

Blue Screen Of Death

By Rocket

Part 1

Operative FOURZEROFOUR shifted on his chair, fingers flying across his keyboard. He reached out and picked up a bottle, swallowing cherry soda and replacing the bottle on the desk without taking his eyes off the screen.

In his imagination, the shabby apartment was replaced by a gleaming hackers lair, the streetlight filtering through the curtains hinted at a glittering, futuristic city beyond.

He completed his program and leaned back, taking another gulp of soda and scanning his work for errors. The screen reflected the untidy bedroom behind him and the Bladerunner poster taped to his door. He flexed his fingers and cracked his knuckles, imagining his program – the ultimate worm – flashing through the internet to cause corporate chaos half a world away. His finger hovered over the button, not quite daring to press. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Now that he was finished, he was tired, and he wondered how long he'd been working. The constant twilight of the drawn curtains made it hard to know the time. Telling himself not to be a coward, that Case, or Count Zero, wouldn't hesitate to unleash the worm on an unsuspecting corporate lowlife, he reached forwards and pressed Enter with a shaking finger. Green numbers scrolled across the screen and FOURZEROFOUR felt his heart beat speeding up. The computer tower under the desk stuttered and whirred. The screen went black, then lit up blue, the bright colour making him squint. Yellow writing tracked across the screen in the wake of the blinking cursor:

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ERROR 404: FILE NOT FOUND  
FOUND YOU
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Then the lights went out.

“Ow!” MacGyver leaped out of the shower, stubbing his toe. Grabbing a towel, he hopped into the living room, stepped over his hockey gear and scooped up the telephone. “Hello?” He listened, scrubbing the towel over his hair, “Oh, Kate- Long time, no hear, how's the new job going?” “Going great, thanks” MacGyver could hear the smile in Kate's voice, “New generation of computers are just amazing!”

“That's good,” MacGyver stood on one leg and examined his toe, “How are you liking New York?” “It's OK, Weird, you know?” Kate laughed, “It's like living on a film set, everywhere looks a little bit familiar because I've seen it in the moves. I keep expecting Bruce Willis to come running down the street in a dirty undershirt!”

“I'll bet!” MacGyver dried his other foot and wrapped the towel around his waist, reflecting that Kate had come a long way since her ugly duckling days.

“Anyway, although it’s lovely to catch up with you, I do have a favour to ask...” Kate hesitated, chewing her lip.

“Sure, no problem,” MacGyver stretched the phone cord as far as it would go, reaching out to pluck some clean underwear from the radiator. “What do you need?”

“One of my friends, a student at MIT, has messed with something he should probably have left alone.” Kate sighed. “He’s a pretty good hacker and a red-hot programmer, but he tripped something that’s freaked him out and he turned up at my apartment at three in the morning, terrified that someone’s coming to kill him!”

“Wow, that does sound like something out of a movie.” MacGyver pulled a T shirt out of his hockey bag and put it on, balancing the receiver between his ear and his shoulder. “Do you think he’s actually in danger, or has he just scared himself?”

“Mmm, I dunno,” Kate glanced over her shoulder at the sleeping figure on her couch. “He’s been known to exaggerate but he seems genuinely scared this time. He brought the programs he’s been working on with him and they look like the real thing to me.”

“Ok.” MacGyver sat down on his couch, combing his wet hair with his fingers. “What do you need?”

“Can you babysit him for a few days while I try to get to the bottom of this?” She shook her head as her guest snored and turned over in his sleep. “If he really has written what he says he’s written, not only is he probably in real danger, but him being here puts my job in danger too – I can’t be seen to be associated with a known hacker.” She laughed, but there was no humour in it. “Various alphabet agencies wouldn’t be impressed.”

“No, they would not!” MacGyver shook his head, “No problem Kate – put him on a plane and I’ll pick him up from LAX. What’s his name?”

“Marius.” Kate described the young man currently asleep with his mouth open, thanked MacGyver and hung up. Crossing to the couch, she shook his shoulders. “Hey! FOURZEROFOUR! Get your skinny behind up – you got a plane to catch.”

“So, Kate tells me you’re a pretty good hacker?” MacGyver glanced across the jeep at the young man belted into the shotgun seat. “Marius?”

His passenger nodded, but made no reply, frightened eyes scanning the traffic ahead. He turned in his seat, looking over his shoulder at the backed-up traffic behind.

“Marius!” MacGyver tapped him on the shoulder, making him jump, “You’ve got to relax! No one except Kate knows you’re here, she told me you don’t have any connections in LA, so you’re safe. Relax, OK?” MacGyver returned his attention to the traffic, inching along in the smog.

