

The Mustang Chronicles:

Heroic Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

She heard the disturbance before she saw the cause.

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea lay awake on the king-sized bed, staring at the ceiling. A balmy May breeze rustled the curtains as dawn peeked over the horizon, and measured footsteps - combat boots, most likely - sent animals scurrying from their dens.

Twenty... no, thirty, minimum. A coordinated strike force.

The young woman imagined a squad, clad in black from head to foot, including ski masks to hide their faces. They could attack Boleskine House anonymously, without consequences.

At least, when she wreaked havoc, she took responsibility for her actions.

The possibility of rolling over and resuming sleep nil, she kicked off the quilt and swung her legs over the side of the mattress. A mass of auburn tresses tangled, she trudged to the bathroom for a shower.

Hot chocolate and a bowl of cereal fortified her for the challenge ahead - whatever might transpire. She suspected the trespassers would be waiting for her to emerge from the historic Georgian mansion, as she did each morning, crossing to the barn to feed and water her horses.

Unlatching the deadbolt on the steel-reinforced front door, she pulled the panel inward. A whispered command accompanied the gesture: “Nobody moves for five minutes.”

Balanced on thick tree limbs or crouched behind dense underbrush, the platoon was rendered immobile - as well as frustrated and confused when they could not fulfill their orders.

Annoyed grunts and muffled curses reached her ears as she traversed the gravel drive, rolling a heavy door aside on its tracks.

Not only did the horses toss their heads and flip their manes, two men in expensive black suits turned from admiring the animals toward her.

Broad shouldered, squat, with a full head of grey hair, she recognized the one near her Arabian from photos adorning scraps of newsprint that wrapped her bi-weekly grocery deliveries.

President of the United States.

“Oh, hell...”

His Harvard-educated baritone might have been addressing journalists at a press conference. “Good morning, Miss Duryea.”

As a rule, Mustang seldom felt in awe of prominent individuals. She'd interacted with Gandhi, St. Francis of Assisi, Mark Twain, Erwin Rommel, among others. Celebrity didn't faze her.

"If this is supposed to be a clandestine operation, Mr. President, you've failed miserably," she sniffed, moving toward the oat storage bin.

"How so?"

"I heard your team take up their positions nearly an hour ago."

The politician's Adam's apple bobbed self-consciously. "We'll have to work on their stealth, then."

"Indeed." A metal bucket filled, she poured oats into each horse's feed trough. "Care to tell me why you traveled all this distance with your friend?"

"My... friend is Secretary-General of the United Nations."

Mustang glanced at the dark-skinned, athletic elder. "Good morning."

"It is an honor, Miss Duryea." His accent, though more comprehensible than the local Scottish burr, smacked of a British upbringing. South Africa, perhaps?

"Let's cut to the chase, please, gentlemen," she pressed. "Your time is valuable, I know."

"Is there somewhere... more private?" queried the President.

"The horses won't tell anyone."

The Secretary-General bristled. "Walls have ears."

"Indoors or out," added Mustang. "Trust me, no one will hear."

The men glanced at each other, then nodded simultaneously.

The President began, "Miss Duryea, there's a situation with which we need your assistance."

"How do you know that?" she countered. "How do you know anything about me?"

"The files..."

"Whose files?"

"The NSA, the CIA, the Secret Service..."

"Oh, hell..."

When Mustang had used her power over the natural elements to destroy all records of her existence, she'd directed the command only at the FBI's databases. She'd not considered that other governmental agencies would be compiling dossiers...

Those would vanish in short order.

"May I continue?" the President remarked.

"Please."

“Over the past few decades, our country - and the globe - has been plagued by certain... factions that, in the name of protecting the populace, have caused significant damage to public infrastructure and private property, without being held accountable for the billions of dollars it costs to restore the status quo.”

“I don’t...”

The Secretary-General interspersed, “They describe themselves with a variety of names: heroes, mutants, gods, even. Their inherent abilities have been augmented chemically or biologically, or they have pioneered advanced technology, and they claim to use these resources in defense of the planet against... alien entities, but have succeeded in only causing wholesale destruction.”

“And, they don’t clean up after themselves,” Mustang chuckled.

“Not a brick from a fallen building nor a fender from a crushed car,” the President noted.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Stop them.”

Pausing as she poured fresh water for the roan mare Wench, she cringed, “Huh?”

“You can bring an end to the carnage.”

“I don’t...”

The Secretary-General relieved her of the bucket and deposited her on the rough-hewn wooden bench near the tack room. He sat beside her, cradling her work-gloved hands in his. “Miss Duryea, we know you are capable of great feats, manipulating everything from the weather to casino roulette tables on the French Riviera. Congressional committees, special commissions at the United Nations, have banded together to demand these rogue mercenaries cease and desist, but they refuse. They claim humanity will perish, or be enslaved, if they suspend their vigilante activities. All the while, people and businesses suffer great financial losses due to their dismissive attitude.”

“I still don’t see...”

Pinned between the officials on the bench, Mustang felt like the cheese in a marbled-rye bread sandwich.

“You can disable their transports, the superior weapons they possess,” urged the President.

His companion chimed in, “You can restore the mutants to normal human form.”

Mustang gazed through a dirt-encrusted window at gathering clouds. Yes, she could do what they asked - and far more. What good would her efforts serve,

though? If these... renegades repudiated their role in widespread devastation, her intervention would teach them nothing about liability and self-control.

She hid a sarcastic snicker with a forced cough. No one could ever claim her to be an authority on self-control.

“What about the... enemies of Earth they fight against?” she wondered.

The President ventured, “You can stop them, too. Create a protective shield around the planet...”

“Inter-dimensional,” drawled the Secretary-General.

Mustang shot off the wood, echoing, “Inter-dimensional?”

“There’s been speculation that the activities of those from other galaxies have opened portals between...”

“Oh, hell...”

She’d traveled through time and space all too recently, gaining a cursory understanding of what types of creatures lay millions of light years in the distance. She’d sworn to a very special...

