

Penny Dreadful

Act One

Penny stood on tiptoes and waved, almost knocking the hat off the lady behind her.

“MacGyver! Over here!” She beamed as MacGyver waved back at her and strode across the airport lounge. “Your flight was really late! And I thought I might have missed you because I was late too, and then there was such a nice security guard who let me in even though he really shouldn’t have, and I’ve been waiting ages for you, and...” She took a breath.

“Hi Penny,” MacGyver smiled down at her.

I see you, my daughter, I see you there in the airport, waving to your beau. He doesn't look at all as I imagined he would, but these are strange times.

I followed you here, to make sure you were safe. For it is not time, not yet. Many things have to happen before then, and happen they must, for then order will be restored.

“You’re going to just love New York!” Penny linked arms with him and they walked out of the lounge. “I’ve got this cute apartment, and the theatre is amazing, and the director is just... Well, you’ll see.

“What time do you have to be at the theatre tonight?” MacGyver dodged around a bag lady pushing a supermarket trolley. “Pardon me, ma’am!”

I see you talking to him, so happy and carefree. I see the gestures you make and I think you are telling him about the fate of my poor son. You make the shape of his doom, you describe how he perishes and your beau tells you to stop. In my heart I hear him tell you not to talk of such terrible things, but you are not chastened and you lead him away into the city.

He is a gentleman, your beau, for he moves aside to let one less fortunate pass, and talks to her kindly when most would cast her aside and spare her not a second thought.

“Not until six.” Penny flagged down a cab, smiling at the driver. “The first act is amazing! There’s this enormous helmet and it comes down onto the stage really fast and Peter – he’s playing Conrad – he does just the best death scene, and –”

“Penny!” MacGyver waited until Penny turned to face him. “I’ll see it this evening, don’t spoil it for me, OK?” He waved the ‘Castle of Otranto’ playbill and smiled.

“OK.” Penny got into the cab and told the driver her address. MacGyver sat back in the old Crown Victoria, letting Penny’s chatter wash over him as he looked out at the skyscrapers sliding past the window.

I see you get into the cab and roll away, to be swallowed up by the press of traffic. Now I turn away, heading back to my home. I will see you again soon.

I have things to prepare, events to put in motion, delicate balancing acts to perform if my story is to play out as it should. For only by completing the story can I make right the tragedy that has occurred.

I walk all the way back, as a penitent man would, while others ride in automobiles. The sidewalk is cold through the thin soles of my shoes, and I feel my heart echo its chill as I compose myself for the task ahead of me.

O, my daughter, I regret the sacrifices that will be necessary.

The call from Penny had arrived at just the right time. After his adventures in Egypt, MacGyver had felt in need of some time off, and a trip to New York to see her perform in her new play seemed like the perfect escape. He'd been pleased to see she had one of the lead roles too, her hard work finally paying off. Even if the theatre was so far off Broadway it would be hard pressed to see it on a clear day...

He wasn't familiar with the story. Penny had tried to explain it, but enthusiasm had got the better of her and he'd been no wiser when she finished. He closed his eyes, enjoying the thin Spring sunlight slanting through the cab window.

I arrive, slipping in through the back door. I stand in the warm darkness, breathing in the dust and the velvet and the words that linger in the rafters.

I climb high, making sure that everything is perfect, that the story can begin as it must, setting into motion the chain of events that will lead to the return of him who was taken from me.

I climb down again, walking the boards and mouthing the words in the gloom.

Everything is ready.

"So you see, my character's a real tragic heroine!" Penny ladled spaghetti and sauce onto two plates, handing one to MacGyver. "Matilda gets ignored by her father because he likes his son Conrad better, and then Conrad gets squashed by a giant helmet on his wedding day, and... Are you alright?"

"A giant helmet?!" MacGyver choked on his spaghetti and reached for a glass of water. He took a sip and stared at Penny, who blinked back at him, confused.

"Yeah. So he gets squashed and his dad – my character's dad – goes crazy and decides to marry Conrad's fiancée himself because he's so mad that he doesn't have a son now –"

"As you do..." MacGyver twirled his fork in the spaghetti and tried to concentrate.

"Right. But Isabella – that's the fiancée – she runs away because she doesn't want to marry her fiancé's dad, and Theodore the peasant hides her in the church and –"

"Penny!" MacGyver held up a hand. "I'm coming to see it this evening – don't spoil it for me!" He ate another bite of spaghetti and smiled around it. Penny smiled back.

"OK, Mac." She picked up her fork and started on her own meal.

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MacGyver took off his coat and stuffed it under the theatre seat. The theatre lacked the glamour of Broadway, but it was full and people sounded excited to be seeing the show.

You are one face in a sea of guests, but I see you. You hide amongst the wedding crowd to watch my son and his lady married, and I see you. Now it is time, and you will see my story unfold.

Behold, stranger...

The lights dimmed and the heavy curtains rolled back to reveal a castle scene, set for a wedding.

MacGyver had been ready for another of Penny's heartfelt, but badly overdone performances, but was pleasantly surprised. Her acting had improved and her portrayal of the sad, forgotten daughter was convincing. He watched Lady Isabella proclaim her love for Conrad, watched the chorus of servants finish decorating the stage and listened to Penny sing of her happiness at the wedding and her sadness at losing her brother. Up in the rafters, giant heraldic banners and suits of armour swayed gently.