Marius stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and went back to watching all directions at once. His knee bounced in a nervous rhythm. MacGyver drew breath for another try, then glanced at Marius’s face and let it out unused. He slouched in his seat, stuck in the traffic jam and thinking that it was shaping up to be a long week.

The first thing Marius did on arriving at MacGyver’s apartment was to pull all the curtains. The second thing was to lock the doors and check the window locks. Only then did he sit down on the couch and heave a shaky sigh.

“So, what’s been happening?” MacGyver poured two glasses of juice, handing one to Marius. “What’s got you jumping at shadows like this?”

"It's uh... complicated." Marius took a sip of juice.

"Ok, let's see how I do." MacGyver put down his glass and shoved his hands into his pockets. "You write a program that does... whatever it does. You what? Use it? Brag about it? Something that attracts attention you hadn't anticipated, anyway. And when that attention comes knocking on your door, you hightail it out of MIT and wind up on Kate's doorstep at three in the morning." MacGyver held out his hands and shrugged. "How am I doing?"

"Not bad." Marius nodded. "The program hacks into other programs and steals the data. It doesn't damage them, just copies everything and then disappears, leaving no trace that it was ever there."

"So, it's a worm," MacGyver grinned at Marius' stunned expression, "I know, right?"

"It's not just A worm, it's THE worm. A totally untraceable worm is the holy grail for hackers at the moment, a really good one would be worth millions to the right buyer."

"And could cost a lot of people just as much in the wrong hands." MacGyver nodded. "So, anyone coming up with a perfect one immediately paints a target on their back, for any passing cyber-criminal to see."

"Oh yeah." Marius took off his baseball cap and scratched his short, bleached hair.

"So, all I did was a test run against a small company. I didn't want the data for anything, but their security looked good and I wanted to see how Shai-Hulud - that's the name of the program - would do, and it worked!" Marius leaned forwards, his enthusiasm showing, "But then it all got a bit... weird." He shrugged. "I don't know what happened, but suddenly, something dumped me out of the internet, put me on hold. Then the screen flashes up blue like it does when the computer crashes and words started writing themselves across the screen, like it was talking to me, like it could see me or something!" Marius shuddered.

"What did they say?" MacGyver frowned, seeing how scared Marius was.

"This." Marius dug into his backpack and pulled out a disk. He glanced at MacGyver's computer, then down at the disk and up at MacGyver, "I mean, if you're OK with me running this on your rig..."

"Be my guest." MacGyver waved his hand in the direction of the computer.

Marius sat at the desk, switched on the computer and watched the screen as it ran through the boot up sequence.

"Hey, this is pretty good!" Marius turned in his seat to see MacGyver grinning at him.

"I guess I don't look like your average computer enthusiast..." MacGyver finished his juice and put the empty glasses in the sink. "The computer is from work. Phoenix does a bunch of different stuff and new technology is part of that."

"Right." Marius turned back to the computer, thinking that maybe there was more to Kate's hippy friend than met the eye. "OK, here it is."

MacGyver stood behind him, watching the screen.

Green writing scrolled quickly up, too fast to read. Then the screen twitched, blanked and lit up blue instead. MacGyver leaned closer as yellow writing appeared.

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>ERROR 404: FILE NOT FOUND
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"Four zero four is me," Marcus pointed out, "It's my hacker handle."

"OK." MacGyver nodded.

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>FOUND YOU
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"Hmmm," MacGyver's eyebrows went up as Marius' address scrolled up the screen, followed by his longitude and latitude.

>SHAI-HULUD WILL BE MINE

"That's when I bailed out." Marius' voice was subdued. "Whoever it is knows where I live, man!" He got up and peeked around the edge of the curtains.

"How would they hack you?" MacGyver sat down at the computer. "Talk me through what you did?"

"Uh..." Marius ran a hand through his hair and sat on the arm of the couch, "How much do you actually know about computers?"

"Try me." MacGyver smiled.

In another town, another computer beeped and a light blinked in the corner of the screen. Data crawled up the screen, the listening program spewing out an identity and location.

The operator glanced across at the machine, then walked across the room to study the screenful of information. Red lips curled upwards in a humourless smile.

"Fourzerofour..." The smile grew wider. "Come to me my pretty."

The operator pulled a map of LA off the shelf, unfolding it over the computer keyboard and tracing the location with a long-nailed finger.

"Venice Beach. Fourzerofour, you have run a long way." She licked her lips. "Closer to me though."

