

Lifelines

***Phoenix Foundation Local Reserve
Nevada***

MacGyver let his arms dangle over the fence loosely as he watched the wild mustangs grazing in the distance. It had been months ago now that he'd saved them from certain death at the hands of local ranchers, and every now and again he liked to come out and visit.

This time, he'd brought Sam along to meet his favorite stallion – a horse that had saved his life during a brushfire.

“Why do I get the feeling you could retire out here right now and forget L.A. even exists?” Sam teased, taking a bite out of a sandwich he'd brought along as he too watched the mustangs. “I guess they are kinda interesting. Maybe I could do an article on them sometime...” He set down the sandwich, picked up his camera and began to take a few random shots.

He lowered the camera again as one of the horses separated from the herd and walked over to them. The horse leaned over the fence and MacGyver reached out to stroke his nose.

“Hey fella.” The horse's ears swiveled and he snorted softly. “You remember me, don't you?” He stroked the horse's neck and turned to Sam. “This guy saved my life. Bravest thing I ever saw.”

He's magnificent.” Sam reached out to stroke the horse too, but the stallion snorted and stepped back. Sam hurriedly withdrew his hand. “OK, no touching!” The horse stared at him for a moment longer, then stepped forward and deftly stole his sandwich.

“Hey!” The horse stepped back out of reach, chewing. “Did you see that, Dad? He stole it! I didn't think horses even ate cheese!”

“I guess this one does!” MacGyver laughed, watching the horse turn and saunter back to his herd. Sam sighed and picked up his camera again.

“At least I can photograph him, thief that he is!”

Mac watched Sam at work and smiled. It had been a good idea to come to Nevada for a couple of days. It was weird, but out here he felt so alive, so free from any burdens. He hated to admit it to himself, but just lately he felt like age was catching up with him. Nothing specific, just the odd headache here and the odd eye strain there. *Maybe I need to get out of the Aurix Project and back into some good old fashioned field work where I can get some fresh air...*

“Penny for the thoughts going through that inexplicable head of yours?” Sam had stopped taking pictures and was staring at his dad intently. “You know, you've been a little *too* serious lately?”

“It’s just the assignment Pete has me and Nikki working on,” MacGyver admitted with a sigh. He turned away from the panoramic view, leaned his back against the fence and shook his head wearily. “There’s a couple more weeks of it yet, and it’s all red tape and paperwork.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s one big headache, *literally!*”

“Ah,” Sam grinned knowingly. “Paperwork was never your thing. Anything I can do to help?” He stuck in a new roll of film and clicked his Canon shut.

MacGyver winced. “Nope, it’s an external audit on an electronics company specializing in avionics. They’re doing some work for NASA, and NASA basically wants to know they’re getting top grade circuitry after what happened to the *Challenger* shuttle.”

“Well at least the NASA part sounds interesting,” Sam prodded. “Anything you can give me a scoop on?” There was a teasing grin on his face that suggested he already knew the answer.

“Not really. Not unless you want a few hundred shots of diodes, PCB’s, resistors, coils, IC’s, solder wire...”

Sam held up his hands in defeat. “Okay, I agree, it sounds boring!” The grin slowly faded from his face and he became a little more serious. “You know, speaking of work...”

MacGyver recognized the tone and the expression instantly. Sam had an assignment, and he knew his dad wasn’t going to like it. “You have a job, huh?”

“Yeah, my editor rang before we came out here.” Sam looked apologetic, but there was also a spark of excitement in his voice. “It’s overseas. I won’t be gone too long, but I kinda might be incommunicado for a few days.”

There was an awkward pause. Mac wanted to say Sam shouldn’t go. Heck, he *wanted* the kid to have some nice nine to five office job that never put him in peril unless the coffee machine exploded. But then, how could he ask that given his own lifestyle? Eventually, he patted Sam on the back and forced a wan smile even though his mind was screaming something else.

“Well, by the sounds of it we should both be about finished the same time. What say we do another road trip on the bikes afterwards? I know I could do with the break and fresh air, minus the plane crash this time, though.”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah, definitely minus the plane crash!” He put his camera away in his holdall and his eyes turned just a little watery. “Glad I found you dad...even if it did take awhile.”

MacGyver put his arm around Sam and squeezed just a little. “Not as glad as I am, kiddo.”

* * * *

*Aurix Aeronautics
Silicon Valley
California
Sometime Later...*

MacGyver peered through the special glass of the clean room, watching intently as the employees within worked meticulously on tiny, but very important PCB's. At his side, Nikki Carpenter was almost as mesmerized. The lights were bright, and MacGyver squinted against the glare, feeling a headache starting behind his eyes.

The room was where the RCS thruster control circuits were being manufactured for the latest space shuttle, and everything had to be "surgically" clean. The area looked more like a hospital lab than a factory, with two glass walls for viewing.

The workers inside all wore white coveralls, shoe covers, white hats, masks and blue latex gloves. There was special matting on the floor to pick up any dirt or dust from people who entered, along with a special air filtration system to ensure everything was squeaky clean. Hi Tec seemed too loose a description, but the safety measures were very necessary.

"I have to say, this is pretty impressive," Nikki offered, taking her eyes from the room to turn to Mac, arms folded in front of her.

MacGyver nodded. "Yeah, but it's not what it looks like, remember? It's about the whole process from goods inwards to shipping. If any one process fails to meet NASA's criteria..."

Nikki nodded knowingly and was about to make a comment when their guide from Aurix, Michelle Brewer reappeared from the nearby offices. She clasped her hands together and beamed just a little too pleasantly. "Everything in order?"

Mac couldn't help but smile back. Michelle was a very pretty blonde with a figure that matched her radiant expression. That didn't, however, detract him from his mission. "Looking good here," he answered. "Can we have the records for quality audits done on all the components fitted to the RCS thruster controls when they entered goods inwards next please?"

Michelle raised a brow but scurried off back to the offices.

"That's a whole lot of paperwork to sift through," Nikki winced. "Do we really need them?"

"Well, all this cleanliness and static free environment is pretty useless if the parts weren't up to scratch from the supplier." Mac jerked a thumb back to the clean room. "Seeing isn't always believing," he pointed out.

Nikki nodded. “Yeah, and the devil is in the detail.” She looked a little sheepish. “Sorry, I’m just getting tired of the red tape side of things. I don’t know how Pete does this stuff 24/7.”

“Because he’s a saint.” Mac pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh as Michelle returned with a huge pile of printouts. He took them with another smile. “Thanks.” Then he glanced at Nikki apologetically. “Would you mind if we headed back already? I hate to admit it but my head is splitting in two. I can take the printouts home and check them later. There’s nothing top secret about quality control figures, after all.”

Nikki patted his arm. “Be my guest, especially if it means *I* don’t have to dig through them all.” She let out a sigh. “To be honest, I’m tired too. Paperwork is more draining than field work. Who knew?”

Mac nodded. He knew alright. That was why he usually avoided it like the plague. He let Nikki take point out to the parking lot, dumping the computer prints on the back seat before climbing behind the wheel. Nikki hopped in beside him and stuck on her belt.

“Home, James,” she teased, patting the dash.

MacGyver felt like he should make a sarcastic comment back – it was how they worked together, but today, he just didn’t have it in him. He wasn’t just tired, he was dead beat.

Instead of talking, it took all his concentration to turn on the ignition and pull out onto the highway. His hands felt strange on the steering wheel, like they weren’t even attached to his arms. *I should pull over...*

Except at this point, his limbs didn’t seem to want to obey his mind anymore. He blinked and shook his head, hoping to clear it, but the movement spiked pain in his forehead and his vision blurred. He tried to tighten his grip on the wheel, but his fingers felt rubbery and indistinct. *I should slow down...*

“Mac? Are you OK?” He heard Nikki’s voice, but she sounded very far away.

Mac tried to press the brakes, but his foot wouldn’t budge from the accelerator. In fact, he was actually applying *more* gas, because his legs were now simple dead weights he couldn’t control.

“Mac? MacGyver! Talk to me! Are you Okay? MAC!”

From somewhere in the back of his aching brain, he heard Nikki scream out a warning about a bend, and then abruptly he was sleeping – dreaming about mustangs, and being finally free.

* * * *

MacGyver didn't know how long he'd been out of it, but as his eyes opened up and struggled to focus, he realized he was in a hospital room with the window blinds closed and the lights muted.

He tried to move, noted it hurt his head far too much, and that he was hooked up to an I.V. even though he couldn't feel any physical injuries bar his headache.

Concussion maybe?

MacGyver let his eyes close momentarily, tried to remember exactly what had happened, and when he couldn't, he dared to reach over and press his bedside buzzer. Even that movement made him dizzy. He recalled the one time he'd gotten drunk as a Kid – the one time that had put him off alcohol for life – and even then he hadn't been half as “out of it” as he felt now.

Footsteps down the corridor made him pause any reminiscing and he squinted painfully as the door opened and the room lights automatically brightened.

A female in a white coat entered, and before Mac could say anything introduced herself. “Ah you're awake, welcome back Mr. MacGyver. I'm Doctor Helena Curtis, the neurosurgeon assigned to your case.”

Mac blinked, taking in the words, but it was hard to let anything sink in. “Neurosurgeon?” He frowned as if it would help. “What happened? Where's Nikki?”

Nikki was in the car when..?

The doctor's face said it all before she even answered. “It appears you blacked out at the wheel. There was an accident and...I'm afraid your friend...”

MacGyver felt every muscle in his body sag. He blinked up at the doctor and shook his head. Nikki couldn't be dead! They were just talking, just griping in fact, about how the Aurix audit was hard work. He rubbed at his temple and closed his eyes. “There must be a mistake...”

The silence stretched as MacGyver tried to piece together what had happened. He fought past the pain and the fog in his head, retracing the journey. He'd felt ill, set off in the Jeep with Nikki, and then...

...and then he'd lost control.

MacGyver's hands bunched in the sheets and he screwed his eyes shut, the pounding in his head deafening, hot tears pricking behind his eyelids. Curtis walked closer, stuffing her hands in the pockets of her white coat. It somehow made her seem slightly intimidating when Mac finally reopened his eyes and accepted what she was saying. “I'm so sorry, she didn't have a chance. Your Jeep careered off the highway and down a steep incline. It's a miracle you escaped with cuts and bruises.”

Mac swallowed, fighting for control. It really wasn't about cuts and bruises, he didn't care what had happened to him; it was about the *why* this had happened. It was the

usual story of everyone around him ended up dead or hurt and he walked away unscathed.

“I was tired. I should have asked Nikki to drive.” The words and tone were sharp and bitter. Right now he hated himself more than any man on earth. He clenched his jaw against the scream trying to escape and hunched forwards.

“I killed her. It’s all my fault.” MacGyver’s whisper was harsh and strained, and Dr. Curtis had to lean in close to hear him.

“It really wasn’t your fault,” Curtis was apologetic now, like she had more bad news. But that was probably because she did. “You didn’t just black out through fatigue Mr. MacGyver, it was because you’ve developed an aneurysm – from looking at your notes I’d say it was caused by a fall you took some time ago off a multi-storey car lot?”

Mac looked up at her and shook his head as if it wasn’t possible. “That was a few years ago. I’ve been fine since?”

“Sadly that’s often how these things work. You often don’t know you have one until it leaks or bursts.” Curtis was talking slower, and her eyes watched MacGyver for every reaction. “Have you had any headaches lately, blurred vision, anything like that?”

