

Atlas Part One

"Hey Mac, how'd it go?" Jack took his feet off MacGyver's coffee table and brushed cake crumbs off himself and onto the floor.

"OK, I guess." MacGyver limped over to the couch, still not trusting all his weight to his recently mended ankle. "Hospital says I'm just about mended and to take it easy for a bit, but I should be fine."

"Well, that's good. Isn't it?" Jack frowned at MacGyver's expression. "Why the long face, Kemosabe?"

"Yeah, it is." MacGyver ran a hand through his hair. "But we're real close to Atlas's deadline, and we still don't have enough to go on to take them down." He sighed. "Jack, I can't fail on this one. I can't." He shook his head.

"So, let me help." Jack sat forward on the edge of the couch. "I'm kinda between jobs here at the moment 'cause the plane is at a um... tricky stage and I'm waiting for Lenny the Wrench to -" He frowned as MacGyver's eyebrows shot towards his hairline. "What?"

"Your mechanic is called 'Lenny the Wrench'? Nobody has a name like-". MacGyver stopped and shook his head. "You know what? Never mind. Yes, Jack - I'll take any help I can get, thank you."

"OK, cool." Jack grinned. "So, where are you at with Atlas? Last I heard, they definitely had the upper hand. Have the brainiacs at Phoenix got the lowdown on the lowlifes?" He rubbed his hands together, looking eager to help.

"Some of it." MacGyver took the last slice of cake off Jack's plate and propped his foot on the table.

"We're sure Atlas is headed up by a guy called Carmichael, a millionaire who's masquerading as a philanthropist. Or he might actually be a philanthropist and we could be chasing his evil identical twin." MacGyver glanced at Jack. "Because he does have an identical twin, and although we bugged them both, only one of the bugs is still working and we have no way to tell which."

"Woah, amigo..." Jack took off his hat and scratched his head. "Really no way to tell them apart?"

"Nope." MacGyver shifted his leg which was beginning to ache. "They're creepy-identical. They sound the same, they use the same words and have the same mannerisms, and they both have offices here in L.A., though Troy Carmichael is based in New York. The other one, Tristan lives here in California." He shook his head. "So, we can't even track the location of the bug, because they have offices really close together and they're both in the city at the moment."

"Huh." Jack reached for the cake plate, looking disappointed as MacGyver bit into the last slice. "So, where do we start?"

"I go back into Phoenix tomorrow morning and see if they've come up with anything new."

MacGyver shrugged. "I really hope they have..."

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"Welcome back!" Helen stood up, smiling as MacGyver came into the Phoenix offices. "It's lovely to see you, MacGyver."

"Hi Helen," MacGyver smiled back. "It's good to be here. Is anyone else in yet?"

"Nikki just got in. Willis is out this morning and I haven't seen Seeley yet." Helen handed MacGyver a pile of files. "All yours!"

MacGyver took the files back to his office and put them on his desk. He stood in front of the notice board, staring at the photos pinned there. Since he'd last been there, there were some new notes in Seeley's neat handwriting. Now Hawkins was linked to Camp Parks with an arrow marked 'Wilkes bought parts through Hawkins', and a note under the large letter C in the centre, reading '2xC - hate each other!'. MacGyver turned, hearing footsteps behind him.

"Morning, hop-along!" Seeley grinned at MacGyver. "You're looking better. Have a good rest?"

"Kind of..." MacGyver grinned back. "I'm not sure how much resting I did, but I'm feeling much better, and ready to take on these guys!" He pointed at the noticeboard.

"Sounds good." Seeley put his hands in his pockets and stared at the board too. "We've made some progress, as you see."

"Yeah." MacGyver shifted his weight off his bad ankle. "So, the Carmichael twins hate each other?"

"Oh, so much!" Seeley shook his head. "Whichever twin we've still got bugged has some very vitriolic things to say about the other!"

"Are they still in L.A.?" MacGyver folded his arms, staring at the board.

"Mm, as far as we can tell." Seeley reached out and straightened a crooked photograph. "So, we still don't know which one we have. My guess is Tristan – he lives in L.A. full time and in the conversations we've got, our mystery twin sounds very much at home." He shrugged. "Nothing conclusive, just a hunch."

"OK, so Hawkins links to CSM Wilkes, and Wilkes to the Carmichaels." MacGyver traced the links with his finger. "Carmichael's name was in Wilkes' computer. Dr Gregory links to them because Carmichael funded Atlas's superbug project at Wellforce."

"Correct." Seeley pointed to Gunther Schmidt. "Your reformed Nazi links to them because he was trying to bring down the new Atlas Project."

"And Carmichael set Klaus Muller on me." MacGyver frowned.

"The sniper I caught – if only briefly – fitted the description for Olga Schneider too." Seeley nodded.

"Yeah, they're all definitely linked."

"So that leaves Phoenix's Marcus Davidson and Sundance's mystery boss." MacGyver leaned on the edge of the desk.

"Davidson was at school with the Carmichael twins." Seeley reached behind himself, picked up a college yearbook and flipped through the pages. "Here."

A young Marcus Davidson smiled up off the page, his photo near to those of the Carmichael twins, sporting identical braces and slicked-back haircuts.

"They were in the same fraternity too." MacGyver touched the information printed under the image.

"So they were," Seeley turned his head to read. "Looks more and more like Tristan's our guy."

"Maybe." MacGyver frowned. "It does make it more likely that Davidson was feeding information to one or both of them about projects at Phoenix they might want to back." He stared at the yearbook. "Do we know which one he was friends with? If they hated each other back then too, I don't reckon he would have been friends with both."

"I hadn't thought of that." Seeley flipped through the book. "Davidson overlaps with both of them as far as clubs and societies go, but more so with Tristan." He shut the book. "My money's on Tristan being the man."

"So that just leaves Sundance's boss." MacGyver got off the desk and paced the length of the room.

"How does he fit in?"

"You got me." Seeley shook his head. "Maybe he doesn't. Maybe we're reading too much into a two-bit gangster trying to talk a good fight."

