

The Mustang Chronicles:

Godly Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea gazed at herself in the bathroom mirror as a brush untangled her auburn mop. She couldn’t deny being able to pass for a teenager, despite her 28 years, but she felt positively ancient.

She’d spent a decade at Boleskine House in the Scottish Highlands near Loch Ness. Her plan, upon leaving Montana after high school graduation, had been to find somewhere quiet to live out her days, undisturbed by humanity. In that, she’d failed miserably.

If she’d kept a diary, the pages would have been filled with chicken scratch recounting the troubled and power-hungry who’d invaded her space. Her ethereal companions - St. Francis of Assisi, German general Erwin Rommel, Mohandas Gandhi and Mark Twain - persistently reminded her that her own lack of self-control exacerbated the problem, her impulsive behavior wreaking havoc which she then had to reverse.

Trudging to her bedroom, she pulled on a pair of green sweats, socks and sneakers, heading out to the barn to feed and water her three remaining horses. They, at least, demanded nothing more of her than simple care and exercise, and she enjoyed their company.

Mustang hiked up to a clearing upon completing this daily chore, remnants of an old picnic table resembling a pile of kindling among tall grass. In its intact form, it had served as an altar for the bizarre rituals enacted by Jack Parsons, occult practitioner and scientist - and, as she’d discovered, her grandfather.

He’d manipulated her, during her initial visit, into participating in his final rite. She’d submitted to being blindfolded and, upon his signal, thrust a knife into the altar’s surface - except he’d positioned himself between the blade and the wood; tempered steel ripped into his flesh, killing him instantly.

And she’d wound up connected to the natural elements in terrifying ways.

Fulfillment of her whims required no spoken words, in fact. A stray thought could manifest earthquakes, storms, lightning bolts to transport her anywhere on the globe...

Running her fingertips over dew-coated shards, she wished to be shed of this power. Her study of Parsons’ journals, though, confirmed death as her only release.

Quite a few people had tried to kill her, ending up dead themselves. Bullets and guns melted into puddles; those who attempted to physically restrain her experienced electric shocks capable of frying their internal organs.

Some deemed her a god, prevented from eradicating all species from the planet only by her own determination. She would far rather have been an ordinary female, riding through the woodlands of her father's horse ranch, free as a bird.

Dejected, she descended the hill, sighting a blonde on the gravel drive.

"Oh, hell," grumbled Mustang. "Not again."

This uninvited visitor's attire astounded her. Coat and skirt of the same striped fabric, with a frilled mauve silk blouse, matching shoes and purse... not cheap, by any means.

"Are you lost?" she wondered.

Lips painted vibrant red replied, "Not if you're Lady Elizabeth Neville."

Mustang swallowed her heart. She'd invented the pseudonym upon her arrival in country, to protect herself from prying eyes... another unsuccessful ploy.

"Who are you?" she pressed.

"A messenger."

Given her clothes, she bore no mere telegram. "From some lawyer?"

"No. From God."

The guffaw that escaped Mustang's throat wasn't meant to offend, but it could not be stifled. "Excuse me?" she eventually squeaked.

"In a vision, I was charged by God to seek you out..."

Another interfering lunatic, Mustang deduced. "Sorry, lady. Not interested."

Tramping toward the house, she pulled a keyring from her pocket. Her stomach growled; she remembered she hadn't eaten any breakfast.

"You ignore me at your peril!" warned the woman.

Mustang retorted, "I ignore you for your own safety. Please, leave."

Reinforced steel swung inward and closed behind her. The deadbolt latched, she shuffled toward the kitchen.

"Why? Why?" she yowled aloud. "Why am I a magnet for all the fruits and nuts?"

As she sat at the metal dinette table with a bowl of cereal and tumbler of orange juice, a familiar figure occupied the chair opposite.

"This is no random nutter," stated the dignified Rommel.

Between bites, she snorted, "You know this, of course, but cannot explain further."

"It's a... very sensitive situation."

"Which usually means someone is going to die."

"Not unless you..."

"Go off on a raging tangent?"

“Correct.”

“Look, General, I’m past being sick and tired of this stupidity. I just want to be left alone...”

“You must hear her out. It’s... essential.”

“To who?” she snapped.

He corrected, “Whom.”

Carrying the stoneware bowl to the sink, Mustang leaned forward. “Oh, hell.”

An Italian-accented baritone interspersed, “She is a mystic, blessed with exceptional visions...”

“No, Francis. I won’t... I can’t...”

“For the good of the world, Signorina.”

She whirled on the pair, both summoned from their graves during those early months acquainting herself with her command over the elements. “Rather than torment me with riddles, I wish you’d just go away!”

They vanished in an instant.

She spoke to the air. “Thank you. Now, I can get on with my day.”

Except, she knew that would be impossible. Rain pelted against the living room windows as she rearranged chess pieces to their starting positions on the inlaid board; she’d be stuck indoors until the clouds broke.

The woman, lacking rain gear or umbrella, paced the drive, soaked.

“Oh, hell...”

Once this intruder was ensconced on the green sofa, the Mistress of Boleskine started a fire on the hearth to warm her. She fetched a mug of hot chocolate, as well, gratefully accepted.

“I’ve got a lot of cleaning to do,” Mustang announced as she retreated along the corridor.

The cultured voice countered, “Be more concerned with cleansing your soul.”

Games, always games, lamented Mustang. Best to have done with this skirmish.

She retraced her steps and sank on the cane-backed rocking chair. “All right. Spill it.”

“Let me apologize in advance. This isn’t something I would normally do.” Smoothing her skirt, she inhaled deeply. “I come from a wealthy family in Yorkshire, but I rejected their money and status once I finished my studies at university, opting for a simpler life in a Benedictine monastery. I was assigned the

most menial tasks: scrubbing floors, washing dishes, feeding the livestock. I enjoyed the hours of prayer and freedom from the cares of the masses, until...”