Mac ran a hand through the front of his hair and found the motion hurt. He wasn’t sure if he’d bumped his head in the crash, or if it was from the aneurysm itself. “A few headaches,” he finally admitted. “But that was just work?”

The doctor shook her head. “No it wasn’t.” Her eyes suddenly moved to the linoleum floor. “I’m afraid there’s something else…”

“Oh?” *Could this really get any worse?*

“We believe from the size and the position of the aneurysm that it’s inoperable. And given the headaches, the blackout and scan results we’ve just taken, we think its leaking and could burst at any time.” Curtis put a hand on Mac’s forearm. “I know this must be a shock, too much to take in even. I’ll leave you for awhile.”

MacGyver opened his mouth to tell her not to leave, but it was too dry to even make a coherent sound. In the end he just nodded and slumped back onto his pillow.

It was ironic really, how it had taken all those years for Sam to find him, and now this was going to happen. But then he always did hurt the ones he loved – that was why he’d never settled into marriage – it was too risky.

And what about Nikki?

It was too much to accept she could be gone like a candle extinguished in the night by some random breeze. She was too strong, too sassy, and too *alive*.

I should have died back then when I took the fall onto that car. It would have been cleaner, less messy. No Sam to upset. No Nikki to kill...

But then fate had always been cruel that way, and now the good old reaper was going to finally collect what was his.

And right at that moment, MacGyver didn't care.

* * * *

That Night...

The ship's horn startled MacGyver into a waking state, and he rubbed at his eyes. The nightmare of the hospital room was thankfully gone, replaced by the view from a liner's wooden deck. He couldn't recall why he was on a ship, but it was far better than the dream he'd been having about aneurysms and Nikki's death.

Mac blinked and looked around him. There were passengers milling everywhere, and some of them seemed strangely familiar. He stepped closer to the safety rail and leaned over just enough to catch the name of the vessel he was on, emblazoned on a plate.

Osiris...

It took a moment for realization to dawn. This was the liner that carried souls across to the afterlife – at least that was what his mind had shown him after the fall a few years back. He'd met his mother and father here, and Grandpa Harry.

So the hospital was real? Am I dead already? Did I die in my sleep?

Sam...

Mac stumbled backwards, stunned, his mind reeling with questions.

“Mr. MacGyver, so nice to see you again!” A voice from an upper level caught his attention, and when Mac looked up he saw the captain of the *Osiris* peering over a rail at him. “Why did you have to go to Aurix Aeronautics Mr. MacGyver? What did you need to investigate for? There was nothing to see, and now Nikki Carpenter is dead because of you...”

The captain stepped back to reveal Nikki looking out across the horizon, back to the land they were fast leaving behind. Reality and *life* that they were leaving behind.

Mac backed away until his shoulders hit the stark coldness of an outer cabin wall. He tried to close his eyes to it all, but even through the darkness, his mind filled with images of the Jeep speeding off the highway at a sharp bend and tumbling wildly onto the rocks below.

The captain's voice droned on. “Why Mr. MacGyver? Why bother with Aurix? Was it your idea? Well done! You killed a friend...”

“No!” MacGyver yelled, arms flailing out of control, until after a few seconds he realized he was back in the hospital room in the darkness. He fell back against the pillows, panting heavily as sweat dripped from his brow. His mind was hazy, and his skull felt like it was ready to explode – but then maybe it was.

After seconds turned into minutes, he eventually felt composed enough to shakily press the buzzer again. He wasn’t sure he liked Dr. Curtis, but then maybe that was because she was the bearer of bad news. Right now, though, he needed more answers, even if it meant they were from her.

It took awhile, but eventually Curtis appeared. As she entered, was that a look of annoyance on her face? It was fleeting, and MacGyver wasn’t even sure it wasn’t his imagination and fatigue filled eyes playing tricks.

“I...I think I had some kind of nightmare or...I don’t know?” MacGyver pushed up onto his elbows. “It was like...like before, when I was in the hospital with the original head injury, except everyone in the dream, vision, call it what you will, they were yelling about Aurix, about Nikki about...”

“About it being your fault?” Curtis nodded and helped him into a sitting position. “It’s the aneurysm,” she explained. “It’s causing pressure – that coupled with your subconscious reliving recent events, and you have a very heady cocktail. Maybe it would help to talk to someone about it?”

Mac cocked a brow. Seeing therapists had never been his thing. “You mean see a counselor?”

Curtis smiled, and there it was again, that little tinge of insincerity that was gone in the blink of an eye. “Something like that. It might help after all you’ve been through.”

“Is there any point?” MacGyver watched the doctor’s expression. “I mean, why bother, if I’m dying?” He sucked down a breath, wishing he wasn’t so negative. He was never negative. He should be coming up with a plan to live, all held together with a little hope and a dash of duct tape. Eventually, he let the breath back out and stared at Curtis. “Pete Thornton? My son Sam? Why aren’t they here?”

“Mr. Thornton is taking care of the audit at Aurix. It has to be complete before the next shuttle launch in just two days, apparently, but he assures me he’ll be in as soon as he can. He’s also having a top neurosurgeon flown in for a second opinion, but...”

“But you don’t expect them to come up with anything, either,” Mac finished for her, suddenly feeling the urge to tinker with something to keep his hands and mind busy, except here he didn’t even have a pen or a paperclip. “And Sam?”

Curtis winced. “I’m sorry. We’ve been trying to contact him since all of this happened, but no luck. If you have a way of contacting him..?”

He did say he’d be incommunicado for a few days on that assignment...

An emptiness suddenly hit MacGyver like he'd never felt before, not even when he was on missions behind enemy lines with no contact with the outside world. He was truly alone, no son, no friends, just the knowledge that he was dying, his final days tormented by nightmares and guilt trips. "Okay," he gave in. "I'll see the counselor, if nothing else it's someone else to talk to."

"Good!" Curtis seemed pleased, considering it was a pointless exercise, but Mac let her have the moment. He didn't have the energy not to. "She's actually just finishing with another patient. I'll go see if she can fit you in today..."

The doctor vanished, her white coat swishing like a cape-wearing wraith in the night, and within five minutes, she was back with a tiny woman MacGyver could have sworn he'd seen in a Bond Movie – and not on the side of 007. She wore a very prim and proper plaid suit, and her eyes narrowed like she was scrutinizing everything.

Curtis left them to it.

"Mr. MacGyver I presume?" The little woman plopped down onto the only chair in the room and smiled far too broadly. Didn't she know how he was feeling? Didn't she know he maybe had days, hours even to live? "I'm Dr. Sandhurst. Dr. Curtis tells me you've been having nightmares. Care to tell about them?" She folded her arms in front of her and waited expectantly.

Somehow, the brusque approach worked and Mac opened up to the tiny counselor more than he ever had to anyone – even Pete. Or maybe that was just because of the drugs they had him on?

"I keep seeing Aurix – it's a place I was doing an audit on before the accident – except in my dreams I see other people, Nikki who died in the accident, my Grandpa...and..." Mac's voice trailed. How could he tell this woman about his brush with death before, and about the *Osiris*, the ship that took away the dead? He bit his lip, remaining silent.

Instead of asking him to continue, Sandhurst's eyes narrowed. "If you're nightmares are about Aurix, it might be significant. What were you doing there, Mr. MacGyver? Is there something about the place in your subconscious you'd feel better telling me about? Perhaps you found something there in the audit that might be triggering that part of your nightmare?"

MacGyver's mind was too bleary, too overwhelmed by the questions. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "No, I don't think so...it was just a whole lot of red tape..." *Careful Mac, remember she doesn't have security clearance to know what Aurix are working on...*

"Red tape can be so annoying, can't it Mr. MacGyver?" She patted his arm. "Do try to think on it. I'm sure the key to unlocking the nightmares is this project of yours..." Sandhurst rose from her seat, sniffed and headed for the door. Before closing it behind her, she looked at him pointedly. "Do call for me if you think of anything else you'd like to get off your chest."

The door slammed as she exited, and Mac was left feeling like he'd just been examined by an alien nation under a microscope. Sandhurst hadn't tried to help him one bit, she'd cross-examined him and then left.

This isn't just a nightmare; it's a waking nightmare I can't escape from. It's not right somehow...

There was something, something he should have noticed on the edge of his peripheral vision, but that was hiding just out of reach. MacGyver tried to concentrate, but the act seemed to just make him more tired. He attempted to fight it, but was suddenly so weighed down by some mental fog, that he once again drifted off into slumber.

It wasn't a place he wanted to be, and yet his mind dragged him back there. He was on "the other side" again, walking down the deck of the liner of death. He could feel the timbers beneath his sneakers, and smell the salty ocean air.

"MacGyver!" The way his name was spoken sounded like a taunt, and he couldn't resist whirling around, even though he knew who was heckling.

It was the ship's captain again, and he was shaking his head like he was scolding a naughty child. "Mr. MacGyver, you know you really shouldn't have left last time. Your place was here all along, on the trip with Harry."

MacGyver shook his head. This wasn't real, it was a dream, and all he had to do was wake up and it would be over, wouldn't it? Except part of him believed it. Were his mom and dad here to greet him this time?

"Tut tut, who will look after Sam now that you're going to die?" The captain continued his tirade, and two crewmen had joined him, their stance suggesting they wouldn't allow MacGyver to try and leave without a fight. "Was Aurix and what you found there really that important? Just *what did* you find there, Mr. MacGyver? Why were you even looking? Who was it at NASA that put in the request? You see, it's all their fault don't you?"

MacGyver turned away, cradling his head in his hands, the pain in his skull was so intense. His brain felt like it was ready to melt down and his vision was so blurred he saw three of everything. Could you actually feel like that on the other side?

"You're not giving up on me again, are you, Bud?" The words were scolding again, but this time there was a tinge of affection too, and Mac could have recognized the gruff voice anywhere. It was Harry.

MacGyver pulled his hands away from his head and dared to open his eyes.

Harry was looking back at him, and he looked angry. "You shouldn't be here, not then, not now. I told you before, it's not your time. Now go get back where you belong and sort out this mess, Bud, before I have to take my boot to your behind and kick ya there!"

Mac smiled wanly. Somehow, the ticking off from Harry had made him feel better – stronger, and his head was clearing too. Maybe he could fight this, maybe...

“You shouldn’t be here, not then, not now. I told you it’s not your time...”

Harry’s voice repeated the words over and over, fading slowly until he was gone, and the *Osiris* and her crew along with him.

MacGyver blinked and noted he was staring at the ceiling of his hospital room in the darkness, and he was panting. What the heck just happened? His mind wanted answers, and for once, his body seemed willing enough to want to help him find them. From somewhere, he pulled the strength to roll over, mindful of the needle in his hand and the line snaking up to the drip stand. He felt for the tube, but couldn’t find it.

And then it hit him – he’d been writhing in his sleep so much he’d somehow pulled the I.V. from the back of his hand. How long had it been out? And more to the point wasn’t it meant to make him feel better? So why did he actually feel more alert, now it was out?

Mac pushed up onto his elbows and tested his body. His head ached, but it was a duller pain, and he was still groggy, but somehow he felt different. He pushed up further, swinging his body onto the edge of the bed. Dare he try to stand?

He let his feet slide to the floor and was surprised how cold it was to his flesh. He shivered, and then realized he was standing without any assistance. There were slippers by the bedside chair, and instinctively he slid them on. Barefoot was never good in an unknown situation, and this was fast becoming just that.

This isn’t right...

And what about Pete?

I don’t care about how important the Aurix thing is, he would have been here for me!

