

Life and the Grave

MacGyver smiled and blinked against the bright rays of sun blazing around the mountains west of the Egyptian city of Asyut. If he lifted a hand to his face, he could see the bustle of the excavation: tents, people with brushes and charts, plastic tarps, and careful arrangements of tools and artifacts. The sun was setting, which meant that soon, the temperature would drop and the dig site would be wrapping up for the day, but MacGyver wanted to come and see it as soon as he got off the plane.

As he approached the excavation site, a stocky man in Western clothing began to walk in his direction. As MacGyver lifted his hand in a little half-wave, the man called, “Hey! What’re you doing here? This is an official excavation. No unauthorized access.”

“Name’s MacGyver. Pete Thornton sent me.”

The man, obviously an American, looked almost disappointed. “Oh. Well, can I see some ID?” Annoyed, MacGyver dug around in his pocket for his wallet and muttered, “Yeah, sure.” This wasn’t quite how he’d envisioned his first experience with the excavation, and with the sun setting quickly, he had little time to waste before the archaeologists would call it a day and make him wait for tomorrow to see what—if any—fascinating discoveries that they’d come across. The man passed MacGyver’s ID back to him and ran a hand through his short black hair. “All right, c’mon in. Sorry for double-checking you like that. We’ve been having some problems with locals coming in unannounced and moving things around. I had to be sure you weren’t here to cause trouble.”

“No problem,” MacGyver replied.

“So what’d the Phoenix Foundation send you here to do, anyway? I heard we were getting another American, but we’ve got plenty of archaeologists already.”

MacGyver shook his head as he looked around to see where most of the digging was taking place. “I’m not an archaeologist. Not professionally, anyway.”

“Is there such a thing as an amateur archaeologist?” the man asked, puzzled.

MacGyver just gave him a look and crossed to the person he was really there to see. “Dr. Anbar!”

The elderly Egyptian man glanced around to locate the source of the voice and smiled when he saw MacGyver. “Ah! You must be Pete Thornton’s friend. What did he say your name was?”

“MacGyver.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. MacGyver. Any friend of Pete’s is a friend of mine.” Anbar shook MacGyver’s hand with a wide grin that belied how seriously he’d been giving orders to the archaeologists just moments before.

“We’ve actually met once before, Doctor,” MacGyver said, feeling a little shy. “You were giving a seminar in Los Angeles, over the symbolism of jewels and minerals in the ancient world. It was at least ten years ago. You probably don’t remember me.”

Anbar scrutinized him for a moment. “I remember Los Angeles very well. Lovely city both times I’ve visited. Now that you mention it, you do look familiar to me. You asked me a question, didn’t you?”

Mac nodded. “I asked you about sapphires and—”

“Sapphires and lapis in the temple of Jerusalem, yes, I remember now!” Anbar nodded, brown eyes sparkling. “That was an excellent question. They were all good questions. I wish I could

remember them all. Well, welcome to the excavation of Inpuhotep's family crypt. I see you've already met our head of security."

"Yeah, I did," MacGyver replied, glancing over at the American man. "I didn't get your name."
"Nick Westley the Second."

Mac raised an eyebrow. "Mind if I call you Nick?"

Nick shrugged. "Call me Nick, call me whatever you want—just don't call me late for dinner. Excuse me, I gotta check something."

As the head of security walked away, Dr. Anbar shook his head. "Unusual man, even for an American. But, come! Let me introduce you to our team."

The good doctor then proceeded to trawl MacGyver through a list of names that he would probably never remember, since there were at least fifteen archaeologists in all. ...Except for Anna and Jennifer, the Australian twins. He might remember them.

Grinning at the pair of blondes over his shoulder, he collided with a bulky and bald man whose name had already slipped MacGyver's mind. Travis? Trevor? Whatever his name, he dropped the handkerchief that he'd been using to wipe the sweat from his head when he slammed into MacGyver like a brick wall.

"Sorry, mate," Travis/Trevor said before getting the attention of Dr. Anbar—who'd been trying to discuss the excavation's findings with MacGyver, oblivious to his new friend's distraction.

"Dr. Anbar, we've found more execration texts and shabti figures in the antechamber, but so far, there's still no evidence of another entrance. I think we've got to face it: our original conclusion was right. The empty sarcophagi and remaining artifacts we've found are all that's left. The mastaba must have been sacked long before we got here, just like all the others." The towering Briton shook his head. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

"No!" Anbar's voice was firm. "I've researched Inpuhotep and his family for years. I've studied this tomb! Mastabas like this one often had secret chambers and hidden entrances. The antechamber is just a decoy to fool the robbers. The real burial chamber is buried deep inside. I'm certain of it, Terrence! We've just got to keep looking."

Terrence. That was it. Tall Terrence? MacGyver could remember that.

Terrence sighed. "All right, Doctor. We'll keep looking. But we can't keep this up forever. Even with the Phoenix Foundation's grant, we only have enough funding for another two weeks. And even with all the money in the world, we have our agreement with the Egyptian government to consider. We only have permission to investigate here until the end of the month. If we don't find something soon, we won't have a choice."

"I know that," Anbar replied, "but we're close. I know we are."

Terrence watched the elderly Egyptologist for a moment before nodding his bald head. Then he walked off to join his fellow archaeologists without another word, handkerchief forgotten in the dust.

"What's this about a hidden entrance?" MacGyver asked, curiosity immediately piqued.

Anbar smiled. "Pete told me a little about you. He mentioned to me that if anyone could help me find the burial chamber in Inpuhotep's tomb, it'd be you. I'm sure you know that Egyptians often used false chambers, labyrinths, traps, and all kinds of decoys to keep out unwanted visitors."

MacGyver winced just a little as his mind rapidly retraced every single dangerous archaeological venture he'd ever volunteered for (or been dragged into). "Yeah, I know all about that."

"Well, Inpuhotep was just a vizier, not royalty, so his mastaba is much more modest than most. But that doesn't mean that his family's crypt doesn't have a few surprises somewhere. My research tells me that the entrance to the rest of the tomb has got to be inside the antechamber somewhere, and one of the old family journals that I found in the local archives suggests that sand is the key. But obviously, there's sand everywhere in this area, so most of the others think I'm wrong."

MacGyver shrugged. "I doubt you're wrong, but maybe there's just something we're missing. Mind if I take a look?"