No. This was different. If she complied with the officials’ mandate, she’d stand alone against forces who believed themselves good, as well as those who acted from less than honorable intentions.

“What do I get out of this, if I agree?” she grunted, facing them.

The President stammered, “What... do you want?”

“Peace.”

The men eyed each other.

“That’s... not...” murmured the Secretary-General.

“Don’t give me any excuses. You know it is, but aren’t willing to put forth the energy to make it reality. Equality for all, food for all, dignity for all. Those are my terms. Take it or leave it.”

A sense of power - having nothing to do with abilities bequeathed to her by her grandfather, scientist and occult enthusiast Jack Parsons - swelled the 27-year-old’s head momentarily. The mere fact these men begged for her favors, on behalf of countries across the globe, gave her *carte blanche* to do as she pleased.

And, what she could do!

The Secretary-General, younger than his associate by a decade or more, rose first. He offered his hand to the President, whose knees popped when he straightened.

“Nothing is to be divulged about this... pact to anyone,” advised the President.

She quipped, “The horses won’t will keep your secret.”

They shook her hand in turns, with the Secretary-General raising her scarred palm for closer inspection.

“You have suffered for this... gift,” he observed.

“My own fault.”

Gallantly, he kissed her fingers before releasing them. “When shall we know?”

“You know already,” she smirked.

The President stroked the Arabian’s nose. “It is done?”

“Yup.”

“Good day to you, Miss Duryea,” he stated, sidling toward the barn door. “You have our thanks.”

“I have your promise to work for peace. If you break it, you know what will happen.”

She stood near the metal track, watching them depart on foot. Their vehicles must have been parked near the B852 roadway, and they’d hiked the distance.

The incompetent entourage abandoned their concealment, falling into formation and marching away, weapons shouldered.

Rather than return to the house, Mustang saddled the sorrel gelding, Sarge, for a ride around the acreage. She needed to unknot her stomach muscles, which signaled trouble to come.

However many dozens of these mutants, or heroes - or however they referred to themselves - existed, they would not be happy when they attempted to go about their business and found themselves unable to function, or make use of whatever equipment had been devised to augment their strength or influence.

Mustang hadn’t needed their names or locations to accomplish the task. She let the President and the Secretary-General’s own knowledge of their files provide the information. That nature had complied with the directive, she had no doubt.

She was glad the politicians hadn’t asked her to restore the damage. Snippets in the newspaper had clued her in to the extent of the desolation, especially in New York City, but she had no desire to reconstruct skyscrapers or untwist mangled tracks in subway tunnels.

Inhaling the scent of heather as she navigated narrow trails around the Boleskine property, she trembled involuntarily at the reference to inter-dimensional incursions. Her discussions with an expert in the field had not worried her at the time, but now...

Mention during those chats of cultures with advanced spacecraft that could cover the distance between planets in hours, rather than years caused legitimate concern. Some of these species were peaceful, others hostile. Earth had been ignored until its inhabitants started pushing toward the stars; available resources attracted those who'd ravaged their own worlds and required fresh supplies.

Growing up rather isolated on a Montana horse ranch, Mustang had paid little attention to the news of the day, whether politics, crime or... extraterrestrial. During her exile in the Scottish Highlands, she'd avoided computers, radio, television and phones. To assuage periodic boredom, she perused fragmented sheets of newsprint in the boxes of staples sent over by the Dores grocer in a pickup truck, usually the second and fourth Thursday of the month, but they didn't provide sufficient facts to deduce the whole story of any particular incident.

This ignorance might be to her advantage, she mused. An awareness of the true state of the world could well cause her anger to escalate, with horrendous results. She'd long known that she couldn't get angry. She did terrible things when she let her anger have sway.

Death, demolition...

She sounded very much like those both her morning visitors feared. Why had they chosen her as their advocate? If the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency had files on her - prior to her uttering a quiet command annihilating their contents in full - what conversations had been conducted in windowless rooms swept daily for electronic bugs about using her as a weapon against enemies, domestic and foreign, and aliens from space?

She'd defeated agents from a variety of countries who'd converged on the grounds in a desperate ploy to capture her. Their rifles reduced to puddles of molten metal, their limbs shattered by finely honed martial arts techniques, those left alive skulked into the forest like wounded pups.

That the President had made his case in person, without subterfuge, softened her resolve not to get involved in such situations. She despised those who tried to trick her, or cajole her into compliance, even romancing her.

The path she'd traveled over time was strewn with their bodies, to her shame.

Yet, she felt little remorse for opportunists who'd played their games and lost. She regretted the demise of specific individuals for whom she cared deeply but, often, they met their end without her interference.

These ruminations continued through the afternoon, while Mustang exercised the other horses, saving the Arabian for last, and a brisk gallop across her neighbor Glenn MacDonough's open fields.

The sleek, red and white helicopter's descent to a grassy clearing renewed the tightness of her muscles; the engine noise made her mount skittish.

She wouldn't have time to return the stallion to the barn before confronting more uninvited visitors.

"Oh, hell..."

II

Mustang Duryea tethered the Arabian to an oak's low branches well beyond the helicopter's whirling blades and the dust kicked up by the churning air. A man alighted from the passenger seat once the din faded: dark-haired with a goatee, mustache and slender build.

What's with the designer suits? the Mistress of Boleskine puzzled silently as long strides propelled him toward her. Her ratty jeans, Pink Floyd t-shirt and muddy sneakers appeared quite out of place in contrast.

"You live around here?" he barked in an authoritative tone that irritated her nerves.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I'm looking for a certain woman..."

"Well, you found one."

"Not you. She's older, more mature."

That statement elicited a callous laugh from the erstwhile American. "This *mature* female have a name?"

"She's known in these parts as Lady Elizabeth Neville."

"Oh, hell."

"Sounds like you've crossed paths with her."

"Those who... cross paths with her... seldom live to tell the tale."

White teeth flashed. "That's her."

"That's me, you mean."

He stiffened. "Excuse me?"

