

The Mustang Chronicles:

Ruffled Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

With most of the tourist attractions, including Urquhart Castle, located on the western bank of Loch Ness, noise and exhaust fumes from shuttles and buses rarely disrupted Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea’s daily horseback rides around the 47 acres surrounding Boleskine House. The previous spring’s torrential storms, however, had washed away multiple sections of highway A82, and construction continued into the summer to repair the damage. That meant traffic on route B852, along the eastern shore, saw a substantial increase in traffic.

The occasional sputter and squeal of brakes could be ignored as she wound between dense foliage on one of the bays or her prize Arabian. The choking of fouled spark plugs and repeated attempts to restart an overheated engine one particular Friday, however, drew her attention to the roadway.

Horns of aggravated drivers prevented from continuing their travels and shouted expletives added to the cacophony.

She reined Molly toward the barn. She’d learned to avoid interaction with humans, for her own peace of mind and their safety.

She’d spoken to no one except delivery drivers from the grocer in Dores and the feed store in nearly a year, content with the isolation.

While grooming and feeding the three animals in their stalls, she heard hesitant voices approaching.

“Oh, hell...”

Her auburn head did not turn when a heavily accented baritone queried, “Excuse me, but can we use your phone?”

“I don’t have one.”

“We need an ambulance.”

“Why?”

“When the bus stalled, my buddy Jorge was in the can. The sudden stop threw him into the sink and...”

“Concussion?”

“Worse.”

Through grit teeth, Mustang grumbled, “I’ll loan you one of the horses and you can ride to my neighbor’s...”

When she straightened and spun, her jaw dropped.

The figure before her might well have weighed as much as the mare beside her.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” the man quipped.

A younger tenor interjected, “What about me?”

Curly haired, deeply tanned and not yet 15, the slender lad stepped past the other passenger.

With a nod, Mustang shuffled toward the saddle on its stand. The teen relieved her of the burden and handled the task with skilled hands.

He spurred Sarge to a gallop and disappeared into the woods.

“Who is he?” asked Mustang.

“Haven’t a clue.”

“Just a bunch of strangers on a guided tour?”

“Pretty much.” He reversed through the door so the Mistress of Boleskine could exit the barn. “I’m Miguel Iglesias.”

Squinting against the mid-day brightness, she sniffed, “I don’t care.”

“You don’t... recognize the name?” His bulk practically deflated.

“Nope.”

“But, you’re American...”

“Haven’t lived in the States for...” - she mentally counted - “nearly ten years.”

As she wiped sweat from her neck with a stained red kerchief, she groaned at the appearance of two other men on the gravel drive.

“These two from the bus?” she puzzled.

Iglesias shifted toward the newcomers. “Probably.”

The taller of the pair wore a black shirt and trousers, uncomfortably pointed hand-tooled oxfords, gaudy jeweled rings with fingerless gloves and an ankle-length leather duster - too warm for the humid weather - had lank bronze hair that hung below his shoulders, and a serious expression. His companion sported baggy denim shorts and a U2 t-shirt with sweat socks and stained sneakers, confusion fogging his searching orbs.

“This is private property,” she declared.

“We’re... looking for a friend.” The coated intruder boasted a New York inflection, if she guessed rightly. “A bowler hat, fur-trimmed overcoat and a distinctive cane...”

“Haven’t seen him.”

The distant whine of sirens confirmed the messenger had reached Glenn MacDonough’s and summoned the authorities and paramedics, and possibly a tow truck or replacement bus.

“I’ll thank you to be on your way now,” prompted Mustang.

A plump mitt extended toward her; she tentatively grasped the digits.

“I’d like to thank you for your kindness,” stated the uninvited visitor, “but I seem to have misplaced my wallet.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“No, tickets to my show this weekend.”

“Thank you, no. I don’t...”

“Everybody needs to laugh, and I get the feeling you don’t... much.”

She squinted at his bald pate, goatee and triple chins. “You one of those comedians who specializes in inappropriate jokes and foul language?”

“You don’t read the papers or watch TV?” he countered.

“Nope.”

Sarge, panting from the exertion, meandered into sight at that moment, riderless.

“What the hell...” Mustang grunted.

The performer snickered, “Maybe the kid’s shy,”

“Maybe he’s the pick-pocket who rifled the passenger’s belongings after we left the bus,” speculated the close-cropped, skinny trespasser.

“How would you know?”

His associate explained, “He behaved oddly the entire trip from Inverness. Moved from seat to seat, chatting up strangers and scoping out their bags...”

“When the driver ordered us off after the engine died, he lagged behind.”

“So, you think he’s making a break for it?” Mustang pressed, leading Sarge into the corral and securing the gate.

“Probably,” replied the young man.

She chuckled, “Not with anything that doesn’t belong to him.”

An abrupt microburst of wind swept past the Georgian mansion and the quartet, raining wallets, wrist watches and jewelry at their feet.

“Oh, hell...”

Iglesias bent to pluck his billfold from the pile. As the other two focused on Mustang, he extracted gold-embossed tickets from among assorted cash and laid them on her scarred left palm. “I hope you’ll come. It’ll do you good.”

Rather than argue, Mustang nodded her thanks and tucked the rectangles in her hip pocket.

The sirens louder, Iglesias trundled toward the roadway, anxious to reunite with Jorge.

Anxious to be rid of these other interlopers, Mustang sidled toward the historic dwelling. She sensed the one raise his rings in her direction in a threatening fashion; he recoiled when they slid off his finger and rolled to her feet.

“He’s already here, isn’t he?” resounded the accusation.

Key poised near the deadbolt in the steel-reinforced door, Mustang barked, “This is my house, and you’ve been warned.”

“Don’t defend him...”

She whirled, hazel orbs smoldering. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but you don’t want to see me angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry... and people die.”