A breeze lifts the hair on the back of my neck. I watch your doom, my son – it sways and it sways in the same breeze and you do not know what awaits... What happens here tonight must undo what went before. In my heart, I know that this is true. I will have you back...

Conrad took the stage again, telling his father of his love for Isabella. Above him, the armour swayed faster and the small orchestra started playing what MacGyver thought of as 'danger music'.

I watch. I watch. Soon he will suffer your fate for you and you will be returned to me. I am so excited!

MacGyver's eye was drawn to the giant suit of armour. The workmanship was impressive, he thought. It almost looked like real metal instead of cardboard and canvas. The happy couple walked down the 'aisle' in the middle of the set and the orchestra struck up with the Wedding March. The helmet swung once more and then fell, whizzing down on a rope just as Conrad stepped to the front of the stage. The Wedding March dissolved into more frantic 'danger music' and the helmet crashed to the stage, landing inches from Conrad, the impact echoing all around the theatre. The rope snaked down out of the rafters after it, landing on the stage in a rumpled coil.

NOW!

The entire cast jumped, and Isabella gave a very realistic scream. The actor playing Conrad had gone pale under his makeup and collapsed to the stage in a dead faint. MacGyver saw Penny take a deep breath and step forward, speaking her line loud and clear. The rest of the cast rallied and carried on, Isabella crying some very real tears and Manfred, her father, clearly shocked. MacGyver frowned. Either this cast were far better than he's anticipated, or he'd just witnessed a very real stage accident...

Where are you?

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“Are you OK?” MacGyver stood aside to let two actors and a stage hand out, all looking shocked. Penny ran down the steps and hugged him. Even through her heavy coat, MacGyver could feel her shaking.

“Six inches to the left and it would have hit him, Mac!” Penny’s voice was muffled against his jacket. “It would have killed him!”

“I know.” MacGyver rubbed her back and waited for her to stop crying. “How about we go back in and see if we can figure out how it happened?”

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Inside they found the actor playing Conrad sitting in his dressing room with three of the chorus, drinking brandy and telling them how he was done with New York, that he was going back to Ohio, where you could walk across a stage without fear of getting flattened by low-flying armour. They left him to it, and Penny pointed up a ladder at the side of the stage.

“That’s how you get up to the catwalks and the flyspace. Where the scenery hangs, that it.” She stepped out onto the stage, looking up nervously in case something else came tumbling down.

Where are you going, stranger? What are you doing here? Are you looking for my son? He is not up there, I would know.

I cannot find you, my beautiful son. Perhaps it will take time for you to return to me from so far, so far away. Perhaps the story has to play out, so that you can come in at the end and take your bow with the rest.

Perhaps I have failed you. The fake Conrad still lives after all...

No. I will make the rest of the story come to pass, and then you will come back to me. I will not fail you again.

“OK.” Macgyver started up the ladder, trying not to look down. Getting to the top, he inched out along the catwalk, looking at the ropes and pulleys that controlled the stage sets and the props. Hanging on tight to the railing, he glanced down at the stage to see where the helmet had landed, and moved a little more to his right. Looking up again, he reached up to a pulley and pulled out a tuft of something stuck in the wheel. He frowned at the fibres and put them in his pocket. He pulled out his Swiss Army Knife and used the screwdriver to unscrew the two halves of the pulley, revealing some bright, new scratches on the inner surface.

“Penny?” MacGyver heard her walk across the stage to stand underneath him, but didn’t dare to look down. Vertigo was already causing his vision to swim and he could feel his heart beating fast. “Penny, I think we got a problem...”

What does he see up there, the stranger? He does not belong up there. He sees my work, my wasted work...

He must not know.

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When MacGyver got back onto the stage, they looked for the director, only to find she'd already left. They checked on Conrad, who'd taken the brandy bottle and gone home, and found that the janitor was the only one left in the building.

Walking down the cold night street, the neon lights reflecting on the wet tarmac, MacGyver felt Penny take his arm and huddle closer to him.

"Hey," He looked down at her. "Hey!" he waited until she looked up at him. "We'll figure it out, OK? I'll come in with you tomorrow morning and go over everything with the stage hands. We'll make sure nothing else happens."

"Thanks, Mac." Penny nodded and sighed, her breath spiralling away in the cold air.

MacGyver put his other hand into his jacket pocket, feeling the scrap of rough rope. It had been cut, not worn away. He frowned in the darkness, feeling the familiar fizz of adrenaline start in his stomach.

Someone at the theatre had tried to murder Conrad...

Where do you go, stranger? Back to my daughter's house, I think. I know where she lives. I know where they all live, these players. They act their scenes and speak their lines and they do not know.

They do not know that they are walking across your grave...

Act Two

MacGyver sat up on Penny's couch, stretching the kinks out of his back. The day or two after a hockey practice he was always creaky, even without the hard tackle that had sent him crashing into the boards. He pushed back the patchwork quilt and rubbed his eyes. They'd talked long into the night, trying to work out who might have wanted to kill Conrad, or sabotage the play or the theatre. They hadn't come up with any ideas, and it had taken them both a long time to get to sleep. MacGyver had heard Penny tossing and turning in the next room until very late.

He reached out and picked up a note propped against a houseplant on the table: 'Gone to the theatre early. You were asleep! See you there. Love, Penny.'

