

Part One

“How did I let you talk me into this?” MacGyver complained as Jack Dalton led him down yet another twisting street.

“You don’t even know what it is yet, Mac!” Jack replied cheerfully. “Where’s that old sense of adventure?”

“I think I left it behind two or three alleys ago. How much farther?”

“Not much! And then you’ll get to see the newest venture of Dalton Enterprises!”

“Dalton *Enterprises* now? Whatever happened to Dalton Air & Sea?”

“Gotta keep up with the times, Mac! I’m landlocked. At least until I can fix up the plane.”

“What happened to it?”

“You really wanna ask?”

MacGyver sighed. “Just where exactly are you taking me, Jack?”

“Open your eyes, amigo! We’re there!” Jack beamed, gesturing to the dull, ramshackle building in front of them. Weeds poked up through cracks in the sidewalk and parking lot, and layers of paint were chipped off the brick walls.

MacGyver stared in confusion. “Jack, this is an old bingo hall. And it shouldn’t even be that---this building needs to be condemned. What are we doing here?”

Jack puffed out his chest in pride. “It might be a bingo hall *now*, but in a couple hours, it’s going to be the arena for the showdown of a lifetime!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Follow me!”

Grabbing his best friend by the arm, Jack marched through the unlocked door and down some linoleum-and-concrete hallways that were in no better shape than the building’s exterior.

“Jack...”

“Come on!”

At last, Jack pushed MacGyver through a short corridor that ended in a doorway sheltered by a thick velvet curtain. “Look inside, Mac!”

Trying not to roll his eyes at Jack, MacGyver stepped into the doorway and peered past the curtain.

In the room beyond, a group of six people was hard at work: unrolling a mat on the concrete floor, unloading equipment from stage boxes, and setting up a very unusual structure.

MacGyver’s eyebrows flew upwards. “Is that a wrestling ring?”

Jack looked as if any minute his pure glee could boil over and cause him to burst. “That’s right, Mac! Jack Dalton Enterprises presents---*Coastal Elite Wrestling!*”

“How did you ever get involved in something as crazy as this?”

“I won it in a poker game!”

“What?!”

Jack nodded. “It was the darndest thing, Mac. There I was, trying to bluff my way out of the hole, and all I had left to wager was my own airplane. Then the guy across from me wagered his regional wrestling promotion. And then just like that, as if by magic, I was able to make my royal flush and win the game! And now, this entire business is all mine.”

“But you don’t know anything about professional wrestling! Or *any* kind of wrestling, Jack! What are you going to do with all this?”

“Are you kidding? I’m going to run it and make a fortune, that’s what I’m going to do with it!”

MacGyver shook his head, incredulous. “Jack, did it ever occur to you that maybe your poker buddy lost his business *on purpose*?”

“Of course not! CEW is great!”

“Huh?”

“CEW. It’s the short version of the name. C’mon, Mac, you’ve gotta see the locker rooms! I wanna introduce you to everybody!”

“Jack, I really don’t know about this.”

“Come on! You’ve at least got to meet Gaijin and Panama Frank!”

Knowing that there was no arguing with Jack, MacGyver sighed and followed.

“The locker rooms are down this hallway,” Jack explained on the way. “Of course, they’re really just storage rooms that we’re repurposing, but they work. The babyfaces are in one and the heels are in the other. Of course, the ladies get their own.”

MacGyver rolled his eyes. “Of course. That’s what all this is about, isn’t it, Jack? You want to impress some girl, so you’re dragging me along.”

“C’mon, Mac, I can’t do that! They’re my employees.”

“That’s...a surprisingly mature attitude, Jack.”

“I told you, Mac, this is a legitimate business.”

For a second, MacGyver believed him...but then Jack opened the locker room door.

Two men wearing cowboy hats were helping a younger man get into a lion costume, complete with a large maned head, just like a high school mascot. Meanwhile, a masked luchador was practicing heroic poses in front of a mirror beside a bearded Viking who was slathering his face with blue warpaint.

“Jack...”

“Hey, don’t worry, amigo. They’re not crazy, I swear. This is just for the show.”

The Viking glanced at MacGyver and Jack in the mirror. “Hey, boss, who’s the mark?”

“Not a mark, my friend!” Jack announced proudly. “This is my best friend MacGyver. He’s here to see the show and help me out with producing. Hey, have you seen Kobayashi around here anywhere?”

The Viking grunted and went back to his facepaint. "Cutting a promo in the basement."

"Jack, we need to talk," MacGyver insisted.

Jack closed the locker room door. "Sure thing, Mac! Walk with me!"

MacGyver grabbed Jack's arm and pulled him back. "Jack, listen to me. You never said anything about me helping you with *anything!* I knew there had to be some kind of catch, I just knew it. Now, what do you *really* want?"

"No catch this time, I promise! Look, I had to say that about you being a producer with me because if I didn't, everybody would have their guard up around you. I'm working with a tight-knit group of people, Mac. They're like a family, and if you're not one of them, you're not acceptable backstage."

"I'm a mark?"

"Exactly! Now, c'mon! If we hurry, you can catch the end of Kobayashi's promo."

Mac rolled his eyes as Jack took off again. "What's a promo anyway?"

Jack brought MacGyver to a quiet corner where a Japanese man was standing in front of a rolling camera. Kobayashi was a little over five and a half feet tall, with black hair pulled into a long unruly ponytail. He had sharp obsidian eyes and tattoos peeked out from the loose collar of his long-sleeved black shirt.

He stared directly at the camera and folded his muscular arms as he spoke with a slightly-accented voice:

"For years, foreigners who come to wrestle in Japan have been called what they are: *gaijin*. Foreigners. No *gaijin* could have ever understood what it means to be a fighter in Japan---the sacrifices and years of hard work. But now, the strongest fighters in my country are spreading across the world, and I've come to show all of you Americans what it really means to fight. Now I am the Gaijin, and even though none of you understand who I am or what I've done---you *will* give me respect."

