

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Experimental Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

Amazing, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea mused as she trod the eastern shore of Loch Ness, how people continued to dump debris along Scotland’s highways. From soda cups to fast food wrappers, tires to broken appliances, overstuffed green garbage bags and loose cardboard... why did so few respect the environment?

The Mistress of Boleskine, during her years on the estate, had set aside time most Mondays after lunch - weather permitting - to perform her own version of trash clean-up along the B852, bordering the western edge of her property, from Dores to Foyers. Rather than hire a lorry to haul the rubbish to a landfill, she employed powers over nature bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons to break down the detritus into its core elements and restore them to the soil.

This temperate May afternoon, she supervised the process from a tree stump shielded by dense underbrush. An unusual wheezing and groaning shattered the peace and nearly deafened her; she wondered if her directive somehow met with resistance on the ethereal plane - like a machine that needed its gears oiled, or a car’s brakes rubbing bare metal.

The clamor soon faded, and her muscles relaxed.

“You’re very thorough.”

Mustang leapt from her perch, rotating a full 360 degrees to locate the source of the masculine voice.

Not that she minded tourists on the grounds during the day, but when someone had the effrontery to sneak up on her...

If not for the lightness of his complexion, the man would have readily blended with the landscape, clad in a tan leather duster, beneath which could be seen a tightly-tailored brown pin-striped suit, purple dress shirt open at the collar atop a grey t-shirt, and white high-top sneakers. Short brown hair stuck out at a strange angle above his forehead, his features narrow between longish sideburns.

“Sorry if I frightened you,” he declared, British accent blended with a hint of Scottish burr.

“You lost?”

“No.” He emerged from his concealment, studying the meticulous disintegration of roadside refuse. “Phenomenal achievement. Did you invent the technique?”

The woman could not let herself be drawn into another precarious situation by sharing her secret with a stranger. She deflected his question. “Who are you?”

“I’m the Doctor.”

“I didn’t send...”

“Not that kind of doctor.”

“University professor?”

“No.”

“Then, what...”

He flashed a smile, upper lip curling to display straight, white teeth. “I was... in the neighborhood, and recorded some anomalous energy readings. I wanted to be sure my instruments weren’t malfunctioning.”

Mustang’s jaw hardened. He must be a technician with the regional meteorological service. Both in the States before she left Montana, and here in Scotland, those desk jockeys tracked her activities and kept the authorities apprised...

“I can’t help you...”

From inside his suit jacket, he drew a pen-shaped instrument that emitted a bluish light at one end and a pulsing tone when he aimed it at the decomposing plastic ten meters distant.

“Now, wait just a minute...” she protested. “What is that thing?”

“A sonic screwdriver.”

He announced it as if she should understand the term; his flippancy annoyed her.

“Okay, let’s try this again,” she stated. “Why are you on my property?”

“Yours?” He glanced at dense foliage on all sides. “Jock White lives here.”

Oh, hell...

But, this guy was far too young to have known her grandfather, the occultist and scientist who’d co-founded the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California, and who’d been one of the pioneers of solid jet fuel development.

“How’d you know Jock?” she asked, using the moniker Parsons had been given after his death was faked in an explosion.

“Is he at home? He can vouch for me.”

“He... died about ten years ago.”

“So, you bought the place...”

“It’s a long story.”

That riveting smile. “I’ve got time.”

She could order him gone, but had the feeling he wouldn’t give up until he’d completed his tests.

Besides, the din of traffic increased as tour buses headed back to Inverness, laborers drove in the opposite direction after a long shift, and she could barely hear him.

“Where are you parked? I’ll show you the way...”

She meant a vehicle; he preceded her through a thicket to where a faded blue telephone-style booth topped with an emergency beacon nestled between the trees.

She approached warily. “What the hell is this?”

“My controls need to be recalibrated, I fear. I meant to land a half-kilometer east.”

“Land?” Mustang felt herself unable to breathe, absolutely petrified. Her surroundings responded to her emotional upheaval: a violent tremor unbalanced them both, a microburst of wind stripped branches of their leaves, tree trunks split in twain,

She recoiled, bumping against this uninvited guest, who wrapped his arm around her waist to prevent her collapse.

Her spine pressed against his sternum, she detected two distinct heartbeats penetrate his flesh and her Pink Floyd t-shirt. She wrenched from his grip, stumbled and fell against the police public call box, as back-lit bold lettering declared above the double door.

He reached for her; she waved him away. Clutching the metal handle affixed to what felt like wood, the panel swung inward and she tumbled across the threshold.

She pitched into a vast chamber, a hallucination generated by her confused mind. Not that she’d excelled at any type of science in high school - when she bothered to attend classes - but this... defied even the most basic laws of physics.

The door had slammed shut, catching a clump of her auburn ponytail in the gap. The man who called himself “The Doctor” freed her when he unlatched the deadbolt and slipped past her, a sheepish grin conveying apologies and befuddlement.

“I’ve... never seen that happen before,” he acknowledged, checking the locks. “The security protocols can’t be... overridden. Only my key...”

Mustang’s internal security protocols *had* been overridden, meaning her common sense evaporated amidst this turmoil. She didn’t even flick her index finger and the door popped open.

The Doctor’s turn to retreat. “What!” he stammered, glancing from the landscape beyond the lintel to her, seated awkwardly on metal grid flooring. “Who are you?”

She seized the railing and pulled herself upright. “It seems we have a lot to discuss. First, we’ve got to hide this... contraption where no one will find it by accident.”

“What do you suggest?” he countered, fiddling with the deadbolt.

“My barn.”