"Right." MacGyver scrubbed a hand across his face and headed for the shower.

Good morning, stranger. I see you at my daughter's house, waking long after she has departed. You do not know what I have done, the deception I have wrought to bring about the next part of the tale and bring my son back to me.

It is right that you do not know. After all, you are only a stranger.

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MacGyver pushed open the stage door and stuck his head through. He could hear voices on the stage some distance away.

“SSSH!” A stern-faced woman with her hair in a bun frowned at him over a pair of reading glasses.

“Sorry...” MacGyver whispered back and she nodded, returning to her notes. He followed her pointing pencil to a seat at the side of the stage and sat down as quietly as he could. He looked up into the rafters, but the scenery had all been lowered.

The scene finished and the stern woman leaned towards him.

“Did you come with Simon?” She glared at MacGyver when he shook his head. “He’s very late!”

“No, ma’am, I came on my own. I’m Penny’s friend.” He held out a hand. “MacGyver”.

“Oh.” She made no move to shake his hand and he withdrew it. “I thought you might have brought Simon. He was very shaken by last night and I haven’t seen him at all this morning.” She stared at MacGyver as though convinced Simon’s absence was all his fault.

“Who’s Simon?” MacGyver saw Penny at the other side of the stage and gave her a small wave.

“He plays Theodore.” The stern woman followed his gaze and beckoned Penny over. “Penny, is Irene over there? I can’t find Simon and she might know where he is.”

“I’ll go ask.” Penny disappeared behind the curtain, reappearing a few moments later. “She hasn’t seen him, but she’s going to give him a call. Penny smiled at MacGyver. “They’re sweet on each other. Isn’t that adorable?”

“Adorable, right.” MacGyver shook his head, confused. “Penny, who’s Irene? I’m a little lost here...”

“Irene plays Isabella, Conrad’s fiancée. Also Manfred’s fiancée, though she really doesn’t want to be. Theodore is the peasant who loves her and hides her when she runs away, so it’s a bit like life imitating art, seeing as how they’re a real life couple, don’t you think?” Penny smiled her devastating smile again and ducked back behind the curtain, leaving MacGyver just as confused as before.

“Uh... Right. That didn’t help, Penny!” He turned to see the director smiling at him over her reading glasses.

“Would you go after her, please? I really do need to know where Simon is.” Her eyes twinkled and MacGyver decided she wasn’t quite as stern as she appeared. He nodded, smiled back and disappeared into the backstage area to look for Penny.

You will not find your Theodore, for he is not here. Isabella cannot save him. Matilda cannot have him. You, stranger, you cannot save him – you are not a player on this stage. No, Theodore is gone, and I have brought about his death in a manner befitting. He has been sacrificed and my son will return.

So I have decreed it and, after all, I am the lord of this castle...

MacGyver walked past the stagehands checking the scenery, glancing at their work as he passed. Nothing seemed amiss, but when he looked up into the flyspace, he could see a new pulley gleaming amongst the old, dull ones.

He found Penny and another woman sitting on a costume hamper. Penny had her arm around her companion, who was crying and talking on a mobile phone.

“What’s happened?” MacGyver crouched down next to Penny, who shot him a worried look.

“Mac, I’m so glad you’re here! The most terrible thing has happened! Simon was on his way here early this morning, when some madman grabbed him and knocked him out. Imagine!” Penny’s eyes were wide and her voice grew louder. “Who would do such a thing?!”

Is he on the line now?” MacGyver turned to Irene and pointed to the loudspeaker button on the phone. Irene pressed it and Simon’s frightened voice filled the room.

“You gotta help me! I don’t know where I am!” Simon sounded as though he was trying not to cry.

“OK, calm down.” MacGyver frowned. “Tell me what you can see.”

“Who is this? Irene?!” Simon’s voice climbed higher, panic taking over.

“Simon, he’s a friend of Penny’s. Please listen to him, OK?” Irene handed the phone to MacGyver.

“Simon, what can you see?” MacGyver frowned at the rising sound of Irene crying. He put his thumb over the microphone and whispered to Penny, “Take her someplace else! And find me a map – I need to know Simon’s route to work.” He waited until Penny had shepherded Irene out before lifting his thumb again. “Simon? Talk to me, buddy.”

“I’m... Um...” Simon swallowed hard. “I’m tied to a freakin’ chair! I’m up high, ‘cause I can see out the windows and I’m halfway up the buildings. Um...”

“Simon, you’re doing great.” MacGyver accepted a map from Penny with a nod. “Did you get grabbed coming here straight from home?”

“Uh huh.” Simon coughed. “I was on my way here and some guy grabbed me from behind and put something over my face. Next thing I know, I’m waking up tied to a chair! Who does that stuff?!”

“Let’s work on getting you back first, OK? We can worry about ‘who’ later.” MacGyver traced the route with his finger. Penny had calmed Irene down enough to get her to mark Simon’s home and his usual route to the theatre. “You’re up high, right?”

“Right.” Simon sounded calmer.

“Anything else?” MacGyver moved his finger on the map, borrowed a pencil from the director and crossed off a few streets without tall buildings. “Do you recognise any buildings you can see? Any signs?”

“No, but I can see a crane...” There was a rustling noise as Simon turned. “And there’s some broken windows in here. It looks kind of old and abandoned. Also, I can hear a bulldozer.”

