

Fight Club

Round One

MacGyver stopped his motorbike at the side of the road and switched off the engine. The sky was brightening and the night chill giving way to what promised to be a warm day. He sat back on the bike and put his hands in his jacket pockets, watching the sun rise over the city. Below, the first rays of sunlight sparkled on the water, and the Golden Gate Bridge shone red as the light touched it. He watched until the sun was fully over the horizon, then pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. Checking the address written there against his map, he started the bike and descended into San Francisco.

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Phoenix Foundation

“Good morning, Helen.” Pete walked into his office, hung his jacket on the hook behind the door and sat down at his desk, propping his cane up beside him. He reached across his desk and his hand brushed against the paper there. He picked it up, bringing it close to his face, but couldn’t read the handwritten note. He frowned, irritated that he’d have to ask for help, and reached down to switch on the computer. As the machine booted up, clicking and whirring, Pete heard footsteps approach.

“Pete?” Willis knocked on the half-open door. “Helen said it was OK for me to come right in”.

“Willis, Hi. Have you seen MacGyver this morning?” Pete pushed a chair out for Willis and picked up the letter.

“Not so far.” Willis sat down, passing a mug of coffee to Pete. “He seemed a bit... strange on the way back last night. Really upset about the way the Phoenix directors... Well, you know.” He blew on his own coffee and sipped it.

“I know, I’m working on it.” Pete drummed his fingers on his desk. “Willis, I hate to ask, but someone’s left a note on my desk, and...” He trailed off, embarrassed.

“Oh, right. Sure thing.” Willis took the letter and opened it, scanning the contents. He frowned, reading the note again.

“What does it say?” Pete leaned forwards in his seat.

“I, um...” Willis cleared his throat, his voice quivered. “It’s Mac. He’s, um... He’s not coming back!”

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San Francisco

MacGyver could hear the familiar, parade-ground voice even over the bike’s engine. The door to the Visitation Valley Challengers Club had been propped open and MacGyver could see rows of kids in white Karate suits practising punches. He checked his watch, surprised at such a large before-school turnout. Locking the bike, he stepped into the hall and sat down at the back, watching Rutherford T Hines at work.

Hines was encouraging a group of older kids to punch the heavy bags harder. The teenagers were sweating in the cool room, letting out a shout every time they landed a punch or set the bags swinging with a kick. Hines moved on to a group of smaller kids, kneeling down to hold a focus mitt for them to hit. His voice was stern, but the kids seemed pleased whenever he stopped to help their group. MacGyver leaned forwards, resting his elbows on the back of the chair in front and his chin on his arms.

Hines had some rough looking kids in his class, gang tattoos visible on their necks and hands. He has some very young ones too, the smallest looking about kindergarten age, although there were no parents in the room. Hines looked at his watch and gathered his class into a circle.

“Now, today is a brand new day.” He looked around the circle. “Today, we hold our heads high and we meet the challenges that face us.” He looked at the older kids. “We will not take drugs.”

“No Sir!” The class replied.

“We will not fight except in self defence!”

“No Sir!” One kid at the far side blushed, avoiding Hines’ gaze.

“We will not participate in gang activity!” Hines started at the two tallest kids, nodding when they replied along with the rest. “We will work hard at school!” He dropped down on one knee, concentrating on the younger kids.

“Yes Sir!” The youngest nodded hard.

“We will make our families proud of us!” Hines’ expression softened and he placed a hand on the shoulder of a hollow-eyed kid standing next to him.

“Yes Sir!”

“Class dismissed.” He held onto the hollow-eyed kid for a moment longer, speaking quietly to her as the rest of the class got ready for school. The kid nodded, wiped her nose on the sleeve of her suit and ran off to get changed. Hines waited until the last of the kids had departed, then strode over to MacGyver.

“Tourist!” Hines’ voice echoed in the empty hall.

“Captain Hines.” MacGyver saluted, making Hines grin.

“What brings you to this fair city? Los Angeles not enough of a challenge, maybe – come to do some real work for a change!” Hines sat down next to MacGyver. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.” MacGyver smiled back. “I’m just... taking a break, so I thought I’d come and see how you’re getting on.”

“Taking a break. Uh-huh.” Hines gave MacGyver a sharp look, then shook his head. “Whatever you say, Mac.” He sat back, spreading his arms across two seat backs. “We’re doing well here, as you see. Next class comes in at ten – self defence for victims of domestic violence.”

“Sounds good.” MacGyver nodded.

“Wish it wasn’t necessary, but we live in dark times.” Hines shook his head, standing up. “Then drug rehab, young mothers and babies group, adult literacy and then back to Karate after school lets out this afternoon.” Hines counted the classes off on his fingers. “You sticking around for a while?”

“Few days, I thought.” MacGyver helped Hines to collect up the kick shields and focus mitts.

“Well, I could use your help. You got a place to stay?” Hines stowed the practice gear in a box and shut the lid.