A ball of blue energy soared toward her, generated via the youth’s wild gestures. She brushed it aside like an errant fly.

“You’re a Morganian!” he exclaimed.

She countered, “I’m a hermit who doesn’t like being disturbed.” The door swung inward, she backed over the threshold and slammed the panel shut. Only then did she allow her knees to collapse like gelatin, landing ungracefully on the foyer tile.

“I am Balthazar Blake,” the shout penetrated the walls. “I call Maxim Horvath to reveal himself and face the fate of all Morganians.”

After that, silence, until their shoes crunched gravel as they departed.

Mustang recovered her composure and trod to the kitchen. She’d eaten no breakfast, and it was well past noon.

Finding the refrigerator open and jean-clad legs visible in the gap, her fists clenched.

“Is this your revenge for being... robbed of your take?” she snapped.

The teen poked brown curls around the insulated edge. “I’m hungry. It’s been a long day.”

Not so much as a twitch of her wrist preceded him flying across the room and out the kitchen door, which opened at her unspoken command. He landed beside the unused grill, scrambled upright and sprinted into the shadows.

“Good riddance,” she mumbled, assessing the half-eaten block of cheddar cheese, open package of bologna and orange peels. “I need to put up the electric fence again, I suppose.”

“Isn’t that a bit drastic?” chimed the Southern twang of Samuel Clemens. “You’ve had no interruptions of your idyll these many months.”

“One is too many, but four in a single day?” she objected.

“The construction will be completed in a matter of weeks...”

“Until then, the fence will dissuade any casual callers.”

“As you wish.”

Clutching the peanut butter jar, she faced the shaggy white hair and thick mustache above a white suit and bow tie. “It’s for their own good!”

“Because you still can’t control your impulsive behavior...”

“What should I do? Let a thief steal my food?”

Clemens smirked.

“Or a couple would-be sorcerers attack me from behind?”

“How do you know...”

“It wasn’t any conventional weapon that shot that energy ball!” She mimicked their elaborate movements with disdain, as unnecessary as the wands in the Harry Potter stories, or the nose-twitching of old television series like *Bewitched*.

“And, the comedian?”

“Good luck to him. For me to sit in the midst of a rowdy crowd would be far too precarious...”

“Glenn MacDonough would be glad to drive you, I’m sure.” Clemens gazed out the window above the sink. “Or, his nephew.”

This mention of the British orthopedic surgeon intrigued her. “Denis is visiting?”

“Indeed.” He pointed beyond smudged panes. “In fact, he’s on his way here.”

“Oh, hell...” That she smelled of horses, straw tangled in her auburn tresses, didn’t bother her so much as the doctor knowing her secret, that she’d been bequeathed power over the natural elements by her late grandfather, scientist and occultist Jack Parsons. “What does he want?”

“His watch and his wallet, I’ll wager,” muttered Clemens.

“You mean, the kid...”

The white mane bobbed before vanishing as Sommers knocked on the framework.

Mustang swallowed any rash comment as she wrenched the knob inward. “Well, hello!” she managed. “Long time, no see.”

His blue eyes radiated concern. “Are you all right?”

“Sure. I...”

“There’s a thief about. I think he stole one of your horses...”

“No, Sarge is safe. As for what was taken...” Her stomach growling, she ushered Sommers around the structure to where the ill-gotten gains remained unclaimed.

“Who does this stuff belong to?” he inquired, squatting to select his own belongings.

“A tour group, mostly, stalled on the highway.”

“Damn him!”

“Would you do me the favor of taking this stash to them?”

Brushing his hands on the back of his khaki trousers, he scratched the straw-like mop atop his head. “You still fear... dealing with people?”

“Some were already here,” she admitted. “It didn’t go well.”

He glanced from her troubled countenance to the discards. “Have you a bag or a box?”

At a jog, she disappeared in the barn, fetching a cardboard box from the groceries delivered a day previous.

“Perfect!” Sommers praised. He loaded the assorted trifles and strode toward the curve in the drive. “When I’m done with this, I have another matter to address with you.”

She watched him, disheartened, then retraced her steps. “Oh, hell...”

At least, Mustang managed to devour two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with a tall glass of milk before he returned. He joined her at the steel dinette table, accepting her offer of coffee.

“So, what is it?” she urged, exhaustion straining her muscles.

“Have you heard of Miguel Iglesias?”

For lack of a better reaction, she sighed, “Why?”

“He’s a countryman of yours. I thought you’d be familiar with his comedy. He’s actually of Mexican decent, though born in Los Angeles.”

She repeated, “Why?”

Averting his gaze, Sommers hesitated briefly. “Uncle Glenn told me you haven’t left the property in ages. I... it’s not healthy. I...”

“You believe everyone needs a good laugh?”

“Then, you *do* know him!”

She grinned sheepishly. “I met him not two hours ago.”

Sommers deliberated. “I did notice someone who resembled him waiting to board the reserve bus...”

“Not resembled. Him, in person.”

“So, do you want to go with me?”

“Do you have tickets?”

“No, but Uncle Glenn has connections...”

Mustang retrieved Iglesias’ gift and waved them at her guest. “So do I.”

II

A Led Zeppelin t-shirt, jeans and sandals sufficed for the evening; Mustang’s rage would have been unrestrainable had she dressed up for what amounted to a pathetic debacle.

In fact, the only part of the excursion the young woman enjoyed was eating a quasi-American hamburger and fries - not the British-style “chips” - and a chocolate shake made from real milk and ice cream.

Dr. Denis Sommers borrowed his uncle’s construction pickup for the drive to Inverness, calling for Mustang just before 6:00. The restaurant, only a block from the theatre where Miguel Iglesias was billed, filled to capacity as the couple finished their meal in a corner booth - boisterous, drunk patrons slurring their words and insulting their friends.

Sommers clutched her hand gently as they strolled the cobbled lane, sun setting behind gathering clouds. “That’s not you, is it?” he prodded.