“That’s good.” MacGyver handed the map to the director, who took back her pencil and wrote ‘crane’ on a building. “Which side of you is the crane on?”

“Left.” There was a muffled crash and Simon gasped.

“Simon? What is it?” MacGyver turned the map around, frowning.

“That bulldozer – it’s getting really close!” There was another crash and Simon yelled. The phone cut off abruptly, leaving the cast staring at it.

“Simon!” MacGyver hit redial, but a recorded voice told him the phone was unavailable.

“Mac, I think I know where he is!” Penny bunched up the map in her hand. “We can go rescue him!” Without waiting, she set off for the stage doors at a run.

Run, my daughter, run. You cannot save him this time as you have so many times before.

This time, he is mine.

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“Get in!” MacGyver pulled up alongside Penny, waited for her to jump into the car and pulled out into the traffic. “Which way?”

“Right! No, Left!” Penny pointed, MacGyver swerved and they cut across two lanes into a narrow street. They stopped at a construction site fence and Penny leaped out. MacGyver followed, ducking through the gate and onto the site and chasing after her.

“Hey!” the foreman’s angry yell made Penny flinch, but she kept running. “You can’t go in there!” The foreman grabbed MacGyver’s arm as he raced past, spinning him around.

“There’s a man trapped in there!” MacGyver jabbed a finger at the derelict building, already being torn into by a wrecking ball. At its foot, a bulldozer shunted fallen rubble away. The crane operator swung the wrecking ball out, tearing loose a large chunk of concrete. The top floor sagged as the concrete fell.

“Penny!” MacGyver pulled his arm loose and scrambled across the heaped rubble. “Penny, stop! It’s dangerous!” he caught up with her at the doorway. “The whole building could come down any minute.”

“Simon’s trapped in there!” She wriggled out of his grasp and dived through the door. MacGyver turned back to the foreman, who threw up his hands in disgust and started yelling at the crane driver.

MacGyver stepped through the doorway, dust in the air making him cough.

“Simon!” Penny’s voice echoed in the empty hallway. They pounded up the concrete stairs, stopping and calling at every floor. The higher they went, the worse the cracks in the old walls looked to MacGyver. Far below them, the bulldozer rumbled to a halt and the crane operator shut off his engine. In the silence, MacGyver could hear the building creaking and groaning around them.

“Simon!” Penny yelled again and, this time, they heard a faint answering cry.

“This floor! Penny, we need to be quick – this place sounds like it’s about to go!” More dust and grit fell from a crack and MacGyver ducked as a piece of ceiling plaster bounced off his head. “Simon! Keep yelling – we can hear you!” They listened for Simon’s next yell and followed the sound.

The corridor before them sagged at one side, and the floor settled lower as they inched their way along. They rounded a corner and MacGyver stopped with a gasp, grabbing Penny's arm and leaning back. They had come to the part of the building that had been partly demolished, and a few feet ahead of them, the floor had collapsed, leaving a broad gap and a four storey drop to the ground below. MacGyver tightened his grip on both Penny and the doorframe, vertigo threatening to tip him over the edge.

"Simon!" Penny's hands flew to her mouth as the dust cleared, revealing Simon on the other side of the gap, tied to a chair. His head whipped round and he cheered.

"The cavalry got here! Penny, am I glad to see you! You gotta get me out of here, the whole place is falling down!"

"We know!" Penny turned to MacGyver. "We need to make a bridge." She looked around, seeing nothing they could use.

"Stay here." MacGyver eased himself back from the terrifying drop. "I think we passed the janitor's closet back there. Don't move!" He pointed first at Penny, then at Simon. "That goes for both of you." He ran back down the corridor, finding the door marked 'Janitor' at the end. He tried the handle, then kicked the door until it burst inwards, knocking down mops and brushes. He pulled them out of the way and grabbed a folding ladder leaning against the closet wall. He paused, picked up a window pole as well and set off back to Simon and Penny.

"Hurry!" Penny was pale and panicky. "The floor just moved!"

"Yeah, I felt it." MacGyver set down the ladder and started unfolding it. "Help me with this, would you?" He glanced across at Simon, now silent. "Can you scoot any closer to the gap?" He finished unfolding the ladder and laid it across the gap as Simon shuffled the chair as close as he dared.

"Penny, sit here, please." MacGyver wedged the ladder under a fallen beam, took a deep breath and took a step onto the ladder. "Oh man..."

Staring at Simon to avoid looking down, MacGyver inched his way out over the drop. He was almost halfway across when the floor shifted again, making his ladder slide...

Act Three

"Hurry!" Penny was pale and panicky. "The floor just moved!"

"Yeah, I felt it." MacGyver set down the ladder and started unfolding it. "Help me with this, would you?" He glanced across at Simon, now silent. "Can you scoot any closer to the gap?" He finished unfolding the ladder and laid it across the gap as Simon shuffled the chair as close as he dared.

"Penny, sit here, please." MacGyver waited until Penny kneeled on the ladder and nodded up at him. "Think heavy thoughts." He took a deep breath and took a step onto the ladder, pushing the window pole ahead of him. "Oh man..."