"You've got two minutes to explain your business before you're cited by the local constabulary for trespassing." She didn't bother to explain they were both - technically - trespassing on Glenn MacDonough's land. "The fine is 500 British pounds."

"Chicken feed."

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" Mustang prodded.

"You don't... recognize me?"

She'd never appreciated riddles, and tired of his evasiveness. "Should I?"

“I’ve lost millions because of you.”

The earth tremored beneath their feet as her rage escalated.

“Two research facilities reduced to rubble,” he droned. “Computer servers fried; dozens of aircraft grounded due to propulsion failures...”

Somehow, he was connected to the rogue vigilantes, she realized. Their financial backer, evidently.

“Better to spend those millions to shelter the homeless and feed the hungry,” she admonished.

“There’ll be no food, and no housing, if the criminal elements from across the universe are allowed access...”

“Bullshit.”

His mustache twitched. “You ignorant child, how dare you...”

A flexible band encircling his left wrist flickered with red and blue lights. His right index finger poked a jeweled button repeatedly. When nothing happened, he removed the bracelet to inspect its components.

“What have you done?” he snarled.

“Who says I’ve done anything?”

“Our sources in the White House and at the U.N. notified us a treaty had been finalized that renders us obsolete...”

“Not obsolete, just useless.”

“So, who will stand against those who seek to overrun the planet for their own gain?”

Mustang’s fists clenched and unclenched. “Why should that matter to you? You’re not a general or an elected representative...”

“I’m a genius, billionaire, playboy philanthropist, which supercedes any legislation that originates on Capitol Hill.”

“That kind of attitude is what’s created the current predicament. Your kind can’t just go off on a tangent at the expense of honest citizens, even if you think it’s right.”

Her opponent scowled. “That kind of ignorant generalization sparked the creation of the Sokovia Accords.”

“Whatever that means.” Mustang retreated toward the Arabian. “Go back where you came from and leave me alone.”

He caught her up in three strides, seizing her shoulder with an iron grip. “The President doesn’t grasp the implications of this dilemma.”

An electrical charge ran through his frame, causing him to retract his hand. He shuddered as she whirled on him, hazel orbs burning.

“You have no idea what we’re up against,” he hissed. “Most of the entities we battle can be subdued with the advanced arsenal we’ve developed, combined with superior ingenuity. There’s one, though...”

She’d let him explain, in the hopes of being rid of him. “One what?”

“He’s a human male who can control the minds of anyone who gets within thirty feet of him, or thereabouts.”

“And?”

“They can be compelled to kill themselves or others, commit crimes... anything.”

“Bullshit.”

“You’re not the only one who thinks so. Those who’ve seen him can’t remember what he looks like after he manipulates them to his will. So, when police reports are filed - if they *are* filed - the physical characteristics don’t match, the incidents aren’t linked and the investigation goes nowhere, eventually stuck in a drawer.”

“Too bad,” scoffed Mustang. “What do you think I can do?”

“If you can stop us, you can stop him.”

“You mean, if I reverse what I did to you, you can deal with the other... threats to humanity, while I’m left dealing with the guy you won’t touch with a ten-foot pole?”

He issued the ultimatum flatly. “There’s ten million bucks in it for you.”

“Screw you and your money.”

Mustang marched away, swung into the saddle and urged the stallion to a full gallop, headed away from Boleskine.

She reined the Arabian near the barn an hour later, perspiration moistening its coat and her skin. Her auburn ponytail had collected assorted twigs and leaves from trees lining the trails, mud from the previous day’s rain coated her clothes.

Her visitor sat on the front stoop, oblivious to the symphony of bird calls.

“The chopper pilot is waiting for you,” Mustang scolded.

A tart reply: “He’s paid hourly.”

“Is there a reason you’re hanging around?”

“You didn’t let me finish what I came to tell you.”

The young woman slumped against the wrought iron railing, tired and hungry. “What?”

“My calculation of the assets necessary to maintain such a vast network of minions who jump when you speak puts us on similar footing financially, which is why you rejected my offer of ten million bucks.”

“Minions? Dude, really?” she guffawed.

This levity gave him pause. Smoldering brown orbs glared at her. “Neither your wealth nor your... employees will protect you, if Kilgrave finds you.”

“He won’t.”

“Don’t be so sure. Before you... disrupted our surveillance systems, we’d tracked him to Scotland. I think I can safely say his hackers would have infiltrated the NSA and downloaded your particulars once word of the President’s trip was leaked. Your... methods would be of great interest to him.”

“Get lost.” She pulled a key ring from her pocket, approaching the door. “Next time you - or any of your sort - step foot on my land, you’ll be in for a big, and painful, surprise.”

“Have it your own way.” He straightened and stretched, muscles cramped from sitting so long. “Just don’t call on us to bail you out when things go - how do you British say it? - pear-shaped.”

She chuckled. “I’m not British. I’m as American as you.”

His expression bemused her just prior to him hiking toward the woods.

Stepping across the threshold, she deliberated: had she acquired an accent in her years of exile?

Not that she spoke much with anyone on any given day.

Except Glenn MacDonough, her neighbor, and the grocery and feed delivery men.

If she’d picked up their inflection, she’d embody the burr she absolutely despised.

The prospect disgusted her.

The door slammed; the deadbolt snapped into place. She leaned against the painted steel, horrified.

“I’ll feel better when I’ve eaten something,” she rationalized, moving toward the kitchen.

The white-suited figure with wild white hair and bushy mustache accompanied her. “Something chocolate?” he hinted.

“That would be nice.”

Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain, opened the shiny stainless refrigerator and scanned the contents. “You may have to wait until this week’s delivery.”

“There’s chocolate fudge brownie ice cream in the freezer.”

“Ah!”

“But, I need some protein to restore my drained energy.”

“Uncivil confrontations definitely sap one’s strength.”

“Who was that egotistical jerk?” queried Mustang. Receiving no answer, she spun on the ethereal manifestation. “I hate when you’re not honest with me.”