“I’m fine now.”

“Good.”

That is, until the sound of running footsteps from behind boded ill.

A lanky, speeding image crashed between them and, in the confusion, deft fingers lifted Sommers’ wallet from his trousers.

The pick-pocket didn’t get far. As soon as she realized what had transpired, Mustang directed he be pinned on his knees, immobile.

When the pair reached him, she uttered a curse.

“What is it?” wondered Sommers.

“Don’t you recognize him?”

The surgeon raised the culprit’s chin into the light of a street lamp. “Well, damn me! Twice in two days, you try to pinch my cash?”

Somber brown eyes glared at his captors. “You, or someone else. I gotta make a living.”

“What’s your name, boy?” demanded Mustang.

“Harris.”

“Harris what?”

“Kimball.”

“Harris Kimball?” she stated.

“No, idiot. Kimball Harris.”

Sommers yanked Harris to his feet. “Well, Kimball Harris, you won’t have to worry about making a living when you’re spending time in prison.”

A constable on foot patrol near the theatre had joined them, and took the teen into custody, but not before Mustang slid Sommers’ wallet from the tattered corduroy slacks.

“No sense going through all that red tape to recover this,” she beamed as they skirted the queue at the “Will Call” window and presented their tickets to the usher at the door.

Seated in the third row, Mustang and Sommers didn't need to rely on the large screens mounted on either side of the stage to see the antics and facial expressions Iglesias employed in his act. Quite spry for his size, he made use of sound effects and vocal impressions to convey his anecdotes.

Mustang found no humor in the tales of police stops, immigration kerfuffles, overeating, and ethnic differences - while over 1,000 spectators roared and applauded around her.

Sommers acknowledged his sore abdominal muscles as they exited the building. "I haven't laughed so hard in years." He studied her wrinkled brow. "Why didn't you find him funny?"

"Maybe I'm jaded," she grunted. "There's no humor in insulting the intelligence or traditions of others."

Rounding the corner, a silver Mercedes limousine nearly struck them, trying to escape throngs of fans converging on the stage door, chanting Iglesias' nickname.

The comedian scrambled from the rear of the vehicle, mobbed by the crowd before he could reach Mustang to apologize for the incident.

She'd seen such foolishness too many times. "Go away!" she shouted, but what reached the ears of that rabid mob was the howl of a vicious beast. Screams and shrieks accompanied their abrupt withdrawal into the darkness.

Leaving Mustang, Sommers and Iglesias to stare at each other.

"You okay?" asked the performer.

The auburn ponytail bounced vertically.

"Glad you could come."

Sommers responded before Mustang leveled her honest opinion of the show. "Thanks for the tickets."

"There's a party at the hotel. Hop in."

Mustang's digits halted Sommers' forward motion. "Your friend recovering from his injuries?"

"They're keeping him overnight for observation. We fly out first thing..."

"Where to?" queried Sommers.

"Dublin, then Galway, then home."

Mustang offered, "Good luck to you."

She tugged Sommers along the sidewalk, unsure of where the pickup had been parked.

"Why were you so rude?" he protested.

"Would you want to attend a party where they get soused and tell even worse stories?"

“I... suppose not.”

“Great.” She released her grip. “I’ll be glad to get back to Boleskine.”

Or, not.

Sommers dropped her on the gravel drive and, as she neared the mansion’s entrance, she glimpsed a shadow on the steps. It ascended as she neared, and she could distinguish a bowler, voluminous overcoat and a walking stick topped by a prism glinting off the crescent moon.

“Oh, hell...” she moaned. “You’re Maxim Horvath.”

The head swiveled, features hidden by the gloom. A cultured voice drawled, “How do you know my name?”

“Your friends were here, looking for you.”

“Friends?”

“One called himself Balthazar Blake. I don’t know who the kid was.”

An unintelligible phrase was followed by, “David Stutler.”

“Whatever.” Mustang remained at a distance, with no intention of inviting this trespasser inside. “Take off.”

“No.”

“Then, what do you want?”

Horvath summarily dismissed her. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because, this is my property.”

“You’re too young to know its history.”

Here we go again, she mused. Some connection with the duplicitous Aleister Crowley, who’d occupied the mansion in the early 1900s, or Jack Parsons, who’d lived in the Gate House for decades after the FBI faked his death in California.

“Look, I’m tired and I have to be up early to tend my horses,” she related. “Please, go.”

A purplish glimmer emanated from Horvath’s cane, illuminating not just the gem, but a selection of rings - a dragon, for one - and a pentacle ornament.

“You will unlock the door and provide me food and lodging,” he hissed.

“Like hell.”

The flash of energy crackled in her direction, dissipating before it made contact. A second, then a third, failed to reach its target.

Horvath’s knees buckled, awed. “Morgana reborn!”

“No. Mustang. Known in these parts as Lady Elizabeth Neville. Now, get lost.”

She marched toward the door; Horvath bowed until his nose touched the dirt. She refrained from inserting the key in the deadbolt, instead watching until he awkwardly regained his footing and reversed along the gravel, similar to knights departing the presence of royalty.

Once he was far enough not to interfere with her, she hastily ducked inside and locked the door.

A mug of hot chocolate soothed her jangled nerves as she sat in the living room's cane-backed rocking chair. When she moved a white pawn on the inlaid chess table, Erwin Rommel took up the challenge.

"General," she ventured while contemplating her next tactic, "what is a Morganian?"

The crisp German-accented baritone replied, "You mean, in the realms of magickal practice?"

"I... suppose so."

"They are adherents of Morgana le Fey, the sister of the legendary King Arthur of Camelot. She reputedly used dark magick to gain power over Merlin..."

Bishop poised in mid-air, "You're kidding."

"Not at all. There were those in the Third Reich, at Hitler's insistence, who specialized in researching metaphysical history and potential ways to augment the destruction wrought by more common means."

