

Shadowside

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

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

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

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

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

This time, MacGyver wasn't sure there was. He stood in silence.

“Mac...I don't like it when you get like this...” Pete reached out, feeling for MacGyver's arm, and when he touched warm clammy flesh he paused. “So what the heck just happened?”

MacGyver broke, every last detail of his encounter with Mariotte spilled out like water from a fountain, and when he was done he simply sagged down onto a chair next to his friend, feeling empty and so very alone, even though he was surrounded by people.

Pete took a moment to let it all sink in, or maybe he was just speechless too. Eventually, he swallowed hard and his hand fell away from Mac's arm like he too felt defeat before the game had even started. “MacGyver I...”

“Don't know what to say?” Mac finished for him. “Then maybe I should say it for you. Maybe I should run from here, grab a taxi and find Sam...”

“But you can't leave those men up there to die, either can you?” Pete sucked down air. “I've know you too long for you to just run from this, even for Sam.”

MacGyver bit his lip. Pete was right. Heck, Pete was always right.

“And besides,” Pete continued. “There's no way you could get to Alameda in time anyway. Even if I sanctioned the use of the Phoenix Learjet, its cruise speed is 500mph, and Alameda is almost two thousand miles away. What could you possibly do in an hour?”

Mac nodded. The jet could push Mach 0.8, but given the time it would take to file a flight plan, actually get to the jet, land the other end, well, the math did all the talking. “I get it,” he admitted. “Zito has given me an almost impossible task, but you know he expects me to pull it off somehow, right?”

“Right,” Pete agreed almost too soberly.

MacGyver took a moment. He was panicking purely because Sam was involved. Would this happen in any other scenario?

Dang right it wouldn't bucko...

He sat up straight, sudden determination pushing him back into the game. Whatever he could do to help the shuttle would have to ultimately be long distance, and it was the same with Zito. Somehow, he had to release the doctor without physically being there.

So which first?

Mac realized his heart didn't like the answer his head was giving. He was here in Houston, and despite his mind being on Sam it made sense to try and help the shuttle first – besides, he had an idea that might work about the thrusters, but no idea for Zito – yet.

“I think I can save the shuttle,” MacGyver eventually offered sounding more confident than he felt. “If they'll let me try?”

Pete slapped him on the back, perhaps a little too heartily, and Mac coughed. Thornton ignored it. “Well alright! I better go tell Newman you want to try something. I expect he'll argue again...”

The Flight Director seemed to sense he was being talked about, and chose the moment to approach them with Bennett in tow like a pilot fish to a shark. Overhearing his name mentioned, Newman scowled. “Argue about *what?*”

“MacGyver has an idea how to save the shuttle.”

Newman's nose twitched in agitation. “Maybe I need to keep repeating myself, but your help is the kind we can do without!”

“Sir, we're out of options,” Bennett dared to interrupt, but his voice quivered in trepidation. “I'd like to hear what they have to say.”

Pete waved a hand. “Why you guys talk, I'm going to pull Seeley Atkins from the Phoenix jet at the airport over to here, he may be of some help.” Without asking for assistance, he stood up and made his way to a nearby desk.

Mac watched him go, amazed at how he navigated blind and then turned back to Newman and Bennett. It was time to make some magic happen. “We can't replace the boards, right? But what if the astronauts could repair them?”

Newman bristled, seemingly un-amused, and he moved to turn away. Bennett stopped him. “How?” The engineer asked, his face as determined as MacGyver's.

Mac pulled out a diagram of the thruster control board he'd been using earlier and began pointing at the faulty components. "Okay, so RL3 is a relay, D3 and D5 are diodes, and IC2 is an integrated circuit. Over here, you've got a resistor wire, and all these are suspect. Can your people check to see if the same components are used on any other boards on the shuttle, preferably ones not used for re-entry?"

Bennett's eyes flashed with apparent excitement. "I see where you're going! Remove the bad components and replace with the same from other boards that were made by different manufacturers!"

Newman apparently wasn't so optimistic. "That's if those components are on any other boards, *and if* the guys up on the shuttle can do the job."

Mac raised a brow. He was a have a go kind of person, and he was sure given the situation the astronauts would be too. "Why don't you ask them?" He suggested as Bennett scurried off to check shuttle schematics for the required parts.

Newman paused, and for a moment MacGyver thought he was going to argue or give some sarcastic retort. The man was still annoyed at Phoenix's failings, but could he let that go to save lives?

Newman took down a long, apparently calming breath and picked up a headset. After a brief explanation, Steve Lockridge, the shuttle's co-pilot appeared on a huge screen that everyone was now glued to.

The Texan waved playfully, even though the situation was dire. He was a man Mac could work with.

"None of us up here have any soldering skills whatsoever," Lockridge offered the room. "But I'm dang sure up for giving this thing a try if you guys are?"

Mac nodded. After all, the planet would never have evolved if man hadn't tried things and experimented. He picked up a headset of his own without waiting for Newman's permission. "Okay, Steve, name's MacGyver, and I'll be talking you through the repair. Do you have anything we can work with up there?"

Lockridge's head bobbed, he vanished from the viewer and then returned with a slightly worse for wear soldering iron, which he let playfully float around him in the zero gravity. "We just picked this puppy up from the Russian space station in a batch of kit to come earth side. Thing is, don't I need to take stuff off as well as solder on? How do I do that – there's no de-soldering tool in this whole shebang?"

Mac adjusted his headset, concentrating as he worked everything out in his head before replying. "It's nice and easy, I can talk through it blindfold," he reassured.

Bennett bobbed up beside him, breaking the conversation. He was breathless, and very excited. "When can do it! The same components are on six other boards, and none of them supplied by Aurix, or needed for re-entry!" He shoved several printouts under Mac's nose, then sobered a little. "Well...everything except the resistor wire...it's a little pigtail that..."

MacGyver stopped him explaining. "I know what it is, and we can improvise," he assured.

Bennett blinked, seemed to readjust his thoughts and then addressed Lockridge without asking exactly what "improvise" meant. "Okay, let's get these boards out. First you'll need to remove the cargo bay arm control access panel and remove the second board to your left by pulling sharply backwards to unplug both connectors..."

It took Lockridge and the rest of the crew a further seventeen minutes to remove all the boards without damaging them. Seventeen long minutes in which all Mac could think about was Sam. He took a foam cup of coffee from a N.A.S.A. employee and drank heavily, even though he normally hated the stuff. Maybe the caffeine would keep him awake and alert the next few agonizing hours.

"Mr. MacGyver?" It was Bennett. "You're turn to take the reins." The engineer's expression said he didn't envy Mac one bit.

Mac nodded and faced the screen again, wiping a hand through his hair. It was wet with perspiration, even though the air conditioning was blasting out over their heads. "Right, you have the iron and some solder braid?"

Lockridge waved a small blue spool of something at the N.A.S.A. crowd with a cheeky grin. How he held his cool was anyone's guess. "If this is the stuff, then yep, I'm ready to roll!"

"Okay, first we need to remove the good parts. We'll start with RL3. It's at the top left hand corner of the board, a small black relay..." Lockridge took a second, then nodded he'd found it. "Turn the board over, and place the braid over the first leg of the relay, then apply the iron over the braid until the solder melts. You'll see the solder seeping into the braid quite quickly. Once it's absorbed it all, move onto the next leg until all the solder is removed."

Lockridge silently tried out the procedure, his brows furrowing as he tried to hold his hand steady. Eventually, he grinned as the relay was released from the board and began to float up in front of his face, little globules of dried solder following in its wake. "Easy as taking candy from a baby!" He smiled, and then quickly bobbed his head back down, working on the other components in the same way.

Next to Lockridge, Ames, the shuttle commander was quietly collecting all the parts as they floated up from the work station. An hour passed before the pilot and his superior had finished the task. By this time, Lockridge's jovial façade was waning, and his head was almost covered with as much sweat as MacGyver's.

Lockridge wiped a hand across his forehead and he let out a long puff of air. "That was interesting..."

MacGyver paused a moment. Taking parts from boards they didn't need was one thing, but if they damaged the thruster PCB's, well, there was no repairing them. "Can you hold up the board you've just been working on and let me see it?"

Lockridge's brow furrowed, as if he couldn't see the point, but he held up the PCB anyway. Mac squinted at the green rectangular shape on the screen, trying to make out the tiny areas where the astronaut had removed components. He let out a small puff of exasperated air at what he saw.

Lockridge had removed the components, but in some places, at the expense of "lifting the land" where it had been seated. If that happened on the thruster PCB's, there was no going back, and no "MacGyvering" them to work.

"You've done a good job," Mac began, "but you have to do better on the thruster boards. See the tiny tinned area where each part is soldered on? That's called a land, and if you hold the iron on it too long, it gets hot and parts company with the board, and that's pretty much game over..."

Lockridge took a look at his handiwork and swallowed hard – any joviality was now gone. One slip up now, and his life, and everyone else's on the shuttle was over. Considering the stakes, he took it pretty well. "Guess I better not strike out on this one, huh, or Commander Ames will be taking more than my wings..." The pilot settled back down, and once again began removing parts, this time much more slowly.

Everyone around MacGyver became suddenly silent. It was make or break time. Mac looked at the clock, more minutes passing agonizingly slowly – minutes he couldn't get back to save Sam. What had taken an hour to remove on the cargo bay boards, this time took an hour and a half. Lockridge needed to be faster putting the good parts back in, or it wasn't just going to be Sam that was in trouble.

The pilot mopped his brow every few seconds, his eyes becoming cloudy with his own perspiration, but his hands moved faster now they had purpose. He took just thirty minutes putting the relays, diodes and IC's into their new homes. Eventually, he stopped, whistled and held the boards up for MacGyver to check. "All done, except we need that dang resistor wire, and we don't have one..."

Mac examined the board closely. It was hard to tell for sure, but it looked like Lockridge had pulled it off. Now it was his turn to pull something out of the bag. "Okay, that looks pretty good," he praised. "Now you folks just need to help me out a little. We need to find something we can solder to replace the resistor wire, copper, brass, tin all solder easily, but we have to be careful it will take the load..."

Commander Ames and Bennett both looked horrified at the same time. Bennett spoke first. "And just how do we do that? Its impossible to test the load of a homemade resistor wire up there!"

Mac didn't pull any punches. "We guess. It's the only shot at this we've got. We need the wire or metal we find to be the same thickness, and we coil it exactly the same amount of times...and then we pray."

No one spoke. Everyone knew they were out of other options, but admitting it wasn't coming easy.

Lockridge broke the awkward moment. “You mean to tell me I burned my fingers for nothing?” He chuckled then moved back and grabbed something that appeared to have been stuck down near the shuttle controls. It was an ancient Hula doll. He shook it at the screen, its faded colors filling the room as it bounced around. “Me and Betty here we were sure hoping to be home for supper tonight...”

Bennett rolled his eyes and looked at Mac. “That’s his good luck charm. He’s taken it on every flight he’s made, both for the Airforce and N.A.S.A. although how he can joke with it at a time like...”

MacGyver cut the engineer off by addressing Lockridge. “Lockridge, what makes that little lady dance so well?”

The pilot quite discourteously pulled up the little doll’s skirt to show a homemade spring. “Granddaddy fixed her for me when I was just a kid, and she’s been dancing ever since!”

“And now she’s going to save your life,” Mac concluded. “That spring looks like an old piece of copper?”