“It’s not lack of honesty, child. There are some things I’m not permitted...”

“Bullshit!” She yanked a jar of peanut butter from the cupboard and grabbed a loaf of bread off the shelf. “In the afterlife, you’ve admitted to being attuned with the flow of time, knowing what *has* happened, and what *will* happen. Still, you refuse to be forthcoming...”

“We... can’t influence your decisions. The results could be... catastrophic.”

“Not like I’ve ever caused chaos in the past, eh?”

“As you’ve acknowledged, at least you clean up after yourself. This time...”

The butter knife she extracted from the drawer near the sink pounded the granite counter. “It’s serious, isn’t it?”

“If that man of whom your guest spoke gets within striking distance...”

“Striking distance?”

“He must get close to you for the... chemical reaction to infect you. You would then become little more than his puppet.”

“Spooky,” breathed Mustang.

“He would then not only have control of humanity but, through you, nature. He would be invincible.”

“It would be simple to block that reaction...”

“How can you restrict the air?”

“You’re posing that question to *me*?” Wearing a sardonic smile, she bit into the sandwich and chewed meditatively.

“I apologize, my dear. I forgot you have yet to improve your self-control...”

She glowered at the spectre of the dead American author. “Whatever I do will most definitely require absolute self-control, Sam. Do you think I want some bastard inside my head, when I have enough trouble dealing with my own impulses?”

He patted her arm soothingly. “I was only...”

“I know, I know. Your sharp wit got the better of you, and it’s not appreciated fully by someone whose sense of humor is rather skewed.” The sandwich consumed, she fetched a tumbler from the dish rack and filled it with milk to wash down the sticky delight. “Go on, now. I’ve got to concentrate.”

A bowl of decadent ice cream assisted in that endeavor. She sat on the cane-backed rocking chair in the living room, a fire on the grate warming the chamber against a cool May evening. She could not allow fear of impending danger distract her, or a half-finished chess game on the inlaid board beside her.

All she had was a name, and a bizarre one, at that: Kilgrave. She freed her mind of mental images, leaving a blank slate for nature to work with as she instructed the elements to locate this individual somewhere within the borders of the country where she'd been making her home.

Once that feat had been accomplished, he would be encased in an impermeable - albeit invisible - suit that would prevent anyone with whom he came in contact from being affected by his efforts to supplant their individual wills.

Meaning: if he persisted in his quest to find *her*, when the two came face-to-face, he'd be mad as a hornet robbed of its sting.

Mustang showered and brushed her auburn locks, allowing them to dry as she scrubbed the dishes in the kitchen sink and ran a load of clothes through the washer and dryer. Comfortable in a pair of grey sweats, she listened to the acreage surrounding Boleskine House settle for the night as dusk gave way to darkness.

What a day! she surmised as she flopped on the king-sized bed. Not having to worry about nocturnal intruders, thanks to the booby-traps she'd installed on the grounds via her powers, she did not hesitate to close her eyes and slumber in the arms of Morpheus.

Crackling static of a radio roused her in the wee hours, nonetheless. Bears prowling, owls hooting she could tolerate, but not man-made contraptions.

Indistinguishable mutterings in a deep register must've emanated from a hand-held device dropped by one of the President's security detail 24 hours earlier.

Still, that squad had long since returned to the States, and would be beyond the limited range of this receiver...

The young woman bolted upright on the mattress.

Unless...

"Oh, hell..."

Did all covert mercenaries use the same frequency for their communications? she pondered. If so, who was prowling the estate at such an hour?

She crept to the window and cranked open the pane to better distinguish the transmissions. While her brain automatically translated foreign languages through more than a decade of relying on her power, she momentarily suspended that function to hear the original voices.

Russian, or a dialect thereof.

"Oh, hell..."

Then, a series of petrified shrieks resounded through the stillness.

Nothing quite like abruptly being bound, wrists and ankles, between two sturdy trees by unseen manacles, or being dragged 100 yards through thorny brambles.

Whether this detachment of unidentified interlopers came to appeal to her good sense or cause her harm, their mission proved futile.

Their medics, and whatever psychologists they consulted, would discount their stories as drug-induced hallucinations or symptoms of mental illness.

Amidst sparks and sizzling, the walkie-talkie shattered into its base components as Mustang returned to bed.

III

Soft spring rains seldom deterred Mustang Duryea from completing her daily chores. When downpours occurred, she never bothered with an umbrella, enduring a thorough soaking as an excuse for a mug of piping hot chocolate upon slipping out of wet garments and into a cozy bathrobe.

That Wednesday, en route to the barn to clean the horses' stalls and refresh their water and oats, she noticed extensive splintering at the base of the corral's fence posts. The scrapings of teeth on wood, with deeper impressions on the trunks of nearby trees.

Beavers.

She squatted beside the gnawed bark, streams of liquid matting her hair and dripping off her nose and ears, resigned to the cycle of nature.

Deer and rabbits ate any vegetables she tried to plant - she'd given up any aspirations of being a gardener after two seasons at Boleskine. At least, birds of prey and feral cats kept the rodent population at bay, preventing the critters from taking up residence within the mansion's walls.

She'd long since resolved to live in harmony with creation, harkening back to days when she'd skip classes at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School in favor of riding her pinto, Heartbeat, through the pastures of her father's horse ranch. Cougars, bears, elk... did what they had to do to survive.

Her Earth Science teacher - one of the few courses she'd enjoyed as a student - explained the process as the food chain.

Except, today, the only animals that should have ventured into the open were ducks.

A flock flew overhead, in fact, bound for breakfast on the choppy surface of Loch Ness to the west.

Mustang felt like she carried an extra fifty pounds on her limbs as she trudged toward the dwelling, so saturated was the cloth of her jeans and yellow hoodie.

Her hair wouldn't dry for hours.

The sight of a bedraggled human clumping along the gravel drive astonished her; she halted, curious to discover who might be so insane as to travel in this weather.