“Until?”

“It was a night in May, eighteen months ago. I couldn’t sleep, so I went to the chapel. When I raised my eyes from the passage of scripture on which I’d been meditating, I saw... I saw...”

“God?”

The sandy mop bobbed as she nodded. “In all his glory, surrounded by angels. He spoke to me in the most gentle tone...”

“Maybe you’d fallen asleep and dreamed it,” Mustang ventured.

“That’s what our chaplain and the abbess thought. But, then, apparitions started occurring quite frequently.”

“Oh, hell.”

She repressed a sob. “You don’t know what it’s like to experience such things, and no one believes you!”

“Trust me, I do.”

“The more I insisted the visions were real, the worse it became. I was denied permission to profess my final vows and expelled from the monastery. I’ve been working as a secretary for a real estate agent in Barnsley, scratching out a modest living...”

“And the incidents continue?”

“Yes.”

“Including one about me?”

“Yes. Two weeks ago.”

“And, this message you were sent to deliver?”

“God wants you to stop what you’re doing.”

Mustang bit back a smirk. “What *am* I doing?”

“I... have no idea.”

“And, despite your ignorance, you journeyed hundreds of miles to tell me this?”

“I... was entrusted with a mission...”

Twirling a strand of auburn around her index finger, Mustang prodded, “Has God given you other... missions?”

“He instructed me to confront the bishop about certain policies...”

“What policies?”

“Why does that concern you?”

“Because, if I’m to give any weight to your story, I need to verify this isn’t just another scam...”

The woman scowled. "The bishop wrote me off as barmy, too."

"And you're surprised?" Mustang crossed the carpet, tossing another log on the grate. "I've studied world religions, and there is no other recorded instance of God appearing to any saint *or* sinner..."

"That point has been made abundantly clear to me, but I can't explain why I've been chosen..."

"Have you seen a psychologist?"

"The bishop sent me to one. He recommended an MRI to determine if a tumor was pressing on certain parts of my brain..."

"With what results?"

"No abnormalities whatsoever."

Mustang considered. "How did you know where to find me?"

"God knows everything. He told me."

Perhaps true, perhaps false. Anyone in the village of Dores, a few miles north, could have directed this woman to Boleskine. She might've read media reports about weather anomalies in the region...

"When do these visions occur?" probed Mustang.

"It varies."

"Can you be a little more... precise?"

"Sometimes, I'm praying. Once, I was fetching copy paper from the supply closet at the office..."

"So, you're busy at something else, you look up and..."

"Precisely."

This dynamic struck Mustang as unlikely though, without sufficient technical knowledge, she couldn't determine exactly how an image could be generated - or what equipment would be necessary to project it.

"Do you converse with the vision, or does he just dictate his will to you?"

The visitor threw up her hands, frustrated. "How many times I've been asked that! If you saw God, standing right in front of you, wouldn't you be too awestruck to talk?"

"I... suppose so."

"Then, why press the point?"

"So, he states his request, then disappears?"

"He... states his request, directs me to bow my head in prayer, and is gone by the time I say 'Amen.'"

A major red flag popped up in Mustang's mind. "I'm sorry, Miss..."

"Carolina FitzHugh."

"I'm sorry, Carolina. I just can't give any credence to this foolishness."

She leapt off the sofa. “Fine! I’ve wasted three days and a lot of money traveling here, and for what?”

“Is that what this is about? Money?”

“I’m not rich, like you. Roaming around the countryside sharing God’s word with the people has drained my bank account...”

Resigned, Mustang led Carolina to the locked inner room, opening the wall safe where she stashed cash won at casinos on the French Riviera. She pulled two bundles of 100 pound notes from the stack and plopped them on the woman’s palms.

“Take this, and stop having visions.”

The money fell on the floorboards. “I... can’t! It’s not something I can control!”

Mustang retrieved the funds and wrapped Carolina’s fingers around them. “Trust me. You won’t ever see... God again.”

Carolina’s blue eyes stared into her hostess’ hazel eyes. “Promise?”

“You’ll forget all about the visions.”

The pair exited this quasi-panic room; Mustang paused to secure the lock. As they strode toward the front door, Carolina pulled a handkerchief from her coat pocket, blowing her nose.

Strong winds and spitting rain assailed them on the stoop. Mustang puzzled, “How did you get here?”

“I hitched a ride from the village.”

“You... can’t hike that distance in this gale. I’ve got a poncho in the barn, and you can borrow one of the horses to ride over to my neighbor’s. He’ll drive you into Inverness...”

“I’ve... never been on a horse.”

“Then, I’ll go with you.”

They traversed the gravel expanse, both shivering. When Mustang rolled aside the massive door on its track, the sight froze her blood.

“Oh, hell!”

II

Carolina FitzHugh crashed to her knees, chin lowered; Mustang Duryea imagined the pain of jagged pebbles slicing the woman’s flesh as she gaped at the image hovering a foot above the straw-scattered barn floor.

If this wasn’t actually God, it was a suitable imitation, she mused. A flowing white robe concealed his entire body, though the shoulders were broad and

square. The mass of flowing white hair combed back from a high forehead seemed to move with the wind, a substantial beard and mustache hid his mouth, a prominent nose, thick brows, sparkling eyes seemed to change color as the light shifted.

“Forgive me, Father,” Carolina pleaded, fingers steeped in a devout pose. “My efforts have been in vain.”

The basso profundo - with a hint of Scottish burr? Mustang speculated - reverberated through the structure, frightening the horses. “You, unworthy servant, shall do penance in the afterlife for your negligence...”

This spectre didn’t gaze at Carolina, positioned to his left, but stared past Mustang into empty space. Of course, this supposed mystic wouldn’t be aware of that, her gaze downcast.

Mustang, however, inched forward, her motion unheeded by the mysterious presence.

She glided right through him, and he never stopped droning on about the need for adherence to his mandates.

