of Guthrie Manor as a preserve, how else could these persistent spectres gain their final repose?

First things first, she determined, glancing at Lord Guthrie's bandaged appendage. Without the pain of his injuries, he might be more willing to listen...

Propped on the coffee table, she draped his right arm across her lap and unwrapped yards of gauze. The stitches were coated with dried blood, holding together jagged wounds. The natural course of healing would take weeks and, until then, each time he moved a calloused finger, he would remember the cause.

This time, she deliberated at length before opening her mouth. "Restore all muscles, tendons and nerves in this hand to their state 24 hours ago, dissolve the stitches, and mend the skin to where no scars show."

Richard's dark eyes widened as the deed was done. "If this you do, can you not save us?"

Mustang wearily raised her face. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but doesn't Hugh have to meet your terms, so you can be freed of your ties to Guthrie Manor? I can instruct the soil to give up the remnants of your bones, but that won't compensate for how you died."

"Rightly you speak. It must be Guthrie."

"Since we agree, you can leave my house. Go, tell the others where things stand. Hugh should sleep for a few hours, then we'll..."

"No, I shall not leave."

A stubborn child could be no more exasperating. Worse, rousing the elements would serve no purpose - wind would blow right through him, the ground not move Richard against his will.

Then, she would compel him with sheer physical effort, albeit bolstered slightly by a silent directive.

The tinker didn't anticipate the abrupt charge, which backed him from the living room into the foyer. He slammed against the wall and, when Mustang altered her course, scrambled to remain away from the front door.

His iron grip on her shoulders stalled Mustang's progress. She sank to her knees, feeling overpowering weight pressing upon her. Forearms unhindered, she seized Richard's legs and jerked, landing him on his backside.

He reared up, and she knew one blow would knock her cold. Wincing against impending pain, she reopened her eyes moments later to see Hugh Callum's intact hand restraining Richard's hooked strike.

In a fraction of a second, Lord Guthrie had the Chinaman in a head lock from which there would be no escape - in normal circumstances.

"Open the door!" Hugh cried.

Mustang did. Richard Yang was expelled; the deadbolt secured.

A futile move, except the spectre could not breach the barrier without resuming his intangible form.

And he couldn't take human shape again without Mustang's permission.

Still, she realized Richard would maintain a constant presence until she fulfilled her promise.

Hugh swatted at the purplish orb as if killing a fly.

"You must be hungry," his hostess intimated.

"Famished." Pausing to contemplate the lack of bandages, he flexed his fingers. "Was I dreaming?"

"If only."

He leveled blue eyes on Mustang. "You're upset. What's happened?"

The Mistress of Boleskine retreated to the living room and her cane-backed rocker. Hugh pursued her, towering above the chair like a sentinel.

"You can tell me," he urged.

"I... stuck my nose where it didn't belong," she groaned. "Again."

"You mean, me?"

"I should've left Guthrie Manor when you were rushed to the hospital."

Hugh stared at his unscarred palm. "It wasn't a dream."

"No, and if you ask any more questions, there'll be hell to pay." Mustang rose, bracing herself for the work ahead. "Something to eat, then down to business."

Dogging her steps to the kitchen, Hugh's interrogation persisted. "What do you mean, 'down to business'?"

"You've a lot of bones to dig up before those ghosts will vacate the premises, so you can sell your birthright."

“If you bought it, you could keep the ghosts. You wouldn’t have to worry about being alone...”

“Thanks, but no. That’s not the kind of company I’d enjoy.”

Pouring two glasses of orange juice, Mustang drew a carton of eggs from the refrigerator. “Boiled, or fried?”

“Poached, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Toast and sausage?”

Over her head, he yanked open the freezer. “Got any steak?”

The primary reason Mustang hated visitors: tending their needs. They could be volatile and capricious, whereas horses were content with food, shelter, regular exercise and love.

She set a skillet on the stove. “Help yourself. I need to check the barn.”