The Doctor migrated between split-trunk tree-like pillars - six in total, positioned as if marking the corners of the platform supporting a hexagonal console. A gigantic, transparent cylinders-within-cylinder configuration emerged from its midst like a growing plant, evidently operated by switches, buttons, levers and screens, salvaged, perhaps, from a war-ravaged tank. The curved interior wall surface bore circular disks embedded in raised hexagonal plates, set from floor to ceiling.

“Does this thing even work?” she grumbled, not really curious about the specific materials or their functions.

He activated a row of lights. “On average, fifty percent of the time.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“You said it needs to be moved.”

She backed toward the exit. “Not while I’m in it.”

Peremptorily clutching his sleeve, she yanked him outdoors. He closed the door, and jiggled the latch to ensure it had properly locked.

“Now, what?” he queried.

She placed her index finger on his lips for silence as the call box ascended from the brambles.

“No!” shouted the Doctor, brushing her digits aside and lunging forward. “I won’t be stranded...”

“Geez, dude,” she scolded. “Trust me.”

Brown orbs squinted at her. “That’s what I always say.”

“Okay, then. We agree to trust each other, until we find out what the hell is going on.”

She extended her hand but, when he made to clasp it, he noticed the scars on her palms. “You *are* the One!” he murmured, awed.

“Oh, hell...” she grunted dismissively.

Another moment’s hesitation before he gripped calloused digits, confirming their accord. He stood beside her as the box rose like an elevator to a height above the trees, then glided in the direction of Boleskine’s barn.

Mustang reversed course to where her mare, Pietra, was tethered, contentedly munching weeds. She entertained no doubts about hoisting this spindly

individual onto the saddle behind her; he would be lucky to weigh in at 150 pounds.

“By rights, the gentleman sits in front,” he stated.

She offered him her arm. “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Not... exactly.”

“Then, shut up and climb on!”

He obliged, with an impressive agility.

Setting off at a trot, his light hold on her shoulders affirmed a familiarity with horses, which soothed her own tension.

“You ride?” she asked.

“Never really have an opportunity, but I love it.”

“Good.”

“You have... more?”

“Six, including an Arabian.”

“You... haven’t told me your name.” His breath on her ear made her flesh tingle.

“Likewise.” Mustang slackened the reins as they neared a clearing beside the corral. “And, what’s this nonsense about ‘The One’?”

The Doctor slid off the roan’s haunches; Mustang dismounted before he could assist. The telephone booth levitating three meters above the gravel drive, she rolled back the barn’s wide metal door so the last stage of the transfer could be completed.

The horses didn’t approve of this invasion of their space, but she calmed them with an extra portion of oats, an apple and carrot apiece. The Doctor fed Wench, Sarge and the Arabian, lingering at the last stall to admire the magnificent animal.

“Do you like hot cocoa, coffee, or tea?” prodded Mustang as they tramped toward the Georgian-style mansion.

“Coffee, please.”

Unlocking a steel-reinforced door, she ushered him into the living room, where a carved chess set sat ready on an inlaid table.

“You play?” he beamed.

“As often as possible.”

Longing in his eyes touched her heart. This man - this creature? - lived in isolation, and ached for companionship, as did she on quiet nights.

“Make yourself at home.”

Rather than settle on the green sofa, he hung his coat on the foyer rack and followed her into the kitchen, where shiny, stainless steel appliances astonished him. “You’re a cook, too?”

She unhooked a cast-iron skillet from an overhead rack and placed it on the stove. “Plain meals, but nutritious, though I do confess, I love chocolate with an abiding passion.” A saucepan occupied a smaller burner, warming milk. She filled a coffee pot with water at the sink, then scooped aromatic grounds into the basket to percolate.

“What about Christmas?” wondered the Doctor.

She raised her eyes from stirring sugar and cocoa into the milk. “What about it?”

“All the food, the celebrations so customary for... humans.”

“Which you’re not.”

“Yup.” He applied a distinctive emphasis to the “p”.

“First, fair warning: if you instigate an alien invasion, you will die, and I won’t even need to open my mouth to accomplish the deed.”

A wry grin, that more resembled a frown, with his lips tightly pursed. “Earth’s defenses aren’t that sophisticated at this juncture.”

Mustang fetched a ceramic mug from the cupboard and topped it off with steaming liquid, as the coffee pot signaled the conclusion of its cycle. “Help yourself,” she advised.

They sat opposite each other at the metal kitchenette table, casual rivals.

“I repeat,” the Doctor contended, “this planet doesn’t have the capability...”

“If push comes to shove, they have me.”

He sipped the French roast blend and nodded his blessing on the taste. “Meaning?”

“Government entities, large and small, have used every method at their disposal - legal and illegal - to win me to their cause.”

“And...”

“While I will not take sides in international conflicts, should the threat come from... elsewhere...”

He stretched spindly legs beneath the table. “Good for you!”

“Then, you travel in peace?”

“I try. I... encounter others - of many species - who aren’t content with their lot, and want to invade other worlds, subjugate races they deem inferior, and what have you. I... endeavor to resolve the issues diplomatically.”

“But, you’ve had to take... stronger measures?”

“Occasionally.”

“Killing those who refuse to... to...” Mustang’s fists clenched and unclenched, “see reason?”

“Sadly, yup.”

“Me, too.”

She averted her face from his penetrating gaze.

His changed the subject. “So, tell me how you spend Christmas? Feasting, revelry, presents under the tree?”

She drained her mug and carried it to the marble counter, staring out the window. “I... haven’t celebrated Christmas in years, and only once in this house.”

“So, if I show up on that holiday, you wouldn’t insist I join you for turkey and all the trimmings?”

“A peanut butter sandwich, maybe.”

They laughed together, stress alleviated. The Doctor deposited his mug beside hers and chucked her shoulder. “White gets the first move.”

## II

Analytical, this one, Mustang determined. Even when engaging German General Erwin Rommel in play, she’d not noticed such strategy as this Doctor devised.