"Oh, hell..." Mustang abandoned the game. "So, Maxim Horvath seeks this Morgana, and Blake is trying to stop him?"

"Who's to say?"

"Do you know how sick I am of these... wanna-be magickians who think Boleskine is a haven for their misguided schemes?"

"Isn't it?"

She seized the arms of the rocker, knuckles white. "What do you mean?"

"You are here. Others of your... ilk can sense your dominance over the natural forces and want to share in it."

"Preposterous!"

"If the weather services can track the anomalies you cause on the tangible plane, cannot those with an affinity for... alternate dimensions do likewise?"

"So, I'll never be free of being tracked, on any level?"

Rommel grinned wryly.

"Gee, thanks."

Stomping to her bedroom, she flopped on the king-sized mattress but couldn't sleep. If Horvath intended to find Morgana, he would return eventually. If

Blake and this Stutler planned to prevent their nemesis from obtaining his goal, they would ignore her warning about trespassing on private property.

No electrified fence - visible or invisible - would stop them, either.

They would stand before the house, as she peered through the window, or on the hillock clearing near Jack Parsons' rotting pseudo-altar, waging a magick battle for preeminence. They might wound or kill each other, but that wasn't the worst of it.

The concentration and manipulation of their energies on the site would summon the authorities and shatter her solitude.

Tapping at sunrise barely audible, Mustang initially believed it the wind rattling the kitchen windowpane as she sipped her orange juice, bacon crackling in a skillet on the stove. Shifting on the seat, she recognized that rather clueless mien through the glass.

"What are you doing here?" she snorted after he slunk indoors.

David Stutler, gangly with dark hair and a distinct twitch, inhaled deeply before his nasal tenor noted, "I need your help."

"I want the truth."

She pointed to a chair; he dropped on the hard surface.

"Last night, we were in Inverness, and Balthazar's ring was stolen. Without it, he can't..." He seemed at a loss.

She urged, "Go on."

"How much detail do you want?"

"All of it."

"You... won't understand."

"Try me."

"It's clear you are a... sorcerer of some degree," he burred.

She loaded strips of bacon onto her plate. "I don't describe myself that way, but whatever."

"According to Balthazar, he and Horvath were apprentices to Merlin in the time of King Arthur." With a wave, Stutler declined breakfast, continuing as his hostess ate. "Horvath betrayed Merlin and sided with Morgana. After Merlin was killed, Balthazar spent centuries locating his heir."

"You?"

A shrug. "Merlin's ring identified me."

"But, you wear no ring."

"I've... surpassed that requirement."

"Balthazar hasn't?"

"Though he trained me, I have since..."

“The student becomes the master.”

“Something like that.” Brown eyes darted around the chamber. “We thought we were finished with Horvath in New York when Morgana was eliminated. Balthazar suspects he has discovered a means to resurrect her. We’ve been tracking him around the globe...”

Mustang guffawed.

“What’s so funny?”

“He thinks I’m her.”

Stutler shoved away from the table. “What?”

“Last night, he was here. He tried to... overpower me with that crazy cane of his. I... put him in his place.”

“You have that level of power?”

“I can do a lot more than deflect those puerile energy balls you shot at me yesterday.” The plate cleared, Mustang ran water in the sink, squirting dish soap into the stream. “What do you want from me?”

“Find Balthazar’s ring and restore it to him.”

“Try the police station in Inverness. The same kid who robbed the tour group on the bus was arrested last night in town. It’s probably in their evidence locker.”

“But, how would we explain...”

“Don’t. Walk in and take it.”

“They’ll stop us.”

When she vanished, he fell backward over the chair. “What the...”

“What kind of sorcerer can’t make himself invisible?” she chided, materializing.

“I’m... more into science, actually.”

Rinsing the dishes and arranging them in the rack, she chuckled. “My interactions with science have only gotten me in trouble.”

He towered over her as she dried her hands. “Will you come with me?”

“No.”

“How can I convince you this is life or death, not just for me, but for the planet?”

“In your estimation. What if I told you Horvath could drop dead this instant, if I ordered it?”

Stutler shuddered. “You’re... so casual about it.”

“It’s a fact of my life, not that I don’t regret the deaths of certain people.”

“You’re... barely my age.”

"I'm older than you think. When I received this... gift, it... stopped me from growing old."

"Then, you are on par with Balthazar, who's hundreds of years old."

"Except that he needs a ring to focus his magick. I don't." Mustang sidled to the kitchen door, opening it. Listening intently, she caught the object that flew through the gap in her scarred right palm.

Stutler jumped. "What the..."

"Don't be so timid, boy. While we were talking, I summoned the elements to bring me the ring." She tossed it on the table. "Take it to your friend and leave me be."

"That's... phenomenal!"

Strong arms seized her wrists from behind and twisted them upward, exposing the mangled flesh. Mustang didn't bother to struggle against Blake, as Stutler's eyes widened.

"Dave's told you our story," the sorcerer growled. "Now, tell us yours."

III

"That's it in a nutshell," Mustang Duryea concluded her narrative as the trio sipped coffee from ceramic mugs at the kitchen table.

"So, entirely by accident, you've come to exceed what it took me years of tutelage to master under the great Merlin?" breathed Balthazar Blake.

"You should know that controlling the elements is only limited by the capacity of the human mind."

Stutler added, "Similar to science."

"Science has rules," Mustang corrected. "When the human mind is convinced those rules are absolute, science goes no further. Gravity, for instance."

"We're... not here to debate..." Blake interrupted.

"Then, why are you here? Horvath has already come, and gone."

"He'll be back."

"Only as a last resort."

Blake's mouth opened; Stutler hushed him with a glance.

"Explain," Blake insisted.

Mustang sneered, aware he'd eavesdropped on her entire conversation with Stutler. "I'm not in the habit of repeating myself."