"I dunno." MacGyver shoved his hands into his pockets. "I don't like loose ends, and I reckon he's linked in somehow..." He shook his head. "I'm just not sure how. Yet." He turned and headed for the door. "I'm going to go and see how Willis is doing."

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"Mac? Hey, welcome back!" Willis clamped a flask into the mad-professor chemistry apparatus on his lab bench, wires trailing from his headphones to the computer.

"Hey Willis, looks interesting..." MacGyver crouched down, his eyes level with the bubbling flask.

"Yeah, it is. I'm analysing some mystery goop one of our teams pulled out of the –" He broke off, pressing a hand to his headphones, then spinning around and hurrying back to the computer.

"Never mind that – I think we're finally going to find out which Carmichael twin we've been listening to!"

ATLAS PART TWO

Willis flipped a switch and Carmichael's voice filled the lab.

"-ing to be too long before we see each other again, dear brother." There was a rustling of cloth.

"No, I hadn't forgotten." The second voice, identical to the first, sounded impatient. "You need to be going brother, or you'll miss your flight."

"Hardly." The first voice sounded amused. "It's my plane..."

"Of course. I'd forgotten you'd gone into aviation this year." Footsteps echoed on a hard floor and a door opened.

"Until Kansas City, brother." There was another rustle and one set of footsteps faded away.

"I hate Missouri." The second Carmichael twin sighed. "And I've always hated the brinksmanship in which we've both become involved." The door closed and the remaining set of footsteps faded away too.

"OK." Willis rubbed his hands together. "The bug stayed here in Tristan Carmichael's house, so it belongs to Tristan and not Troy."

"Because Troy is now heading for LAX ready to go back to New York." MacGyver nodded. "So all the hinky stuff you've been hearing about these last few weeks is down to Tristan."

"Looks that way." Willis grinned. "Tristan's our guy! Thank you, modern technology!" Her blew a kiss to the recording equipment.

"Seeley will be pleased." MacGyver grinned back. "He's been saying all along that Tristan was the one behind Atlas."

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The next morning MacGyver arrived to find Seeley waiting for him.

"Anything exciting?" MacGyver handed Seeley a cup of coffee and sat on the edge of his desk.

"Very." Seeley blew on the coffee and took a sip. Pulling the night shift and listening in on Carmichael's bug had left him looking tired, a shadow of stubble on his chin. "Not long after you left, before Tristan left for New York, he had a very interesting phone call with his pet General. The one from the stadium, yes?"

"Right!" MacGyver sat up straight.

"Superbug plane will be in Kansas City on Sunday." Seeley rubbed his eyes, stifling a yawn.

"This Sunday?" MacGyver ran a hand through his hair. "That doesn't give us much time..."

"No." Seeley took a swig of coffee. "So we'd better get busy working out a plan to shut it down before it goes anywhere after that!"

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"Just one loose end now." Nikki stood in front of the noticeboard. "Where does Sundance's sleazy boss fit in?"

"Still working on it." MacGyver leaned back in his chair, flexing his foot to work the stiffness out of his ankle. "Sundance was involved in kidnapping homeless people, but without knowing who his boss was, we don't know why."

"Huh." Nikki walked around her desk and tapped at her computer keyboard. "Well, if I was going to kidnap a bunch of homeless people, I'd want to have a ready market for them." She turned the monitor around to face MacGyver. "Wouldn't you?"

"Where did you find this?" MacGyver leaned forwards to read the screen.

"Doc." Nikki shrugged. "We've stayed in touch since he helped out with finding Matthew at Christmas, and he collects any news he can find concerning homeless people. Including this little gem." She waved a hand at the screen.

“Right.” MacGyver frowned, reading the news article Nikki had pulled up on the screen. Border patrols had intercepted a van travelling south into Mexico. The patrolmen had been alerted by shouting coming from inside the van, otherwise they wouldn’t have investigated. When they opened up the back, they’d found a dozen homeless people who’d been kidnapped. The group claimed they had been told they were being taken to a medical facility where they would be used as unwilling test subjects in disease and drug trials, but the local police were never able to confirm this. “Well, that links them, at least in theory -” MacGyver held up a hand as Nikki drew breath to speak. “- to Sundance at one end and Wellforce and Atlas at the other, but we’ll have a hard job proving it. Certainly not by Sunday, anyway.”

“I guess.” Nikki shook her head. “The van matches the one Sundance had too...”

“I know.” MacGyver shrugged. “I think we have enough for Pete to get the police involved even without this, but thank you for finding it.”

“No problem.” Nikki returned to her desk, turning the monitor back around. “Do you have a plan for Atlas yet?”

“Almost.” MacGyver glanced at his watch. “Just waiting for the final piece of it to get here, so that we can put it together.”

“Final piece?” Nikki stopped typing and looked up.

“Jack Dalton.” MacGyver flinched, waiting for the reaction. Nikki had met Jack before.

“Your plan to stop Atlas spreading superbugs all over the US of A hangs on California’s most unreliable man? Really?” Nikki shook her head in disbelief.

“Yeah.” MacGyver held up both hands. “Trust me, I know how it sounds!”

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“So, let’s check that we all understand what we’re doing.” Pete folded his hands in front of him, looking round at the blurred figures filling his office. “Mac?”

“Sure, Pete.” MacGyver glanced at Jack, who’d been told to stay quiet and, for once, had done so.

“Me and Jack go to the airfield and get onto the plane. We disable the plane so it can’t take off and defuse the superbug apparatus so it can’t disperse. Then we get clear and wait for the authorities.”

“Good.” Pete nodded. “Jack, I want you and Seeley to work out what kind of plane they’re going to use. You’re the aviation experts here.”

“Yessir!” Jack saluted, making Seeley duck as Jack’s hand flashed past his ear. He gave Jack a sour look, which Jack ignored.

“Seeley?” Pete turned.

“I continue working with Willis, trading shifts in listening to Tristan Carmichael’s bug to find out as much as I can about the plane, the superbugs and the timetable.” He frowned at Jack, who grinned back at him. “In between, I work with Mr. Dalton here on identifying suitable aircraft capable of carrying the payload and using that particular airfield.”