“We could add to the fun with Truth or Dare Chess,” she proposed, removing his queen’s bishop from among the squares.

He didn’t shift his gaze from the board. “What’s that?”

“Each time an opponent’s piece is taken, we get to ask a question. If no answer is forthcoming, a suitably embarrassing dare is proposed...”

“Sounds amusing.”

“And informative.”

“Go ahead.”

“You mentioned visiting Jock White here. How, when, and why?”

He retorted, “That’s three questions, actually.”

“One now, and the others later.”

“If you think you can take more of my pieces.”

“Oh, don’t worry your head about that,” she taunted.

“Very well.” He slid his rook’s pawn forward. “On your calendar, the last time would have been 1982. Sometimes I’d just drop in to check if anything... extraordinary has transpired.”

“What did you think of him?” She flushed at this overt curiosity. “Sorry.”

When he smiled, she spied subtle dimples. “He’d been a scientist of note in his prime, and we discussed his theories and experiments. His interest in what might be called ‘dark magick’ distracted him from more practical explorations of the universe...”

“You know that aspect of his story?”

“He told me much of it.”

“The Moonchild?”

A curt nod.

“He was... my grandfather.”

The Doctor’s fingers flinched above his king’s knight. “That’s how you come by this... ability to obliterate your enemies?”

“Purely by chance.”

“Then, you *are* the One.”

“What does that... imply?”

He replaced her pawn with his queen. “That being which has the potential to bring universal peace, or total annihilation.”

“What...”

He wagged a playful, thin finger at her. “Ah, my turn!”

She bowed her chin humbly. “Go ahead.”

“What’s your name?”

“I have many.”

“That’s to be expected,” he remarked.

She listed her legal name, her pseudonym in exile at Boleskine - Lady Elizabeth Neville - and her nickname.

“Mustang?” he chortled.

“The horses. I’ve always been... a wild one.”

“Ah!”

She maneuvered her rook in line with the black king. “Check.”

“Clever girl. Very clever.”

“You travel through time and space?” she resumed the game.

“Yup.”

“Alone?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“By choice.”

Mustang could respect this response, but remained unsatisfied. “Isn’t it hazardous, not having anyone to... to...”

The Doctor glowered at her.

“What if you’re hurt, or abandoned when that... contraption...”

“It’s called a TARDIS.”

“What if it craps out on you on some desolate world inhabited by carnivorous centipedes?”

“You have quite a vivid imagination.”

“I used to watch old science fiction movies.”

“Reading is more educational.”

“Depends on the book.”

“Fine. I used to have a companion. The emotional attachments that developed... made it difficult...”

“They fell in love with you and cramped your style?” she joked.

“The failure was in me. I got to the point where I didn’t want to leave them, even when it was for their own safety, or so they could get on with their own lives, start their own families...”

Mustang twirled her queen absently. “Then, you’ve no one...”

“No.” He shifted his king behind the last remaining pawn. “Nor do you.”

“True.”

“You could, though, if you opted...”

Her auburn tresses’ vehement shaking denied this assertion.

“Whatever fears...”

“Not fears. Facts.”

“I... don’t believe you.”

“So be it.” Her queen pinned the Doctor in checkmate. “As winner, I have the final call.”

“Very well. Proceed.”

“I dare you to kiss me.”

The Doctor bristled. “I... don’t... I won’t allow myself...”

“Any scientist worth his salt will attest that all theories require proof.”

“Indeed.”

“Then, I am about to present irrefutable proof why I can’t let my guard down when it comes to... relationships, especially those of an intimate nature.”

“As you wish.”

He rose and opened his arms to embrace her. Instead, she jerked him by the lapels from the living room, through the foyer - tossing him the duster - and into the clear, heather-scented night.

“Why the... dramatics?” he objected, gravel from the drive crunching beneath his sneakers. “You need a particular setting?”

“I don’t want the house to implode.”

The Doctor halted in his tracks. "That's... absurd."

"No scientist makes that claim before conducting his experiments."

She tugged him to the hillock, where Jack Parsons' former altar - a weather-beaten picnic table - lay in ruins.

This sight intrigued him. "What..."

"Lightning."

"A storm?"

"A command."

"Explain," he pleaded.

She raised her palms, the scars a blur in the dimness. "It's how *I* travel."

His sonic screwdriver illuminating the skin, he examined mangled flesh - after placing a pair of plastic-framed reading glasses on his slender nose. "The current... directly..."

"Yup." She mimicked his inflection so accurately, they both snickered, though Mustang detected a tear streaming along his left cheek.

"I can't imagine the torment... and you, being so young..."

"Why? How old are you?"

He divulged, "Over nine hundred."

"Oh, hell..."

Mustang shivered in the chill breeze; the Doctor gallantly removed his duster and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thanks."

His hands slipped inside the leather and rubbed her arms so the friction would warm her. She spun into him and planted her lips on his, explosions of epic proportions detonating around them.

Cannon fire on a battlefield, with the associated impact tremors, flying shrapnel, smoke clouds and collateral damage - which he'd witnessed on a myriad of planets - were a lark compared to the inexplicable downpour, hail, thunder, tornado-grade winds and chasms that opened along the incline.

He held fast to her, uncertain what would occur if he relinquished his grip.

A terrifying 30 seconds, seeming an eternity.

Sudden silence jolted him back to reality - as if he'd been fleetingly sucked in and out of an alternate dimension like a yo-yo. Mustang's soaked head rested against his ribs; she muttered, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Cupping her chin, he raised her face level to his own. "I've... never... experienced anything like that..." He used a handkerchief, itself drenched, to wipe droplets from her cheeks. "Thank you!"

"Now, you see?" she croaked.

