

Under the Wire

Phoenix Foundation Headquarters L.A. Division

MacGyver sat dolefully at his desk, staring at the computer screen in front of him as if it would automatically download its contents into his brain. He hadn't been in the office for weeks – mainly because it usually meant red tape and endless paperwork. But today, he'd finally had to give in and face the music.

Pete had Mac scheduled to do an audit on a company called Aurix Aeronautics with Nikki Carpenter in a couple of months, and Mac had to do his homework in advance if he wanted to do the job right. Getting a feel for Aurix, and exactly what technologies were involved, however, wasn't anywhere near as interesting as field work.

Sheesh, when I get older I have a whole lot more of this to look forward to...

MacGyver tapped a few keys and brought up more information and classified schematics. This time, it actually piqued his curiosity a little, and he sat up from his slouched position to read.

The audit he was going to be doing had been initiated by NASA – Aurix were supplying some key systems for the space shuttle program, and the space agency wanted to know exactly what they were getting, and who they were dealing with.

Images of thruster control circuits and C.A.D. diagrams filled Mac's head and he smiled. If you were going to have to deal with paperwork, then at least this was *his* kind of paperwork.

He settled into his chair to digest the electronic bounty when the door to his office swung open and Nikki breezed in.

“Don't tell me you're bored with the Aurix stuff already and want to pick my brains so you don't need to read anymore of it?” MacGyver smiled cheekily at Nikki, teasing her. It was the usual game of wit and sarcasm the two liked to bounce off one another.

This time, though, Nikki wasn't playing. “I haven't had chance to even look yet.” She shook her head, and her expression said she was the bearer of bad news. “We finally have a lead on Roger Mariotte,” she sighed.

Mac straightened in his seat just a tad more. Mariotte had been like a ghost for months since the whole affair on Flight LA4177. The F.B.I. and C.I.A. hadn't had any luck in finding him. It was like Mariotte had simply disappeared. That small fact had been a constant worry to MacGyver, because he couldn't shake the feeling that Mariotte would try to hurt Sam again.

“What have you got?” Mac almost snapped.

Nikki cocked her head back towards the door, and MacGyver obediently followed her back to her office. On Nikki's desk, a video image blinked on her computer screen over and over again. She clicked on a cursor with her mouse and zoomed in.

"This CCTV footage is from a gas station in Alameda. You can clearly see its Mariotte at the counter paying for fuel and groceries."

The alarm the images caused was easily apparent in Mac's expression. "Alameda..? Heck, he's not even in a different state! This is too close for comfort." *Sam...what if he's come back for Sam?*

Nikki appeared to sense his fear and laid a hand on his forearm. "I've already sent two of our people down there to check it out. Pete approved it as soon as he saw the pictures."

MacGyver ran a hand through the front of his hair in exasperation and then shook his head. "No. I need to go down there myself. If this is about Sam then..."

"Then we'll take care of it. We'll keep him safe, I promise." Nikki's eyes flashed with sincerity, but there was something else Mac couldn't quite make out. A tinge of knowledge, perhaps, that he wasn't quite privy to yet? "Actually, Pete wants to see you in his office..."

MacGyver whirled around on the spot and marched upstairs. If there was one thing he hated, it was being left in the dark, especially when it concerned his son.

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***Pete Thornton's Office
Phoenix Foundation Headquarters
L.A. Division***

MacGyver knocked on Pete Thornton's door but didn't wait to enter. If anything, he'd expected Pete to be waiting for him, hoping to talk him out of going to Alameda. What Mac found however, was Pete sitting quietly at his desk, with a U.S.A.F. general seated opposite him.

"MacGyver, we've been waiting for you." Pete gestured with his hand. "This is Ben Harpham. He's just flown in from Europe - a U.S. base in the U.K. to be exact."

Mac shook Harpham's proffered hand, but was somewhat taken aback by his presence at all. He'd wanted to talk to Pete about Mariotte, not whatever this was. If Pete was aware of what was happening with Mariotte, he didn't show it.

So what have I just walked into? MacGyver mused silently as he took a seat. "So how exactly can I help? Nikki said you wanted to see me?"

Harpham took off his cap, sat it down in front of Pete's nameplate and took a deep breath. "Yesterday, whilst on a mission to enforce a no fly zone, one of our F16's was

shot down over Bosnia. The pilot hasn't made any contact as of yet, and N.A.T.O. won't condone sending in a full search and rescue team as it may stir up the situation over there. It's been pretty tense of late, especially since *Operation Deny Flight* took a more active role, and we bombed some actual targets last month."

MacGyver took in the information, fiddling with a pencil he'd found on the edge of Pete's desk. The General seemed to let the troubleshooter digest what he'd been told, then continued with the real reason he was here.

"This situation is pretty personal to me – you see the pilot, Lt. Pete Kaminski was a friend of my son's. They did their training together."

"If N.A.T.O. won't let a team go in, how can we help?" Mac asked, feeling the officer's pain.

Pete answered for Harpham. "The Phoenix board has agreed to send in an operative "under the wire" so to speak – an unofficial mission that will be denied should anything go wrong."

Finally, MacGyver understood. "I take it I'm the operative in question," he asked.

"Only if you agree," Pete confirmed. "We expect conditions to be pretty much like they were in Romania last time, and you handled that perfectly."

Mac bit into his bottom lip. He didn't think things had gone perfectly that time at all. Sometimes he still had nightmares about what had happened to Viktor and the atrocities that had gone on over there, right under the rest of the world's nose.

And what about Mariotte if I go to Bosnia? The thought, and Sam's safety, lingered in his mind. "Pete, Nikki just told me about Mariotte in Alameda?"

Harpham's expression said he had no clue what the men were talking about, but Pete held up a hand, and his own features softened as he obviously felt Mac's concerns. "At the moment, it's just a lead. We have good people here that can handle it, including Nikki. Lt. Kaminski isn't so fortunate. He needs you, MacGyver."

Was that emotional blackmail?

Mac knew Pete wasn't beyond tugging at heart strings to get what he wanted, and a man's life did hang in the balance – if, of course, the downed pilot was still alive.

"Okay, I'll do it, but you better have someone watching over Sam while I'm gone..."

Pete smiled. "I already have Atkins tailing him."

* * * *

Somewhere over Bosnia
24 Hours Later...

MacGyver looked out into the clouds as the tail of the private Phoenix jet he was aboard opened up. It was nighttime, and he was about to be dropped over the territory where the F16 had been shot down.

On any other occasion, his fear of heights might have already kicked in, but tonight, all he could think of was what was happening back home while he was here.

Was Sam safe? Where was Mariotte?

Mac tried to push the lingering thoughts out of his mind and focused on checking his chute one last time. He tugged on the harness, and nodded to the operative working the tail.

The subtle red light beside him turned to a glowing green and the man gave Mac a thumbs up. It was time to leave.

Swallowing hard, MacGyver stepped forwards until there was nothing beneath his boots but air and abruptly felt himself freefalling through the heavens. Even with his fears, it was an amazing sensation – to be one with the sky like a graceful bird of prey.

He savored the moment, checking the altitude gauge on his harness strap until it was time to pull the cord and open his parachute.

The dive was over all too quickly, and as the chute opened he was tugged backwards and up. No sooner had he settled into a vertical position than he realized something was wrong.

The wind that had been light and southwesterly when they'd taken off was suddenly much stronger here, and it had changed direction to almost the opposite of before. He tried to correct, guiding the chute as best he could, but up ahead was a copse of trees, and there was no way he was going to miss them.

Oh great...

Mac's boots skimmed the treetops for several seconds, and then he was plunged into a large oak that would have given the one in Sherwood a run for its money. He dropped rapidly until his fall was broken by the canopy of his parachute snagging in the upper branches.

With an undignified jolt, he came to rest high off the ground, with only a sliver of moonlight through the clouds and branches to give any illumination to the scene.

MacGyver took a moment to regain his composure and then reached down for the release of his harness. He slammed his palm down hard on it, expecting to tumble to the earth below, but nothing happened.

So, Mariotte is running loose in L.A. I've been blown into woodland, and now my harness is jammed and I'm left literally high and dry. Can today get any worse?

Mac slid his right hand down to the pocket in his field jacket where he'd stored his knife, but annoyingly, the harness was completely covering the flap, and it wouldn't slide out of the way. He wriggled, but it only seemed to tighten the harness more.

I guess it can get worse...

Somewhere to his left there was a noise, and Mac instantly stopped grousing and concentrated on the sound. Someone or something was approaching. The question now, was friendly locals, or Serbs who would take him prisoner, if he was lucky.

Mac strained his eyes in the darkness, and after a few seconds was able to see three people moving through the trees – and they were definitely trying to be covert, even though they were dressed just like villagers.

Dare he ask for their help?

“Ugh, folks...would you mind giving me just a little hand here?” MacGyver tried to sound casual, maybe funny even. Heck, it always worked for Jack Dalton.

The group stopped dead in their tracks, and after what seemed a moment's deliberation moved closer. Mac realized he was looking at two young women in their twenties, and a teenage boy.

The girls seemed friendly enough, at least from their expressions, but the kid was holding an AK47, which was now firmly pointed at Mac. His stoic, unwavering gaze suggested he would use the weapon in a heartbeat.

The elder of the two girls put her hand on the barrel of the gun and gently pulled it down to point at the muddy earth they walked on. “Not everyone is our enemy,” she soothed, and then turned to Mac, scrutinizing him. “Are you an American pilot?”

Mac licked his lips. He was a good judge of character, but just how much could he divulge to these people, when he didn't even know who they were, or who they worked for? He decided on just enough information not to be lying. “No...I'm not a pilot, but I am American. I guess you could say I'm looking for someone.”

The girl struggled to stifle a giggle and her face grew into a warm smile. “Well, Mr. American, you're not likely to find anyone hanging around in that tree!” She put a hand on her chest. “I am Ana.”

Mac smiled back as warmly as he could, hoping to soften the other two locals bravado as he had Ana's. “You have a point there,” he agreed. “Name's MacGyver, and I'm pleased to meet you folks. I don't suppose you happen to have a knife I could cut my harness with? I'm kinda stuck?”

Ana turned to her companions and spoke rapidly in her own dialect. After a moment, the other girl, and the kid with the AK47 shook their heads.

Ana frowned. “I'm sorry, we have nothing suitable. I could go back to the village, but we're really not supposed to be out here...”

MacGyver guessed the three were part of some local resistance type group, and he didn't want to get them caught by the bad guys, just to get him out of a tree. It was time to think outside the box. He twisted in the harness that was causing all the trouble, spinning around so he could get a better view of what was around him.