Lockridge instantly seemed to see where the troubleshooter was going. “And it’s the right thickness...just needs cutting down a little!” He crudely pulled the Hula from her spring and grabbed something off camera. When he came back, he was cutting down the spring and trying to roll it over the nose of a pair of pliers to match the pigtail shape of the missing component.

While Ames held the board one last time, Lockridge soldered it in, his hands shaking violently. It looked messy, but it just might work.

Bennett wasted no time in taking back control. “Alright, let’s get those boards back where they belong!” he rubbed his hands together as the astronauts started to slide the PCB’s back home.

Ten seconds later, they hit another snag. This time it was Ames who addressed the screen. “My board won’t reconnect.” He spun it over in his hand, scrutinizing it. His sigh and expression said they had another issue before he even spoke. “One of the connector pins is damaged. It must have happened when we removed them. She won’t slot back in, it’s too bent.” Without asking for permission, he took up the pliers and tried to twist the pin back into shape. It protested at his rough handling by snapping clean off in the connector.

Silence once again returned to the room. Every step forward they made, they then took two back, and they were getting dangerously close to their deadline – and Sam’s.

MacGyver refused to let the tension get to him, if he allowed any more emotion in, then it would be the end for the shuttle and his son. “Give Lockridge the board back,” he said calmly over his mike. “Steve, I want you to de-solder the pins on the connector block just like you did the other components, and then I want you to gently knock the damaged pin out from behind with the end of the long-nosed pliers...”

Lockridge followed the instructions, and there was no joking, no speaking at all. When he'd finished, he looked up his eyes asking the question his mouth dare not. *What next?*

"Anyone got a safety pin or a paper clip?" Mac responded.

Ames appeared onscreen with a note board and pulled a clip from the bundle of paperwork on it. He looked somewhat guilty as he offered it to Lockridge. The pilot took the clip and just stared at it, mystified.

"You need to bend it out straight and then cut it down to the size of the other pins in the connector," Mac prompted.

"The solder won't stick to this, though?"

MacGyver stepped nearer the screen, as if it somehow made him closer to the astronauts, reassuring them as he talked them through. "You need to tin it first. Heat up some solder on the iron and run it along the pin you've made, then push it back home in the connector and solder it. It should hold."

Lockridge did as he was told, and when the board was complete, he pushed it home himself then closed the panel. He looked to Commander Ames, who nodded. It was time to do or die. "We're ready to get in position for re-entry," the pilot confirmed to mission control.

Newman, who had been watching and listening silently moved to take back control of the proceedings. He gave the thumbs up to the men around him before announcing, "Affirmative, you have a go for re-entry." He pulled away his headset mike, addressing the room instead of the shuttle. "We have just one hour left, let's make this work people!"

MacGyver watched as the room turned into a bristling mayhem similar to how it had been when the thrusters had failed. The engineers had purpose again, and they were making the most of it.

Someone stepped up beside him, and for a moment Mac expected it to be Mariotte back to gloat that there was no time for Sam. Instead of the megalomaniac, though, he was greeted by the stoic gaze of Seeley Atkins, Phoenix's second best man. At his side, Pete had also returned to the fray.

"Are they gonna make it?" Atkins asked in a low voice.

Pete answered without even being able to see what was happening on the screen. "You bet they are if Mac had anything to do with it."

MacGyver didn't reply, he watched as the men orbiting the earth slid into their positions on the flight deck and then requested what might be the last order of their lives.

"Ames to Houston, do we have a green light for burn?"

“Commander Ames, you have a go, good luck and Godspeed.”

Ames reached forwards and began pressing controls that lit up at his touch. There was a pause, and everyone held their breath. Nothing was happening. Had the P.A.S.S. system blown one last time?

MacGyver felt his heart rate go up a notch.

And then slowly and gently, the shuttle began to change trajectory as its elegant white airframe turned ready to push through the earth’s atmosphere. The room turned into one huge cheering crowd, but Mac couldn’t be happy, not yet. There was less than an hour now to save Sam, and two thousand miles between MacGyver and Zito.

Pete as always, sensed Mac’s fear and frustration as if he were his own son. “MacGyver, if there’s anything I can do..?”

“There’s nothing...” Mac shook his head.

Atkins turned to his two companions and raised a brow. “Nothing *legal*, perhaps.” He jerked a thumb to something unseen beyond the hallway behind them. “But I’ll bet you with N.A.S.A.s super computers we could “fake” Zito’s release into another state hospital.” He looked Mac straight in the eyes. “I’ve heard you’re pretty good at making stuff up as you go along?”

MacGyver didn’t normally condone doing anything that was illegal, and he knew Seeley was the same, but this was different, it was Sam, and, it wasn’t exactly going to hurt anyone. “We don’t have security clearance for the main frames, but I might be able to wing it,” he replied, already working a way around N.A.S.A.’s security in his head.

As it happened, there was no need. Newman had been listening in the background, perhaps with a softer heart than they gave him credit for. He stepped forwards between the group of men. “I could never sanction the use of government property for such a venture,” he began, “but you did just save the shuttle, so if you just happened into the mainframe room by mistake...” He handed over his swipe card to access the computers. “Just don’t take long, there are staff down there that might get a little suspicious.”

Mac took the card gratefully, and headed for the door. Pete’s voice stopped him.

“I can’t do anything official either, Mac, you know that, but you’re going to need someone to have Zito released to in Alameda, or we can’t pull this off. Let me make a call and see who we’ve got in the area I can trust?”

MacGyver ran a hand through his hair and nodded. Everything suddenly felt like they were wasting precious time, but this had to be done. Newman led Pete to the nearest phone and dialed for him. Two minutes later both were men were back.

“Nikki’s at the nearest regional office,” Pete didn’t look happy. “She’s the only one I trust to do this knowing its illegal, but I really don’t like leaving her alone to handle Zito. She’s about a half hour from the institute...”

Mac felt the same. Having his kid in danger was enough, without adding Nikki into the fray, but what choice did they have?

“Nikki can handle herself.” Seeley looked to Pete and then MacGyver as he spoke. Somehow his black suit, white shirt and tie all seemed out of place here, but that didn’t matter, he was one of the good guys. A little straight-laced and by the book at times, but he was Phoenix all the way. “Let me help too,” he offered. “I can bend rules sometimes too you know?”

“Are you any good with computers? We’re going to need to both work together to pull this off in time.” MacGyver held his breath as he waited for an answer.

Seeley grinned, which in itself was unusual. “Hey, in a former life I wasn’t just a fed and damn good field agent, I was on the tech team. Anything you can do, I can probably do better.”

MacGyver didn’t argue. He knew Atkins wasn’t boasting, he was stating a fact, and it was one Mac was grateful of. “Okay, let’s do this!”

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MacGyver slid the access card into the reader on the wall and held his breath. There was no reason to think it wouldn’t work, but he couldn’t help but hesitate. There was a pause, and the unit bleeped, the ominous red indicator light turning green after a second.

Seeley pushed in first, his right hand hovering over his jacket where MacGyver knew he wore a shoulder holster.

Inside, there was a pair of N.A.S.A. engineers working at a console – they looked up as Mac and Atkins entered, but didn’t speak. Mac nodded to them and smiled, hoping his calm attitude and manner convinced them he should be here. After a moment, the taller of the two nodded back and they both left.

“Do you think they suspected anything?” Seeley asked, fidgeting with his tie.

Mac shook his head in uncertainty. “I sure hope not.” He sat down at a console, the whirring and beeping of the mainframes around him soothing his tense nerves like birdsong on a summer evening. “I’ll work on a fake court order to move Zito,” he explained. “Can you deal with the paperwork transferring him to a hospital closer to California?”

Atkins bounced down into a red plastic seat across from Mac. “I’m on it,” he reassured. “I’ll have a hard copy sent to the Phoenix regional office for Nikki.” His

fingers tapped at the console keys faster than even MacGyver's, and occasionally his eyes left the screen to check on Mac.

Mac didn't look up. He was concentrating so hard his knuckles were white as sheets like he was gripping a steering wheel too hard. The keyboard groaned at the excess pressure he was exerting without even knowing it, and all the while his mind screamed one thing.

Sam...

Twenty minutes later, Seeley hit the enter key triumphantly and pushed his chair back from the desk just a touch. "I'm good to go," he grinned. "Guess I haven't lost my touch!"

MacGyver was about to say he'd finally finished too, but before he could open his mouth, the door burst open, bouncing into the wall behind so hard one of the hinges popped and it swung aimlessly.

Before it could settle, two armed security men stormed into the room, weapons drawn.

The lead guard's hand was shaking, like he'd never been put into an actual situation before, and it made Mac wonder what kind of people the space agency were hiring. It also made him wonder if the man was likely to fire his weapon without just cause.

Seeley, just don't provoke these guys, his mind yelled.

The shaking security man seemed to read Mac's mind and shifted his aim slightly onto Atkins, who was smiling just a little too warmly given their situation. "Nobody move, or I'll shoot..."

Seeley seemed to take that as an invitation and began to shift his weight in his chair...

Part Two

Slowly and deliberately, Atkins raised his hands up. "Hey guys, you're making a big mistake here." He narrowed his eyes suggestively. "We're here on official business. Hadn't you heard my friend here just saved the shuttle crew?"

The guards edgily glanced at one another. They'd obviously heard *something*.

"You wouldn't want to put a hole in a national hero now would you?" Seeley continued, raising a brow.

There was more hesitation from the security men – enough distraction, in fact for MacGyver to slide a ruler across the table and over the edge with one end, and under an empty mainframe spool the other. With a quick look over to Seeley, he slammed his hand down on the edge over the table, bouncing the spool up at the still shaking guard.

The man flinched as the spool clattered against his weapon, and he fell back slightly in surprise. Mac used the moment to jump from his seat and land a punch to the guard's jaw. The guard dropped back unconscious, and Mac winced at the sight, and at the skin it had taken from his knuckles once again.

The second security man whirled, trying to aim at MacGyver. As he instinctively moved his gaze from Atkins, it gave Seeley the opportunity to pounce. The ex-fed grabbed the guard around the neck, squeezing just enough for the man to fall lifelessly at the side of his companion.

Seeley let out a puff of air. "Jeez, I'm getting old and slow..." He grabbed a phone cable that was protruding from the end of his desk and tied up the man.

MacGyver took a full mainframe spool and did much the same with the guard he'd knocked out, wrapping the tape over and over to bind the man's hands behind his back.

"Oh boy...why am I sensing this part of the mission didn't go to plan?"

MacGyver and Seeley both looked up to see Pete standing in the doorway with his cane, one brow cocked at them as if they were naughty school kids. "Nikki's ready," he informed, moving sideways slightly so his two colleagues could exit the room and join him in the hallway.

"We got the job done," MacGyver sighed. "With just a little collateral damage."

"Nothing a few Tylenol won't fix, though, Mr. Thornton," Seeley assured, straightening his tie again.

Pete winced, but didn't ask what they'd just done as they headed for the exit.

"I'm worried Pete." MacGyver stopped moving and ran a hand across his mouth. "Nikki might be ready, but what happens once she's got Zito outside the institution gates?"

"Don't worry, Mac, I've told Nikki to ditch Zito once they're at a safe distance from the guards. She's been given a microdot-sized tracker to slip on him; we can follow that to find Sam."