After a short pause, the cameraman straightened up, switched off the camera, and nodded.

"That's great, Kobayashi. And your English is really coming along."

The Japanese wrestler smiled slightly and returned the nod before catching sight of Jack.

Jack grinned and waved. "Hey, Kobayashi! This is my friend MacGyver. Mac, this is Hikaru Kobayashi, one of our best wrestlers."

"Nice to meet you," MacGyver said.

"Konban wa," Kobayashi replied with a polite nod.

"Are you ready for your heel turn tonight?" Jack asked.

Kobayashi nodded slowly. "Yes. I believe I will be a very good heel." A shadow crossed his face before he said, "Excuse me, please. I should get to the locker room now."

As he walked away, MacGyver glanced at Jack. "Are you gonna explain to me what any of this means?"

Jack grinned mischievously. "Aw, c'mon, Mac! I don't want to spoil the surprise. Hey, come over to the Gorilla with me. The show will start in just a little while, and we've gotta get moving, amigo!"

The "Gorilla," apparently, was the same curtained corridor that Jack had brought MacGyver to peek through before. Only now, they could definitely hear the sounds of a growing audience behind the curtain.

"Do you hear that, Mac?" Jack asked, still beaming. "That's the sound of success. And Kobayashi---excuse me, Gaijin---is going to be the highlight of the night. There won't be a single quiet fan in the crowd, I guarantee it!"

MacGyver shook his head, unsure of what to think. "If you say so, Jack."

"Shhh, I'm listening for my cue!"

A few seconds later, Jack swaggered through the curtain without a care in the world. Surprised, Mac discreetly peered through to watch his best friend walk toward the ring. A young woman with a microphone announced, "And now introducing your general manager...Jack Action!"

As MacGyver watched, Jack stepped into the ring and graciously accepted the announcer's microphone. "Good evening, citizens of Los Angeles! And welcome to Coastal Elite Wrestling! Now, who's ready for some action?!"

MacGyver grinned, watching Jack's gleeful reaction as the crowd cheered. Just then, someone brushed past him. The man who ran from behind the curtain and up to the ring was six feet tall with tan skin, dark sunglasses, a Hawaiian shirt, and a straw fedora.

"Cut it out, Action!" the man said into his microphone. "Everyone here can see that your wrestling promotion---if you can even call it that---is a waste of talent and everyone's time! If they were smart, they'd demand a refund for those cheap tickets they bought and get out of here."

Jack made a show of rolling his eyes for the crowd. "Well, well, well, if it isn't Panama Frank. Nice to see that your big loss last week didn't slow you down any. Hey, if you think that being here is so stupid, then why are you sticking around, huh?"

Menacingly, Frank replied, "Because I want a piece of Kiryu."

Jack took a step back, seemingly flustered. "You want to challenge Sakamoto Kiryu?"

“Yeah. I’ve got a bone to pick with that guy.”

Jack laughed. “Look, amigo, if you pick a fight with Kiryu, you’ll be picking bones, all right---your own, out of his teeth.”

“I don’t care! I’m no coward! You’re the GM---make the match! Now!”

“You want me to make the match?”

Jack paused to soak up the immediate cheers and chanting from the audience, then repeated himself: “You really want me to make the match?”

This time, in addition to the crowd reaction, Panama Frank lifted the microphone to his lips and said, “That’s right.”

“All right,” said Jack, finally relenting. “You’ve got your match---a tag team match. You and Hayato Tanaka versus Gaijin and Sakamoto Kiryu.”

“What? But that’s not---”

“Tonight, as the main event right here in Los Angeles, California!”

After that, Jack dropped the mic and sauntered out, pausing to shake hands with people in the crowd along the way. Finally, he made his way back behind the curtain and his face split open in a giant grin. “Well, what do you think, kemosabe? How’d your old buddy do?”

Mac smiled as he stepped aside to let a group of female wrestlers pass through the curtain and down to the ring. “You really surprised me, Jack. You’re a natural performer.” He paused. “And this was much better than that time you tried to be a magician!”

With a look of mock hurt, Jack replied, “Mac, Mac, Mac. I am *still* a magician. You want me to pull a quarter out of your ear? How about a half-dollar? Ten pennies?”

“No, thanks. So what do you do around here now that the show’s getting started?”

“Well, usually I’d be staying right here to make sure everything runs smoothly, but since you’re here---c’mon, amigo! Let’s go watch the shizow!”

They went down the hall and slipped through a back door into the audience. Standing in an aisleway amidst aluminum bleachers and folding chairs, MacGyver had a decent view of the ring, and he watched with Jack as two of the bulkiest and most athletic women he’d ever seen began to fight. The two women were polar opposites, with one wearing all black and the other in a glittering luchador outfit. As MacGyver’s eyes scanned the room, he realized that there were at least 200 people in the audience, an immense number for this ramshackle venue, and many of them were holding handmade posterboard signs with wrestlers’ names and catchphrases scrawled across them in permanent marker. Someone had hung large spotlights to the steel rafters above the ring, flooding the area with bright white light. The scene was almost too much to take in all at once.

“Jack, are you sure about this?” MacGyver asked, suddenly concerned as he watched the wrestlers grapple. “What if someone gets hurt?”

“Trust me, they won't,” Jack replied nonchalantly. “We do have a paramedic here tonight just in case, but nothing ever happens. You'll see.”

One of the women overpowered the other and threw a powerful punch---that missed by at least three inches. The wrestler stumbled backwards anyway, acting like she'd been hit by a missile. MacGyver shook his head. “I see what you mean.”

Jack smirked. “It's all kayfabe, Mac, that's all it is.”

“Isn't that kind of like lying to people?”

“Nah. Everybody sees what they want to see. They *want* to believe it's real, even if they know it isn't. Just like being a magician! The marks eat it up.”