“Now, prostrate yourself and beg mercy,” the tirade ended. As Carolina lowered herself onto the chill concrete, muttering some rote formula, Mustang observed the translucent facsimile flicker and dissipate.

An electrical transmission cut at the source.

Raising her visitor upright, she scrounged a first aid kit from the tack room and extracted embedded gravel from Carolina’s joints, covering the scrapes with gauze after an ample dousing with alcohol.

“Now do you believe me?” the patient whined as her nerves sent twinges of anguish to her brain.

“I can see why *you* believe it. Very impressive.”

“But, you don’t...”

“Sorry, no.”

Carolina bolted off the bench. “You’re worse than Saint Thomas! At least, once he touched the risen Christ, he proclaimed his faith!”

Mustang saddled two horses and helped Carolina swing onto the roan’s back, the Mackintosh getting tangled in the stirrups. They rode toward Glenn MacDonough’s at a trot, drizzle annoying.

The construction project manager busy tending his own stock, he shouted, “Lady Elizabeth!” from the corral.

She tethered the mounts to the fence and waited for the Scot to approach.

“How can I be o’ service, Milady?”

“My... friend needs a ride to Inverness. Can you oblige?”

“Ach, aye. I was headin’ there on the hour for a meetin’...”

“That’s grand, Glenn. I appreciate it.”

“Come in the house for a cuppa while we wait...”

Mustang waved Carolina in the direction of the brick dwelling, while she tugged MacDonough’s sleeve. “I need another favor,” she whispered.

“Anythin’, Milady.”

“There’s a detective in London” - the Mistress of Boleskine wracked her memory - “named Sheila Holmes. I need you to convince her to make the trip up here. Tell her money is no object, and it’s urgent.”

“Ach, Milady, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing... dangerous, Glenn. Just... something weird that I need straightened out.”

“I’ll ring her from m’ study while ye enjoy your tea.”

“Thanks.”

Steaming brew warmed the women as they sat in awkward silence at the kitchen table. MacDonough brooked no argument when he suggested Mustang shed her damp sweats in favor of a bulky flannel shirt and plaid lounge pants. She felt a right idiot as her clothes were thrown in the dryer, and both their shoes were placed before the marble fireplace.

He reappeared after ten minutes down the corridor, jacket and keys in hand. “Ye are welcome t’ ride along, Milady,” he stated.

“No, thanks, Glenn. I need to get home.”

The tilt of his white-wisp covered head and faux salute indicated a favorable outcome: she smiled her gratitude. Shortly after the mantle clock struck noon, the pickup sputtered toward the B852 highway as she nudged Molly’s flank, Sarge’s reins also entwined in her fingers.

Lunch consisted of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a glass of milk and chocolate frosted biscuits - the Scottish equivalent of cookies. She’d neglected the dishes most of the week, and squirted liquid soap into a stream of water from the tap as the sun set in the distance.

A shimmering silhouette visible near the grill, beatific features gazing toward the window, didn’t frighten Mustang, but heightened her curiosity regarding this nefarious scheme.

Who would wish to ruin an innocent person’s life by faking a series of visions...

“Francis, you claim Carolina is a mystic,” she carped aloud. “Even if she’s being duped by... some bastard with a pile of electronics?”

The saint from Assisi materialized beside the refrigerator. “She *is* a true mystic. She has experienced the depths of divine love in ways that defy words. Being contacted by heavenly entities is not essential to that state of her soul.”

Mustang grunted, “Nice to know.”

“You will assist her?”

“I’ll... figure out what’s going on and set her straight. After that...”

“Such disappointment will ravage her soul. She will be plunged into severe depression...”

“Not my problem.”

Instinctively, Mustang knew Francis would prompt her to correct the issue without even a word...

But, if she had no information on why Carolina was being targeted for this ruse, how could she possibly defuse the crisis?

“We’ll wait and see, okay?” she sighed.

“Your kindness is a gift to humanity.”

“Bullshit.”

She dipped her hands into soapy water, Francis departing unnoticed.

Sleep came in spurts that night; random noises roused Mustang, her suspicions about Carolina’s tormentor invading her dreams, as well. She spent the next day on tenterhooks, awaiting the arrival of the private detective she’d met under precarious circumstances.

Without access to train timetables or bus schedules, she distracted herself by rearranging kitchen cupboards and mopping the tile floors.

A polite tapping on the steel-reinforced door mid-afternoon preempted polishing the hand-carved chess set. On the threshold, a tall, slender female in Motörhead t-shirt and jeans, short brunette curls disheveled, accompanied by an equally tall young man with close-cropped blond mop and a prosthetic left leg.

Mustang ushered them into the living room; they settled on the green sofa.

“I was... stunned to receive the call from Mr. MacDonough on your behalf,” Sheila Holmes remarked. “Given our previous interactions...”

The American commented, “This is a unique predicament, and I thought you’d have the resources to get to the bottom of it.”

“Explain, please.”

In less than five minutes, Sheila’s brain was sorting the details. Johnny Watson, her companion - a former British Army medic who’d served in the recent Afghan conflict, losing his limb - punched data into his mobile phone, pings alerting him to incoming responses.

“May we inspect the barn?” Watson entreated.

“Sure.”

In the fading afternoon light, Sheila marveled at the Arabian in its stall.

“Magnificent!”

“Thanks.”

“How did the horses react to the projection?”

“They were definitely spooked.”

“Meaning, it wasn’t a figment of your imagination.”

“Oh, absolutely not,” concurred Mustang. “From the little I know about such things: heathens like me shouldn’t be able to share the visions, which made the ordeal even more... nonsensical.”

“In contrast to the sightings at Lourdes in France, or Fatima in Portugal,” Sheila added.

“Right.”

Watson had been brushing bits of straw from side to side, then bent to pluck a length of insulated wire off the ground. “Whatever equipment was installed to facilitate the fraud, it’s been removed.”