Escape! Some might’ve viewed it as running away. They might believe she’d fled her own problems after Jim Neville was shot; she knew differently. Problems always seemed to find her - even here near Loch Ness. Those wandering the property in search of Aleister Crowley lore didn’t bother her, but she dreaded the random tap on the door.

Like when the messenger had brought yesterday’s invitation to Guthrie Manor.

She should’ve torn up the envelope and never read the contents.

Sarge welcomed her by nuzzling her arm as she filled his bucket with oats. If not for Hugh and Richard, she would’ve saddled the sorrel gelding then and there, and ridden the packed trails of her 47 acres until dark.

Who knew how many days would pass before that plan would come to fruition? Hugh Callum wouldn’t willingly undertake the excavation of his grounds, which meant she’d have to supervise the endeavor and, possibly, provide unseen aid.

She estimated her mood would grow more foul by the hour.

No mistake there.

Hugh left a stack of pans, dishes and silverware in the sink. He, meanwhile, searched high and low for a television.

“The expense you went through to renovate, and you didn’t install a satellite receiver?” he grumbled.

“It wasn’t a priority.”

“Well, I need to see the stock reports. You really don’t own a computer?”

“Not even a phone.”

“Damn, woman! This is a *nightmare!*”

Within Mustang's head, the warning echoed: I mustn't get angry. I do horrible things when I'm angry. "If you don't like the accommodations, you can drive yourself home on that fancy crotch rocket you love so much."

"I think I will."

One down, one to go.

The fluttering sphere warmed itself near a blaze she built on the living room grate that evening. Shining dully, Richard might have been missing his friends. Toying with the chess set beside her rocker, Mustang briefly debated whether he knew the game... No.

"I'm not going anywhere," she remarked. "If you float back to Guthrie Manor, I'll be here for you to pester in the morning."

The intensity moderately increased.

"Tomorrow, we'll start in earnest."

Two down, and she could look forward to a decent night's sleep.

Except for ghost-inspired visions.

Which Hugh Callum - tucked beneath three blankets in an extravagant master bedroom - presumably shared.

The Triumph's distinct rumble stirred Mustang at dawn. Lord Guthrie might have endured extensive torture, so haggard did he appear in A-line undershirt, leather jacket, plaid pajama bottoms and scuffed boots.

"You've got to rid me of them," he begged, brushing past her before she could offer him coffee.

"The preserve is still the most viable option."

"The most expensive, you mean."

Mustang rationalized, "If the new owners dig up the bones themselves, the whole estate will be turned over to preservationists until overzealous archeologists excavate the site."

"They'd want their money refunded."

"Indeed."

Hugh ran agitated fingers through his scraggly, unkempt mop. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"Don't look at me," retorted the young woman.

"But, the scene was so vivid. You and I, standing on a hillock beside a pile of mangled planks, with the skeletons assembled and paying homage..."

"I know, I know." She led him into the kitchen, filled a mug with steaming Columbian brew. Presenting it to him, she ventured, "You're nobility. You should have contacts in the government. Couldn't your staff..."

Seating himself, Hugh admitted, "There *is* no staff. My uncle had no stomach for politics. He preferred hunting, fishing and women."

"While the tyrants in his employ terrorized innocent tenants."

"Eh?"

"Never mind."

"You're titled, yourself. Why don't you contact your people?"

"It's not..."

"Your husband's family disapproved of his union to an American, and cut you off after his death?"

"Nothing like that. I..." Mustang leaned against the counter. "Unless you personally make restitution for the crimes of your predecessors, the orbs will continue their nightly light show."

"I'll pay handsomely for the bones to be recovered and buried."

"Money is no substitute for sweat. According to your... great-great aunt, you have to get your own hands dirty."

"I don't understand how you can talk to them. Are you a medium?"

"No, I'm a small." Her attempt at humor failed, though her oversized flannel shirt looked quite comical.

"Marry me."