Staring at Simon to avoid looking down, MacGyver inched his way out over the drop. He was almost halfway across when the floor shifted again, making his ladder slide. He clung to the ladder with his eyes shut, knuckles white on the rungs. When the movement stopped, he took a deep breath, tasting dust, and opened his eyes again. The shift had tilted Simon's end of the floor and the chair

was scraping across the old boards towards him. MacGyver scrambled along the rest of the ladder, lunged forwards and grabbed the leg of Simon's chair, stopping him right at the edge of the gap. For a moment they stayed, frozen and staring at each other, then MacGyver unhooked his free hand off the ladder and pulled his Swiss Army Knife out of his pocket with shaking fingers. He cut the tape fastening Simon's arms and legs and nodded at the ladder behind him.

"Go. I'll hold this end." Simon nodded and scuttled across the makeshift bridge. As MacGyver got up again, the building rumbled and the floor tipped. This time the ceiling sagged too, beams creaking and cracking. The gap widened and he jumped clear just as the end of the ladder dropped off the broken floorboards, tumbling to the ground far below.

"Mac!" Through the clouds of dust MacGyver could see Penny's stricken face. Something rolled against his foot, and he stepped on the window pole before it could fall over the edge. The building shook and the ceiling plaster split, a bundle of electrical cables swinging loose in a loop.

"Go! I'll be right behind you!" He watched Penny haul Simon to his feet and shove him through the doorway, giving MacGyver a frightened backward glance. He looked up at the cables and hefted the window pole.

"Here goes nothing..." He reached out with the pole, hooked it into the cables and took a step back. Taking a tight grip on the pole, MacGyver jumped and swung over the gap. The gap rushed underneath him, the cables sagged and for a heart-stopping moment, he thought he wasn't going to reach the other side. He made a frantic grab for the edge of the floorboards and clawed his way up to safety. Hearing another ominous creak, he got to his feet and threw himself through the doorway, just as the floor collapsed.

He raced back through the building, catching up to Penny and Simon and hurrying them out. They stumbled outside and sprinted across the construction site, turning at the far edge to see the end of the building disintegrate into a heap of rubble.

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MacGyver spent the rest of the day at the theatre. Simon had lasted an hour before having breaking down and having to be taken home by Irene to recover. MacGyver stood in for Theodore, with Louisa the director as Isabella and one of the other stage hands, an older man MacGyver hadn't met before, prompting them as necessary.

"You seem to know this play pretty well." MacGyver sat down next to the stage hand when they took a break from rehearsing and opened a bottle of water. The stage hand shrugged, not meeting his eye.

"I've heard the lines a lot of times. It isn't playing out how it should, though." He looked angry, but excused himself politely enough, and disappeared into the backstage area. MacGyver took his water and went to sit with Penny at the edge of the stage, dangling his feet over the orchestra pit.

"He's a weird guy," MacGyver nodded in the direction of the retreating stage hand and Penny shrugged.

"That's Martin. He's kind of quiet. I think he's just shy, y'know? He's been here for years, right since the theatre opened." She pulled up her feet and wrapped her arms around her legs. "He always seems sad. I wonder why?"

I don't understand.

How can you rescue Theodore when you aren't even in the play? It must have been my Matilda rescuing him again, despite my efforts. But I did set up the sacrifice. I was true to my role.

Perhaps this was meant to be. Perhaps I need to don a different mask, as actors often do, and make the sacrifice of Theodore come to pass from another part of the stage.

I know you are close, my son. I can feel your presence.

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They rehearsed until the evening and then went home, glad that they had the evening off. They spent the time trying to work out who might have kidnapped Simon and why, but came to no conclusions. MacGyver took a long time to get to sleep again, still shaken by his narrow escape. He finally drifted off, resolving to find out more from Simon in the morning.

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MacGyver awoke to the sound of Penny singing in the kitchen. He rolled off the couch, standing up and stretching. He looked around for his t-shirt, then remembered it was in the wash, filthy after the dust and dirt of yesterday's escape. He hitched up his sweats and headed into the kitchen to retrieve his clothes, regretting his decision to travel so light.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" Penny handed him a mug of tea and an armful of lavender-scented clothes. "All clean." She danced out of the kitchen, singing along to the radio and grabbing a piece of toast on the way past. MacGyver heard the bathroom door shut and the shower start up. He shook his head and took his tea back to the living room, dropping the clothes on the couch. The movement pulled at his shoulder and he moved across to the mirror, turning around and looking at his own reflection over his shoulder. The bruise from hockey practice had darkened, spreading across his back.

"Damn..." MacGyver resolved to have a word with his team mate when he got back to Los Angeles. He changed into a clean t-shirt and jeans and sat down to wait for Penny to finish in the bathroom.

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Simon and Irene arrived late, Simon wearing sunglasses and a big hat in an attempt to disguise himself. Neither of them looked to have got much sleep.

Rehearsals didn't go well, and the company stopped early for lunch. Simon and Irene headed to a burger joint, complete with disguise, and Penny took MacGyver out in search of a salad.

"I don't get it." Penny took a bite of her sandwich, chewed and swallowed. "It's like the play is cursed or something!"

"How's that?" MacGyver poked at something green and wobbly in his salad, trying to identify it.

“Well, it was the first play performed here, and everyone knows the theatre’s got bad luck.” She took a sip of soda and wiped her mouth.

“Bad luck?” MacGyver looked up, seeing Penny nod.