Despite being provided no physical description by yesterday's helicopter passenger of his alleged enemy, the young woman surmised this tall, spindly male clad in an almost neon purple suit fit the bill.

"You Kilgrave?" she shouted, the sound drowned out by droplets splashing on rock.

He hollered, "Is this Boleskine?" Barely audible.

She couldn't leave a drenched rat to his fate, so she gestured broadly for him to follow her into the house.

The foyer became an instant lake. Kicking off her sneakers, she made like an amateur ballerina, tip-toeing along the hall to grab towels from the linen closet. Passing a stack to this Purple Man, she tried to recall how many others she'd welcomed, running their outfits through the wash to restore them to wearable condition.

Once excess water had been absorbed, she guided him to the spare bedroom, where she'd taken to keeping sets of sweats in a five-drawer chest. "Help yourself," she remarked.

"I appreciate it."

Her soaked mop encased in a quasi-turban, she settled on the living room's cane-backed rocker and moved the hand-carved chess pieces to their starting positions, just in case...

It would be a way to pass the time while the laundry finished.

Standing in the doorway, harsh golden-brown eyes surveyed the less than luxurious furnishings. But, then, he looked less than luxurious in baggy green sweats, damp bronzed mop combed off his high forehead.

"Such a prestigious domicile deserves the finest decor..." he critiqued with a hint of British accent.

She squinted in disdain. "I lean more toward the utilitarian."

"Then, you should be living in that ramshackle hut down the lane, not here. Where is the dowager noble who befits this grandeur?"

It took Mustang a few seconds to remember the meaning of the term "dowager". She'd enjoyed watching classic films as a teen, many of them produced

by English directors. The main family's dowager aunt, for instance, was a widowed - and usually elderly - matron, carrying the title of duchess or marchioness...

"Boy, you've got it all wrong," she chided facetiously.

"Don't mock me."

"If your assumptions weren't so ludicrous, I wouldn't."

He towered over her chair. "I have it on the best authority this estate is the home of Lady Elizabeth Neville, an influential and wealthy woman."

"Your 'best authority' sucks."

"Tell me why."

His very attitude made it clear he expected total compliance with his directive. When she laughed outright, he recoiled.

"It hasn't penetrated your thick skull, has it?" taunted Mustang. "Didn't you notice, as you traveled to Inverness, people suddenly stopped bowing to your every whim?"

"I..." He sucked air through rows of straight white teeth. "How could you know that? I told the business owner seated opposite me in the dining car to buy me a drink, and he actually declined. That's never happened before. Leaving the train station, I ordered a limousine driver to bring me here, and *he* refused, saying he'd been contracted to chauffeur a couple on their honeymoon."

"Doesn't feel good to lose your edge, does it?"

"Since I was ten years old, everything I've asked for, I've been immediately given: the best food, expensive clothes, the finest lodgings..."

She grumbled, "Why purple?"

"No particular reason." He crossed to the fireplace, stirring dying embers into flames and arranging two logs on the grate. "You haven't answered my question."

"You can't control people any longer, because the source of your power has been... neutralized."

Kilgrave stiffened. "What?" He closed the distance between them. "There's no way..."

She grinned and shrugged.

"It's not possible," he insisted.

"Quit whining and have a seat. Tell me about yourself."

He sank on the green sofa, fidgeting. "I..."

"How did you acquire... this knack that instills such fear into human beings who should know better?"

Thin lips twisted in a sneer. "Which version of the tale do you prefer?"

"If there's more than one, share both. I like a good story."

“The one that garners the most sympathy involves my parents as medical researchers, who performed cruel experiments on me when I was still a child, subjecting me to surgeries, monitoring, tests. Their work triggered something in my brain that made me able to control the minds of others.”

“Sad, but not exactly true, eh?”

“Who’s to say? I have few memories of those years. Being doused with toxic chemicals is a transformative event, in and of itself.”

“I won’t argue with you there.”

“Where is Lady Elizabeth?” pressed Kilgrave.

“Why do you wish to see her?”

“She... possesses qualities that could prove... advantageous in my endeavors.”

Mustang snorted. “You mean, her command of nature could propel you to an unrivaled position amongst these... super humans I’ve learned inhabit the planet.”

“Very astute, young lady.” He studied the chess board. “Who are you?”

“I, too, can tell differing stories, depending on whether I wish someone to pity my plight or beg for my favors.”

Elegant, twig-like fingers twirled the white king. “I’m listening.”

“Basically, I’m a kid from Montana who was sent to live with her grandmother in Massachusetts to keep her out of trouble. When the old lady died, she left instructions for me to seek out the man who lived here. That meeting... did not go well, and I was left to deal with abilities that I neither understood nor wanted.”

“And, the other version?”

“I’m the widow of a British lord who prefers living in solitude.”

His eyes widened. “Then, you *are*...”

She nodded.

“What... precisely are these abilities?”

“How does the saying go?” she mumbled. “If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.”

“That’s highly unlikely.”

“Wanna bet?”

“The stakes?”

“If I’m right, you give up your ridiculous ambitions.”

“And, if you’re wrong?”

“You’ll have me completely at your disposal.”

The offer was too tempting to refuse. He extended his hand; she grasped it.

Kilgrave prompted, "Tell me all."

"*All* would take the rest of the day. Let me summarize: I travel by lightning bolt, anywhere in the world - and even through history. I can manifest the dead. When I get angry, all hell breaks loose - literally - with spontaneous earthquakes, thunderstorms, fires, hurricane-force winds ravaging the countryside." She paused, his features alight with anticipation. "You want more?"

"Of course!"

"I can't be confined to a jail cell or locked hospital room. Guns and knives pulled on me melt into puddles of goo. I can't be killed, and I can heal the wounds of others."

He flipped her right palm toward the table lamp illuminating the room to offset the day's gloom. "These scars... are old. Why haven't you healed *them*?"

"A reminder of my own foolishness."

Kilgrave clucked his tongue. "Anything else?"

"I can manipulate roulette wheels and dice at the craps tables."

"Meaning, you *are* rich."