“Yes.” Pete nodded again. “Willis?”

“Uh, surveillance, like Seeley said.” Willis cleared his throat. “I also maintain comms with everyone and make sure everything happens at the right time.” His hands shook as he folded his papers.

“Relax, you’ll do fine.” Pete heard the rustling papers and the tremor in Willis’s voice. “Nikki?”

“Wheelman.” Nikki grinned. “So to speak. I tail Carmichael from L.A. to Kansas City, just in case he makes any unexpected detours, stick with him while he’s there and then I blend into the scenery afterwards when the police turn up to take him in.”

“Great.” Pete smiled. “We sound like Mission Impossible, don’t we?” Then his smile faded. “Let’s hope we have just that much success.”

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The week passed slowly.

Pete spent most of it talking to the police, to Los Angeles detective teams, to anyone who would listen. He grew increasingly frustrated with the pace at which the authorities worked, having hoped they would leap into action immediately. LAPD promised to keep him informed. But updates were sporadic and, as Sunday grew closer, he grew more and more apprehensive.

By Tuesday, Jack had irritated Seeley so much that they were working in separate rooms. Jack's initial awe at being part of such an important Phoenix project wore off quickly, and his usual exuberant personality resurfaced. Seeley found working alongside such an irrepressible and chaotic person intolerable and had split their tasks, shutting himself in a spare office and leaving Jack to spread his notes and blueprints across every flat surface in the main office.

MacGyver spent the week studying maps, aerial photographs and the schematics for every crop sprayer, sprinkler system and spray-bomb he could find. One of his DXS contacts found him some truly terrifying information about bioweapons that had been 'retrieved' from some unsavoury overseas locations. It gave him sleepless nights and haunted his days with the awful consequences of failing to bring Atlas down.

Nikki traded shifts with Willis and Seeley, listening in on the bug in Tristan Carmichael's pocket. Carmichael spent a quiet week, after the revelations of the week before and, if he carried out any further preparations for launching Atlas, he did it out of earshot of the bug. Willis, who was most familiar with Carmichael, thought he seemed more subdued, less vitriolic in his dealings with employees and associates than usual. Nikki didn't think he seemed much different, and was sure that any change was due to anticipation of the events to come.

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On Saturday evening, MacGyver, Seeley, Jack and Willis left for Kansas City. Nikki watched their plane take off and walked back to the parking lot, feeling nervous and very exposed.

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Pulling up near Carmichael's mansion, she checked her pocket one last time for her plane ticket to Kansas City. She setup her mobile listening equipment and sat back. The signal was clear, and she heard Tristan talking to his secretary and preparing for the trip. He sounded calmer than she had anticipated, as if he was just going to a regular meet-up with his brother and not about to unleash disease and despair on an unsuspecting public. Nikki shifted in her seat, and settled in for a long wait.

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"Movement." Three hours later, Nikki made a call to Willis and started her car. She pulled out at a discreet distance behind Carmichael's limousine and followed him through the Los Angeles traffic.

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"This should be fun, right?" Jack rubbed his hands together, watching an aeroplane take off as MacGyver steered the Jeep into the airport parking lot.

"You and I define 'fun' very differently, Jack." MacGyver shook his head and Jack dragged his gaze away from the aeroplane.

“Sure, bioweapon, right.” Jack nodded, trying to keep his excitement under control. Aeroplanes and flying filled him with a childlike joy that he found almost impossible to contain even in a situation this grave. He followed MacGyver out of the Jeep and across the airport in silence.

Looking left and right, MacGyver ducked through a service door, pulling Jack in after him. Walking down an unpainted corridor, MacGyver pulled two waterproof jackets off their hooks and handed one to Jack.

“When we go out, we head straight for Aviation Services at the far side of the airfield.” MacGyver waited for Jack to nod. “We do not stop to admire the aircraft. We do not talk to the ground crew. We do not give anyone ‘orders’.” MacGyver made quote marks in the air. “This is serious, Jack. I need you to work this my way.” He watched Jack nod again and swallow hard.

“Sure, Mac. This is your party.” Jack looked around and took a deep breath. “Your world is a pretty scary place, Kemosabe!”

“You don’t know the half of it.” MacGyver smiled, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Come on.”

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“And... I see them.” Seeley murmured into his mic, concealed up his jacket sleeve. He took a sip of his drink and glanced around the New Majestic Steakhouse, his outward expression bored.

“There they are.” Nikki’s voice in his ear was quiet. “I still don’t get how they do the identical clothes thing. It’s not like they call each other and compare notes!”

Seeley hid his smile behind another sip of his drink. “Some weird, psychic twin thing. My daughter tells me about them – she thinks supermarket tabloids are the last word in cutting-edge journalism! Good evening.” He turned on his bar stool as Nikki sat down next to him.

“Psychic or psycho?” Nikki signalled the bartender, allowing Seeley to kiss her on the cheek and smiling at him.

“Bit of both.” Seeley helped himself to peanuts and let his gaze wander across the room, to where the Carmichael twins were eating steaks.

“So here we all are.” Nikki stirred her cocktail and ate the olive. “Mac and Jack are at the airfield, Willis is on standby and, last I heard, Pete was finally getting somewhere with the police. All we need is Carmichael to say the right words and we’ve got him.”

“Mm.” Seeley watched the Carmichaels over Nikki’s shoulder. “Go on, you scumbag.” His voice was icy. “Go on and say the words...”

ATLAS PART THREE

“So, dear brother, have you been gainfully employed this year?” One Carmichael twin swirled red wine around in his glass and took an appreciative sniff.

“Of course.” The second twin took a sip of his own wine. “Have you?”

“Of course.” The first twin smiled and put down his glass. “I do so enjoy our little get-togethers each year. Father would be so proud of what we’ve each achieved.”