“That’s... impossible,” Mustang protested. “How would anyone get in...”

Sheila chided, “I beg to differ. We’ve been on the property for an hour, without once being challenged about our purpose...”

Mustang flushed to the roots of her auburn locks. “Well... I don’t mind tourists wandering around during the day...”

“What about after dark?” inquired Watson.

“Oh, you wouldn’t want to risk it.”

“Then, perhaps you should keep your security system constantly activated.”

Mustang squinted at Sheila. “The traps don’t... operate like that.”

The veteran bristled. “Whatever switches you use...”

“Drop it, John,” Sheila advised. “You mentioned God appeared again after Miss FitzHugh left?”

Mustang preceded them around the side of the Georgian mansion, stopping near the grill. “Here.”

Sheila squatted to scan the undergrowth, then glanced at Watson.

“Whatever it is, it’s portable,” he said.

“You’re on to your associates?”

“Tracing any thefts from special effects companies and scientific imaging labs.”

“You’re thinking holograms?” asked Mustang.

The detective straightened. “Very astute, Mustang.”

Watson flinched. "Mustang?"

"My nickname since I was a kid."

He hesitated. "Intriguing."

"Horses have been a major part of my life."

"But, a mustang runs wild..."

"Believe me, she does," Sheila chuckled.

"Before we left Baker Street, you told me..."

"Hush, John."

Mustang sensed the tenuous relationship and resisted aggravating the couple. "You guys hungry? I've some steaks in the freezer."

Watson demurred. "We'd better be going, if we're to..."

"No, John. I think we should stay. If the... perpetrator of this fraud hung about after Carolina left, he'll no doubt try again..."

"To what end?"

Sheila followed Mustang through the kitchen entrance. Together, they commenced preparing a tasty meal, while Watson sipped a cup of tea at the dinette table and scrolled through messages on his mobile.

"How's your uncle?" croaked Mustang, unwrapping two packages of beef on the counter, Sheila washing her hands.

"He's... fine."

"Shocked the shit out of me to see him when you were here before. I really thought I'd done something stupid..."

"Yet, you weren't shocked to see God?"

"I think you and I both grasp there is no such... entity."

"A man-made creation to lull the masses into compliance with antiquated mores?" muttered Sheila.

"Yup."

"Your... affinity with the elements, though..."

"Not a God-given gift, by any means. A... fluke of nature, a joke of the universe."

"Which could be employed to the detriment of all living beings."

Mustang lowered a large cast iron skillet onto the stove. "I've consciously tried to avoid that scenario."

"I seem to recall horrible things happen when you get angry."

"And, yes, I get angry... quite often."

"Because of the humans who choose to interfere with your solitude?"

"Bingo!"

Watson drained his cup. "What the hell are you two talking about?"

The women burst out laughing.

Steaks medium-rare, green salad, corn on the cob and chocolate cake filled the trio's stomachs, with the subsequent admission of total exhaustion.

"You're welcome to the spare room," Mustang stated.

Sheila observed, "There are four vacant bedrooms."

"But, only one is furnished."

"Ah!"

"And... you're not..."

"No, we're not," grumbled Watson.

"Well, then, Sheila and I can crash on my king-size mattress, and you can have the double to yourself," Mustang decided.

"That works," Sheila affirmed, already well along the hall. "Good night, John."

Watson glared at Mustang, unmoving.

"You have questions," she surmised.

"Lots."

"Fancy a game of chess while we chat?"

"I... haven't played since..."

She led him to the living room. "You mean to say, you and Sheila don't sit across the board on foggy London evenings?"

"Her... inclinations run elsewhere."

"Like... chasing after a certain movie producer?"

Watson flopped on the sofa. "How'd you know?"

Mustang abruptly discerned that Watson didn't remember their previous encounter in Nice, when she'd popped over on a lightning bolt to replenish her depleted cash reserves. Sheila, though, could not be forced to forget; her link to the ghost of Sherlock Holmes shielded her from Mustang's power.

"Tony Downton and I were... acquainted."

"You? You're just a teenager..."

"I'm older than you think, John. Tony... flew to Loch Ness to scout locations for a film he planned to make after his Sherlock Holmes flick. Or, maybe that was a cover for finding the ideal spot for his honeymoon..."

"Honeymoon? Who was he planning to marry?"

She sneered, simultaneously removing his queen's bishop from the board. "Just the mention of his name turned you green with jealousy."

"Sheila broke off the engagement, and he hooked up with some bimbo..."

"The gal who shot him?"

"She'd been aiming at Sheila, and Tony stepped between them."

“No greater love has man...”

Watson threw his rook against the wall. “Don’t give me that. He was a womanizing bastard, not fit to tie her sneakers.”

“In that, you’re right.”

The former medic’s eyebrows arched. “Really?”

Mustang hadn’t intended to reveal what transpired between Downton and herself, but the particulars would be wiped from Watson’s mind soon enough.

No more had she opened her mouth, however, than a resounding voice rattled the window casements.

“Elizabeth! Come out and face your judgment!”

Together, the duo rushed to the window, pulling aside heavy curtains. Levitating above the gravel drive, God awaited his subjects.

III

“Shit!” Watson gasped.

Mustang tittered, “Impressive, eh?”

Sheila dashed past the living room, wrenching open the front door and careening outdoors. Watson, on her heels, nearly collided with her when she halted on the steps.

The Mistress of Boleskine squeezed by them in short order. The longer the spectre remained, she estimated, the more likely the British couple could expose its origins.

Besides, a considerable delay indicated whoever was operating the equipment had to be close by, gauging the reactions of those “God” addressed before advancing the one-sided diatribe.

She hissed, “Check the west side of the house.”

They glanced at each other, then Watson hobbled to the left, making a circuit of the building to catch any trespassers from behind.