MacGyver lifted an eyebrow. “They're not marks, Jack. They're fans.”

“They're marks! Ask them yourself if you don't believe me. C'mon, Mac, you're missing the show!”

The matches continued for at least another hour into the night: high-flying luchadors, technical masterminds, submission hold specialists, street brawlers, and martial arts experts---it seemed like every style of wrestling in the world was being crammed into sixty short minutes.

And honestly, after seeing all of it, MacGyver still couldn't understand why people liked it. He'd much rather have been watching a hockey game. But he could still appreciate the athleticism---not to mention the dedication of everyone else in the room.

“I can see why this is so important to you, Jack,” MacGyver commented as the lights went dark and music played to signal the last match of the night. “I'm sorry for calling you crazy earlier. You might really be able to make this work.”

“Thanks, kemosabe,” Jack replied. “You know, I have a really good feeling about all of this, too. It seems like for once, everything's about to work out for old Jack Dalton.”

Out in the ring, the lights came back up as Panama Frank and the three Japanese wrestlers circled each other like lions. The bell rang as the referee signaled for the match to start. Jack watched on with pride.

Then everything broke loose.

The second the bell rang, Kiryu and Tanaka set on Kobayashi like wild jackals, beating him with fists, knees, and calculated martial arts strikes.

“What do they think they're doing?” Jack said, shocked. “Something's wrong.”

MacGyver quickly looked from Jack's face to the ring and back. “This wasn't supposed to happen?!”

“Not at all! Come on, I gotta go find out what's going on!”

Before MacGyver turned to race with Jack down the hall, he noticed the look of shock on Kobayashi's face---and the referee throwing up his arms in the shape of an X.

“What happened out there?” Jack shouted as Kiryu and Tanaka darted past the curtain and down the hallway, forcing themselves to stop before they ran headlong into Jack and MacGyver. “Why did you do that?!”

The two Japanese men glanced at each other anxiously, almost fearfully, before Kiryu said, “*Mōshiwake gozaimasen. Yakuza wa watashitachi o kyōsei shita. Iku beki desu.*”

Then both of the wrestlers pushed past them and rushed out.

Jack turned halfway to watch them run out of the bingo hall, gaping. “I don't believe this. Mac, what's happening?”

“I don't know, but I did understand just one word very clearly.”

“Yeah? What did they say?”

MacGyver frowned. “Yakuza.”

“Yock-za? What does that mean?”

“It means we need to have a talk with your friend Kobayashi. And fast.”

Part Two

“Kobayashi, what happened out there?” MacGyver asked quietly, watching as the paramedic patched up the worst of the strong-style wrestler's cuts and bruises. Both of them were sitting in the storage space-turned-locker room after Kobayashi had been attacked by his fellow performers in the ring---for real. Jack was pacing the room like he couldn't sit still as Kobayashi gave his answer.

“Everything happened so quickly. I never knew anything was wrong. I was thinking about how to set up for the first spot, just like usual, but then they started coming after me, and I had no idea what was going on. It's a good thing that I was too shocked to react, because if I had gotten angry...” He trailed off. “I don't know why they did this. Sakamoto-kun is my best friend, and Hayato and I have always gotten along.”

“Does this have anything to do with the yakuza?”

Kobayashi stiffened abruptly. “Who told you that?”

"I only know a handful of words in Japanese, but I do know that your best friend mentioned them as he ran past us just a few minutes ago. And your reaction just now makes me think that those tattoos you're covering up are something more than a fashion choice---especially since you're missing more than half of the pinky finger on your left hand."

Kobayashi covered his left hand and looked away in shame. "It's true. In Japan, I was a yakuza."

Jack finally drifted over to them, pulling up a steel folding chair and listening intently. "I still don't get it. What's a yakuza?"

"A Japanese gangster," MacGyver said grimly.

"What? A gangster?" Jack stared at Kobayashi. "A gangster? You're a gangster? How can this be happening? Why are you here?"

"Please, Jack-san, don't fire me," Kobayashi said, distressed. "I can explain."

"Start with the pinky finger thing," Jack said.

The wrestler took a deep breath. "I joined the yakuza when I was sixteen. I---was a very disrespectful child. About two years into my time with them, I made one of my superiors very upset, and he sent two yakuza to teach me a lesson. That was when I knew I had to apologize. So---so I cut it off and took it to him. After that, I was a very good yakuza."

Jack blinked, staring at Kobayashi with a mixture of shock and horror. "You cut off your own--- Mac. Mac, he cut off his own finger. Did you hear that? He cut off his own finger!"

"Yeah, I heard," MacGyver replied with a grimace. "These are serious people. How did you end up here in the States?"

"Every time I wasn't with the yakuza, I was wrestling. All the yakuza in my gang loved to watch, and the people who own the wrestling promotions in Japan will invite the yakuza to the shows, out of respect. So I was always in and out of the arena. I started trying to talk to the wrestlers and pick up some moves. I would spend hours in gyms practicing on my own. And then finally, I tried out to be a wrestler myself. That was when I wanted to leave the yakuza and go through the wrestling dojos, just like the real wrestlers in Japan have been doing for decades. But the boss didn't want me to leave. That's why my *oyabun*---" Kobayashi paused for a second as he struggled to think of an English word that would fit. "My mentor in the yakuza, he arranged for me to come to the United States. But now it looks like the yakuza have followed me here." He touched a patch of purple bruise that was spreading across his chest. "And now it looks like they want more than my finger, if they managed to scare my friends into attacking me."

"We've got to do something about this," Jack said.

"I agree," MacGyver replied. "We need a plan, and we start by talking to Sakamoto and Hayato. Do you have any ideas where they might be?"

Jack shrugged. "All of the wrestlers tend to stay at the same hotel. We could check there first." Mac nodded. "Let's go." Kobayashi stood to go with them. MacGyver shook his head. "You should stay here and finish getting yourself checked out."

