

“CRAPS IN VEGAS (A Tale of Joe Fixit)”

Chapter 1

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NOTE: This story takes place before the events of PLANET HULK

Voices...

Numerous people throughout history have committed the darkest of deeds then blamed their actions on the voices they heard, the ones inside their heads. Dr. Robert Bruce Banner was a scientist and physicist, not a psychiatrist. However, he knew a little something about *the voices*.

There'd been a time when the three primary personalities of Banner's fragile psyche had been fused into a single identity that eventually adopted the moniker of The Professor. Leonard Samson had largely been responsible for that. Yes, muscle-headed Doc Samson, always leaping before looking once his intellectual curiosity got to ticking. He meant well, he always had, but sometimes he just didn't know when to stop fiddling and leave well enough alone.

In any case, Banner's fused personality state, like all his Hulk manifestations, turned out to be only temporary. However, something got left behind. When Banner slept, he sometimes had dreams that were not his own. Even when wide-awake, on occasion, he'd find himself in the midst of a daydream uncharacteristic of anything in his nature. He'd gotten pretty good at secluding himself from the rest of humanity for days at a time, which generally kept him from hulking out. But going hulkless by no means freed him from his gamma-spawned curse. Sometimes Banner had a taste for a beer, something the scientist would never drink. Or he'd feel a craving for hot dogs, something that he—with his basic knowledge of nutrition—would never stomach. Sometimes he found himself dwelling on his memories of his late wife Betty for longer periods of time than one might deem healthy. Other times he experienced memories that he didn't truly remember, images that played through his mind like unfamiliar

movie previews. After a couple weeks of strange dreams, uncharacteristic cravings and unfamiliar memories, Banner deduced what was happening to him.

The brutish, childlike Hulk liked hot dogs; Joe Fixit loved his brewskies, and the Professor’s link to Betty was particularly strong since he embodied the Hulk incarnation that Betty fully accepted, the selfsame incarnation which had—in his mind at least—felt responsible for Betty’s death. Early on, when Banner shared a simple duo existence with the childish Hulk, the man rarely—if ever—recalled any memories or sensations experienced as the Hulk. But now the fusing of his personalities had left behind a kind of mental fusion that had Banner fully recalling memories or feeling the desires of any and all of his gamma-spawned personalities.

Sometimes, though not often, Banner awoke in a cold sweat from a nightmare induced by the devil-Hulk, the blackest part of his psyche, or by the giant ogre-Hulk, the one held in check only by the combined efforts of Fixit, the childish Hulk, the Professor, and Banner himself. Thankfully, such instances were as rare as they were horrid. Lately though, Joe Fixit had grown restless. He wearied of Banner’s destitute wanderings, his whiney need for seclusion. Joe wanted some time in the sun. He wanted money, women, nice clothes, and if he got a chance to bust some heads in the process, even better. Banner had been on the road for months. His last job was as a bicycle messenger in Seattle, from which he’d managed to save just over \$800; more than enough for a bus ticket to Vegas.

Las Vegas.

The Silver Cloud Gaming Club was one of Joe Fixit’s old haunts, back when he worked for Mike Berengetti. Joe made it a habit to stop in whenever he got the chance, whenever he got a weekend pass from Banner’s head. He was a regular and a favorite at the Silver Cloud. Joe dropped a lot of money whenever he came through, and he was offered the best of everything. He was even allowed to crash in one of the V.I.P suites from time to time. In exchange for a luxurious roof over his head with a score of gorgeous hostesses to fulfill his every wish, Joe watched out for the club and scared off any bad business or unsavory characters.

Craps was Joe’s game of choice. He preferred the quickness of the game. The crap table let you know whether you were a loser or a winner within a couple rolls of the dice, and nine times out of ten, Joe walked away a winner. Of course, having access to Banner’s brain was a big help, considering Banner’s knack for calculating the mathematical odds of a dice roll, taking into account the possible number combinations that could land. Yes, Joe had to admit the wimp was good for something.