Blake's scowl exposed hints of his true age. He deposited his mug in the sink. "Then, we'll bother you no more."

"I won't bet on that."

“Why not?” ventured Stutler.

“Because, your curiosity is piqued by my abilities, as is Horvath’s. I gave him a good scare; once he calms down, he’ll want to know how I managed it. If I were you, I’d check in Dores, the little village north of here. He’s probably enshrined at the pub, devising a way to best me.”

“Horvath was never one to frequent bars,” Blake remarked.

“After what I did to him, if he denied needing a drink, he’d be lying.”

Resigned, Blake signaled Stutler toward the exit. Mustang secured the bolt and shuffled to her room. Lack of sleep and frustration at the wasted morning exacerbated her fatigue. She crawled into bed and didn’t wake until the setting sun painted the sky with pastel hues.

That spectacle hadn’t roused her, though. An ominous scraping, like a knife prying open a window, jolted her from a bizarre dream where wizards in ancient robes battled for supremacy.

Creeping along the corridor, she paused, tracking the source of the noise. Out the front door, she rounded the mansion and tip-toed up to Kimball Harris, wrenching wood chips away from the glass to one of the unfurnished spare rooms.

“Well, well. The cops let you out on bail?” she hailed.

Instantly, he stiffened, a cheap icepick thumping on the ground.

“Well?”

He retreated onto the grass, hands raised.

“Leave off,” Mustang snarled. “I don’t have a gun.”

“The peelers will.”

“You think they’re coming?”

“You rang them, didn’t you?”

“You’re short on memory, kid. Like I told the comedian the other day: I don’t have a phone.”

Arms relaxed, he scrutinized his surroundings.

“Yeah, you could run, if you like,” affirmed the Mistress of Boleskine.

“First, tell me, why’d you come back? This is a long way to go to raid my refrigerator again.”

“You live alone in this great big shack, and I need a place to hide out.”

“You broke jail?”

“They were hauling me back to the orphanage,” he gulped.

Mustang swallowed hard. “How old are you, kid?”

“Thirteen.”

A tall thirteen, lanky and coordinated, almost the exact opposite of David Stutler.

“How long you been on the streets?” she asked.

“On and off for three years, since my dad died.”

“How’d he die?”

“He crewed one of the ferries between Liverpool and Dublin. Washed overboard by a freak storm in the Irish Sea. They never found his body.”

“And, your mom?”

“The docs found cancer while she was carrying me. They couldn’t treat her, so she died a few months after I was born.”

“Your dad didn’t remarry?”

“He did, once. Didn’t earn enough money to keep her in the style to which she was accustomed, so she left him for some rich banker after about a year.”

She pitied him in the depths of her heart. At least, she’d had a mother and father, though they didn’t get along and seldom paid attention to her.

Providing assistance to this escaped juvenile would only bring the authorities down on her. Not that they could confine her in any cell.

“Come inside. I’ll fix dinner.”

“You won’t ring the constables?” When she directed hazel orbs at him, he cowered. “Right, you don’t have a phone.”

A set of red sweats bagged around his narrow shoulders and ankles, but showered and with his wavy mane combed, he looked fairly presentable. They sat together, enjoying steak, potatoes and milk.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, chewing the meat.

“For what?”

“Not forcing me to eat vegetables.”

She snickered, “I don’t like them, either.”

“Is there a bed for me?”

Hesitantly: “Yes.”

“I’m knackered.”

“Did you walk all the way here?”

“Not on your life. I caught a ride in an empty lorry headed for Foyers.”

“Smart,” she praised. “How’d you lose the constables?”

“Those idiots? We were on the way to the train station when I bent to tie my shoe, just as a pretty bird in a scanty dress breezed past. While they watched her, and I sprinted down an alley.”

“Did they make you go to school in the orphanage?”

“I skipped, most days. The teachers didn’t care.”

“You read and write?” Mustang pressed.

“Pretty much.”

“What do you want to do with your life?”

“Be free.”

His host choked on a bite of potato. She’d wanted no more for herself, both before and after Jack Parsons’ had inflicted these powers upon her...

Any long term decisions would wait until morning, as Harris began to nod off over his chocolate cake. She escorted him to the guest room, but he rejected her suggestion that she tuck him in bed.

“I gave that up when I was six.”

She commented, “I was eight.”

“G’night.”

Drawing the door closed, she stood in the hall, befuddled. Another predicament from which to extract herself, and no telling when Blake, Stutler and Horvath would once more descend on her.

The last thing she expected was to find Miguel Iglesias on the front stoop the following morning, a t-shirt bearing his distinctive logo and jean shorts with sneakers his trademark.

Cloth cap in hand, his bald dome glinting in the sunlight while his bulk obscured much of the dawn, he greeted her with that melodious Mexican accent.

“I... didn’t realize you were nobility when last we met,” he began. “All through the shows in Dublin and Galway, I couldn’t stop remembering your face in the third row, never cracking a smile. If you’d joined me for the party after that near miss with my limousine, I would’ve found a way to have a private discussion on why you don’t find me funny.”

“Of over a thousand people in that theatre, and God knows how many millions you’ve entertained on your tours, why bother with me?”

“Because you... recovered my wallet for me in a way I couldn’t fathom, and you shine like a beacon through a dense fog.”

“Oh, hell...”

She maneuvered herself, allowing him clear passage into the living room. When he lowered himself on the green sofa, the creaking springs threatened to collapse, and she held her breath momentarily.

The cane-backed rocker moved back and forth for a few seconds before she spoke. “How can I help you?”

“What makes you laugh?” urged Iglesias.

“I grew up on a horse ranch in Montana. I don’t think I ever saw my father smile. I remember little of my mom beyond her constant complaints. I spent most of the time riding my horse through the woods. Later, after... well, I couldn’t make

a move without worrying that I'd bring harm to someone, or wreak havoc accidentally."