Mustang glided forward, positioning herself six feet from the pulsating image.

“You have attempted to usurp my authority over humanity,” the unsynchronized mouth blustered. “You have denied me worship that is rightfully mine.”

Even though she knew no one would hear, she spat, “Bullshit!”

That the sounds emanated from the hologram confirmed the degree of technological prowess, though the process wasn’t interactive or flawless. If Sheila Holmes and Johnny Watson couldn’t discover the culprit, she’d do it herself.

The signal sputtered and faded a moment later. Watson rounded the corner of the mansion with a small metal box on his palm.

“That?” gushed Mustang.

“Silicone chips and transistors with a radio transmitter,” he explained.

Sheila speculated, “Linked to a wireless network?”

“That’s... anybody’s guess, for now.”

“Get on it, John.”

Tires crunching gravel grew louder; Glenn MacDonough’s pickup eased along the curved drive and braked beside Mustang. “Ach, Milady, I dinnae know ye had guests.”

“No problem, Glenn. These are the detectives from London.”

He slid from behind the steering wheel, clasping their hands in turn. “Glad ye were able t’ oblige her ladyship.”

Mustang squirmed at the use of the term. “What news?”

“Your friend, Carolina FitzHugh?”

“What about her?”

“No more we arrived at her hotel in Inverness, than she had another of those visions. She’s been taken to hospital.”

“You were... there?” queried Mustang.

“Aye. She looked poorly, so I escorted her t’ her room. I’d just tucked her in a chair by the bed, when she pitched forward ont’ her knees like she’d suffered a stroke.”

Sheila chimed in, “Did you see it, too?”

“Ach, aye. I ‘twas that afraid m’ heart had stopped.”

“What did it say?” asked Mustang.

“He threatened her wi’ eternal damnation if she dinnae complete the task she’d been gi’n.”

“And, then?”

“She fainted dead away.”

“Which is when you rang the ambulance?” interspersed Watson.

“Aye, lad.”

Mustang groaned. “They’ll strap her on a gurney in the psychiatric ward, through no fault of her own.”

“That... may be the whole purpose of this exercise.” Sheila lowered herself on the stoop.

“You mean, to drive her mad?”

Brunette curls bobbed affirmation.

“What good would that do?”

Watson caught Sheila's gist. "You told us her family in Yorkshire is rich. Maybe a greedy relative wants to negate any claims she has to the fortune..."

"But, if she'd been allowed to profess her vows in the monastery, she would've relinquished any inheritance," Sheila attested.

"Or, not." Mustang. "Nuns *can* accept bequests from their relatives, stipulating how the money and goods should be distributed."

"How'd you..." Watson.

"There are a lot of old books in my grandfather's study..."

MacDonough retreated to his vehicle. "I'll leave it t' ye t' aid that poor wee lass."

"Thanks, Glenn."

"Anythin' ye need, ye ha' but t' ask."

The trio watched the pickup trundle between the trees before returning indoors.

"We've got quite the mess to untangle," stated Sheila, sinking on a metal dinette chair.

Watson growled, "I could use another cuppa."

"To hell with tea," Mustang cursed. "How'd you guys get here?"

"We took the train to Inverness, then hired a rental."

"Where's it parked?"

"Down near the gate."

"Let's go."

Sheila glowered at her hostess. "Where?"

"The hospital. We've got to break Carolina out before she becomes a permanent resident."

"But..." Watson objected.

"No buts, John," contended Mustang. "Our fiend with the God complex probably planted that transmitter here before he chased her up to Inverness, to waylay me while he pushes her over the edge."

Sheila patted Watson's hand. "Makes sense."

"Not to me, it doesn't."

"Then, what are you thoughts on the matter, John?" Mustang prodded.

Agitated, the veteran slumped on the seat. "Fine. Let's go."

They were climbing in the blue Ford Fiesta when his mobile chirped. He swiped to activate the device, the exchange quick and cryptic.

"Well?" Sheila inquired, key in the ignition.

“I sent my contact at the electronics repair shop photos of the components inside the box. It’s configured not only to receive complex transmissions and generate holograms, but to trigger an explosive charge.”

Gears rasped as Sheila tensed mid-shift. “What?”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang fumbled with the handle and lurched from the compact, running as fast as her knees permitted toward Boleskine House.

Watson remained on the passenger seat. “What does she think she can do? It’s too late...”

“What did your source tell you?”

“The bomb will detonate thirty minutes after the remote signal disconnects.”

Sheila clenched the wheel, knuckles white. “Fuck!”

“Let’s go...”

“Are you daft, John? Would you abandon comrades-in-arms if you knew they were marching into a deathtrap?”

“There’s nothing we can do...”

“That’s your opinion.” Sheila yanked the key from the steering column and swung off the bucket seat. “Wait here, if you like.”

She hastened along the drive, positive all would be well when she caught Mustang up. She grasped the extent of the American’s power, Watson ignorant of her potential to kill or cure.

The earth beneath her feet heaved ominously; she reeled against a walnut trunk, off balance. A blast reminiscent of thunder suddenly sucked in reverse chilled her bones. Righting herself, she continued toward the mansion.

Mustang sat, crossed-legged, on the gravel, face hidden behind quavering hands.

Sheila crouched beside her. “Are you hurt?”

“Nope.”

“You... found the bomb?”

“Yup.”

“How?”

Mustang snarled, “Sometimes, it’s as easy as throwing a few grains of dirt in the air. The breeze carries them to the desired object...”

“That’s... a handy skill.”

“One of many, I suppose.”

“Then, you cut the detonator wires?”

“Oh, hell no. When it blew, I contained it...”

“I would’ve loved to have seen that.”

“No different than turning a sock inside out.”

Sheila scrutinized Mustang’s calm demeanor. “Still...” She extended her arm; the Mistress of Boleskine clutched it and allowed herself to be pulled vertical. “We off to Inverness, then?”