“Uh-huh. I only agreed to work here because I was, well...” She paused, blushing slightly. “Between jobs, I guess you could call it. There was some kind of terrible accident when the theatre was being built – its not as old as it looks – and a lot of actors won’t go near it.” She put down the sandwich. “It’s a shame, the theatre itself is lovely.”

“Right.” MacGyver ate some salad and reached for his glass of juice.

“And now poor Simon gets kidnapped and Peter – that’s Conrad – almost gets killed!” She shuddered. “It’s almost like the play’s coming true!”

“Coming true?” MacGyver frowned, swallowed and pushed his plate aside. “How’s that?”

“Well,” Penny leaned forward as if sharing a secret, “First Conrad really nearly gets killed at the wedding, which is what happens in the play, and then Theodore gets locked in a tower by Manfred because he helped Isabella escape. Simon’s Theodore, so...” She shrugged, sitting back.

“I don’t believe in curses, but this is starting to sound like more than coincidence.” MacGyver finished his juice and set the glass down. “Can you think of anyone who would want to see the play fold?”

“No.” Penny shook her head, stirring the ice in her soda with the straw. “It’s been really popular and we’ve had good reviews. I can’t think of anyone who’d want to shut us down.”

“And there isn’t anyone who’d benefit if you closed?” MacGyver took the straw from his own drink and folded it into a knot.

“No,” Penny shook her head. “No competition from other theatres, no-one wants the building... nothing.”

“OK.” MacGyver ran a hand through his hair. “What else happens in the play? If we assume that person or persons unknown are trying to make the play come true, what do we have to look forward to?”

“Well,” Penny ticked off points on her fingers. “After Theodore is captured and put in the tower, he escapes. He gets Isabella from the church and hides her in a cave to stop Manfred from finding her. Then he has to fight Manfred’s knights. But the knight he wounds turns out to be Isabella’s father, who falls in love with Matilda. That’s me.”

“So far so good. No-one else is dead!” MacGyver nodded. “What happens next?”

“Manfred wants to marry Isabella, but she hates him, so he goes to the church to find her and kill her because she won’t marry him. But she’s not there, she’s in the cave, see?” Penny beamed at MacGyver. “At the same time, Matilda goes to the church to see Theodore, because she’s secretly in love with him...” Penny came to a halt as MacGyver held up a finger.

“I thought Isabella loved Theodore.” He frowned. “Was I wrong?”

“No, you’re right. But Matilda loves him too.” Penny watched MacGyver put his head in his hands.

“This is making my head hurt!” MacGyver shook his head and sat up again.

"I know, right?" Penny smiled. "So, Manfred sees Matilda and in the gloom he mistakes her for Isabella and stabs her. I get a really neat death scene! What...?"

"Uh..." MacGyver reached out, taking Penny's hand in his. "Manfred kills Matilda, right?"

"Right." Penny nodded.

"So maybe it's not just Theodore we need to worry about..."

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They arrived back at the theatre to find the stage hands at work on the scenery. Everything had been let down to stage level and a box of props had been emptied out at the front of the stage. MacGyver and Penny picked their way through the clutter and went into the green room.

They had only been there for a minute when Irene burst in, in floods of tears and with blood on her shirt. Penny and MacGyver jumped up to help.

"Irene, whatever happened?!" Penny took the hysterical girl's hands.

"Oh Penny," She sobbed, "It's Simon! We were attacked!"

Act Four

"Simon?" MacGyver ran back to the stage, leaving Penny to deal with Irene. He found the actor in his dressing room, throwing things into a duffel bag. A cut on his arm had bled through the handkerchief tied around it, but he seemed more angry than hurt. "What happened?"

"I've had enough of New York!" Simon turned, glaring at MacGyver. "Enough! I've been drugged, kidnapped and shouted at by that witch of a director! I hate the weather and the traffic, and now I've been mugged! I hate this theatre, and I hate this play, and I hate this city, and if you stand there and stare at me much longer, I'm going to start hating you too!" He stuffed the last of his belongings into the bag and yanked the drawstring shut.

"Are you OK?" MacGyver decided to ignore the rant, pointing at the actor's arm.

"He cut me! He had a knife, and he slashed at me, but I punched him and then I grabbed a bag of trash out of a dumpster and hit him with it!" Simon glanced down at his arm as if seeing it for the first time. "He cut me! He..." His eyes rolled up and MacGyver caught him as he fainted. He laid Simon down carefully, then sat back on his heels, thinking.

"Is he alright?" Louisa stood in the doorway, looking concerned.

"Yeah, he's just fainted" MacGyver turned to face her. "Do you have a first aid kit here? He could use some patching up, but he's basically OK."

"I'll get it." She stepped to the side to let Penny come in, and left to find the kit.

"It's true, isn't it? Someone's trying to make the play come true." Penny knelt down beside MacGyver, brushing Simon's hair off his forehead. "Theodore just had to fight off Manfred's knight."

"He was mugged, so I guess you could see it that way. Someone tried to stab him and he fought them off with a bag of trash." MacGyver grinned. "I like his style, by the way – the trash was a good choice for an improvised weapon!"

"Irene says the man who attacked them was yelling about how Theodore had to die. He didn't try to take their money or anything a normal mugger would do." She shook her head. "I don't like this, MacGyver." She leaned forward, seeing Simon's eyelids flutter. "I think he's coming round."