“Only just got here.” MacGyver shook his head.

“Stay with me if you want.” Hines hooked his thumbs in his belt. “Couch is comfortable enough.” He glanced through the open door. “Wouldn’t leave your motorcycle there though – this isn’t such a good neighbourhood!”

“Right...” MacGyver looked at his bike, then out at the graffiti-scrawled and neglected buildings beyond. “You got your hands full here, am I right?”

“Holding back the tide of scumbags, junkies and gangsters so that the next generation don’t grow up just like them!” Hines finished tidying the hall and turned to face MacGyver.

“Big tide...” MacGyver lifted his jacket off the chair and put it on.

“I ain’t beat yet.” Hines grinned. “What happened to you, Tourist? You used to be hell-bent on saving the world from itself!” His grin faded as MacGyver shrugged. “Tell me about it later. Maybe we can help each other out.” Hines turned and walked down the Challengers front steps. “Come on – I’ll show you a better place to park the iron horse.”

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“So that’s it for today.” Hines followed MacGyver out of the Challengers building, locking the door behind him. MacGyver had helped with the kids Karate, been an ‘attacker’ for Hines to demonstrate self-defence techniques, mended a tennis ball machine donated by a country club and helped the youngest kids to make ‘bird-balls’ – wildlife snacks made from melted fat, seeds and raisins to hang in the club’s small back yard. Talking to the kids and to the parents who collected the little ones, he’d also heard story after story about how finding the Challengers Club had changed lives. Whatever he’d initially thought of Hines’ teaching techniques, they seemed to be working here.

He followed Hines’ beat-up truck through a maze of rollercoaster streets, the bay glittering blue between the buildings. They pulled up outside an older apartment building and Hines led him up to the third floor, unlocking his front door and standing aside to let him go first.

“You said you could use my help?” MacGyver pushed his bag behind Hines’ couch and sat down.

“I did.” Hines tossed him a bottle of juice and started making dinner. “We got us a competition coming up, with some other youth clubs, and I could use an extra pair of hands wrangling the kids. You in?”

“Absolutely.” MacGyver took a swallow of juice and looked around Hines’ apartment. It was neat without being military-smart, with a shelf of well-read books and a patchwork throw on the couch.

“My sister made it.” Hines watched MacGyver nod, tracing the pattern with his fingers. Hines stirred the onions in his skillet and frowned. “How come you’re here, Mac? Your head’s somewhere out in left field, so come on – what’s eating you?”

“You really want to know?” MacGyver sighed, got up and walked over to the window. “I quit Phoenix.” He turned to see Hines’ expression.

“Didn’t see that coming!” Hines shook his head. “Must have been a pretty good reason, right?”

“Right.” MacGyver turned back to the window, watching the traffic on the steep street outside. “The directors are probably going to do something I find... problematic. The fact that they’re even considering it is enough to make me leave. I didn’t join Phoenix to support the bad guys, RT.”

“Huh.” Hines frowned. “And if they decide to do the right thing after all?”

“I dunno.” MacGyver scrubbed a hand through his unruly hair, tugging at a tangle. “That’s why I’m up here, trying to decide what I’m going to do next.”

“Well, alright then.” Hines added tomatoes and beans to his chilli and turned the heat down, wiping his hands on a teatowel. “I’ll show you what we’re going to do next.” He picked up a flyer for a Karate competition and handed it to MacGyver.

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Despite his reservations about watching kids fight, MacGyver found he enjoyed the competition. Several youth clubs had entered teams, with competitors ranging from five year olds in too-big karate suits to teenagers who fought hard and accepted defeat almost as gracefully as victory, shaking hands and bowing at the end of each match. Only one group behaved differently, a group from Hunter’s Point whose logo was a clenched red fist.

“They cheat.” MacGyver looked down to see five year old Cody looking solemnly up at him. “And they’re bad losers. Mr Hines says they don’t display the true spirit of Karate.” He repeated the phrase carefully, then leaped up to cheer one of the Challengers kids, waving his flag with the Challengers ‘linked hands’ logo on it.

Concentrating on the Hunter’s Point team, MacGyver decided that Cody was right. They were very good at sneaking illegal hits past the referees and, once or twice, he was sure one referee was turning a blind eye to some of the more obvious fouls. Leaving Cody with some of the older kids, MacGyver made his way down to the edge of the mats, where Hines was refereeing. He waited for a break, and then signalled to Hines.

“Doing pretty good, aren’t they?” Hines grinned, waving to his team.

“Yeah, but we’d be doing even better if that ‘red fist’ team weren’t cheating!” MacGyver watched Hines glance over at the Hunter’s Point area and nod.

“But if the referee don’t see it, it ain’t happening.” Hines held up a hand. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, they do push the limits every time they compete, but I’ve been watching them when I can and there’s not enough happening to call them on it. We just have to be better than them is all. Prove that fighting fair is the best way to win.” Hines glanced at his watch, nodded to MacGyver and walked back to his mat to start his next fight.