“Yup.”

They met Watson en route to the car, ignoring his questions about the explosion.

The journey marred by tense silence, Mustang finally addressed the couple. “I’ll need a distraction to get past the hospital’s security guards.”

“What are you suggesting?” queried Sheila.

“Hell if I know.” She patted Watson’s shoulder. “Thank your friend for me, will you? If he hadn’t phoned when he did, Boleskine would be nothing but rubble.”

“I still don’t get how you prevented...”

“Let it go, John,” Sheila warned.

“I don’t see why...”

“You will, in due course.”

“And, even if we do distract the guard, how will you breach multiple locks on the psych ward?”

Sheila’s contralto deepened. “Let it *go*, John.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Mustang snickered. “She wants to protect you from me.”

“Protect *me*? From *you*?”

“If I swear to confess everything once we’re safe, will you focus on the current dilemma?”

He shifted on the cloth upholstery, blue eyes smoldering. “Swear?”

Mustang raised her right hand. “On my honor.”

The medical facility unpleasantly familiar, she pointed the pair to the emergency entrance. She hung back while they approached automatic doors, adopting their assigned characters.

A uniformed guard, perched on a stool inside a cramped shack, controlled the access mechanism. “How may I help you?”

“It’s my wife,” Watson moaned. “I think she’s having a miscarriage!”

Sheila doubled over, letting loose a blood-curdling howl.

Glass panels parted and they staggered through to the reception area.

Rendering herself invisible, Mustang accompanied them.

Her swift materialization startled Watson; she dragged him toward a side corridor, Sheila also in tow.

“Hide in here. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

The Londoners loitered in a vacant office, staring at each other.

“How’d she *do* that?” the veteran demanded.

“John, it’s complicated. I long since discovered the best way to describe Mustang’s... gift is with a quote from Shakespeare: ‘There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’”

“What the hell?”

“Remember the case involving murders at a club on the South Bank?”

“The loonies who thought they were vampires?”

“Correct. Mustang... well...”

“She orchestrated the whole debacle?”

“No, she terminated a reign of terror that had lasted centuries.”

“You’re saying she’s some kind of... of...”

“A very... unique individual.”

“Must be, if you’re so damned enamored of her.”

Mustang didn’t like hospitals and, especially, not at night. Skeleton crews taking those shifts left corridors in dimness, patients in desperation...

The third floor psychiatric ward boasted key-coded doors, which flew open as Mustang neared. She peered in the windows of each cell - how else could they be described? - recognizing Carolina strapped to a bed in unit 315.

Restrained and catatonic.

“Oh, hell...”

God, mute, monitored the scene from the corner.

Searching the premises for the miniature transmitter not an option, Mustang unfastened velcro bands from Carolina’s wrists and ankles, and hoisted her over one shoulder, with added strength drawn from nature. Orderlies lounging at the nurses’ station were too busy viewing a soccer match replay on the television to heed her passage.

They’d all be unemployed by dawn.

Descending in the lift - navigating the staircase too treacherous - she deposited Carolina on an examination table in the office, interrupting an argument between Sheila and Watson.

“She’s in no condition to travel!” ruled the latter, checking her pulse and respiration.

His flatmate urged, “Do we have a choice, John?”

“There’s no way we’ll get out of here...”

Mustang confronted him. “John, for the next five minutes, just trust me.”

His blue orbs met her hazel eyes, and he acquiesced without further dispute.

Carolina in his arms, the group filed from the facility, unimpeded.

The ailing woman stretched on the Ford's rear seat, Mustang cradled her head on her lap as they pulled from the car park, southbound.

"I'll never fathom how we managed that," confessed Watson.

"Call it a miracle, if you like," Mustang quipped. "After all, we're dealing with God."

"Forgive me!" Carolina shrieked, wrenching upright.

Her attendant held fast to her shoulders. "You're safe now, don't worry."

She dissolved in tears against Mustang's chest. "I... I..."

Not ten seconds later, the latter bellowed, "Stop the car!"

Sheila slammed on the brakes; fortunately, light traffic eliminated the possibility of a multi-vehicle collision. "What's wrong?"

"I just saw God."

Watson scoffed, "Huh?"

"A block back. Outside a pub." She scanned the district. "Pull over to the curb and let me out."

"You... can't wander these streets alone, in the dark," cautioned Sheila.

Mustang chortled, "Knowing what you do, you say that?"

Humbled, the detective apologized, complying with the request.

"And, what should we do in the meantime?" Watson mumbled. "Sit here like a pair of dolts?"

"Take Carolina home," Mustang replied.

"She lives in Yorkshire!"

"Exactly. That's where the solution to this mess will be found."

Sheila preempted Watson's rebuff with a finger on his lips.

"You'll handle God?"

Sarcasm dripped from Mustang's lips. "Oh, I'll handle him, all right."

She stepped onto the pavement; Watson crawled into the back to tend Carolina, and the Ford sped off into the darkness.

Mustang's palms - scarred by multiple excursions via lightning bolt to locales around the globe - rubbed eagerly together as she trekked toward the establishment where she'd seen her prey.

"Time to face your judgment, ya bastard."

IV

Determined strides conveyed Mustang Duryea toward The Crown, her clothes transformed from red flannel, jeans and sneakers to a scoop-neck turquoise sequined blouse, tight black leather mini-skirt, fishnet hose and stilettos.

“Hey, Big Yin!” she hailed, using the Scottish term for “big man,” his wild mane towering above fellow inebriates. “I fancy a large one!”

The drunks latched onto the blatant innuendo. A snide chorus of cat-calls, “Oooooo,” and assorted critiques - “What. A. Ride.” and “I’d hit that” - accompanied her into the tacky establishment.

He balked. “Fuck off, you lot!”

“Get in there.” sputtered one of his companions as two sets of hands shoved him toward the door.

“Sorry?”

“She’s mad for it!”