Anbar flashed a grin. "Of course you should look, MacGyver, that's what you're here for!"

A loud clatter broke off the conversation abruptly. Springing into action, everyone ran towards the source of the sound.

"Oh, no!" one of the archaeologists groaned. "Look at our equipment."

"It's scattered everywhere! This is the third time this week," chimed in another.

Terrence sighed. "Come on. We'd best be sure that nothing's broken. Do an inventory of the artifacts, too, just to be sure. After that, we'll have to come back when it's daylight."

Nick Westley reappeared, searching in all directions. "I don't know what could be doing this, but I saw those animals out there again. I think they're jackals." He pointed out a pair of small canines peering at the group from behind a rock. "Maybe they're wild dogs and not jackals. I don't know, but I don't like 'em. They're too close, and they could be the ones messing with all our stuff. I know for a fact that something's been digging a hole underneath the tarps."

MacGyver watched them for a moment and shook his head. "Those aren't jackals. Not wild dogs, either. They're foxes."

"Just ordinary foxes?" Nick said doubtfully.

"Well, how do we get rid of them?" Terrence asked.

"I think I have a couple ideas," MacGyver replied as he picked up Terrence's sweaty handkerchief from the ground with two fingers. "Will you show me the hole they've been digging?"

"Yeah, sure thing," Nick said, leading MacGyver around a maze of trenches and coverings until they came to a blue tarp close to the rock wall. A sizeable hole had been scratched into the dirt and sand beneath the tarp, between two stakes that were holding it flush against the ground. "See what I mean? I don't know why they want in there. It's not like there's any food or anything around here."

MacGyver shrugged and knelt beside the hole. "Foxes like to burrow. They make their homes in shallow holes under the ground. These two are probably looking for a place to raise their young." Nick snorted. "Well, they need to raise 'em somewhere else."

"What we need to do is convince them that this area and this burrow have been claimed by somebody else." MacGyver waved the handkerchief in the air before stuffing it into the hole. "Normally, anything with enough human smell on it is enough to keep foxes away. They're usually pretty shy."

"These foxes are anything but shy! They came around and started getting into stuff in broad daylight."

MacGyver quirked an eyebrow. "It's not exactly broad daylight out here anymore, but I see what you mean." Then he pointed to some of the equipment. "Those candles over there, by the mosquito netting. Citronella?"

"Uh, I think so, yeah."

MacGyver grabbed one of the big, round candles and Nick reached over with a lighter.

"Why do you need one of these?" Nick asked. "You getting bit?"

"No, but I need some of the wax."

Nick's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Citronella is a natural repellent for just about everything, not just bugs. The smell is so strong that it'll keep the foxes and lots of other animals far away from that hole." When the candle had burned long enough to melt a sizeable pool of wax, MacGyver dripped the fragrant liquid around the perimeter of the half-finished fox burrow. "There you go. I don't think they'll be giving you too much trouble anymore."

"Hey, Nick!" Terrence called. "We're ready to head out!"

"All right! I'll do another check and be right behind you," Nick said. After a moment, he looked at Mac and added, "Also, thanks for the help. That's a neat trick."

MacGyver smiled. "Don't mention it."

As Nick started to walk away, he smirked and replied, "I wasn't planning to."

Rolling his eyes, MacGyver started to look around at the equipment that the others were working on putting away, checking off items on an inventory clipboard before securing everything under tarps staked to the ground. "Need some help with that?"

"No, I think we've got it, but thanks," one of the archaeologists replied. "We've gotten used to picking everything up over the past few weeks. At least nothing's gone missing this time."

"Things have gone missing?" MacGyver tilted his head in curiosity. "What kind of things?"

"No artifacts, thank goodness, but lots of equipment. Brushes, chisels, shovels, radios... You name it. And even if nothing gets lost, we still have to pick it all back up and shove it underneath the tarps again. It's hard to protect the equipment and the artifacts from the weather when something keeps stirring it all back up. Hopefully, that thing you did to keep away the foxes will help with this."

Slowly, MacGyver shook his head. "Somehow, I don't think that these problems have been caused by the foxes. I'm far from being an expert, but that hole seemed a little too perfect and a little too deep to be an animal. It could've easily been a person with a hand shovel... someone who'd like to use the foxes to draw away suspicion."

"Well, if it wasn't a fox, then who could it possibly be? We have the support of the government and the local community. There aren't any other teams competing for this dig, and the people buried in this tomb have no more living relatives. There's no one else who would care about something like this. I mean, as a historian, I hate to say it this way, but—we're just digging up some dead guys. That's it."

MacGyver shrugged. "You could be right. Maybe it's nothing."

The archaeologist raised one perfectly tanned eyebrow. "But let me guess: you're going to keep an eye on things anyway?"

MacGyver smiled. "You got it. I'll see you tomorrow."

When the next morning finally rolled around, MacGyver was one of the first to arrive at the dig site. Only two others had beat him to the punch. Dr. Anbar was already meticulously dusting a clay figure with delicate brushes, and Nick—occupied by a Walkman’s headphones—seemed to be patrolling the excavation site. The head of security offered MacGyver a slight half-wave as the troubleshooter approached. Half-waving back, Mac made a beeline for the Egyptologist.

“Morning, Doctor,” MacGyver called with a smile.

Anbar returned the smile as he looked up. “You’re early, I see! Very good. Are you ready to take a look at the antechamber of the tomb?”

“You bet I am!”

“Too bad! You must help me with this first.” Anbar laughed and waved MacGyver over to his workspace, which was essentially a wooden crate beneath a sturdy tent. “While I work on this shabti, I need you to take these brushes and start working on cleaning up those pottery shards. And be gentle.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” MacGyver promised, picking up the brushes and carefully wiping away centuries of encrusted sand and dirt from the reddish pottery. “What exactly are these things, anyway? They don’t look like any pot I’ve ever seen.”

Anbar glanced up from the shabti to smile at his new friend again. “They’re called execration texts. They’re common enough, but it’s a very uniquely Egyptian custom.”

“How so?” MacGyver asked, always curious about other people and other cultures.

“The ancients believed that names held great power. A name defines who you are, and so they could be used to bless or to curse. One of the things that the Egyptians of this time period would do is write down the names of evil things or enemies onto clay tablets or pottery, and then they would smash it. Can you guess why?”