The statement so blunt and sudden, Mustang's knees almost buckled. "What?"

"It's the logical solution," explained Hugh. "As Lady Guthrie, you could negotiate with the ghosts and reach an equitable settlement on the family's behalf."

"And rescue you from financial ruin?"

"Your wealth is of no interest to me."

She could tell he was lying. "Does the prospect of a few blisters and spoiled manicure offend you so much?"

"I spent the last three summers on a construction crew," he exploded. "I've delivered newspapers, mopped floors and slaughtered cattle. Now I've inherited what's rightfully mine, I shouldn't have to do menial labor anymore."

"So, you'd marry a total stranger to solve your problems?"

"You're no stranger. You're just like me. You want the best of everything, with as little exertion as possible."

"Which is why I have a cook, a maid and a butler at my beck and call," snarled Mustang.

"You don't, because you harbor deep secrets which could cost you this sheltered life."

He had her, there. “You’d blackmail me into accepting your proposal?”

“No, my dear.” His cup drained, he carried it to the sink. Facing the window, he addressed her reflection. “The concept of love became a prerequisite for marriage only in recent human history. Even today, in some cultures, matches are still arranged by social class or for political advantage. We’d never have to see each other after the ceremony; the manor is large enough to ensure it, as a matter of fact.”

Mustang recoiled, glimpsing something in the glass when she turned toward him. A vague recollection crept from her brain’s deepest vault - of portraits in a long corridor, crashing to the floor as her anger flared. One in particular...

“Give me a lift to the manor, would you?” she implored. “It’s too cold to ride this morning.”

“It’ll be colder on the bike.”

“But faster.”

Hugh drew a mobile phone from inside his jacket. “Should I call the registrar?”

“No. There’s no need for a marriage license. I’ll... help you in any way I can.” Snatching her parka off the kitchen coat rack, she concluded, “You may have to dig the graves yourself, though, if that’ll satisfy them.”

“I’ve wielded many a shovel through the years, so I won’t object.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they departed Boleskine House. Somehow, the contact - even through insulated cloth - made her skin crawl.

IV

Immature blossoms passed in a blur on the jaunt to Guthrie Manor. Mustang’s mind was elsewhere, yearning to piece together the mystery borne of this spectral quagmire. She would be unable to accomplish it alone, she knew, and help would not come from the gangly man onto whose leather jacket she held with all her strength.

Hugh Callum drove the Triumph motorcycle like a lunatic, speeding through curves and skidding on gravel.

“You’re going to kill yourself someday,” she commented, dismounting beneath the castle’s portico.

He chuckled. “I laid down my other bike under a Manchester bus three years ago. Walked away with a couple scratches.”

“Next time, you might not be so lucky.”

“That’s what Mum said. Entreated me to trade this baby toward a more genteel Volvo or a Ford.”

“But you kept it.”

“There’s no feeling like the wind in your face on the open road...”

“And bugs in your teeth.”

“Not if you keep your mouth closed.”

The pair entered the arched doorway, held open by the pretentious butler.

“Your phone messages are on the library desk, Your Lordship,” he announced. “Two are quite urgent.”

Clearly, this servant did not find the leather jacket thrust into his hands suitable attire for a Scottish noble. Distaste crinkling his features, he shuffled through the entrance hall.

“Give me a tick to handle this business, and we can fetch whatever equipment needed from the stables,” stated Hugh.

Mustang was, frankly, glad to have him out of the way. By twos, she climbed the carpeted staircase to the second level, discovering a more modest flight leading to the third floor.

Well-preserved portraits of various Lord Guthries adorned the hall outside the master bedroom. Groping for a light switch, individual fixtures illuminated each frame, bearing a gold plaque detailing the name, dates of birth and death.

Inspecting the distinctive visages, Mustang detected a purplish glow mingling with the fluorescent beams. “Hello, Richard,” she greeted.

The orb brightened in acknowledgment.