MacGyver went back to the Challengers area, finding everyone watching the club’s final fight. The Challengers champion, Sherry, was fighting a girl from Hunter’s Point. The two were evenly matched in height, weight and determination but, where Sherry used skill to score her points, the Hunter’s Point girl used only aggression. But Sherry had strike after strike disallowed, while her opponent got away with sloppy throws and below the belt strikes. MacGyver and the Challengers kids grew angrier and when the Hunter’s Point kid was declared the winner, even she looked surprised.

Furious, MacGyver went to find Hines, who’d watched the end of the fight from across the mats.

“Hines!” MacGyver gripped his sleeve. “That was wrong and everyone here knows it! You saw it too – we have to do something!”

“Right.” Hines nodded, his face grim. “This time I agree – we can’t let that stand!”

Round Two

Furious, MacGyver went to find Hines, who’d watched the end of the fight from across the mats.

“Hines!” MacGyver gripped his sleeve. “That was wrong and everyone here knows it! You saw it too – we have to do something!”

“Right.” Hines nodded, his face grim. “This time I agree – we can’t let that stand!”

MacGyver waited impatiently while Hines explained the cheating that had gone on during the last fight. The official listened, then shook his head.

“All our referees are trained and approved by the American Karate Association, Mr. Hines, as you well know. You can register a complaint with the head office if you feel that strongly about it, but today’s results will stand.” He gathered his papers and stood up to leave. When Hines and MacGyver didn’t move, he put his briefcase down again. “Was there something else?”

“You saw that, right?” MacGyver stepped forward, ignoring Hines’ hand on his arm. “You watched it and you think it was judged fairly? How?!”

“Ah.” The official turned to MacGyver. “I represent the American Karate Association, but I’m not a match referee. But all our referees are trained –”

“And approved. Right.” MacGyver shook his head in disgust and turned away from the table. Behind him, the official picked up his briefcase and left.

“Hines? This stinks.” MacGyver shoved his hands into his pockets and followed Hines back to the Challengers Club kids. “Hey, what?!” He looked up to see the cheating referee, now wearing jeans and t-shirt instead of his Karate Association shirt, chatting with the Hunter’s Point club coach.

“Mac, wait! Dammit!” Hines put out a hand but MacGyver shook off his grip, striding across the hall to the Hunter’s Point club. “Wait here, OK?” Hines left the Challengers kids waiting together and set off after MacGyver.

“Hey!” MacGyver stopped at the edge of the Hunter’s Point group. Some of the older kids gave him unfriendly looks, but they moved out of his way.

“Can I help you?” The Hunter’s Point coach stepped forwards and the referee moved back, starting a conversation with a green-haired kid and avoiding meeting MacGyver’s eye.

“Yeah, your pet referee there is a cheat!” MacGyver pointed to the referee. Behind him, Hines swore quietly.

“Is that right?” The coach came to the front of the group, spotting Hines behind MacGyver. “Challengers, yes?”

“Yes.” MacGyver folded his arms. “Your man there allowed foul hits from your girl and disallowed perfectly good hits from ours.!”

“I see.” The coach nodded. “Sounds a lot like sour grapes to me. Sound like it to you, Mike?” He glanced over his shoulder at the referee.

“Sure does, Tom.” The referee stepped up behind the coach, frowning.

“Well, let’s see. The judges have no problem with the result. The other clubs have no problem with the result.” Tom ticked off the points on his fingers. “And the kids here have no problem with the result. Only you and Rutherford here.” He grinned at Hines, who frowned but didn’t comment. Tom turned back to MacGyver. “Maybe our kids are just better than yours. Hell, they’re certainly trained better!” He laughed at Hines’ scowl. “Nothing to say, Rutherford?”

“Yeah, I got something to say.” Hines shouldered his way past MacGyver and stood toe to toe with the coach. “You train your kids that violence and dirty fighting are the right things to do. You train IN exactly what I train OUT of my kids. I train discipline and self-control, not aggression and arrogance!”

“That’s fighting talk, Rutherford.” Tom’s voice was quiet. “You looking to fight me?” Behind him, the kids and Mike moved closer. Sensing movement behind him, MacGyver turned to see that the Challengers kids had walked quietly across the hall to join them, and were now staring down the Hunter’s Point club.

“Rematch!” The word was out before MacGyver had finished thinking it. The Challengers kids cheered and Tom smiled, all teeth and no humour.

“What do you say, Rutherford?” Tom’s grin grew broader. “You and your cheerleader there –” He flicked his fingers at MacGyver, “- and your best kids against me, Mike and our best kids.”

Hines took a breath, aware that the hall had grown silent and that the other youth groups were all listening.

“Make it a fundraiser!” One of the spectators stood up.