"I'm... able to pay my expenses. I don't need a surplus."

"Now, that *is* a foolish sentiment. I've amassed a huge fortune..."

"To what purpose? You don't pay for the services rendered to you, you voice your needs and are obliged, without cost."

"And *you* pay for what you have?"

"Sure. Oats and straw for the horses, groceries for myself..."

"Horses?" he repeated.

"Out in the barn. Six of them."

"May I see them?"

"If it ever stops raining, sure. I'm not in the mood to go out and get wet again."

He contemplated his appearance and unceremoniously shivered with cold. "Yes. No need to risk illness."

"You don't ever get ill, do you?"

"Come to think of it, no. Not since..."

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished. I had to walk five miles from Inverness before I hitched a ride the rest of the way."

"I haven't eaten breakfast yet. Do you cook?"

"I usually travel with a chef, or eat at three-star restaurants."

"I can fry up some bacon and eggs, or make peanut butter toast. Your choice."

Wistfully, he intoned, "I haven't have bacon and eggs in years."

"C'mon, then."

In the kitchen, Mustang yanked a cast iron skillet off a wall hook, placing it on the stove with ample strips of bacon popping in the grease. Eggs over-easy occupied a separate pan. Orange juice filled two tumblers, with lightly-browned toast adorning a china platter on the art-deco dinette table.

The pair devoured every bite.

It didn't startle Mustang that Kilgrave didn't raise a finger to help cook or clear the table. When she squirted dish soap into the warm stream filling the sink, he observed the domestic scene with near-glee.

"One thing you haven't explained to me," he ventured as the last utensils were placed in the drying rack. "How did you neutralize my..."

"You've already lost our bet. I'd be crazy to 'fess up."

"What do you mean, I lost? You said you were going to kill me, but I'm still very much alive."

"For the moment."

She reveled in taking her turn to terrify this uninvited visitor. How many souls had he devastated with his puerile dictates...

He'd closed his eyes and seemed to exert a tremendous effort, if the bulging veins of his neck were any indication. Once he gave up straining his capacities, he spat, "I feel like I'm encased in a hazmat suit. But, it's not protecting me from contracting some communicable disease, it's preventing my... influence from reaching others!"

"And, if I have anything to do with it, you'll stay that way, indefinitely."

"Why?" he stormed.

"Because, from what I gather, you're just a spoiled child, inflicting his tantrums on the public."

"And, what are you? From the information I obtained - and the reason I believed you to be much older - you've defied law enforcement on six continents and made a shambles of countless innocent lives!"

"Hey, I admit I've had local police and Interpol after me, as well as intelligence agencies and covert operatives. Unlike you, whose existence borders on the mythical, I don't make them comply with idiotic requests like jumping in the lake." As an afterthought, she added, "Though I have *thrown* a few in the lake."

"You see, that's where you failed. You're seen as flesh and blood. I'm regarded as a ghost, a shadow, something intangible. No one can touch me, because I can order them to forget me."

"Oh, I can do that, too. But, I don't... abuse the privilege."

“You’re calling me abusive?”

She snarled, “Damn straight.”

“You’re bold now, but when I shake off this... this...”

“You won’t, unless I see a reason to release you - and I won’t.”

“What about time and distance?”

“What about it?”

“My... influence extends about ten meters from where I’m currently standing, and lasts only about twelve hours.”

“In the early days of dealing with what some have called my... gift, I had that problem. I couldn’t go to sleep if I wanted to maintain control over a situation.”

“You’ve... solved that problem?”

“Years ago.”

“So, what you do, lasts...”

“Until I consciously command otherwise.”

His lips pursed thoughtfully. “Well, that puts you one up on me.”

Mustang grew bored with this exchange and moved toward the door.

“Let’s play chess.”

“To what end?” He glanced out the kitchen window. “It’s stopped raining. My suit should be dry by now. I might as well leave, since you won’t... change your mind about me.”

“Heroes *or* villains, I won’t change my mind. You’ve all been reduced to ordinary human beings.” She sidled along the hall. “Good luck fending for yourself in the real world.”

In the living room, she toyed with the black queen. General Rommel, Mark Twain, Gandhi or St. Francis of Assisi could have materialized opposite her to commence a game; not while Kilgrave remained in the house.

Let him depart, unimpeded. He, like the helicopter passenger from the previous day, would no longer be able to rely on the favors - or forgiveness - of taxpayers. When they inflicted harm or damage on others, they would be called to account, liable to being sued for damages in a court of law, or thrown in prison.

The gaudy purple suit, lavender dress shirt, black tie and purple suede shoes - that could have wound up totally ruined without her kindly intervention - made him resemble a concord grape. He lingered on the threshold, indecisive whether to plead with his hostess or mutely withdraw.

His pride got the better of him. “If I ever escape this... this... trap,” he proclaimed, “I shall return and subject you to tortures so excruciating, you’ll plead for death.”

Why Mustang enjoyed pranking these self-righteous sorts, she couldn't fathom, beyond the momentary pleasure it gave her to take them down a notch. She rose and followed Kilgrave outdoors, where she grabbed his shoulder, spun him around and planted a kiss on his lips that jolted the stoop beneath them.

"Without the risk of failure, success means nothing," she declared, shoving him down the steps, retreating inside then securing the deadbolt.

IV

Stacking bales of straw in the barn Thursday morning, the Mistress of Boleskine reminded herself to be more conscious of eating breakfast before undertaking strenuous activities. Without a plentiful supply of protein, every joint screamed in agony, and she surmised she'd pulled muscles on her left side while hoisting 20-kilo sacks of oats onto the metal shelves.

She shuffled inside the Georgian mansion, kicking off her sneakers. Padding past the living room, she detected an unexpected presence. She reversed motion and took a second look.

A middle-aged man sprawled on the sofa, Black with a shaved cranium and patch over his left eye, browsing an old magazine from the fireplace kindling box.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snapped.

Solid limbs in black denim swung to the floor. "I could ask you the same."