MacGyver stumbled to the cupboard across from his bed, using the wall for support until the feeling of Jell-O in his legs abated. Gently teasing open the door with shaking hands, he expected his personal things, clothes at least, but there was nothing. *Great, stuck in a hospital gown and slippers. Not my day, or night, whichever it is!*

Being in a gown didn’t mean he had to be stuck in the room, though. He wanted details now that his mind was clear of the chemical induced fog. What hospital was this anyway? Who were these people?

He stumbled to the door and gripped the chrome knob, twisting with what little strength he had, but it was locked. What kind of hospital locked patients in, apart from mental facilities? What if there was an emergency?

Okay, so what about the window, there are always alternatives...

Mac turned himself around and again used the walls to navigate the room. With each step, though, he was feeling better and his headache was clearing. That shouldn't be happening with an aneurysm, now should it?

The blinds on the window were closed – in fact, now that he thought about it; they had been since his arrival. Originally he'd thought it was to help with the headaches he'd been suffering from, but was that really the reason?

Mac clumsily pulled the cord to open the blind, but what he found wasn't what he'd been expecting, and it certainly wasn't a view of L.A.

The window had been carefully boarded over from the *outside*.

And there was no hospital in the world that did that.

Part Two

MacGyver's world echoed and spun; he raised a shaking hand to his head as the realization sank in. He leaned against the window sill, his legs suddenly unable to take his weight.

If this wasn't really a hospital, and the drugs he'd been given weren't really medicine, then...

Maybe he wasn't really dying.

He took a breath, sudden hope making his heart beat fast.

Maybe Nikki wasn't really dead!

The only problem was, with the door locked, and the window effectively barricaded from the outside, there was no way to find out the truth, how ever bizarre it was.

Mac sucked down a breath and spun around, steadying himself when the sudden move made him dizzy – apparently the drugs hadn't completely worn off yet.

He scanned the bedside table, but there was nothing to pick the door lock with, and nothing to attack the hinges with. And of course, there might just be a guard on the door anyway, if he chose that as an escape route.

Right, so that just leaves the window!

MacGyver slid open the large glass pane and examined the wood that had been fixed on from the outside. He pressed against it with his weight, testing it, but it was hammered on firmly. Nevertheless, it had to come off if he was going to see what was beyond, and try for an escape.

I need a crowbar!

Mac put his attention back on the room, but whoever had set him up had been very careful not to leave anything but the “set dressing” behind. Apparently his reputation for making things had preceded him. The thought brought a smile to his face and spurred him on.

After checking the cupboard again, MacGyver’s eyes locked on the I.V. stand. It was shiny chrome – metal, just like a crowbar. Maybe not as strong, but it might be rigid enough to get him out.

He moved to the side of the bed, sat on the edge and examined the stand more carefully. The base was made from four legs that were almost flat strips of steel with small coasting wheels on each end.

Mac turned the whole thing upside down, ignoring the bag of drug-filled fluid that fell away and clattered onto the floor. He examined the legs, and felt his heart skip when he found they only screwed into the base. Carefully, he unwound the nearest leg and then pulled off the wheel.

The thing he was left with was just the right size and thickness to use on the window, but the end simply wasn’t flat enough to pry at anything with. Mac bit into his lip, frowned, and then focused on the door to the bathroom. He nodded, satisfied he’d found the solution, and then jogged over to the door with a new sense of energy.

Mac placed the edge of the metal into the door frame nearest the hinges, wedging it as best he could, then he slammed the door with all the strength he could muster, praying there really was no guard on the outside of the outer door.

No one came running, but the wooden bathroom door gave way, splintering in his grasp. Mac ignored the chewed up timber and examined the bar. He sighed with relief as he noted the metal end had now effectively been “crimped” into maybe, just maybe, a shape he could use on the barricade.

Moving back to the window, MacGyver positioned the impromptu crowbar between the boarding and the window frame, wedging it into place with a whack of his hand. Then he put all his weight behind it, forcing the nails and board away from the window. It was slow going, but eventually, the wood gave way and snapped outwards.

Mac moved onto the next board, and the next until there was room for him to snake his body through the hole. Remaining ever-cautious he listened at the gap and poked one of the boards through. When nothing happened, he popped his head through to assess the situation. The building he was in was huge, but it was certainly no hospital. The walls were dirty and stark and the roof of the far section looked to have given way in places. If Mac had to call it, he’d guess he was in an old factory or warehouse.

He looked away from the structure, hoping to get a fix on his location, but the building was surrounded by desert and the odd cacti. There were no other buildings, not even on the horizon, and no people anywhere.

To Mac’s right, the windows weren’t boarded and nothing about the building looked unusual. He was pretty high up and a strong breeze blew his hair into his eyes. To

the left was another window, and it too was boarded over. *Could Nikki be in there?* There was no way to tell without physically looking, and the only way over to the window was a section of drain that ran horizontal across the whole side of the structure. It looked as old and damaged as the roof on the far section, but could it take his weight?

MacGyver ducked back into the hospital room. Something to wrap over the pipe to help drag himself along would be real handy. He could use his feet on the building wall to take some of his weight that way too. He scratched his head in frustration. His belt would have been perfect, but his captors had taken that along with his clothes.

Mac winced, but refused to give in – his persistence paid dividends when after a few minutes, he noticed something dangling from under the sheet on his bed. He pulled at the leather and realized he was looking at restraining straps – had they been for him?

MacGyver couldn't help but smile. *Well they sure are now!*

He removed the straps and noted they were shorter than he'd have liked, but as long as they went over the pipe, they'd have to do. Moving back to the window, he climbed outside onto the ledge with the straps and crowbar tied around his neck.

He paused for a second as his head spun, and he made the fatal mistake of looking down. There was a car parked below, reminding him too much of his fall onto one in the past. He gripped the window frame until his knuckles were white, but his vertigo cleared, then he moved onto the pipe with the strap, focusing on the task rather than how high up he was.

His surgical gown billowed and flapped in the breeze, and MacGyver blushed as he realized anyone below must be getting a full view of his underwear. The wind blew the gown around his leg and he had to let go to tug it free, his breathing ragged and his heartbeat loud in his ears.

“Man, I hate heights!” He blinked hard, trying to clear the lingering dizziness, and took the next step.

The pipe groaned with his weight, but MacGyver kept his moves slow and deliberate, feeding his way across to the other window in about five minutes. Once he reached the safety of the other ledge, he paused and puffed out a breath of relief then balanced himself carefully to work one-handed on the boarding with the “crowbar.”

The question was, would Nikki be the other side, or had something terrible still happened to her? MacGyver tried to think about it while he worked. She was going to be there, she was going to chew him out with a bout of her sass for not rescuing her sooner, and then she'd tell him she could have escaped on her own anyway, she was just waiting for him to be polite...

MacGyver smiled as an image of Nikki filled his brain, and two seconds later the smile broadened when he pulled away the first timber to see Nikki lying on a bed through the window. The place was a fake hospital room, just like his had been, and Nikki looked way out of it. She had probably been drugged, but at least she was alive.

Mac worked on more of the boarding until he could slither inside, and was grateful when his slippers touched down on the linoleum and he could leave the giddy heights of the window ledge behind.

Moving across the room to the bed, Mac checked on Nikki first. She was half-conscious and grinned sleepily at the sight of his face. “Whoa, you look sure good for a dead man,” she slurred. Then her face crumpled and a tear slid down her cheek. “You’re dead...” She whispered. She blinked in confusion, then her eyes slid closed and she drifted back to sleep.

Mac patted her affectionately, but moved to the door. Escape, not small talk was the order of the day right now. He slowly checked the handle, but it was locked, just like his, and again there was nothing in the room to pick it.

There was no chance of getting Nikki out and back to his room, and even if he could, there was no escape from there either.

MacGyver popped his head out the window and took another look at the building. There was another window to his left, smaller, but not boarded. Could he slide across to that and get inside?

With little other choice, he clambered back out onto the ledge and onto the pipe again. Thankfully, the second window was closer, and this time he didn’t look down. As an added bonus, the window was actually open a fraction enough for him to slide a hand through and open it fully.

Mac thanked whoever was watching down on him and dropped inside. It was dark, but there was enough light from outside to make out he was in some kind of storage area, and from what was lying around, he guessed the building had some kind of connection with electronics manufacturing. Did this mean Aurix Aeronautics was behind the madness of the last few days? And why?

MacGyver moved cautiously over to the door and tried the handle – this time, it was open. He nudged it forwards just a crack and peeked out into the corridor beyond. It was clear, but for how long? No doubt the phony doctors would be doing their rounds again soon, although he hadn’t quite figured out what they were up to yet.

He ducked back into the room, his priority now was getting Nikki’s door open without awakening the dead, and that meant he needed some kind of lock pick.

Looking round, he spotted a dust-ridden shelf with old production line test sets. They were old and covered in cobwebs, but the one on the end was something called a “noise box” – an insulated box with the equipment inside that protected the gear from outside interference. The box lid had a pinned hinge. *Perfect!*

MacGyver moved to a different shelf with rusting, ancient tools and rummaged until he found a pair of cutters, they were corroded and stiff, but it didn’t matter. Using them closed, he lined up the tip with the end of the pin and used the flat of his hand to whack it out just a touch. Then he pried open the rusted cutters and carefully used

them as pliers to pull the pin the rest of the way. With a final move, he cut the pin in two, making a pair of perfectly usable lock picks.

Mac didn't waste time thinking what might happen next, and moved back to the door. The corridor was still empty, so he slid outside to Nikki's room and quickly used his new tools to get inside.

Nikki was still lying across the bed, her skin pale and beaded with perspiration as if she'd been fitfully tossing and turning. Had she been having nightmares too? Was it all part of the interrogation process? MacGyver eased the needle out of her arm, letting the drug drip onto the floor.

Mac tapped her cheek gently but with enough force to make her stir. "Nikki...it's me, MacGyver!"

"Huh?" Nikki blearily opened one eye, frowned and then rolled backwards, puffing out a breath. "I was...just dreaming about...you," she slurred.

"Something nice, I hope?" Mac couldn't help but tease as he carefully sat her upright and put her arm over his shoulder. "Do you think you can walk with my help?"

Nikki thought about it and grinned a little too cheerily. "Nope," she offered almost inaudibly. "But I have a feeling you're going to make me try anyway?"

MacGyver smiled wanly as he took her weight. "Oh heck yeah! C'mon if we get out of this I might even buy you dinner."

Nikki grimaced. "Tofu?" She almost slumped back onto the bed. "Maybe you better just leave me here..."

MacGyver ignored the taunt and lifted Nikki to her feet. She groaned, but managed to stay upright as he jostled her into the corridor. It was still empty, but without knowing the layout of the building they had no idea where the exit was. *And we could sure do with some clothes before we attempt the desert outside!*

Mac moved slowly, taking Nikki's weight until they reached the end of the passageway, then he paused. There were voices coming from a room to his left, and he recognized Curtis as one of them, although he wasn't sure about the second.

Curtis sounded angry, and Mac heard a clattering sound that suggested she might have tossed something across the room in temper. "I've had enough of getting nothing out of this MacGyver character!" She was almost shouting. "Can't we just kill him?"

The second voice was calmer and much more casual. "You know it's not that simple! What if MacGyver has already spilled to someone? Before the payoff that could be disastrous for us. No, we need to know what he knows, and if he's told anyone before we make a move. Besides, you know Mariotte has other, much bigger plans for him..."

MacGyver moved backwards so fast his spine was pinned against the cold factory wall. He wasn't just surprised, he was stunned. There had always been the chance Roger Mariotte would have another go at getting to Sam after the Flight 4177 incident, but how did Mariotte connect to Aurix and a fake accident and hospital?