Kobayashi stubbornly took a step toward Jack. "With all due respect, I don't let other people solve my problems for me. If this is a yakuza problem, then I'll be the one to stop them. I'm coming with you."

MacGyver slowly nodded. "All right. Let's go."

A short time later, Mac's Jeep rolled into the hotel parking lot.

"Do you know what room they'll be in?" MacGyver asked.

"Yes, it's the one next to mine and Frank's," Kobayashi replied, leading them upstairs. He knocked quietly on the white-painted wooden door. When that didn't work, he rolled up his sleeves and pounded on it hard, shouting, "Sakamoto-kun! Hayato! *Kono doa o ima aite kudasai!*"

They could hear Tanaka protesting as Kiryu unlatched the door and opened it. "*Konban wa,*" he said in a shaking voice, stepping backward as his eyes fell on the intricate tattoos covering Kobayashi's exposed arms. "Hikaru-kun... I'm sorry."

Kobayashi pushed past his best friend and stood in the center of the room, glaring at the two wrestlers. MacGyver and Jack followed quietly inside and Kiryu shut and latched the door.

"What did they say to you?" Kobayashi said in a low voice, speaking in English for the benefit of the two Americans. "What did they say to you that would make you beat up your own friend? *Uragirimono!*" His voice escalated to a shout.

Tanaka said nothing, eyes downcast.

Kiryu did the same for a moment, until finally he sank into a deep bow in front of Kobayashi. "*Gomen'nasai.*"

Kobayashi sighed. "I forgive you. I know you were afraid."

"You need to tell us everything that happened," MacGyver broke in quietly. "We have to get to the bottom of this."

Kiryu straightened up and nodded. "They came two nights ago, when we first arrived back here in Los Angeles. They told us that they knew you were here, and they told us to attack you in the ring at the next show."

Tanaka nodded and added something in Japanese.

Kobayashi listened carefully. "Hayato says that there were two yakuza and a *gaijin*; he thinks an American. The yakuza were waiting in the audience tonight to be sure that they followed through and attacked me, no tricks."

Kiryu nodded. "Yes. They threatened to kill both of us and harm our families back home if we didn't do what they told us."

"Could either of you identify these men if you saw them again?" MacGyver asked.

Kiryu immediately answered yes, and after Kiryu quickly translated for Tanaka, he nodded yes as well.

"We need to talk to the police. All of you should tell them everything you told me," said MacGyver.

Kobayashi shook his head vehemently. "You can take those two to the police, but I'm not going anywhere near them. No way! I'm ex-yakuza! They'll arrest me on sight."

"No, they won't. You haven't committed any crimes in America so far, have you?"

"Well... no."

"Then you should be fine. Either way, you need to tell the police everything. They can help you."

Tanaka broke into the conversation with a couple of phrases in quiet Japanese, and both Kiryu and Kobayashi stilled, exchanging a serious glance.

"What is it?" Jack asked. "What's wrong?"

Kiryu bit his lip. "Hayato-kun says that he recognized the *gaijin*'s voice. We couldn't see his face because he wore a hooded jacket and a mask, but we could hear his voice well. And now that I'm thinking about it, I've heard it before, too."

"Who was it?" MacGyver asked.

Kiryu shook his head. "Neither of us know. But Hayato-kun is right---the voice belongs to someone backstage."

"Back---backstage?" Jack echoed. "You mean---"

Kiryu nodded. "Yes. We believe that the American working with the yakuza is one of your wrestlers."

Part Three

Kobayashi paced outside the hotel like a lion circling in its cage. Before they took Kiryu and Tanaka to the police station, MacGyver and Jack had warned Kobayashi to stay inside. But he refused to obey them, just as he refused to talk to the police. He knew what the next step would be: his former yakuza brethren would be coming to pay him a visit personally, and there wasn't anything that could stop them.

Finally, Kobayashi stopped, sighing as he stared down at the sidewalk. He felt certain that he would never escape his former life. He was a fool to think that he ever could. Slowly, he rolled up the sleeves of his long shirt. Intricate tattoos wound down his arms like filigree chains---a pattern of colorful koi swimming down one of his arms as bursts of cherry blossoms exploded across the other. To an average American, these tattoos would seem beautiful. To Kobayashi, they were just another reminder that his past would always return to haunt him.

He heard the footsteps a second too late. By the time he whirled to see who was behind him, one of the two yakuza had already socked him in the ribs, knocking him backward.

"Look at that," the first yakuza said in Japanese. "It's our missing brother."
"Brother?" the second yakuza sneered. "More like a traitor."

Kobayashi lifted his chin high, forcing himself not to touch his sore ribs. He recognized these two. They were enforcers for their gang's boss---and they also were tough opponents in a fight. "What do you want from me? I'm not yakuza."

The first one, Ichiro, shook his head slowly, the platinum-dyed tips of his mid-length hair swishing. "Once a yakuza, always a yakuza, Hikaru. I guess you've forgotten. And that's a real shame, especially with the *kumicho* coming so nearby. We hoped that sending your new friends to give you a solid beating would remind you about your loyalty, but I guess you need another lesson."

The other yakuza, who usually went by Rin, cracked his knuckles slowly---not that he had that many to crack, given that he was missing both pinkies and an index finger.

Kobayashi smirked. "You should spend less time worrying about me and more time wondering what you're going to do once you run out of fingers. What did you do, Rin? Sleep with the boss' wife again? Is that why you got picked to come here and---"

Before he could finish the sentence, both yakuza attacked him savagely, even going so far as to rip some long hair from his scalp. Blood ran down Kobayashi's face as he struggled wildly. At last, he managed to get one arm around Ichiro's throat, and he squeezed the yakuza's neck as hard as he could, muscles straining. Ichiro was beginning to pass out when Rin smashed Kobayashi over the head, and everything went dark.

Kobayashi woke up in an unfamiliar bed with a white light above him and noises all around. He began to panic---until Jack's face blocked out the light and he realized that he was in a hospital.