“You are definitively the One.”

His hair matted, suit clinging to his bony frame, she cringed in shame at giving sway to yet another whim. For once, she hadn't allowed some rank opportunist - who sought her power for his own ends - to take advantage of her loneliness. This Doctor could be her equal...

Recovering his composure, he bent his arm toward her; she slid her hand through the crook sheerly from exhaustion. They strolled through mud and rubble to the dwelling, shoes squishing.

“So, it wasn't merely... an illusion sparked by our... excitement?” he posed.

“No, the wreckage is tangible. I could... restore the grounds right now, but I'm too tired.”

“I understand why.” His sneaker's laces snagged beneath an exposed root, he hopped awkwardly to loose them. “Have you... done this before?”

“And far worse.”

“What!” Not a question, but a declaration of sheer bewilderment.

Mustang led the Doctor into the guest room, presenting a thick terry robe and towels.

“I'll fix up your suit, then you can go,” she lamented.

“Go?” he echoed. “But, there's so much to do!”

“You have your scientific proof, and I sense you're the kind who respects the wishes of the species you've met, as long as they don't pose a danger to those you're protecting.”

“Correct.”

“Then, once you've had a decent meal, you can leave.”

“Come with me, Mustang,” he gushed. “We can travel the universe. I can show you wonders you'd never dreamed existed.”

The mere idea initiated a bizarre chain reaction. Within seconds, uncontrollable trembling wracked her frame; she cackled hysterically and crashed to her knees. The Doctor held her, rocking her as he expounded quietly on the mysteries of life beyond Earth's confines.

A quarter hour elapsed before she regained a semblance of self-control, a process exacerbated by her recollections of St. Francis of Assisi, Mohandas Gandhi and other spectral visitors scolding her for disregarding the consequences of her actions.

The pair sat on the floor, the braided area rug not absorbing moisture dripping from their clothes - but it was better than ruining the bed, the Doctor rationalized.

Finally, Mustang stroked his smooth cheek, grateful for his patience.

“I take it, your answer is no,” he summarized.

“God, I wish I could say yes.” She commandeered a towel. “Who would care, really, if I vanished? The FBI would throw a fit and a few agents would be reassigned to desk jobs, or terminated outright; the CIA would hustle to realign their international network; Interpol would presume their database software had been corrupted by a computer virus. The Russians and the Chinese... oh, hell, what a political mess that would be!”

“Everyone *does* want you, don’t they?”

Mustang smirked, lifting herself off the boards. “You’ve heard the saying, ‘It’s nice to be wanted,’ eh? Well, not this way.”

As she withdrew, elegant fingers restrained her. “I... want you, Mustang. We can bring peace to worlds who’ve known only war or oppression...”

“Doc, those who’ve... crossed my path are seldom the better for it. They could recite, chapter and verse, how when I get angry - not if, mind you - I do horrible things. I’ve been known to adopt the roles of judge, jury and executioner, which would not be... conducive to the task you’ve given yourself.” She tried to shrug him off, to no avail.

“We could work in tandem, balancing each other’s strengths and weaknesses.”

“Weaknesses,” she repeated. “What are your weaknesses?”

His hand retracted. “Right now, quite a substantial one.”

“And, in the clinches - if my life was at risk - could you make an objective decision to save millions of the victimized over my silly ass?”

She saw his Adam’s apple bob.

“Same here.” She felt like an idiot. “If I permitted myself to... well... anyone - anyone, you hear? - noble or vile, good or bad, who harmed you would be reduced to molecules and scattered among the stars.”

For a prolonged moment, the Doctor stood utterly still, contemplating her. “The women who’ve been my... companions... have mostly hidden their emotions, afraid they’d spoil our friendship. No one has ever made such a bold and uncoerced proclamation of devotion to my face.” He made a pretense of wiping his brow. “I’ll... never forget it, and be eternally grateful you honored me in this fashion.”

Mustang closed the door as she departed, rivulets streaming down her nose.

“Oh, hell...”

Fried chicken, buttered noodles and mixed salad might not seem fare worthy of an extraterrestrial visitor, in Mustang’s estimation, but it served to stave

off hunger. The Doctor, leaning against the counter, observed the preparations, that motionless stance and somber mien exuding more affection than the most poetic words.

Seated at table, the pair ate quietly, except when Mustang's curiosity bested her.

"What is your... species called?" she finally asked.

"We are Time Lords."

"With two hearts?"

"Yup."

"From what planet?"

"Gallifrey."

"Which is where on an astronomical chart?"

"It's not."

"Why?"

The Doctor chuckled. "My kind have not always existed peacefully. In the final days of the last war, a decision was made: the planet and its inhabitants were frozen in one moment of time."

"Invisible?"

He licked his lips at the taste of chocolate pudding.

"Wow. I'm sorry."

The next spoonful hovered near his mouth. Brown eyes widened as he gazed out the window above the sink. A spectrum of lights illuminated the horizon, the whirring of propulsion systems capable of interstellar flight drowned out bird song and horses neighing their irritation in the barn.

"What's that?" Mustang speculated, shifting on her chair.

He recited, "The indirect result of a singularly unique confluence."

"In English, please?"

"They've found us."

"Who?"

He scraped remnants of delicious sweetness from the bowl, and dabbed his lips with a paper napkin. "The Judoon."

"What in hell are Judoon?"

"A galactic police force, known for their very literal interpretation of the law."

"And, why would we get their attention?"

He clutched her hand and yanked her out the kitchen door. "They... tend to randomly track my whereabouts, because I've been known to... bend the law now and again. I've always managed to stay one step ahead of them and avoid prison. If

their ship was already in this sector, your... display earlier must have triggered their sensors, and they put two and two together..."

"Oh, hell..."