In the darkness, it wasn't easy, but in the distance he thought he saw the glimmer of something metallic. Mac squinted, forcing his eyes to focus on the thing. It was a derelict 4x4, and by the looks of it, it had been hit by a shell. Some parts of the cab were still intact, though.

MacGyver spun back around to face Ana, who was still watching him intently. He nodded towards the hulk of a truck. "Would you mind going over to that truck and seeing if there's something sharp I could use? Maybe a shard of glass or metal?"

Ana nodded and ambled off, leaving her friends to watch over Mac. He wondered if that was intentional, given he could be a spy working for the enemy. After all, they knew nothing about him, and owed him nothing.

Ten minutes later, Ana returned empty handed. She shrugged. "All the glass is in tiny pieces," she explained. "And the metal is torn and twisted, but there is nothing I could get free without a blowtorch!"

"Okay, thanks anyway..." MacGyver bit into his bottom lip.

There was something he was missing here. He glanced over at the wreck again and realized it had once been a Mitsubishi – and not just any Mitsubishi, it was a Japanese import variant, and that sometimes meant they came with emergency flares in the footwell on the passenger side. It was a huge long shot to think that the flare would still be present and not damaged, but it was worth a look.

Mac grimaced apologetically. "Look, I hate to ask, but could you go back over there? Look on the front passenger side near the floor. There might be a cylindrical flare fastened to the A panel trim."

Ana cocked her head, smiled, and then padded back over to the LWB Pajero.

The boy with the gun scowled. "You waste our time. We could be elsewhere, killing Serbs!"

MacGyver looked the kid over and doubted seriously if he'd ever killed anyone. Whether he was capable was anyone's guess. "Taking lives isn't the answer to anything," he offered carefully. "There are always solutions, y'know, if you look hard enough?"

"That's good, coming from an American," the kid retorted. "You people seem to worship guns. I've seen on TV, you all have them in your homes, stuffed in your belts or hidden in your cars!"

Mac lifted both arms away from his body. "You won't find one on me..."

Ana appeared from the darkness, breaking up the conversation. In her left hand, she held a very tatty flare. “Is this it?” Without letting Mac answer, she clambered up the tree and onto a lower branch just high enough to pass it to him.

MacGyver was surprised and impressed with how agile she was, considering the long skirt she was wearing. *These people have had to adapt, and fast, or die...*

Mac stretched his right arm until it felt like muscle and sinew would snap, and it just gave him enough reach to snatch the flare. “Thank you. Now you folks might wanna take a few steps back while I use this to get down...”

Ana slithered back down the oak and practically had to tug the boy back to a safe distance. The other girl was exceptionally quiet, and extremely obedient. She moved into the shadows of the trees like a wraith, almost vanishing at Mac’s instruction.

Once MacGyver was sure it was safe, he took a breath and ignited the flare. Its scarlet glow lit up the night, and it was a beacon to the enemy, but also a savior to the troubleshooter.

Carefully directing the heat to the lines on the parachute, Mac cut through each one in turn until he felt the last one snap. With a crack, Mac suddenly felt weightless as his body tumbled to the ground. As his frame hit the dirt below, he instinctively rolled as he’d been trained.

It was a harsh fall, but MacGyver was lucky enough to escape with just a bumps and bruises. He scrambled to his feet and brushed off sods of soil and loose mud from his jacket. Then after fumbling for a few seconds more, he was finally able to retrieve his knife and cut away the rest of the harness that had kept him up the tree.

As he worked, his local companions watched him. When MacGyver eventually stowed his knife back in his pocket, Ana stepped forwards, her hands clasped in front of her. “This is my brother, Velid, and my sister Kadira.”

Mac nodded to the pair but focused on Ana. He had a mission here, after all, and time was wasting. “Ana, do you know anything about an American pilot being shot down around these parts? He’s the person I’m here to find...” It was a risk divulging even that much, but he needed intel.

Ana took down a long breath, glanced warily at her very edgy brother, and then nodded. “We know where he is. We have been helping him since he came down from the sky much as you did.”

There was a hesitancy in her voice that said she still wasn’t sure whether to trust MacGyver or not, and Mac couldn’t blame the girl. These were harsh times in this area, and death could come swiftly from the Serbs with their ideas of genocide.

Mac hunkered down just a touch, until his eyes were level with the girl’s. Eye contact was always a good way of gaining trust. He put a hand on Ana’s shoulder. “Will you take me to him? He could be in a great deal of danger. Heck, we all could...”

“Why should we believe a word you say?” Velid spat, the AK47 in his grasp moving dangerously close to targeting MacGyver again. “You could be in league with the Serbs, and we could be leading you to this man to kill him!”

“But I’m not,” MacGyver said with total conviction. “You can frisk me, you won’t find any weapons.” *Of course, real killers can use their hands as the weapon, he thought dryly.* But better not offer up that fact to Velid – the kid was obviously pretty bitter about trusting people.

“I trust you,” Ana broke the moment. “Kadira will return to our village, and I will take you to the pilot with Velid.” She looked to the younger girl expectantly, and Kadira nodded and ambled off onto a nearby pebbled path. “Come, it’s this way...”

Ana guided MacGyver through the copse with Velid bringing up the rear. The boy was stonily silent, and Mac noted, very jumpy. In his nervous state, it would be easy for someone to get hurt or worse.

Mac made a mental note to be more careful around Ana’s brother as he stepped over a small rivulet of water, splashing through a shallow area the other side.

Ana smiled at his lack of local knowledge of the terrain.

“Hey, it’s kinda dark out here,” Mac made light of the moment as best he could. “How about giving a guy a break?” He shuffled up closer to Ana, his hands in his pockets as he walked. “Where are your parents?” He asked carefully, jerking a thumb back to Velid. “Did something happen to make him so bitter?”

Ana shrugged. “Our parents are dead, killed for their beliefs. I suppose you could say the war happened, if you can even call it that.” She stopped walking and looked at MacGyver with eyes filled with something he couldn’t quite fathom. “Why doesn’t the outside world do more?”

Mac wished he had the answer, but whether it was here, East Zambula, or some South American state, no one seemed to care until it was too late. Sanctions just didn’t work fast enough when people were dying.

He looked back to Ana with sadness. “I just don’t know...”

Ana nodded, as if she expected the answer, and then pointed to an abandoned, bullet-ridden house. MacGyver instantly thought about the three bears, or Hansel and Gretel, except this was no fairy tale.

The house had once been painted white, and there were remnants of floral curtains at the windows. One whole wall had been blown out by a shell, though, shattering any illusions.

Ana stepped over the rubble of the wall and grabbed a carefully placed lantern from behind an old black stove that sat on its side. She lit the lantern, and then moved on

again until she reached a pile of debris that appeared to be from a collapsed section of roof.

Ana put the lantern down and grabbed some of the wreckage, quickly pulling it to one side. It was then MacGyver realized the rubble was actually carefully placed camouflage for a cellar door. He dug, helping the girl to finish the task, while Velid stood guard.

Once the door was free, Ana grabbed a large metal ring and tugged. The thing screeched open with a rusty growl and Mac winced.

Ana ignored him and took the lantern in one hand, deftly clambering down set of steep stairs into the unknown. MacGyver followed, watching his step on the ancient wooden rungs.

At the bottom, he noted he was in a pretty small room that smelled of damp earth and mould. Water dripped from the ceiling in several places. In the far corner, sitting in the only totally dry spot on the floor, was a man, mulling over a wad of paperwork. He glanced up as he realized Ana had company, and the look on his rugged features said he was not happy to have been found.

MacGyver's eyes scanned the man's clothes – they were military issue, yes, but definitely not a USAF flight suit. In fact, Mac was sure they weren't U.S. issue at all.

To confirm his suspicions, the stranger pulled a SIG Sauer automatic faster than lightning, and pointed it at the troubleshooter.

Mac winced; things were not going to plan.

“And just who the bloody hell are you?” The man's accent wasn't American. In fact, he had a British accent – not an Oxford or Cambridge man for sure, though. Mac guessed the guy was from Yorkshire, or thereabouts.

“Name's MacGyver...and I'm guessing you're *not* Lt. Peter Kaminski?” Mac slowly moved to put his hands in the air. His newfound “friend” looked more than annoyed, and his trigger finger itched like he wasn't afraid to use it.

The gun didn't waver. “You guessed right, Pretty Boy.”

Part Two

MacGyver kept eye contact with the stranger. The man was unwavering, and given his choice of weapon, Mac guessed he was either a mercenary, or British Special Forces. Given his accent, the latter seemed most likely.

The question now, was could it be a coincidence he was here, or was his presence connected to the downed F16?

Mac licked his lips and made his choice, deciding that the situation deserved the truth, for better or worse. “I’m here shall we say, off the record, searching for a U.S. pilot...”

The gun still remained stoically in position. “That’s impossible, mate, Peter Kaminski doesn’t exist – the name, and the downing of the F16 was simply a cover to get me into Bosnia. I’m with British Intelligence, and I’m here to gather information to give N.A.T.O. more leverage to launch bigger operations in the area. Which puts you in a very tricky spot, I’d say. So, you know who I am, what say you show and tell who you are before I decide to put a bullet in you?”

MacGyver slowly lowered his arms, even though the other man hadn’t given him permission. Showing intimidation now was not going to get him anywhere. He worked for the DXS long enough to know how these people were trained.

“I work for a think tank called the Phoenix Foundation. Couple of days ago a U.S.A.F. general named Harpham approached us about the F16 going down, and about the loss of Pete Kaminski. He said the authorities wouldn’t get the pilot out, and asked us, specifically me, to come on in and save the day. He said Kaminski had trained with his son, which kinda goes against your story...”

The Brit finally let the Sig Sauer drop into his lap, and he reflexively flicked on the safety. His expression said he was still wary, but then that was part of his training too. “I’m Paul Watkins, employee of her Majesty’s Secret Service, and you’ve just walked into one bloody big mess up, *Mister* MacGyver...”

Mac shook his head and finally dared to walk up to Watkins. The man wasn’t all that tall, but he certainly had presence. “Look, I’m in the dark here? Care to fill me in?”

Watkins pushed the papers he’d been reading to one side and looked up at the ceiling, apparently deciding just what to say. “Someone on the inside – probably your General Harpham is obviously working with the Serbs. He must have known about my mission and he’s used you, and your Phoenix Foundation to search me out for the enemy.”

Mac wasn’t so sure. He ran a hand through his mullet and spun around, thinking hard. “That doesn’t make sense, why would a U.S. general help the Serbs? It’s not like they have millions to offer him?”