She folded up the map and turned to replace it, then paused, frowning. The operator unfolded the map again, scanning for a particular address.

"Surely not..." She shook her head, "That would be just too good to be true!" She laid the map aside, opened a search engine and typed in "Phoenix Foundation". Nodding at the results, she blanked the search bar and typed again. "MacGyver" She sat back in the chair, reading the results. A little hacking gained her confirmation that the address did belong to Mac.

"How delicious!" She reached forwards and tapped keys, feeling excitement build. "Oh MacGyver, you really have made my day..." She touched the picture on the screen, "You and little hacker friend are in for a really bad day!"

Victoria James switched off her computer and left to pack a bag, ready to fly to LA.

----- Part Two -----

“OK, so I guess you stay here for a while, soak up some sunshine and wait for Kate to get in touch.” MacGyver stifled a yawn. “How long are you planning to stay up?”

“Maybe a while longer.” Marius frowned as MacGyver’s computer let out a sound like an electronic raspberry.

“Well, keep it down, OK? I’m going to bed.” MacGyver shook his head as Marius nodded, lost in his game.

MacGyver cleaned his teeth and got into bed, shutting his door to keep out the sounds of electronic warfare coming from his living room. He’d left a message for Kate, letting her know that Marius had arrived safely, but hadn’t received a reply. He frowned in the darkness. Normally Kate was good about keeping in touch, so either her can’t-talk-about-it new job was keeping her busy, or she was caught up in whatever trouble Marius had stirred up. Making a mental note to call her again in the morning, MacGyver turned over and went to sleep.

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MacGyver jolted awake, his heart hammering. He sat upright, feeling the adrenaline racing but not knowing what had woken him. A glance at the clock told him it was three in the morning, and his apartment was quiet. In the next room, he could hear Marius snoring.

Then he heard it.

A scraping under his window, a stealthy rustle in the bushes underneath. Grabbing the hockey stick next to his bed, MacGyver leaped across to the window and yelled, brandishing the stick.

Outside, dogs barked, a neighbour yelled for him to shut up and a late-night runner paused to direct a wolf whistle at him before jogging on her way. In the distance, MacGyver heard the sound of running feet but, leaning out of the window, he saw no one. He looked around and then went outside, standing in the street in his pyjamas to see what might have disturbed him, but the street was quiet.

Returning to his bedroom, he listened to Marius snoring through the guest room door, replaced the hockey stick and climbed back into bed.

Dawn was breaking by the time he got back to sleep.

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“Marius, I think we have a problem.” MacGyver sat back on his heels, squinting against the morning sun.

“What kind of a problem?” Marius leaned out through MacGyver’s bedroom window, trying to see what MacGyver could see.

“The kind that comes with a detonator!” MacGyver held up the wires he’d found in the bushes beneath his window. “These were spliced onto the cable out here. They’re the sort you use when you want to set a bomb in the field.”

“Say what?!” Marius almost fell out of the window, leaning too far forwards. He gripped the wood frame tight and held on, wondering how MacGyver knew so much about bombs..

“Yeah.” MacGyver twirled the wires in his fingers. “I guess this is what I heard last night.” He squinted up again seeing Marius’s face pale and worried above him. “I think it’s time we found out some more about your blue-screen super-hacker, don’t you?”

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Victoria James frowned at the screen and set aside her coffee. She read the message board entry again, unable to work out who would send her details of the current bounty on MacGyver. It had doubled since her last, failed attempt. Her mystery correspondent typed again:

>INTERESTED?

>MAYBE she replied.

Victoria drummed her fingers on the desk, waiting for a reply. When none came, she added:

>WHY TELL ME THIS?

>I LIKE YOUR STYLE

The reply was immediate and Victoria smiled.

>FLATTERY GETS YOU NOWHERE. HOW MUCH DO YOU WANT HIM?

The cursor blinked, in time with the tick of her alarm clock.

>BOUNTY IS YOURS. I WANT TO WATCH YOU WORK

>AUDITION? Victoria frowned.

>SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

Again, the reply was immediate and Victoria rolled her eyes.

>NOT INTERESTED. I WORK ALONE

She was about to shut the computer down when the reply flashed up on the screen.

>PITY. YOU COULD BE SO MUCH MORE.

Victoria exited the program, shaking her head. There was always someone, thinking they were superior. Probably still living in his parents' basement, she thought, spending all day typing away in his underwear.

Locking her motel room door behind her, Victoria headed for her car.

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"OK, thanks Kate. Yeah, I'll tell him." MacGyver put down the phone and stared at it, drumming his fingers on the handset.