“Yeah, winner gets the ticket money to buy new sports equipment for their club!” Another spectator stood up and started clapping. The applause grew, and Tom’s grin grew with it.

“Ticket money and a public apology from the loser.” Tom held out his hand towards Hines, but MacGyver seized it and shook.

“Agreed!” He glanced across at Hines, but Hines was still staring at Tom. Tom turned and shepherded his kids out, leaving Hines glaring at an empty doorway.

“Tourist, you and me are going to get these kids home, and then I’m going to explain to you exactly how much trouble you and your excitable conscience have just landed us in.” Without looking at MacGyver, Hines turned and strode away.

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Phoenix Foundation

“So what do we do?” Nikki sat down in Pete’s office.

“Beats me.” Willis took off his glasses and cleaned them on his lab coat. “He left the note and just... went. Took off on the motorcycle and hasn’t been seen since.”

“I tried getting hold of Sam, but he’s in Guatemala covering a story.” Pete located the note and passed it to Nikki to read. “He’s out of contact for at least another week, according to his office.”

“Pete, how much truth is there in this?” Nikki frowned as she read MacGyver’s letter.

“More than I’d like.” Pete sighed. “I’m fighting it – I have a board meeting today, actually, and I hope to convince everyone that they’re choosing the wrong path.”

“Good luck!” Willis shook his head. “I really hope you do it – the more I think about it, the more I agree with Mac. I don’t think I want to be the puppet of some giant, sleazy corporation either!”

“OK.” Nikki put her hands flat on her knees. “Assume that Pete talks the board into seeing sense. We still have to find Mac and tell him that Phoenix is still the good guy after all. Where else do we look? I mean, what if he just doesn’t come back?”

“He’s got to come back.” Willis got to his feet. “Phoenix isn’t Phoenix without him.” He paused in the doorway. “He’s got to come back, right?”

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San Francisco

“See, here’s the thing.” Hines held up the focus mitts for MacGyver to practise punching. “Tom Counter and Mike McKay have been thorns in a lot of sides ever since they opened their youth club. Put your weight into it.” He circled, holding out the mitts one at a time to test MacGyver’s reaction speed. “Sports is pretty much all they do, but it keeps the kids off the streets and so most of the time, I got no problem with them. Watch your footing, there.”

“But they train their kids to cheat!” MacGyver shook his hair out of his eyes.

“They see it as training for the real world.” Hines swept the mitt over MacGyver’s head, nodding approval when he ducked in time. “Unfortunately, it spills over into competitions too.”

“And the cheating referee? Is that training for the real world too?” MacGyver circled, keeping his guard up.

“I’ve never seen it that bad. Mike’s always been on the sketchy edge of refereeing, favours the kids who show aggression more than skill, but it’s always been minor stuff.” Hines took off the mitts and picked up a kick shield.

“So why now?” MacGyver kicked at the pad, earning a disgusted look from Hines. “What did I do wrong?”

“Let’s just say you’re better at punching.” Hines took a firmer grip on the kick shield. “Try again. I think ‘why now’ is because me and Tom crossed swords at the last competition over his kids using excessive force, and he’s been looking for a way to get back at me ever since. No, not like that!” Hines put down the shield and demonstrated the kick slowly for MacGyver. Then he turned and faced MacGyver, hands on his hips.

“What’s got into you anyway, Tourist? What happened to Mr. Peaceful? You’re the last person I would have expected to lose it and go picking a fight like that!” He picked up the kick shield. “Well?”

“I guess I’m just tired of seeing the good guys get stomped by people who think they’re above the law.” MacGyver sighed, moving into his kicking stance again. “There seems to be too much of it about just recently!”

“Well, amen to that.” Hines rocked back as MacGyver kicked the pad much harder. “Better! There’s more fight in you than I thought!”

“Sometimes I wonder.” MacGyver blinked sweat out of his eyes and kicked again, driving Hines further across the mat each time he kicked.

“Hey – you don’t get to give up! We’re the good guys, remember?” Hines grinned over the top of the kick shield. “Again, faster this time.”

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Over the next week, Hines and MacGyver practised whenever they could. Coaching the kids helped MacGyver to improve too, finding out the limits of his own knowledge through explaining it to someone else. They practised in Hines’ apartment and in the local park in the evenings, went running early in the mornings and talked fight tactics in the breaks between classes at the Challengers Club.

MacGyver found his attention totally focussed on the upcoming competition, his concerns over Phoenix fading into the background. Only at night, lying awake on Hines’ couch, did he think about Atlas, and Phoenix, and his friends and family back in Los Angeles. Hines’ words kept running through his head: We’re the good guys. We don’t get to give up.

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The day before the competition dawned clear and bright. Hines and MacGyver got back from their run early, their shirts already sticking to their backs from the heat. The run up and down San Francisco’s rollercoaster streets didn’t seem to take very long, and MacGyver was surprised to find he wasn’t out of breath at the end.

“Good time, Tourist!” Hines stopped the timer on his digital watch and grinned.