“He would.” The second twin cut a bite of steak and chewed it before continuing. “He always had high hopes of the pair of us.” He speared a potato with his fork. “Although I’ve always thought he’d have been happier to see us working together instead of competing all the time.”

“I disagree, brother.” The first twin’s grin was mischievous. “Where would be the fun in that?”

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“So, which is which?” Nikki glanced from one twin to the other.

“The bug came in with the twin on the left so he’s Tristan and the goody-two-shoes on the right is Troy.” Seeley drained his glass and ordered another. He watched Nikki frown. “Relax, it’s only lime

and soda. No-one's getting drunk tonight." He looked out of the window, seeing the sun set red and gold behind the buildings.

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MacGyver squinted into the sunset, shading his eyes with his hand. The row of aeroplanes parked outside aviation services looked innocuous enough. He and Jack had been hiding behind a low building and watching the planes coming in and going out. Every one had been moved, repaired or attended to except for one at the far end of the building, which nobody had approached. Beside him, Jack shifted position and sighed.

"How much longer do you reckon?" Jack looked from MacGyver to the lone plane and back again.

"As long as it takes, Jack." Long experience of stakeouts with DXS kept MacGyver from speculating. Speculating only made the wait seem longer.

"It's just that we've been hunkered down here for a really long time, and I gotta tell you compadre – I got pins and needles in places I didn't think you could get them!" Jack shifted uncomfortably.

"So, go for a walk." MacGyver turned to look at him, lowering his binoculars. "It's about time one of us had another scout around anyway. Just don't talk to anyone, walk fast like you have somewhere to be, and don't go snooping into anywhere ground crew aren't meant to be." MacGyver turned back to the plane and raised the binoculars again. "Leave that part to me, OK?"

"OK, Mac." Jack stared at his friend's back, thinking that he really didn't know this new, serious MacGyver at all.

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"So that's about everything I've done this year." The second twin swallowed his last bite of steak and pushed his plate away. "Turned a tidy profit too. No wolf at the door for me this Winter." He picked up his wine, admiring the rich colour before drinking. "And your tally, brother?"

"I'm still waiting for one bird to arrive at its nest." The first twin smiled, as though at a private joke.

"So my tally isn't quite complete." He laid down his fork. "Though even if I haven't done as well as you this year, I guarantee I'll outstrip you next year." He finished his wine and poured more.

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"Is he sweating?" Nikki looked at the Carmichaels' reflections in the mirror behind the bar.

"Probably." Seeley loosened his own collar. "It's plenty warm in here. Which one?"

"Tristan. No, Troy." Nikki frowned at the reflection, confused by the reversed image.

"Tristan looks cool enough." Seeley shook his head. "His veins must run ice water instead of blood. He knows what he's about to do and he sits there eating steak and drinking wine as though nothing's changed. Unreal."

"Keep it down." Nikki touched the back of Seeley's hand. "We wait and we keep listening until we've got the goods, OK?"

"Right." Seeley moved his hand out of reach. "Listen and wait."

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"Anything?" Jack sidled back around the corner of the building and crouched down next to MacGyver. "There's a bunch of guys loading drums onto a trolley back there – all with hazard stickers on them. Think they're our guys?"

"You tell me." MacGyver passed Jack the binoculars and moved to let him through.

"Yes!" Jack leaned forwards and MacGyver grabbed his jacket, pulling him back into the shadows.

"It's them!" He watched the ground crew loading the barrels onto the lone aircraft for a moment

longer before handing the binoculars back to MacGyver. Night was falling, the sky darkening quickly. The temperature was dropping and the stars appearing above them promised a cold, clear night.

"Who do you think the target is?" Despite the danger, Jack found himself excited, keen to carry out his part of the mission.

"We still don't know." MacGyver squinted through the binoculars in the fading light. "Come on, we have to get on there."

Staying low and dodging from shadow to shadow between the airfield lights, MacGyver and Jack made their way to the plane. Aviation services was darker than the rest of the airport, the lit bays where the planes were worked on all at the other end of the building. Reaching the last pool of shadow before the lone plane, MacGyver took hold of Jack's jacket again and turned him round.

"We walk out to the plane like we're meant to be there, right?" He watched Jack nod. "If we're questioned, what do we say?"

"We're checking coolant levels and hydraulic fluid before take-off." Jack nodded.

"What do we not do?" MacGyver kept hold of Jack's coat.

"We don't make anything else up. We don't try and make small talk with anyone on the plane because they're either bad guys or ground crew, and they're not going to be pleased to see us!"

"Correct." MacGyver let go. "Any problems, let me handle it. You're an ace pilot, but this part of the plan is my part, ok?"

"You got it." Once again Jack was unnerved by how serious MacGyver had become. "We got this, compadre. You know that, right?"

"I hope so, Jack." MacGyver looked across the tarmac to the waiting plane. "I hope so." He zipped up his stolen ground crew jacket and set off towards the plane.

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"So, do I ask anything about this mystery bird of yours?" The second Carmichael twin looked over the top of the dessert menu at his brother.

"Oh, you'll see it soon enough." The first twin glanced through the restaurant window at the night sky beyond. "No, dear brother, this time next year not only will I win our little competition, but you will be incapable of competing." He lifted his glass and toasted his brother, who leaned back in his chair.

"Really." The second twin wiped his mouth with his napkin and signalled to the waiter.

"Any guesses?" Nikki murmured, glancing across at the Carmichaels and then back to Seeley. "Your goody-two-shoes looks about ready to lose it."

"Nuh-uh." Seeley finished typing a text message and flipped his phone shut. "Pete's got the local police involved now, so all we need is Tristan to admit what he's up to and brag about where the plane is going. Willis has the police patched into the feed from the bug so, as soon as he says it, they're good to go."

"Great." Nikki turned back to the Carmichaels, now eating dessert and arguing in whispers. "Come on Tristan, make with the bragging..."

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They were almost at the plane when they heard the shout. MacGyver and Jack turned, seeing a man wearing a ground crew jacket walking towards them.

"This one's done." The man shook his head, "No need for any more checks."