Mac shook himself. His mind was still fuzzy from the drugs, and for now it was better to escape, and then worry about the details later. He grabbed Nikki's arm again and all but dragged her past the door where the two were talking and into the next empty room.

There was a bench and a whole lot of grey metal lockers there, so he sat Nikki down and took a look around. Mac guessed it was where the "doctors" got dressed for their roles, as there was a table in the corner with a coffee maker, spoons and other small items that had been recently used.

He opened up a few of the lockers and found a ladies jacket, some scrubs and a white doctor's coat. Slim pickings, but the trousers to the scrubs were better than the gown he currently had on, so he changed into them.

Next he moved to the table with the coffee maker and grabbed a half eaten pack of cookies and a knife – both might come in handy later.

Nikki wasn't impressed. "Not exactly what I had in mind when you mentioned dinner," she complained, rubbing at her head like it was going to fall off.

Mac didn't answer. They were too close to the bad guys in the other room for small talk, and Nikki was still too "out of it" to understand. He grabbed her arm, pulled her to her feet and back out into the corridor. As he moved along it, he noted there was no security at all, no cameras, no more locked doors. Mariotte and his crew obviously thought they had Mac and Nikki fooled.

The passageway ended in stairs, at the bottom of which was a junction. To the left was another corridor, and to the right a fire door. *Finally, a way out!*

MacGyver pushed on the bar section with his free hand and was relieved when it opened without an argument. The door led straight out into the desert he'd seen from the upper level. There was nothing but sand and one single track road for miles. Arizona or Nevada maybe? If there was any local plant life around it might give him a clue, but for now they could be anywhere.

"Jeez, you sure know how to show a girl a good time," Nikki blinked, tried to focus her eyes with a squint and then sighed. "I don't suppose this is Waikiki..?" She was obviously being sarcastic, dazed or not.

Mac smiled. "Not unless they moved the ocean," he admitted. "C'mon, we need to find a way to get outta here..." He teased Nikki forwards to a corner of the building and peeked around the edge.

"I vote we get a cab," Nikki countered.

“A car isn’t a bad idea,” Mac agreed. “Except the only one I saw out the window earlier seems to have gone.” He sighed. If the car had still been around he could have hotwired it, but there were no other vehicles of any description. Going out via the road on foot was out of the question because once the bad guys knew they were missing they would be an easy catch.

That just left one option – right into the desert with just a knife and a packet of cookies.

Mac took Nikki’s arm again and was thankful when he noted she was taking more of her own weight. Half-dragging someone over slippery hot sand was no fun, and they had to move fast to get over the horizon, there was simply nowhere else to hide in between.

Eventually, as the sun rose high in the sky, they clambered over a rise and were out of sight from the old factory. They slid gratefully down the dune the other side and paused at the bottom. It was rockier here, and the boulders were interspersed with the odd cacti. To the right were the remnants of an old railway bridge, and MacGyver led Nikki to it. The shade it gave from the midday sun was essential, and it also gave cover from the bad guys for awhile while they rested.

Mac lowered Nikki down first, and as she hit the boulder he’d chosen for a seat with a bump, she seemed to waken up just a touch more. She looked down at the hospital gown, pulled it away from her flesh in distaste and blinked. “Why do I remember a hospital bed?” She blinked again, more apparently coming back to her. “Wait...I whacked my head in your Jeep and then some seriously weird stuff happened...”

“Welcome to my world.” MacGyver nodded. “You wouldn’t believe the last few days I’ve had.”

Nikki grimaced. “I think I’m glad I don’t remember too much of it.” She licked her lips. “I could sure do with a drink...”

Mac thought about it, he was dry too, and out in these conditions that wasn’t good. However, there were no streams or rivers out here, and he wasn’t about to find a Pepsi machine anytime soon. There was always going the natural route though. “I’ll see what I can do,” he offered cryptically as he began rummaging around under the bridge.

“You’re not going to find a six pack under a boulder you know?” Nikki said sassily, her sarcasm returning with her state of consciousness.

MacGyver retrieved a small stick and held it aloft as if he’d found gold. “Perfect! I just need something with a sharp point...”

Nikki wasn’t impressed. “Please tell me that’s not to go divining with?” She raised a brow and a cheeky smile played across her lips. She was back to full form now.

Mac grinned back and pointed to a small cactus. “Not exactly. See that little fella? Well that’s a Beavertail Prickly Pear, and at the right time of year they bear edible

fruit, but if you're careful about removing the spines and glochids you can eat the pads any time – and they're real juicy.”

“The what, now?” Nikki's brow creased.

“Glochids. Um... The hairs around the spines. Here.” MacGyver pointed with his knife and Nikki pulled back slightly.

“Oh, yeah. Glochids. Delicious...” Nikki's face suggested she wasn't thrilled by the idea, but Mac ignored her and spiked a young immature pad with the point of the stick. Using the knife he'd taken from the factory, he cut the pad free and then began to scrape the spines away. Eventually, he was able to cut it down to a chunk of juicy flesh which he passed to Nikki.

“Pity I can't start a fire, its way quicker to burn the spines off, but our friends from the “hospital” would probably see the smoke.” As he spoke, MacGyver ambled back over and spiked more of the Beavertail's pads to add to their bounty and then dropped back down besides Nikki to clean them up.

“Because these would be so much better barbequed!” Nikki took a bite, wrinkling her nose. She chewed thoughtfully. “You know, this doesn't taste as bad as I expected – kind of like a green bean.” She swallowed and took another bite.

Eventually, Mac began to nibble on a piece for himself. “You know, it's a shame this is a Prickly Pear and not something rarer,” he offered after swallowing. “We might have been able to pinpoint our location. As it is, we could be anywhere...”

“It's not *where* I am that worries me!” Nikki scoffed. “It's what the heck is going on! Please tell me you know something?” She lobbed a chunk of cacti at a boulder in annoyance.

“I know enough to be worried,” MacGyver admitted. “As we were getting out of that building I heard some of the bad guys talking – and Roger Mariotte's name was definitely in the mix.” He let the detail sink in.

“Mariotte?” Nikki was obviously shocked. “What could he have to do with any of this?”

Mac shrugged and took another piece of Prickly Pear. It wasn't exactly tasty, but they needed to keep hydrated. “They said something about him having “other plans” for me.”

“Don't take this the wrong way, but all that back there can't just be about revenge on you over the Boeing incident. That was over a year ago, and this was all way too elaborate. It's like some weird stunt from the Cold War.”

MacGyver agreed. “You're right. I think it goes beyond that. I also heard them talking about making sure nothing happened before the payoff – and given the questions I was asked when I was “out of it” and thought I was dreaming, I would say its all about our little audit on Aurix.”

Suddenly the penny seemed to drop and Nikki gaped. “Oh my...Aurix are an avionics manufacturer, and Mariotte was the exec of an avionics company when he got caught doing dirty business the first time!” She stood up from her perch and began to shakily pace, forcing the remnants of the drugs from her system with sheer tenacity. “We need to find out what he’s up to and fast!”

Mac glanced at the clothes he was wearing and the ongoing terrain in frustration. It was easy to say, but not so easy to do, given their current predicament. Not that he would ever let that stop him trying. “I hate to say it, but I think we need to concentrate on gettin’ out of here, first, then worry about Mariotte.”

The words had barely left his lips when a faint noise in the distance caught his ears. Mac strained to identify the sound, and as it grew consistently louder he recognized it as the whir of a helicopter’s rotors. It could be an innocent flight over the desert that might be able to save them, but it could equally be Aurix’s people on their tails.

MacGyver edged from under the bridge’s remains, keeping his back pinned against the ancient stonework and in the shadows. Craning his neck until it almost hurt, he caught a side view of the JetRanger hovering over a patch of the desert to their left.

It was so low it was churning up a small whirlwind of sand – too low for any harmless chopper on a regular journey.

Mac squinted, and the bright red decals on the side of the Bell that read “Aurix Aeronautics” confirmed his worst fears. He slid back under the bridge, his heart pounding.

“It’s them isn’t it?” Nikki asked, arms folded across her chest in stoic determination.

MacGyver nodded. “It sure is. I guess the hunt is on...”

Nikki didn’t seem to like that description and answered it with a cynical grimace. “Yeah, and we’re the prey!”

Lifelines Part 3

“And that’s not all,” Mac bit his lip. “With how low that guy is flying, if he gets too close, he’ll spot us, even under here.” He looked back over his shoulder, only to see the chopper inching their way. It didn’t look good.

Nikki threw her arms in the air. “Great! What are we supposed to do now? Shrink under one of these boulders like a snake?”

MacGyver sucked down a breath and looked around. There was nothing they could use to fight back, and there was nowhere to hide.

Or was there? His gaze slowly moved upwards until he was staring at the underside of the bridge remains. Cobwebs, their inhabitants, and several rotting timbers glared back at him.

Mac's expression turned from concern to a cheeky grin, and he pointed upwards. "Nope, we don't go down," he offered. "We go up!"

Nikki followed his eyes to the grim shadows of the overpass' underbelly and frowned. "We what?"

"We climb up there and hang underneath the bridge supports where the wooden beams and poor light will help hide us." MacGyver began to climb as he spoke, clambering over rocks and using crumbling brickwork to gain a footing. Halfway, he turned and offered a hand to help pull Nikki up.

She took it with a scowl. "What are we, bats now?"

Mac ignored her, reached up, grabbed a beam that looked intact and then swung his legs over it. "Something like that," he admitted. "Except I'm hoping we don't need to hang around too long, you know what I'm like with heights..."

Nikki smirked as if the idea was sweet revenge, and then grabbed the adjoining beam, tucking her legs up and out of sight. "That's what worries me," she quipped. "I remember what happened last time I tried to climb something with you!"

Two seconds after the words had left her lips, the helicopter swooped down next to the bridge, kicking up clouds of sand and dust. It was so low it was almost touching the desert, and several of the Prickly Pears were torn from their roots and mangled by the rotors.

"You were right," Nikki whispered as if the Bell's inhabitants could hear her over the whoosh of the blades and roar of the engine.

Mac cocked his head knowingly. "Heck, it's what I'd have done if I was chasing someone..."

The helicopter seemed to hover for forever, and for a moment MacGyver worried they'd been spotted anyway, then abruptly it turned tail and sped skywards, heading for another section of desert.

"Well that almost gave me a heart attack," Nikki groused as she let her legs drop and climbed back down to her perch. "So now what?"

Mac joined her, but took a moment to answer. He was in thinking mode, and sometimes all the information took awhile to assimilate before he came up with a plan – but in the end, it was what he was good at. "Well, we've been walking for a few hours; I figure it will be dusk soon, and with any luck the chopper won't be back again this way now until morning. Once it gets dark, I think we should try and move on. Unless, of course they have heat seeking equipment, then our goose is cooked."

Nikki huffed. "I don't think I like that option," she complained. "Did you really need to mention it?"

MacGyver smiled. He really liked working with Nikki, her total honesty and all-out sass were a breath of fresh air. “C’mon, I think we can start moving now...” He carefully left the safety of the bridge and shielded his eyes, looking into the distance for any signs of the enemy.

The evening sky was waning, turning gradually into darkness that allowed the stars to permeate the sky unhindered. There were no clouds, and no man-made light sources to spoil the thousands of bright sparkling bodies in the heavens.

And thankfully, the horizon was clear of bad guys.