Uncertain, the faux deity stumbled into the gloomy interior, where Mustang leaned provocatively on stained wood.

The barman sauntered past shelves of bottles and taps. “Not here, lass,” he barked, assuming the worst. “On your bike.”

He stalled, though, when the figure in long-sleeved purple velvet shirt, black trousers and boots positioned himself directly behind her, wedging her against the bar.

“Two double whiskeys, Sam, and a pint of heavy.”

“Aye.”

Mustang addressed him via an etched mirror lining the wall. “I’ve seen your mug before.”

“I’ve been on telly a few times. Small roles in movies and the like.”

Their drinks delivered, the barman accepted a 20 pound note.

“An actor?” queried Mustang. “What are you doin’ these days?”

He seized the small glass and downed amber liquid in one gulp. “A special-effects project.”

“Computer generated stuff?” She slammed her drink and glimpsed his grin of approval.

“I dinnae ken the technical end o’ it. They film me in costume against a green screen, then... animators manipulate the action.”

An accurate summary of a complex - albeit imaginary - process, Mustang huffed. “So, you’ll be on the big screen in one form or another?”

He chugged half the dark ale. “Aye.”

“Playing what character?”

“God.”

She reached over her shoulder, wrapping her arm around the back of his neck, and flipped him onto the bar, knocking a row of glasses to the floor. She took advantage of his momentary disorientation for a thorough, close-up view. No mistaking those eyes, even if the holographic transmissions lacked high quality definition.

Neither the barman nor other patrons dared move.

Mustang’s tone lost its playful inflection. “Who hired you for this role?”

“A... friend of a friend in Glasgow,” he stammered.

“His name, ya bampot, or you die right here.”

“I... dinnae ken your anger...”

Her fingers tightened around his throat. “The footage you recorded has been used to drive an innocent woman insane.”

“That’s... impossible!”

A real dunce, this, Mustang decided, releasing her grip. “How long have you been... under contract?”

“Two years.” He raised himself on one elbow, massaging bruised flesh with his free hand.

“Don’t you think that’s a little... unusual?”

“Ach, nae. It takes that long to develop a script and schedule production.”

“Still, I want names.”

“Sorry, lass. I cannae help ye. As I ken the situation: the original team who put up the dosh reneged on the deal after most of my scenes were in the can and, without financin’, everyone else got the boot. The director eventually convinced a couple toffs to loan him what he needed, but most of the actors and crew had already taken other gigs.”

“Except you.”

“Aye.”

“And you didn’t find that odd?”

“He would ha’ been forced to redo all the previous scenes...”

She yanked him forcibly off the bar. “Come with me.”

The barman blocked their egress. “Who’s gonna pay for the damage?”

“What damage?” growled Mustang.

He gazed over her auburn head at the restored fixtures.

Wind whistling along the dark lane might have been caused by her riled spirit, but she consciously maintained control of her thoughts - temporarily. Yanking the actor toward the junction, she concentrated on their destination...

A crack of lightning roused the neighborhood but, peering between the curtains, the only sign of something amiss: a scorch mark on the asphalt.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, Mustang quoted, landing on her feet as pastel hues painted the Yorkshire countryside. Her captive - she should've asked his name, dammit - didn't fare so well. Groggy and nauseous, he rolled on the damp grass and emptied the contents of his stomach.

Mostly alcohol.

Gradually recovering his senses, he stared at the pooled chunks. "Why are there always diced carrots?"

The Mistress of Boleskine offered him a hand up; he availed himself of the gesture, befuddled.

"Who are you, and where are we?"

"The FitzHugh estate outside York."

"Why..."

"I need you to identify the man who signed you to play God."

"You think he's here?"

"Yup."

"And the woman?"

"She's on her way."

He leaned against a sturdy oak. "I dinnae ken any o' this."

"I'm a little fuzzy on it, myself, to be honest."

"Then, why..."

Mustang's sneaker kicked a stone. "Tell me this: when did you record the statement, 'Elizabeth, come out and face your judgment'?"

His shaggy head tilted left, resembling an ungroomed labrador. "Six months ago, give or take."

"That clip was projected as a hologram at my house near Loch Ness last night, right before someone tried to blow up the place."

"What?"

"I'm Elizabeth."

He sank on an exposed root, head in his hands. "The... script outlined scenes from the Old Testament..."

"You've been duped, dude."

"Donal. Donal MacLean."

"On your feet, Donal. Let's go get the architect of his scam."

Brushing off his trousers, he squinted at his companion. "You... were wearing different clothes..."

Another mind she'd have to wipe of these memories.

As they hiked sloping acreage toward a veritable palace, a rented Ford Fiesta veered along the secluded drive. Tires left a trail of rubber when the vehicle braked unexpectedly; Sheila Holmes and Johnny Watson scrambled from the car.

“How’d you get here before us?” inquired the detective. “We covered the distance in half the normal time...”

Mustang mocked, “Really?”

“Oh, right.”

“Where’s Carolina?”

“Asleep in the back,” Watson announced. “This whole episode has traumatized her...”

“Were you able to find out anything useful?”

Sheila supplied, “She’s practically incoherent.”

“Then, let’s get to the bottom of this.”

Mustang took the point, Sheila and Watson flanking her, MacLean bringing up the rear.

“Why is God here?” murmured Sheila in Mustang’s ear.

“He can identify the person who concocted this plot, saving you the need to ask a laundry list of questions.”

“Good idea.”

Watson ventured, “How are we going to get inside?”

“We aren’t,” Mustang noted. “They’ll come out to us.”

A fire alarm’s harsh jangling propelled uniformed servants, family and guests from the historic edifice, assembling on expertly manicured lawns near a four-tiered granite fountain.

Mustang slipped her arm through MacLean’s. “Do you see him?”

He raised his index finger, she batted it to his side.

“The balding bloke, third from the left, chatting up the dark-haired lass.”