"Tell me what?" Marius said around a mouthful of cereal. He swallowed and stuffed in another spoonful.

"Kate hasn't been able to find out who we're dealing with." MacGyver ran a hand through his hair. "But she says it's none of the current major players, so far as she can tell. She said to say 'hi', by the way."

"Oh. Hi Kate." Marius sketched a wave. "So how can we find out? I mean, Kate's the best there is, and if she can't work it out, then..." He shrugged, looking nervous.

"Maybe we're not looking for a straight-up hacker who wants to use Shai-Hulud." MacGyver paced the length of his living room and turned. "Maybe we're dealing with someone who's simply being paid to retrieve the program so that it can be sold to the highest bidder."

"Is that better or worse?" Marius cast a worried glance at the window.

"Most likely worse." MacGyver picked up Marius's program disk and tapped it against his fingers.

"Most hackers I know don't go around setting bombs. Come on." He pulled on his jacket and slipped the disk into his pocket.

"Where are we going?" Marius shovelled in the last of the cereal and grabbed his backpack.

"Phoenix." MacGyver held open the door to his garage and Marius went through, starting to feel really scared.

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“How long will it take us to get to Phoenix?” Marius turned around in his seat, scanning the road behind them for pursuers.

“About half an hour.” MacGyver glanced in the rear-view mirror and overtook a truck, seeing a blue sedan pull out behind him.

“Can we go any faster?” Marius looked at each mirror in turn, biting his nails.

“Nope.” MacGyver changed lanes again, watching as the blue sedan followed suit. “Not without getting a ticket, which would slow us down even more.” He pulled into the fast lane, and the blue sedan sped up to match.

“I guess.” Marius glanced at MacGyver reassuring himself that the disk was still in MacGyver’s pocket. He looked behind again and sat back. “At least we haven’t picked up a tail!”

“You watch too many movies, kid.” MacGyver glanced at Marius, checking that he was wearing his seatbelt. Without indicating, he pulled across three lanes of traffic and gunned the Jeep down the off ramp. Beside him, Marius yelled and grabbed his backpack as the Jeep roared around the curve.

“What are you doing?!” Marius gripped the door with one hand as MacGyver pulled another sharp turn. Horns blared and drivers yelled as MacGyver steered the Jeep through a narrow space between a delivery van and a garbage truck. Flashing through the gap with inches to spare, MacGyver stamped on the accelerator again.

“You know how you told me we don’t have a tail?” MacGyver glanced in the rear-view mirror again, seeing a flash of blue as the sedan overtook a bus. “Well, you were wrong!”

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Victoria sneered at the angry bus driver and pushed her car faster along the busy street. She’d hoped to tail MacGyver all the way to wherever he was going but, somehow, he’d noticed her. Perhaps the antsy kid in the shotgun seat had tipped him off. She reached across, pulling her gun out of her purse without taking her eyes off the wheel.

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MacGyver ignored Marius panicking beside him, concentrating on weaving through the traffic. He frowned, thinking that leading his pursuer straight to Phoenix was probably a bad idea. Whoever they were, they were good. In his experience, ‘good’ also often equalled ‘armed and dangerous’. He turned sharp left again, hoping to lose the sedan in the maze of surface streets that made up South Los Angeles.

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Victoria stood on the brakes and the car fishtailed to a halt. Clouds of smoke rose from the wheels as she skidded off again, dodging an ice cream truck and a taxi as she jumped the red light. In the distance ahead, she saw the Jeep make another turn, but when she screeched to a halt at the end of the road, it was gone. Victoria swore and thumped the steering wheel. Figuring that MacGyver would continue heading away from his home, Victoria turned right, speeding past shops and apartment blocks and scanning the side streets for sight of her quarry.

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MacGyver glanced in the mirror again and let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Did we lose them?” Beside him, Marius clutched his backpack in a white-knuckled grip.

“I sure hope so!” MacGyver looked all around, seeing only the LA traffic around him.

“Are we still going to Phoenix?” Marius looked at MacGyver, picking nervously at the strap of his bag.

“Not right away.” MacGyver concentrated on the traffic, changing lanes and speed to try and reveal any pursuers. “I think we’ll drive around a little bit first.” He looked at Marius as they stopped for a red light. “I don’t want to lead them there if I can help it.”

The light changed and they pulled away, driving through a tangle of cross streets and heading north. Looking out of the window, Marius saw a flash of blue.

“AAH! They found us!” he watched in horror as the blue sedan passed overhead on a bridge. He caught a flash of blonde hair as the driver turned towards them and accelerated off the bridge. The blue sedan disappeared, only to come roaring out of a side street moments later.