Mac shook his head, the concern in his eyes flashing like lightning on a stormy night. "Zito isn't dumb enough to fall for that kinda plan, Pete. He'll know."

"What else can we do?" Seeley looked frustrated, and his hand kept wandering to the side of his jacket where he kept his weapon. Atkins wanted action, he wanted to be able to take charge of the situation rather than the bad guys – MacGyver knew just how he felt – minus the gun.

"Right now?" Pete queried. "You can both get yourselves on the Phoenix jet and get to Alameda! I told the pilot to go get lunch so you better get over there and "steal"

fast. Nikki should be waiting the other end by the time you arrive, complete with the tracking gear to get after Zito and his henchmen.”

Seeley looked to MacGyver. “Are we gonna argue who is gonna fly that puppy?”

MacGyver just managed a smile.

* * * *

Metropolitan Oakland International Airport 3hrs 20mins later...

MacGyver scrambled down the Learjet steps as soon as they hit the asphalt, with Seeley not far behind looking ever-so-slightly dishevelled. Their footsteps echoed ominously across the private bay as they raced across it to the exit area where Nikki would be waiting.

Except Nikki wasn't there.

The area was unusually quiet and MacGyver's stomach back-flipped when he realized a man dressed much like Seeley began beckoning them over. Atkins confirmed Mac's fears when he held a hand up to the unknown individual, suggesting he recognized him. If Nikki wasn't here, and someone Seeley knew was, that had to be bad.

“I'm Max Sterling from the Alameda office.” Max held out a hand, his face as dour as the Grim Reaper's. “I'm a friend of Mr. Thornton.” His expression said that meant he knew how to keep quiet.

Something had gone wrong, badly wrong. It had to have, didn't it?

MacGyver swallowed hard, but it was Seeley that spoke first. “Zito got Nikki, didn't he?”

Sterling took down a breath. “She never returned from the state hospital and the police just issued a release saying Zito has escaped. The only upside is, the tracking device is active.” He passed a small receiver box to MacGyver that beeped cheerily. “There's a car outside, a red Ford Crown Vic.” Max squeezed a set of keys into Mac's hand. “Go find Nikki and your kid.”

MacGyver nodded, but he felt like the wind had been knocked clean out of him. Sam being involved changed everything, and now Nikki too. Apart from Pete and Jack, they were pretty much all of his “family” and it was his responsibility to fix. He turned to Atkins. “You don't need to get involved in this any more. It might get messy and...”

“And you don't want another death on your conscience?” Seeley interrupted, putting a hand on his side as if he was suddenly annoyed. “Look, MacGyver, firstly I don't plan on dying any time soon, and second you don't get rid of me that easy. Over a year ago

I stood outside Sam's hospital room guarding him from Mariotte and his goons. As far as I'm concerned, nobody fired me, that's still my job."

Mac felt a relief inside he couldn't explain. The burden of what he was up against somehow seemed halved now that Seeley was helping because he wanted to, not because he'd been ordered to, and MacGyver realized he might have to some day add another name to that list of "family" he'd just been thinking about.

Seeley slapped him on the back, waking him from the sentimental and emotional haze he'd slipped into.

"C'mon, let's go get us a couple of madmen!" Atkins slid the car keys from Mac's loose grip and began jogging across the private terminal, his black jacket billowing in the breeze that seemed to have whipped up as they spoke.

MacGyver shook himself and followed.

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The tracking device burred in MacGyver's hand as Seeley avoided a pothole in the road, the Ford rocking and bucking as the highway turned into nothing more than a short dirt track.

"I don't like this," Atkins said quietly as they approached what looked like an abandoned motel. "It's perfect for an ambush..."

Mac shook his head. "Zito doesn't work that way. He'll want to play some kind of mind game before the kill. It's how he operates." The tracking device's beep turned into an incessant whine, signaling they had arrived, and yet somehow MacGyver already knew they weren't going to find Sam, Nikki, Zito, or Mariotte here. This was just the beginning.

He opened the car door tentatively and stepped out; Seeley did much the same, except he drew his gun lithely from its holster as he approached the rotting building.

Seeley took point, nodding to MacGyver to take the opposite side of the main door as they approached. The screen hung limp, its frame smashed and inner mesh holed.

"Whoa, I'm thinking Bates motel and then some," Seeley whispered, his trigger finger ticking as he licked his lips in anticipation.

Mac frowned. The gun was making him nervous, not the reference, but he did suddenly have images of a bloodied shower curtain in his mind, and it made him shiver.

Not wanting to see any blood for real, MacGyver took the initiative and moved first, kicking at the damaged screen until it fell away and they could enter through the already half-open door.

The door led to what would have been an office. A dusty counter still sat in the corner of the room, an ancient telephone waiting for a call that would never come. The pale blue paint was peeling from the walls as moss and slime took over.

Attached to the space behind the counter where the usual obligatory calendar hung, was a map – a *new* map, that contrasted starkly against the rest of the décor. The chart was of the whole of the U.S. and spanned half the wall – and there was writing on it in bold red marker.

*“A map to the sun or a map to your doom?
Figure it out, or Sam dies soon.
A piece here, a piece there, you’ll find him along the way.
A holy house in the desert, a storm on a hill, a token you’ll find when you get to
the mill.”*

MacGyver’s shoulders slumped. It was a very corny rhyme concocted as both a joke, and a riddle by Zito. And Zito was good at this kind of thing.

Seeley hovered around the room with his weapon, and when he was sure it was clear, holstered it and joined Mac, a scowl on his face as he read the riddle. “Just what is that supposed to mean?”

Mac tapped the map with his finger as his mind already began working. “It’s our job to find out,” he explained, biting his lip in concentration. “But it suggests there’s a time limit, or Sam dies...”

“You know, I hate to say it, but Zito and Mariotte will kill Sam anyway – if they haven’t already. And why no mention of Nikki?” Seeley’s tone was apologetic, but he didn’t pull any punches with the facts. It was his way.

“I don’t know,” MacGyver admitted, picking up an old pencil from the counter and twiddling it through his fingers as if it would speed up his thought process. “But it worries me...” *What if she’s already dead?* He shook himself. “First thing we need to do is look at the map. It’s a puzzle meant for us to solve. I’m guessing “a map to the sun” simply means Sam, and a map to your doom implies there’s a trap.”

Seeley leaned on the wall and put a hand to his side as he concentrated on the phrase, his brow creased in thought. “You know this is Zito laughing at us because trap or not, he knows we’re going to have to follow his game? And I really don’t like the “piece here, a piece there” part. I don’t have to tell you what that implies?”

MacGyver winced. “No, you don’t,” he said softly. “So we need to stop that happening.” He stared at the end of the riddle until the words began to blur before his eyes and jumble in his brain.

*“A holy house in the desert, a storm on a hill, a token you’ll find when you get to
the mill.”*

Eventually, he ran a hand through the front of his hair and whirled around away from the map to clear his head. “So what place on the map has a holy house in the desert, a mill, and is stormy? It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack!”

“We can’t win this war...” Atkins pinched the bridge of his nose, and then whirled abruptly, slamming his fist into the decaying wall so hard it bloodied the knuckles of his right hand. The move surprised MacGyver. Until now, Seeley had always come across as the perfect, emotionless fed you saw in movies. But apparently, he had another side. He was about to comment, when the desk phone began to ring.

The motel hadn’t been used in decades, yet it had a working telephone? There could be only one answer, and Mac didn’t like it. He snatched up the receiver anyway, and before he had chance to speak, Zito’s smooth, serpentine tones filled the crackling line.

“Why MacGyver, so good to be working with you again...” Zito was his usual sardonic, malevolent self.

MacGyver tried to be calm, emotion now was a show of weakness, and yet he still couldn’t help the crack in his voice as he spoke. “I didn’t think “good” was a word in your vocabulary?”

Zito chuckled. “Why MacGyver, was that a hint of fear in your voice? Tut tut, you should never let emotion cloud your judgement. That was always Kate’s weakness...”

“Let me speak to Sam, or there won’t be any mind games.” Mac’s hand shook as he held the phone, and he was glad his adversary couldn’t see his trembling limb. *You hope he can’t see. This is Zito, he could be anywhere...*

“I’d love to oblige,” Zito oozed fake charm. “But I really haven’t had the pleasure of meeting your dear boy – yet. But don’t worry, MacGyver, Sam will get his just dessert, or should that be, desert?” Quiet laughter filled the line, just before it went dead.

MacGyver let the receiver fall back in the cradle and was silent.

“It was Zito, huh?” Seeley probed. “What’d he say?”

Mac snapped from his deep thought. “He said Sam will get his just dessert, or should that be desert, then hung up. It’s a word game – part of the puzzle we have to solve.”

“Dessert, desert? How the heck can that help us?” Atkins wasn’t impressed.

MacGyver ignored him and moved back to the map. “We have to be looking for a desert, it’s played a part in the riddle more than once now. There are so many, though, how do we find the right one?”

It was Atkins time for quiet contemplation, his eyes narrowed as he obviously wracked his brains for answers. “You know, I vacationed in Arizona a couple of years back, took my kid to Cathedral Rock, could the “holy house” part be that simple?”

MacGyver's dark expression brightened just a touch. "Isn't Thunder Mountain in that area too?"

Seeley nodded. "Yeah, but that's got nothing to do with..." And then the penny appeared to drop. "Wait, I get it! Storm on a hill equals Thunder Mountain! We've cracked it."

Mac's right forefinger traced across the map and then paused. "They're both in the Sedona area, but I don't recall, or see any kind of monument, attraction, or place with the word "mill," and that's got to be part of the equation or Zito wouldn't have used it in the riddle." He took out the two pins holding the map to the wall and rolled it up. "There's a phone in the car, let's go call Pete."

* * * *

The Ford was still sitting innocently waiting for them in the abandoned motel lot. Balls of tumbleweed danced around it playfully in the breeze, and the sky grew dark with raven black clouds that signaled a storm. Even the weather was against them.

MacGyver ignored it and climbed into the Crown Victoria, grabbing the car phone from the center console. It was a Phoenix vehicle, and had a direct line to the central office. He quickly asked to be patched through to Thornton, who was still in Houston at mission control.

"Pete, can you get one of those N.A.S.A. guys to look something up for me?" The line was buzzing and crackling, but Mac hoped it wouldn't die. "I need you to do a cross reference of the words Sedona and mill. Zito left us a riddle and I don't like the implications for Sam if we don't solve it."

"Okay, give me two seconds..." Pete's voice sounded distant, but then it was. He returned after just five minutes. "We've got nothing, Mac."

MacGyver wasn't giving in, although he gripped the phone that bit tighter as he spoke. "Can you get them to widen the parameters they're using?"

More silence, until Thornton returned a second time. "I think we've got something," he said triumphantly. "There's a seedy motel off the I-40 called The Mill House on the way into Sedona. Does that sound what you're after?"

Mac's face lit up, even though Pete couldn't see it. "It sure does," he confirmed and then added. "I'll be in touch," as he put down phone.

"Tell me you got it?" Seeley raised a brow.

"We got it." Mac nodded as he climbed into the Ford. "We need to get back to the airport and fast."

* * * *

The Mill House Motel
Off the I-40
Two Hours Later...

Sedona Airport was small, in fact, it only had one runway, but even so it had gotten Mac and Seeley to their target faster than any car could. With the help of a hire vehicle, they'd made good time to the motel.