Watkins pushed up from the floor and stuffed the Sig in his belt. “How the hell should I know? What I *do* know is that the Serbs are probably right on your tail. Let me guess, I bet Harpham’s people supplied your gear? Well you better search it fast for a tracking device.”

MacGyver’s brow furrowed. Harpham’s people had supplied his gear, which was pretty unusual really, considering he worked for Phoenix. Without saying a word, he pulled his knife from his pocket and began working the lining away from his jacket. The stitches were tight, like they were the original factory ones, but the sharpness of his blade made light work of them.

He sighed as he spotted a flat and very small device carefully sewn behind one of the breast pockets.

“Okay, so you’re right, Harpham’s in this up to his eyeballs, but why? I still don’t buy money or politics.” Mac slipped his knife back into his trouser pocket and wondered if he ought to search those too. Considering he hadn’t another pair, he settled on hoping they were clean.

“I don’t know why, and I don’t care. All I know is my mission is had it, thanks to the idiot.” Watkins scowl said his mind was thinking of much more colorful words to describe Harpham, and had Ana not been present, he would surely have used them.

MacGyver was impressed that the Brit had that much integrity, killer or not. “You’re right,” he admitted. “We should call in to our people and sort this mess...” He reached to his shoulder and loosened the strap on his backpack. It slid down and he tugged open the flap to retrieve his radio.

Or rather, what was left of it. He’d felt the pain of landing from the tree, but apparently the radio had been mortally wounded. The outer casing was cracked and several small components fell out as Mac gently shook it. He rolled his eyes.

Watkins couldn’t help a small grin and his Yorkshire accent surfaced strong and true. “I’d say that’s well and truly bugged...”

“What about yours?” Mac asked hopefully.

Watkins shrugged. “No radios. It’s too risky in my game. I have a rendezvous point when my mission is over, and if I don’t make it, I’m presumed compromised.”

Suddenly MacGyver felt like he was hitting his head against a brick wall. *Why did I accept this assignment when I could have been after Mariotte?* “So how the heck do we warn Phoenix and the authorities what’s going down?” He shook the radio, wishing he had something to work with, but the damage was beyond even him.

“This isn’t just about Harpham being a traitor.” Watkins kicked angrily at a grimy pillow he’d apparently been using. “I came here to find evidence of the atrocities going on. The world needs to see this so that N.A.T.O. is justified in more aggressive action. How can I finish my mission now the Serbs know who I am? Not to mention thanks to you, they’re probably outside already!”

Ana stepped forwards between the two men. Until now she’d been deathly silent, but she held a hand up like an ancient matriarch, silencing her companions. “Give me the tracker,” she almost demanded. “I will take it across country away from here. I can be your decoy.”

“No way!” Mac didn’t let her get chance to say more. “This isn’t a game. Those soldiers out there will kill you and your family for even being near us. What do you think they’d do if they found the tracker on you?”

“I know exactly what they’ll do,” she countered. “I’ve seen it enough times over the last few months, and I’m willing to take the risk.”

Mac wasn’t. “I said, no way!”

Watkins was apparently less concerned. “She’s right. The only way I can finish my job here is if the Serbs are tailing her, not me. It’s *that* important.”

“*Lives* are important,” MacGyver almost growled. “Not just some figures on a N.A.T.O. board.”

Ana put a calming hand on Mac’s forearm. “This *is* about lives and that’s why I’m doing it, don’t you see?”

MacGyver took a breath, rubbed at the stubble forming on his chin, and actually took a moment to think. While he didn’t necessarily agree with Watkins motives for sending the girl, he could see Ana’s, and at the end of the day he couldn’t really stop her anyway. “Okay,” he slowly agreed. “But it doesn’t mean I have to like it...” he shot Watkins a glance of disapproval, but the Brit either didn’t notice, or didn’t care.

Ana picked up the tracker and rolled it over in her palm, examining it before stuffing it into a pocket on her coat. “I will see you again when it is safe!”

Before Mac could argue, she was bounding up the steps back into the darkness of the outside world.

Watkins cocked his head seemingly in approval. “She’s got nerve, that lass.”

“Why do I get the impression she’s a long way to catch you up?” MacGyver’s scowl made it obvious it wasn’t a compliment. Watkins was a killer, not a humanitarian that was for sure.

The Brit saw the funny side of the comment, even though he obviously picked up on Mac’s implication. “You’re not exactly Napoleon Solo you know? Your entrance could definitely do with some work...” He chuckled wryly.

“Yeah well, you’re not exactly James Bond yourself – not with *that* accent.”

MacGyver glanced at the Sig Sauer. “So who are you really? I’m betting S.A.S.” He nodded to the automatic.

Watkins gave a small sarcastic salute. “Aye, you’re not wrong. D squadron, B troop at your service, Sir – at least I was, before being recruited to British Intelligence.” His eyes scrutinized Mac for a second, apparently evaluating. “You might work for a think tank now, but you’re no civvy, either, not originally.”

Mac took down a breath. It had been a long time since he’d thought about his bomb disposal training, and then his work with Pete prior to Phoenix. It was easy to forget he’d once been classed as a government man himself. “I used to work for the D.X.S.” he admitted. “So maybe with both our knowledge we can somehow save this situation?”

Watkins rubbed at his chin like his was some grizzled coal miner rather than an agent, but he didn't get chance to reply. A noise from topside made both men whirl around and stare at the steps down into the cellar.

Someone was coming, and if it was a Serb patrol, they were both probably as good as dead.

Watkins pulled his automatic and aimed, while Mac grabbed a nearby axe handle and took position with it behind the steps, hoping to knock the newcomer's feet from under them should they be the enemy.

The wood creaked with the interloper's weight, and then Ana appeared from the darkness, tears streaking her face, as she gulped down air between sobs.

MacGyver was at the girl's side first. He dropped the handle and grabbed her by the shoulders, looking her in the eyes to try and calm her. "Ana, what's happened?"

More footsteps from above, and two seconds later, Velid appeared, he looked more angry than upset, and his hands shook with temper as he clasped his AK47. "It's a massacre! No one stood a chance!"

"Hey kid? Will you shut your mouth so your sister can explain?" Watkins icy glare stopped Velid in his tracks, and he swallowed hard, but didn't speak again. Apparently even he knew Watkins wasn't to be trifled with.

"Ana?" Mac tried again. "What's going on?"

Ana rubbed her forearm across her face, wiping away the streaks were she'd been crying. "We heard gunfire," she sniffed. "We followed the sound back to our village, and when we arrived the Serb soldiers were there. We missed most of the attack; by the time we reached the outskirts everyone was dead – even Kadir." She choked back more tears at her sister's name and MacGyver suddenly felt guilty.

Has the village been attacked because the Serbs were following me? Did they figure out I got some help getting outta the tree?

Mac let go of Ana's shoulders and closed his eyes for a second. It was never easy in these situations – never easy to admit that as much as he tried, sometimes his actions caused suffering and pain. And he felt that pain, every dang time an assignment turned out like this.

Watkins obviously had no such cross to bear. "We need to go back to the village." He turned around and hunkered over, grabbing his pack from where he'd been seated, along with the paperwork he'd been reading. "It's ironic, but the photos I can get of this are just what I need to take back home to get opinion behind more N.A.T.O. action."

"Is that all you can think of?" Mac snapped without thinking.

Watkins shrugged. “It’s what I’m here for.” He swung the pack over his shoulder and took the stairs two at a time out of the cellar.

Velid eyed MacGyver a moment, possibly waiting to see what move he would make. Eventually, the kid followed the Brit out into the night.

“We should help Paul,” Ana told MacGyver, her voice still quivering, but her forcefulness saying she was drawing strength from somewhere. “He might be an abrupt, sometimes even rude man, but what he’s doing here could actually help.” She took Mac’s hand, squeezed it, and then took off after her brother.

MacGyver waited just a second, amazed at her resilience, and then gave chase.

* * * *

The village was cold and silent. No birds chirped, no children laughed, even those cradling the bodies of their loved ones sobbed without making a sound.

A small and very chill breeze whipped up from the south, and as MacGyver stepped over the debris of people’s homes, he realized it had begun to rain – even the heavens wept for this community.

It reminded Mac of the village in Africa he’d recently liberated with the help of Jack Dalton. Miles apart and yet joined by a common problem – mankind’s cruelty to one another.

Mac bit into his lip as he watched Paul Watkins snapping away wildly with a high end camera. Would pictures be enough? He doubted it.

From somewhere close, a burst of staccato gunfire brought him from his melancholy thoughts. *More Serb soldiers?*

MacGyver broke into a sprint and was soon joined by Watkins, his Canon SLR replaced with the Sig Sauer. They reached a small fence that had been torn partly down by the Serbs, and the other side was Velid. He was hovering over a young Serbian soldier, his AK47 prodding the youth like an animal.

Mac slowed, realizing Velid had shot the Serb once already. “Hey, he’s down, there’s no need for any more violence.” He held up his hands and cocked a brow, urging Ana’s brother to be calm and not do anything rash.

Velid wasn’t apparently that easily swayed. He jerked his head behind them to a huge hole in the ground and several terrified villagers with shovels. “He was making my people dig a mass grave for all the villagers his kind killed! He deserves to die and I’m going to make sure that he does!”

MacGyver could see the hatred flaring in Velid’s eyes, and to a degree he could understand it, but he couldn’t condone another death. “Whoa there now, you better not kill him, we might need him for information...it could maybe save other people going through what your village has.”

Velid's hands shook, but Mac wasn't sure whether it was shock at what he'd done, or temper because he wasn't going to be allowed to finish the kill.

"Killing isn't the only way you know?" Mac soothed, trying to reach out, hoping there was still an ordinary teenager inside Velid's darkened soul somewhere. "In fact, it's no way at all... For heaven's sake; he's just a kid like you. You were once neighbors before Yugoslavia broke up, how can you all turn on each other so easily?"

Velid didn't answer, but the wounded Serb groaned and rolled onto his back, his left hand clutching at his right shoulder. The kid's eyes were full of fear, and they were locked onto MacGyver as if he was the last merciful man on the planet.

Mac knelt at the Serb's side and pulled away his hand to look at the wound. Velid's bullet had glanced off the very top of the youth's shoulder, taking a chunk of flesh, but nothing more. He'd been lucky so far.

MacGyver looked up, wondering what he could use to staunch the bleeding, and summarily found a piece of cloth from Ana's top being placed in his hand. He nodded in thanks and pressed it against the wound. "It's not bad," he assured the soldier, hoping he understood.

The youth gulped and shot Velid a glance.