“All right. You can have thirty minutes in the flesh.”

The Chinese tinker sucked air greedily once he assumed human form. “You were not kind yesterday,” he chided.

“I don’t need constant supervision.”

“The Guthrie aunt say trust no one. We wait too long...”

“Another few hours shouldn’t be much to ask.” As he stood beside her, an idea struck her. “What do you know about these men?”

“Only the first Lord Guthrie do I know.” Then, an afterthought. “And, his nephew.”

“His nephew?”

“He inherit title after uncle’s death. Did nothing but chase women and gamble.”

Richard indicated the paintings at the beginning of the long row. The initial occupant of Guthrie Manor had posed with a long powdered wig and

military uniform. His darkly handsome heir, coincidentally named Hugh, was rendered in a gold-trimmed frock coat, holding a wine glass.

“Did you haunt the manor during his time?” Mustang queried.

“Weakly. Only with years has our... strength - and anguish - increased.”

“Then, his management of the estate...”

“There are books,” volunteered Richard.

“What books?”

“Ledgers, diaries.”

Mustang’s interest piqued. “Where?”

“Secret room in Lord’s bedchamber.”

“Show me.”

Maids had already cleaned the spacious suite that morning, and sunlight warmed the chill air. Richard stomped across the Persian carpet to a closet, within which another door was visible behind a collection of outdated suits and shirts belonging to the previous generation.

Together, they pried open the panel, releasing a cloud of dust. It might have been decades since anyone inspected the room’s mouldering contents.

Hugh Callum located Mustang twenty minutes later, seated Indian-style on the mattress. Stacks of tooled-leather volumes left impressions in the quilt; the one on her lap commanded her undivided attention.

Richard, standing watch, poked her at Lord Guthrie’s approach.

“You researching the location of the bodies?” Hugh probed.

She replied flatly. “No. The misdeeds of your ancestors.”

“Look, Mustang, one of those calls was from a London socialite interested in buying the property. She and her husband are flying up this afternoon for a tour. We’ve got to get rid of the ghosts...”

“Hugh, why do you need the money so desperately?”

“I... it’s none of your business.”

“Could it be you have gambling debts to pay?”

“No, I...”

“Because the second Lord Guthrie did. That’s why he forged his uncle’s signature on bank drafts and execution orders. Those who knew of his philandering ways were silenced, permanently. Including the dowager aunt.”

“What? Such poppycock!”

“His name was Hugh, and he killed his uncle when the old man learned of his crimes. Gradual poisoning, to look like consumption...”

“You’re talking nonsense!”

“You’re in the same predicament, aren’t you? Been too often in Monte Carlo...”

Richard sided with Mustang in the dispute, and pinned Hugh’s arms behind him to prevent escape. His thirty minutes of tangibility expired, however, he vanished just as Mustang reached for the phone to summon police.

“Oh, hell!” she lamented.

That glint of evil she’d recognized in Boleskine’s kitchen window claimed the man’s blue eyes as he lunged toward her.

“Mother’s financial adviser had invested her wealth unwisely,” he confessed, pressing her against the wall with fingers at her throat. “On the verge of bankruptcy, I sacked him and sank the remaining funds in... high interest bonds. For two years, the return exceeded my expectations. Then, the bottom fell out. A massive Ponzi scheme. I had only one option to cover the taxes due...”

“Killing your uncle.”

“Not by preference. I resorted to contacting Uncle’s friends, pretending to solicit donations to a charitable foundation. Nearly had every cent we needed, when he uncovered the plot and threatened me with prosecution.”

Her windpipe constricting, Mustang had no alternative. Hugh’s conviction for one murder would result in the same sentence as a conviction for two.

And she didn’t feel like dying.

The electric charge which shocked Lord Guthrie blasted him into the corridor. Crumpled on the floor, the portrait of that other Hugh shook loose of its hook and crashed upon his head.

A purple orb flickered nearby.