Mac began to walk and noted Nikki had obediently fallen into step beside him, her arms wrapped around her as the temperature began to gradually drop. “It’s kinda beautiful out here, huh?”

Nikki seemed to think about it and her answer was ever-so-slightly derogatory. “You mean the red hot day, the ice cold night, the violent bad guys after our butts, the deadly insects under every rock, the pathetic excuse for clothes we’re wearing...”

Mac held up hand. “Okay, but apart from that?”

Nikki couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh yeah, I must come back to this place for a vacation. If only I knew where “this place” actually is!”

“We’ll figure it out.” MacGyver paused as they began to climb a small rise. The land was becoming less rocky, but did that mean anything? He didn’t mention it to Nikki, but increased his speed until he reached the summit. What he saw below made him sigh with relief.

There was a building silhouetted in the moonlight. It looked derelict in the sparse light, but even derelict buildings could be a haven of untold spoils to Mac. He waved to Nikki to speed up, before hurriedly sliding down the sand the other side so fast he almost rolled to the bottom.

As they grew close, Mac recognized the tumbling structure as an abandoned gas station. There was a road to it of sorts, but it was awash with tumbleweed and potholes, and was obviously as abandoned as the building that sat on it.

Nikki grumbled as she realized their “spoils” wasn’t about to have a working phone or shower. “Great! What are the odds we find a place that hasn’t been used since Billy the Kid was out here!”

MacGyver wasn’t so downtrodden and smiled as they reached the old pumps, their blue, white and red Amoco paint flaking from the desert sun. “This place could still be a great source of information, not to mention a few goodies with the right imagination...” As he spoke he began rummaging behind an old stand that had probably once held newspapers.

Nikki crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. “You mean *your* imagination.” She glanced around. There were several rusted out cars around back, a busted up 50’s

pickup by the main shutter door, and several piles of ancient corroding bicycles in various states of decay by the side entrance. “Ooh, I’m tingling with excitement at what we have here,” she mumbled as Mac continued to sort through the bounty without apparently hearing.

Something moaned, catching MacGyver’s attention more than Nikki’s sarcasm, and he looked up to see a torn and faded sunblind flapping in the night wind that had seemingly whipped up from nowhere. They should probably get inside soon, before conditions worsened, but the workshop shutter door, windows, and the main entrance were all boarded up over.

Mac looked at the corroding cars out back and chose a Pontiac to search first. The fenders were missing, along with two of the doors, and the trunk was open, creaking eerily in the breeze.

Careful not to disturb any snakes or other venomous wildlife that might be hiding within, he poked around until he found a small tire iron. Perfect!

A minute later, he’d pried off the wood and they were entering the station through the side door. There was no electricity, and no water supply, but the place would make a good shelter and hideaway for the rest of the night.

“Not exactly the MGM Grand,” Nikki noted, brushing away an oil soaked and very dusty rag from a stool, only to find one of the legs broken. “But I guess I’ll take it…”

“We need light, and for once I don’t have a match,” MacGyver made a face that said he’d let himself down.

Nikki pulled at her gown. “Well, don’t look at me! There’s not exactly room to hide anything in this rag!”

Mac vanished back out into the night without answering, and came back a few seconds later with a handful of twigs. Without explaining, he made a small mound of kindling, and then used the two remaining twigs to rub together Boy Scout style until they were smoking, and eventually burning.

He lit the mound, and then quickly began to search around for something flammable – his tiny fire wasn’t going to last long without some help.

“Jeez, size matters you know, MacGyver? And that thing isn’t going to warm any of the tiny critters around here, never mind us!” Nikki glared at the smoldering heap with what appeared to be a somewhat worried expression.

Mac ignored her. This was a gas station ergo there must be some actual gas somewhere, even if the pumps had been dry some twenty years or more. He sifted through a pile of rags, disturbing a Packrat and discovered an old red fuel can. He whirled it around, and was relieved to hear the sound of liquid hitting the sides. With the rags and the fuel, he could make some old fashioned torches and they’d have light.

Nikki seemed suitably sated as Mac handed her the first of his impromptu lights, and then put more sticks on their small fire, building it into something more suited to their needs. “So, now we can actually see, what next?” She spotted a small pile of tires, dusted off some spider’s webs and sat down.

MacGyver wafted his torch back and forth, the bright orange flame flickering like something from a medieval movie in the darkness. There was a workbench, some rusting tools on a shadow board, and, he noted with a grin, several rolls of duct tape – they were saved!

Without mentioning his find, he pulled up a couple of tires like Nikki had, rigged his torch into the side of the defunct car lift and sat down. “We eat first,” he offered up the cookies he’d stolen from the factory. “Then we figure out our next move. We might be safe here until sunup, but then that chopper will be back and we really have no place else to hide out there.”

Nikki looked at him with what could only be described as an expectant expression, and then raised her left brow. “So what are you going to make to save us this time? You do have a plan, right?” She took a bite of her cookie.

Mac exhaled. He’d been waiting for her to ask that question. “Well, I’ve kinda been building up an idea in my head since we got here...” The thin tin roof above them rattled ominously as the wind outside picked up, making him pause and glance upwards.

Nikki shuddered and clasped her arms around her chest reflexively. “That wind really needs to go, its creeping me out more than the goons chasing us.”

Mac rubbed at the stubble building on his chin and shook his head. “Actually, I was kinda hoping that breeze would pick up a little more, it would really help.”

Nikki scowled and held herself tighter.

MacGyver found it amusing she hadn’t asked him more, but didn’t waste time explaining. If she wanted answers, she’d tell him so. Instead she huddled closer to the crackling fire while he set to work.

First, he moved to the workbench and selected as many of the tools available that weren’t too rusty to use. Then, he jogged back outside to the pile of old bicycles. The cold night air and frigid wind bit into him through the hospital gown and scrubs, but he ignored it, and the tingling in his extremities it caused, focusing on his task.

It took awhile to pick through the rotting bounty, but eventually MacGyver found three suitable wheels. Two of the tires were flat, but that could be dealt with later. Now he needed framework – again the metal was rusted and weak on most of the bikes, and it took twenty painfully cold minutes to find what tubular sections he needed. Luckily, though, one still had an old hand pump on it, and that might be invaluable later.

MacGyver took the frames and wheels inside and set them on the bench, aware that Nikki was silently watching him. Without pausing to chat, he selected some tools, and ventured back out into the frigid night to retrieve the next piece of the puzzle. This one was a little more challenging to salvage, but if there was one thing Mac had, it was patience.

He pulled an old oil drum from near one of the pumps, tucked his wrench and screwdriver into the elastic waist of the scrubs, and then vaulted up on top of the barrel. It wasn't quite high enough, but with a little stretching on his toes he was able to reach the old canopy that flapped, torn and ragged in the wind. He grabbed the wrench, and with a quick flick of his wrist began to unfasten the frame, and the remaining canopy material until it collapsed in a heap on the floor. Both would be used in his plan.

Mac jumped down, bundled the faded material in his left arm, and took up the section of broken frame in his right. Now he could start to build his "Frankenstein project" and hopefully get them out of their current pickle.

He took the items inside, set them down and looked at all the broken bits and pieces he had to work with, pondering where to start. He could feel Nikki's eyes boring into his back, watching, waiting to see what he was going to make.

After a moment's deliberation, he selected the two flat tires. Using the screwdriver, he pried off both the outer tire, then the inner tube. There was no repair kit out here, so he tied a very small knot over each hole and then stretched the tube back down making the knot smaller while keeping the hole covered.

MacGyver, nodded, happy with the impromptu results, and then replaced the tubes and tires onto the rusted rims. It was a little fiddly as the tubes were now a fraction smaller, but he managed it with a satisfied grunt.

Using the pump he'd found earlier, he re-inflated the tires and then stood back to look at them.

"You're building a three wheeled bike?" Nikki finally couldn't seem to resist asking.

MacGyver kept it cryptic. "Not exactly..."

Now he had three good wheels, he needed a chassis. It was time for a lot of duct tape, a bit of sawing and a huge prayer. Taking up a tubular section, he began to cut until he had three smaller sections. Using the duct tape, and some old bolts from a bucket he'd found, a triangular shape began to emerge.

Mac set the chassis down on the floor. It was time to give his chariot some wheels. He scratched at his head, and then ran a hand through the front of his mullet. There was no drill to attach the wheels, so what next?

He moved back to the work bench and noticed a set of punches. Selecting the largest, he rolled it over in his palm. It could work – the frame was very light, if he could just

get enough weight behind each blow, he might be able to hammer the holes where he needed them.

Picking up an old claw hammer from the bench, he moved to the chassis, marked out the wheel positions with scratches from the pointed tip of the punch, and then began to pound on the punch with everything he had. It took all of his effort, but twenty minutes later, the chassis had two wheels at the back, and one at the front, much like a trike.

“I hate to tell you this,” Nikki began to quip. “But the Hell’s Angels are never going to accept that thing into their fold...” She frowned at it, apparently trying to figure it out. “How does it even move, there are no pedals, no chain, no nothing?”

MacGyver smiled cheekily. “No pedaling required on this beast, it has its own power...kinda...I hope...” He winked, but wouldn’t say more as he continued to work.

“So what if you won’t tell me what *you’re* up to, can you at least tell me what you think the bad guys are?” Nikki watched the small smoke spire whirling to the ceiling from the fire as she spoke. From her expression, it looked like she was mesmerized by it. “Maybe we can brainstorm some answers while you do your thing?”

“Well, we know Mariotte is involved, and from the evidence back there it looks like Aurix Aeronautical is too. I’m thinking if they’re working together it means sub-standard parts like Mariotte sold before...” MacGyver worked some duct tape around a joint as he talked, tugging at it to test how secure it was.

Nikki shook her head, deep creases furrowing her brow. “Sub-standard when it comes to the space shuttle just won’t cut it!”

“I know,” Mac agreed somberly. “Especially when the shuttle those parts are fitted to is scheduled on a military mission two days from...” He scowled as he realized he’d lost all track of time. “Well, two days from when we crashed the Jeep.”

“From when *you* crashed the Jeep,” Nikki corrected. “I was just along for the ride.” She sucked down a breath. “But yeah, those drugs messed with my head too. I have no clue what date it is. We could be too late already.”

Mac tugged off another length of tape and cut it with his teeth, working even faster than before. “We need to get out of here fast and warn Pete and the N.A.S.A. guys.”

Nikki nodded. “That’s a given. What I don’t get is why the game with the fake hospital? Why not just take the N.A.S.A. payout for the bad parts and make a run for it?”

“I think the little charade back there was for two reasons. One, like I said before, I think Aurix wanted to know how much you and me had figured out, and if we’d told anyone.” Mac slapped the tape on his creation and patted it down firm. “If N.A.S.A. got wind of the parts being below par they wouldn’t have paid for the order, and that meant A LOT of money being lost by Mariotte and Aurix.”

“But I was just drugged there weren’t any mind games involved,” Nikki pointed out.

MacGyver nodded. “I think the mind games were purely to mess with *my* head. It was my personal punishment for what happened on Flight 4177. Mariotte is one warped individual. He even puts Murdoc to shame.”

“All this craziness and we didn’t even know or suspect anything!” Nikki pinched her nose. “I really thought that place was squeaky clean.”

“Me too,” Mac admitted, and then paused from his task as something hit him. Something so obvious he should have seen it before if his brain hadn’t been addled with drugs. “You know, now I think about it, there was something! Remember that last day when I’d asked for some data on the quality audits on parts, when they’d arrived in Aurix stores?”