Velid glared back, his finger tickling his rifle's trigger, but he didn't speak or move.

"I...I'm sorry for what happened here..." The Serb looked at Mac. "My father wanted me to be a proud soldier, insisted I fight for the cause...but I don't feel proud today." He looked at the ground as rain pelted down through the trees around them, splashing off his face like tears.

Mac carefully took his flattened roll of duct tape and used a few long strips to try and secure his makeshift dressing in place. As he worked, he kept his eyes locked on the soldier. "If you don't agree with what's happening, then why not try and change it?" He asked quietly.

"I'm but just one voice, and it would quickly be extinguished if I spoke of how I really feel." The Serb winced as he tried to sit up with Mac's help.

"One man, one voice, that's how it has to start," Mac pushed. "You can help us today, here, now, and all you have to do is give us some information."

"I'd say you owe us at least that," Watkins chimed in. "Seeing as how we stopped ol' Vicious Velid here from ripping your head off."

The soldier looked around the group and then licked his lips. He looked tired, and Mac knew he was hurting.

“I don’t really know much. I was a nobody, not allowed to know all the details. What I can tell you is that the commander of this region, Miodir Nikolić has been given top secret information by a U.S. officer.”

Watkins pushed forwards, hovering over the soldier with a definite air of menace. His voice grew deep and guttural, and everyone present knew that meant he would go to any lengths to get the answers he needed. “What kind of information?” He demanded. “And I don’t expect to be told a bunch of lies, because I think you know what that would get you?”

“The officer has given Nikolić the route of a flight of F15’s that are part of the *Deny Flight* operation. Nikolić has already given the order to try and shoot them down...” The soldier coughed and grabbed at his shoulder. For a moment, he closed his eyes in obvious pain.

Watkins didn’t flinch; he simply pulled a map from his pocket and stuffed it under the wounded youth’s nose. “Show me where your people are positioned, and I *might* let you live...” It was a growl, rather than a sentence.

“He sent a team with SA14 Gremlins here.” The Serb pointed on the map with a bloodied finger. “North of the region...and it’s to happen in the next four hours...” His voice waned and his eyes rolled back as he slipped into unconsciousness.

MacGyver watched him for a moment. The soldier would live, but if they didn’t do something about the missiles, the same might not be said for the F15 pilots.

“What are Gremlins?” Velid asked, apparently losing interest in the Serb now that he was no longer awake to intimidate.

“They’re a kind of portable surface to air missile,” Mac answered gravely. “And given the position this kid just pointed out on the map, they’re too far away to reach on foot – at least in the next four hours.”

Watkins shook his head and ran a hand over his very short hair in obvious disdain. “What a bloody mess. How are we supposed to do anything with no radio and no transport?”

Mac sucked down a breath. “I guess we have to improvise...”

Part Three

Ana had other ideas. “Our grandmother has an old diesel truck, and if the soldiers haven’t wrecked it along with everything else, you could take that? It’s beat up, but it drives.”

Mac didn’t hesitate. Even if the Serbs had damaged it, there was always a chance he could work his magic. “Can you show us?”

Ana nodded and pointed back the way they just came.

Velid apparently wasn't so enthusiastic about leaving. "What about him?" He jerked his AK47 to the Serb.

"I could take care of him?" Watkins offered, tapping the barrel of his Sig.

Ana shook her head. "No, there has been enough killing. I will come back and take care of him." She glared at her brother. "And *you*, are going to help me."

MacGyver sighed with relief as the girl led the way to her grandma's. At least some people still had morals; after all they'd been through. He only hoped some of Ana's pride and principles rubbed off on Velid – and soon.

* * * *

The truck was an old Ford transit flatbed that had seen better days, but it hadn't been damaged by the Serbs. With a few pumps of the pedal and a few silent prayers, MacGyver soon had it ticking over. It sounded like a tank, and plumed out more black smoke than Harry's old coal stove, but it moved a heck of a lot faster than being on foot.

Watkins took up position as shotgun, and with a quick wave Mac said goodbye to Ana and pulled the Ford out onto an old track. The road was barely more than something carts would move on, and it was filled with ruts and holes, but it was also safer than the only other road they could use – that would definitely have enemy checkpoints.

"Do you think the kid will kill the Serb?" Watkins asked after a while, meaning Velid.

"I hope not," Mac admitted. "People need to learn there are other ways." He looked pointedly at Watkins. "*You* need to learn there are other ways."

The ex S.A.S. operative laughed. "What? Reprogram this Neanderthal into a modern, caring Homo Sapien like you? I don't think that's going to happen any time soon."

Mac rolled his eyes. "Try it – you might be surprised." He dropped the Transit down a gear and was about to yank the wheel over hard to miss a tree stump when a hail of bullets spattered the windshield.

The toughened glass splintered into a myriad of spider's web sections and a plume of steam erupted from the totaled radiator.

The truck careered on forwards, ramming the tree stump hard and coming to a rest with one of its rear wheels still spinning. The hood popped up with the impact, and the engine roared in protest for several moments, then died.

Inside, MacGyver and Watkins lay slumped forwards, Mac's arms strewn over the wheel his hands had gripped seconds earlier.

From the tree line, two Serbian soldiers emerged; their Russian weapons poised to fire should the two prone forms in the Ford move.

The lead Serb signaled to his cohort to move to Watkins' side of the truck, while he took the driver's side. When no one inside moved, he strode closer, warily peering through the open window.

When he was within reach of his enemy, he seemed to relax a little, and that was when MacGyver made his move.

The troubleshooter sprang into life, punching the soldier right between the eyes before he could jerk back away from the truck.

On the other side, Watkins did much the same with the second Serb, albeit with a much stronger throw of his arm.

While Mac was forced to clamber from his seat and hit his foe again to silence him, Watkins was able to stand and watch his arms folded in apparent amusement. "Bit slow there DXS boy," he quipped.

MacGyver puffed out a breath, shook his sore knuckles as usual, and took a moment to regain his composure. "I'm not in this to hurt people; I'm here to help them."

Watkins shrugged and jerked a thumb at the still form of the man he'd hit. "Hey, if you weren't here he'd have had the flat of my hand straight to his nose bone. Lights out, right permanent."

MacGyver knew the move well. The force from the blow would have sent the Serb's nasal bone up into his brain, a very quick, quiet death used by the likes of Watkins. Whether he should be thankful Watkins had used restraint because of him, well, he wasn't sure on that one yet. For now, it was just good that he hadn't killed the man. "We can secure them both with some duct tape..." He tugged the roll from his pocket, rubbing absently at the back of his neck where he'd jarred it in the crash.

Watkins winced. "I hate leaving loose ends. Loose ends usually end up having big mouths later."

A brief memory from another mission flashed through MacGyver's mind – a memory of a Russian soldier in Afghanistan who he'd let live. The Russian had later returned the favor and allowed Mac, Zia and Ahmed to escape over the border.

"Sometimes compassion can go a long way, y'know?" Mac vocalized his thoughts, and Watkins simply shrugged as he began securing the soldier's with Mac's tape.

Once both Serbs were immobilized, MacGyver and Watkins picked up what little gear they had from the truck and began the journey back on foot. For awhile, neither man spoke. The chances of saving the Airforce pilots now were pretty slim, and that fact didn't sit well with Mac, or Watkins.

Eventually, the dirt track they were following widened, and an offshoot to the left appeared to lead to an abandoned farmhouse. The outbuildings were losing their roof tiles and the windows were mostly smashed in by stray bullets, vandals and a

multitude of other possible reasons, but sitting in front of the largest barn was an old Fiat.

MacGyver paused at the edge of the track and eyed the car. The two front tires were flat, but that could be with standing rather than punctures. He glanced over to Watkins who was checking out the path ahead like he expected an ambush. “We should check out the car. Maybe we can get it to run?”

“The tires are out and the battery is probably long dead looking at that old thing.” Watkins appeared uninterested, but MacGyver ignored him and padded up the impromptu road to the farm.

On close inspection, the tires appeared intact – at least he couldn’t see any bullet holes or obvious punctures. *Maybe we can re-inflate them?*

Of course, that was a mute point if the battery was dead. Mac peered through grimy windows, but there were no keys in the ignition. He tried the door, and it was open, so he clambered inside and rolled lithely under the dash. Taking out his knife, he swiftly cut through the relevant wires and hotwired the Fiat.

Nothing.

It was pretty much what he’d expected, but that wasn’t a reason to give in.

“Told you it was a no hoper,” Watkins offered as he moved up to join MacGyver outside the farm. “Maybe there’s something inside we could scavenge, though?”

MacGyver ignored him and remained focused on the car. “We could get the battery from the truck?”

Watkins kicked one of the flats. “What about these things? The truck wheels won’t fit, and we can’t blow them up with our mouths, despite all the hot air that comes out of yours sometimes...” He looked in the trunk for good measure. “No spare tire, either.” He pulled out an old rusted foot pump and tossed it in the long grass at the side of the car. “Even this thing is busted...”

Mac picked up the pump where it had landed, examined it, and then set it down on the passenger seat as if was of some use. Without saying a word, he jogged off through the open farmhouse door and vanished inside.

Heading for what he hoped was the kitchen, MacGyver made a beeline for the sink. He tugged open the two cupboard door below it and examined the pipes there. They were plastic. *Perfect!*

Watkins ambled in, hands stuffed in his trouser pockets. He cocked his head to one side in amusement. “Planning on taking up plumbing?” He teased

MacGyver smiled back cryptically. He wasn’t going to give anything away just yet. “Can you go back to the Ford and get the battery, and the “O” rings off the intercooler pipes for me?”

Watkins raised a brow, then turned, obediently doing as he was told. While he was gone, MacGyver set to work on the pipes. They were the push on fittings, which made it easier, but the lengths of the sections he needed was all-important, as was the diameter. For his plan to work, he needed two sections, one that would fit neatly inside the other.

Tugging out his knife, he selected the saw attachment and cut a length a couple of feet long. There were a couple of t-pieces he could use in the kitchen, but not smaller diameter pipe.

Determined, MacGyver took the dilapidated stairs two at a time to the bathroom. It was crude with the pipes not even hidden from view. To Mac, that was heaven. He kneeled, examining what was on offer and taking off a couple of sections to check the sizing.

It took a few moments, but he found what he was looking for running alongside the bath tub for the waste water. He unscrewed it, jogged back downstairs and slipped it inside the first piece he'd cut. There was a tiny gap, and that would be where the "O" rings Watkins was collecting would play their role. They would make the gap airtight, creating a very impromptu piston effect.