The entrance lobby was tiny, and a scrawny looking man smoking a cigarette sat behind a table watching daytime TV. He looked up as they entered, scratching at one arm like he had fleas. The vest he wore was stained, like he hadn't changed in a few days, and would have looked good on John McClane.

MacGyver ignored the manager's attire and pulled out two photos – one of Mariotte, and one of Zito. He sat them down on the desk, along with twenty bucks. "Excuse me, have you seen either of these guys recently?"

The manager flicked ash onto the floor, scrunched up his nose, and then viewed the pictures. "Nope, nobody like that's been around." He belched noisily. "Your name wouldn't be Angus though?"

Mac's eyes widened in surprise and slight annoyance. "Why do you ask?"

"Cause some short dude with long hair came in and paid me two hundred bucks for a room. He told me what you looked like, said I should give you the keys when you arrived." The manager tossed a grimy key across the table and turned back to his TV, apparently finished with the conversation.

Seeley reached over and took the key before MacGyver could touch it. He smiled wanly. "I think I should go in first on this one..."

Mac knew it was an attempt to shield him from whatever horrors the room was hiding, but it didn't change a thing. He wanted to be first inside, first to see if there was anything of Sam in there.

Seeley didn't wait for a complaint and jogged from the office, his free hand reaching and extracting his weapon.

The room was just three doors down from reception.

Mac looked through the window. It appeared to be empty, apart from a small box on the bedside table. He nodded to Seeley, who didn't bother using the key. Turning it in the lock meant making a noise and for-warning any possible enemy. Instead, the ex-fed launched at the door with his perfectly polished right shoe.

The door yelped in wooden agony as it was torn from the top hinge and burst inwards. Seeley followed behind it, scanning the room back and forth with his automatic. He moved to the bathroom, but that too was empty.

MacGyver moved straight to the box. It was beckoning him like it belonged to Pandora. Next to it was another handwritten note.

Mac wanted to check for explosives, every sinew in his body screamed that this could be a bomb, or a trap of some variety. And yet, concern for Sam outweighed any concern he had for himself.

Mac tore at the box lid, hearing Zito's riddle over and over in his mind about finding Sam piece by piece.

He stopped dead as the cardboard flaps moved out of the way to reveal what was within.

A raggedly cut human finger sat innocently on a small scrap of cloth that was soaked through with blood.

Part Three

MacGyver stepped back, almost dropping the box on the floor as his emotions took control. He was distraught and angry at the same time.

Seeley put a calming hand on Mac's forearm. "Hey," he soothed. "We have no way of knowing for sure if that's Sam's finger. It's just a bloodied mess, it could be anyone's. We need to just stay focused, and carry on playing the game, okay?"

Mac took a deep breath. Normally emotions wouldn't cloud his judgement, but this wasn't just any assignment, it was a psychological war between long-time enemies – and Zito and Mariotte were winning. "Okay," he reluctantly agreed, then scooped up the new note to read.

*"Butch and Sundance,
Holmes and Moriarty,
Seeley and Angus,
Do come join the party!
It's not Sante Fe,
But do come and play...
A finger I've taken,
Maybe a hand today?"*

MacGyver turned white, how much pain and suffering could Sam take? Was he even still alive? His hand shook, and Seeley gently took the handwritten paper from it and read it for himself.

"C'mon, we're not giving in," Atkins pushed. "Pull out the map. The first puzzle was a destination, and this obviously is too. Think, Mac. Concentrate!"

"Well, the motel is our point of reference, but do we look north or south? "It's not Sante Fe." Could that mean the opposite of New Mexico, or maybe it is in New

Mexico, just not Sante Fe?" Mac rubbed at his eyes, he was getting tired, and he couldn't allow that to happen.

"The opposite would be back where we've been, California," Seeley noted, running a finger away from their location on the map.

MacGyver didn't like it, there were too many possibilities again, and yet somewhere there must be a clue. "I'll look for anything relevant to Holmes, Moriarty, Butch, or Sundance. You check New Mexico for the same," he suggested.

Seeley nodded, his eyes already scanning locations like he had been programmed to do it blindfold. After just a few moments, he looked up. "There's a place called Moriarty here," he tapped his finger. "It's just off the I-40 again. That could be significant? A pattern maybe?"

"That means Butch and Sundance must be what we need to find there!" Mac screwed the map back up into his pocket. "You drive, I'll get back on the phone and see if Pete can do another search."

Seeley nodded and then jogged back out of the motel and back to the car. Atkins slid behind the wheel and spun it around with just the palm of his hand as MacGyver began dialing Phoenix again. The sedan kicked a small zephyr as it sped towards the exit sign, but somehow the way out had been blocked by a fallen tree. It looked recently cut.

Mac frowned and paused what he was doing as Atkins began to reverse up. Something was wrong...

Before he could tell Seeley to hit the brakes, the rear end of the car suddenly dropped and they were almost jarred from their seats with the jolting motion. Seeley was still composing himself as MacGyver jumped from his seat, half expecting an explosion, but there was nothing. He sucked down a breath as Atkins joined him, once again straightening his tie.

"Jeez, your friend Zito likes to play dirty huh?"

"Just a little." Mac kneeled to take a look what had happened. A deep groove had been dug into the sandy ground of the lot, and then covered over. It wasn't all that deep – it hadn't meant to hurt them, simply slow down and annoy. "This is Zito's way of showing even here he was in control, he holds all the cards."

"We're not gonna push this baby free," Atkins observed. "I guess I better call a tow truck, and that's gonna cost valuable time." He slammed a hand into the car's roof in frustration, and then flexed his fingers when he realized it hurt.

MacGyver couldn't help a small smile as it reminded him of his own terrible punching technique. Then he sobered a little. "We can't wait," he insisted, and then turned to search among the tumbleweed like he was looking for gold.

The place was a mess, with scrap iron, rotting car carcasses, old wood, spent cigarette packets, and lots of used gum embedded in the ground.

Mac looked back at the motel, maybe that would be more fruitful? He quickly jogged back inside. Finally, he spotted a fire hose and began to unwind it.

“Exactly what are you going to do with that?” Seeley asked with a frown. “I mean, if we had another car to attach it to then yeah, maybe we could pull ourselves out, but then if we had another car, we wouldn’t need to!” He watched as Mac carried on anyway. “You do know we can’t tug the car free with brute force with that thing, right? So c’mon, put me out my misery, what the heck are you doing? I’ve heard you do stuff like this over and over but...”

Mac enjoyed the moment. It was good to see Seeley forced into lateral thinking. Without answering, he unwound the flat hose and dragged it to their car. Luckily, their ride was front wheel drive, and that small fact was about to save their bacon.

He popped off the hub cap and began to thread the hose through a slat in the steel wheel, and then tied it off. Taking some of the slack hose, he then wrapped it around as much of the tire as possible. Satisfied one end was secure, he took the other and fastened it to the nearest tree that he assumed would take the force of what he was about to do.

“Okay, run the motor.” MacGyver pointed to the open driver’s door, and Atkins climbed in and turned the ignition. Once it fired up, he gunned the gas, making the front wheels spin. As the wheels turned, the hose went with them winding around the tire until it turned into a makeshift winch.

As the hose continued to gather around the wheel, the car was pulled forwards and free, using its own momentum.

With a grunt, the sedan lurched out of the rut and Seeley quickly hit the brakes. MacGyver nodded to him, and then pulled out his penknife, cutting the now unwanted hose from the tire. It wasn’t the easiest thing to cut through, but his blade was sharp and true.

Eventually, MacGyver slid into the car slightly breathless with the effort. *Dang, I’m getting old – no, just tired*, he chided himself.

While Mac once again began to dial Phoenix, Atkins guided the car out of the lot, using the entrance rather than exit this time. They were just a few miles down the road when Pete came back to them with more answers.

“Mac, the only reference we can come up with here to Butch and Sundance that include Moriarty is Sundance Aviation! It’s a flying club for gliders. Could that be it?” Pete’s voice sounded almost as tired as Mac felt.

“It has to be!” Mac answered hopefully.

“It’s at the Moriarty Municipal Airport,” Pete continued, “According to our information the place is small, but the runway should take the Phoenix jet!”

MacGyver looked to Seeley. “I guess we’re about to take yet another flight...”

Atkins nodded. “Yeah, and this time I’m taking the helm.” He grinned cheekily, and Mac had to wonder if the ex-fed wasn’t making an attempt to lighten his spirits just a touch. “Your landings suck...” He winked and then hit the gas just that little bit harder back to the Learjet.

* * * *

Sundance Aviation Office
Moriarty Municipal Airport
New Mexico

The airport was much smaller than what Mac expected – Pete had warned him it wasn’t exactly LAX, but it was so quiet it was almost dead. He shuddered at his own choice of words and decided maybe rural was a better description.

The Sundance office was on the edge of the strip, and even as they approached MacGyver could see it looked empty. He sighed and took a moment to shake himself. He was tired, and from Atkins constant rubbing of his eyes, he was too. They’d been going for hours now, and neither of them was superhuman – but then, that was what Zito was probably hoping for. A tired man made mistakes.

Seeley reached for his weapon as they got closer to the front shutter door, but Mac waved him off. There was probably no need for firearms if this was like the last couple of leads.

The door creaked ominously as Mac pulled it back and they entered. He told himself it just wanted a little oil, but the sound still grated on his jangling nerves.

The room was tiny, and as he’d expected, very empty. There was a counter with flying club leaflets, and a bell. Mac rang it and looked around while they waited. There were photos of gliders on the walls, and several certificates for safety and training.

Seeley went for his tie again, this time to loosen it, instead of straighten. “Is it me, or is it kinda hot in here?”

MacGyver’s gaze wandered to the air conditioning vents and he moved to hold a hand over the nearest. It wasn’t blowing at all – either it was broken, or it had been purposefully switched off.

“Mac, I think you’re going to want to see this...” Seeley had moved behind the counter and was staring at something with distaste.

MacGyver wasn't sure he wanted to see it at all, but he moved around to join Atkins anyway. Under the lip of the desk there was yet another box and accompanying note. Mac reached out to open it, his face turning white and his right hand shaking. *Sam...*

Seeley reached out, gently pushing MacGyver's hand away. "Let me do this? I got a kid too you know? I get it." He picked up the box and slowly opened it. It was obvious he tried, and failed not shrink back from what he saw.

Inside the box was a roughly severed human hand – apparently the same one the finger had come from. Bone and sinew had been torn like it had been hacked off cruelly without thought, and Mac had to close his eyes to push away mental images he wished his mind hadn't conjured. He felt sick, but tried to console himself that a hand was just that, a person could live without one. Sam might still be alive.

Seeley picked up the note and read its contents out.

*John Wayne went there,
Maybe Sam will too?
Menagerie or zōion,
The name's up to you..."*

Seeley pulled a face, "What the hell is a zōion?" He turned the note sideways, then upside down to see if the word made any more sense to him. It didn't.

"I've heard it before somewhere..." MacGyver closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, letting the calming breath open his mind. "I think I heard Professor Atticus use it at some point..." He chewed his bottom lip for a second before the eureka moment. "I've got it! Zōion is the Greek for animal, and it's the origin of the word zoo! That coincides with the word menagerie, so we're looking for a zoo somewhere!"