"Hey, Mac, I think he's awake!" Jack said.

Kobayashi just groaned. "What happened? How did I get here?"

"We were hoping you could tell us," MacGyver replied. "When we came back to the hotel, we found you laying on the sidewalk with blood coming out of your head."

"It's a pretty nasty gash, too," Jack commented. "The doctors had to staple it."

"Luckily, none of the damage is permanent," MacGyver said quickly, seeing the disturbed look on Kobayashi's face.

The wrestler sighed, noting with displeasure that his bruised ribs ached every time he moved.

"Two yakuza from my gang managed to sneak up on me. It's just what I thought. The *kumicho*---the boss---is angry that I left, and now they want to punish me. There's nothing I can do except go back---and I'm never going back."

"Hey," MacGyver said gently, "if they were people you recognized, then the police can track them down. You can identify them so the police can investigate."

"No police!" Kobayashi said, fists tightening around the flimsy white sheets. "The police won't help a yakuza."

"Sure they will!" Jack replied. "Especially when they see the number those two guys did on your head!"

Kobayashi gritted his teeth. "You don't understand. The police won't help someone like me. They don't even care. You know what happens if someone kills a yakuza? They turn themselves in. They go to the police with their weapon and confess, and what happens to them? They get one or two years in jail at the very most! Because owning the gun and the bullet are bigger crimes than killing a yakuza! We're not even real people! We can't even go out in public with our sleeves rolled up, or we'll get banned from places because of the tattoos! The police won't help me."

"That may be the way things used to be, but American police aren't like that," MacGyver insisted, "and neither are the courts. Give the police the names and descriptions of the men who attacked you. They're dangerous, and they need to be arrested."

Kobayashi was silent. Then he looked at Jack. "I don't want to go to the police, Jack-san. But I trust you the way I trust my *oyabun* in Japan. If you really want me to talk to the police, then I'll do it."

Jack nodded. "You need to see the police, Hikaru."

Kobayashi sighed again. "I thought you would say that. Then I should go before I change my mind." He swung his legs to the side of the hospital bed and began to stand, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Whoa!" MacGyver said, rushing to help Jack steady him. "Slow down! You just now got fifteen staples put into your scalp. I don't think you're ready to---"

"Let's just go," Kobayashi said stubbornly. "I'm already up now, right, Jack-san?"

"He has a point," Jack started to say, but MacGyver's withering glare cut him off. "Hey, maybe Mac's right and you should slow down some..."

In moments, however, Kobayashi recovered---or *seemed* to recover---enough to stand on his own and grab his clothes from the plastic chair beside the bed. "Don't feel bad. Yakuza aren't known for being reasonable people," he said with a grin.

MacGyver sighed. "What did you get us into, Jack?"

"Hey, this time, it wasn't all my fault."

"Just don't ever play poker again."

Jack snorted. "Blackjack is more my game anyway."

"I told you the police wouldn't help me," Kobayashi growled an hour or so later, as the three of them were exiting the police station.

"It's going to take time, that's all," MacGyver replied. "We just need to find a lead on where the yakuza who attacked you are. That'll speed up the investigation."

Jack snapped his fingers. "Good thinking, Mac! We can lead the cops right to 'em!"

"*Maybe*," MacGyver emphasized. "We don't have enough information for ourselves yet, let alone enough to help the police."

Jack nodded. "So what are we gonna do about it?"

"We aren't going to do anything, Jack. You and Hikaru are going to get back to the hotel and stay put. I plan to find out as much as I can about this American that they've been working with. I'll meet you in a couple hours."

"But, Mac!"

"No buts, Jack! Hikaru's hurt. Besides, if there really is someone on the inside working as one of your wrestlers, then I'll have a better chance of getting information if I'm not snooping around with the boss."

"Fair point," Jack conceded. "Good luck, Mac!"

“Thanks,” MacGyver replied. “And be careful.”

As MacGyver started his Jeep, Jack led Kobayashi to his car---or, at least, the car he was temporarily using.

“We're not *really* just going to stay put, are we?” Kobayashi asked.

“Are you kidding me?” Jack said with a grin, fingering the brim of his cap. “We're going to do some investigating!”

Part Four

MacGyver took a deep breath and pushed through the glass door of the old bingo hall. Since Coastal Elite Wrestling was booked for another show the next day, the ring was still set up and people were still constantly flowing in and out of the locker rooms. It was the perfect time to blend in and eavesdrop.

Unfortunately, the first conversation he came across sounded like this:

“Izi hizeard thizat Gizaijizin gizot hizurt fizor rizeal.”

“Yeah, looked like he got some stiff potatoes. Definitely a shoot.”

“Hizope hize's izokizay.”

Slipping around a corner to avoid being seen, MacGyver ran a hand through his hair and frowned. He'd never heard that many Z sounds in his entire life. And none of it sounded remotely like a language that he was familiar with. If eavesdropping and snooping for information wouldn't work, then he needed to try a different tactic.

He went straight into the locker room, pausing at the doorway when he saw fifteen pairs of eyes turning to stare at him. “Hi,” he said with an awkward wave. “Name's MacGyver.” Rapidly forcing himself to recall what Jack had introduced him as before, he added, “I'm Jack's new producer.”

For a split second, everything was silent and MacGyver wondered if he'd made a mistake. Then the wrestlers burst into laughter and returned to their business.

“We wondered when you'd come by to introduce yourself,” Panama Frank commented, offering a handshake.

“Sorry,” Mac replied. “With Kobayashi getting hurt, Jack and I were a little busy.”

He reached out to shake Frank's hand, expecting a firm grip---and being taken aback when the wrestler's handshake was as loose as a limp fish.

Frank chuckled. “How new to this business are you?”

“Very,” MacGyver admitted.