Oh, hell, Mustang lamented. Another idiot being circumspect.

"Get out," she demanded. "I'm in no mood for this today, and my neighbor is due 'round any minute to unload supplies so I can repair six fence posts in the corral, damaged by all-too-eager beavers."

"Not even going to offer me a cup of coffee?" hinted the American-Bronx accent.

"I'm not Starbucks."

Fully upright, he towered over Mustang. "No, you're something much worse. You neutered my crew, so now you have to step in and cover for them."

"Fat chance."

"I don't blame you, really. When the President of the United States makes a request, honest patriots are likely to capitulate."

Jaw clenched, she breathed evenly to prevent an outburst that would bring the ceiling down on their heads.

"But, that two-bit politician and his overzealous cronies on the Hill don't grasp the danger we face. The threat - from within and without - is mind-blowing."

"To each his own, I guess."

“That kind of ignorance got us into this predicament.”

Her sarcastic rejoinder: “You have a solution?”

“Undo what you’ve done, plain and simple.”

“No.”

She moved toward the kitchen; he restrained her with considerable force.

“Those who believe in nonviolence, or pacifism...”

A surge of current retracted his grip, and he wedged his injured appendage beneath his armpit, applying pressure against the pain.

“I’m no pacifist, if you - like the others over the past couple days - have been informed by those who can be bought for a few bucks. My body count might be far fewer than yours, but that’s only because I don’t like the idea of wholesale genocide, and I don’t use guns.”

“Yeah, you’re... talents are off the scale. That’s why...”

“No,” she stressed.

A box of corn flakes and jug of milk landed on the dinette table with an ominous thud. She grabbed a tablespoon from the dish rack and flopped onto the nearest chair as her unwelcome guest considered his options.

The first bite half-way to her mouth, she glowered at him. “I already told you: get out. If you send anyone else to bother me, they’ll soon learn from their mistake. Coming after dark, they’ll get the shit scared out of them. If I see them during the day, they’re dead.”

“Yeah, we intercepted the radio chatter from the Russian wet team that tried to hit you night before last.” He sat opposite her. “If you’re so... pissed, why didn’t you snuff Kilgrave?”

“He’s harmless: a five-year-old in a man’s body. He doesn’t know any better.”

“On his way to an ultra-maximum security prison, to boot.”

“Huh?”

“We nabbed him in a pub not too far from here last night. Drunk as a skunk and moaning about being broke.”

Mustang chewed thoughtfully. “Well, when you can’t just walk into a bank and have the teller fork over a wad of cash, I suppose it changes your perspective on life.”

“We could send you along with him. You’d never escape.”

“Bullshit. No cell can hold me.”

He leaned forward; his breath stank, ruining her appetite. “If you work with us, you can have anything your heart desires.”

“I already *have* everything my heart desires, buddy.” The spoon clattered in the half-empty bowl. “Take off.”

He stood slowly. “So, you won’t restore my team to... their...”

“Don’t even try to make out what they is normal, dude. Toppling buildings, turning quiet neighborhoods into killing fields... They needed to be shut down, and they will stay on ice, as long as I have any say in the matter.”

“What about when the dregs of the universe break through dimensional rifts...”

She smirked. “What rifts?”

“You wouldn’t understand, not being educated...”

Milk splattered on his expensive leather jacket and black t-shirt, the bowl crashing on the tile.

“I may have skipped enough school to send the local truant officer into hysterics, but I know there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Twitching fingers hardened into a fist. “That’s Shakespeare, by the way.”

Her visitor’s right eye squinted.

“And your stupid rifts - the rifts between hundreds of dimensions that have been allowing all sorts of weird shit to disrupt innocent lives - have been sealed.” She shoved him toward the exit. “You’ve got thirty seconds to get out of my sight.”

Not the sort to budge an inch, this looming figure double-timed along the gravel drive while trying to maintain his dignity. Engines revved beyond the curve, and three black SUVs with tinted glass maneuvered awkwardly on the narrow track, soon disappearing.

Mustang yearned to blow them into tiny pieces.

“You handled that quite well,” praised Samuel Clemens from the foyer.

She whirled toward the white-suited author. “It was the least I could do to get them off my back.”

He vanished instantly as the sound of tires crushing rock increased. Glenn MacDonough’s pickup approached, loaded with wooden posts, a portable power saw and assorted tools.

“Are ye certain ye dinnae wish me t’ do the job for ye, Your Ladyship?” the project manager queried, running arthritic digits through wisps of white hair.

“This was my favorite project every spring, besides watching the mares in foal.” Her stomach grumbled. If she didn’t mop up the spilt milk, it would soon begin to stink. “I’ll get started right after I finish my housework.”

“As ye wish.”

“You can pick up the saw on your way home this evening,” she advised.

“Aye.”

After latching the tailgate, he swung behind the steering wheel and turned the key in the ignition.

“By the way,” she said when he lowered the window, “were you in Dores last night?”

“Aye. A few o’ m’ mates enjoy a pint or two at the pub o’ an evenin’.”

“Did you notice anything... anyone...”

“A bloke all in purple?”

Mustang sensed her cheeks redden. “Aye.”

“Nae from these parts.”

“No, definitely not.”

“Seemed... out o’ sorts.” MacDonough reached for the handset of his radio, beeping urgently. “Friend o’ yours?”

“We’ve... had dealings.”

“Well, he must ha’ been wanted by the constables. Two huge bastards hauled him off, kickin’ and screamin’.”

Unable to muffle her laughter, the young woman envisioned the scene. “Thanks, Glenn.”

“Be careful wi’ the power tools. I would nae want t’ hear ye wound up in hospital wi’ missin’ fingers.”

She didn’t waste the energy to explain that, should such a tragedy occur, she could easily reattach the severed flesh.

Just as easily, she could have requested the elemental forces perform a thorough cleaning of the kitchen, droplets of white liquid not only on the floor, but the walls and ceiling.

She underestimated her own strength when aggravated.