First, Mac needed to cut two grooves for the rings to sit in on the inner pipe. He used the saw blade again, careful not to cut all the way through the plastic. Once this was ready, he set to work on the first t-piece, making a crude end cap with two smaller sections of pipe either side for a makeshift handle.

As he finished up, Watkins breezed back in and whistled as he saw the pieces ready to fit together in the floor. "I'm not sure what I'm looking at, but I think it's impressive."

"Did you get the rings?"

Watkins opened his palm and offered up the oily items. "Okay, so what are they for?"

MacGyver slipped them into the grooves on the pipe, and then slid the pipe inside the larger one. He put the t-piece "handle" in place and pumped it up and down. "It's a crude hand pump for the tires. Or rather, it will be once we finish it off with parts from the broken one outside. We need the valve and adapter off that fitted on the bottom of this and..."

"And you're a nuttier than a fruitcake," Watkins offered helpfully. "That's never going to work, and even if it does, how do you even know the parts you need on the foot pump are any good?"

"I don't," MacGyver admitted. "But I won't know for sure until I try." He stood up, taking the half-built pump and his knife outside with him.

Watkins followed.

Half an hour later, Mac, along with a little duct tape, had the pump pushing out air into the correct connector for the tire valves. It didn't have the P.S.I. of anything you'd get at a gas station, but it would, MacGyver hoped, very slowly inflate the Fiat's two flat Goodyear's.

Watkins nodded his apparent approval. "Right, so we can pump them up...but in case you haven't noticed, they're not exactly seated on the rims anymore. How do we fix that one Mr. D.I.Y?"

Mac sucked down a breath and grabbed his canteen from his utility belt. "Go find me something flammable in an aerosol while I grab a drink, and I'll show you..."

Watkins returned with a rusted can and passed it to MacGyver, crossing his arms in apparent anticipation, he hovered over the Fiat.

Mac looked at the aerosol, the writing was all in Croatian, and he had no clue what it said, so how had Watkins? Had he guessed, or could he read it? *This guy is way smarter than most give him credit for...*

Mac didn't mention the can, but simply took it to the Fiat's deflated tires, pushed them away from the rim slightly and sprayed all the way around the edge. Then he quickly took out a match to each and ignited what he'd pumped between the rubber and metal.

The tires swelled with a bang popping into place on the rims as the sudden flames expanded the air within, inflating them.

Watkins nodded. "You do know as the air inside cools, those bad boys will go flat again, though?"

MacGyver tapped the pump he'd made with the toe of his boot. "Yep, that's why I just spent all that time making the pump. I don't know how much air we'll get in with it, but hopefully enough to get us moving."

"Aye, or those two pilots are toast," Watkins added somberly as he took the pump, attached it carefully and began to try and stop the tires from going back down again.

Mac watched him a second. They were worlds apart, and yet this cold-blooded killer with a license was growing on him.

* * * *

Pumping up the Fiat's tires had proved more time consuming than either man had hoped. That, added to the time it had taken to actually make the pump, meant they were in trouble.

Once the car was movable, Watkins had insisted on taking the wheel, pointing out Mac was a good driver, but he was also way too cautious.

MacGyver hadn't argued, and the little car had bounced and grumbled its way across the countryside breaking a spring and knocking off the rear bumper as it went.

Three and a half hours had passed since they'd spoken to the Serbian soldier Velid had wounded. The deadline had been four hours, and so far there was no sign of any enemy camp.

Maybe the Serb kid sent us in the wrong direction? Maybe I really am too trusting?

Mac was pondering the fact when Watkins pulled over and took off the meager sidelights he'd been using under the gloom of the overhanging trees.

"Over there?" The Brit hissed. "Through the trees..."

MacGyver squinted and realized he was looking at a truck with a camouflage net over it. He clambered out of the Fiat, and was followed by Watkins.

The pair edged across a small clearing, under a section of bushes, and emerged to find the camp they'd been searching for. There was a large olive drab tent that appeared to be the centre of operations.

MacGyver could hear voices from inside, but once again the language barrier stumped him. He winced as he realized he was at the mercy of his companion.

Watkins smirked cheekily. "They're talking to Nikolić on the radio about the mission," he explained. "We're in time, the flight was delayed twenty minutes."

"We sure could do with that radio right about now to get some help and tell them about Harpham." Mac shook his head. "First I guess we better deal with the S.A.M.'s." He gestured to two cases on the far side of the tent. There was just one guard watching them.

"You lure him back here into the trees, and I'll deal with him."

"No killing!" MacGyver growled, not daring to think what Watkins had in mind.

"We'll see..." The Brit sounded sincere, but when Mac scowled at him he winked and trotted off into the shrubbery, instantly blending with it.

Sheesh, he's like a wraith...and how come I get to be the decoy? MacGyver inwardly grouched as he jogged to the edge of their cover and began rustling leaves and foliage just enough to gain the Serb's attention.

The soldier started as he appeared to realize there was something going on. Mac hoped he was going to be mistaken for some animal, and not instantly fired upon, and he continued to move around, low to the ground, like some wild boar.

The Serb seemed to deliberate, the rifle over his shoulder dropped into his hands and he moved forwards, apparently assessing the situation.

Just don't fire or you'll bring the others outta the tent...

The guard seemed to hear Mac's thoughts and sprinted into the bushes without pulling the trigger. Before MacGyver could roll out of the way, Watkins had the man in his grasp, the Brit's arm neatly wrapped around the Serb's neck. He applied just enough pressure to make his opponent collapse, and then grabbed the man's rifle as it slipped from his hands.

Watkins winked at Mac, who was still on the ground. "Blimey, you're rubbing off on me! Yesterday I'd have snapped his spine..."

Mac clambered up, brushed himself off and glanced back to the clearing. He jerked a thumb towards the crates near the tent. "Can you deal with one of those missile launchers as easily?"

"We *do* get anti-terrorist and weapons training, y'know?" Watkins nodded, sounding offended that he'd even been asked.

Mac ignored him. It was getting to be a habit. "I'll get the one on the left, you take the right." He jogged back to the edge of their cover, scanned the area for more troops, and then cautiously dodged over to the crates.

Taking out his knife, Mac pried open the lid of his chosen launcher and licked his lips as he looked inside. It was already loaded with a S.A.M., so he'd have to disarm that too. *Back on McGinty's palomino again...*

At his side, he could hear Watkins doing much the same, and Mac couldn't resist looking at what he'd levered the lid of his launcher with.

Watkins had a rather large hunting knife in his grasp, and when he saw Mac watching he mouthed "Mine's bigger than yours" and grinned.

For some reason, Mac couldn't help but grin back. Dammit, Watkins humor was infectious, even if his love for weapons was not.

Mac took a breath and focused back on the launcher. It was simple enough to disable the thing with just a few moves, and thankfully, it wasn't about to blow up on him if he made a mistake.

Seconds passed, and just as he'd finished sabotaging the S.A.M.'s trigger, he felt Watkins at his side.

"You done?" The Brit asked.

Mac nodded. "Yeah, it won't fire anytime soon, but we still need to deal with the other soldiers to get to that radio."

Watkins slid his knife into his boot and scratched at the back of his head absently. "I suppose a full frontal assault might be a bit much?"

“Just a touch,” Mac agreed, smiling at the sardonic irony in the other man’s voice. “Maybe there’s something a bit less bloody…” He eyed the covered over truck they’d spotted when they first discovered the camp. An idea was forming from single objects into larger pieces of a dangerous puzzle. It was how his mind worked sometimes.

Without explaining, MacGyver stealthily moved from the crates over to the truck. He checked the lines holding the tarp to the canopy. *Perfect!*

Undoing the rope, he quickly dashed to the tent and threaded it around the guy lines, and then back onto the truck’s rear tow hook. He wasn’t done yet, though.

Watkins watched, apparently intrigued as his companion grabbed an old flask from the truck’s cab. Mac took the cup and filled it with oil from a pipe to the engine, and then ran back with it to the generator the Serbs were using to power their base.

The generator was close to the tent, and Mac clenched his teeth as he gently teased off the cap to the small fuel tank that fed it. The cap popped off with a thunk, and he swiftly poured in the oil from the cup.

Almost instantly, the generator started to belch out a thick acrid smoke as the fuel and oil mixed and burned. Mac nodded and turned to go back to the truck, but Watkins was way ahead of him.

The Brit had climbed into the cab, and once there was enough smoke to make a blanket around the tent, he started it up and pulled forwards. The engine dribbled oil where Mac had cut an oil feed for his booty, but it didn’t matter, once the tent guy lines were simultaneously ripped from the ground, effectively collapsing the tarp on the soldiers, Watkins cut the engine and jumped back out.

The Serbs inside the tent began to frantically shout as they tried to push out of the heavy material on top of them. Three soldiers eventually emerged – straight into the cloud of smog Mac had created.

The unexpected smokescreen obviously caught them by surprise, and it was enough of a distraction for MacGyver to punch out the first two without a single shot being fired.

The third managed to grab a rifle, but his finger never made it to the trigger. Watkins rammed the barrel of his own AK47 into the soldier’s back and spat out an order in his own language, apparently telling him to “drop it.”

The Serb complied, raising his hands in the air with an expression of fear. Whether the look was because he didn’t know what to expect from Mac and Watkins, or that he *did* know what to expect from Nikolić for failing, was unclear.

MacGyver signaled for all three men to get down on the ground, hands behind them, and they dutifully obeyed. He tugged out what was left of his roll of tape and secured them with it. “Time to check out the radio and see if we can retune it…”

Watkins nodded and switched off the generator, then began pulling at the tent canvas until he managed to get it up and over what had been inside. The radio was ancient and sat on top of a small wooden desk.

MacGyver checked it out and was relieved to find it was powered by batteries, not the generator he'd sabotaged. He wasn't sure how much more smoke he could inhale without becoming asthmatic.

Looking at the frequencies, he quickly made a few adjustments until he found the channel he hoped would put him in touch with Phoenix.

Watkins watched, but didn't argue or suggest they should try his people. Maybe he just didn't want to reveal who "his" people exactly were.

It took ten minutes of being rerouted and passwords begin exchanged, but eventually Mac got a very bad line straight to Pete Thornton. Every few seconds, the signal would be lost and then come back again with a hiss and a pop as he told his story.

"So you think Harpham is behind all this?" Pete asked, seemingly incredulous. "But he's a good man, why Mac? *Why?*"

MacGyver didn't have the answer. There was no sense to the General's actions, but deep down somewhere, he had to have a reason.

"Okay, stand by you two, I'll get through to the authorities about Harpham," Pete sighed. "And I'll make the arrangements to get you out of there as fast as we can..." The line began to crackle. "...stand by, I'll...in touch..."