MacGyver thought it over for a moment before answering, “To get rid of the evil?”

Anbar beamed. “That’s right.”

By then, other workers had begun to fall in and start up the daily activities of excavation.

MacGyver glanced at them periodically as he worked alongside Dr. Anbar. Everyone seemed to be wrapped up in their work, totally carried away by the excitement of unearthing new pieces of history. ...Except for Nick, who was still just as surly-looking as he had been the day before.

Mac shrugged. History isn’t quite for everyone.

“Come with me,” Anbar said, dusting off his hands. “It’s time that I show you what we’ve uncovered so far of Vizier Inpuhotep’s tomb.”

Eagerly, MacGyver set down his brushes and pottery shards and followed the Egyptologist.

The excavators had unearthed a large rectangular pit beneath the ground. Months of painstaking work had uncovered a significant portion of a medium-sized, flat-roofed stone structure buried beneath the earth. A short stepladder descended into the pit, and as he followed Anbar, MacGyver could see a narrow sandstone entryway that led into the actual tomb. MacGyver couldn’t help unleashing his inner anthropologist a bit; he loved seeing how other people, even far back in history, lived their lives. And the idea of seeing this monument from the inside, having the chance to step where people from thousands of years ago had once stood, was just plain exciting.

The inside of the stone tomb was cool and dry, quite a bit cooler than the desert outside, which was already starting to bake in the morning sun. The subterranean room that he'd stepped into was square with beautifully decorated walls. Frescoes and paintings, preserved by the dry air, brought to life various scenes depicting the Egyptian gods. The floor seemed to be made of some type of brick, and each brick was carved with hieroglyphs. Two sarcophagi rested side by side in the center of the room. Most of the artifacts were shattered, and the sparse furnishings made it obvious that grave robbers had beaten the archaeologists to the tomb, likely by centuries.

MacGyver lost his train of thought when he realized that Dr. Anbar was speaking to him.

"...and both are empty, of course. We checked those first. It's likely that the robbers looted the bodies along with everything else. But MacGyver, if my research is correct, then they would have been mere servants anyway, or less important relatives. The real vizier and his wife are likely buried in a chamber deeper inside the tomb. I'm telling you, this must be just the antechamber, set up to fool the robbers. Just an antechamber! It must be!"

"If you believe it, then I believe you," MacGyver replied. "What can you tell me about these wall paintings? Maybe they can give us a hint."

Anbar brightened at MacGyver's question. "Well, naturally, the largest of them is an admonition against grave robbers. Actually, the scribes seem to have written out a very lengthy and elaborate curse describing all the blood that will be shed if anyone enters the tomb. But most of the paintings are just about the vizier and his life... Although several of them depict him with Wepwawet and Anubis, too."

"Wepwawet? I've never heard of that one."

Anbar nodded. "He was a wolf god, worshipped primarily in the Upper Kingdom, and he was often called 'the opener of the ways.' In fact, Asyut was once named Lycopolis by the Greeks in his honor. In the murals, you can distinguish him from his father Anubis by the colors. Anubis is painted in black, and Wepwawet is white or gray."

MacGyver paced the floor, looking at all of the murals. One on the back wall, above the vizier's sarcophagus, depicted a man traveling down a staircase while the gray-headed wolf god looked down from above. "Opener of the ways, huh?" He knelt and tapped one of the bricks on the floor. "And all these hieroglyphs inscribed on the floor—what are these?"

"Names of the gods, mostly. It's quite an unusual feature. None of us have seen names inscribed on the floors before in burial chambers. It's very exciting."

"Is there one with your wolf god's name on it?"

"Yes, I believe there is. One moment—I saw it here not long ago. I think it was—yes, here it is!" Wincing a bit from a pain in his knee, the Egyptologist stooped down and ran his hands over an inscribed brick in the far right corner of the antechamber. Someone had touched this brick recently; all the sand and dust surrounding it had been swept away, leaving the inscription clearly visible. But MacGyver doubted that the last person to come along had done what he was about to do.

MacGyver knelt beside Anbar and pressed down firmly on the brick with his palms, trying to apply as much pressure as he could. His efforts were rewarded when the brick sank into the floor with a loud scrape. A rumble echoed within the walls as ancient mechanisms moved and a small circular section of the wall behind the sarcophagi rolled to the side, revealing a trapdoor.

MacGyver released a breath that he didn't know he'd been holding. "My guess is that putting pressure on this brick shifted a pole or a stone or something underneath us, and that must have shifted something else inside the walls that allowed that panel to slide away."

“This is—this is astounding! I-I can’t believe that we actually found it!” Dr. Anbar cried. “Thank you for uncovering this for me, MacGyver. For all of us, really. I should’ve seen it sooner! It seems so simple now. I had gotten so convinced that sand was the key to it all that I had blinded myself to other solutions.”

MacGyver grinned. “Don’t worry about that right now, Doctor. Right now, we’ve got a tomb to explore! Do you have a flashlight handy?”

“No—we’ll have to get the others. Terrence! Terrence! Jennifer! Come quickly! Come! MacGyver found it! He found the door! I told you there would be a door! I told you!”

While Anbar was rallying the other excavation personnel, MacGyver peered into the new entrance, trying to get a glimpse into the darkness. Now that he looked at it, he realized that it wasn't a trapdoor so much as a very small hatch. He could definitely see the first two steps of a narrow stone staircase, but apart from that, all was darkness. He glanced up when he heard the running footsteps flying towards the unearthed mastaba. Every archaeologist, along with Nick the security chief, flooded into the antechamber with the troubleshooter and the Egyptologist.

“I’ve got a torch,” Terrence said, face splitting into a huge grin when he saw the door beside MacGyver. “I can’t wait to go in there and look around!”

“MacGyver should be the first to enter,” Dr. Anbar said solemnly. “He discovered the entryway, so he should get the honor of being the first man inside.”

Nick shrugged as he shone his flashlight around in the opening. “I doubt if there’s anything in there.”

“Ah, c’mon, Nick. Don’t tell me you’re not at least a little excited by this,” MacGyver said.

“I’ll be excited when everybody makes it out of this excavation thing with no accidents so I can go home to Santa Barbara and get paid,” Nick replied. “But I guess the whole hidden tunnel thing is kinda neat.”