Frank shrugged. "It's okay. We were all new once. You shake hands the way you work. If you shake stiff, you work stiff. If you shake loose, you work loose. So, you want to make sure you say hello to everyone. Start with Paul." He gestured to the largest man in the room, who was playing cards at a folding table in the corner.

MacGyver nodded. "Thanks."

As he walked over to the table, he wondered which of these men could be secretly working for a group of vicious criminals. None of them seemed particularly outgoing so far, but none of them seemed dangerous, either. He approached the card table and cleared his throat. Paul and the two men at the table with him looked up. Paul was huge up close, with muscles that were even more impressive than Kobayashi's and blue eyes that glared up at MacGyver---and suddenly, Mac began to wonder if it had been a smart idea to interrupt the game.

"Hi. I'm the new producer. Name's MacGyver. Just...thought I'd introduce myself."

Paul stood up and MacGyver's brain began to filter through every self-defense move he knew. But then Paul's face split into a grin and he grabbed Mac for a handshake (loosely, of course). "Hey, man. I wondered when you were gonna stop by. Jack mentioned he'd be bringing on some new hands. So you're gonna be helping everyone choose moves and set up spots, huh? Well, it's great to have you here." He sat back down again and added, "Especially if you're a friend of Jack's."

Relaxing slightly (still keeping in mind that everyone was a suspect), MacGyver asked, "So, what do you think of Jack?"

Paul chuckled as he picked up his cards. "I gotta say, when he first took over, I wasn't sure about him at all. He knew next to nothing about this business. But he's picked it up like a natural. Between you and me? I think all of us are about to go places. That is, if everyone can stop screwing around and take it seriously. But you didn't hear that from me." The men at the table snickered and restarted the card game.

Feeling relieved that Jack was doing well with his employees---and even more relieved now that he finally knew what it meant to be a wrestling producer---MacGyver introduced himself to every wrestler in the locker room before making his way back to Frank.

"Welcome aboard," Frank said with a grin. "It's a good thing Paul likes you. You sink or swim depending on what he thinks."

MacGyver shrugged. "Seems like it went well. I have one more question and then I'll get out of you hair."

"Okay, what is it?"

"What's a stiff potato?"

“Okay, Hikaru,” Jack said as he started the car. “How are we going to start investigating these guys? Do you have any ideas?”

“Absolutely,” Kobayashi answered without hesitation. “But it's dangerous. I'll need your help, but when the time comes, I won't ask you to go in with me.”

“Are you kidding? It's going to take *at least* both of us to get rid of those yakuza guys. I'm all in, amigo.”

Kobayashi nodded thoughtfully. “You might not think so when you hear what I have to say. I think we should forget Rin and Ichiro. They're small-time enforcers anyway. I think we should go straight to the *kumicho*.”

“What does that mean?”

“The *kumicho* is the yakuza boss, the leader of my gang. Ichiro let it slip that he was nearby---probably in this city.”

“That's great, but how are we supposed to find this guy? The city's huge.”

“Check the hospitals!”

Jack frowned in confusion. “Why?”

“There's only one reason why a man like Riku---the *kumicho*---would leave Japan, and that's his liver.”

Jack squinted. “You're losing me. I don't get it.”

Kobayashi shook his head impatiently. “Yakuza always drink and smoke. Even inject amphetamines. And the bigger you are, the more you have to drink.”

“Ohhh,” Jack said, finally understanding. “So he must be here for a transplant or something, then.”

Kobayashi nodded. “Yes! If we find his liver, we find Riku.”

Shortly after, Jack pulled into the parking lot of the UCLA Medical Center. “Don't get your hopes up too much, okay?” he told Kobayashi. “But I have a nurse friend who works here, and she might be able to give us some information.”

Kobayashi raised an eyebrow before gesturing loosely to the building with his intact pinky finger. “So...?”

Jack blinked. “So what?”

Kobayashi nudged his shoulder. “Is she a girlfriend, Jack-san?”

“Au contraire! She's just a very sweet girl that I happen to---” Jack trailed off and sighed. “Yeah, okay, we've been out a few times, but it's not serious. Now, c'mon!”

Jack's friend was short with ginger hair, and she glared at him from behind the nurse station as he walked over. “Can I help you?” she asked coldly.

“Hey! Alicia! Long time, no see! Listen, I kinda need a favor...”

“Then you should've called me back!”

She started to walk away, but then Kobayashi called, "Please! It's very serious."

The nurse looked back at him. "How serious?"

"Life and death," Kobayashi answered.

Alicia sighed. "Oh, all right. What do you need?"

"Please, check the list for liver transplants and see if Riku Minamoto is here."

She shrugged. "Okay, but it'll take me a while to check the files."

"We can wait," Jack replied cheerfully. "This is going well so far. See! This'll show Mac that I can investigate, too. I don't need to be left behind!" Then his smile faded away. "Although, I do have one question. What will we do if we find this guy?"

Kobayashi carefully rolled up his sleeves. "Riku is an old samurai. He believes in *giri*."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means...it means you give something and you get something."

"Look, amigo, you've got to learn how to say things clearly. I have no idea what you're trying to tell me."

"Riku wants my life, so I'm going to make him think that I want to take his."

"Ohhh. I see. Smart plan. But, that's if he's here. He might not be. Maybe that guy misspoke and the boss man isn't even in--"

Jack never finished his sentence because Alicia returned with a clipboard in hand.

"I don't know how you knew, but Riku Minamoto is definitely on the transplant list," she said. "At the very top, too. Which is strange, considering that I didn't even see his name on here when I checked it day before yesterday."

"Where is he? Which hospital?" Kobayashi asked urgently.

"This one, actually," Alicia replied, followed by a cry of "Hey!" when Kobayashi grabbed the clipboard from her hands. He checked to see which room the *kumicho* was waiting in before tossing the clipboard onto the counter and taking off down the hall---with Jack in pursuit.

"Thank you! I'll call you later!" Jack shouted as he chased the wrestler.