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They abandoned rehearsals for the afternoon, as everyone was far too shaken and Simon made good on his earlier threat, catching the first bus back to Buffalo and vowing never to return.

Run away, Theodore, run away. Your part in this play is done and only one task now remains to me before my son can return to take his bow.

The stage hands finished their work on the scenery and hauled everything back up into the flyspace before leaving. Penny and MacGyver were about to leave too, when Louisa asked to see them.

"MacGyver, I need you to do something for me, please." Louisa looked worried.

"Sure, what?" MacGyver sat back in his chair.

"I need you to be Theodore." Louisa watched his reaction. Behind him, Penny gasped and clapped her hands.

"I don't know, Louisa, I'm not much of an actor..." MacGyver shifted uncomfortably. "I'd be happy to fill in as a stage hand, but on the stage is different."

"You know the part already, from helping us out earlier. You know the moves and Penny tells me she's been familiarising you with the story." Louisa winked at Penny, who blushed. "It would only be for a few nights, until I can hire someone to fill the place for the rest of the run."

"Mac, you'd be great!" Penny smiled at him, and MacGyver felt his resolve weakening. "Say you'll do it!"

"Well, I..." MacGyver sighed, knowing when he was beaten. "Just for a few nights." He leaned forward in his seat. "But we do need to discuss the fact that someone's trying to make the play come true. Simon's mugger called him Theodore, which means he knows who he was playing. The weird things that have been going on are mirroring events in the play." He watched Louisa nod. "And that means that whoever it is could be coming after Matilda next."

"Well, with you to protect her, I have no doubt Penny will be perfectly safe." Louisa set aside her pencil and script, folding her hands on the desk in front of her. "MacGyver, I will not let this person, whoever they are, scare me into taking this play off. We've all worked too hard and too long to let that happen. People are depending on me to keep this theatre going, and I have no intention of letting them down." She stood up. "Penny, would you take MacGyver and see if Theodore's costume will fit him, please?"

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"How does it look?" Penny leaned against the wall next to the dressing room door.

“Uh, well...” MacGyver tugged at the sleeves of Theodore’s tunic. “It’s a little short. Maybe if I roll up the sleeves...”

“I’ll get you the leggings.” Penny went into the costume store, smiling to herself. MacGyver was going to be on stage with her!

“Leggings? No-one said anything about leggings! Penny?” MacGyver looked out of the dressing room, Theodore’s tunic in his hand. The bare bulb above the doorway blinked and brightened for a moment, showing up the bruise on his shoulder. He shook his head, as Penny was nowhere to be seen. “Never mind...”

I see you stranger, dressing in Theodore’s clothes. I see you turn, calling to Matilda. And then I see it. There, on your back. Theodore is known by the mark on his shoulder... And you have the mark.

Now I understand why my efforts have been in vain. I have been pursuing a false Theodore.

And now I have the real one in my sight.

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“Five minutes!” Louisa knocked on MacGyver and Penny’s doors, warning them that the curtain would be going up soon. She stepped to the side of the corridor to let one of the stage hands hurry past. Then she took another look. “Martin, whatever happened to your eye?!”

“Nothing,” Martin waved a hand as he hurried away. “I walked into a door, that’s all.”

“Right...” Louisa frowned, unconvinced but then shook her head, dismissing it as something to find out about later.

You see nothing, foolish puppetmaster. You have known me all this time, and yet you do not see your Lord when he walks among you. You do not see the plan I put in place, do not see the miracle that is taking place before your unworthy eyes.

Soon he will be returned to me.

Then you will all see...

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MacGyver stepped onto the stage. Penny smiled at him and he nodded back, her words echoing in his head. ‘Speak loud and slow, and like you really mean it’. He took a breath and spoke his first line.

Acting wasn’t as bad as MacGyver had thought it would be. The company were good, helping him out with cues and whispers from the wings that the audience couldn’t hear. He couldn’t see the audience, dazzled by the stage lights, and their applause at the end of the first scene boosted his confidence. Penny found him backstage and gave him a hug.

“You’re doing great! You make a really good Theodore!” She hugged him again and then rushed off to change her costume.

MacGyver looked up, seeing the helmet swaying gently above him. It had worked as it was supposed to, and Conrad had been safe this time, so whatever the play's mysterious nemesis had planned, it must be still to come. A thought struck him and he crossed to the box of props and stage weapons at the side of the stage. Kneeling down, he tested the edge of every weapon in there and pushed the collapsing knives used for the knights' battle and for Manfred's murder of Matilda against the side of the box. The knights' daggers worked fine, but Manfred's jewelled blade felt heavy when MacGyver picked it up, and the blade refused to slide up into the handle. When he turned the knife to the light, the blade glinted sharp and real. MacGyver frowned, beckoning to Louisa.

"Look at this! This blade was meant for Penny – Manfred would have stabbed her for real!" He wrapped the blade carefully in a scrap of cloth. "Maybe we can get it tested for fingerprints and catch the killer."

"Oh my..." Louisa went white, realising what a narrow escape Penny had just had. "And Gregory – that's Manfred – would have stabbed her, thinking he was holding a stage prop!" She sat down on a box, script falling from her hands. "MacGyver – it must be someone here! Someone from the theatre!"

