

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

Chapter 3

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

Joe Fixit's suit was mostly ripped and tattered in the chest area, so he ditched the coat. But enough of the shirt still clung to him, though his hat was lost. Too bad, he liked that hat. Hell's Hole was indeed a dive, as Bud had warned. It was opaque inside and hidden on a back street about 12 miles from the casino district. Beers were four bucks and drinks were about the same, as long as you ordered from the bottom shelf. Bud had offered to treat. He nursed a beer while Joe was halfway through a second pitcher. A quick scan of the place told Joe everything he needed to know: this was a joint for losers. This was where guys who lost everything in the casinos came to drown their sorrows, if they could afford to. Everyone drinking looked depressed, and everyone working there looked like they needed a drink.

“I've been to some out of the way places, Bud, but I never even noticed this place.”

“You're a winner, Joe. I don't imagine you cover places this low on the grid,” said Bud.

“Are you kiddin? What if I told you I lived in a cave once upon a time?” Fixit submitted.

“I’d say those days are long behind you, Joe.”

“What’s with all this ‘loser’ talk? You act like I ain’t never been down on my luck before. I understand ‘loss’ probably better than anyone on this planet.” Joe chugged the remainder of the pitcher.

“I didn’t mean nothing by it, Joe. I know you understand loss. I always hated that things ended up so bad between you and Marlo. I know that was a bitch to live through.”

“Yeah, well we’re not here to talk about me, are we?” Joe signaled for the bartender to bring another pitcher. “Who is this Kingpin those lames mentioned? Why has he put a target on your forehead?”

“I guess you wouldn’t know the name out here on the West Coast. He’s a mover back east, kinda runs things in New York City. You had to have come across his name somewhere. Tangles with Daredevil and Spiderman a lot.”

The bartender set a fresh pitcher of beer on the table, and after Bud paid for it, Joe raised the pitcher to his lips.

“Can’t say I ever met the man, but he doesn’t sound like someone who sends a hit squad after a man without good reason. What’d you do, Bud? Why is someone from way back east shooting up this city? *My* city?”

Without a word, Bud set his black briefcase upon the table. After making sure no one was in the immediate vicinity, Bud unlocked then opened the case. Joe found himself staring at thousands of crisp dollars, neatly bound in bundles of hundreds. Joe narrowed his eyes at Bud. He felt like he was seeing his old friend for the first time.

“Let me guess... You didn’t find it in a taxi cab, right?”

Bud closed the case, unable to defend himself. “What can I say, Joe? Sometimes a man is his own worst enemy.”

“Sometimes a man’s got to be. What’s your reason? Don’t tell me you’re gambling again.”

Bud gulped the rest of his beer then removed the case from the table and placed it on the floor between his legs. “I didn’t Joe, not for a long time. I went to my meetings steadily, and everything was okay for a couple years. But life has a way of reminding you what you are inside, no matter how hard you try to change.”

“Aww hell. What happened, Bud? I thought you found a gig as an accountant in Manhattan. That’s what you told me the last time you were here in Vegas.”

“Yeah, but I screwed up and lost it, Joe. Too many absences. I exceeded my vacation days coming to Vegas to gamble away all my life’s savings. Losing my wife didn’t stop me. It wasn’t until the bank foreclosed on my house. I used what was left of my savings living in motels while attending a 12-step gambling program. I still had my credentials and my Masters degree. I got myself together and went on a resume blitz for about five months. I was on the verge of giving up and applying at a fast food grease pit when I got a callback. Turns out it was a subsidiary of a company owned by one Wilson Fisk, the man also known as the Kingpin in New York. Mind you, no criminal charges have ever been made to stick to the Kingpin. His lawyers are more expensive and more connected than the attorneys who defended R. Kelly or O.J. They’re well worth their weight in millions. So as far as the law is concerned, he’s always been on the books as a legit businessman.

“I thought I’d be using my skills as an accountant, and in a way I was, but not in the way I expected.”

Joe injected, “Let me guess: money laundering?”