“You should go in with us, Nick,” piped up Jennifer from behind Dr. Anbar. “Maybe it’ll give you a better appreciation for what we archaeologists actually do.”

Nick shrugged. “I doubt it, but...well, I guess somebody’s gotta hold the flashlight, right?”

MacGyver grinned. He recognized a guy feigning indifference when he saw one, and he knew that the entire group—including the security guard—had to be just as excited about exploring as he was.

“Enough talking. Let’s go in and check it out!” Terrence said, passing his flashlight to MacGyver. “You first, like the good doctor said.”

MacGyver smiled. “Good thing I don’t believe in ancient curses.” Shining the light down the narrow stairs, he took the first step into the darkness of the tomb.

And he screamed.

Terrence jumped, banging his head on the stone ceiling and cursing loudly. The others gasped and looked on with expressions of shock—until MacGyver flashed them a grin.

“Sorry,” Mac said with a laugh, “I couldn’t resist. A little tomb-exploring humor.”

“Next time, keep the humor to yourself. You nearly gave the old man a heart attack!” Nick complained.

“Me?” Dr. Anbar replied indignantly. “You looked like you’d seen a ghost!”

“I’m just the security guard, all right? They didn’t teach me how to deal with mummies and ancient curses at the police academy.”

“Everything’s fine,” MacGyver assured them. “It was just a joke, that’s all. All right, here I go.” He stepped down the stairs to the mud-brick floor and looked around, shining the yellow-white beam of the flashlight in all directions. Nick, the only other person with a light, stood beside him and helped illuminate the area. They had emerged from the staircase into a large room, empty except for some kind of stone altar and a large stone slab decorated with a painting and several hieroglyphs.

“This must be the chapel,” Anbar said from his place in the middle of the staircase, frozen in his tracks as he looked on into the room with wonder, oblivious to the impatient horde of archaeologists waiting on the steps behind him. “This is where the funeral ceremonies would have been held, and the stela on that altar represents Inpuhotep and his family in the afterlife.”

“Hey, check this out,” Nick said, shining his flashlight on the wall near the altar. “It’s a fake door, just painted on.”

“It’s meant to allow the spirits of the deceased to move in and out of the room,” Terrence explained, reaching out to touch the painted doorframe.

MacGyver moved forward for a closer look, and he smiled as he heard Anbar’s eager footsteps shuffling behind them—slowly shuffling, but as fast as the elderly Egyptologist could go. He had just turned to face the staircase and was about to offer to help when abruptly, a stone slab dropped down from a hidden slot in the ceiling, landing at the bottom of the staircase with a loud crash and blocking the rest of the group from view.

Immediately, MacGyver jumped towards the stone, with Terrence and Nick hot on his heels.

“Dr. Anbar!” he called. “Can you hear us? Is everything all right?”

“Yes!” Anbar shouted back, the voices of the others audible in the background. “We can hear you fine, and all of us are unharmed. Is everyone all right on your side?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure how to get back to you. Is there another way out?”

“Probably, but you’ll have to find it. There’s no way to know where it could be—if another route even exists at all. I’m so sorry, MacGyver! We must have somehow activated the trap, but I have no idea what we could have done to set it off!”

MacGyver shrugged reflexively, forgetting for a moment that the Egyptologist couldn’t see the gesture. “There’s no telling. Everything in here is centuries old. It’s possible that the trap just triggered spontaneously at exactly the wrong moment.” A sort of lingering burn twitched in the back of MacGyver’s mind; he sensed danger. What were the odds that a stone which had remained in place for hundreds of years would suddenly fall into the doorway at the exact moment of the tomb’s rediscovery? How could that possibly be an accident?

But then again, his rational mind argued, what else could it be?

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” Terrence added, “we’ll find a way out!”

“Until then, we’ll work to find a way to move this stone,” said Anbar. “Good luck to you!”

“Thanks,” MacGyver replied as he surveyed the room with his flashlight again. “We’re probably going to need it.”

“Oh, my God, it’s the curse. The curse is real,” Nick whispered, breath coming in shallow gasps that echoed off the brick walls. “Oh, my God, I’m gonna die in here. I should never have taken

this job. I only wanted a little extra cash because I'm still paying off my loans, but I never expected that I was gonna die in some dead guy's tomb in Egypt. Oh, my God."

"Just calm down, Nick. We'll be fine," Terrence said.

"No, we won't. There are probably all kinds of snakes and scorpions and God only knows what else in here, and if that big rock thing that closed off the door just triggered on its own just because it's old, then what else in here could go off at any moment? Huh? Huh? Answer that! And what about oxygen? Are we gonna run out of air in here?"

"Not a chance!" MacGyver answered, hoping that he sounded reassuring. "The ancient Egyptians always built air shafts into their tombs. That way, the builders and artisans could work on the inside without dying. Now, Terrence is right—we're going to be fine and we're going to make it out of here, but only if we stay calm. Take deep breaths, okay?"

"Okay," Nick said, his nodding made visible by the glow of his flashlight. "Deep breaths. Right. I can do that. I'm a cop. I can do that."

MacGyver returned the nod encouragingly. "Very good, Nick, you're doing great. Now, let's just think about this for a second. This mastaba isn't very big, right?"

"Right, and most mastabas of this type wouldn't have very many rooms," Terrence replied.

"That's good," Mac said. "That should make it easier for us to find the exit. We'll find the door that leads out of this room—the one for people, not spirits—and we'll check each area until we find our way out."

Terrence chuckled. "You make it sound so simple."

MacGyver grinned in the near-darkness. "Most problems are simple if you just take the time to think them through."

"Yeah, well, I hate to rain on everybody's parade, but how exactly are we going to keep track of where we've been?" Nick said. "Our visibility is less than great, and didn't these guys build false exits and stuff? What if we get lost and end up going in circles?"

"He has a point," Terrence admitted.

"Hang on. I've got an idea," MacGyver said, tugging off one of his shoelaces.

"What's he doing?" Terrence asked. "His torch is going all over the place. I can't tell what's going on."

MacGyver screwed his eyes shut as Nick shone a light right into his face. "I'm taking off my shoelace."

Terrence frowned in confusion. "What for?"