"Uh, yeah." MacGyver held up the empty container he'd taken from the trash can outside aviation services. "It didn't get the coolant levels checked." He smiled and turned away, walking towards the plane.

"Everything's been done." Now the man sounded angry. In three long strides he'd caught up, grabbing hold of Jack's sleeve. MacGyver stopped and looked down, seeing in the dim light that the

man wore combat boots instead of the standard issue work boots worn by the rest of the ground crewmen he'd seen. He looked up again, catching Jack's eye and nodding. Simultaneously, they both drew back a fist and punched the fake ground crewman in the face. The man's eyes rolled up and his knees buckled as he was knocked unconscious. MacGyver caught him, putting an arm around his waist and 'walking' him towards the plane. Beside him, Jack shook out his hand. "Hurts, doesn't it!" MacGyver spared him a brief glance and a grin before hoisting the unconscious man higher.

"It really does!" Jack blew on his knuckles. "What are we going to do with him? We can't exactly take him with us!"

"He won't be out long. We'll leave him on the grass away from the runways." MacGyver let the man slide to the ground. "He'll be safe enough."

"What if he wakes up and raises the alarm?" Jack looked down at the unconscious man.

"We'll make sure he can't go anywhere, at least for a while." MacGyver reached into his pocket, producing a roll of duct tape.

"Ah!" Jack grinned. "Kemosabe, I like your plan!"

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"They've got to say something soon!" Nikki prodded at the olive in her latest, untasted cocktail.

"I surely hope so." Seeley watched the Carmichael twins finish their desserts and order coffee.

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"I can't get in!" Jack wrestled with the door handle. "The cockpit's well and truly locked!"

"You must have broken into a plane before." MacGyver glanced up from trying to pry the cover off the landing gear mechanism. "Don't look at me like that, Jack – I'm pretty sure you know how it's done!"

"Well, yeah." Jack gave the handle one last tug and then turned to MacGyver. "But it's not exactly a stealth operation, y'know? I start seriously breaking and entering, it's going to make a lot of noise and attract a lot of attention!"

"OK." MacGyver beckoned to him. "Let's see what we can do from inside the cargo hold."

They climbed into the cargo hold and Jack went to the front, examining the lock on the cockpit door. Moments later, someone outside slammed the cargo hold doors shut and they heard someone climb up into the cockpit. MacGyver ducked down behind the device bolted to the plane floor and Jack dived behind the drums of liquid. The engine fired and MacGyver and Jack exchanged horrified stares as the whine of the turbine grew louder.

"Mac, this was not in the plan!" Jack scuttled to the back of the hold, to where MacGyver was examining a squat, ugly device.

"I know." MacGyver crouched down, looking under the device. "We'll work it out, OK?"

The plane rumbled down the runway and lifted up into the sky. Jack leaned over MacGyver's shoulder, holding a flashlight as MacGyver examined the wiring on the bomb.

"Guess we're on our way, amigo." Jack glanced out of the window, but the sky was dark.

Underneath the drone of the engine, he could hear the pilot talking on the radio but couldn't make out the words. He leaned forwards over MacGyver's shoulder. "How's it looking?"

"Not good." MacGyver reached into his pocket, pulling out his Swiss Army Knife. "Not good at all..."

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"Perhaps you'd care to elaborate, dear brother." The second Carmichael placed his hands on the table, staring at his twin. "What exactly did you mean when you said that I'll be incapable of competing next year?"

“Well.” The first twin sat back, a manic gleam in his eyes. “The reason you won’t be able to compete is that you and your shiny little empire will no longer exist!” He grinned. “I arranged to spend some time with some very clever men, who share my fascination with the possibilities offered by, shall we say, selective removal of the opposition.” He held up a hand to forestall his twin’s comment. “Very soon, your stupid, flashy, money-making city will cease to exist in its current form!” He watched his twin, nodding in satisfaction at his horrified expression. “The city itself will still be there, but no-one will want to do business there for an inconveniently long time!” he fished a pack of cigarettes out of the inside pocket of his overcoat and reached a hand into another pocket for his lighter.

“You’re insane!” The second twin found his voice, his face white.

“No, poor people are insane.” The first twin put the lighter down on top of the cigarettes. “I’m merely eccentric.” He met his brother’s shocked gaze calmly.

Seeley and Nikki exchanged a brief, horrified look.

“Willis, are you getting this?!” Nikki’s voice was high and thin as she thumbed her mic.

“Got it.” Willis sounded equally shocked. “He’s seriously going to unleash a plague on a whole city just because he hates how successful his brother is?!”

“Looks like.” Seeley shook his head. “He’s going to drop superbugs on New York just to increase his market share!”

“I’ll relay this back to Pete.” Nikki could hear Willis tapping his computer keyboard in the background. “That way he can set in motion whatever DXS are going to do.”

“How do you go about protecting a whole city?” Nikki looked at Seeley, aghast. “Where do you even start?!”

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The plane droned on through the night, hills and scrub and desert gliding past the windows far below. A drop of sweat ran down MacGyver’s forehead and he blotted it on his sleeve before it could fall into the device before him.

“How’s it going?” Jack held the light a little higher and cast a nervous glance at the cockpit.

“I can’t...” MacGyver shook his head, running bundles of wires through his hands. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Even the fail-safes have fail-safes! Everything’s coded. If I mess with anything, it goes off!”

“You can do it, Mac.” Jack forced a smile and punched MacGyver on the shoulder. “I got faith in you, buddy.”

“Not this time, Jack.” In the beam of the flashlight MacGyver’s face was white and desperate. “I don’t even know where to start! I can’t break the code! I... I can’t do it!”

ATLAS PART FOUR

“OK, so Pete’s passed on that Tristan is planning to let Atlas loose in New York.” Seeley sat down again and ran a shaking hand over his smooth hair. “Local police are on their way.” He nodded at the twins. “How’re they doing?”

“Well,” Nikki glanced at the Carmichaels. “Troy’s been going nuts at Tristan, all about how insane he is and how he’s got to stop the plane before he unleashes mayhem and destruction etc etc. Tristan is lapping it up – look at him!”