### III

Mustang and the Doctor sprinted through the gloom to the barn, scrambled over the tack room window sill, and made their escape in the TARDIS just as the Judoon craft dipped below trees to the north.

Initially, the vibration of the TARDIS made Mustang queasy, with sparks flying from the console and spliced wiring petrifying her. The whole scenario a nightmare, she couldn't help but guffaw, "I'm traveling through space in a bathrobe!"

The Doctor assessed images scrolling on two digital screens, neither comforting, from what his passenger could determine. "What!" he exclaimed, then again, louder, and a third time moments later.

Mustang eased her grip on the tube-like railing, breathing steadily to subdue the nausea. "Problem?"

"Give me a hand over here, will you?"

"Sure."

An abrupt patch of turbulence knocked her sideways, and she collided with him as he fidgeted with a lever that didn't seem to perform its function. He caught her by the waist before she slammed into a bank of switches.

A burst of sparks inches from her ear nearly blinded her.

"Oh, hell!"

"Can you repair this?" pleaded the Doctor.

"I have no clue what's wrong with it!"

"Right now, the shield modulation is out of sync, meaning the Judoons can fix their weapons on the fluctuations..."

"Not good?"

He parroted, "Not good."

A series of clicks, pops and whines preceded dead calm.

Mustang never moved a muscle.

"The power of your mind, my dear..." marveled the Doctor, kissing her on the temple before resuming his calculations.

"Where... are we?"

"Hiding behind Jupiter."

"And, where are we going?"

“No idea.”

“What about the Judoons?” she wondered. “How do we defend ourselves against them?”

“They’re only doing their job. They’re just a... little overzealous.”

“If we’re safe for a bit, what about some clothes?”

“Good idea.” He spun a dial clockwise.

“What’s that?”

“Auto-pilot.”

“Can you be sure it’ll hold us on course?”

“It hasn’t glitched in... um, six months.”

She clenched her teeth. “Reassuring.”

Their fingers entwined, he ushered her through a door into an even larger room.

“This... defies...” she remarked, swiping toward the domed ceiling.

“You mean, the TARDIS being larger on the inside?”

“Yup.”

“Technical or simplified?” He shuffled into an oversized walk-in closet that would make any clothes horse envious.

“Basic.”

“You understand the concept of multiple dimensions?”

“Sort of.”

“The exterior of the TARDIS - the cabinet - exists in one dimension but, as you enter, you cross into a different dimension.”

Mustang deliberated, then smiled. “Cool.”

He left her to select an outfit.

“What if I take a wrong turn on my way back?” she yelled after him.

“Just remember: a left, two rights, and a left.”

She watched him turn right and descend a flight of stairs, realizing that logic - as she knew it - had little to do with this realm.

And, she wasn’t going to try to figure it out.

An actor could play any role in Shakespeare with the selection before her, and she indulged herself by plucking an oversized pirate shirt off a hanger, adding leggings and boots. A mirror tucked behind a box of hats confirmed she looked ludicrous, but she didn’t care.

She’d probably wake up when the alarm blared at 6:00 AM, the debacle an obscure dream.

The Doctor had raided his private collection, she assumed, once more wearing a brown pin-striped suit, now with a light blue shirt, black patterned tie

and the high-top sneakers. When she approached the console, he broke into a huge smile.

“Avast there, matey!” he hailed.

“Everything okay?”

“Brilliant.”

“You... don’t seem to have much in the way of furniture,” she noted.

“The TARDIS definitely wasn’t designed for... human comfort.”

“Don’t you... sleep?”

“Not usually. Time Lords don’t need sleep.”

“You don’t eat, either?”

“It’s not required, but I did enjoy that pudding you served for dessert.” He licked his lips anew. “That’s a different version of pudding than Brits eat... and, in some ways, better.”

“It’s an American thing.”

He extended his left arm, and she inched beside him, the screen showing the emptiness of space. “How’d you come to be living in Scotland as pretend nobility?”

She launched into the narrative of her troubled youth: being sent to live with her grandmother in Massachusetts, that elder’s death, and her journey to seek out Jack Parsons. She felt him stiffen when she related how she’d killed her grandfather during a ritual of his own devising.

“Assisted suicide,” he stated flatly.

“Pretty much, though it haunts me to this day.”

“Some of my... deeds haunt me, too.” He exhaled slowly. “Through that door, three rights and up two flights, there’s a library with a couch that’s not terribly lumpy. You should be able to rest there.”

“What about you?”

“It’ll be awhile before we reach our destination.”

“Which is?”

“Halcyon, a gorgeous place to regroup before I take you home.”

“Home? We’re just getting started!”

The Doctor scrutinized her countenance. “But, you said...”

“I... may have been mistaken. This may be the solution to my problems...”

A German-accented bass reverberated around the chamber. “Can you be positive?”

“What!” the Doctor barked. “What!”

A reedy tenor vibrated the wall panels. “Wherever you go, Mustang-ji, you take yourself with you.”

“What!” repeated the Doctor.

She patted his hand. “A couple of my... mistakes.”

“Mistakes?”

“Inadvertently manifested from their graves.”

“Who?”

“General Erwin Rommel of the German Afrika Corps, and Mahatma Gandhi.”

“You... *know* Gandhi?”

“Yup.”

“We could have used him at the peace negotiations when the Cybermen tried to invade Earth.” He checked settings on the nearest panel. “But, how are they speaking to you now?”

“They... shadow me, kind of like the Judoons pester you.”

“To remind you of your failings?”

“My lack of self-control.”

The Doctor squeezed her fingers. “That must be tough but, they’re right, you know.”

“I know. They are the conscience I ignore when impulsiveness gets the better of me. Then, they’re the guilt that forces me to rectify the mess.”