“That wasn’t nice, Richard,” remonstrated Mustang. “But, neither was he.”

Hugh Callum was remanded into the custody of two Inverness constables just after noon. His tale of woe failed to elicit Mustang’s compassion. She’d dealt with murderers before - each tried to justify his actions, when the deeds were truly psychotic.

It did stun her when - shackled at the wrists and ankles - he boldly repeated his earlier proposal, “Marry me.”

“Why?” She’d heard of women who wed death-row inmates in the States, and thought them quite mad.

“Keep the estate in the family. Otherwise, the government will foreclose...”

“Given the history I read, I don’t think your family deserves it.”

Lowered onto the rear seat of a police car, Mustang watched Hugh being driven down the tree-lined lane, as the potential buyers cruised up in a rented BMW.

“Problem?” asked the Armani-clad man.

“Nothing that will affect the manor’s value,” proclaimed the butler from the top step. “Allow me to show you all the amenities.”

The door closed, leaving Mustang to hike the distance to Boleskine House. She didn’t mind; the spring day invigorated her.

She didn’t get far. A host of orbs assailed her as she neared the woods.

“Yes, yes. I haven’t forgotten you,” she responded to their swirling and blinking.

Their tormentor’s descendant subject to local justice, the spirits should be content with a suitable burial and blessing. That would mean concocting a story for the vicar of the church where Jack Parsons was interred. Any publicity about the old bones would bring archeologists and historic preservationists down upon the region - as had happened with the Druid stone circle from which she’d freed Brede Carver.

Then again, wouldn’t the Guthrie clan have its own mausoleum in the church yard? To have these victims placed there would be poetic justice, and convincing the minister to mumble a few prayers to “re-bless” the site might not be difficult.

Eighteen plain pine coffins were delivered on a truck to Guthrie Manor that Saturday. The butler, seeing himself as the sole authority on the estate, refused to sign the receipt. Mustang, tool belt slung around her skinny waist, intercepted the vehicle near the forest, and directed it to a muddy clearing.

She ended any argument with the household staff before it started, sealing them inside the structure for the project’s duration.

“It’s almost the lunch hour, ma’am,” hinted the florid assistant after the last box was unloaded.

“There’s a delightful restaurant in Dores,” she suggested. “Be back at 2:00, and you can haul these into town.”

In relative privacy, she urged nature to surrender the remains of those wrongfully murdered by the second Lord Guthrie’s subterfuge. A flurry of wind, minor quakes and rain assembled the skeletons in a neat row. Mustang repressed thoughts of the weather service’s reaction to these phenomena.

“Each of you,” she addressed the ghosts, “materialize long enough to stand beside your bones so I can properly identify them.”

Not an easy process to load shattered fragments and bits of cloth into each coffin, nail it closed and write the name of the opaque individual on the lid.

“Had I known these men would be such rogues,” declared the dowager aunt while Mustang transferred her femur into the unlined crate, “I would have burned the proclamation from the King bestowing this land upon our progeny, leaving us with a thirty acre farm and modest income. We would’ve been better off than having to live a lie these many years.”

“The lie of the first murder?” Mustang asked.

“The lie that the first Lord’s military service won a key battle and saved many lives. To my shame, he was a coward, and hid behind the infantry while thousands died.”

Richard Yang lingered until the last. His duties fulfilled, he managed a bashful grin. “You good woman, missy. Had I lived, marry someone like you, I would.”

Mustang laughed. She’d lost count of the men who considered her a potential wife, some too recent for her to completely quash her grief. She might never grasp how males couldn’t stomach an independent female.

“Rest well, Richard,” she responded. “And thanks.”

He bowed, and vanished.

The truckmen needed no extra assistance to reload the coffins on their flat-bed vehicle. They suspected Mustang was playing a prank, sending them to Inverness with boxes as empty as when they’d arrived.