Joe wore a custom-fitted light gray two-piece with vertical navy blue pinstripes, thin white gloves, and a gray hat with a tilted brim. An Amazonian golden-blonded woman clung to his left arm while a busty brunette stood on his right with her arm as far around his waist as she could get it. Three more scantily clad women, along with other spectators, crowded around to watch the winner. As Joe glanced around the busy room, he caught sight of Ron Westmont, the club owner, who slowly headed in his direction. This was a good time to stop, Joe figured. No point in stirring any more attention than usual, and no point in ruffling Westmont’s feathers by winning too much. He had nearly \$20,000, good enough to secure some female company for awhile; the five girls surrounding him would do. And if he needed more, there were plenty other gambling houses in town; he could hit each and every single one.

He gathered his chips then, after tossing a few to the dealer overseeing the game, placed them into a large bowl and handed the bowl to the brunette on his right.

“Cash these in for me, Naomi. Then you and the other girls meet me up in my suite.” Joe’s voice grated like a cement mixer, but his tone was low and controlled.

“A couple of the girls are new; they don’t know you, Joe,” the brunette replied.

“Then you tell ‘em all about me, and don’t skimp on the details.” Joe smacked Naomi’s bottom as the eager young woman made her way toward the cashier’s window.

Joe took the opportunity to approach Ron Westmont, who extended his hand. Joe removed one of his white gloves and shook Ron’s hand.

“Thanks for leaving me something to pay the light bill, Joe.”

“You’re a riot, Westmont,” said Joe. “We both know you ain’t hurtin’ for bucks.”

“Don’t be too sure. Way this economy’s going, they could bulldoze this place and build a Jamba Juice bar or something. By the end of the week, my crew could be downsized and left wearing T-shirts to sell pockets and smoothies.”

Joe Fixit didn’t have much of a neck, but he still managed to shake his head in disagreement. “This joint goes over my dead body, Ron. You’ve done me a good turn often enough, you know. I stick by those who stick by me.”

Ron gave Joe’s right arm a couple firm pats. “Come on, Joe. You can’t stop big business and commerce. Sure, I’m doing ok, but I don’t get the crowds I used to

get in here even four or five years ago. I’m telling you, casinos ain’t the meccas they used to be.”

The men walked and talked for a bit until one of the hostesses approached Ron. She was a little over five feet with light brown hair. Though she paraded about in a bustier and a thong with red heels, her manner was demure and unassuming.

“Sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Westmont, but it’s that British guy again, the one that gets tight-assed if his vodka-martini is stirred instead of just shaken. Today he’s at one of the blackjack tables. If he puts his hand up my skirt one more time-
-!”

“You want me to send him back to Loch Ness via air-mail?” asked Joe.

Ron shook his head. “Don’t bother, Joe. I’ll monitor the fellow while Connie here takes a break to cool off. The gentleman in question is a very valued customer. He spends more money here than you do, Joe, even when he loses to the house.”

“Don’t hate the player, Ron, hate the game,” chuckled Joe.

“Take care of yourself, Joe. You’re welcome here anytime,” said Ron. He took his leave as Joe headed to the cashier’s window. One of the three cashiers behind the bulletproof window addressed him.

“A blonde was here with a bowl of chips to cash in? Would have been just under \$20,000. She might have been with friends.”

The cashier nodded and grinned. “You are Mr. Fixit, yes? The girl and her friends said they would be upstairs in your suite.”

Joe walked to the lobby elevator and pressed the ‘UP’ arrow. Just then, a voice from behind him called out, “Joe? Is--Is that really you?”

Joe turned around. A dark-haired man had just entered the spacious lobby in a tan, unbuttoned trench coat revealing a beige polo and brown slacks. He carried a black briefcase.

“You got a familiar face. Where do I know you from?” asked Joe.

“My name’s Benito. They used to call me ‘Bud.’”

“Bud... Bud Tomaccino, right? You used to come through Mike’s place from time to time.”

“Yeah, Vegas used to be a regular stop for me. I haven’t been back here in a few years. I didn’t think you were even still around these haunts. I guess it’s a lucky thing, me running into you here.”

The elevator door opened, but Joe did not get on. “Lucky? What are you talking about?” asked Joe.

Bud submitted, “I need some help.”

There was the abrupt sound of shattering glass, which drew both Joe and Bud’s attention. The men spun around, facing three armed figures in white fencing-style tights and ski masks carrying Uzi’s. The lobby floor was covered with a layer of glass shards.

One of the figures stepped out in front of the other two and said, “Benito Tomaccino! The Kingpin says you’re cancelled!”

The three masked men opened fire.

TO BE CONTINUED...