And Pete was gone, at least for now.

MacGyver set down the mike and glanced around them. How long would it take to get picked up? The woods here could be full of Serb soldiers, and Nikolić wasn't going to be happy they'd ruined his chances of downing US warplanes. Mac could see torture on the cards if they were captured.

Watkins apparently wasn't concerned with the same things. He looked worried, but his next sentence proved it wasn't about his own life. "You know, we can't leave here, not yet. At least, I can't..."

"Are you crazy? We'll be the top of Nikolić's hit list. We gotta get out of here with those photos you took." Mac was no coward, but there was no point, no reason to die here now.

"There was another part to my mission," Watkins finally admitted. "If there was any chance I could take out Nikolić then I was supposed to try. And after what I've seen him do here, I need to give it a go. If there's one person in this world that needs stopping then it's that bas..."

Mac didn't let him finish. "Killing one man won't stop what's happening here. There's always another just as bad ready to step up and carry on doing the atrocities. The killing *has* to stop somewhere – that's the whole point."

"Aww, you're going all preachy on me, Mac, you know I can't take that girlie stuff." Watkins was smiling.

The radio behind them burped back into life, saving Mac and the Brit any chance of arguing. It was Pete back on the line.

"Mac, Harpham has been arrested. It seems he *has* been giving the Serbians information, and he did set you up to find Watkins for them."

Pete paused, and MacGyver could tell something was bothering his old friend. "There's a catch to this isn't there? A reason we didn't know about?"

"There is," Pete confirmed. "And it wasn't what any of us was expecting. Remember how Harpham told us the downed pilot was a friend of his son's from training school? Well, the truth is, Harpham's kid never made it through training school – he flunked out, and later became a photo journalist. His last story took him to Bosnia..."

MacGyver's heart skipped a beat of dread. Instantly an image of Sam flashed into his mind. Pete didn't need to say what had happened next, Mac could already guess, and it made his stomach churn as he couldn't help but see the parallel with his own son.

"Nikolić captured Harpham's kid," Pete continued the story. "He found out just who his dad was and has been blackmailing Harpham for intel ever since..."

The radio popped again and then grew silent. Mac guessed Pete was giving him time to digest the new information. *How far would I go to save Sam?*

Watkins seemed to read MacGyver's thoughts, even though he knew nothing about Mac's own son, or that he was a journalist. "You can't justify his actions? He's put too many lives at stake just to save one!"

"I take it you don't have kids?" Mac's tone wasn't angry. He'd lived most of his life not even knowing about Sam – a life he thought meant he had no responsibilities, and how wrong he'd been. You should never pass judgment, or take anything in life for granted.

"No," Watkins admitted. "I've never really had the opportunity. Too busy killing people I guess." His shoulders sagged as the realization hit home.

There is a heart and soul inside him, Mac realized.

Pete broke the thought. "So what do we do now? I can get you guys extracted, but..."

"But you can't authorize a rescue mission for Harpham's kid, it could cause an international incident," MacGyver finished for him.

It was cold, it was heartless, and it was what Mac had expected from the authorities. And no matter how bad Pete felt, he wouldn't be able to overrule the decision.

"You should know how governments work by now," Watkins grumbled. "It's not about right or wrong, or lives, it's about them. About what makes them look good or bad. I've seen it enough."

Mac believed the Brit had with the flat, deadness to his voice. The man before him had seen more than he would ever tell. And MacGyver was sure now that Watkins was sick of it.

Watkins lips edged back into a tiny smile. "Reading my mind again Mother Teresa?"

"Maybe," Mac admitted, part of him sure where the conversation was going.

"So, can *you* leave that kid in the hands of the Serbs?"

The whole countryside seemed to fall silent.

Mac had a choice, and it was far from a simple one, or an ethical one, or a moral one. He had come here straight after finding out Mariotte might be after Sam again. And just how had he felt about that?

Two young men, their fates determined not by who they were, but by who their fathers were.

And Mac couldn't leave it at that any more than Harpham had...

Part Four

Mac pressed the transmit button on the mike. "Pete, I'm going to try a rescue mission. We can't just leave the kid out here."

"MacGyver...you know I can't help you?" The tone of Pete's voice suggested he was angry about that fact. "But I can pretend I didn't hear what you just said. And I can delay your pickup a few hours..."

"Thanks, Pete. I owe you one."

MacGyver imagined his friend smiling on the other end as he answered.

"I doubt that. I owe you more than I can count," Thornton admitted. "Now go find Harpham's son and be careful about it. His name's Steve, by the way."

"Just tell Nikki to keep after Mariotte, and I'll be home before you know it." Mac let go of the transmit button, and the line grew silent. He knew Pete was keeping the conversation to a minimum because of what he was about to attempt.

Mac glanced at Watkins, unsure of what his next move would be. The Yorkshireman winked. “Count me in, you mad bugger. I need to find that camp to get Nikolić anyway.”

“You’re still going after him to kill him?” MacGyver was disappointed. He’d hoped some of his humanity had rubbed off on Watkins. “You know I can’t condone that.”

“You don’t have to.” Watkins turned away, as if he was slightly ashamed. “That’s why Her Majesty gives *me* the license to kill, not you. And for once, I think Nikolić is someone who deserves what he’s going to get.”

Mac didn’t really believe that. Everyone deserved a fair trial, but no matter what, he knew there would be no changing Watkins mind – only Watkins could do that. “Okay, so we can take their truck, but how do we even find Nikolić?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ve been well briefed on his location by intelligence minions.” Watkins clarified. “But the truck’s leaking oil from the pipe you cut?”

It was MacGyver’s turn to wink. “Oh don’t worry about that,” he offered as he moved to the truck and popped the hood. “The Phoenix Foundation has a minion that can fix that too...”

* * * *

Watkins parked the Serbian truck a good distance from where he expected Nikolić’s base to be, and the two men walked in on foot. The camp was in a forested area, with guards hidden in the undergrowth, camouflaged by the local flora.

The outer perimeter was made up of tents and troops ambling too and fro, rifles slung over their shoulders. But further in there was part of an actual building made of brick and stone, its incomplete walls plastered in off white and pockmarked with bullet holes.

From the machinery and abandoned tools lying around, this had been a building site before the war began, possibly a factory or industrial unit being constructed – and now it lay unfinished, used for the opposite of its original purpose. Now this place meant death, not any kind of future.

Mac hunkered down behind a fallen tree and took in the scene. It wasn’t going to be easy to infiltrate the first line where the tents were, let alone find the kid beyond that. He blew out an exasperated puff of air and waited for Watkins to bring up the rear.

The Brit finally arrived ten minutes later.

“Is your parking really that bad it took ten minutes?” Mac teased, looking at his watch for effect.

Watkins wiggled a tiny pair of binoculars in his right hand. “I was gathering intelligence. Jeez, that might be why they call me an intelligence agent...” he snarked back playfully.

“So what ya find?”

Watkins gestured past the soldiers milling around. “I think the kid’s being held on the South side. I can see a bunch of cells beyond a pretty dodgy brick wall.”

“Is it bad enough for a couple of charges to bring it down? This place was never finished...” Mac was thinking, the cogs in his mind whirling double time.

“Maybe,” Watkins conceded. “But we don’t have any charges, explosives, hell I don’t even have one stinking grenade...”

Mac rubbed at the stubble that was getting thicker on his chin. *Jeez, I need a shave.* “We took out the missile launchers back at the camp, but not all the S.A.M.’s. There are still some in the back of the truck we took. Ya think maybe we could dismantle a couple and jury rig some explosives and a detonator?”

“Do we have a choice?” Watkins scooted back to where they’d parked the truck and clambered in the back, closely followed by MacGyver.

As Mac used his knife to remove an access panel on “his” S.A.M. he glanced up at Watkins. The Brit already had his missile in pieces and the explosives removed.

“You know, this was a good idea, but just how do we get Harpham’s son out of the cell, once we’ve blown the wall?” Watkins continued to work as he spoke.

Mac popped out the explosives from his S.A.M. and placed them carefully down, focusing back on the trigger mechanism to use for the bomb they were making. “We need something heavy duty to wrap around the bars and then the truck’s chassis. Maybe we can just tear those bars right on out...”

Watkins finished his part of the task and slipped his knife away. His expression was one of bemusement, but it also seemed to say that he didn’t doubt Mac one bit. “Something heavy duty, huh? Don’t suppose you just happen to have a length of chain in that bottomless pocket of yours along with that duct tape?”

Mac twisted a bare wire and attached it to his jury-rigged trigger. Happy with his work he set it down next to the explosives and joined the corresponding wires. “Not exactly. But I noticed when you were gone that this place was once a building site?”

“Aye, I spotted too very rusted JCB’s back there, but they’re no good to us in that shape. And there’s definitely no chain on them, or rope even.”

“No,” Mac admitted, “but there’s a seriously heavy duty wooden reel of cable out there behind the second excavator. I guess they never finished putting in the mains electricity to the place before the war. That cable should take the strain, if we can unwind and cut enough to use.”

Watkins' smirk reappeared. "Mac, you never cease to amaze me with that brain of yours. We should be able to roll or unwind a length easy enough. But we'd need a bloody big Swiss knife to cut it!"

Mac bit into his lip. Watkins was right, but that didn't mean the idea was a bad one, they'd found a useful item nearby, now they needed to find another useful item to be able to complete the task. "C'mon, let's go take another look."

MacGyver carefully picked up the bomb they'd made and jumped from the truck. Watkins picked up his own AK47, plus another he'd found, along with a multitude of clips and brought up the rear.

It was getting dusk by the time they made it back to the edge of Nikolić's stronghold. Watkins plucked his binoculars back out and began to scan past the guards.

The soldiers seemed to have thinned out, but there could still be any number more hidden within the bushes. This was their territory, and they knew exactly how to use it to their advantage.

Watkins passed the binoculars to Mac without saying anything, and MacGyver quickly realized they were equipped with night vision. He twisted them into focus and aimed at the area where the hulks of the derelict JCB's lay. There was a tool bag on the floor. Most of its contents had spilled out and had been trampled into the muddy ground, but he was sure he could see the edge of a saw blade.

It was full-sized, and "might" just cut through the diameter of the cable where his pocket knife stood no chance. "Wait here..." he didn't want to waste time explaining, so simply handed the glasses back to Watkins and hunkered down low, following the bushes and undergrowth as far as he dared.

A Serb with his rifle slung over his shoulder ambled into view. He held a flashlight, and skimmed the perimeter with it. The beam narrowly missed MacGyver's head, and the Serb moved on, oblivious.