“Thank you, Captain!” MacGyver grinned back. His kicks and punches had improved, his strength and stamina had grown and he was sure he had a good grasp of the competition rules.

“You ready to hear about your opponent now?” Hines was pleased with MacGyver’s progress, but felt it was only fair to warn him who he was up against.

“You betcha.” MacGyver stood aside as Hines unlocked his door, then followed him up the stairs.

“Here.” Hines handed MacGyver some photocopied newspaper articles. “Michael Peter McKay of San Francisco, California.” He pointed to the top article. “Three times county Karate champion, twice won the state championships. A few years ago, but he was good. He ain’t just a referee, Mac.”

“Uh-huh.” MacGyver glanced through the articles and then gave them back to Hines. He reached into his rucksack and pulled out a similar sheaf of articles. “Michael Peter McKay, also disqualified from two high-level competitions and who collected the most warnings of anyone three years running. I know who he is.” He grinned at Hines’ stunned expression. “I went to the library as soon as I knew I had to fight him.”

“You didn’t know who he was when you picked the fight, though.” Hines shook his head.

“No, I didn’t.” MacGyver sat down on the couch to unlace his sneakers. “But I knew that if you had to fight Tom Counter, I couldn’t let McKay be chosen as the referee. Easiest way to take him off the list of referees was to get him on the list of competitors instead. That way you get a fair fight.”

“And you get your ass kicked!” Hines dropped the papers on the table and faced MacGyver. “It’s not that I’m ungrateful, but you don’t have any idea of what kind of fight you’re in for here!”

“So, show me.” MacGyver leaned forwards, his elbows on his knees. “Show me all the dirty tricks he pulls, show me how to counter them.” He frowned, thinking of the way Atlas were acting, the dirty tricks they were pulling on Phoenix to make the directors do the wrong thing. “We’re the good guys, Hines. We don’t cheat, we win fair and we don’t get to quit!”

Round Three

Phoenix Foundation

Nikki put down the phone and stared at it, drumming her fingers on her desk. MacGyver hadn’t been home. None of his crazy neighbours knew where he was, and his landlord had been no more help than, ‘Mac went bush a while back’. He’d answered the door shirtless and wearing a hat with teeth on, and Nikki had smelled the beer on his breath. She’d declined his invitation to a ‘rockin’ Dundee party’ and left, no closer to finding MacGyver. She’d called everyone she could think of, and made a list of all MacGyver’s usual haunts. What else did he do? Where did he go? She frowned at the list, suddenly realising what was missing. She flipped through the yellow pages and dialled. Six rings later, the phone was picked up.

“Hello, Challenger’s Club, Cynthia speaking. How may I help you?”

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“So, you see why it would be catastrophic for Phoenix to ally itself with this company.” Pete stared around the table, picturing each board member as he looked at their blurred outlines.

“They have offered to make an incredibly generous contribution. The good we could do with that money far outweighs any questions we might have about their business practices.” Davidson, a board member of long standing, folded his papers on the table.

“Their ‘business practices’ are everything Phoenix stands against.” Pete stared at Davidson’s outline. “If Phoenix is seen to be working with them, it loses all credibility. It is a force for good in environmental, social and humanitarian causes. Surely that’s worth more than any donation of dirty money, no matter how generous.”

“Oh, right!” Davidson held up a hand. “So, the Redwoods project doesn’t matter? The school computer systems we’re upgrading, that can just wait, can it? The research we’re funding into glaucoma and macular degeneration, that can be shelved, right?” Davidson watched Pete flinch and nodded, satisfied. “Because without this donation, all those valuable projects will just stall. Is that what you want, Thornton?”

“We’ll find the money another way.” Pete’s voice was firm. “We’ve never relied on funding from bad sources before and I see no reason to start now.” A murmur of agreement ran around the table, and Davidson scowled.

“Shall we vote on it?” The chairman, Collins, took the cap off her pen and looked at each board member in turn. “Those in favour of accepting the funding, please raise your hands.” Pete heard a rustle of cloth as Davidson raised his hand, but didn’t think that many others had moved.

“And those in favour of rejecting it?” Collins counted hands and, over the sound of a roomful of people moving, Pete heard her pen scratch on the paper. Then he heard a sharp exhalation and the scrape of a chair being shoved back.

“You’re a bunch of idiots and you’ll drive Phoenix into the ground with your holier-than-thou attitude!” Davidson’s voice was harsh and sour. “I guess it’s not only Thornton here who’s blind to the facts!” the door slammed behind him and his footsteps faded away down the corridor. Pete heard Collins’ earrings rattle and she shook her head and, further down the table, one of the other board members gave a low whistle. Collins turned to Pete.

“Mr Thornton, I trust I can leave you to make the necessary arrangements?”

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“Well?” Willis set down his box of doughnuts on Nikki’s desk as she finished her phone call.