Nikki nodded, but looked puzzled. “Yeah? And?”

“Well I had a headache at the time, I wasn’t thinking straight, hadn’t been for a few days, but the dates on the paperwork hadn’t matched up. The audit date was before the booking in date, which is impossible unless the records were faked!”

“So the parts were never checked?” Nikki asked. “That doesn’t actually make them bad, though, not without proof at least.”

Mac sat back and took a breather. “Maybe they weren’t checked because Mariotte KNEW he was buying faulty goods from the get go. And if that’s true, oh boy...the shuttle is in big trouble.”

“Is there any way to tell what the bad parts will do if the shuttle launches?” Nikki was sitting forwards now, her face a masque of horror. “There has to be a way to stop this mess...”

“Maybe.” MacGyver bit his bottom lip – something he was doing a lot lately because things were getting from bad to dire real quick. “I’d need to get back into Aurix, though and see their records, talk to people, hope there’s some kind of trail. First we need to get outta the desert, though.” He stood up and headed for a glass office door that had seen better days. The bottom panel had been patched over with a nice piece of wood that was just what he was looking for.

Mac pried off the wood using his bare hands and took it over to his creation. It was a little longer than he’d hoped, but it would do. Using the hammer and punch from earlier, he made several crude holes and fastened the plank down with some cable ties. It wasn’t pretty, but it made a workable seating area.

Now it was time to add some “power” to his beast.

Making another hole slightly to the front of the chassis, Mac pushed through another shaft made from bike tubing and attached it to the frame with some more rusty bolts. The shaft stood up vertical from the bodywork like a crazy tubular sentinel.

But MacGyver wasn't done yet. Selecting another tube from a smaller bicycle, he slotted it inside the first tube and spun it around, making sure anything attached to it would swing 360 degrees at will.

Now for the crowning glory.

Mac took up the section of canopy metal and reattached the material he'd salvaged from it to make a "sail". Old sections of rope from the garage were fixed in a couple of places so the sail could be steered more easily.

The final task was to secure the canopy remains and sail to the smaller piece of tubing with the last two bolts he could find, and lots more duct tape for good measure.

Nikki stared at the metal monster in disbelief. "Okay...so is it a bike, a surf board or what? And how the heck is that thing going to help us escape?"

MacGyver found the slightly panicked, uncertain tone to her voice amusing. "It's called a land yacht," he explained. "And we're gonna sail out of here on it!"

"Sail?" Nikki's face said she thought he'd gone mad. "You do know we're in the desert, not the Atlantic, right?"

MacGyver jerked a thumb to the shutter door and beyond. "Did you notice how much flatter it's gotten outside? Hardly any rocks? That's because we're on an old lake bed, which means it's perfect to use with this," he patted the yacht. "And the wind you hate so much is going to get us on the move. I have a feeling we're in Nevada – and if I'm right, I have an idea which way to go to get us out of this mess."

Nikki made a harrumphing sound. "Yeah, well you're not the only one working around here. While you were outside? I did some scouting of my own and we're *definitely* in Nevada. There's some stuff in the office over there that confirms it."

Mac nodded. It was good to have confirmation that he wasn't about to steer them into the middle of a desert, or the hands of the bad guys. He glanced back to the side door, noting that the sun was beginning to rise. "It's time to test out our ride. We need to get moving before that chopper comes back."

He moved over to the shutter door, pulling on the side chain until it grudgingly began to slide up and open. The metal sections groaned and screamed with the effort, and MacGyver paused and tied up the chain as soon as there was enough room to get the yacht through.

Pushing his creation out into the open, he shaded his eyes against the new dawn and chose a direction, lining up the wheels so that they would be heading the right way, and be catching the prevailing wind.

Nikki padded out after him, arms still folded across her chest. "Is this really gonna work?"

Mac patted the board he'd affixed as a seat. "Why don't you climb on and find out?"

She looked dubiously at him. "Is this thing *safe*? I think I need a helmet..." Nikki climbed on anyway, and MacGyver followed, sitting in front of her to steer.

"You know real land yachts can get up to 80MPH with a good wind?" Mac teased.

Nikki looked suitably terrified and quickly wrapped her arms around his waist. "Don't get any ideas," she teased back.

"No, ma'am!" Mac couldn't resist grinning. "Don't worry, we won't be going that fast. We don't have a high enough wind, and our sail would never take it. I am kinda hoping for 40MPH outta this thing though."

Nikki still wasn't happy, and grumbled under her breath. "I guess it beats walking..."

Mac nodded and tested out the controls. He had two small tubular shafts coming out each side of the front wheel. He perched his feet on them for a simple steering mechanism – a push to the left or right, the wheel would pivot, and they would move in that direction. Then there was the rope hand controls to maneuver the "mast" for maximum wind speed. Everything seemed in order. "Okay, here we go!" He pushed forwards using his legs until the breeze caught in the sail and they slowly began to move under their own steam.

Nikki's eyes lit up. "I don't believe this is working!"

Mac smiled as he worked the sail, pushing his creation to make the most of the warm desert wind. The yacht, complained, the rag tag construction groaning and creaking as it bounced over the odd rock or crack in the lake bed.

Halfway across the flat, a noise broke the idyllic peace, the sound echoing like a fairy tale monster in Mac and Nikki's ears. Their plan had almost worked, but the chopper was back, and they were like sitting ducks with nowhere to hide, and nothing to fight back with.

"It's them, isn't it?" Nikki's nails bit into MacGyver's side as she gripped him just that little bit tighter.

He nodded, tugging at the sail ropes in vain, urging more speed from a breeze that could give none. Behind them, he could hear the Bell JetRanger getting closer. Had they been spotted already?

"Mac! Is that a road?" Nikki had dared to let go with her right hand and was pointing furiously to the end of the dry bed. And she was right, a winding, almost invisible desert road ran adjacent to them, and even better, not far from the road was a tunnel burrowed into the rock of the barren hillside. "Can we make it?"

"I'm dang well gonna try!" Mac kicked at the tubes on the front wheel, almost bending them with his weight as he spun the yacht around towards the tunnel. He felt

something snap beneath him, and realized some of the corroded bolts he'd used had snapped. Would it hold together long enough with just duct tape to reach the haven of the hillside?

If that chopper gets too close, it won't matter, the downdraft from the blades will be enough to collapse our sail. If the bad guys don't try and shoot us first...

They were running parallel with the road now, but there was a mound of sand separating the two. MacGyver licked his lips and looked over his shoulder. The helicopter was closing – they'd definitely been seen. He had no choice now but to take drastic action.

Turning the craft sharply again, he flipped the yacht into the air using the sand bank as a takeoff ramp. It was like a scene from *Knight Rider* when K.I.T.T. used turbo boost, except they had no turbo, and the director couldn't shout "cut" if this stunt went wrong.

The yacht seemed to be airborne for minutes, when in reality it was mere seconds. It bounced down onto the asphalt, more of the bolts snapping and some of the tape tearing, but somehow it still had momentum. MacGyver looked over his shoulder again to see Nikki screwing her eyes closed, and he wished he had the luxury.

Some of the tubes he'd used to make his machine had bent as they'd hit the road, and the metal was now rubbing on the rear wheels, throwing the yacht out of control, but thankfully still towards the tunnel mouth.

Bullets bounced off the road and splattered the surrounding sand as the bad guys grew too close for comfort. A hail of machine gun fire ripped through the sail, and then, somehow they were thrown into semi-darkness as the hill swallowed them – at least for a heartbeat.

Nikki opened her eyes and then screamed as the glare of headlights illuminated the tunnel and threatened to engulf them.

The yacht veered, slammed into the concrete of the tunnel wall and then rolled back, coming to rest in front of an ancient bronze Buick. Somehow, the car had managed to stop without hitting them.

MacGyver blinked, looked up through the haze of the car's lights and realized why. The driver that was climbing from behind the wheel looked around a hundred-years-old and had probably been doing all of 20MPH. That small fact didn't stop her cussing.

Oblivious to the fact that Mac and Nikki were sitting in a crumpled pile of bullet-ridden parts, she began to wag her finger and reprimand them in a voice so stern she had probably been a judge in another life – or maybe even this one.

"You young scamps think you can come out here and just take over the highway with your homemade junk, well I'm going to call the police!" The aging woman's silver-grey hair glistened in the wane light, reflections from the tunnel walls making it look

almost like she had a halo as she complained. But then, maybe she was an angel, given how she'd come from nowhere and was probably about to save them, even though she didn't know it yet.

MacGyver scrambled up, brushed himself down and had to smile at the old lady as he helped Nikki from the wreck. "Sorry, ma'am," he apologized. "I don't suppose you have a phone in your car? We kind of have an emergency of national proportions to report." He knew there was little chance the woman would say yes, given her age it was unlikely she'd have such a modern piece of technology hanging around, especially as her car was over thirty years old.

The old lady blinked as if his words were insulting. "Course I do! Just 'cause I look like I belong to Methuselah's entourage don't mean I act like it!" She sniffed. "Not to mention my boy works for the telephone company..." She looked around them and shook her head apologetically. "There won't be a signal in this dang tunnel, though."

Mac knew their new friend was right. He moved past her, peering at the tunnel mouth. The helicopter was hovering there, as if its inhabitants were sizing up what to do next. The sound of the rotors roared and echoed down the hillside, almost deafening them.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the Bell vanished. Had they given in because they'd seen the car, or were they simply watching and waiting from a distance for the group to exit the tunnel?

"My name's Annie Mae," the old lady introduced herself. "Now what say we get our butts outta here before those guys in the helicopter come back? I'm assuming they really don't like you folks? The County Sheriff's not too far away, I just passed him getting breakfast at Big Al's."

MacGyver was surprised at Annie's sudden trust, and her very modern attitude, but he didn't tell her so in case she decided to cuss at him again. "Sounds good, Ma'am!"

"Call me Annie, or I'll get cross with ya'll!" Annie scooted back behind the wheel with shockingly nimble moves and Mac and Nikki struggled to follow as quickly.

Within seconds the Buick was kicking up a dust trail and exiting the tunnel where Mac had entered. The chopper didn't reappear, and Annie settled into a steady fifty as she handed MacGyver her phone.

Mac took it gratefully and dialed Phoenix while he kept his eyes skywards.

"MacGyver! Where on earth have been? Is Nikki with you? When you went missing and we found your Jeep I thought...we all thought..." Pete's voice crackled down the line, his words hurried and obviously pained.

MacGyver could tell his old friend had thought the worst, but he had to stop the tirade of words and explain what was going down. "Pete, just hang fire and I'll tell you what I know, we have to move fast or there's going to be a disaster!"

Pete stopped talking.

“Listen, Pete, forget me and Nikki and where we’ve been, you have to stop the shuttle launch. I’ll explain everything as soon as we get back to Phoenix, but you HAVE to stop that shuttle!”

The line grew eerily silent and for a moment Mac thought they’d lost the signal. “Pete? Ya there?”

“MacGyver...it’s too late, the shuttle launched yesterday.”

Part Four

Aurix Aeronautics

Silicon Valley

California

Sometime Later

MacGyver and Pete Thornton waited patiently in a blue unmarked Phoenix van that had been parked innocently across the street from Aurix’s main gate. The van was full of high Tec surveillance equipment, but today it wasn’t being used.

Once Mac and Nikki had been picked up from the Nevada sheriff’s office where Annie Mae had dropped them, things had gone into overdrive. Nikki had gone back to Phoenix’s main office to co-ordinate, and Mac had joined Pete at Aurix.