“Oh, surely not!” MacGyver did a double take, recognising the face underneath the curly blonde hair. He leaned on the horn and, tyres screeching, pulled the Jeep around in a tight turn. “I thought she was dead!”

“Great! We’re being chased by a ghost!” Marius gave in to his panic. “I’m in a strange town with a strange guy, and I’m going to die in a car wreck because a ghost wants some stupid computer program! This is how I die!” He clawed at his seatbelt, thinking only to escape from the situation.

“Marius, calm down.” MacGyver spun the wheel and the Jeep took another corner, narrowly missing a police car. “We need a new plan.”

“You don’t say!” Marius yelled over the traffic noise.

“Marius, that’s Victoria James back there. Does that name mean anything to you?” He glanced across at Marius, seeing him shake his head.

“She’s an assassin and a computer expert. If you’ve attracted her attention with Shai-Hulud, we’re both in trouble. She’s had two goes at me already, and I only just escaped with my life. No.” MacGyver shook his head, concentrating on the traffic. “We definitely need a new plan.” He thought hard, racing the Jeep through Central LA. A police car with lights flashing zoomed past, going the other way.

“That’s it!” MacGyver snapped his fingers. “New plan...”

----- Part Three -----

“No way!” Marius hung onto the door as the Jeep jumped the light and swung across the traffic.

“No choice.” MacGyver frowned as he saw Victoria make the same turn. “Marius, if she catches us, she’s going to shoot us. Believe me, a police station is the safest place for you to be right now.”

“I’ll get arrested.” Marius blinked rapidly, unable to decide which was the more frightening choice.

“Only if you tell them what you spend your free time doing.” MacGyver cut in front of a truck, smiling as he saw Victoria trapped behind. “Call the number I’ve given you, ask for Detective Murphy and say I’ve sent you.”

“She’ll yell at me.” Marius folded his arms. “And then she’ll still arrest me ‘cause I’m gonna have to explain why some mad, trigger-happy hacker assassin is trying to shoot me!” His voice rose above the traffic noise, loud and panicked.

“Look at it this way.” MacGyver steered around a dirty yellow convertible and a red Jeep, ignoring the yell of protest from the convertible’s driver. “At least this way you’ll be alive to complain about it.” He indicated left and changed lanes, waiting until Victoria did the same before yanking the wheel right and accelerating down a side street. “The station’s coming up. Are you ready?”

“You want me to jump?!” Marius’s eyes flared wide.

“Almost.” MacGyver pulled into the station, ignoring the parking lot sign and gunning the Jeep right up to the doors. “NOW!”

Marius scrambled out of the Jeep and raced up the precinct steps. As soon as the door swung shut behind him, MacGyver stamped on the gas and roared away, passing Victoria James as she careered up the street towards him.

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“Dammit!” Victoria stamped on the brakes and her rental car slewed to a halt in the middle of the road. She ignored the drivers honking horns and shouting as she looked from the police station’s swinging doors to the Jeep accelerating away down the road. Scowling, she swore and slammed the car into gear, giving up the hacker in favour of her nemesis. She sat back in the seat. Gripping the steering wheel tight.

“I’m coming for you, MacGyver. You’ve cost me the program, at least for today, and you’re going to pay in blood and teeth!” Her voice rose to a shout and she snarled as she dodged through an intersection, narrowly missing a pack of school children. “The bounty on your head requires you to be alive, but –” She grinned, all teeth and no humour, “- it is non-specific about condition!”

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“Willis, would you take a look at this for me, please?” MacGyver dropped Marius’s disk on the overflowing desk. “Willis?”

“Under here.” A hand holding a pair of pliers emerged from under the desk and waved. “I’m pretty busy here, Mac – how urgent is it?”

“I’m being chased by an assassin who’s already tried to blow up my house, because of an MIT student who’s invented the ultimate worm program...” MacGyver folded his arms.

There was a curse and a scuffle from under the desk, a flash of sparks and Willis got to his feet, blowing on his scorched fingers. He stared at MacGyver and shook his head.

“You’re being chased by...” Willis blinked several times. “And is he still chasing you?”

“She. And no, I lost her in the traffic around Alameda.” MacGyver sat down, feeling suddenly tired. “Oh, good.” Willis’s nonchalant tone was betrayed by his hand shaking as he picked up the disk. “And this is the...?”

“Ultimate worm program.” MacGyver made quote marks in the air. “Marius – that’s the student – explained it to me, but I need you to check if it’s the real thing.”