Mac let out a sigh of relief, and dodged across to the huge rusty excavator. Its bright yellow paint was thinning and oxidized scabs were appearing on its metal skeleton, but it still had one purpose left – the cover it gave could save Mac's life.

His back slid down its cold and muddy front wheel as he slithered to the ground, intent on crawling to the tool bag. In the distance, a stray dog barked incessantly, maybe it wanted food; maybe it wanted this horrid fight to end, so it could return to its home and master.

Mac pushed away the thought and let his right hand slide forwards in the mire until his fingers felt the sharp metal teeth of the saw. He tentatively prodded further until he had the wooden handle, and he pulled on it, yanking the saw quickly and carefully beneath his chest. It was quite rusty, but he didn't want to risk even a tiny glint off the blade alerting the Serbs.

He looked around, but the soldiers appeared to be eating. Chow time had proved the perfect distraction.

Mac reversed until he was back at the JCB and panting, mostly from the mental rather than physical exertion. Now he had to move behind the excavator, unroll a length of cable, cut it, and drag it back, and this stuff was going to be heavy.

He moved cautiously to the rear of the JCB where the wooden reel was standing, but he needn't have worried about unrolling it. Watkins had somehow beaten him to the task, and was waiting, arms crossed in the darkness.

This was Watkins' game, MacGyver realized, and he was damn good at it, seeping into the night like a Ninja.

"Maybe you are James Bond after all?" Mac whispered, only half-jokingly as he began to saw into the massive wire as quietly as he could.

"Nah, he's way too posh for me, I drink beer, sometimes whiskey, not some daft cocktail with fancy fruit stuck in it!" It was Watkins' turn to only half-joke.

MacGyver didn't mention the fact that he didn't drink at all. That was something for later conversation – should they live.

The saw croaked and grumbled its way through the cable as Mac put his full weight on it, and he could actually see the blade bending slightly, but it was working. The insulated wire finally gave in his grasp and the section Watkins had unwound tumbled free.

Mac leaned over to grab it, but Watkins put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "It's too much to try and drag that around with those soldiers about. Go get the truck and pick it up on the way to the wall."

"We can't just ride through here like Butch and Sundance! We'll be under fire the minute they hear the truck approaching!" Mac was incredulous, had Watkins lost his mind?

"Oh, *you'll* have plenty of time to get the cable, because it will be me that's under fire. It's my turn to come up with the madcap plan, except I don't make things, I *do* things."

Mac stopped trying to get a hold of the wire, and scowled. "Say what?"

"I'm going in after Nikolić," Watkins explained, looking over his shoulder as if he'd heard something. "My attack will be the perfect distraction for you to go in and get Harpham's kid."

Mac was suddenly so frustrated he wanted to slap his forehead with his palm, but somehow he resisted the urge. "I hate it!" He almost shouted, then caught himself and lowered his voice. "That's not a plan, it's suicide!"

Watkins shot his customary cheeky grin. “No mate, its *retirement*. With the type of job I have, I’d never be allowed to simply leave Her Majesty’s finest. At least this way I go out doing something better than just killing for the bureaucrats.”

“There has to be another way?” Mac was almost pleading, even though he knew there would be no changing his companion’s mind.

“There isn’t,” Watkins confirmed. “I’ve come to a crossroads, thanks to you. And now I’ve made the choice which path to take.”

Mac’s head drooped. He felt sad and angry at the same time. While he’d hated the killing, he’d never planned on changing Watkins’ perspective on things so drastically he would all-but commit suicide.

But then wasn’t this always the same? Someone, somewhere always ended up dying to save another. Why did it have to be that way?

MacGyver turned, his mouth open to try and talk Watkins out his plan, but the Brit had been expecting it. He put a finger to his lips, effectively telling Mac to hush, and then took the AK47 from his shoulder and dodged from the JCB across to the second excavator. He paused before his assault, looking back with one last wink.

“Better hurry with that truck, Mac, even James Bond can’t fight off a camp of Serbs on his own...” And with that Watkins was gone, mixing with the Serbian guards like a chameleon.

MacGyver felt a lump rise in his throat. Watkins had got guts, no matter what his shortcomings were, and in another life, another time, he suspected they could even have become friends, despite their differences.

There was no time to ponder that now, though. He had to get to the truck and get it back here within minutes, or Watkins’ sacrifice would have been for nothing.

MacGyver began to run, ignoring the cries of Serbs behind him as they saw his fleeting form splashing through the mud and into the foliage beyond.

* * * *

The truck bounced violently beneath him, reminding Mac of a ride he’d had on a particularly nasty bunch of wild rapids down in South America. That time his life had been on the line too, but today it felt different, because he wasn’t on his own, and Watkins wasn’t coming back.

Mac tried to put the thought out of his mind as a Serbian soldier jumped in front of the truck and emptied his clip into the front end.

MacGyver yanked hard on the steering, forcing the truck to slew crazily, fishtailing in the wet ground, and narrowly missing the man. He was here to save a life, not take one, if he could help it.

More bullets pelted the old GM, shattering the right side of the windshield and peppering the drab metal with holes. Mac tried to ignore it and he headed for the length of cable they'd cut, but if the enemy fire didn't stop soon, he was going to be in trouble.

On cue, the barrage against his vehicle seemed to lessen and Mac realized the majority of soldiers were now running away from him, and towards the inner building. The complex suddenly erupted in a hail of gunfire and small explosions, and he knew Paul was making his move.

Mac slowed the truck, skidding to a stop in the mud to attach the cable to the rear end. There was no resistance to his presence now, and he couldn't help but be amazed how one lone man like Watkins could cause such chaos.

He's dang good...

A pillar of fire exploded in the distance, too close to the cells for comfort, and MacGyver hastened to finish securing the cable and clambered back into the truck.

It was full frontal assault on the wall time, and he could only hope the front of the GM would stand the impact and still be intact enough for them use it to escape. *There's always Plan B*, he chided himself. Although what that was exactly was beyond him until it presented itself.

The truck appeared to sense its impending doom and began to groan as he floored the pedal. It was short on oil after he'd "borrowed" some earlier, and the old diesel engine would only take so much.

Mac ignored the sounds and steered the olive beast straight at the crumbling wall. At the last minute, he used his left arm to shield his face against flying glass and other possible dangers, but he needn't have.

The bricks simply disintegrated as the truck ploughed into them, like a house of cards falling from a small zephyr.

MacGyver's heart skipped a beat, and he kept his foot down until he'd almost reached the cells. Once close enough, he spun the wheel, bringing the behemoth to a skidding sideways stop next to a bank of barred windows.

Was Harpham's' kid really here? Was Watkins sacrifice worth it?

He jumped down from the cab, sprinted to the nearest window and peered inside. The cell was empty save for a scurrying rat feasting on ancient scraps.

Mac moved to the next window.

Bingo! Someone was inside, huddling in a corner, terrified and perilously thin. It was too dark to make out any features, or how old the person was, but even if this wasn't Harpham's' son, they didn't deserve the treatment they were getting.

MacGyver raced back to the truck, grabbed the dirt covered cable and hauled it to the bars. It wasn't easy to thread through and tie off as it was far less pliable than a rope or chain, but on the second attempt he managed it.

The gunfire around him was getting closer now. Had the soldiers gotten the better of Watkins?

Mac pushed an image of the Brit aside and continued his task. He jumped back in the truck, flooring the accelerator once again until the engine began to whine with the strain. He stuck his head through the broken glass of the side window to look behind as the wheels slipped in the loose, wet ground, and then finally gained purchase.

There was a grating sound as the cable pinged as taut as it would go, and then finally the bars in the window surrendered, screaming as they were torn from the bricks and mortar that held them fast.

The truck staggered forwards until Mac hit the brakes and then lay still, chugging unevenly as its tired motor ticked over.

MacGyver was back out in less than a second, climbing through the narrow window space and into the darkness beyond. There were shouts from inside somewhere down a corridor – the soldiers knew he was here, there was little time left.

Mac approached the figure in the corner cautiously. It was definitely a man, and he was rocking back and forth, his arms wrapped tightly around his body like it could protect him. His eyes widened as he finally realized someone had entered, his mind apparently finally broken from its fear induced stupor.

“It's okay, I'm here to get you out,” Mac soothed, a hand outstretched in friendship. “Name's MacGyver, c'mon, I have transport...”

There was an awkward pause, and Mac could hear the boots of Serbs as they rapidly approached from one of the adjacent passages.

The figure gulped and finally looked up enough for MacGyver to see into his tortured eyes. He looked old, like he'd spent time with Methuselah himself, but beneath the pain and suffering was a young man not much older than Sam. His lips were bloodied from countless beatings and his cheeks bruised and swollen.

The realization hit Mac hard. This could be Sam in this position. *Photojournalist...*

“I'm Steve...” The kid coughed out his name, confirming he was Harpham's son, and then wearily tried to stand. The effort was too much for him, and he slumped back down, chest heaving.

Mac hunkered over, grabbed the young man's arm and slung it across his own shoulder, taking Steve's weight and hauling him up. The process of getting to the window was more a case of dragging the kid than walking him, but it was also the quickest.

Once there, Mac wasted no time in lifting Steve into the gap and pushing him through. There was a small yelp as the kid lost his balance and landed in a heap the other side, but MacGyver ignored it.

The guards were at the cell door, fumbling in the darkness to unlock it. Why they hadn't put any lights on was anyone's guess, but Mac presumed Watkins had somehow taken the power out.

Just as Mac's legs tumbled through the window and out the other side, a spattering of bullets followed. They were far from home free yet.

"C'mon!" Mac tried to encourage Steve to stand, and to his credit he tried, but within seconds his legs were buckling back beneath him.

Mac caught him before he hit the ground hard a second time, and this time didn't even bother to try and drag him. Instead, he lifted the kid hastily over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carried him to the truck, slipping and sliding along the way as his boots lost their footing on the soddened earth.

Gunfire erupted from the window, spraying the GM with a line of bullets that narrowly missed the cab and Mac's right ear. The noise as it exploded into the metal of the truck was deafening it was so close, and he almost dropped Steve into the passenger seat as he reflexively grabbed for his ringing eardrum.

Steve grunted, but his eyes seemingly offered thanks.

MacGyver didn't attempt to go around to the driver's side to get in; instead he clambered over the kid and slammed the still idling beast into first gear. It complained heartily as he gunned the accelerator, and for a second the rear wheels just spun again, then the truck took purchase in the mud and lurched forwards, back towards the toppled wall and freedom.