“Found him!” Nikki took a doughnut and smiled as she bit into it. “I called the Challengers Club –” She swallowed and licked sugar off her fingers. “- And the woman there told me she’d spoken to the organiser of another branch in San Francisco, who told her that Mac had turned up to help out just over a week ago, and he’s still there!”

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San Francisco

After the last class had gone home, MacGyver stayed at the Challengers Club. He’d told Hines he had some jobs to finish, but really he’d just wanted some time alone to think. After finding out that Mike McKay was a champion fighter as well as a referee, MacGyver had done some more digging.

The library's newspaper archive had been helpful – San Francisco had been proud of its local champion and McKay had featured regularly in the sports pages.

Hines had walked him through McKay's repertoire of off-limits moves and shown him how to defend against them, but MacGyver was sure from the news articles that McKay had been a formidable fighter even without cheating. He sighed, moving a tray of 'bird-balls' aside to wipe the kitchen counter.

While he'd had plenty of fights over the years, there was something different about walking into an organised one. Previously, fights had happened quickly and he hadn't had time to think about them before the fact. Even knowing that this fight was refereed and unlikely to end in death or permanent injury (although McKay had caused permanent harm to a couple of fighters in the past), didn't stop it from going around and around in his head. He pulled the tennis ball machine out of the way and swept the floor underneath. He looked up, hearing footsteps outside, then shook his head, dismissing his concern as paranoia.

What would he do next? He couldn't stay with Hines forever and he couldn't return to Phoenix and work for an organisation with links to such wrongdoing. Perhaps he could go back to Minnesota and get involved with some of the environmental work up there. His particular set of skills would land him a job with ease. He frowned, hearing the Challengers Club gate creak open. Crossing to the window, MacGyver saw a group of shadowy shapes duck around the corner of the building. The streetlight gleamed on green hair as the last figure moved out of sight. He crossed the hall again, guessing that the group were heading for the kitchen and the door to the club's back yard.

Just as he reached the kitchen door, the window exploded inwards. A rock landed on the kitchen floor amongst the glass and the group outside cheered. MacGyver ducked away as more rocks and the contents of the garbage can were dumped through the window. The door shook as someone kicked it. MacGyver saw the wood splinter around the lock and realised that a few more kicks would probably break it. There was another crash as a second window broke, and the hiss of an aerosol can. Vivid blue paint arced across the main entrance door glass.

MacGyver spun around, looking for something he could use as a weapon. He darted back into the kitchen, avoiding a second shower of garbage, and grabbed two trays of bird-balls. The balls had set hard and knobbly, about the size of a baseball. He looked around the main hall and ran across to the tennis ball machine in the corner. Wheeling it back to the kitchen, he lined it up with the kitchen door and loaded the bird-balls into it.

The door shuddered under another powerful kick. MacGyver unrolled the machine's cable and plugged it into the socket.

The next kick broke the doorframe and the door slammed back, revealing a teenager in a Karate stance outlined against the streetlight. MacGyver pressed the trigger and the first bird-ball flew out of the machine, hitting the kid in the forehead and shattering into pieces. He yelped and dropped back, clawing at his face.

MacGyver adjusted his aim and fired again, the next bird-ball catching the kid behind in the shoulder. He swung the machine around and fired through the broken kitchen window, hearing yells of surprise and pain from the Hunter's Point kids there. Three youths charged the kitchen door and MacGyver fired again and again, driving them back. The last of the bird-balls slammed into the green-haired kid's retreating back and MacGyver turned, pushing the machine ahead of him into the main hall.

He scooped up a bowl of satsumas and reloaded the machine, flinching as a brick flew through another window, showering him with broken glass. He turned the machine and let fly, high-speed fruit leaving bruises as it hit the youths outside at short range.

A particularly large satsuma jammed the machine, and MacGyver picked up a box of beanbags, throwing them at the fleeing vandals. He stood in the Challengers Club doorway, watching them running away and grinning.

Round Four

MacGyver stretched down to one foot, then to the other. He looked over the kids in front of him to see the Hunter's Point team doing the same. Several of their team had distinctive, round bruises and, as soon as the green-haired youth met MacGyver's eye, the kid looked quickly away again.

MacGyver stood up straight, pulling on one arm to stretch his shoulder. Over the Challengers kids' heads he saw Mike McKay glance his way, then say something to Tom Counter. They both laughed.

"Ignore them." Hines stepped behind MacGyver, tying his black belt tight. "You'll be fine."

"Right." MacGyver watched McKay pull off his t-shirt, the muscles in his broad chest and back clearly defined. McKay took longer than necessary to find his gi jacket and put it on, acknowledging a wolf-whistle from someone in the audience with a smile and a wave.

"Ignore them, OK?" Hines took hold of the front of MacGyver's borrowed jacket, turning him around.

*

Nikki parked her car and walked into the sports hall. Two teams were warming up at opposite ends of the mats, and the spectators seats were filling up. Seeing MacGyver at the far end of the hall, she found a seat quickly to avoid being seen.