Alicia scoffed as she picked up her clipboard. "Yeah, like I haven't heard that one before."

MacGyver was beginning to realize that Jack had been right about the wrestlers being a tight-knit group of people---and the more he learned about them, the more he realized how much of an outsider he truly was. Frank, his self-appointed mentor, had started to explain some of the basics as they walked to the ring.

"If you work stiff, that means you hit hard. You don't want your wrestlers to be stiff. This isn't Japan, and somebody could get hurt. Now, if something is scripted, like me going up against Jack, that's called a work. If it's real, like when those two dudes started beating the tar out of Kobayashi earlier, then that's called a shoot. And above all, you always keep kayfabe. That's not gonna bother you so much, being backstage, but just remember that when you're helping these guys figure out what to do during a match."

"I appreciate the help, Frank, but you still didn't tell me what any of this has to do with potatoes." Frank smiled---and then socked MacGyver in the jaw. "That was a potato."

MacGyver rubbed his sore face, knowing that he'd have a bruise later. Then, he did what he would do if someone had tried to crosscheck him in a hockey game: he hit back. Not hard, but enough to get Frank's attention.

Frank's grin grew wider and the hand that flew to his jaw mirrored Mac's motion from earlier. "And there's the receipt. Not bad! C'mon, the guys are already in the ring."

Frank whistled to the three wrestlers and they paused in their training to look. "Hey, guys. This is MacGyver, the new producer. He just met everybody in the locker room, and he's all right. But he's just getting smartened up, so don't break him just yet."

"Comforting," MacGyver said dryly.

The three wrestlers climbed out of the ring and gave him three limp handshakes.

"I'm Randy Thompson," the biggest one said. "I go by Trucker. These guys are Stewart Nixson and Saul 'The Saw' Wilson."

"Nice to meet you. What are you working on?"

Saul grinned. "Triple Threat match for tomorrow night! We're working on the finish."

"I'm going to win," Stewart said, twisting one finger around the strings of his hoodie. His voice had a ring of aggression to it that automatically made Mac suspicious.

"Nice," MacGyver said, keeping his thoughts concealed. "Why don't you show me what you have so far?"

Quickly, the three of them got into position in the ring. Lightning-fast, Saul got MacGyver up to speed. "At the last part of the match, after we throw a whole bunch of punches, Trucker's gonna knock me flat on my back!"

Grinning, Trucker shoved Saul backwards with one meaty hand, and Saul flew to the center of the ring and sprawled out like he'd been hit with a concrete block. "After that, Stewart will take over," Trucker said. "I'll catch his moonsault for a piledriver."

"And then I'll recover and attack them both!" Saul finished from his place on the mat. "That's all we have so far. What do you think?"

"It sounds good to me," MacGyver said slowly, hoping that this wasn't a test of his knowledge.

"Now we need to figure out how we're going to go from your attack to Stewart's win. Right?"

“Right,” Stewart said slowly, running a hand through his short black hair. “Well, whatever we plan, I have to be able to do it in a lion suit. So this is what I think: when Saul attacks, I’ll roll out of the ring and hide. Then Saul, you can go to town on Trucker.”

“That’s good,” MacGyver said. “You’re a heel, right?”

“Of course,” Stewart replied. His eyes narrowed.

MacGyver shrugged nonchalantly. “Just checking. So when you roll out, you can wait for Saul to get Trucker on the ground. Then just before he goes for a pin, you can hit him with a sneak attack.”

“Maybe you could use the kendo stick beneath the ring without the ref seeing,” Saul suggested.

“That’d get you some real heat, and it’d be something that doesn’t happen every time.”

Trucker shook his head adamantly before any of the others could reply. “No way. The last time Stewart used a kendo stick, he got somebody hurt. I’m not going in the ring with him like that until he proves he knows what he’s doing.”

“No way!” Stewart snapped. “I didn’t do anything wrong! Besides, I’m the heel! I’m the one who calls the match. It’s my decision!”

Trucker shook his head again. “It’s MacGyver’s decision. He’s the producer, and he reports straight to the boss. What he says goes.”

MacGyver quietly blew a puff of air through his mouth as he scanned each man’s face. Saul was completely unfazed, but Trucker was looking to him for a real decision. Stewart, on the other hand... Stewart concerned MacGyver. Not only had he been showing aggression, but he had also been acting nervous the entire time Mac had been there. He was certain that the wrestler had something to hide, and he thought that maybe if he could push the guy just a little farther, he might be able to get Stewart to slip up. “Sorry,” Mac said finally. “I think using sticks in the ring is just too dangerous.”

Red-faced, Stewart slid out of the ring and shoved MacGyver as hard as he could. “You don’t know anything!”

“I think I do. I’m almost certain that you’re the one who helped two yakuza enforcers threaten Kiryu and Tanaka enough to make them fear for their lives.”

The truth was that MacGyver had been anything but certain, but the bluff worked.

The expression that crossed the wrestler’s face was enough to convince him, but then Stewart said, “You don’t know who you’re dealing with! And you can’t fight back.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Paul’s voice rang out from across the room. He stepped forward across the concrete and Stewart’s face contorted. “You know, it’s funny,” Paul continued. “I pegged MacGyver here for a mark the second I laid eyes on him, so I thought I’d come see how

planning the spot was going. But then, you know how these concrete hallways echo. I was standing in the Gorilla, man, and I heard every word you guys just said.” When he spoke, he edged in closer. “Is it true? What he said about you getting Kiryu and Tanaka to attack another wrestler. Did you do that?”

Stewart's face drained of color and his hands balled into fists. “No way. He's not even one of us! Why are you listening to him?”

“Because it adds up,” Paul said. “You were late yesterday, and so were those two Japanese guys. I had to get Antoine to cover for you in the lion suit. Where else would you have been? And it ain't exactly a secret that you need money.”

“We all need money! It doesn't mean anything.”