Once the authorities had been informed of what was going down, the feds had decided that an armed assault team would be first inside the aeronautics company – a fact that Mac had protested against from the get go – he hated guns, and in this instance innocent factory workers could easily get caught in the crossfire.

The radio in Mac’s hand crackled and beeped. “This is Red Dog, we’re inside the building and it’s clear. You have a green light to join us.”

“Understood Red Dog,” MacGyver answered the call and bounded out the rear of the van so fast Pete would have struggled to catch the blur even if he could still see. As it was, Pete brought up the rear, assisted by Seeley Atkins, one of Phoenix’s finest.

* * * *

MacGyver bounded up the stairs to Aurix’s second story and offices, taking two steps at a time, Pete and Seeley following more slowly behind. Waiting expectantly for him at the top, clad in black with a good amount of body armor and a light machine gun, was Agent Rick Darwin.

“Looks like your bad guys were expecting us,” Darwin jerked a thumb to the nearest office. It was empty. “Your escape probably caused the mass exodus of management here.”

More F.B.I. agents milled around them as he spoke, weapons still drawn, but safeties on. Mac winced at the sight, but noted that on the shop floor behind their group, staff had been working oblivious to any wrong-doing until the feds had entered. How many, if any, had known what was going on at Aurix?

Don't worry about them. The men on the shuttle are running out of time...

“We need to find records and fast!” Mac pushed past Darwin to the nearest computer console and began typing. Whoever had vacated the desk had gone so quickly they’d left it logged on. That was a bonus. He hit the folder that should have contained the RCS circuit test results, but all the records had been conveniently wiped, including any backups. He slammed a fist down onto the table in exasperation. “They cleared everything. Without these files we can’t pinpoint what might happen to the shuttle.”

Darwin peered over MacGyver’s shoulder at the screen. “My people might be able to retrieve what’s on the hard drive, or rather what’s not there right now. They’ve done it before.”

Mac wasn’t convinced. “Yeah, I could probably do it myself, but in time to save those guys on the shuttle? I don’t think so...” His shoulders dropped in defeat, but then a familiar face gave him hope.

A woman he’d met on the original audit had broken away from the gathering crowd of workers and was heading their way. Eileen had seemed genuine when he’d spoken to her before, and he felt like it was worth the risk to trust her now.

As she approached, MacGyver noticed she was wringing her hands and they were shaking. There was fear in her eyes, and he was convinced it wasn’t faked.

“Excuse me? Can someone tell us what’s happening?” Eileen looked back and forth between Darwin and Mac, then settled on Mac, probably because she’d seen him around before and at least knew who he was.

“It’s okay,” MacGyver soothed. “No one is in any trouble except your boss, but there have been some...discrepancies – big ones that could cause a disaster. Would you try and help us stop it happening?”

Eileen gulped. “What can I do?”

Pete put a hand on her forearm. Keeping her calm and thinking straight was the name of the game if they were going to get answers. “Is there any way to find out the test results for RCS circuits apart from the computer records?”

“Well...the results are initially recorded on attribute and SPC charts. They’re not put on file until later.” Eileen paused and her eyes involuntarily strayed to one of the open offices. “I guess the paper copies might still exist.” She moved towards the office and Mac and Darwin followed.

Eileen moved to the desk and opened up the second drawer, but it was empty. Before she could say anything, Seeley picked up a nearby waste basket and frowned.

“Mac?” He passed the basket to MacGyver, who looked inside. The basket was full of charred remains and soot, and there was nothing left to try and “bring back” like he had in the past. The charts were gone.

Eileen’s features said it all. She was terrified. “Without those, or the computer files, you can’t find what you need, can you?” She was turning white. “And this is about the shuttle, isn’t it? Those parts were fitted to it...”

MacGyver wasn’t so downbeat. Sometimes the human mind was a better storage tool than any piece of paper or computer disc. “Eileen, think hard, who would have actually tested the parts on the line?”

“Eileen’s pallor returned, just a little. “The order was so important the line supervisor took personal charge of all the testing!”

Darwin’s trigger finger suddenly moved back to his weapon and hovered. “That means the supervisor was probably in on the whole thing,” he barked, obviously frightening Eileen. “I need a name, now!”

“Vicky Keeling,” Eileen stammered. “But I haven’t seen her for awhile...”

Mac and Darwin looked at one another. Keeling was their only hope now. She had to be found or the shuttle was probably doomed.

Darwin turned to his subordinate. “Lock the building down. We need to find Vicky Keeling, and we need her fast. Get her picture from the company employment files, if they haven’t burned those too!”

The man gave a small salute to his S.W.A.T. style helmet, even though it wasn’t required and jogged off to give out orders to his team. At a nod from Pete, Seeley turned and followed him. Twenty minutes later, Seeley returned with a short blonde in tow, her hands cuffed in front of her. He nodded to Darwin. “We found her trying to get out of one of the rear fire exits.”

“Vicky Keeling, I presume,” Darwin offered sarcastically. “Going somewhere nice?”

Keeling snorted. “I know my rights. I don’t have to tell you guys’ squat!” She rolled her eyes and sat down on the edge of a desk as if to suggest she had all day to wait them out.

MacGyver watched her, thinking she looked as cold and hard as she sounded. She returned his gaze steadily, then snapped her gum and turned her glare on Seeley instead. He ignored her.

“If you don’t help, people could die, you realize that, right?” MacGyver tried a softer tone than Darwin. Sometimes attacking a situation wasn’t the only way. “The circuits you let through that failed? You had to know where they were going? Who they might kill?”

“Contrary to most, I don’t have a conscience when I’m being paid big bucks.” Keeling shrugged, letting her hands dangle in the cuffs as she spoke.

Pete frowned. Years of practice in reading people’s intentions from their voices alone told him she genuinely didn’t care. “How about a deal to shorten your sentence now that those big bucks aren’t going to be an option?” Pete made the offer, and MacGyver glanced at Darwin who gave a nod of approval.

Keelings’ head cocked as if she was considering it. She sucked down a breath, and eventually spoke again. “Okay...so what do you want to know?”

“What failed on the RCS boards you tested, and exactly how would it affect the thrusters?” MacGyver was tense as he asked the questions. Even with the answers, could they fix the problem, given that it was now “off world?”

“Look...four out of five boards I tested failed. I’ve scrapped better before the new management took over.” Keeling looked a little nervous now, as if the severity of the situation was kicking in. “And its not just one messed up component, either. Each board has several sub-standard parts fitted to it.”

Darwin mouthed “Oh my God” but he didn’t seem to be able to form the actual words. MacGyver wasn’t giving in so easily. “Will the boards fail first time?” He pushed. “Is there any chance..?”

“They sometimes work a few times before blowing,” Keeling tried to sound optimistic. “But there’s something else you should know. The way they’re integrated into the system, they could take out other shuttle functions if they do fail.”

“How could anyone risk human life like this?” MacGyver was astounded, but then again, this was Mariotte’s doing. The work of a madman. “How long has this being going on?” He dared to ask.

Vicky huffed and stood again. “Aurix have been buying damaged or super cheap, super low quality parts since the company was taken over just under two years ago.”

Darwin seemed incredulous. “And nobody knew? Nobody on the factory floor questioned anything?” His brow furrowed in apparent disbelief.

Keeling appeared to find his comment amusing and smirked. “Of course not, I was paid well to make sure the rest of the operators didn’t find out. Why do you think I was the only one allowed to test the boards? It sure as hell wasn’t to maintain quality.” She snickered, and then looked around. “Anyone got a cigarette? This whole conversation is getting boring...”

Mac and Darwin ignored her, but Seeley pulled her to one side and sat her down hard in an office chair. “Sit down and shut up.” She glowered at him and pulled a face as he turned away to pick up the phone. She heaved a dramatic sigh as she heard him talking quietly to the police.

“I guess this whole thing makes sense now,” MacGyver groaned. “Why the quality reports I was given didn’t have corresponding dates, and why Nikki and me were interrogated to find out if we’d realized.” Something hit him, and he looked Keeling straight in the eyes. “Who was it that bought the company out two years ago?”

Vicky shrugged and looked around with a sniff as if she didn’t give a damn. “Some Mexican or Spanish guy – name’s Otiz, something like that.”

Mac reached inside his bomber jacket and pulled out a black and white image of Roger Mariotte. He waved it under her nose, thinking Otiz might simply be a false identity. “Is this the guy?”

Keeling’s nose wrinkled. “Nope, I’ve never seen Otiz, but this fella,” she tapped the photo with her forefinger. “He’s been hanging around a lot lately. No idea what he called himself.”

MacGyver whirled away from her, running a hand through his mullet in exasperation. Mariotte was involved, they knew that much, but who was Otiz, and how did they catch him? He turned back around to see Seeley having Vicky Keeling walked out to a black and white by two armor-clad agents. He nodded to MacGyver and followed the police out.

This is such a mess...

“So now what, Mac?” Pete’s face said he was as worried as his troubleshooting friend. “Just how badly in trouble is the shuttle and her crew?”

MacGyver didn’t pull any punches, and the crack in his voice spoke a thousand words. “We need to talk to someone in charge at N.A.S.A. and fast. The shuttle has two of those faulty circuits on board – one primary and one backup, and with a failure rate of four outta five, we need to get those astronauts home and fast...”

FCR-1
Mission Control Centre
Houston
Texas

Mac looked around the control room in awe of all the technology that surrounded him. Screens and technicians filled every area, and a main screen flashed with images and details of the shuttle and its telemetry. Pete stood beside him, not seeing but “hearing” the urgency in the room.

The pair waited, but not patiently for Mike Newman to join them – he was the Flight Director of the mission, and the man they needed to brief on everything they’d discovered.

“You must be Thornton and MacGyver?” A tall, and very thin man approached them, offering up his hand. He neither smiled nor frowned, his steely eyes and taunt

moustache suggesting he was an individual who showed little emotion. Maybe he couldn't in his position.

MacGyver shook Newman's hand first. "Call me, Mac, and this is Pete..." He gestured to Pete, who in turn shook the director's hand. "I'm sorry we have to meet like this..."

Newman nodded and turned to look at the screens behind them. "At least the astronauts are almost done. They'll be initiating the re-entry program soon, so there's no point in scrubbing the mission at this stage." His moustache twitched as he watched images of inside the shuttle's cockpit.

MacGyver joined Newman, but focused on the paperwork in his hands rather than the screens. "Mr. Newman, I have to be honest, I'm still worried." He offered up the top two sheets of paper to the Flight Director. "Can I speak to the GNC engineer on this mission, along with anyone else who may be involved directly or indirectly with the thrusters control systems?"

Newman read the first few lines of data and rubbed a hand through his hair. "I think you guys are over-reacting a little, but follow me, I'll get everyone into my office. We can't take any risks." He picked up a nearby phone, barked a few orders and then led them into a side room that doubled as a secondary office when there was a mission on. Five minutes later, they'd been joined by several other N.A.S.A. employees, all in black trousers and white shirts. It looked like something out of a movie.

Once everyone was settled, MacGyver read through the data he'd compiled, pointing out the failure rate on the thrusters boards, and what he thought it might do.

The GNC engineer, Phil Bennett agreed. "Folks, I think we have an even bigger problem here than we first thought." He stepped into the middle of the room, taking the floor. "As most of us know," he paused glancing at Mac and Pete to suggest they might "not" know, before giving an explanation. "The shuttle runs on a computer system called the Primary Avionics Software System, or P.A.S.S. for short. Basically, it has four computers running along side one another. If one fails, the other three can still safely control the shuttle. Even if two fail, the remaining two can take over. On top of this, there's still a fifth backup system."