*

The kids competed first, in age order. Cody lost his fight after tripping over his own over-long trousers for the fourth time, allowing his opponent to land a chance punch. Sherry won hers, to thunderous cheering from the Challengers end. Her opponent sulked and wouldn't shake hands.

Talking to the mum sitting next to her, Nikki found out about the previous competition, the argument and the rematch. While listening, she watched both teams, thinking how well MacGyver and Hines seemed to work together, and how nervous MacGyver looked. She blinked and frowned. Why was MacGyver wearing a karate suit, anyway? MacGyver didn't know Karate as far as Nikki knew, and he never fought unless he absolutely had to...

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Hines stepped onto the mat, cool under his bare feet. He stepped forward, bowing to Tom Counter without breaking eye contact. The sounds of the Challengers lids talking behind him faded as he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly and concentrating on the fight ahead. Tom's eyes sparkled with anticipation as he circled Hines, looking for an opening.

Tom lunged in, judging Hines' skill from the way he responded. The two men were similar in height and build, and traded blocks and counters without either scoring a point. MacGyver saw that Hines' breathing remained even long after Tom began to tire. Hines blocked a couple of dodgy-looking strikes and the referee frowned, but didn't comment.

Then Hines struck, landing a fast kick and punch combination that sent Tom staggering across the mat. The referee awarded the points and restarted the match. This time Hines had the upper hand, obvious even to MacGyver's untrained eye, and took only a few minutes to score the remaining points he needed. Tom, knocked down by a flying kick, slid across the mat on his back. Hines walked over to him and extended a hand.

"Did you know about your kids trashing my club?" He watched Tom's expression change.

"Trash? What are you...?" Tom frowned up at Hines, his confusion genuine.

"OK then." Hines nodded and waited for Tom to take his hand, pulling him to his feet.

The referee declared Hines the winner and Tom shook hands with him, following him off the mat.

"What's this about your club getting trashed?" Tom wiped blood from his nose. "I don't know a thing about that."

"Come on." Hines stopped, turning to face Tom. "I believe that you don't know about it, but I'm not sure I can say the same of your friend there." He indicated McKay, listening to the Hunter's Point teenagers and nodding his approval of what they were saying. "I'll tell you about it while we watch Mac fight."

*

Nikki watched MacGyver step out onto the mat. He looked very different in the Karate suit and with his hair pulled back tight in a ponytail, almost like a stranger. He looked small opposite his powerful opponent, similar in height but narrower across the chest and shoulders. MacGyver moved as though he wanted to be anywhere but on the mat, while his opponent swaggered into the centre like a rock star taking the stage. Nikki was surprised at the cheer that accompanied him and turned to her neighbour.

"That's Mike McKay." Her neighbour smiled and nodded. "He was quite the local champion when he was competing. Most of the Hunter's Point kids see him as a hero."

"What do you think of him?" Nikki watched her neighbour shrug.

"He's very good, but he takes a few chances. Plays a bit fast and loose with the rules, you know?" The neighbour wrinkled her nose.

"Great." Nikki watched MacGyver and McKay bow to each other. "He's a bruiser and a cheat." She leaned forwards, seeing McKay say something to MacGyver, but she was too far away to hear.

*

"I'll make it quick." McKay bowed to MacGyver, his smile predatory.

"Just make it a fair fight, OK?" MacGyver watched the smile drop from McKay's face, replaced by a sneer.

"Fight!" The referee stepped back, leaving MacGyver eyeing his opponent warily. McKay attacked first, making MacGyver dance back out of the way. He spun, firing off another kick that whistled past MacGyver's nose.

MacGyver stepped in, trying to land a punch, but McKay moved fast for such a large man, and swayed just out of reach. A misstep cost him a point as he stumbled and MacGyver's fist crashed into the side of his head. McKay shook his head to clear it and scowled.

When the fight restarted, McKay pressed forwards. MacGyver avoided being driven out of the mat area, but dodging past McKay cost him a point as a kick caught his side. McKay pursued him, but a punch to MacGyver's exposed back earned him a warning.

*

Up in the seats, Nikki watched as MacGyver fended off the better fighter. She turned to her neighbour.

"I didn't think you were allowed to kick people's knees." Nikki looked back at MacGyver, hopping and assuring the referee he was OK.

"You're not." The Karate mum watched as McKay received another warning. "The new guy sees it coming, though. Did you see him counter that kick?"

"Uh-huh." Nikki turned back seeing the referee once more talking to McKay.

*

"Do that again and you're out." The referee turned from McKay to MacGyver. "And you – more action, more attacks. You're all defence. I know you're new, but you got to go for it. OK?"

"OK." MacGyver stood on his spot and waited for McKay.

"Fight!" The referee stepped back, casting McKay a warning look.