“OK.” Willis sat down at his desk and fed the disk into the computer. “One moment...” He read the lines of code scrolling across the screen. Took off his glasses to clean them and had another look.

“Nasty.” He popped the disk out of the machine and held it out to MacGyver. “It’s the real deal alright. No wonder someone was chasing after it!” He shook his head. “Where’s your hacker now?”

“With Detective Murphy. I dropped him off and told him to call her, and she called to let me know she’d picked him up just as I got here.” MacGyver pulled a face. “She wasn’t pleased!”

“Mm.” Willis tapped his pen on the table. “What will you do with him and his ultimate worm now?”

“I honestly don’t know.” MacGyver put the disk back in his pocket and stood up. “Hey, thanks Willis.”

“Don’t mention it.” Willis watched MacGyver leave his office, then turned back to his computer, studying the copy he’d made of Marius’s program as it crawled across the screen.

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Victoria James rolled to a halt outside the Phoenix Foundation, scanning the parking lot. She smiled, seeing a familiar brown Jeep parked near the door.

“Found you!”

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MacGyver rubbed his eyes and scrubbed his hands through his hair. He glanced at his watch, shaking his head at how late it had got, and then at his phone hoping for a message from either Kate or Detective Murphy. He found neither, but read through fifteen panicky messages from Marius before shaking his head again and shoving the phone back into his pocket.

He still didn’t know what to do about Marius and Shai-Hulud. If Victoria James was after them, she wouldn’t stop until she’d either got them or until she was dead. He couldn’t go and collect Marius in case she was still tailing him, he couldn’t go home in case there was another, better bomb waiting for him, and he couldn’t stay at Phoenix forever. MacGyver sighed, made a decision, and got to his feet. At least if he went home and found his apartment rigged to explode, he had a fighting chance of defusing it without putting anyone else in danger, and Marius would remain safe.

He put on his jacket and fished out his keys. As he turned to leave the office, all the lights went out.

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MacGyver walked through the empty building, his sneakers quiet on the carpet. Though it was dark, he found the fuse box easily and struck a match, holding it up and using the light to check the fuses. He frowned, seeing they were all intact. He turned, planning to go to the reception desk and see if the cleaners had flipped the master switch by mistake, but saw a shadow move in the corridor outside and froze in place.

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Victoria had waited until the last of the cars departed and the Jeep was alone under the parking lot light. Then she’d waited a while longer, in case anyone left on foot. Once darkness had fallen, she’d got out of her car, entered the door code she’d learned watching Phoenix staff through her binoculars and slipped into the building. Reaching behind the reception desk, she had tripped the switches she found there, plunging the dimly lit building into complete darkness.

Phoenix hadn't changed much since the last time she'd been there, and familiarity with the layout let her go straight to the elevators and up to MacGyver's floor. Creeping along the corridor, she drew her gun, holding it low in both hands. She glanced into an empty office, seeing a light blinking on a computer at the back. If she was really lucky, she might even find the worm program here too... She listened outside MacGyver's door, but heard nothing. She chanced a glance around the door, but the room was empty. Crossing to the chair, she laid a hand on the seat, finding it still warm. She rifled through the backpack lying on the floor but the disk wasn't there. It wasn't in the computer either, and Victoria frowned. Perhaps when she caught up with MacGyver, she could use her powers of persuasion to find out where he'd hidden the disk. She touched the knife in her pocket and smiled, thinking how much she would enjoy persuading him to talk...

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MacGyver crouched down behind a filing cabinet, listening to the footsteps walking past. The sharp click of heels on the corridor floor passed and faded, and he heard them stop at the end. Lying down to avoid being seen, he peeked around the doorframe, just in time to see Victoria James's back disappearing around the corner. He sat back on his heels, wondering what to do. If he left and then called the police, he'd be safe but Victoria would have access to all Phoenix's computer data, including a couple of top-secret government projects they were working on. If he called the police and stayed until they arrived, Victoria would shoot her way out and people would get hurt. He got to his feet, deciding that the only way to stop Victoria and prevent anyone else getting hurt was to capture her himself. He pulled out his phone and dialled, listening for returning footsteps as the dial tone buzzed in his ear.

"Marius?" MacGyver stood up, checked both directions and set off after Victoria along the corridor.

"MacGyver? Geez, I can hardly hear you!" Marius paused his computer, glancing guiltily at the hacking program he'd been running. He glanced at Detective Murphy, listening to music and cooking dinner in the kitchen, but she didn't seem to have heard the phone ring.