"That doesn't explain..."

"If I tell you more, you'll be at risk."

"Are you in some kind of witness protection program?"

"No, You could say I'm voluntarily in seclusion for the protection of others."

"Your life has been so... horrible that you can't laugh?" Iglesias mourned.

"It's just that, what others find funny, I don't. It's not your fault."

"I try to stay off controversial topics, like politics..."

"Yet, you poke fun at other cultures, at the authorities..."

"What other material can I use?"

"That's your choice. Not everyone will agree with that choice, but you shouldn't worry about it. Be glad you make so many laugh."

"Somehow, I can't." He glanced around, taking in the dormant fireplace and the furnishings. "You struck me as the sort who needed to laugh more than anyone I've known, and I failed in that task."

"Maybe I didn't laugh because I've caused so much misery to others, and making fun of people only reinforces my own mistakes." Mustang rose and cupped her hands around Iglesias' ample chins. "Let it go, Miguel. I'll be fine."

She felt the burden lifted off his shoulders, wiped from his conscious mind. Accompanying him to the door, she watched as he joined his crew in a rented van, tires spitting gravel along the drive.

"What was that all about?" Kimball Harris droned groggily as she shot the deadbolt.

"One of your victims."

"The fat bloke?"

"Yup."

"Wanting me arrested?"

"He didn't know you were here. We had... other business."

"For someone who likes living alone, you see a lot of people."

"Not by invitation. They seem to find me against my will."

They tramped toward the kitchen.

"You could tell them to sod off," suggested the teen, pouring himself a bowl of cereal.

"I... feel like I owe them something - kindness, consideration."

"Even when they're selfish bastards only out for their own profit?"

"You're right, of course."

“But, you won’t change?”

“If I did, you’d be out the door in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t want anything you have, other than a little food and a place to sleep.”

Mustang chuckled. “That’s why you’ve been hunting for a wall safe?”

His head drooped, spoon swirling through the milk.

“If I gave you a hundred pounds, or a thousand, what would you do with it?”

“Get off this island.”

“Do you have a passport?”

“I’d stow away on a freighter.”

“Then, what?”

“Do as I pleased for as long as the lolly lasted.”

“What about getting ahead, earning your own way?” Mustang lamented.

“You mean, trade school or some apprenticeship?”

“Sure. Is there anything you like to do?”

Harris snorted, “I’m really good with my hands.”

His host felt herself grinning. “You could build things, be a carpenter, a mechanic, or a musician.”

“My dad wanted me to play piano, but I hated it.”

“Nobody’s pressuring you. Your whole life is ahead of you...”

“Working like a dog for a few pounds, day after day after day?”

“It’s the lot of most human beings.”

“Except you. You’re rich.” He drained his tumbler of orange juice.

She couldn’t divulge the source of her wealth: craps tables on the French Riviera, the dice obeying her unspoken commands. He would recognize her as a kindred spirit, a con artist, a thief.

If she caved and bestowed a generous allotment of cash on him, no matter how he spent it, he would eventually return for more, now that he knew she was a soft touch.

She couldn’t abide it.

Sending him to Dores, on foot, with a fifty pound note in his pocket, he would forget where he’d obtained it, and continue his aimless wanderings.

Scrubbing the sink after the dishes were stacked, she sighed, “What a day!”

And it was only 10:00.

She’d sorely neglected the horses since the bus disrupted her isolation, except for food and water. Once she packed off Harris, she could exercise the

three remaining mounts - still grieving for the other trio that perished in a fire while she'd absented herself from the property on what amounted to a fool's errand.

But, she'd enjoyed herself; she'd relished being able to indulge in simple pleasures without worrying who might get hurt or what trouble she would cause.

"Kimball," she called as she emerged from the shower, towel wrapped around her auburn tresses, yellow terry robe tied at the waist.

A search of the mansion confirmed his departure. He'd jimmied the door to her "safe room", the inner study where she kept Jack Parsons' journals, and could hide against almost any intrusion.

Harris had worked the tumblers of Parsons' old safe, in the wall beside one of the book shelves, and absconded with three hundred pounds.

He must've been disappointed, but he hadn't bothered to rifle the books, in which she concealed various amounts, for a total of twenty thousand.

He'd fled on foot - if he'd stolen one of the horses, her retribution would have been swift and merciless - so she muttered the command that would compel a loss of memory...

Two problems solved: Iglesias and Harris would not again darken her door. Cooling off the Arabian after a gallop across open fields beyond the trees that afternoon, the last reared its ugly head.

Bowler in one hand, cane in the other, a sweeping bow augmented Maxim Horvath's plea, "I implore your favor, dear Morgana."

Mustang leapt from the saddle, keeping her eyes fixed on the man, who must've been sweating inside the fur-trimmed overcoat. Her mount safely in the corral, she assessed routes to the dwelling that would not intersect with his path.

"Please, do not deny me my rightful place by your side," he persisted.

Still, if he believed her to be a reincarnation of Morgana le Fey, he wouldn't take any action against her, for fear of riling her. If she could play the role...

A futile effort, she determined. Pretending to be a witch from the sixth century, or thereabout, she had no command of the behaviors or language...

Best to end him and eliminate whatever threat he posed toward the world.

Blake emerged from the underbrush, long gait in those uncomfortable pointy oxfords making Mustang cringe. He declared, "That's my duty."

She withdrew. "Be my guest. Just don't make a mess."

IV

Fireworks.

Mustang hoisted herself onto the corral fence, stroking the Arabian's mane to soothe him as arcs of lightning crackled between Horvath and Blake. The scene reminded her of duels staged in classic movies: two cowboys at opposite ends of a dusty lane, shooting six-guns - and hitting nothing - or Europeans in powdered wigs and frock coats wielding sabers on a grassy knoll in some 18th century town.