"To give us a way to mark where we've been going. I'll cut the shoelace into pieces with my knife, and I'll tape them down to the floor every few feet as we travel. That way, we'll have a trail of breadcrumbs to lead us back here if anything goes wrong. Even if our flashlights run out of battery along the way, we'll still be able feel for the shoelaces to find our way around."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "You have tape?"

In response, MacGyver pulled a flattened roll of duct tape from his back pocket. "Looks like I've still got about half a roll left." He grinned. "Never leave home without it."

"Who are you?" Nick said. "Seriously, who are you?"

"Just a troubleshooter, that's all." With a shrug, he cut off the first section of shoelace and taped it to the floor. "C'mon, let's get going. Maybe we can make it out of here in time for dinner."

Finding the doorway was easy, but deciding which way to go after that was not.

"Right or left?" Nick asked, aiming his light first in one direction, then the other. Either way, the beam illuminated nothing; the light merely trailed off into fuzzy darkness.

“Flip a coin?” Terrence suggested. “Or maybe we should split up.”

MacGyver shook his head slowly. “Splitting up in here is a bad idea. If we’re separated and one of us gets hurt, we might never find each other.”

“I say we go right,” Nick said.

Terrence chuckled. “That settles it. We’re going left.”

“Hey!” Nick protested. “Don’t think that you can push me around just because I’m not some Oxford-graduate bone-digger like you! I’m only here to keep you guys safe.”

“We don’t really need you,” Terrence pointed out. “There’s nothing that we need protection from. You’re just a precaution that the Phoenix Foundation wanted to have. It’s nice to have you along, but completely unnecessary.”

MacGyver shook his head. “Listen, I understand both sides of this argument, I really do. But now is not the time. We need to get going if we want to get out of here.”

“All right, then, Troubleshooter,” Terrence said. “Which way are we going?”

Mac sighed and looked down both dark passages, pitch black in either direction, with no hints as to where they should go. “Pick a number between one and seven.”

“One.”

MacGyver glanced at the security guard next. “Nick?”

The guard blinked. “Seven. Why?”

MacGyver nodded at the hallway. “The number was six. We’re going right.” Tentatively, he stepped forward into the shadows, his two companions close behind. After a few moments, they reached a brick wall. “Dead end.”

“What do we do now?” Nick whispered. “Turn around and go back?”

In the dim light, Terrence rolled his eyes. “Of course we go back. We can’t very well go forward, can we? I told you we should’ve gone left. And why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t stop,” Nick replied, voice still hushed.

“This isn’t a bad thing,” MacGyver said. “Now we know which way not to go. We’ve eliminated a possibility, and that’s good. When we get back to the spot where we turned right, I’ll mark the floor with an X so we’ll know not to come back this way.”

“Good idea,” Terrence said. “Here, Nick, lemme see the light. I’ll get started down the left side while MacGyver marks the spot.”

Mutely, Nick passed the flashlight to Terrence, watching as the tall man stepped down the corridor.

MacGyver glanced up at the security guard while he taped an X onto the bricks. “You don’t have to stand so close to me, you know. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re the best chance I have of getting out of here in one piece. I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

The two of them walked side by side as they began to catch up with Terrence. Mac shook his head slightly. “That’s not necessarily true. Besides, this is just an old mausoleum, essentially. There may be a few more booby traps in here, but the odds are that nothing’s going to happen as long as we don’t panic and we keep our eyes open.”

“What about the curse? Anbar said there was a curse. H-he said so from the beginning, when they first opened up that entryway. The curse says that blood will be spilled, Anbar said so. They laughed about it, but... I don’t know.”

“There’s no such thing as curses,” MacGyver insisted. “Everything in here is man-made, and we’ll find out way out of it. You’ll see.”

“Hey! I’ve found another door!” Terrence called from a few yards away.
“That's great!” MacGyver said. “Wait for us!” He could see the beam of the archaeologist’s light up ahead as they grew closer.

Terrence reached out, opened a well-preserved wooden door, and stepped inside.
A split second later, his body dropped to the floor, the flashlight rolling lazily over the bricks from his limp hand.

“Terrence!” Nick cried, sprinting forward. He came to an abrupt halt just in front of the archaeologist—or rather, the corpse. “Oh, no. Oh, my—” On the brink of hyperventilating, Nick staggered backwards as MacGyver came closer.

The tall, bulky man was lying in a pool of his own blood, a deep red puddle that was widening by the second. His bald head was unnaturally tilted backwards on the uneven bricks, the white bone of his neck visible through the torn-away flesh and the blood bubbling out of his lacerated throat.

MacGyver fought off a wave of sickness and grief. "I can't believe that this is happening." Head reeling, he stepped away and braced himself against the cool brick wall. "Nick, are you all right?"

"I-it's the curse. It's got to be. We're gonna die."

"There's no such thing as curses," MacGyver whispered half to himself, eyes squeezed shut. "It's my fault. I said that we shouldn't split up, and then I went right ahead and let him do it. I should've stopped him."

"It's the curse. The curse got him. Nothing you coulda done," Nick replied in a shaky voice. MacGyver shook his head vehemently. "There isn't a curse! It's my fault! Oh, man. Terrence. No, this shouldn't have happened. I shouldn't have let it happen. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"We gotta get out of here," Nick insisted quietly. "Gotta get out before the curse gets us too." He started shining the light around the area, flicking the beam around the hall and the room. "But this room looks like a dead end. It's just full of stuff. I don't see a way out. We—we can't get out of here. We're trapped! The curse!"

As the light shone around the doorframe, MacGyver caught sight of something gleaming and shiny, right at neck-height.

“A head wire,” MacGyver managed to choke out. “Terrence wasn't killed by any curse. That’s impossible. This was a booby trap. I’ve heard of these before. A razor-sharp wire, strong enough and sharp enough to almost decapitate someone.”

“Y-you mean those things could be anywhere?” Nick stammered.

MacGyver nodded grimly. “I’m afraid so. Maybe it would be better for us to look around on our hands and knees from now on.”

Immediately, Nick dropped to his knees. “Good idea. Very good idea.” His face was pale and he rubbed his eyes with one clammy hand. “I can’t believe this. My God. What a way to die.”

"I'm sorry," MacGyver said quietly. "I wish I could take all of this back. Terrence should still be with us right now. I'm so sorry, Nick, but we're going to make it out of here together, all right? Nobody else is going to die. Our only choice is to keep moving."