He swiveled her toward him, grasping her forearms. “Am I an impulse that guilt compels you to rectify?”

“I could ask the same of you,” she countered.

“You mean, do I regret bringing you along...”

“Yup.”

“Not at all, not at all. I’m supremely glad you’re here.”

She grinned wistfully. “And, yet, I hear a tinge of doubt.” She glanced from his doleful brown eyes to the screens, blipping at periodic intervals. “What would the Judoons have done to me if you’d left me at Boleskine?”

“Nothing. No treaty is in place giving them jurisdiction over humans.”

“What would they have done to *you*?”

“I would have been taken into custody, tried before an intergalactic tribunal, and sentenced to an extended term at hard labor on any of a dozen penal colonies.”

“Oh, hell...”

“I couldn’t leave you. If UNIT or Torchwood got hold of you...”

“Who? Or, what?”

“Agencies that deal with alien incursions.”

Mustang threw her head back and laughed. “Just what I need: more government flunkies hounding me!” Then, sobering: “We’re both in the same boat, Doc. We can’t... blink an eye without pissing off the powers that be.”

“If we find a remote planet and live off the radar, as they say...”

“God, how I wish that was an option!”

“There are countless planets...”

“To be explored, for sure. Could you give that up for... some dull routine?”

“Valid point.”

“How do Time Lords occupy their days, anyway?”

The Doctor found her naivete humorous. “No differently than other species: select a consort, raise a family...”

“You mean, kids?”

He nodded, spikes of brown hair immobile.

“Picture this: me, in labor, giving birth. With every push, decimating a wing of the hospital, and the personnel therein...”

That one sentence dispelled any fantasies he might have nurtured about an ideal union.

Concluding the deliberations.

“I’ll... take you home,” he pledged, focusing on the controls.

Mustang rotated his chin toward her. “It’s not that I don’t want the same joys most couples crave. If I can’t even kiss someone without devastating the landscape for five miles in every direction, there’s no way...”

“It would be different in space.”

“You think so?”

“There are millions of kilometers between planets, light years between galaxies. At that range...”

A giggling at the base of her neck sparked hope in her soul. “I’d hate to take the risk without... scientific verification.”

The Doctor switched on the auto-pilot, escorting her to a vacant alcove in the depths of the TARDIS and sealing the door. He loosened his tie as she ran to his arms.

They defied gravity in those moments, with no adverse effects to themselves or the ship. They lay side-by-side on a moth-eaten picnic blanket scavenged from a disused cupboard, oddly warm in the afterglow, discussing their future, when a shrill alert roused them to action.

Dressing frantically, they raced to the control center, the screen cluttered with an assortment of alien craft surrounding the TARDIS, weapon systems targeted.

“What!” the Doctor spat. “What!”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang slumped against the railing. “What do they want?”

With a mortified scowl, he professed, “Maybe our... experiment had repercussions beyond the TARDIS.”

“How so?”

“Elevated energy output could have translated to their instruments as some advanced form of technology.”

An artificially translated voice boomed through a speaker embedded among the components. “Doctor, you are ordered to stand down and surrender.”

“On what charge?” he responded.

“Violation of interplanetary accords forbidding proliferation of offensive armament.”

“I’ve committed no such infraction.”

“Then, what just rendered every system - including life support - inoperative on our ships?”

“Oh, hell...” grumbled Mustang, blushing.

The Doctor whispered, “Can you reverse the malfunction?”

“Do I *want* to?” she sniffed. “These guys sound like a bunch of sanctimonious...”

“There are, maybe, five thousand beings on those crafts. Innocent of any wrongdoing...”

“You have one earth minute, Doctor,” came the warning.

Mustang blocked her companion’s access to the controls. “One question.”

“What?”

“Ask them how far away they were when... the outage occurred.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, please!” begged Mustang.

The Doctor complied with her request. The distances ranged from 10,000 kilometers to six light years.

Mustang collapsed on the metal grid.

“Thirty seconds, Doctor.”

Trembling hands raised her to her feet. “What is it?”

She fought the frenzied giggles, her face buried in his chest. “I never would have suspected...”

Kissing her tousled auburn tresses, the Doctor joined briefly in the merriment. No experiment had ever failed so pleurably.

The nearest ship emitted a plasma bolt...

“Oh, hell...”

## IV

In certain predicaments, Mustang wished fulfillment of her commands involved elaborate gestures, a twitch of her nose - like in the old television series *Bewitched* - or the wave of a wand, as written in the *Harry Potter* novels.

Especially with the pirate shirt's flowing sleeves.

What a show that would be! she mused.

Not so, however, and no time to choreograph such gyrations.

The beam disintegrated well before it contacted the TARDIS, and mystified chatter on the communications channels caused her to bite her lip, drawing blood.

The Doctor lightly punched her arm. "Get on with it, Mustang."

"But, I'll never have another chance..."

"They're running out of air..."

She acquiesced, succumbing to the whim: she raised her hands in the guise of an avenging angel, the voluminous sleeves her wings. Her clap caused the TARDIS to jolt sideways and, on the screen, every ship's lights flickered in a syncopated rhythm as they resumed normal function.

Mindful of their close proximity, the ships reset their coordinates and navigated from the sector over the course of an hour. The Doctor drew Mustang away from the controls; brown eyes glared solemnly down at her.

"It's... not my fault," she sputtered. "You were as eager as I..."

"And, I remain so. There must be a way... but, the essence of how I've earned the trust of so many species is this: I'm never cruel, never cowardly. I don't give up, and I don't give in. These beings know I'm the Doctor. I'm a Time Lord. I'm from the planet Gallifrey in the Constellation of Kasterborous and, I will do nothing to harm them, so long as they take no aggressive stance against others."