The whole thing smacked of the absurd.

Yet, it amounted to a study in technique. Horvath's power emanated from the gem-topped walking stick, ornamented with the dragon ring, the pentacle pendant and a second ring - from some erstwhile sorcerer he'd defeated, or killed? Mustang pondered. Blake used his hands, his own ring somehow linked to the balls of light and fountain of water that extinguished his opponent's burst of flames.

What a waste of motion! she sighed.

Finally driven to the ground, Horvath cast dark orbs upon the Mistress of Boleskine. "Morgana, will you do nothing to save me?"

Mustang's hazel eyes rolled skyward. "This is your battle, dude. I'm out of it."

The exchange gave Blake pause, nonetheless, and he suspended his offensive temporarily. He, too, stared at the young woman. "Are you truly Morgana, in a different guise?" he demanded.

She laughed outright. "If I was, why would I hang out in the middle of nowhere when there's a world to be conquered?"

Horvath's refined baritone cracked. "But, you are the most skilled..."

"Oh, shut up!" she instructed, hopping off her perch. "You're scaring the horses!"

As she strode toward the mansion, a collection of leaves braided themselves into a ribbon and wrapped around his mouth, silencing any further outbursts. She unlocked the deadbolt, passed through the portal and secured the door behind her.

To be confronted by David Stutler, lingering in the foyer.

"Oh, hell..." she snarled. "I thought you'd had the good sense ditch those lunatics."

"Can we talk?"

Resigned, she led him into the living room, indicating the green sofa. "Make it short."

"Don't know if I can."

"Do your best." She settled in the cane-backed rocker.

Head bowed, elbows resting on his thighs, the boy didn't look comfortable. "You know what's between those two?"

“You were there when Blake told me...”

“It’s more than that.” He glanced at her. “There’s a woman...”

“Yeah, Morgana.”

“No, another woman.”

“Oh, hell...”

“She was Merlin’s third apprentice. She sacrificed herself to save Balthazar, sucking Morgana’s essence into her own body...”

“Stupid.”

“Some would say noble.”

“Whatever. Go on.”

“Horvath turned against Merlin because Veronica preferred Balthazar.”

“You mean, this whole ordeal was sparked by jealousy?” spat Mustang.

Stutler nodded meekly.

“Morgana conned him into believing she would give him Veronica if he helped her?”

“More likely, kill Balthazar, leaving him as Veronica’s only choice.”

“Same thing.”

In one swipe, Mustang cleared the chess board, its game incomplete from when she’d last consulted Erwin Rommel. “How many people have died or been injured because of this... insanity?”

Stutler flinched.

“At least, my excuse for creating chaos has been naivete and impulsiveness. These... jokers... should have known better.”

He slumped on the cushions in guilty silence.

“Well? What are you going to do about it?”

“Me? What can I do?”

Mustang rose. “You’re supposed to be Merlin’s heir, more powerful than both of them. Put an end to it!”

“How?” On his feet, Stutler towered over her. “I’m really a science geek with a twist.”

“Then, twist them both into the ground, for all I care!”

She preceded him outdoors, where the combatants, strength drained, held their ground by sheer will.

Stutler recoiled as she moved between them.

“If you don’t, I will!” she promised.

“Will what?” queried Blake.

With the men equidistant from her, she commanded the elements to repulse the energies targeted at each other back to their source.

Startled sorcerers soared into the trees, crashing against unyielding trunks and collapsing amidst gnarled roots.

Mustang confronted Stutler. "Get them out of here, before I get really angry and do far worse."

"Yes, ma'am!" he gulped, rushing toward his mentor.

She sank on the step, observing futile attempts to rouse Blake, blood oozing from a gash on his cranium. On the far side of the barn, Horvath moaned piteously, left arm bent awkwardly above the wrist, indicating a fracture.

"You could heal them and be rid of them all the quicker," whispered Rommel, at her side.

"I could. But, I won't. They deserve this pain, and anything else they get."

"Is jealousy such a bad motivation..."

"Because men have been jealous, they've started wars where thousands - hundreds of thousands - have died. Whether over a woman, a piece of land, or a belief system, it's one of the most stupid motivations in history."

He deliberated. "You may be right. In Hitler's case, he was jealous of other races and cultures, wanting to make his own superior - permanently."

"Don't remind me. That kind of thing still goes on nearly a century later. Makes me want to toss my cookies."

"Toss my cookies?" Rommel echoed, puzzled.

"Vomit."

"Ah!"

Just as Stutler raised Blake upright, the latter slumped into the dirt once more. Mustang stifled a chuckle.

"It's not funny!" Stutler shouted. "I could use some help!"

She retorted, "You telling me you can't manage a basic levitation?"

For an instant, given the young man's blank expression, Mustang sensed he'd completely forgotten such a feat was possible. Then, steadying himself, he raised Blake off the ground without touching him.

Horvath, for his part, gripped the lowest branch of the nearest oak for support with his undamaged hand, struggling to reach his broken cane with a scuffed leather shoe. When it rolled away, he scowled toward Mustang.

"Have pity, Morgana!"

"Why?" She marched toward him. "If you have any capacity for honesty, admit that - if I healed you - you would not only eliminate those two, but me, as well!"

"No, Morgana! Never!"

"Liar," she scoffed quietly, fists clenched.

Rommel interspersed, "Don't!"

"Do you know how hard I'm trying?" she addressed the German general's spectre. "If they're not gone in the next couple minutes..."

A spontaneous downpour drenched her and, as the soil transformed into mud, melted the jewelry on Horvath's cane. His bravado shattered, he sank beside the puddle of molten metal and liquified stone, petrified as it merged with rivulets flowing into the woods.

"How could you, Morgana?" he moaned. "Have I offended you so completely?"