"MAC!" Penny beckoned frantically to him. "You're on!"

With a backwards glance at Louisa, who shooed him towards the stage, MacGyver turned and strode on, speaking his next lines. Was the killer one of the actors on stage with him? One of the stage crew? Who could possibly have a motive? A hand shoved him forwards and hissed the next line to him, and MacGyver forced himself to concentrate on the play.

Damn you! You steal away the last step in my plan, steal my glory and steal my son! I cannot allow this! I will not allow it!

I am the Lord of this castle, and I will kill her myself!

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The ending approached. The scenery was changed again, the smoke machine and the lowered lights making the stage dark and eerie. The orchestra played quiet, creepy music and Penny stepped onto the stage. She sang of her love for Theodore, her sadness that he did not return her love and her wish to see him just one more time. As she walked in and out of the hanging scenery, the lighting made her look fragile and ethereal. Manfred appeared at the corner of the stage, red-lit from underneath to look evil. The light painted the edge of his knife crimson, and he proclaimed his desire to kill the woman who spurned his advances so cruelly. MacGyver held his breath as Manfred rushed across the stage, snarling 'Isabella!', watching as Manfred plunged the fake blade again and again into Penny's chest. Her scream sounded real, and MacGyver had to concentrate on not racing across the stage to help her. He'd checked the blade himself right before Manfred had gone on stage, but he still breathed a sigh of relief when Penny collapsed gracefully to the boards completely unharmed.

Wait. Wait. Not long now...

The last scene passed in a haze of relief. MacGyver's Theodore was declared Prince of Otranto, Manfred declared his sorrow at having killed Matilda and Isabella married Theodore. The curtain closed to a standing ovation, and opened again to allow all the actors to take another bow. It swung shut for the last time and the company relaxed, relief at having survived the performance clear on everyone's faces.

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"Just a minute!" MacGyver peeled off the leggings and dragged on his jeans before answering the door. Penny stood outside, beaming.

"How do you like being an actor, Mac?" She came in and sat down, leaving her bag on the floor.

"It has its moments!" MacGyver fastened his belt and pulled on a sweatshirt. "Man, was I glad when the curtain came down. I hope that means the killer's given up, whatever his or her crazy plan was."

"I know! I was a tiny bit scared..." Penny broke off, waving to someone MacGyver couldn't see.

"Hey, Martin. Wasn't he good!" She frowned, and MacGyver turned around to see the stage hand in the doorway, black eye standing out stark against his pale, sweat-sheened face.

NOW!

"Are you OK, buddy?" He took a step towards Martin but the stage hand's face twisted into a savage snarl and he leaped forwards with a knife in his hand.

"You have to die!" He hissed, advancing on Penny. "You have to die so I can get him back!" He lunged with the knife and MacGyver grabbed his arm. They struggled, but Martin pulled away, slashing at MacGyver.

"Manfred kills Matilda! I kill Matilda, and then everyone comes back onto the stage!" Spit flew from Martin's lips as he stabbed at Penny again. MacGyver grabbed the back of Martin's shirt and punched him hard in the ear, but Martin didn't seem to feel it. Penny screamed, scooped up her bag and swung it at him. "Everyone comes back on stage! Matilda is dead, but she comes back for a bow!" He ducked under the bag and Penny scuttled behind a chair. "Conrad is dead but he comes back for a bow! My son!" He let out an anguished yell and launched himself over the chair, stabbing wildly at Penny. MacGyver grabbed the leggings off the floor and threw them over Martin's head, pulling them tight around his neck. He yanked them backwards and Martin flew back, tumbling off the chair and cracking his head on the floor below.

"She has to die so that my Conrad, my Connor can live..." Martin's eyelids fluttered and he passed out.

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MacGyver and Penny watched the police leading Martin away. They hadn't been able to undo the knotted leggings that MacGyver had used to secure him, so had left them on in lieu of using handcuffs.

"It's a shame." MacGyver turned to see that Louisa had joined them, wrapping her cardigan around herself against the evening chill. "Although he did all those terrible things, I do feel for the man."

"How's that?" Penny watched the police load Martin into their van. "And why did he think he was Manfred?"

"Martin had been here from the beginning, when the theatre was built, you know." Louisa took a sip of the coffee she held tight in her hands and watched the van leave. "He applied for a job as soon as I put in the advert for stage hands, but I didn't connect his name with the accident until just recently."

"What happened here? Is this something to do with why the theatre has a bad reputation?" MacGyver watched Louisa wince, then nod.

"When the site was being cleared for the theatre to be built, one of the construction workers was killed when a wrecking ball broke free of its crane and fell. He was killed outright, poor boy." She sighed and shook her head. "By the time I found out what had happened, I had already cast this play and we were halfway through the run. He never said anything, you know."

"Who never said anything?" Penny leaned forwards, fascinated.

"Martin." Louisa sighed again, and a tear sparkled on her cheek in the headlights of a passing car.

"You see, the young man who died was Martin's son. Connor." She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"The poor man must have been driven mad by grief, and when we started with this play, I suppose it all became too much."

"Martin and Connor. Manfred and Conrad. Oh..." Penny put her hands to her mouth and a tear slid down her face. "Poor Martin."

"Poor Martin." MacGyver echoed, putting his arm around Penny. "Sometimes life just isn't fair."