A bucket and rags accompanied her around the chamber, the scent of fresh pine replacing stagnant odors. Rather than rise from her knees, she sank on her heels, reveling in the silence.

No one would set foot on the Boleskine estate for the foreseeable future, without her direct permission.

The likes of politicians and mutant heroes would have no need to disrupt her idyll. She would’ve liked to see the expression on her most recent guest’s visage when he received the report that inter-dimensional travel had ceased with the closure of the rifts.

He’d laud her as a god in human form, if he didn’t already.

She didn't really... find that prospect offensive. To sit above the masses, to ensure they coexisted peacefully with those of other nations, other cultures - other species? - might not be a bad goal to pursue.

"You've rejected that notion on many occasions," observed St. Francis of Assisi in his tattered brown robe, leaning against the granite counter. "Your claim to prefer solitude..."

"Maybe I've finally grown up."

Clemens' bushy mustache rippled when he chortled. "Not yet, child. Not yet."

"Isn't seeking justice and equity a sign of... maturity?"

"Indeed, but how you seek it remains... problematic."

Hazel eyes rolled. "You mean, if I freed Kilgrave, for instance, since he's no longer a danger to others - even though he's committed unspeakable crimes in the past - that would be a sign of... naivete?"

"Absolutely, Signorina," remarked Francis.

"Fine. I'm satisfied I'm not perfect..."

In that moment, somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, a military-grade helicopter suffered an irreparable malfunction in its navigation system. The pilot notified his passengers of the need to return to Ireland in order to make a safe emergency landing. No more had the wheels settled on the tarmac at the Galway airport, than the door popped open, and a set of wrist and ankle shackles crumbled into dust. Kilgrave bent to retrieve a trio of wallets mysteriously extracted from tailored trousers, walking away with his pockets full of cash while his captors fumbled to unfasten their seatbelts.

He mistook the incident for a restoration of his own powers, only to discover in short order that he remained an ordinary human being. He boarded a train for Dublin though, without a passport, his travel options were limited. He managed to stow away on a freighter, disembarking in Liverpool when the ship docked to take on cargo.

As if he wore a GPS tracker, Mustang sensed his progress northward through England and across the Scottish border. She'd locked down the perimeter of Boleskine and would not lift the barrier for him, or anyone.

On this balmy May Saturday, she finished painting the new corral fenceposts, hoping the taste of the chemicals would dissuade any beavers from tearing apart the wood.

"You've got all the trees in the forest," she declared to the air, more paint on her arms and clothes than on the intended surface. "You can leave these alone."

The horses enjoyed being outdoors, fresh air pleasant. Once she scrubbed the stains from her skin with a shower, she'd exercise them - no better way to spend an afternoon.

A pity she had to count the days when no one showed up on her doorstep, seeking her indulgence. On too many occasions since her arrival on Loch Ness' eastern shore, she'd been assailed by the curious, the rain-drenched, the lost, lonely, the injured. Their plight tugged at her heart-strings, and she'd succumbed to impulse, assisting them in solving their problems.

Wreaking havoc too often in the process.

Followed by the angst of restoring order to chaos.

Besides manifesting prominent dead icons, she'd encountered ghosts seeking solace and eternal rest. Those who practiced magick - of the kind her grandfather, Jack Parsons, had preferred - had sought to best her, to acquire her unwanted inheritance.

They'd not left the property disappointed or defeated; they'd mostly left dead.

Even the innocent, who'd not employed lies and wiles, or flattered her with flowery phrases noting her similarity to a beacon of light shining through the darkness of troubled times, had suffered for their trust in her.

Riding the trails on her roan mare Pietra as the sun descended, she bent in the saddle to pluck a pebble off the ground, pitching it at the border between Boleskine land and Glenn MacDonough's acreage.

The stone bounced back after contacting an invisible, impenetrable wall.

"Good," sighed Mustang. "I'm finally safe."

Except, a flash of purple stepped from the underbrush beyond the blockade, straight white teeth framed by thin, smiling lips.

"Go away," she stated. "You have the world before you. Besides, if they come hunting for you, this is the first place they'll search, thinking I helped you."

"Didn't you?"

She squirmed in the saddle.

"I'm... skint."

"Then, get a job."

"I'm... not qualified for any sort of career."

"There's always fast food."

His slender nose crinkled. "What? Me, fry chicken in a vat of putrid oil?"

"Millions of others have started that way, and moved on to better things." Pietra's reins snapped. "Or, go to college, earn a degree. Learn a trade."

"That, too, takes dosh."

“You have no choice but to get your priorities straight, eh? If you need money, you need to earn it.”

“You... don’t. I’ve been to the French Riviera. I’ve heard the tales of the elusive young woman with uncanny luck at the craps tables.”

“Ah, so you think blackmail is an option?” she scoffed.

“I can turn you in to the constables...”

Her contralto bit, hard. “You think I care? Everyone from the lowliest sheriff’s deputy back home to the U.N. Secretary-General is aware of what I can do - and what I’ve done. They’d be beating down my door with cuffs at the ready if they thought they could stop me. Instead, they offer me tens of millions for my help.”

“And you refuse?”

“Damn straight, dude! Here’s an idea: why don’t you try to do some good with your life? Why not set your sights on being a hero, instead of a villain? Why not help others, instead of leech off them?”

“I... have no clue how to do that.”

“Because no one ever taught you right from wrong?”

“Exactly.”

Mustang’s fingers flexed, entwined with the leather. “Like I told another... jerk on Thursday: you’ve got thirty seconds to get out of my sight.”

Golden-brown orbs met her gaze, recognized unshakable resolve.

“Someday, I’ll be back,” he swore. “I’ll break from these bonds you’ve imposed on me, and I’ll tear you to pieces - body, mind and soul - before crushing you like a bug.”

“I won’t hold my breath.” She pretended to check a non-existent wristwatch. “Fifteen seconds.”

Bronzed mane glistening in the sunlight, he set off at a leisurely gait across the field of tall grass.

“Good riddance,” she mumbled, steering Pietra into the trees.