"Whoa." Seeley cringed, "That was some mouthful of fact you got there." He smiled just a little before growing serious again. "Maybe I can help, actually. I'm a bit of a John Wayne fan, and there are a few of his movies that might fit our puzzle too. Especially the New Mexico location. *Sante Fe Stampede, Rio Grande, Rio Bravo...*"

MacGyver held up a hand to stop Atkins babbling any further about his favorite hero. "Wait! There's a Rio Grande Zoo! I've worked with them on saving some rare species through Phoenix."

"Would Zito know that?" Seeley pondered.

Mac nodded. "Yeah, this is Zito, he's a cut above your average bad guy, remember? He's Hannibal Lecter without the craving for flesh..."

Atkins cringed again. "You could have fooled me. He sure likes body parts, even if he doesn't eat them." He stopped talking when MacGyver winced at the reference.

"The zoo is about half an hour away in Albuquerque, ya think this could be the end of the trail?" Mac was vocalizing the scenario he was hoping for, but his expression suggested he had doubts.

“Let’s go find out.” Seeley moved to the door and looked surprised to find it closed. He reached out and turned the handle, but it wouldn’t budge. He tried again, but still it resisted.

“Someone locked it while we were chatting,” Mac mused.

“You’re politely saying we got sloppy, right?” Seeley ran a hand through his hair Mac style.

“We got sloppy,” Mac agreed, “but that’s not really our biggest problem…” He pointed to the aircon vents that had been still and silent before. Something was seeping through them with just the tiniest tinge of red to it.

Seeley followed MacGyver’s gaze and his eyes widened just a touch. “Gas! No wonder it wasn’t working before.” He pulled a perfectly folded white handkerchief from his pocket and placed it over his nose, but it was a futile action.

The noxious vapor was filling the room at an alarming rate. It oozed through the metal grating of the vent and seemed to consume office space until there was nowhere to hide.

There was no smell, just the ominous color invading the air with a slightly sweet taste.

MacGyver and Seeley scrambled to the floor coughing, but the gas followed them within minutes.

“I guess it’s too late to change my mind about tagging along and helping?” Seeley’s eyes watered as he spoke and each breath came out a gasp.

“Maybe you could go wait in the car?” MacGyver got out the last quip before both men fell unconscious, their minds drifting to off into a bleak darkness that was all consuming.

* * * *

The world refocused into a blurred, shiny glass dome that reminded MacGyver of a scene from a Sci Fi movie – something about growing plants in outer space? He shook himself and realized that the dome was, in fact, the cockpit of a glider. He looked around, noting it was the twin seat trainer variety.

A groan from the back confirmed Seeley was in the rear seat.

MacGyver ignored his companion’s protests and took stock of the situation. His hands were handcuffed in front of him, and there was a note stuck to the clocks written in the same pen as the notes with the boxes.

“Time to Fly!”

Was it Zito’s or Mariotte’s sick little joke?

“MacGyver? You awake up there?” Atkins still sounded groggy, but there was an urgency in his voice that said he already understood this was a far more dangerous situation than it looked on the surface.

“I’m awake,” Mac responded, but his focus was on the glider. It was the type that was launched by a winch from the ground, catapulting it forwards and up with great speed, and if it launched right now, neither Mac nor Seeley could reach the controls because of the cuffs.

If they didn’t do something and fast, this was going to be a very short, very deadly flight.

Part Four

Seeley apparently didn’t hear MacGyver, and yelled again, this time louder. “Mac! Wake up!”

MacGyver wriggled his wrists in the cuffs, noting even if he could dislocate his thumb, he wasn’t going to get free – they were too tight. “Will you hush? I’m not asleep, I’m thinking.”

“Yeah, well, we’re about to take a *permanent* snooze if we don’t get free to release the cable if this bird gets launched,” Atkins retorted sarcastically.

MacGyver sighed. Atkins was right. He looked around the cockpit for anything to work with, but the glider was empty. He couldn’t even get a hand to his pockets for a paperclip to work the cuffs. And that was if Zito’s people hadn’t emptied their pockets while they were unconscious anyway. “Seeley, can you see anything sharp back there?”

“No,” Atkins sighed. “And I’m cuffed; no way can I get to my pockets. How long do you think we have before they fire the winch? Zito’s people are probably giving us enough time to wake up, so we know where about to be cow fodder in that field over there...”

Mac stopped and looked out the canopy to see cattle grazing in the distance. It was ironic, but Mariotte was probably somewhere watching and enjoying this too, especially given the “aircraft” connection.

The thought spurred MacGyver on. There had to be a way to beat both his adversaries, there was always a way, if you just remained calm and thought things through. *Seeley is a pretty straight laced, suit wearing agent – a real man in black. He always looks pretty well fettled...right down to his tie pin!*

“Atkins, are you wearing your tie pin?” Mac’s tone was urgent, but composed at the same time, a quality he had down pat. “Can you get to it wearing the cuffs?”

There was a pause, and then Seeley slowly answered. “Yeah...I’m wearing it, but what good will it do us if I die looking well-groomed?”

“You need to pick the lock on the cuffs with it!” Mac couldn’t believe Atkins hadn’t figured that out himself.

Another pause, then a quietly spoken response from Atkins. “Okay...except I’ve never actually picked a lock of any kind.”

MacGyver shook his head. “Take the pin, insert it in the mechanism nice and slow until you feel the ridges inside. There’s a knack to it, but I’m hoping you’re a quick study.”

There was a huff from the rear of the glider, but no actual reply as the ex-fed followed Mac’s instructions. Every few seconds, Mac would hear a low growl of frustration, but after what seemed a lifetime, Seeley gave a whoop of delight, and MacGyver imagined his companion shaking his fist in the air in the rear of the aircraft in celebration.

Except it wasn’t over yet.

The cuffs had barely dropped from Atkins right wrist when the glider bolted forwards as the winch it was attached to snapped into action. The two-seater was launched skywards and Seeley released the tow cable just seconds before it was too late.

With MacGyver still cuffed, Atkins grabbed at the joystick in front of him and took shaky control of the craft. “Ugh...Mac? I’ve never flown a glider before! This puppy needs an engine and fast!” There was tension as he rapidly said the words.

“Relax, neither have I, but it can’t be too hard. All we have to do is catch the right thermals and we can stay airborne for hours. Trust me, it’s just like hang gliding, and I’ve done plenty of that.” MacGyver looked at the instruments in front of him and began relaying instructions to Seeley, slowly and deliberately.

After five minutes, Seeley was hooked. “Ah man, I so need to get me one of these things!” He swallowed, buried his teenage enthusiasm and his usual stoic façade returned. “Now what? Do we land, or try and make it to the zoo in this thing?”

“I think we can make it near enough to the zoo.” MacGyver checked the dials again, wishing he could take control. Instead he gave Atkins more instructions, and within twenty minutes, they were bouncing down on a flat section of desert just outside Albuquerque.

The glider bounced hard, tearing up cacti as it slewed to a halt, one wing tip digging into the sand so deep the aircraft almost did a one-eighty.

The dust was still settling as MacGyver opened the canopy and clambered out, dropping down onto the desert floor with a grunt. “I thought you were good at landings?” He teased.

Seeley straightened his tie, undid Mac's cuffs, and then replaced the pin. Yeah, well my instructor sucked," he joked back, and then pointed. "Road's over there, and I think I see a truck coming this way!"

Mac turned to look and spotted an old GMC with a flatbed trundling towards them rather slowly. He broke into a jog after it, and Atkins followed obediently. As they grew closer, MacGyver began to wave, hoping the driver would stop. It seemed to take him a long time to even notice them in the road, but eventually he ground to a halt, his ancient chariot's brakes screaming in protest at actually having to work.

The truck was rusted, and one front headlight hung limp on the fender. The owner didn't look in much better condition. If MacGyver had to guess, the man was ninety if he was a day. "Excuse me, Sir, but we need to get to the local zoo, and fast." Mac reached into the pocket of his jeans for his I.D. expecting it to have been removed, and was shocked when it was still in place. Why hadn't Zito's people emptied their pockets? He offered up the badge. "Name's MacGyver, and this is Seeley Atkins. We work for the Phoenix Foundation."

The old boy snorted. "Name's Al, and I ain't never heard of no Phoenix Foundation." He wiped his nose on his sleeve as if it was perfectly acceptable. "Guess you can have a ride, though." He patted the bench seat like it was a luxury Cadillac whilst chowing down on what looked like tobacco.

"You'll take us to the zoo?" Mac confirmed, climbing in anyway after Atkins took the lead.

Al sniffed. "Well, I sure can take you, but I can't think why you'd wanna be there right now. Haven't you heard? Some kind of idjit let a whole lot of animals out their cages and says he's planted a bomb there too!" He cranked down his window and tapped the gas pedal as Mac closed his door. Then he turned a huge knob to switch on the antique radio. The announcer confirmed the story.

...Armed police have surrounded the zoo with tranquilizer weapons, but a source at the scene tells us they're reluctant to enter the building due to the additional bomb threat. A disposal unit is on route, but not expected to arrive for another twenty minutes...

MacGyver winced as the newswoman continued. The bomb was definitely another message for him. Zito had known all along that Mac wouldn't be foiled by the glider incident, and as bomb disposal was one of MacGyver's previous vocations, this was just another sick taunt.

What if Sam is in the zoo, or Nikki? Or both?

Seeley read his thoughts. "You can't assume they're in there, you know that, right?"

"Can you imagine what some of those animals would do if they smelled Sam's blood?" Mac couldn't shake the imagery of Zito letting a lion or a wolf loose on an already injured Sam. He felt moisture well in his eyes, but somehow held it back. He had to be strong now, more so than he ever had in the past.

Al's expression said he sensed MacGyver's pain. "I don't claim to know what's happening, but I feel for you, son." He smiled half-heartedly, then pulled the old truck up as they reached a police road block. They'd gone as far as was going to be allowed, at least in the truck.

MacGyver nodded his thanks to the old man and climbed out with Atkins in tow. There was yellow tape across the road in front of the zoo, and a plethora of armed officers taking cover behind a line of cop cars that encircled the zoo entrance.

How were they going to get past the blockade?

MacGyver walked casually along the sidewalk, taking in the scene and anything he might use to their advantage to get to Sam. There were plenty of SWAT trucks, police bikes, ambulances and fire engines. And between the blockade and the zoo gate was a dead jaguar the cops had taken down to stop it reaching the general public.

MacGyver sighed – another senseless, pointless death, even if it was that of an animal. He moved on, saddened at what mankind had let itself become. Zito wasn't alone in the world or treachery, and his kind grew in number every day.

Mac stopped as he came to a café with a large flapping canopy. The name was emblazoned on the pink and white material in onyx font – *Café & Bytes*.

"We've had it." Seeley shook his head as he watched the police presence milling around them. "No way can we get into the zoo now."

MacGyver wasn't so sure. "Maybe we can." He jerked a thumb to the café without drawing attention to himself. "You're good with computers, so I need you to go inside and fake us some orders to be here. I have bomb disposal experience, and Phoenix have helped out on stuff like this before. I once worked on a bomb on an ocean liner, even."

Seeley blinked, like he was confused. "Just how do I get orders from a café?"

"It's not just a café," MacGyver explained quietly. "It's something new called an online café, where people can grab a coffee and go on the web. I had no idea there was one here, but the first one stateside opened a short while ago in Dallas."

Atkins eyes lit up as he had a light bulb moment. "Oh yeah! I remember seeing something about it on the news. *The High Tech Café!*" Without asking more he nodded and slipped through the door, giving a small thumbs up as he headed for an empty seat with a terminal.