"So the circuit boards failing can't stop the shuttle landing?" Pete asked hopefully.

Bennett wasn't so optimistic; he squirmed under the artificial lighting, like he suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. Beads of perspiration were forming on his neck and forehead, suggesting he was worried – or scared. "If only it were that simple, Sir. You see, what Mr. MacGyver has found suggests that in theory, every time we try to engage the RCS thrusters, we could blow one of the computers."

Newman moved to sit on the edge of the desk, fiddling with a ruler nervously as he spoke. "Surely we can just land the shuttle manually without the computers?"

Bennett bit his lip and shook his head. "No, Sir even flying her in old school requires the thrusters to be operational."

“We need to stop the shuttle starting re-entry until we can isolate the RCS thruster circuits from the P.A.S.S. system and figure out how to fire them manually.” MacGyver looked to the Flight Director for action as he spoke, and he got it.

Newman bound from his perch and rushed out into the control room, calmly, but hurriedly giving orders to several men at their respective stations. Mac, Pete and the engineers followed him out, but it wasn't good news.

Pandemonium seemed to break out on all three tiers of the floor as men rose up from their computer screens and chairs to start yelling at the Flight Director, and one another. MacGyver could only imagine this was what it had been like when Apollo 13 had gone disastrously wrong.

“We're too late,” Newman informed them breathlessly a few seconds later. “The shuttle just tried to start the re-entry program, and it's not only taken out both the thruster PCB's, but two of the P.A.S.S. computers as well.” He looked shaken, but then, so was everyone else in the room.

This was the bane of their vocation – the one thing anyone who ever worked for N.A.S.A. dreaded, and it was happening on their watch.

“Now what?” Pete dared to ask.

“We've aborted, naturally,” Newman informed and then let out a long sigh. “The thing is, where do we go from here?” He looked to the engineers hopefully.

Bennett's expression said he wasn't confident. “We can look for a workaround, but without *both* boards...”

Another technician stepped forwards. He was a short balding man whose tie hung loose, and whose glasses were held together with a plaster, but somehow, just everyone knew he wasn't to be ignored when it came to the shuttle. “I don't think it's going to work that way,” he said rather boldly. “This is fly-by-wire at its most complex, and it's not like we can just FedEx a new set of circuits up there – even if we had one, which we don't – at least not one that Aurix didn't supply.”

MacGyver stepped between the engineers and Newman. This was his kind of problem. “Let me help,” he offered. “I've been in these kind of unique problem solving situations before.”

Newman snorted, and for the first time his jangling nerves showed through his calm exterior. “Situations involving a multi-million dollar orbiter and its crew, trapped without a way home? Haven't you people done enough? You were supposed to be doing the Aurix audit, that's what got us into this mess!”

“MacGyver and Nikki Carpenter were kidnapped, for heavens sake!” Pete was obviously more than angry, and he cut the Flight Director off before he could complain more. “They could have been killed over this. And don't forget, if it wasn't for their escape, we wouldn't have any information at all!”

“And a fat lot of good that’s done us!” Newman countered, “By the time you got the data to us, the circuits were already fried!”

The argument continued to and fro, and MacGyver was about to try and calm the situation when a N.A.S.A. employee appeared from a side door and approached him. The woman looked around the room at the mayhem, but didn’t show any emotion. “Excuse me, Sir, are you Angus MacGyver?”

Mac winced. Who would call him that here? Usually the name was only flaunted as a joke by those who knew him well, or as a taunt by the likes of Murdoc. “That’s me,” he eventually admitted.

The tall brunette looked over her glasses before handing him a folded piece of note paper. “I was told to give you this...”

Mac took the paper and unfolded it. Instantly, chills ran down his spine and he forgot all about the shuttle and circuit boards. The message was very elegantly hand-written, and to the point.

“Where is Sam?”

“Where did you get this?” Mac couldn’t help but snap at the girl, even though she probably had no clue about the note.

She glanced over her shoulder. “There’s a gentleman outside the control room waiting to see you. He said you’d understand?”

MacGyver’s heart began to throb with adrenalin and he dropped the paper as he broke into a sprint. The corridor outside FCR-1 was short, and he didn’t have to run far to almost barge into the person he was looking for.

Roger Mariotte found their near-collision amusing and smirked as he backed up slightly from the troubleshooter. He’d grown a beard since Mac had last seen him, and it thankfully hid some of his more waspish features. “Finally we get to have a nice cozy little reunion,” he taunted. “I’ve really missed your company, Angus. After all there’s nothing like a long plane flight to get to know someone. Pity our last one ended so...explosively...”

MacGyver wanted to know how Mariotte had lived through the bomb on Flight 4177, wanted to know why he’d held a grudge against Sam and Mac for something he’d ultimately brought upon himself, but right now, more important questions sprang to mind. *Sam...why the note about Sam?* “I can’t believe you have the nerve to show up here, after all you’ve done!” He eventually sputtered.

Mariotte shrugged. “It’s not like anyone is going to arrest me, Mac. I can call you Mac, can’t I? Unless you prefer Angus?” He sneered. “You see, if any of your federal friends try to take me down, well things could *get really* ugly...”

Mac scoffed angrily – an emotion he rarely showed. “How can things get any uglier, Mariotte? Five astronauts stuck in orbit with no way to get home. How could you do this and put lives at risk *again*?”

Mariotte couldn't resist a chuckle, as if happy with his accomplishment. “The same reason as the first time with the Boeing, Mac – money, plain and simple – although this time I do have a couple of ulterior motives. N.A.S.A. already paid for my wonderful circuits yesterday, the idiots, so now I can work on those *other* motives.”

MacGyver squirmed, his anger turning to panic, even though he tried not to show it. The note Mariotte had sent him screamed of only one target, one motive.

Sam...

MacGyver's expression seemed to be all that Mariotte needed to know that his silent message had gotten through. He smiled, nodding. “Smart boy, Mac, I see you've figured out part of my plans already. Sam put me in prison, and now he has to pay for that. And after what happened on Flight 4177, so do you.”

“Sam's on assignment. He's not even in this country,” Mac's voice was low, as if he didn't believe the words.

“True,” Mariotte agreed, beginning to pace slightly, as if he knew he was going to win this verbal war. “But if you'd like to check, you'll find he never even made his flight. Let's just say he's a guest of a few friends of mine until you complete a little task for me.”

“You can do all this.” MacGyver gestured into thin air, “Fool N.A.S.A. make fake hospitals, and you need *me* for something?”

“I don't need you,” Mariotte agreed. “But I *want* you to do it. Let's just say it's a rather ironic and fitting punishment.”

“What do I have to do?” Mac caved. There was nothing he wouldn't do for Sam, and Mariotte knew it. Whatever the task was, it would be illegal, he was sure of it. And once it was over Mariotte would still kill Sam, and Mac too if he got the chance.

Mariotte's smile waned and his gaze shifted for a second, as if he were having an unpleasant thought. “While I was in prison, I was considered to have some...mental issues.” He cringed as he spoke the last words. “Why, I can't imagine, but still, I was incarcerated in the state mental hospital at Alameda for several months. Whilst there, I met a kindred spirit – someone who hates you and your family possibly even more than I do.”

MacGyver's mind stopped in mid-thought. All he had been thinking of was Sam, and how he could turn whatever Mariotte's plan was into a rescue, but now just the mention of the Alameda hospital sent shivers down his spine. He'd been there before...

“My friend at the hospital helped me form a plan for when I was released,” Mariotte continued, apparently enjoying the look of horror on Mac’s face. “We’ve been working together ever since – albeit long distance through the prison telephone system. I think you know my friend as Mr. Otiz from Aurix.” He chuckled again, and this time the insanity in voice echoed down off the corridor walls. “Or maybe you’ve worked out who he really is by now?”

Mac’s features paled. The mind games and fake hospital all made sense now. Only one person from his past liked to play mental chess like that, and Otiz was Zito in reverse.

“Playing with not one, but two old adversaries is so much more fun, isn’t it, Mac?” Mariotte purred.

“So what does Zito want? There’s always a purpose to his games. Revenge?” Mac felt cold. Mariotte wanted Sam dead, but Zito would make sure it was a long, agonizing game now that he was involved.

“Revenge is always good,” Mariotte agreed. “But isn’t it obvious what he wants, nay *needs* more than that?” He cocked a brow then clarified. “Freedom! Sam’s life for Dr. Zito’s – but this is a one time offer. You have five hours to free the doctor, or Sam dies.”

MacGyver tried to swallow, but felt a lump rise in his throat. Zito and Mariotte would kill Sam anyway, but to buy time, he had no choice but to agree to their demands. Worse still, the authorities would never go along with freeing Zito to save Sam, so that meant he had to break Zito out – a fact Zito no doubt found amusing. *I need to free Zito, but figure a way to save Sam at the same time...*

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Mac conceded, his voice so low it was barely audible.

Mariotte slapped him on the back like they were old friends. “That’s my boy,” he cooed derisively. “Dr. Zito can’t wait to see you again. And he’s simply dying to meet your son...”

Where has the meek mannered criminal from Flight 4177 gone? MacGyver couldn’t believe the change in Mariotte. He’d always been a killer, but before he’d also been somewhat of a coward who liked to hide in toilets and let technology do his dirty work. As usual, Zito had worked his evil magic on the man, turning him into not just a psychopath, but something more akin to a Bond villain.

What options did he have now? Punching Mariotte out or calling security would be easy, but they would also be a death sentence to Sam.

“Ta ta for now,” Mariotte chided as he turned to leave, “I can’t wait for the full reunion later...” With that he slipped into a nearby side corridor, into the shadows, and was gone.

MacGyver felt seared to the spot, his mind screaming that he should run for the nearest fed, or back into the control room to Pete. There were just a few hours to free Zito, and he couldn't just walk out of N.A.S.A. to do it.

His thoughts were a jumbled mess for the first time in his life, and Mac pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to bring them back into line. It didn't happen. All he could see was Sam photographing the mustangs just before he'd left for his assignment.

Eventually, MacGyver forced his legs to move and he strode shakily back into FCR-1 and to Pete. But even now, fate wasn't giving him any kind of reprieve.

If the control room had been in chaos before, it was sheer mayhem now. Technicians and engineers were in panicked groups, while Newman was barking orders to some of the men sat at desks, frenetically punching buttons on their computers, apparently to no avail.

Pete sensed MacGyver's return. "Where'd you go? We sure could have done with you two seconds ago!"

Mac gulped. "Now what?" He almost snapped, and then wished he hadn't as Pete winced.

"The engineers just got the astronauts to try rerouting some systems, but instead of isolating the RCS circuits, they've taken out most of the shuttle's oxygen supply." Pete sagged onto an empty chair in apparent defeat, and Mac had to wonder how he'd sensed its presence. "They've only got about five hours of air left in the main cabin before..."

Five hours – it seemed almost ironic that there were now two deadlines, two problems that would ultimately end in death if they weren't solved.

Pete turned to MacGyver, sensing as if his silence meant something terrible. "Mac? What is it?"

But MacGyver had no words to explain to Pete. How could he? His choices were simple, and yet agonizing.

Mac could walk away from the shuttle for Sam, leaving the astronauts to die or he could stay here, almost certainly causing Sam's untimely demise.

Could there be another option, a way to save both Sam and the men orbiting the earth with very little air left?

This time, MacGyver wasn't sure there was...

*To be continued in the season nine premiere "Shadowside"
Coming soon...*