"That's a good code to live by. Mine comes from a old John Wayne movie: 'I won't be wronged. I won't be insulted. I won't be laid a-hand on. I don't do these things to other people, and I require the same from them.'"

"Fundamentally, the values are compatible. If you're still willing to try..."

"How would you clear a radius of six light years every time... you know."

He propped his skinny frame against the railing. "That's the crux, innit? For me to touch you - and how I want to touch you, even now - it would take a coordinated effort, massive pre-planning... No spontaneity..."

"What about the shield? Isn't that capable of... containing the energy?"

"The shield's gauge registered at maximum power. If it had been disengaged, who knows the extent of the destruction?"

"Oh, hell... Why does my life have to suck?"

“Could you not... pass along this... gift to another, or reject it altogether?”

“I’ve ached for that every second of every day for ten years. The only way to be rid of it is to die.”

Mustang wept in the Doctor’s arms most of the way to Earth. Reports from interstellar freighters and scientific vessels they encountered challenged the calibration of their engines.

She couldn’t even cry without causing chaos.

The TARDIS settled outside the barn; morning dawned to the east, and the horses would be wanting their breakfast.

As well as some exercise.

Wench and the Arabian saddled, Mustang and the Doctor trotted along winding trails, listening to a rhapsody of spring. His delighted smile might have cracked his features; the Mistress of Boleskine’s heart resonated with his child-like enthusiasm.

A fence marking the boundary between Boleskine’s acreage and Glenn MacDonough’s pasture proved no barrier. Accelerating to a gallop, Wench soared over the hurdle, then slowed.

Mustang had sensed the Doctor to be an excellent horseman, and her instincts rang true. He became one with his mount, the embodiment of unity in the jump.

Animals raced across the fields, their riders’ shouts cutting through the humid air. With four other horses to give equal attention, they could have spent hours roaming the estate.

Come noon, the pair sat on the corral fence, arm-in-arm.

“I don’t want to go,” professed the Doctor.

“And, I don’t want you to go. But, you have your... path, and I’m stuck here, alone, for the preservation of humanity.”

His lips pursed in that faux grin. “You’ve been tempted to wipe the planet, haven’t you?”

“More than once.” Her neck pivoted toward him. “How’d you know?”

“Your... outbursts are already on UNIT’s radar. They’ve relied on law enforcement records up to this point - which contain no mention of you personally - though a few big wheels are pushing for a more thorough investigation.”

“How... often are you here?”

“Not as often as I’d like.” A breeze rustled his hair. “I love humanity. There’s an innate quality that merits observation...”

“We can... collaborate, if the need arises.”

“How would I contact you? You don’t own a mobile, or a telly, a radio, a computer...”

“Trust me. If you need me, I’ll know. We’re... inextricably linked at a subatomic level that transcends time and space, ”

He kissed her lightly, her hazel eyes glistening with moisture.

“I guarantee, there are no alien craft in a twenty light year range,” he murmured.

“What about cars, airplanes, ships?”

“Your... emotions haven’t wreaked havoc on them in the past, have they?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

The TARDIS secured from within, the Doctor swept her in his arms. “Perhaps, someday, I’ll figure out a way to boost the damping field on the shields...”

“By then, I’ll be old and grey.”

“And, I’ll have a different face.”

“Eh?”

His changed the subject. “In less than a day, both our lives have changed...”

Dusk painted the skies pastel hues when they returned to the barn - surrounded by police vehicles, news vans and utility trucks.

“Oh, hell...”

She shoved the Doctor back into the TARDIS and combed her unruly mop with her fingers.

“What’s the problem?” she queried, a dozen pistols aimed at her torso.

“There’s a nuclear warhead set to detonate in the vicinity in the next five minutes,” proclaimed an official holding a frantically beeping meter.

“Nonsense! If that was the case, this whole area would have been evacuated...”

A junior constable, shaking in fear for his life, grunted, “Some media types just won’t listen.”

She caught his sarcastic tone. “What... prompted this drill?”

“It’s not a drill,” the lead officer affirmed. “You need to leave, at once.”

Mustang took a deep breath. “And you need to adjust the sensitivity on your equipment.”

She strode toward the house, key ready to unlock the steel reinforced door.

If she’d left it in her bathrobe pocket, on the TARDIS... she’d have resorted to a surreptitious nature-inspired pick-lock.

The cadre of authorized and unauthorized trespassers did not disperse until well after midnight. Their presence delayed the Doctor’s unobtrusive departure;

Mustang could not rejoin him in the TARDIS simply to pass the time. Oddly, none of the investigators asked about the strange blue call box.

Maybe they thought it had been purchased as recycled material, converted into an outhouse or a storage shed.

Eyelids barely open from the strain of the past couple days, Mustang crept to the TARDIS before dawn, holding the Doctor's original trousers and jacket, his purple shirt and grey t-shirt on hangers, his high-top sneakers tied between them. She didn't bother to knock, cognizant her power gave her ready access.

"The coast is clear," she declared, draping the clothes over the railing.

"I know. I watched their... futile search for the warhead." He embraced her. "For my sake, Mustang, be careful. There's no telling who - or what - may come after you."

"Because of a faulty filter on a radiation monitor?"

"You know as well as I do, that's not what brought those fools here. When you... shared your affection in the past with other men - human men - you may have... caused chaos with the weather. With me, the effect was exponentially magnified. That might... draw the ire of others..."

"Who will be dealt with accordingly."

"Never cruel, never cowardly."

"I can't promise no cruelty; you've seen I'm no coward. Hell, I can't even be killed by a fanatic with a high-powered rifle, the scope set for 500 yards."

"That's what makes you so precious to me: your total disregard for all things practical." He separated from her; their eyes met. "If I was granted one wish, it would be that you hold onto this innocence and never allow yourself to become jaded about humanity's potential to better themselves."