Trembling, Nick reached into his pocket and wrapped a rosary around his hand. "Yeah. Okay. Let's get out of here. And fast."

MacGyver grabbed the flashlight that had rolled to a stop against the opposite wall and dropped to his knees himself, handing one of the lights to Nick. Though his stomach was twisting in knots and his heart felt heavy, he needed to get his remaining companion to safety, and the only way to do that was to take his own advice: don't panic, and think the problem through. "The room that Terrence opened looks like a storage room of some kind. You were right. It's definitely not an exit, so our only option is to keep moving forward. Just stay close to me so we don't get separated or lost."

As they shuffled forward, awkwardly trying to keep a hold on the flashlights as they crawled, Nick replied, "I already told you, I'm not letting you out of my sight. I've got to get home. I have my family and my career to get back to. ...Hey, man, do you, uh—do you think that the whole cursed-tomb thing is real? Be honest with me. You keep saying that there isn't a curse, but after what happened with Terrence, I need you to level with me. Do you think it's even a possibility? Even a little bit?"

"Not at all," MacGyver said. "No such thing as curses."

"C'mon, man, I just saw a man die right in front of our eyes, and you're telling me that this place isn't cursed?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. This tomb isn't under a curse. It's just protected. The Egyptians were smart people, and they had a lot of strong beliefs about the afterlife. All these traps and things—they're just the product of that."

Nick shuddered. "Well, I hate it. I just want to go home. I can't stand all these paintings on the walls—all those eyes looking down at me. It's freaking me out."

"Hey, don't panic. We'll make it out just fine as long as we stay calm, okay?"

Slowly, Nick nodded. "Okay."

"Good." Then MacGyver froze, and the security guard nearly stumbled over him.

"What is it?"

"Shhhhhh. Stay quiet and turn off your flashlight for a second," Mac whispered. In silence, Nick obeyed and MacGyver switched off his own light, holding his breath. There, at the other end of the passageway, a faint yellowish orb of light bobbed up and down. The orb quickly disappeared, but the rays emanating from it remained for several seconds afterward.

"What was that?" Nick whispered, switching on his flashlight again. "Please tell me it's not going to kill us."

"I can't say for sure what it was, but I have a suspicion," MacGyver said. "I can tell you one thing for sure: we're not alone in here."

After crawling through the corridor in silence for several minutes, MacGyver's flashlight shone on another door. "Look at that."

"Do you think it's another storage room, or a way out? Is it safe to go in?"

"I don't know. But there's only one way to find out. Stay back. I'll crawl over and open it. If we're lucky, this one will only be guarded by a head wire, same as the last one."

"No, I'll do it," Nick said, shuffling forward until he was in front of MacGyver. "I'll open the door."

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m the security guy, so—so I guess this is my job.” He took a deep breath and pushed the door open with his hand, squeezing his eyes shut. Slowly, he cracked one eye open. “Hey, it didn’t blow up.”

MacGyver nodded. “That’s always a good thing.” He shone his flashlight around the doorframe. “I don’t see any wires, but be careful when you stand up.”

Nick nodded and rose slowly to his feet, waving his hand around the top of the door arch. “I haven’t gotten any body parts cut off yet, so I guess we’re good.”

“And a good thing, too, because it looks like the only other hallway that we haven’t explored leads to a dead end.”

Nick took a single step inside the room, just enough for Mac to get a look, and shone his flashlight around. “Hey, check it out. There’s a door on the other side of the room, but what’s all this red stuff on the floor? There’s gotta be at least six inches of it all over the place.”

“Nick, don’t move!” MacGyver half-shouted.

The security guard froze in place. “What? What is it?”

“That stuff’s hematite powder. It’s another booby trap.”

Nick squinted, still motionless. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“I did my homework, that’s all. It’s not smart to come to a place like this without knowing at least the basics of what you’re supposed to be investigating. Besides, this isn’t my first time dealing with tomb traps.” MacGyver sighed and added, “And it probably won’t be the last.”

“Comforting,” Nick replied in a sarcastic drawl. “So what does this magic tomb dust even do? Is it bad juju or something?”

“It’s nothing supernatural. If the article I read is accurate at all, then when a grave robber—”

“That’s us, right?”

“Close enough. If we were to walk through that powder, our movements would stir it up into the air.”

“And we’d breathe it in and it would kill us?”

MacGyver nodded. “Eventually, yeah.”

“So it’s poisonous?”

“Not quite. It’s not toxic and it’s harmless on the ground like that, but each particle is sharp enough to shred your lungs when you breathe it in. Over time, if you breathe in a big amount of the particles...”

Nick winced. “It cuts you apart from the inside out? Ouch. Well, how do we get around it?”

MacGyver shook his head. “We don’t. Not without hazmat suits. Going all the way across would stir too much of it up, and I don’t want to risk it. We’ll have to find another way around.”

“But I thought you said the only other way was a dead end!”

“I did, but maybe we missed something.”

Without warning, a light flashed on behind them and a voice intoned: “Oh, yes. You missed something. You missed something indeed.”

Holding his breath, MacGyver slowly turned to face the speaker. He was surprised to see a young Egyptian man, probably in his early 20s, holding a bright yellow flashlight. The young man’s brown eyes were narrowed as he stared at the two intruders.

“My name’s MacGyver. This is Nick. We’re lost,” MacGyver said slowly, eyeing the person who’d probably been following them this entire time. The man didn’t seem to be armed; maybe he could be reasoned with. “Do you know a way out?”

“Of course I know a way out,” the young man snapped. “This is my family’s tomb.”

MacGyver raised an eyebrow; he hadn’t seen that one coming. “This tomb is at least three thousand years old.”

“Of course it is, but they’re still my family! The vizier and the others buried inside this crypt are my ancestors, and now you outsiders think you have the right to come and take whatever you want! No. None of you are touching my family. No one!”

“Just calm down,” MacGyver said, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace. “The archaeologists didn’t know that the vizier had any living relatives left. If they had, they wouldn’t have started excavating without permission. We can work this out together. What’s your name?”

“Call me Fadil,” he said flatly, jutting his chin upward in defiance. “I’m sick and tired of all of you. I spoke to the archaeologists already. They wouldn’t leave unless I had evidence of my kinship, but what kind of evidence am I supposed to have after thousands of years? All I have to go on is my father’s word, and I’ll never doubt it.”