“Kiryu and Tanaka also told me that they only knew the third man was an American because of his voice. They couldn't see his face,” MacGyver added quietly. “That black hoodie that you're wearing would make it easy for you to cover your face enough to avoid being seen.”

Stewart slowly began to back away---but he collided with Trucker's chest. His lip curled and he stared daggers at MacGyver. “I've had just about enough of you!” He charged forward at MacGyver, ready to attack the troubleshooter.

Calmly, MacGyver sidestepped and punched the wrestler as hard as he could. The next instant, Trucker had grabbed the smaller man by the collar and MacGyver was shaking his hand.

Paul nodded at Trucker. “Lock him up in the broom closet until the boss gets back. Then he can decide what to do with him.” Then he looked at MacGyver and laughed. “So much for Mac the Mark! Where'd you learn to throw a stiff shot like that?”

MacGyver shrugged modestly. “I took up karate a while back, just as a hobby. But I guess I'm still a mark.”

Paul laughed again. “Definitely. I'm sure you can't even speak a lick of carny.”

MacGyver grinned. “Yizou'd be sizurprized.”

Kobayashi froze in the middle of the hallway, just across from Riku Minamoto's hospital room. So far, he didn't see any bodyguards, and he didn't expect Riku to have any---they'd attract too much attention to a yakuza leader outside his territory. But the wrestler began to move cautiously, just to be sure.

“Wow, you must've been training really hard lately. You can run almost as fast as Mac,” Jack sneezed behind him.

“Shhh,” Kobayashi whispered.

“Is someone there?” a voice sounded from inside the hospital room. A faint voice, quiet but still strong, and ragged due to years of chain-smoking.

Kobayashi took a deep breath and pushed himself to stand tall. “Don’t follow me, Jack-san,” he whispered. “Riku doesn’t need to see your face.”

Then he stepped, slowly and displaying more confidence than he felt, into the room. Like a shadow, Jack crept in behind him.

The gang leader was lying feebly in the bed, but alert, despite sunken eyes and skin yellowing with jaundice. He was connected to IVs and medical monitors, yet he still exuded an air of authority and danger. His eyes hardened with recognition. “Ah. The *uragirimono*, daring to show his face before his leader. Shameful.”

“I’m not a traitor,” Kobayashi said stiffly. “But I’m also not a yakuza.”

Riku chuckled breathlessly. “Then what are you, with all those tattoos?”

“I’m not your property,” Kobayashi said defiantly. “I’m my own man. I’ve come to make you a deal.”

Riku laughed again, coughing slightly. “A deal? And what could you possibly offer me?”

Kobayashi leaned forward and reached out, tapping the plastic IV bag that was hooked to the *kumicho*’s arm. “Your life for mine.”

“That’s just saline. Removing it won’t kill me. You’ll have to do better, *uragirimono*.”

Kobayashi smiled tightly. “I have proof that you bribed the hospital with funding in order to get yourself moved to the top of the transplant list.”

“You have no proof of anything!”

“Are you sure?” Kobayashi challenged. “I also have proof of your dealings back home in Japan---and witnesses! What do you think the American authorities will do if they find out? Your visa will be revoked---and you won’t get your liver.”

Riku stared at Kobayashi, visibly enraged. “You’re lying. You have no proof.”

Kobayashi slowly crossed the room and slowly picked up the telephone in the corner. “So I can call the police now, then? You’re an innocent man, and I have no proof, right? So it’s okay for them to come?”

Jack watched Kobayashi begin to dial with a poker face on the outside and a stifled grin on the inside---and the hidden grin grew wider as Riku let out a hiss under his breath.

"I accept," the yakuza leader growled, muscles tensing beneath his traditional tattoos. "Your life for my liver. If you keep quiet, I'll let you go."

Kobayashi nodded, satisfied, and hung up the hospital telephone.

"But," Riku added sinisterly, "if you speak a word about me ever again, you will suddenly decide to commit a very messy suicide. I swear it."

"Deal." Kobayashi walked out the door and Jack scrambled to follow.

"This is great!" Jack said. "I can't wait to tell Mac all about it! Hey, do you think he managed to track down the American guy helping them?"

"Definitely," Kobayashi said with a grin. "Thank you for helping me, Jack-san. I'm free, and I wouldn't be without you."

"Anytime, me boyo, anytime."

"So just like that, he gave up?" MacGyver asked Jack as they walked out of the police station---again.

"Sure did, Mac! I guess he really wanted that new liver."

"I don't know," MacGyver said doubtfully. "I know these gang types, and they don't usually give up easily. Something tells me we haven't seen the last of Mr. Riku yet."

"What about *giri*?"

"What?"

"You know! Getting something for nothing---I mean, nothing for---no, it was something for--- Ah, never mind."

MacGyver laughed. "Don't get too complicated on me now, Jack. I only just learned the difference between a work and a shoot."

"Everything's a work, Mac. So, how'd you manage to figure out that Stewart was the yakuza guy?"

MacGyver grinned. "You want the real answer, or kayfabe?"

Jack sniffed and adjusted his cap. "Very funny, Mac. Well, either way, I'm glad you caught him. I can't believe he turned in those two other yakuza guys to get a lighter sentence. So much for gang loyalty."

MacGyver shrugged. "All I know is that I thought the folks back at Phoenix were doing the hard work while I ran out with you for a break, but now I'm starting to think that maybe professional wrestling is much more complicated than I thought."

"Sure it is. What's Phoenix working on this time?"

Mac ran a hand through his hair. "Still trying to figure out who's funding this Atlas thing. And basically, it's a lot of work with nothing to show for it so far."

"Sorry to hear that, amigo. But for what it's worth, the next time you need a break, I hear that Mac the Mark is pretty respected backstage," Jack said with a wink.

MacGyver shook his head. "No, thanks. I think my producing days are over. And Jack?"

"Yeah, amigo?"

"Never, ever play another game of poker!"