Mac dared to look in the side mirror, through the cracks in the glass to see what was happening behind. The building was covered in a cloud of smoke now, and here and there, flames licked up the walls like evil tendrils. Amidst the mayhem and fog, a lone figure walked tall, as if somehow he was untouchable.

Watkins held his AK47 in one hand and his SIG Sauer in the other, and around him, Serbs seemed to scurry away in fear. Was it the Brit's sheer tenacity that had them on the run?

The scene lasted mere seconds before Watkins was enveloped by the smog he had created, and he was gone.

Mac looked away from the mirror, focusing back on escape, but his head bowed just a little, knowing that he had probably just seen a friend's last living moments. He swallowed hard and glanced at Harpham's son, still cowering next to him. It was time to go home.

The truck hit a groove in the ground, bouncing MacGyver from his sad thoughts, and he carefully maneuvered around another shell hole before skidding back onto an actual road.

He had the co-ordinates in his head for where Phoenix was going to rendezvous with them, and he steered the GM on the straightest path possible over the terrain, keeping too firm a grip on the wheel until his knuckles turned white.

Steve didn't talk, and Mac didn't have any words to speak to him. All he could think of over and over was how the whole mess had spiraled out of control, just as it had in Romania with Viktor being killed, right after he'd understood what humanity and friendship meant.

And now it had happened again – with Paul Watkins.

* * * *

Pete Thornton's Office
Phoenix Foundation Headquarters
L.A. Division

MacGyver twiddled his thumbs aimlessly as he sat in front of Pete. Normally he would find something on the elder man's desk and tinker with it, but today there was nothing that teased his inquisitive nature.

He wanted away from the offices, away from the memory of his last assignment. The images of Watkins walking through the smoke while he drove away with Harpham's kid still haunted him. It was what the Brit had wanted, but Mac shouldn't have let it gone down that way.

"...Steve is recovering nicely in a U.S.A.F. hospital in Germany, thanks to you." Pete finished a sentence Mac had only half heard. "Hello? Earth to MacGyver, anyone home?"

Just how Pete had known Mac hadn't got his full attention, given his blindness, was anyone's guess, but apparently he had. Mac came back to reality with a start as a letter opener was waved in front of his nose for effect.

"Hey! You could have taken my nose off with that thing!" He teased, and then offered up an apologetic, "Sorry...I was...somewhere else."

Pete sighed, sat back in his chair and took down a breath. He crossed his hands in front of him on the desk and waited.

Eventually, MacGyver became part of the conversation again. "What about Harpham?" He asked. "Will he still be charged?"

"The Airforce has to show this kind of thing won't be tolerated," Pete confirmed. "But I'm guessing given the circumstances they'll show some leniency. His career is over, though, that's for sure."

Mac nodded, but then, no doubt Harpham considered it worth it to save his son. *How far would I have gone, had it been Sam?*

“Ya know, I kinda get where he was coming from?” Mac admitted. “I know just how helpless I felt when Sam was shot on that Boeing, and then again when he was hurt at Klamath Falls during the earthquake.”

Pete agreed with a knowing nod. “I hear ya. A good parent will do anything they can for their kids.” He ran a hand over his mouth, and his expression saddened a little as his voice turned to a whisper. “I know from experience you sometimes don’t do enough, and don’t even realize it.”

MacGyver frowned. Pete’s son had a chequered past when it came to Phoenix, and sometimes Pete blamed himself for not being around for his son enough. Mac had never bought into that, though. “Hey, you’re a good dad, and don’t you forget it.” He stood up and began to pace in front of the window. He had a question, a nagging that wouldn’t go away until he had the answer, even though technically he already knew what it would be. “Pete...there’s something I gotta know...”

Pete had already second-guessed him. “I’m sorry, Mac, the British government has confirmed Paul Watkins never returned from his mission, and that Miomir Nikolić is missing, presumed dead.”

“Dang it, Pete, why don’t we ever get the happy ending? Why does every assignment we complete always have to have that one downside? That one death, that one unanswered question, that murderer who got off, or rhino that still got butchered?” Mac dropped heavily back onto his chair, deflated.

“Hey, you saved the kid, isn’t that enough?” Pete soothed. “Look Mac, I’m really sorry I ever got you involved with all this, but in the end you can only play the cards you’re given, and we thought we were rescuing a downed pilot.”

Mac nodded. “You’re right, Pete. I guess I’m just expecting too much, huh?” He forced a smile, even though his friend couldn’t see it. Somehow, it beat a frown, even if he wasn’t feeling all that happy. “I guess I better go see what Sam is up to before he gets himself into more trouble with Andy...” He pushed out of the chair and headed for the exit.

“He’s still seeing Andrea Donati?”

Mac stopped at the door and this time his smile was genuine. “Oh heck yeah, every chance he gets. She’s the one thing that keeps him grounded. It just scares me to death...”

Pete frowned. “Why?”

“Oh...just that I might have to answer to the name Grandpa Mac some day...” MacGyver closed the door behind him and jogged for the elevator down to the

parking garage, and he could still hear Pete chuckling as he pressed the button for the correct floor.

* * * *

The garage under Phoenix always felt cold to MacGyver. Maybe it was the sterile concrete walls, or just the lack of humans most of the time, he really wasn't sure, but right now, the mood he was in, it didn't exactly make him feel welcome.

He sighed as he stepped out of the elevator and across to where his Jeep was parked. The 4x4 waited obediently, but it wasn't until he got closer that he realized the driver's door was slightly ajar.

Mac's gait slowed. He was sure he hadn't left it this way, which meant an opportunist thief or worse had been at work. A bomb maybe? Someone lurking in the back, ready to pounce with a gun or knife?

He reached the door, tugged on it gently and realized there was a note on the steering wheel. For a moment, Mac smiled – this had to be another one of Jack Dalton's stupid pranks, right?

After all, the last cryptic, and pretty scary memo had been from Dalton in the end. *Yeah, and look where that lead me! An African state in turmoil and a whole bunch of trouble!*

MacGyver snatched up the note, still complaining under his breath, but then he realized the handwriting was not the familiar scrawl of his flying, slightly zany buddy. In fact, he didn't recognize it at all.

“See you at the burger stand. I might even buy you lunch.”

There was a burger and hot dog stall just on the corner of Phoenix, and MacGyver could only guess this was where he was being directed. Intrigued, he fell into a sprint up to the sidewalk and over to the stand.

Save for the vendor, there was no one around, just a few milling shoppers.

Mac opened his mouth to ask the stall owner if any messages had been left, when he felt something cold press into the small of his back. He tensed, hoping it wasn't the barrel of a gun, not out here in the open where innocents could get mixed up in the fray.

He took a breath, made a quick decision and spun around like a mini whirlwind, hoping to catch his assailant off guard.

Instead, Mac found Paul Watkins grinning back at him, his cheeks reddened from stifling laughter. “You fell for that one good and proper, mate.”

Mac brushed at his leather jacket absently, suddenly feeling like an easy mark. “Hey, I wasn't expecting to be ambushed by a dead guy!”

Watkins rubbed at his ear. It seemed to be a habit of his MacGyver hadn't consciously noticed before. "Aye, well reports of my death have been gravely exaggerated, which is just I wanted," he explained a little more quietly. "You see "dying" was the easiest way for me to retire. If they think I'm dead, they won't want to kill me know, will they?"

Mac nodded. It made sense. "Dare I ask what happened to Nikolić? Reports say he's missing?"

Paul smiled, and this time there was something else in his eyes, something gentle Mac hadn't seen there before. Understanding, compassion even? "Let's just say my time with you turned me soft. The S.A.S. trained me to kill, not just improvise, but you, you got me thinking outside the box."

"You didn't kill him?" MacGyver was genuinely surprised and pleased.

"No...I finally realized that would have been pointless. And it made me no better than him. 'Course, that left me with a huge problem, no way could I leave him in power, either." Watkins paused, as if reflecting what he'd done. "Handing Nikolić over to the other side would probably have been a death sentence, and N.A.T.O. couldn't imprison him, so I was buggered."

"But somehow, you made it work, didn't you?"

"Aye, and I didn't use one bit of duct tape!" Watkins chuckled and then explained further. "I took Nikolić to a monastery I knew about, just over the border. It took a lot of sweet talking, but I persuaded the monks there to shall we say, "keep him safe" until the whole Bosnian situation is resolved."

"You? Sweet talking anybody? Now that has to be a first!" Mac shook his head, amazed at the transformation. "Are you sure you didn't hold them at gunpoint?" He teased. "Or maybe that knife you keep tucked in your boot?"

"It wasn't easy convincing them," Watkins assured. "But I think deep down they knew Nikolić would kill, or at least give the orders to kill countless people just because of their faith or ethnicity. By keeping him locked away, they were saving civilians as well as Nikolić's immortal soul." He broke into a grin again. "Not to mention my immortal soul if I didn't have to kill him!"

MacGyver just stood for a moment, unsure how to take it all in. He'd wanted a happy, death free ending just once, and now he'd got one. It all sounded crazy, but it also made him feel good deep down inside, knowing there really was an alternative to guns and death, and he'd help Watkins find it.

"So what now?" Mac asked, thinking of what the Brit would do with his new life.

Watkins apparently wasn't planning that far ahead. He pointed to the burger stall. "Well, I did say I'd buy you lunch..."

Mac winced, rolled his eyes and pointed back to the gate to Phoenix's underground parking. "I think I can find us somewhere a little less heart attack-inducing to eat. C'mon." He fell into a brisk walk.

Watkins followed, seemingly still feeling playful. "What? Good old fish and chips?" He joked.

MacGyver wasn't actually sure he'd ever had the pleasure, even though he'd been to England a few times throughout his life. Heck, he even had another friend named Paul there, although he didn't imagine he was the type to eat fish and chips.

He opened the door to the Jeep Watkins had already "unlocked" previously and climbed in. Paul joined him the other side.

"You're not one of those really healthy eaters are you?" Watkins questioned warily, but with a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Because you know I might just have to go eat with Nikolić if you are..."

Mac pulled the Jeep out onto the highway and grinned. "You mean you don't like salads and Tofu?"

Watkins groaned. "I knew it! You Yanks and your food fetishes!"

MacGyver spun the wheel and took a side road, heading off into the sunset and the heart of L.A.

And he was smiling almost as much as the day he'd first met Sam.

Because Watkins had turned a page, and Mac knew someday he'd do something amazing, something selfless and heroic – all without hurting anyone else, perhaps even without using a gun.

And maybe if he was lucky, their paths might cross again and Mac might even be there to witness it, because Paul Watkins was a rare commodity – a man he now called friend.

The End