Seeley turned, seeing the Carmichael twins’ reflections. The second twin was red in the face and leaning across the table, berating his brother in a fierce whisper. The first twin sat back and listened, his expression triumphant.

“Yuck.” Nikki repressed a shudder. “How long before DXS have planes in the air to stop him?”

“Not long, I hope.” Seeley looked grim. “Also, Willis says the plane has taken off, which means Mac and Jack weren’t able to keep it on the ground. Mac sent the plane specs through, but we’ve lost contact with them for now, so they’d better get that thing under control before DXS decide to shoot it out of the sky!”

*

“There has to be a way to break the code.” Jack’s eyes were very wide and frightened in the glow of MacGyver’s flashlight.

“No.” MacGyver shook his head.

“OK. OK.” Jack took off his hat, scratched his head and paced the length of the cargo bay. “If we can’t crack the code, how about bringing this bird down?” He kept his voice steady with effort, aware that he was talking about a suicide mission.

“Crashing the plane would still spill the superbugs on impact.” MacGyver shook his head. “Even if we just do enough to force a controlled landing, the device is on a timer. All we’d be doing is changing the location of ground zero.”

“Alright.” Jack was secretly relieved. “Then we need to take out the pilot and get control of the plane ourselves. We fly it out somewhere over the ocean, bail out and let the bugs drown when the plane ditches!”

“I like it!” MacGyver glanced up from the device. “You know how you said breaking into airplanes wasn’t a quiet job?” He nodded to the locked cockpit door. “It’s time to make some noise!”

*

The first Carmichael twin smiled at his brother’s whispered tirade. He’d waited a long time to see him lose it like this, really lose control and show that he knew he was defeated. A pity he’d had to go to such lengths to gain his victory but, as their father had always said, the end almost always justifies the means. He reached for his cigarettes on the table in front of him. No smoking regulations be damned – he wanted a smoke and it wasn’t as though he couldn’t afford the fine. Picking up the packet and lighter, he glanced down. Ignoring his brother’s continuing tirade, he turned the lighter over in his hand.

Not his.

“Brother, I do believe I’ve been wearing your coat!” He held out the lighter, oblivious to his brother’s incredulous expression.

“Have you heard anything I’ve said? Anything at all?!” The second twin drew breath to continue, but words failed him.

“That idiot cloakroom girl must have given us the wrong ones at that tedious fundraiser.” He unhooked the coat from the back of his chair and held it out to his brother.

“You’re mad! You’re actually mad!” The second twin pushed back his chair and stood up. “All this to win some stupid competition? You stop this, Troy, and you stop it now!”

Behind them, Seeley and Nikki exchanged horrified stares. As one, they said

“We’ve been tracking the wrong twin!”

*

Jack glanced out of the small window behind the cockpit door, then did a double take and pressed his nose to the glass.

“Mac. Mac!” He turned to see MacGyver look up at him and then back at the device. He seemed to be getting somewhere – wires and components littered the floor in the flashlight’s beam.

“Mac, I get that you’re busy right now, but I’m watching Vegas go by underneath us here.” This time MacGyver’s hands stilled and he looked up, wide-eyed.

“So, we’re not heading for New York after all. We’re heading for...”

“California.” Jack’s voice was grim. “This thing’s going to drop right on the City of Angels!”

*

Seeley swore and stood up, the bar stool clattering to the floor. He pushed his way through the crowded restaurant and elbowed past Tristan Carmichael to grab Troy by the front of his expensive dinner jacket. Two men sitting at the nearest table stood up, ready to intervene. Nikki stepped between them and the Carmichaels.

“Don’t try it, fellas.” She shook her head. “We got this.”

One shrugged and sat down again, but the other stayed on his feet.

“He’s gonna hurt him, lady!” He reached out a hand to move Nikki aside and she pulled a small pistol out of her purse.

“Don’t.” She waited until the man held up his hands. “Walk away.” She glanced over at Seeley, who still had Troy Carmichael’s shirt bunched in his hand. Troy’s nose was bleeding.

“TELL US HOW TO STOP IT!” Seeley’s yell was loud in the silent, shocked restaurant.

Troy Carmichael tipped back his head and his laugh echoed back off the walls.

*

Jack looked around the cargo bay, his own flashlight casting a feeble beam. Pulling aside a tarpaulin, he grinned.

“Come to daddy...” He picked up a rusted crowbar and slid it quietly into the cockpit door handle.

“Three, two, one, knock knock!” He wrenched the crowbar and kicked the door just below the locking mechanism. There was a metallic screech as the lock gave and Jack jumped into the cockpit, fist raised.

“GAAH!” Jack stumbled back as the pilot launched himself out through the door. Jack’s foot caught against the doorframe and they both crashed to the floor with Jack underneath. The pilot grabbed hold of Jack’s lapels, staring at him with wild, terrified eyes.

“We gotta get out of here!”

*

“Seeley!” Nikki called back over her shoulder. “The police are here, let them handle this.”

“HOW?” Seeley shook Troy, who laughed harder.

“You can’t stop it! No-one can stop it!” Blood from Troy’s nose sprayed out with his words. “You’re finished, Tristan. Finished!”

The police grabbed and handcuffed Troy, who was led away still laughing maniacally. Seeley turned to Tristan who’d sat down again, his face ashen.

“I really believe he’ll do it.” Tristan’s voice was shocked and his hands shook as he took out his own cigarettes. “He was always on the ragged edge, even as a child. I remember having to cover up things he’d done. Cruel things.” He looked at the cigarette in his hand and dropped it on the table, unlit. He blinked and shook himself, looking up at Nikki and Seeley. “If there’s anything I can do to help, you only have to ask.”

“Matter of fact, there is.” Nikki put away her gun and folded her arms. “You can tell me exactly where in L.A. your brother is likely to have aimed his superbugs!”

*

“Tel me what happened.” MacGyver stared at the pilot, now being held by Jack.