"Marius?" MacGyver whispered, flattening himself against the wall as he heard footsteps. "Marius, I need you to do something for me. No questions!" MacGyver waited until Marius calmed down, looking out for Victoria as he passed empty offices.

"What do you need?" Marius sounded scared.

"I'm at Phoenix. Victoria James is here with me. She's after me and after Shai-Hulud, and I need you to hack Phoenix and find a way to track where in the building she is before she finds me and shoots me. Can you do that?"

"Whoa..." Marius was silent for a moment. "I dunno."

"Come on, Marius! I need FOURZEROFOUR!" MacGyver realised his voice had risen, and crouched down behind a desk. In the server room opposite, he could see Victoria's shadowy silhouette bending over a desk.

"Yeah." MacGyver heard Marius take a deep breath. "Yeah. Right." He clamped the phone between his ear and his shoulder and tapped the keyboard. "OK, FOURZEROFOUR reporting for duty."

"Tell me what you need." MacGyver looked around the office for something to help him capture Victoria, reaching out and helping himself to a length of cable.

"Uh, your password and an idea of what system you guys run on." Now that he was working on the computer, Marius sounded more confident and a lot less scared. He nodded as MacGyver gave him the information, typing it into his computer and working his way around Phoenix's defences. "OK, I'm in. What do you want me to do?"

"Can you tell which computers are being used right now?" MacGyver stretched the cable between his hands and crept across the corridor, crouching low to avoid being seen.

"Maybe. Hang on." MacGyver heard typing in the background as Marius navigated the Phoenix computer's maze-like structure. "OK, there's three being used right now, but I can't tell you where they are, only what number terminal each one is."

"That'll do." MacGyver crouched down outside the server room door, seeing Victoria's shadow move as she crossed the room. "Tell me."

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Victoria typed, working her way around Phoenix's systems. She bypassed some interesting looking files, determined to find Shai-Hulud. She typed a command and pressed 'enter', but instead of finding the data she'd requested, the computer whirred and clicked and the cursor froze on the screen.

"Now what?" Victoria frowned and re-entered her command, but the computer refused to cooperate.

The screen blanked, and words scrolled across it in blue:

>HI SCUMBAG

>THIS TIME I'VE FOUND YOU

>GIVE UP

The screen filled with 'giveupgiveupgiveup', line after line filling the screen and bathing Victoria's face in blue light.

"NOW!" Marius yelled and MacGyver leaped up, throwing the loop of cable over Victoria's head like a lasso. He pulled the loop tight, hoping to trap Victoria's arms against her sides, but she squirmed and threw off the cable, reaching into her pocket and pulling out the gun. MacGyver froze as she thumbed back the safety and pointed it at him.

"Not good enough, MacGyver." Victoria shook her head. "Now give me the disk and I'll consider not shooting you!"

----- Part Four -----

“Hey,” MacGyver held up both hands. “No need for anyone to get shot!” He took a step back as Victoria scowled at him, bumping into the wastepaper basket next to the desk. He glanced down at the same time as Victoria, quickly hooked a foot into the bin and kicked. The bin flew up, knocking Victoria’s gun out of her hand.

Victoria yelled in rage, leaping forwards and swinging a punch at MacGyver. Grabbing the keyboard from the computer on the desk, MacGyver blocked the punch. Holding the keyboard like a baseball bat, he hit Victoria in the side of the head and stepped forward, meaning to grab Victoria.

“Can we please talk about this?!” MacGyver yanked a cable out of the side of the computer and grabbed the front of Victoria’s jacket and wrapped the cable around her. “I don’t want to hurt you!” “Oh yeah?” Victoria drove her elbow into MacGyver’s stomach, winding him. “Too bad!” She spun around and unleashed a vicious uppercut into MacGyver’s chin. “I want to hurt you as much as possible!” She took a step back and aimed a kick at MacGyver’s knee.

MacGyver jumped back and Victoria circled him, breathing hard.

“Last time we met, you cost me a hundred thousand dollars!” Victoria punched and MacGyver dodged. “Last time we met, you ended up going out of an eighth floor window!” MacGyver scooped a disk drive off the desk, swinging it by the cable. “I thought you were dead!”

“I’m just not that easy to kill!” Victoria ducked under the whirling disk drive and swung her foot in a sweep, which MacGyver jumped. Disks cascaded out of the box he knocked over, raining down on Victoria. MacGyver stooped, wrapping his arms around Victoria and squeezing. Victoria lurched to her feet, braced her feet against a filing cabinet and pushed. MacGyver’s foot slipped on the disks littering the floor and he overbalanced backwards, propelled across the server room by Victoria’s shove. He crashed into the tall computer towers lining the wall, hitting his head. MacGyver’s eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped to the floor, dragging Victoria with him.