"Why cheat? All you have to do to beat me is fight fair. You know that, right?" MacGyver watched McKay frown, think, then nod. McKay and MacGyver circled each other. MacGyver jumped forwards and punched, hitting air but earning a nod from the referee. McKay dodged aside, pivoting smoothly on one foot and landing a kick to MacGyver's shoulder. MacGyver stumbled forwards, kicking out behind himself and feeling his foot catch cloth.

McKay spun away, changed feet and brought another stunning kick down on MacGyver's shoulder. This time MacGyver fell, and McKay lowered his leg, his balance perfect.

MacGyver stood slowly, rubbing his shoulder. He stepped forward as the referee announced McKay's victory, holding out a hand.

"Means more when you win it fair, doesn't it?" MacGyver bowed to McKay, seeing him nod as he bowed back.

"Well done, Tourist!" Hines clapped MacGyver on the back, frowning when MacGyver hissed in pain and put a hand to his shoulder. "You hurt?"

"I'll be fine." MacGyver accepted an ice pack from Sherry and turned to face Hines. "Hines, we need to talk to Counter about the vandalism..." he tailed off as Hines held up a hand.

"Already taken care of. Tom had no idea that was happening and while you were having your fight there, he was getting the truth out of his team." Hines nodded to someone behind MacGyver, who turned to see Counter approaching, the green-haired kid grasped firmly by his Karate jacket.

"I believe Shane here owes you an apology." Counter frowned down at the kid, who looked from Hines to MacGyver and back again.

"I – we shouldn't have trashed your place." Shane dropped his gaze back to the floor. "It was wrong."

"And?" Counter prompted.

"And we'll come and clean it up tomorrow and pay for new window glass a bit at a time."

"And?" Counter's voice was stern.

"And we'll play fair from now on." Shane glanced up, eyes widening as he saw McKay had joined them.

"Well now." Hines folded his arms and stared down at the kid. "That sounds pretty good." He looked across at Counter and McKay. "I guess we all learned something about fair play today, right?"

"Right." Counter stared at McKay, who reddened, and then nodded.

"You OK?" McKay turned to MacGyver

"I'm OK." MacGyver shifted the ice pack further up his shoulder. "So does this mean you're going to work together now?" He watched Hines and Counter exchange a look.

"We can surely try." Hines nodded.

"Good." MacGyver grinned, then turned around, running straight into Nikki. "Ow!"

"OW!" Nikki stepped back, putting a hand to her forehead.

"Nikki? What are you doing here?" MacGyver rubbed his chin, where it has struck Nikki's forehead.

"Getting a concussion, I think!" Nikki blinked hard. "I came to find you, expecting you to be teaching wilderness stuff to a bunch of kids or something, and instead I get redirected halfway around a city that likes its streets vertical, nearly get squashed by a tram and eventually find you

having a fight in a pair of borrowed pyjamas!” She flicked her fingers at MacGyver’s gi jacket. “What were you thinking?!”

“I was thinking I’d take a little time off to decide what I was going to do next!” MacGyver straightened his jacket and tugged at his belt.

“By getting in a fight?!” Nikki shook her head.

“OK, the fight wasn’t part of the plan.” MacGyver frowned. “And you didn’t answer my question – what are you doing here?”

“Bringing food news! Phoenix isn’t going to take the money. Pete talked them around to doing the right thing and Davidson quit on the spot!” Nikki grinned.

“What are they going to do about the... about the research?” MacGyver lowered his voice.

“Go public.” Nikki nodded. “Uh-huh. Phoenix is like someone kicked the ant’s nest right now. We could sure use your help, Mac.”

“They’re not taking the money and they’re not shielding the corrupt scientists either?” MacGyver shook his head. “Pete really did it, didn’t he!”

“Oh yeah.” Nikki pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket. “Pete asked me to give you this – he really hopes you’ll take it back. We all do.”

MacGyver opened the paper, reading the resignation letter he’d left on Pete’s desk. He’d been so sure that the Phoenix he knew was over, that it had been replaced by cheating and corruption, run by corporate power instead of the desire to make the world a better place. But if he was wrong...

“Tell Pete you got me. Whoa!” MacGyver caught Nikki as she hugged him.

“You’re going to come back? Really?” Nikki smiled.

“I am.” MacGyver exchanged a look with Himes, who nodded his approval. “We’re the good guys after all - we don’t quit!”

*

The sun was setting as MacGyver loaded the last of the gear into the minibus. He squinted into the sunlight, shading his eyes with his hand as Himes pulled out of the parking lot.

Miles away, just outside San Diego, a delivery driver squinted into the same sunlight, shading his eyes with his hand. He pulled out of the Wellforce parking lot, glad to be leaving the package marked ‘biohazard’ with its new owner. As he turned, he ran over a leaflet lying on the road. The leaflet flapped in the breeze and fluttered free, the words ‘fight for a healthier future’ now smeared by a greasy tyre mark...