“In it’s purest form. The company was a dummy organization for one of several street-level operations. Hoods would bring in thousands from drug-hustling or prostitution or whatever. I was one of three guys whose job it was to clean the money. I’m not talking about laundering it to hide its source. I had to actually scrub the money clean. The money came in stained, muddy, and often splattered in blood. We had equipment for scrubbing and steaming it. I know it sounds ludicrous, but it makes sense. Who wants to be caught handling filthy, bloodstained money?”

“The money in your case looks pretty spotless to me, Bud. You gonna explain that?”

Bud Tomaccino sighed a deep sigh. He’d always been straight with Joe Fixit. Fixit never judged him for the monkey on his back. He knew that Fixit wasn’t exactly *normal* either. Maybe Fixit was a mutant or something. It didn’t matter to Bud. What mattered was that Fixit was a true as they came. If you were straight with him, he was straight with you. Bud needed to confide in someone right now. He realized he couldn’t really run anymore.

“Night after night, Joe, I watched that dirty money come in. I started to wonder how long I’d have to do what I did, how long I’d have to wash away other men’s filth so that one man could stay wealthy without guilt. You know what I was getting out of it? A lousy \$38,000 a year. So I started taking a couple bundles of that scum-money here and

there. I would take it home and clean it on my own time. That way, I could take my time with it and get each bill crisp and sharp enough to cause paper cuts as you counted it.”

“Aww c’mon, Bud? You stole from this Kingpin and thought you could get away with it? What kinda bonehead plan was that?”

“Joe, I worked there for almost two years and never even met Fisk. I interviewed with the secretary of the assistant to one of his lieutenants, and me and the other three cleaners each worked on our money stashes alone in solitary rooms with no cameras.”

“How do you know there were no cameras? And even if this Kingpin was that trusting, didn’t you figure that someone somewhere would recount your stash after you’d cleaned it?” Joe fidgeted in the booth, as he grew more irritated by Bud’s story.

“I figured those street thugs and whores would be blamed if anything came up short. Besides, I had planned on coming to Vegas on the weekends with my stash, and tripling it at the blackjack table. That way I could even return some of it if anyone called me on it. Damn, it sounded like a solid plan until I heard myself say it out loud just now.”

“So how much is in that case?” asked Joe.

“Just over \$70,000.”

“Bud, don’t tell me you got a target on your ass for a flakin’ \$70,000.”

“Sorry, Joe. It’s the gambling sickness. It’s like a spell that comes over me. I’m sorry you can’t understand it, Joe.”

Before Joe Fixit could respond, the sound of shattering glass and wood, followed by a blast of frigid air, suddenly commanded both men’s attentions. A massive figure with a physique equal to that of Joe Fixit stood in the doorway wearing a black suit with black gloves, and a pair of shades. He removed the shades, revealing that he was a dark-

skinned man with symmetrically cut, close-cropped black hair with light gray around the edges that was eerily luminescent. As he breathed, the light from the doorway illustrated the frozen vapors coming from his mouth. The dust and wood shards clinging to his clothing and fluttering to the floor around him created a sharp contrast with his otherwise ultra-neat appearance. He looked like a monstrously huge church deacon. Fixit rose to his feet, feeling the anger within building, gnawing at him to let it out.

The neatly-dressed ebon-hued giant spoke in a commanding baritone, “Benito Tomaccino! I’m here to take you back to the Kingpin! Don’t think about trying to run or putting up a fight!”

Joe Fixit stepped into plain view. He quickly whispered to Bud, “He’s right, Bud. Stay put. You won’t make it out there on your own.”

Tomaccino didn’t argue. He grabbed the briefcase and scampered behind Joe, who slowly approached the newcomer.

Joe clenched both fists tightly, reveling to the sound of all his knuckles cracking. “Frost! If I’d known you were still hanging your hat in these parts, I’d have brought my roommate’s Bunsen burner.”

“You called me by name. Do I know you?” asked the dark giant, who stopped his advance.

Fixit kept walking toward him. “I’m the nightmare you wish you could repress, Frosty.”

Fixit tore away the remainder of his shirt, pounded his chest with his fists, and allowed the rage welling up inside to come out in a roar that shook the building to its foundation.

The mountain of a man identified as Frost grinned as he recognized his foe.

“Ahh, Mister Fixit. A pleasure to see you once again.”

TO BE CONTINUED...