While Seeley worked on the fake orders to be sent through to the police incident commander, MacGyver decided to go in search of props, and something he could use as a diversion to take the cops' attention while they got inside.

First up, he climbed into an empty SWAT truck and began to look around. He grabbed two tactical vests from a hook, one of which he slipped on, the other was Seeley. Then he opened an equipment cabinet that had hastily been left unlocked.

MacGyver smiled as he turned a smoke grenade over in his hand, then stashed it in a pocket of his vest. The grenade was quickly followed by a CS canister and a small back pack for other things he found along the way. Finally, and with regret, he chose an automatic rifle from the racking to his left. He would never use it – the weapon was merely a prop to convince the police chief they meant business – but nevertheless, it made him cringe.

Clambering back out before anyone could spot him, Mac noticed an unattended ambulance and couldn't believe his luck – two lots of bounty for the price of one. He eased through the open rear door and licked his lips. What could he use here that would compliment the items he'd already taken?

He noted a small oxygen cylinder under the empty gurney, and unfastened it. *This just might work...*

Mac hid the cylinder in his backpack and was clear of the ambulance just in time to meet Seeley emerging from the café. He handed Atkins the vest he'd stolen, and Seeley eyed it with disdain before removing his jacket and replacing it.

"I got the orders sent straight to the incident commander's cruiser, but whether he buys it or not is another thing," Seeley offered, raising a brow as they approached the police line. "He looks a hardball to me." He nodded towards a short, thin man that's body language said he had issues with the world in general before he even spoke.

He turned as Mac and Atkins approached him, as if he sensed they were encroaching on his territory, like a wild animal defending his pack. "Just who the hell are you two, and what are you doing behind my police lines? Are you dumb? Or maybe just blind?"

Seeley took point, flashing his Phoenix badge. "We're here to help," he said smoothly. "Your precinct asked our people for a couple of bomb disposal guys, and here we are." He smiled affably, but his expression said he was thinking something else entirely about the man before him. "You must be Captain Morton? You should have received word we're coming by now?"

The cop's eyes narrowed and he leaned inside his vehicle to check the computer screen on the center of the dash. "I see it, but it makes no difference," he said as he re-emerged. "Nobody is going in that zoo, and I mean nobody. I don't care if you've come from the White House, the Kremlin, or the North Pole, ya got me?"

Seeley opened his mouth to argue, but MacGyver pulled him gently backwards out of Morton's line of fire. He'd been afraid this might happen, and he was also prepared for it. "We'll see what our boss has to say about this!" He pretended to argue. "I think you'll find we have jurisdiction here..."

Mac continued to back away, ignoring Morton's snide responses until they were clear of him and back behind one of the SWAT vans.

Atkins was confused and scratched at his short dark hair in bewilderment. “Why did we give in to that guy?”

“Because he has an army of cops behind him,” Mac pointed out. “But it doesn’t matter, I’ve got it covered.” He patted the backpack that was slung over his shoulder and then began to jog away from the main area of the police cordon to the rear of the zoo, where there was a lesser presence of officers.

Ducking behind a parked Buick, he pulled out the oxygen cylinder and began fastening the smoke grenade to it with duct tape.

“You ready with that weapon of yours?” Mac looked up.

Seeley frowned. “Why?”

“Because you better be as good as your record suggests, or this is so not gonna work!” MacGyver rolled the canister to the rear entrance of the zoo, as Atkins pulled his automatic from under his vest unsure of what was expected next.

The canister clanked across the asphalt and hit the closed gate with a metallic twang.

“Shoot it now!” MacGyver barked urgently. He knew they only had one chance, and the explosion he’d planned wasn’t big enough to hurt anyone, but the bang and the smoke from the grenade would make it seem far worse than it was and hopefully cause the distraction they needed.

It did.

There was instant panic and confusion as the police, and the gathering crowd thought the bomber had activated his device. Cops readied their weapons as civilians ducked into doorways and behind parked cars.

In the madness, MacGyver and Atkins dodged across the road and into the now open entrance, their SWAT vests making all but the untrained think they were under orders to go inside.

MacGyver paused as he ducked out of view of the cops outside and caught his breath. Seeley slipped in beside him, gun still drawn and readied in both hands at his chest.

“It’s pretty quiet for a zoo?” Seeley pondered, a worried look on his face.

“Tell him that!” Mac pointed to a gorilla that was happily swinging from the top of a kiosk. “It makes you wonder what more deadly animals might be on the prowl.”

Atkins snorted. “The only deadly animals I’m worried about right now are Zito and Mariotte!” The gorilla dropped from its perch and scrunched up its nose, staring at them intently. Seeley changed his mind. “Okay, so what other wildlife do you think might be around?” He swallowed hard and his tie bobbed with the motion.

“Relax, if we don’t startle them, they’ll be fine. I’ve worked with a lot of wildlife for Phoenix.” MacGyver put a hand on Atkins automatic. “No shooting anything okay? It’s not the animals fault they’ve been released.”

“Yeah? Well tell him that!” Seeley raised his gun anyway, and Mac turned to see what he was aiming at.

A pack of Mexican wolves had just rounded the corner by the kiosk, and the lead animal had blood dripping from its muzzle. It paused, and licked away some of the red oozing liquid. “We should be more worried about who that blood belongs to...”

Seeley eyed the creature with disdain, but didn’t fire – possibly because of the look MacGyver was giving him that screamed “don’t you dare!” “Man, we’re about to be had for chow.”

The wolves didn’t move, but simply watched, their eyes furtively glancing from each man, and their muzzles twitching ever-so-slightly.

“They’re scenting,” MacGyver informed. “They have a sense of smell about a hundred times greater than a human.”

Atkins wasn’t convinced. “Yeah, well I don’t think it’s my cologne they’re appreciating right now...” His shoulders were tense and his gaze never left the pack for a second as he spoke.

The lead wolf acted much the same, it held its tail high and stood tall, while all its companions had their tails between their legs and hunkered low. The alpha male and his subjects in all their glory.

MacGyver recognized the behavior at once. “Take it easy,” he told Seeley, “there’s no need to shoot. Right now the alpha has his ears back and is kinda squinting, that means he’s suspicious of us, but not angry or about to attack.”

Seeley still didn’t budge, and beads of perspiration began to form on his brow. “Says you...” he offered skeptically.

“Hey, they’re a great animal if left in their own habitat, just like the shark,” Mac responded calmly.

“So how do we get past them without suspicious turning into meal time?” Atkins lowered his automatic just a touch as he spoke. This was all about trust, not of the wolves, but of MacGyver.

“They’re not gonna attack if we don’t run or turn our backs. Wolves like to take their prey while it’s trying to get away, because the action in itself shows fear.” Mac looked at Seeley pointedly. “Also, don’t try and stare the lead wolf out, they see that as a threat.”

Seeley’s eyes moved just a tad. “And again I ask how do we get past them if we can’t move? I still think we should go with plan B.” He wiggled his gun.

MacGyver took a moment to think. If the wolves could scent a hundred times better than a human, then what he and Atkins needed right now was a more interesting scent for the pack to follow. “Stay here, I have an idea...”

“Stay here? While you *leave*? Are you nuts?”

“I’m not leaving. I’m going back to the entrance, and that dead jaguar outside.” MacGyver pulled out his knife and looked slightly saddened. “If I can cut some strips of flesh from it, maybe I can entice the wolves away.” It wasn’t a pleasant thought, but the cat was already dead, and its sacrifice might save others.

When Seeley didn’t argue further, Mac began to carefully back away. The alpha male watched him, taking in every movement of his boots. Eventually, it seemed to grow bored, and its narrow eyes refocused on Atkins.

MacGyver noted the transition and slipped into a jog back to the gate. Outside, it was still chaos from the explosion he’d created at the rear of the building, and he used that to his advantage.

Grabbing the jaguar’s two front legs he dragged it out of view and cut a few small strip of flesh, being careful not to get any of the blood on his hands or clothes that the wolves might scent.

With several garish pieces ready on a torn section of his shirt, Mac had a new problem – how to get the flesh away from where they wanted to be so it lured the pack out of the way. What he needed was a catapult to toss the meat high into the air and away from Seeley and the walkway.

Mac looked around, his eyes scanning anything and everything nearby. There was a wrought iron fence around a lot of the zoo areas, including where he was standing. Each “post” had ornately carved tops. They reminded him of the uprights on a slingshot, but to use this to his advantage, he needed something flexible to wrap around them with very stretchy properties.

He jogged into the next area, his gaze bouncing from one display to another until he arrived at the snake section. There was an exhibit in the corner that caught his attention, and ran to it intrigued. Sitting in the middle of a large glass case was a lifelike rubber example of the extinct *Gigantophis* from the dinosaur age.

MacGyver cheekily climbed up and reached into the case, pulling out the fake snake and stretching it in his hands. It was perfect for what he needed! Racing back to the wrought iron posts, he quickly tied each end of the “snake” down securely, and then quickly fired off his meat slices as accurately as he could.

Mac swallowed. The question now, was would the wolves take the scent and move away from the walkway? He ran back, becoming breathless from the day’s exertion and fatigue.

When he arrived, Seeley had lowered his weapon, and the wolves were gone.

“Just how’d you do that?” Atkins asked, apparently not aware of the flying jaguar parts that had soared overhead moments earlier.

MacGyver shrugged. “It’s not important. What *is* important is that we get out of here before they come back!”

Seeley nodded, and then moved on, pushing further into the zoo under a darkened canopy covered with fake foliage. A wooden carved sign, obviously meant to look like it belonged in a jungle told them they had reached the ape house.

The gate used by the keepers to tend the animals hung open, and Mac and Seeley stepped cautiously inside and then stopped in their tracks.

A body was hung from the ceiling by tied hands, and a pool of blood lay underneath it that was far too big for the person to be still alive. A gorilla like the one they’d seen earlier was poking at the corpse absently, as if it expected it to move. Eventually, it grew bored and sauntered off to poke at something hidden in yet more foliage.

MacGyver moved to rush forwards, but Atkins stopped him, putting a disapproving hand in front of the trouble shooter. “Even I know gorillas can be violent and dangerous, and hey, I hate to say it, but the body could be a trap?” He raised a brow.

MacGyver nodded, shaking slightly as he slowed his gait. This could be Sam or Nikki.

Seeley reached the body first, and after holstering his weapon, he gently spun it until the victim’s face was looking at them. He blinked, obviously shocked by what he saw.

At his side, Mac’s eyes widened. Of all the things he had expected, this was not one of the scenarios he’d imagined. He let out a long sigh of relief.

The body wasn’t Sam or Nikki, but Roger Mariotte. He hung lifelessly, his face a mask of shock and pain.

“Mac, take a look!” Seeley was pointing at Mariotte’s arm – the hand was missing. “I’m guessing those are the body parts you got, not Sam’s!” He looked closer, pulling away some of Mariotte’s clothing. “Looks like our friends the wolves took a bite outta this guy too.”

MacGyver winced. He’d despised Mariotte for the atrocities he’d performed in the name of revenge, but no man should have to suffer the way he apparently had. Mac suspected he’d been alive until the wolves had finished him off. If Zito had done that, Sam and Nikki might have had a reprieve, but they were far from safe. *What if they’re dead too?* After all, there had been no proof to make them think otherwise.