As Rommel retreated into the house, Mustang stormed at Horvath. "What will it take for you to get it through your thick skull: I'm not Morgana! What I do is mostly unintentional, due to anger or carelessness. In all your years as an apprentice sorcerer, didn't Merlin warn you about what damage could be done by not thinking before you called upon whatever magick you needed in any given moment?"

Hair and clothes dripping, Horvath's broad shoulders straightened. "The first rule to using magick involves clearing the mind."

"And, then?"

"Directing the energy through the ring."

"Or, in your case, rings and whatnot."

He pursed his lips.

"Now that your trinkets are no more?" she taunted.

"I..."

"Just as I thought." As her nerves untensed, the rain subsided. "Get your ass up and be gone."

"But, my arm..."

"By the time you hike to Inverness, it'll be healed."

No more the suave adept, Horvath skulked along the gravel drive, following in the wake of Stutler and Blake.

Mustang shifted her attention to the Arabian, who needed a thorough grooming, and the other horses, who required oats and water. She also craved a hot shower.

The pulsating stream relaxed her to the point she yearned to crawl in bed and sleep for a week. A brief detour into the kitchen for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich was interrupted by the presence of Denis Sommers on the doorstep.

She greeted him with an offer of coffee.

He declined, joining her at the dinette table. "You look... refreshed."

“It’s been a tough day.” She took a hearty bite of the bread. “When do you leave for Manchester?”

“Team practices resume on Monday.”

“Glenn will be sad to see you go.”

“What about you?” he hinted.

“You’re a good doctor, Denis, and I consider you a friend, but...”

“I know, I know. Every time you get attached to someone: calamity.”

She snickered in agreement. “Why’d you come?”

“I have a message for you.”

“From Glenn?”

“He’s fully capable of delivering his own messages. This comes from... a bit farther away.”

“Huh?”

Sommers was enjoying the forced suspense. “A mutual acquaintance asked me to contact you.”

“I don’t like games, Denis...”

He patted her hand. “I’m... not sure how you’ll feel about it, that’s all. He said he’d come to see you, and it didn’t go well.”

“Not Miguel?”

“Right, first guess. His manager tracked my office number, and the team secretary gave him Uncle Glenn’s mobile.”

“How? I never introduced you...”

“How can I say this without upsetting you?” Sommers considered playfully. “Your... lack of enthusiasm during the show was noticed by Miguel’s friends, in the same row, and behind us. They heard you use my name, and the manager did what good managers do.”

Mustang drained her tumbler of milk. “Impressive. So, what’s the message?”

“He wants to hire you as a consultant, helping refine his act to be... less offensive.”

“Oh, hell! He’s crazy!”

“I tried to convince him as much, but he wouldn’t listen. I explained your sense of humor has been... dulled by a series of unfortunate circumstances, and you’re not his typical audience. He still wants to pitch the idea to you, next time he’s in country.”

“Which is when?”

“The guy tours over 40 weeks a year. A very serious performer. He’s booked for Edinburgh in October.”

“Did he give you his number?” queried Mustang.

“A long list, in fact. If you can’t catch him on his mobile, there are seven others...”

“Please, call him for me. Thank him, and let him know I’ve got commitments here.”

“The horses? Uncle Glenn would gladly incorporate them into his stock.”

“That’s only a small part of it. You know why I can’t leave. I’d put his whole entourage in danger.”

“I... sort of suspected that would be your answer.” Sommers inched toward the portal. “There’s no harm in asking, though.”

“You seem disappointed I didn’t jump at the chance.”

“In my professional opinion, it would do you a world of good to mix with people - normal people - on a regular basis. You’d learn so much about self-control...”

Mustang smirked. “It always comes back to that, doesn’t it? Face it, Denis, I know my shortcomings, and I’d rather steer clear of hazardous entanglements by staying put.”

His lungs expanded with the deep inhalation. “I feel sorry for you, Mustang. You have so much untapped potential. It’s a shame you’re content wasting it.”

Carrying her dishes to the sink, she avoided his penetrating gaze as he bid her farewell. “If you ever need to talk, Uncle Glenn will be glad to let you use his phone to ring me.”

“Thanks.”

Sommers vanished between the trees; Mustang locked the door. The prospect of sleeping had dissipated, her mind racing with the ludicrous nature of Iglesias’ request. A review of her life could pinpoint only one specific episode when she enjoyed the kind of laughter that the comedian inspired from his audiences.

She’d attended a performance at a club in Helena, where the friend of a substitute teacher at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High - despite using foul language - prompted her amusement, primarily due to her need to release the built-up pressure caused by failures to control her power over nature. The giggles led to hiccups, which led to the near-destruction of the renovated theatre.

Since that catastrophe, she’d found no amusement in life, as a whole. She could never be of assistance in Iglesias’ quest to refine his subject matter.

“It saddens me to see you so morbid,” remarked Erwin Rommel as she wiped the dishes with a tea towel.

She shuffled into the living room, where the chess board had been restored to its former positions. “Did you ever have reason to laugh during your campaign in Africa, General?”

“No, but...”

“It’s a war I’m fighting: not just against myself, but against those who would use my power to their own advantage. You know as well as I how many have knocked on this door - some accidental, some deliberate - seeking my favor to deal with their problems. Each time, new weight has been added to my burden, especially when I failed miserably to do the good that Peter O’Donnell so long ago advised.”

“I’m not the first - nor will I be the last, I surmise - to tell you that you’re too hard on yourself.” Rommel pushed a rook two squares forward. “Doctor Sommers’ prescription may need to be filled.”

“Prescription?”

“To mingle with ordinary people. Your eyes would be opened...”

Mustang took his knight with her queen.

“Even one evening a week at the pub in Dores...”

“I would not call a bunch of drunks ‘ordinary people’,” she grunted.

The game unfinished, he dematerialized.

She sagged in the cane-backed rocker, dejected.