“Wait a second!” Nick interjected. “I remember you. I’ve seen you around before. You’re the one who kept messing with the equipment and stuff a couple weeks ago. I kicked you out!”

“That’s right, I did mess with your tools,” Fadil snapped. “And you still wouldn’t pack up and go. Even when I snuck in and started stealing things, you didn’t leave!”

“Is that why you followed us in here?” MacGyver asked.

Fadil nodded. “And that’s also why I sealed off the entrance to the tomb. No one else is getting inside here! It was bad enough that they broke through into the first chamber. I couldn’t believe that you actually managed to find the secret entrance into the rest of the mastaba. I was hoping that you’d all just give up once you thought you’d hit a dead end, but no! You had to keep digging, didn’t you?” Accompanying his words with an aggressive jab with the flashlight, he repeated, “Didn’t you?!”

MacGyver spread his upheld hands wider. If he weren’t in such a serious situation, he might have found it funny that he was being held up with nothing but a flashlight, but the stirring fear that Fadil might push one or both of the Americans backward into the hematite powder cast a grim light on the moment. “Hey, take it easy, okay? We didn’t mean any harm. We didn’t know. If you don’t want anyone disturbing the tomb, I can make sure that the excavation comes to a halt. I’m friends with the director of the Phoenix Foundation, the ones who are funding the dig. I can guarantee you that the archaeologists will leave. But first, we’ve got to get out of here.”

The young Egyptian squinted at MacGyver suspiciously. “Why should I believe anything you say? How do I know you aren’t trying to deceive me just so I’ll let you out?”

“Look, all you have to go on is my word. But if you think about it, I have no reason to lie to you. I don’t have anything personal invested in this excavation, and even if you don’t help us find a way out, those archeologists will find a way around that stone blocking the entrance eventually. And when they do, you’ll just be right back where you started—unless you let me help.”

“Why would you help me? For years, the Americans and the British have been taking Egyptian artifacts back to your museums—artifacts that rightfully belong here in Egypt. Why would you consider helping me when no one else will listen?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” MacGyver said simply. Fadil scoffed. “And you really expect me to believe that?” MacGyver shrugged. “Yeah, actually. I do.”

“He’s right,” Nick ventured. “We’ve got nothing to lose either way... And at this point, neither do you.” He reached out with his right hand. “What do you say? We’ll stop the digging if you show us the way out. Do we have a deal?”

Fadil stared at the security guard’s outstretched hand for a moment before clasping it with his own. “All right. Deal.”

MacGyver grinned. “Great! Let’s get moving.”

The Egyptian nodded and took a step down the hallway. “You missed the hidden tunnel to the burial chambers—it’s back this way, and that’ll take us to the other exit. Also, you don’t have to crawl the whole way. The wire traps are only found on the doors to the three storage rooms.”

“Three?” Nick exclaimed. “But we only found one!”

Fadil flashed an impish smirk over his shoulder. “This mastaba has many secrets that you Americans will never find.”

MacGyver shook his head with a smile and set off after Fadil, glancing behind him with his flashlight to be sure that Nick was following.

He saw the loose brick just a second too late to call out a warning.

In less than a second, Nick lost his footing as the brick shifted beneath him; his arms flailed, struggling to catch his balance. He fell backwards, landing flat on his back.

His upper torso sank into the hematite-covered section of the floor with a powdery crunch, and a cloud of reddish dust materialized in the air above him. His face was buried and his spine arched in pain as the back of his head smacked into the ground.

“Nick!” MacGyver shouted, grabbing the security guard by the arms and pulling him straight upwards.

Dazed, Nick coughed and spluttered, clawing at his dust-covered face with fingers that were caked in rust-red.

“Nick, look at me,” MacGyver commanded, shining his flashlight into the security guard’s eyes.

“Is he all right?” Fadil asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m no doctor, but I think he might have a concussion. Not to mention all this dust.” MacGyver coughed as the dust cloud began to spread and settle, permeating the area and making his eyes water. “We need to get away from here, and fast.”

“Am-’m I gonna die?” Nick coughed again, scrubbing at his eyes.

“No, you haven’t been exposed to enough to kill you yet. This is kinda like standing by an arc welder with no mask. It’ll hurt you, but the concussion is the bigger problem. Now stop messing with your face like that! You’re only going to make it worse,” MacGyver replied. “We’re going to need some dust masks, and we need to get out of here as soon as we can. Come on—let’s move down the hall, away from this room.”

Fadil nodded, shining his flashlight down the right path. “This way.”

After MacGyver had helped Nick walk a few yards away from the dust cloud, he stopped walking long enough to take off his shirt, wincing a bit as the still air chilled the newly-exposed skin. Grabbing his knife from his pocket, he made short work of shredding his favorite red shirt into three makeshift bandanas. “Here, tie these around your faces. They’re not as good as real dust masks, but they ought to help.”

Voice slightly muffled by the strip of cloth now covering his mouth and nose, Fadil said, “The entrance to the burial chambers is down here, through a trapdoor.” He pointed to a brick on the wall beside MacGyver. “See that part of the wall, the one decorated with the ankh? Push that back, and the door will open.”

MacGyver nodded, knelt on the floor, and pressed against the brick with all his strength. After a moment, it gave way and slid into the wall, much like the one in the antechamber had. As the hole in the floor opened, MacGyver moved his hands away from the brick. The carved ankh crumbled to sand-colored dust beneath his fingers.

Glancing at the dust sadly, MacGyver followed his companions down the stairs and into the burial chambers.

“Is—is this where all your folks are buried?” Nick slurred.

“Not all of them, but yes, these are their sarcophagi,” Fadil said proudly. “My father brought me here many times. He watched over the family crypt all his life, and I promised to do the same.”

Nick looked around at the carefully-arranged row of coffins, surrounded by shabti and offerings, decorated with elaborate designs and precious stones. “Kinda creepy, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” MacGyver remarked. “How we deal with death says a lot about how we deal with life.”

Fadil offered the troubleshooter a hint of a smile as he led the two Americans through the chamber. “My mother and father used to say something similar. How do you deal with death, Ma-MacGyver?”

MacGyver smiled. “MacGyver. You got it right.” Then he sighed and shook his head. “I don’t deal with it very well, that’s for sure. How about you?”