Behind them, the metal gate suddenly slammed shut with a grinding twang. Mac and Seeley reflexively spun around, but it was too late, they were locked in. A crackle erupted from the zoo’s loudspeaker system, quickly followed by the unmistakable voice of Zito. “Man came from the ape, and he hasn’t really evolved all that much, has he MacGyver? Apart from a few special individuals, like us, eh, MacGyver? People who can see beyond the horizon on a higher plane, people who...”

Mac cut him short. He was angry at being compared with a madman, angry for Sam, and Nikki. "I'm nothing like you, Zito. Mariotte was more your style."

Zito chuckled. "My my MacGyver, you should know by now that Mr. Mariotte was just a pawn in the game, just like all my little helpers. And in chess, a pawn, or even a higher piece sometimes has to be sacrificed to win the game." There was a pause as if he was thinking. "And besides," he continued, "Mr. Mariotte was really only interested in money and a little revenge. How boring, mundane, and very ape-like was that? Where was the challenge?"

"What about Sam and Nikki?" Seeley interrupted, raising a brow.

"Ah yes, Mr. Atkins, so nice of you to join us on this little adventure. Sam and Nikki are two of Mr. MacGyver's pieces I'm afraid I've already taken from the board. Should I give them back nicely, or continue until it's checkmate?"

MacGyver couldn't hide the urgency in his voice. "What do you want," he snapped. "You hold all the aces; we have nothing, why don't you just kill us?"

Seeley looked horrified at Mac's suggestion.

"Ah, but it's not the killing that's the fun," Zito retorted cheerily. "It's the mental challenges along the way that make the final deaths interesting. And I have a new challenge for Mr. MacGyver...and your friend Mr. Atkins too..."

"What makes you think I'll play?" Seeley's eyes narrowed. "There's nothing in it for me?"

Zito chuckled again, but didn't directly respond. Instead, he began his next challenge. "Sam and Nikki are in the Reptile House – they're on two small piers. Each pier is set up to blow, dropping them in with some rather nasty creatures. They will both fall at the same time, so which one will you save? Oh, and to make it more interesting, and because Mr. MacGyver is so good at these kind of puzzles, he doesn't get to actually play."

"Then how can we save them?" Mac demanded without thinking – which was exactly what Zito apparently wanted.

"Mr. Atkins has to solve the riddle for you or both Sam and Nikki will drop," Zito's voice oozed malevolence as he spoke. "You can't see me, but I can see your expression Mr. MacGyver. You don't trust Atkins, do you? Why, when Sam was in the hospital after Flight 4177 landed, you wouldn't even get some sleep and leave Seeley to guard your son, now would you? Do you recall that Mr. Atkins? Or can I call you Seeley?" He laughed like he had already won the game.

MacGyver looked across, and it was clear from Seeley's expression that Zito had hit a nerve, and maybe Zito was right. Mac hadn't trusted Seeley back then – he hadn't even known him, but things were different now.

Zito carried on his tirade anyway, apparently seeking to drive a wedge between the two men. “You’ll always be Phoenix’s No2 while MacGyver is around. How does that feel, *Seeley*? Are you now willing to put your own life at risk, for someone who doesn’t trust you?”

Atkins stepped away from the hanging body of Mariotte into the direct center of the Ape House. He looked up to the ceiling, addressing the invisible Zito. His expression said he was but his tone was defiant. “I’m ready, Doc, let’s do this so I can get to whoop your ass.”

The metal gate behind them buzzed, then clicked open.

“The exit is for Mr. Atkins only,” he warned. “If you try to leave MacGyver, I’ll blow the piers right now, and end the game with your dear son food for the gators, and Nikki Carpenter as the dessert...”

MacGyver watched helplessly as Seeley left him behind. Now, there was no way of talking with Atkins to help him with the puzzle – and Seeley wasn’t a puzzle man. A sense of dread began to fill the pit of Mac’s stomach, and all he could do now was wait.

* * * *

Reptile House

Five Minutes Later...

Atkins skidded into the Reptile House and stopped dead as he saw Sam and Nikki on the central piers. They were tied to a chair, just like Zito had described, and they were both alive – for now. He swallowed hard and approached them, his inner gut churning as his mind screamed “You can do this” over and over again.

MacGyver was a good man, not really a friend yet, but someone Seeley respected highly, almost as much as his own father, in fact, and that was high praise indeed.

He rubbed at his chin and realized it was covered in stubble, he and Mac had been at this far too long, they were tired, they could make mistakes.

Seeley slowed his gait and approached Sam first. He didn’t let the kid see him – not just yet. First he needed to see the bomb. Moving to the edge of the jetty, he dropped down onto his stomach, letting his head hang over the side. The wiring for both devices hadn’t been hidden. In fact, it looked like the person who planted it had enjoyed showing off the intricate wiring that joined both seats.

It was just like Zito had said. If one explosion occurred then both people were going in the drink with the gators. If he tried to save one, the other person was going too – this wasn’t a game, or a puzzle, it was a nightmare.

Seeley pushed back up into a sitting position and scratched his head. He had more knowledge of computers than bombs, how the heck was he going to solve this without Sam and Nikki dying?

* * * *

Ape House

MacGyver didn't like being locked out of the action, and he didn't like the fact that Dr. Zito was somewhere watching his every move. *Exactly where is he anyway?*

Mac spun around on the spot until his head hurt looking for a clue. The Ape House had an enclosed viewing platform where more important visitors could watch and where zoo staff could narrate to visitors from. That had to be where the doctor was watching from, and why he was able to use the loud speaker system.

If that's the case, why has he been so dang quiet since Seeley left?

Mac's brow furrowed. Could Zito have left to watch Atkins attempt to save Sam and Nikki? More to the point, could he risk that Zito had and try to escape, knowing that it could put his son and friend in even more danger?

MacGyver sucked down a breath and weighed up his options and the risks. Seeley was a superb operative – too good for his FBI origins, even. But Seeley wasn't used to Zito's tricks. Could he rescue Sam and Nikki on his own without being another victim himself?

Mac trusted Atkins, but in the end he wasn't ever going to be the kind of person that stood around and waited for someone else to do his dirty work. He made a decision, hoping that Zito had left the Ape House for more fun viewing. Tentatively, Mac moved for the gate, waiting for the evil chuckle of the doctor to chill his bones, but there was silence.

He reached out to inspect the lock and mechanism type to see how he could bypass it, but then suddenly recoiled. This was all too easy. The lock was something he could pick with just his knife, and Zito would know that.

MacGyver stepped back, his eyes searching for something he could toss at the barrier. He found a stone, and threw it hard at the metal gate. Instantly, he was greeted with hot fizzing sparks – Zito had electrified the only way out.

The gate, however, was not Mac's first problem. The flash of crackling electricity had caught the attention of one of the larger gorillas still in the enclosure. It drummed its fists angrily on its chest like something out of a *Tarzan* movie, and MacGyver suddenly realized his biggest enemy right now, wasn't a human after all...

* * * *

Reptile House...

Seeley Atkins looked at his watch and wondered just how much time he actually had. He'd read Zito's profile on several occasions, and it suggested the doctor would almost always slant the odds his way – and that meant less time, not more to solve the puzzle.

Deep in his mind, Atkins suspected there probably was no real way to save Sam and Nikki, even though Zito had intimated there was. He was a madman, and a mass murderer, after all.

Drawing down a breath, Atkins finally approached Sam and let the younger man see him. He held out a hand, speaking quietly. "I'm here to help," he almost whispered.

Sam nodded, apparently recognizing Seeley. "Where's my Dad? Why isn't he here? Is he okay?" The questions came out rapidly and urgently, and it was quite clear he was more afraid for his father than he was himself.

"It's okay," Seeley soothed, whilst bobbing down to get a closer look at the wiring on Sam's chair. "Your dad's here, and he's fine, but he's locked in the Ape House. Zito thought it would be fun if I played this part of his whackadoodle game."

Sam nodded as if he understood. "Dad's told me about him, but I never expected to find him working with Mariotte. That is until..." He winced and closed his eyes as if he were seeing something horrid.

Seeley guessed he'd been witness to Mariotte's death, and that wouldn't have been pretty. Something else that wasn't pretty was the device Sam was attached to. Atkins had the skills to disarm regular, run of the mill bombs, but not this one. The trigger that would drop Sam and Nikki in with the hungry wildlife was a complex one, just like Zito.

Not to mention, Seeley was convinced there would be another booby trap somewhere. Zito would want everyone dead at the end of this grudge match, not just the minor players.

"Kid, I gotta admit that I can't disarm what you and Nikki are sitting on. I don't have Mac's skills when it comes down to this kinda puzzle," Seeley sounded defeated, grim even as he sat back on the jetty, his eyes closed in dismay.

Sam, however, was truly his father's son. "Hey! If Dad taught me one thing, it's that you never give in, not ever." He shouted loud enough that Atkins was actually startled and jumped back to his feet. "We don't give in until we're dead, okay?"

Seeley swallowed and regained his composure. "I don't plan dying just yet," he countered. "So tell me, Mac junior, just how do we avoid that?"

"You can't disarm the bombs, right? So both piers are going to drop when they go off, but Nikki and me will be alive when we hit the water?"

Seeley nodded apologetically. "Yeah, Zito doesn't want you hurt, he just wants you to be live gator food..."

"So...why can't you just stop our chairs falling when the piers blow?" Sam offered without having to hardly think about it. "Just because the jetty has to fall into the water, doesn't mean we do. We're not glued to them! They're just chairs with motion sensors!"

Seeley bobbed back down and took a second look. Sam was right. The chairs were just plain and simple wooden affairs – it was the motion sensors that did all the work. If the sensor tripped, the bombs would blow and everything would fall – but the chairs weren't actually fixed to the piers. He scratched at his head, not seeing the significance. *How the heck do I stop the chairs falling? Magic?*

Sam seemed to sense the unspoken question and looked up...

* * * *

Ape House

MacGyver's mind raced as he tried to come up with a plan to open the gate before the gorilla decided to pound on him. He couldn't pick the lock, and he couldn't batter it down with one of the many logs in the enclosure, it was far too strong.

Then it hit him, apes were smart, but not as smart as humans. The pen had been built with that in mind, so perhaps he could find a way to go up and over the high mesh fencing.

The gorilla snorted and eyed him, moving closer as if it sensed he was trying to escape. Mac was forced to back up until his spine hit something hard. He looked over his shoulder and realized he'd bumped into a tree. A shadow caught his attention, and he turned further to see a rope hanging from one of the branches for the apes to play on.

The twine instantly hit a nerve in MacGyver's brain, and he pulled out his knife, cutting through the rope to retrieve as much of it as possible. He wound it carefully, swung it over his shoulder and then quickly began to climb the tree away from the still angry ape.

He reached the highest point in just a minute, and paused to regain his breath, and to look around for his next move. There was security wire at an angle over the top of the electrified fencing, but the two weren't connected. Even so, the barbs would rip him to shreds if he caught himself on it going over.

Mac tugged off the SWAT vest he'd taken earlier and tossed it over the barbs on the fence. Gathering his rope next, he threw it as hard and as far as possible over a metal beam the other side, lassoing it. He tied the free end off on a branch of the tree above him, and then pulled the automatic rifle he'd brought for show from his shoulder.