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“Try that!” Marius pressed the enter key with a flourish. “Let’s see you get out of the building now!”

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Hearing was the first sense to return, a squeaking sound and a tuneless whistling.

MacGyver opened his eyes, squinting in the bright light. He registered that he was moving, the lights above him passing like the stripes on a road. He blinked and tried to sit up, muzzily surprised when he worked out that he was tied down with one of his arms trapped underneath himself. He shook his head, trying to focus.

Then it came flooding back: Victoria, the fight, slipping on the disks and falling backwards into darkness. He raised his head, seeing Victoria in front of him, whistling as she pushed him along the corridor on a computer trolley.

“Welcome back.” Victoria’s smile was predatory. “In case you’re wondering, you’re worth more alive than dead.” She shrugged. “I guess for the extra payday, I can put up with you for a little longer.” She stopped the trolley and reached out, pressing the elevator call button on the wall beside her. “Now all I need to make my day complete is for you to tell me where the disk is.” She produced her gun from her pocket.

“No way.” MacGyver shifted in the trolley, testing his bonds. Victoria had tied computer cable around his chest and arms, but his legs were relatively free.

“No problem.” Victoria shrugged. “After I drop you off, I’ll just come back and find it. It’s got to be here somewhere, right?”

“You sure about that?” MacGyver shifted, reaching into his back pocket with his fingers. He crooked a finger under his Swiss Army knife and pulled it out, keeping one eye on Victoria. She turned to the elevator panel, pressing the button again. MacGyver hooked the knife on the edge of the trolley and pulled, feeling one of the attachments open and hoping it was a blade. He sawed frantically at the cable while Victoria mashed elevator button, feeling the cable stretch and then part.

“Where is this elevator?” She hit the panel with the side of her fist and the elevator doors flew open, greasy cables glistening in the light. “Dammit!”

MacGyver leaped up off the trolley and pushed it into Victoria, tumbling her backwards. She grabbed at the edge of the elevator door, but her hand slipped on the slick surface and, with a yell of rage, she fell backwards into the shaft.

MacGyver pushed the trolley out of the way and leaned over the drop, hearing her yell fade away into the darkness. A wave of dizziness overcame him and he leaned against the wall, sliding down to sit on the carpet next to the elevator. He felt suddenly very tired.

He jumped as his phone rang, pulling it out of his pocket and staring at the screen before flipping the phone open.

“Hi Kate.” He shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. “Yeah, Marius is with Murphy at the moment, so he’s safe.” He shifted, the bruises from his fight with Victoria making their presence felt. “No, there’s no way she could have survived the fall.” He got up, rubbing the back of his head.

“Sure, we can meet up in the morning. Tell Marius his program is safe, would you? Victoria never got hold of it.” He listened, then nodded. “Sounds good, see you then.” He waited until Kate hung up the call before closing his phone and sliding it back into his pocket.

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MacGyver walked down the stairs and into the Phoenix Foundation reception area, feeling in his jacket for his keys. The dark hole made by the open elevator doors caught his attention and he crossed the lobby, steeling himself to see the crumpled shape of Victoria at the bottom of the shaft. He took a breath and peered in, seeing only cables and litter. Frowning, he returned to the desk and pulled out a flashlight from the cupboard underneath.

Shining the flashlight into the shaft confirmed his suspicions – Victoria’s body was nowhere to be seen. He frowned and ran his hand through his hair, not understanding. There was no way Victoria could have survived the fall.

He walked across to the front door, looking out across the parking lot. His Jeep was alone under the light, and Victoria’s blue sedan was nowhere to be seen.

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In a darkened motel room, somewhere in Los Angeles, Victoria scanned the dark message boards, looking for interesting contracts. Her fall down the shaft had been terrifying, and the landing into the accumulated trash at the end had been painful. But Victoria was tougher (and luckier) than most gave her credit for, and now she was angry as well. She would try for MacGyver again, and next time she would collect the generous bounty that had been offered for him. Next time...

She moved the mouse and clicked on the next contract offer, this one with a signature she didn’t recognise. Her eyebrows lifted as she read the message clearly meant for her alone. The terms were generous, and she read the last sentences out loud to herself.

"I hope you will join us in our quest to rid this fine nation of a thorn which has long rankled in it's side. I hope you will join us in ridding the world of MacGyver!"
It was signed E.V.L.

The End