She rode with them to the cemetery, ensuring the transfer into the Guthrie crypt was discreet and unwitnessed. A broken lock on the wrought-iron entry gate gave proof that vandals may have robbed the stone edifice over the years.

Placed respectfully on shelves between myriad Lords and their families, Mustang marveled at the money wasted on opulent caskets and jeweled trim. Regardless of the container, a body decomposed and left a shell of its former self...

Sunday would bring another challenge: dragging the vicar out to the churchyard after services to do his thing.

A thing which offended her sensibilities.

No loving god would permit creatures made in his image to wander the earth, unconsolated, for centuries after death. If heaven existed, as billions believed - or so her high school comparative religion class textbook claimed - then death brought with it peace and tranquility. If heaven existed, there would be no ghosts.

And she would not be able to draw the likes of Mahatma Gandhi or Francis of Assisi from the ethereal realms with a slip of the tongue.

Still, beliefs deemed truth by the mind could wield great power. Accounts of miracles and visions filled library and bookstore shelves. Pooled beliefs, like those of the 18 ghosts, could have prevented them from severing their earthly bonds for so long.

Lady Elizabeth Neville, *aka* Mustang Duryea, took a room at the posh Corriegarth Hotel near Inverness' city centre, rather than hire a taxi back to Boleskine. She treated herself to a sumptuous meal of steak, potatoes and fresh salad in the dining room, followed by a huge slice of chocolate layer cake. Flipping channels on the suite's television, she viewed bits of American re-runs and British comedies. A phone sat beside the double bed; she hadn't the faintest idea who to call.

When the police rang her, the noise nearly propelled her off the mattress.

"We need you at the station to make a statement, ma'am," said the constable.

"Nothing I say will help the case. You'll need to exhume the previous Lord Guthrie's body and do a toxicology test..."

"Your statement would be regarding a separate matter, as we've already taken the body from the tomb. There seems to have been a break-in. Family valuables have been stolen, and more than a dozen unauthorized caskets..."

Mustang choked and began coughing into the receiver.

"Are you unwell, ma'am?"

A few deep breaths soothed her nerves. "I'm... fine. I'd been snacking on some crisps, and swallowed wrong."

"Ah, well. According to Lord Guthrie, it is up to you to file charges against the trespassers at the graveyard."

"Did he say why?"

"Because your late husband was his favorite cousin."

Hugh Callum compounded his lies; where would it end? Or, maybe, he realized official interference would negate all she'd done to assist the ghosts.

"The... thefts in the mausoleum could've taken place months ago, or longer," she bluffed. "As for the new coffins, they are... temporary repositories for some of the older clan, until their original caskets are repaired and restored."

How she hated lies, even distortions of the facts!

"Very well, ma'am. We won't trouble you further. Have a pleasant evening."

"You, too."

Disconnected, Mustang shivered involuntarily. She'd just dodged a bullet, and wanted desperately to withdraw from the line of fire. As soon as the church

doors opened in the morning, she would drag the minister to the site with his book of prayers.

The thirty-ish, bespectacled cleric declined the request, until she stuffed a hundred pound note in his fist. Clad in cassock and surplice, his assembling congregants stood in awe of him floating through the churchyard without wings.

In reality, Mustang jerked him past the worn headstones with such urgency, his feet had little chance to touch the ground.

The Lord's Prayer, biblical passages about ashes and dust, resurrection and life, rounded out a five minute rite. A pleasant breeze swirled around the crypt following the last "Amen," signaling to Mustang the spirits' gratitude.

The minister gone, she sealed the entrance with a whispered edict. The gate would not open again - whether to legitimate or criminal visitors - until the last Lord Guthrie died.

Which, sadly, happened too soon. Mustang received the news with her bi-weekly delivery of groceries on an blustery May afternoon. Following Hugh's trial, prison inmates offended by his superior demeanor had clubbed him to death with a table leg.

For the umpteenth time, the Mistress of Boleskine vowed to shun contact with other human beings.

And ghosts.