MacGyver wasn't going to shoot man nor beast, but the gun's strap was going to come in very handy. He unfastened it from the butt and barrel and then threw it loosely over the rope so he had something to hold onto. Pushing away with all his weight from the tree, Mac part swung, part slid out of the enclosure *Tarzan* style. For a second, he dangled freely the other side, before dropping hard to the ground as the bemused gorilla looked on.

Mac smiled. Who knew it, the SWAT gear had been useful after all? And he'd even managed to impress a primate.

There was no time to ponder the gorilla's expression right now, though. Sam, Nikki, and maybe even Seeley needed him thinking clearly.

MacGyver moved on cautiously until he reached the Reptile House. Sounds echoed over his head of jungle animal cries, all supplied by the zoo's speaker system to add to the visitors' experience. The noise hid other important sounds – including what Zito might be up to, and Mac desperately needed to know.

The good doctor wouldn't be in plain site, so where would he go? Maybe the viewing platform again?

Mac took the stairs to the podium two at a time, careful not to make any noise. At the top, he paused, daring to peek around the corner.

Zito was there, his back to MacGyver as he watched what transpired above the deadly waters below him. In his hand, there was some kind of device Mac recognized as a detonator. As they'd suspected, Zito was ready for one last dirty trick if Atkins actually managed to free Sam and Nikki.

Mac's heart felt like it was going to tear from his chest, but should he confront Zito, or would that make the doctor press the button on the device?

* * * *

Below the platform, Seeley followed Sam's gaze, and realized what the kid was looking at. All around them were fake vines – an attempt by the zoo to make the area look more like a jungle. And those vines were about to save the day.

Atkins guessed Sam's idea was to tie some of the overhead vines to the chairs, so that when the piers blew, the chairs would still be suspended above the water. The chairs didn't need to be moved to perform the task, so the motion sensors wouldn't be tripped, and there was no need to defuse any explosives. The bombs could go off, the pier would drop, but Sam and Nikki would go nowhere.

Seeley had to hand it to the kid, he was definitely a MacGyver – no way would he have ever thought of such a thing. He reached up to cut vines, tie them to more vines, and then to Sam's chair.

“Man, you've earned your surname, alright!” Seeley commented quietly as he worked.

Sam grinned, obviously seeing the other man's point. “Actually, my surname is Malloy,” he teased, correcting Atkins.

Seeley's brow furrowed, then he remembered reading Mac's file and nodded, before moving to work on Nikki's chair. So far, she'd been quiet as a mouse, but only because Zito had seen fit to gag her.

Atkins pulled out the cloth keeping Nikki silent, and then abruptly wished he hadn't.

"Hey, don't you know ladies should be first?" She sassed fidgeting just a little too much for Seeley's comfort.

"You'll be first alright!" Seeley grumbled. "First to explode if you don't sit still!"

"Oh funny guy..." Nikki rolled her eyes, but there was a tinge of fear there as well as sarcasm. "Mac's never sarcastic," she complained half-joking. "And he's faster too..."

Atkins didn't answer; he'd only just finished working on her chair and the vines, when a very familiar voice echoed overhead. It was Zito.

"Very impressive Mr. Atkins." Zito purred. "However, I'm afraid you've actually forfeited the game. You see, it wasn't really your own idea now was it?" He moved forwards on the platform until he was at the edge of the safety railing and in full sight. He held out the hand with the detonator in, taunting them as if he wanted them to see him enjoy his moment of triumph. "This is the final culmination of weeks of work and planning..." Zito spun around unexpectedly, catching Mac watching him. "So nice of you to join us Mr. MacGyver. I was wondering when you would rejoin the game. It's no fun playing with lesser minds than oneself." He smiled as if he'd expected Mac to escape all along. "And now we're all together for my check mate move..."

Surprising even MacGyver, Seeley moved first, lunging forwards whilst rolling and pulling out his automatic. Even more surprisingly, he didn't fire on Zito, but at the motion sensor under Sam's seat.

The trigger tripped, sending a cacophony of sound reverberating through the Reptile House as the small explosive charges detonated. In an instant, the jetty supports gave way, dropping the wooden piers into the murky waters with a crashing splash.

The move was so unexpected, Zito balked. He stood momentarily gaping as Sam and Nikki were magically suspended above the mayhem below, gators thrashing madly in the pool.

After a second, he composed himself, but it was too late, MacGyver had been given just enough time, and dived on Zito impacting one of his famous swinging punches on the doctor's jaw.

A man of words more than action, Zito stumbled, arms flailing and the detonator dropped from his grasp. He tried desperately to grab the railing he'd stood over moments earlier, but his momentum was too great and he lost all footing.

MacGyver reached out to grab him, he loathed Zito, but he didn't want it to end like this. The moment, however, was lost and Zito fell helplessly over the barrier, careering into the water below. He bobbed up just once, screamed and was gone.

Sometime Later...

The zoo was an area of controlled mayhem. Police and SWAT officers swarmed all over the grounds, searching for evidence, bagging clues, taking photographs. It would be weeks before the whole thing had been sorted and categorized into anything that resembled common sense – if that phrase could even be used when Zito was involved.

Keepers mingled between the cops, attempting to get some of the less dangerous animals back in their cages and assigned areas.

MacGyver watched, arms folded as everything played out, and a separate set of specially trained officers drained the gator pool. They were searching for Zito's body, or possibly what was left of it if the gators had been hungry.

The thought pained him; no one should die like that, not even a madman. He took his eyes from the ever decreasing waters to look across at Sam. Sam was talking with Nikki and Seeley quite happily, as if he'd been on a zoo tour rather than kidnapped by two lunatics. *Was I like that at his age?*

Pete Thornton broke the thought. He'd managed to hitch a ride on an army transport plane and arrived far faster than commercial flights would have allowed. It was lucky too, because he'd spent the last hour trying to save Mac and Seeley from a prison sentence after the police incident commander had threatened to press charges.

"You know, sometimes I feel like I'm only here to get you out of trouble?" Pete teased as he used his white cane to guide him to Mac's side. "That's one very angry cop," he continued with a sigh. "Lucky for you two I know his boss pretty well."

Mac smiled. "You know everyone that counts pretty well."

Pete huffed. "Yeah, that's called getting old," he admitted with a chuckle.

Sam sauntered over, joining the conversation by hugging his dad like a limpet attaching itself to a boat hull. "Boy, we gotta stop doing this, Dad!" he said with a sigh. "I can't believe the last time I saw you, it was out with those mustangs..."

MacGyver just smiled wanly. Sam had no idea the hoops Zito had forced him and Atkins to jump through, and Mac wouldn't never tell. Sam had been through enough of an ordeal of his own.

Mac pulled away gently. "We *really do* have to stop doing this," he agreed.

"Ugh oh, here comes your favorite cop," Pete interrupted. "I can smell his awful cologne a mile off!"

The incident commander huffed as if he'd heard, but he didn't comment on it. Instead, he sucked down a breath and then offered up potentially more bad news. "There's no body in the water, and while the gators could have eaten Zito, there's no evidence of it. Any prey those gators can't swallow and eat in one go, they usually roll, drown and store, or tear into smaller pieces, and there's nothing in the water or the bottom of the pool." He looked pointedly at Mac. "Could this Zito character have gotten out?"

MacGyver looked straight across to Seeley and both of them shook their heads simultaneously.

“I don’t think it would be possible without one of us seeing him,” Mac said with a frown. “Although, I guess our attention was on getting Sam and Nikki off the chairs.”

“If he’s not in the pool, and he’s not gator fodder then...” Seeley’s voice trailed and it was obvious he was thinking Zito had somehow escaped.

MacGyver was almost sure of it, and it churned his stomach to think what they’d let loose on the world. Zito may not have won the war, but he had in a sense, won the battle this time. That meant at some point he would probably kill again, or even go after Sam again.

Pete apparently sensed Mac’s torment and gently patted him on the back. “There’s at least one consolation in this mess,” he offered soberly. “Mariotte isn’t a threat to anyone now, even if he did get a nasty end.”

“Somehow, even that’s not comforting,” Mac admitted, putting an arm around Sam like he was still just a kid – but then to MacGyver, a little part of his son always would be. “What say we go pay the mustangs another visit?”

“I’d like that,” Sam confirmed. “Maybe a small vacation on our bikes out there, away from everything? Right now, it kinda sounds like heaven.”

Seeley raised a brow. “You know I’ve never been out to that particular Phoenix reserve, I hear Nevada is nice this time of year?” He smiled cheekily, revealing a less rigid side to his nature.

“Do you have a bike?” Sam teased back. “’Cause you gotta have a bike to ride with us...”

Seeley straightened his tie, cleared his throat, and actually sounded like he was considering it. “Um nope, but I could sure get one?”

Mac slapped him on the back. “Sgt. Cooper did say I’d soon knock you into shape, didn’t he? Guess he was right. If you’re serious, you’re welcome to come along. Right, Sam?”

Sam nodded with a huge grin playing across his features, like he was suddenly enjoying the conversation. “How can I refuse the man who just saved me?”

Atkins was quiet for a second, but his gaze drifted to Pete as if asking for approval for a sudden vacation.

Inexplicably, Pete sensed what the silence meant, even though he couldn’t see the man’s expression. “Just go, will you?” Pete chuckled. “It will do you good to get away from the Foundation for awhile, you’re a bigger workaholic than Mac!”

Seeley showed a rare and genuine smile and MacGyver couldn't help but wonder about him. Why was he so uptight most of the time? The fact that he was considering their road trip probably meant no wife? Maybe no real friends? Mac made a mental note to read more of Atkins' file sometime – he knew there was a kid, so what had happened?

“I guess we should make a move,” Sam suggested. “Sounds like we have a lot of planning to do!” The group began to move off toward the zoo exit, chatting about the proposed adventure.

“You think I should get an Indian?” Seeley questioned Sam, who he'd obviously deemed the bike expert.

Nikki huffed playfully as she brought up the rear. “Huh! So how come I haven't been asked to join this little party? *I* can ride a bike just fine!” The grouching continued as they headed for Pete's limo. “In fact, how do you know I don't have a bike? Maybe my dad was a Hell's Angel! Heck, maybe I delivered pizza in another life! Maybe...”

Suddenly everyone turned and stared at her in unison, but all Nikki did was raise a brow.

“Fine.” MacGyver smiled. “You can come along too. In fact, the more the merrier.”

“Right...” Pete chimed in. “Just leave your poor old blind boss behind! I can ride pillion, you know..?”

All eyes moved to Pete, and Mac quickly realized he wasn't joking.

The Zoo Main Gate...

The keeper looked saddened as he arrived to move the big cat's body. He laid out a black zippered bag – somewhat smaller than used for humans at the morgue. Opening it up, he gently lifted the jaguar inside and then closed it again.

Around him, cops still filled the zoo and surrounding area with their presence, still looking for evidence. He ignored them, focusing on the task at hand. With a sigh, he carried the body bag to a truck marked for zoo use and opened up the tailgate, placing it inside.

Once secured, the keeper climbed into the cab and slowly, as if reverently drove off through the police lines and off into the desert. The cops knew it was a dirty job, he surmised, but somebody had to do it. No one paid him any attention. He was just doing his job, nothing more, nothing less.

Once out onto the empty desert highway, the keeper pulled off his zoo motif baseball cap and mopped his brow to reveal his grey hair, and very grey beard.

Zito smiled at himself as he looked in the rearview.

This game had only just begun...

The End