“I don’t deal with it well, either,” Fadil replied, a sadness haunting his eyes... a sadness that MacGyver recognized all too well. “When my father died last month, I left school to take his place here. He dedicated his entire life to preserving our family legacy in every way he could.”

“Is that where you learned to speak English? In school?”

Fadil nodded. “The University of Asyut. I was studying Egyptology, actually. I wanted to use the things my parents taught me in the real world.” He scoffed. “So much for that.”

“You could still make it happen,” MacGyver pointed out. “The world could use people like you. People who are dedicated to using the past to help the future.”

“My family needs me.”

“You could negotiate with the archaeologists, you know. They could help you take care of this place, help you preserve it. Then you could go back to school instead of trying to guard all of this alone.”

“Maybe,” Fadil replied doubtfully. “But first, we need to get back to Asyut. Your friend isn’t looking so good.”

MacGyver glanced over at Nick. Even though the security guard was able to keep up, he was still unsteady. Mac nodded, half to himself. "You're right. He needs to be checked out by a doctor. How much farther until we get out?"

"No farther. We're at the door. But..."

Even in his somewhat-disoriented state, Nick still managed to raise an eyebrow and say, "But what?"

Fadil swallowed hard. "Um... I'm not sure how to tell you this, but—well—it's been years since my father was well enough to bring me in here, and, um..." He shook his head. "I know that one of these doors leads to the desert just outside the necropolis. We wouldn't be far outside the city, and I know that the tunnel and exit are still clear. But... There are two doors."

MacGyver nodded slowly. "Okay. And what's behind the other one?"

"Hematite powder. Enough to flood this entire chamber and suffocate us."

Mac's eyes widened. "Oh, man."

Fadil set his flashlight on the floor in a spot that illuminated both doors. "The left door is painted with Anubis, and the right door depicts Set. I don't remember which door is which."

"We're gonna die, aren't we?" Nick whispered.

"Not necessarily," MacGyver replied. "Look at it this way: we have a fifty percent chance of getting it right. Those aren't bad odds."

"They aren't good ones either," Fadil countered.

MacGyver shrugged. "I like to think on the bright side. Besides, I've been through worse odds than this."

Nick blinked. "Do I even wanna ask?"

"Probably not," MacGyver said. "Now, we can use our logic to figure this out. What do these hieroglyphs say? Can you read them? Maybe there's a hint."

Fadil shrugged. "I can read several of them, but there's not a hint there. They just describe the gods. Anubis, god of death, friend of orphans and lost souls. Set, god of the destruction and chaos, ruler of the red sands. Something like that."

"So it's simple, right? Death is bad, so we pick the other door, right?" Nick said as he rubbed his aching head.

"Maybe not," Fadil replied. "Anubis is a benevolent god, unlike Set. And he was very popular in this area. Anubis could easily be the way out."

MacGyver was silent for a second as he scrutinized both doors. "Wait a second. Dr. Anbar... Before we came through here, he said something about sand. 'Sand is the key.' He'd found that in his research, in your family's journals. And he had me look over a lot of those, um—those execration text things. I saw a lot of hieroglyphs on them, but none of them look like the ones on these doors. So maybe they didn't think that Set was so bad after all."

"Sand is the key," Fadil echoed. "Set was the god of the deserts and the sands. It would make sense that his door would lead us outside."

Nick sighed. "So what you're telling me is that we're gonna have to guess. Is that right?"

"Afraid so," MacGyver answered. "Fadil, would you like to do the honors?"

The Egyptian took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Yes. I will. I might as well." He reached out with one tentative hand and opened Set's door, waiting to see what would greet them: a way to escape the confines of Inpuhotep's crypt...or a choking flood of rust powder.

The ancient door swung open with a soft creak. A gust of warm air blew into MacGyver's face. The troubleshooter heaved a sigh of relief and grinned. "We did it!"
Fadil grinned, too. "Now we get you both back to Asyut. Follow me!"

As the Egyptian led the Americans through the tunnel to the desert, Nick murmured, "Hey, thanks for getting me out of here alive. To both of ya. I really mean it."
"Anytime, Nick," MacGyver said. "Anytime. You still think that archaeology is boring?"
"Nah, I think you guys have converted me. But next time, I'm staying home and leaving it to the professionals."
MacGyver laughed. "I think you're forgetting that I'm just an amateur."
Nick grinned for the first time since they'd entered the tomb. "Coulda had me fooled."

"Thanks for walking me back to the airport, Fadil," MacGyver said as he walked down Asyut's busy street with his new acquaintance.

"Not a problem," Fadil replied. "I figured that you'd get lost without someone to help you find your way around. Asyut's a big city. Have you heard anything about your friend yet?"

"You mean Nick? Yeah, he's going to be fine. Just resting up for a couple days while he shakes off that concussion. No permanent damage to his head or his lungs, thanks to you. But what about you?"

Fadil sighed. "I've made my decision."

MacGyver nodded. "And?"

"I've decided to allow the excavation to continue. With your influence, I was able to convince the archaeologists to make sure that most of artifacts from my family's mastaba will stay here at the museums in Asyut. The rest will rotate through museums across the world so that everyone else can share my family legacy, too."

MacGyver smiled. "I think your father would be proud, Fadil."

Fadil shrugged. "Probably not, actually, but he's been gone for a while, and it's time for me to pursue my own legacy. I'm going back to the University of Asyut this semester."

"Fadil, that's great! Congratulations!"

Fadil smiled for just a moment, but then it waned. "Thank you, but I have to apologize. I already offered my condolences to the archaeologists, but I wanted to say it to you, too. I'm sorry for what happened. I'm sorry for endangering you and Nick, and I'm especially sorry for the death of the other man. I wasn't intending for the traps to kill anyone. I was only trying to protect my family."

MacGyver placed one hand on the young man's shoulder. "It wasn't your fault. Any of us could have walked into that wire while we were excavating, even if you hadn't been there. You're a smart man with a bright future, Fadil. Best of luck, okay?"

Fadil nodded and smiled. "Best of luck to you, too, MacGyver. I'll let you catch your flight." As the Egyptian began to walk away, he looked over his shoulder and called, "Oh, and MacGyver?"
He grinned. "Watch out for any ancient curses!"

MacGyver grinned. "Curses? No such thing!"