The quartet were unaware Carolina had joined them, utterly confused. She’d heard MacLean’s words and jerked forward, shrieking, “You heartless reprobate!”

On a signal from Mustang, MacLean scooped Carolina into his arms, limbs flailing. When she caught sight of his visage, she stiffened.

“My God!” she burred, then fainted.

Sheila drew Mustang aside. “How cruel...”

“It was for her own good. We don’t need a shouting match at this stage...”

A reluctant, “True.”

“Can’t you silence that... din?” puzzled Watson.

The cacophony immediately faded.

As staff shuffled back to their duties, Mustang instructed MacLean to carry Carolina inside and find a bed where she could rest. Watson and Sheila detained their suspect on a wrought iron bench near the fountain.

Over a late breakfast at a Barnsley café, details of their findings were shared at length. Evan FitzHugh - brother of the estate's owner and uncle to Carolina - had learned both he and his sibling been disinherited when the family patriarch was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease five years earlier, Carolina the sole heir to millions in cash and property. Unable to engineer a change in the old man's will due to his ill health, Evan devised a scheme to render Carolina ineligible to accept the eventual bequest.

"Her desire to become a nun meant everything would be donated to charity upon her grandfather's death, and Evan couldn't stomach that," Watson elucidated. "Her expulsion from the monastery made her fair game for court-ordered confinement in a mental institution..."

"Tragic!" grunted MacLean.

Sheila lamented, "She'll need extensive therapy to recover from this nightmare."

Mustang smirked.

"You wouldn't," chided the Londoner. "Or, could you?"

"It might be dicey."

"It would be a mercy."

"I... don't deal much in mercy," the American confessed. "I tend more toward 'act first and ask forgiveness later.'"

"You've... implied the body count in your wake is rather... significant."

"To my shame." Mustang bit her lip. "What I don't understand is why Evan contrived to send Carolina to me, or what he hoped to accomplish by targeting Boleskine with a bomb."

Watson elaborated. "Evan is an inveterate gambler. He'd seen you in the Nice casinos winning at the craps tables and hoped to extort a substantial sum..."

"Blackmail? Based on what? All existing records have been... deleted or destroyed."

"Exactly his logic. No one goes through life without data being collected. When his research drew a total blank, he reckoned you were hiding dark secrets you'd prefer not be made public."

"The bloody scoundrel!" MacLean cursed. "I cannae apologize enough for my part in this... this..."

Mustang patted his hand. "C'mon, Donal. I'll take you home."

He gulped. "The same way we came?"

“You’d prefer the train, I suppose.”

“Definitely.”

Mustang studied her freshly scarred palms. “So would I.”

In lieu of shaking hands, she favored Sheila with kisses on both cheeks, and Watson with a light chuck on the shoulder. “You’re good, the two of you.”

“So are you,” Sheila acknowledged.

“Wait just a second!” Watson protested. “You promised...”

Mustang grinned. “That’s right, I did.” She pointed toward the restrooms. “I’ll be a minute.”

Waving MacLean to follow, she edged past crowded tables and vanished through the service entrance.

Sheila discerned a subtle alteration in Watson’s demeanor. He wouldn’t remember Mustang’s involvement in this case...

MacLean flagged down a taxi, which delivered them to the station. One aspect of the British rail system Mustang admired: it covered a lot of territory. She paid for a first class compartment to Glasgow, MacLean’s preferred destination.

“I’ve got a little savings put by, but I’ll need t’ be settin’ up some auditions.”

“If I were you, I’d lose the beard and cut your hair. There are more opportunities for a well-groomed actor.”

“Ach, aye.” He briefly pondered the passing landscape. “Elizabeth...”

“Eh?”

“You were... wearing a very... fetching outfit at the pub...”

“To catch your attention.”

“Which it did, aye, it did. Why... shed it in favor of... this?”

“I knew I could never cross that rough Yorkshire terrain in a skirt and heels...”

She didn’t like lying and, in a way, the explanation rang true...

“You’re a bonnie wee lass.”

“Thanks.”

“We’re nae due at Glasgow Central for a couple hours. There’s a comfortable bed...” He grabbed her waist and pulled her into an embrace. “I’ve a mind t’ get a leg over...”

Not unless you want the deaths of hundreds on your conscience when eight carriages derail, she groaned inwardly. Then, aloud, “I’m that knackered, Donal. I was going to curl up for a quick nap.”

“It’d be dead easy to bolt the door and lower the shades...”

Why were so many men attracted to her that way? she mused. Horizontal gymnastics with a man who so closely resembled popular renderings of the supreme deity might qualify as the ultimate irony, given her almost godlike powers; the notion of meaningless, casual sex didn't appeal to her.

Not pleasant being kissed by whisker-shrouded lips before she wriggled from his grasp. "I'm just going to pop down to the dining car for some coffee first."

Her departure coincided with a stop in a Scottish border village; she'd alighted from the carriage and jogged to an adjacent field before the locomotive resumed its motion.

MacLean saw the lightning bolt strike amidst unharvested rows of wheat; he dozed.

Searing pain tore through Mustang's arms when she returned to Boleskine House. Unlocking the steel-reinforced door without a key, she shuffled to the kitchen, wrenched open the freezer door and jammed her mitts into the ice tray.

Not that the wounds blackening her palms ever really healed. She could have mended the flesh, but the scars served as a constant reminder of her need for self-control.

In the cane-backed rocking chair an hour later - refreshed by a shower, clean clothes and a soothing mug of hot chocolate - she pronounced this affair a triumph. "Memories erased, loose ends eliminated..."

"No one died, you mean," muttered Erwin Rommel. "Though, you were tempted..."

"I'm always tempted, General. Isn't that the purpose of the exercise? To master temptation?"

He moved his queen diagonally.

"Speaking of which, I need to exercise the horses," she gushed, leaving the game in limbo.