"I took off, standard run out to LAX. Then the radio stopped working. Then the autopilot kicked in and the radio fired up again on a different frequency – all about weapon trajectories and blast radius and weapons stuff." He took a shaky breath. "Then I couldn't disengage the autopilot and I worked out the new flight plan and we're going to crash! On L.A! And I can't stop it!" He pulled out of Jack's grip and staggered a few steps before stopping. "I fly freight! I'm from Missouri, not Miramar! This should have been a commercial flight, not some nightmare secret mission and –" He pointed a shaking finger at the drums of liquid and the device bolted to the plane floor. "- what the hell is THAT?!"

"That? Oh, that's just a secret bioweapon that's going to wipe out everyone and his dog if we don't disable it!" Jack nodded at the pilot's open-mouthed shock. "So we got bigger problems than a simple crash! So you and me, we're going to go back in there –" he jabbed a finger at the cockpit – "And we're going to work out how to NOT crash while Mac here works out how to switch off the doomsday device! He turned the pilot around and gave him a push towards the cockpit. "Now, GET!"

*

Willis caught up with Seeley and Nikki at the police station.

"Where is he?" Willis skidded to a halt, his sneakers squeaking on the polished floor.

"In the cells." Seeley rubbed a hand across his face, looking tired.

"Did he tell you how to –" Willis broke off as Nikki shook her head.

"Nope, he's lost it but good. We've got Tristan going through everything we can find on Troy's laptop, so Seeley's going to see what we get off that. DXS have scrambled planes to intercept too."

"I'm on it." Willis pulled out a complicated-looking gadget from his backpack. "I found a way to boost the signal to Mac and Jack, so we can at least give them some warning."

"Great." Nikki nodded. "Let's get to work."

*

"I jammed all the dispersal valves with chewing gum and stuck the whole thing together with duct tape." MacGyver ducked his head and stepped through the low door into the cockpit. "It won't stop the device firing, but it should foul the delivery and limit the spread some." He shoved the remains of the duct tape into his pocket. "I also messed with the timer as much as I dared, but I dunno..." He shook his head. "How're you doing?"

"We can't get into the launch stuff, but Carl there is busy unhooking the autopilot." Jack pointed to a pair of feet sticking out from underneath the console.

"OK, that's good. At least we get to choose where we crash!" Mac Nodded. Carl the pilot crawled out from under the console clutching a bunch of wires.

"Try it now." He dumped the wires on the floor and watched as Jack gripped the controls. The plane banked gently to the left and then straightened up. Jack tested switches and nodded.

"OK Mac, we got control of the direction we fly in but not the speed. Glass half-full eh, Kemosabe?"

"Yeah, Jack. Glass half-full." MacGyver frowned at the console. "What else can we do? Can we open the loading bay doors?"

"Probably." Carl stepped out of the cockpit. "You thinking of bailing out?"

"Not just yet." MacGyver grinned. "Jack, aim us for the most remote place you can find, OK? I've got the beginnings of a plan..."

*

"Why's that lighting up?" Nikki reached for Troy's tray of possessions, picking up his cell phone and flipping it open. "Hey, guys? Look at this!"

"What is it?" Seeley glanced up from Troy's laptop.

"Looks like the inside of a plane. All dark and green lights." Nikki held up the phone. "Hey, that's Jack!" The viewpoint changed, showing Jack sitting in the pilot's seat.

"They must have a camera hooked up in there." Seeley leaned over Nikki's shoulder. "Hey, how about we show this to the arch-scumbag in there - I bet he won't be expecting this!" They watched for a moment longer, both breathing a silent sigh of relief when MacGyver came into view.

Troy Carmichael sat on his prison cell bench as though sitting on a throne. He looked up with mild interest as Seeley and Nikki approached, smiling at them.

"I trust room service will be along shortly?" His blue eyes were wide, bright and quite mad.

"You wish, buster." Nikki held up the phone to the bars. "Read it and weep!"

Troy shook his head, disappointed with Nikki's rudeness, but got to his feet and crossed the cell.

When he saw the phone, his eyes lit up and he reached for it, but Nikki moved it away.

"Ah, yes." Troy smiled at the tiny image of his pilot flying the plane. Then his smile vanished as the pilot got up and someone else took his place.

Someone tall.

Someone with shaggy hair.

Someone familiar...

"NO!" Troy's hands flew to his mouth. "No, he's dead. He's... He can't possibly be..." His knees gave out and he sank to the floor of the cell. "But if he's..." He gestured helplessly, his hands falling to his lap. "All my plans..." He blinked up at the Phoenix agents.

"He can't stop it, you know. Not even him." A feral grin showed his teeth. "He'll be the first to die! A fitting sacrifice ahead of the total destruction of my damnable brother and his damnable city!" he nodded, clutching the bars with both hands and pulling himself upright. "Yes!" Spit gathered at the corners of his mouth. "He'll die first, and you'll all die with him! All of you!" He threw back his head and laughed.

*

"WILLIS!" MacGyver yelled into the phone, sticking a finger in his other ear to block the noise of the engine. "We're going to have to ditch the plane! DITCH THE PLANE! Yes, that's right." He listened and then shook his head. "No, no way to disable it totally. Yes, we've done that. You have? That's great! THAT'S GREAT! Not more than a mile, I hope." He listened again. "The most remote spot we can find, way west of Mountain City, Nevada. Yes! Hold them off as long as you can!" He looked around the hold and sighed. "No, there aren't any. THERE AREN'T ANY!" He ran a hand through his hair. "I know. I'll figure something out." He flipped his phone shut and put it in his pocket. He shone the flashlight around the edges of the hold, stopping on a crumpled heap in one corner. "OK, that's a start..."

*

"This isn't going to work." Carl shook his head, pulling at the straps crisscrossing his chest. "You're crazy!" He held onto the side of the cargo hold as the plane started to tip forwards into a dive, the note of the engine rising.

"You'd be amazed how often the crazy stuff works out." Jack shrugged, trying to hide his own nerves. He'd heard about most of MacGyver's crazy ideas over the years, but never taken part in one quite as crazy as this.