"That's..."

She didn't finish the sentence; she didn't want to disillusion him with her cynicism.

He escorted her to the dimensional portal, kissing her that last time before jamming the door closed with the sonic screwdriver - just in case she decided to stow away.

He wouldn't have minded; he would have been flattered. They had to accept their respective realities, though.

She retired to the mansion's stoop until the TARDIS dematerialized, beacon pulsing, before shuffling indoors.

A pounding on Boleskine's front door roused her with less than three hours sleep. Lacking a cup of coffee for fortification, she confronted the visitors with a grumpy mien.

The taller of the trio wore a quasi-military uniform - a major, maybe, given the silver star on his collar - and a black beret with stitched insignia: U.N.I.T.

“Oh, hell...”

“May we come in?” he hinted.

She stifled, “Not unless you want to die.”

When she didn't allow them ingress, the major bristled.

“You're trespassing on private property,” she advised.

“We're... investigating the presence of... an individual who may be in country without a proper visa.”

Laughter burst unbidden from her throat. “Illegal alien,” indeed.

“Why do you find this matter a source of levity, ma'am?”

“I'm... knackered, as you Brits say, that's all. I had a late night...”

His assistant - if the prim young woman in a tweed business suit held that post - opened a portfolio to reveal full-color photos of the barn...

And the TARDIS near the rolling metal door.

“Not one day ago, this... object stood 20 meters east. Now, it's gone. What happened to it?”

“I chopped it up for scrap.”

“May I see the pile?”

“It's already burnt. I like to keep the barn warm for the horses. Spring nights can be quite chilly around these parts.”

“I don't see an axe...”

“I borrowed my neighbor's chainsaw.”

“His name?”

“Glenn MacDonough.”

For Mustang, the major's disbelief didn't annoy her; he and his comrades would forget ever receiving the photos, and the previous evening's crew would likewise lose their memory of a bogus nuclear incident.

“Would you come with me, ma'am?” requested the broad chested officer.

“Where?”

“Just to the barn. I need your permission to search the interior.”

“You're more than welcome to do so, as long as you don't upset the horses.”

Insufficient, evidently. His vice-like grip on her left arm brooked no resistance. They entered the sunlit structure; he rolled the door closed.

“Listen to me, young lady.” Height-wise, he might have been two or three inches taller than the Doctor, but his pock-marked complexion and battle scars marred any appeal he might have for females of his acquaintance. He glared down

at her, guttural snarl irritating. “The Doctor’s TARDIS cannot enter our atmosphere without UNIT’s knowledge, even fully shielded. His presence at Boleskine endangered a number of sensitive projects, and you need to tell me precisely what he was doing here.”

“Not being a scientist in any way, shape or form, I can’t. Nothing he said made any sense to me, and I couldn’t pronounce some of the words he used if my life depended on it.”

“It may, young lady, it may.” From his chest pocket, he extracted a small wire-bound notebook, flipping open the cover. “We’ve been able to ascertain that you live here using the alias Lady Elizabeth Neville, supposedly a widow, but that you’re American by birth. My people are delving into sealed records to find the truth about you before petitioning that you be deported for not holding authorized documents.”

“Good luck with that,” she remonstrated.

She’d long since instructed the natural elements to wipe all public records of her existence from every computer database and server.

The door rolled aside; let the major think she’d wired it to a remote control. “If you’re not gone in five minutes...”

“The local constabulary has no jurisdiction over us...”

“But, I do.”

Beyond the tree line, a chorus of wolves howled. The officer ignored her advice, marching at a leisurely pace toward his black staff car.

That is, until the sounds tripled in intensity.

The female assistant and the plain-clothes guard - armed, if the bulge beneath his jacket was any indication - scurried to the idling vehicle, almost slamming the rear door on their superior.

“Good riddance to you and your ilk,” cackled Mustang. “You’ll forget me and, if I have any say in the matter, the Doctor, as well.”

She wouldn’t forget that valiant being, though. Despite his quirky hairstyle, his undernourished physique, and his weird fashion sense, he had a heart - hearts - of gold. She lay awake every night over the next month, straining to hear the distinctive wheezing and groaning of the TARDIS, to no avail.

The pirate shirt imbued with his musky scent, she draped it over her pillow. She deliberated whether a lightning bolt, of the type that conveyed her from Boleskine to Cannes when she needed to replenish her financial holdings, could cut through the void of space. She recalled the Doctor’s mention of Halcyia; might they not rendezvous there at some future juncture?

“You’re still a human being, incapable of breathing without oxygen,” Erwin Rommel informed her in the still of a late May Wednesday.

“Who’s to know?”

“You, when your body freezes in the void.”

Raising her head, she propped herself on her right elbow. “Could I not command that a... sealed bubble encompass me for the journey? Filled with air, I’d be able to breathe...”

“A journey to the French Riviera might take a matter of seconds, but light years?” argued the German general. “Besides, he told you he returns often to this... hunk of rock, it being his favorite.”

“He’ll not endanger me by coming here.”

“Then, you can meet elsewhere. There’s nothing preventing you from leaving the property on holiday.”

She mumbled, “True. True.”

Still, in the depths of her being, she knew they’d never meet again.

At least, not while he sported a face she’d recognize.

Frustrated, she pulled the pirate shirt over her tank top, the leggings providing a bit of warmth against chill temperatures. The boots prevented her feet from being cut by the gravel of the drive when she ventured outdoors and stared at the sky.

Better she had looked down, where a yellow rose lay at her feet. Plucking it from the dust, she reveled in its scent, without ruminating how it had come to be there.

In the midst of more than a decade of struggling to bring a semblance of order to her life, she’d finally found a speck of happiness.

She would never let it go.