On the floor between them lay a spiders-web of rope, scavenged wires and seat belts, all fastened to a massive tarpaulin. The air was thick with the reek of aviation fuel, spilling from cut lines into the cargo hold.

"It'll work, trust me." MacGyver slid his phone into his pocket, careful not to disconnect the call. He tightened the straps on his makeshift harness and cranked the cargo door open, the shrilling of the alarm lost in the roar of the wind. He glanced once out of the door, seeing only darkness outside, and took a deep breath. "JUMP!" He leaped out, pulling the other two with him.

The wind screamed in MacGyver's ears, so strong that it made his eyes run with tears and threatened to rip the ropes from his hands. He felt someone slam into him and heard a frightened yell before the wind whipped the sound away.

He heard the howl of the plane's engines and, squinting against the wind, saw the plane's lights spinning away beneath him.

Above, the frantic flapping of the tarpaulin steadied and his arms were almost jerked out of their sockets as the canopy opened out and filled with air. He risked a glance down, seeing the light of his phone shining out through his jeans pocket in the rushing darkness and feeling the weight of one of his companions against his back. Below him, the plane's lights spiralled, and vertigo threatened to overwhelm him. A helicopter whizzed by, seemingly close enough to touch, and the makeshift parachute swung and bucked in the turbulence.

The plane made one last circle and a fireball mushroomed up as it crashed into the desert below. The spilled fuel caught immediately, burning bright and hot in the night. Instinctively, MacGyver and Jack pulled their feet up, trying to get as far away from the superbugs as possible. Beside them in the darkness, MacGyver could hear Carl praying.

Moments later, the sound of the explosion reached them – a rolling boom following the fireball up into the desert air. The sound echoed, then faded, and MacGyver was left only with the sound of the wind.

Taking a deep breath, MacGyver looked first up at his improvised parachute. As far as he could tell against the starry sky, neither the descent nor the helicopter's turbulence had damaged it. Then he looked down between his feet. The fire was burning in several places on the desert floor below, showing the plane had broken up on impact. The fire still burned fiercely, lighting up the landscape and burning the superbugs into oblivion. The helicopter made a low pass, searchlights scanning the area.

"Jack?" MacGyver blinked in the darkness, swaying as the parachute spun them around.

"Right here, Mac!" Jack sounded breathless. "Was that it? Is it gone?"

"I hope so!" MacGyver glanced down again, tightening his grip on the ropes as he saw the crash site slide past underneath him. "I think so." He turned himself around, feeling his shoulder bump against the pilot. "Carl?"

"What?!" Carl tightened his grip on the ropes and screwed his eyes even more tightly shut.

"You OK?"

"NO!" Carl spun himself around to face MacGyver, but was unable to stop and carried on turning.

"Do I look like I'm OK?! I'm dangling a million feet in the air from a parachute made of dust cloths and seatbelts, with two lunatics somewhere above a freaking desert full of superbugs!" He revolved slowly, coming around to face MacGyver again. "There is no part of me that is OK!"

"He's OK." Jack laughed and kicked his feet. "Boy, Mac – we really did it, didn't we?"

"We really did." MacGyver grinned, feeling the weight of the past year lift off him. "We brought down Atlas!"

"Who? What's Atlas?" Carl revolved around again, hanging on grimly.

"We saved the world today, buddy!" Jack grinned. "You're looking at two bona-fide heroes right here!"

"Whatever you say, man." Carl spun slowly away. "I just want to get down and go home!"

"Hey Mac, how are we going to get home?" Jack frowned. "I mean, gravity takes care of the 'down' part, but we're going to come down in the remotest patch of desert I could find, with no way to

steer the Good Ship Dust Cloth here, and we could have a lot of trouble hailing a cab in this neighbourhood!”

“Don’t panic, Jack.” MacGyver pointed at his pocket. “Willis is tracking my phone signal so they should be able to find us just fine.”

“And the landing part?” Jack looked down at the ground, which suddenly seemed very much closer. “Uh...” MacGyver looked up at the ropes holding them to the tarpaulin. He tugged on one handful and the parachute lurched. “I’m working on it! Any landing you walk away from is a good one, right?”

“Damn straight!” Jack whooped as the ground rushed up to meet them. “Here we go!”

The parachute swung and flapped as MacGyver tried to steer their progress. A gust of wind caught them, buffeting them sideways, and the parachute caught in a tall cactus and dragged them through sagebrush and thorny scrub before fetching them up hard against some rocks. It tugged a couple more times and then collapsed, draping itself over the three struggling men.

“Mac?” Jack’s voice was muffled as he thrashed his way free of the tarpaulin. “Mac, you OK?”

“Yeah, Jack.” The tarpaulin heaved and bulged, and MacGyver rolled out, stopping at Jack’s feet. “Is Carl OK?”

“NO!” A voice came out from underneath the tarpaulin. “I think I’m dead!”

A light shone at the top of a nearby hill. The helicopter appeared, spotlight beam bouncing over the uneven ground. Shading his eyes, MacGyver raised his other hand and waved.

“Yes!” Jack punched the air and turned around to help Carl up. “Carl? Our ride’s here.” He took the trembling pilot by the arm and led him to the approaching helicopter, holding his hat on as the wind from the rotors threatened to blow it away.

MacGyver got to his feet. The landing had been hard on his ankle and he limped slowly across the desert to the helicopter, now waiting for them on the ground with the rotors turning lazily. By the time he got there, Jack and Carl were already seated and strapped in.

“Hey Mac – any landing you hobble away from is good too, right?” Jack grinned and reached down to help MacGyver into the helicopter.

“Yeah, Jack. Something like that.” MacGyver buckled his seat belt and gave the pilot a thumbs up.

As the helicopter lifted off, he looked out of the window, seeing the crash site fire dying down. He closed his eyes, stretched out his bad leg and leaned back in his seat. Then he felt a tap on his good knee and opened one eye.

“So, Mac,” Jack grinned over at him, “What are we doing tomorrow?”