

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

Chapter 4

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

Joe Fixit and Frost squared off as patrons around them scampered for the exits.

“So you’re the Kingpin’s stooge now, huh?” Fixit asked.

“I provide an invaluable service for Mister Fisk, and he pays handsomely,” Frost calmly replied.

“Hope the medical plan’s worth it,” quipped Joe. He threw a right-handed swing that Frost easily avoided by ducking. Frost lashed out with a right swing of his own, snapping Joe’s head to the side, but Joe simply glared at Frost, unaffected. “Bee stings from a big guy like you? Why don’t you try that again?”

Frost backed off, grinning. He raised his clenched fists and breathed over one then the other, covering each with a block of ice. Now armed with fists like mallets, Frost lunged forward and slammed into Fixit’s face with a left swing followed by a right that took Fixit down to his knees. Frost surveyed his work. Fixit’s gray face blemished into a bluish, bloated bruise while green blood flowed from his teeth tearing into his bottom lip.

Fixit groaned and stood back up. He could feel his broken left jawbone healing, the ripped muscle and sinews in his face knitting themselves back together. Sometimes he

wondered which was worse: the pain inflicted upon him or the pain of his gamma-spawned body repairing itself.

“Have I impressed you yet?” asked Frost.

Joe’s answer was a furious growl as the men charged into one another and grappled. Joe wanted to throw some punches, but Frost managed to hinder any such efforts by keeping their arms entangled. Both fighters were locked in stalemate until Joe Fixit felt himself slowing down a bit, felt his reaction time growing dull, felt his head starting to ache. And he felt cold, frigid, as if caught in an arctic blast. Damn, what was Frost up to now, he wondered. Frost pressed on, their arms still locked. Slowly but surely, Frost was forcing Fixit back, inch by struggling inch. Fixit tried to say something, but his throat was suddenly very dry... And cold. He could hear frost breathing and another sound, like twigs crackling.

Finally Frost broke the silence: “Hear that snapping sound? Those are your bones freezing as they grow brittle and crack. And that headache you’ve got? That’s your brain deprived of oxygen as your blood freezes and clots. What can I say, Joe? It’s about time you chilled out.”

Rage was the fuel that stopped Fixit’s head from hurting long enough for him to focus. He struggled against Frost and managed to grab his foe under each arm. Fixit groaned and strained, and his effort paid off. He raised an astonished Frost into the air and held him over his head.

Finding himself able to speak again, Fixit taunted, “Frost! Y’hear that golden silence? That’s my body’s healing factor repairing whatever you break.”

Fixit hurled Frost behind him. Frost soared the length of the room, his descent shattering the oak bar. The ebony giant’s body crashed into the shelves of alcohol selections behind the bar, along with the wall behind the shelves. Fixit approached, wincing a bit as a hefty gust of alcoholic beverage odors tainted the air. Catching sight of Tomaccino, Fixit shouted, “Get outta here, Bud! Outside, across the street, now!” Briefcase in hand, Bud obeyed.

Frost struggled to his feet, drenched in alcohol, glass shards from the bottles, and spots of plaster from the wall. No longer wearing the dark shades, Frost grew furious as he looked at himself, frantically trying to brush away glass shards and plaster. “You monstrous baboon! I -- I can’t go back to the Kingpin looking like this, smelling like this!”

Frost sprang across the damaged bar toward Fixit, who was ready for him now. Fixit blitzed Frost with a left-handed haymaker that caught Frost in mid-air and sent him hurling back into the damaged wall, this time crashing completely through to the kitchen in back. Joe followed his foe, snatching an undamaged bottle of whiskey on the way back. He entered the kitchen area sniffing, having caught wind of a different scent that overtook that of the spilled alcohol. Frost was on the floor trying to get to his feet, the stove next to him a metal wreck, like a damaged auto. It had been dislodged from its wall, which was on the verge of falling apart. The new odor was the gas escaping from the pipe left open by the dislodged stove. Fixit smiled as he watched the half-dazed Frost scramble to get to his feet. Fixit opened his bottle and took a swig. Then he tossed the bottle at Frost’s face; it shattered upon impact.

“You -- you think this is funny! You’re treating me like I’m nobody! I’m working for the Kingpin, you ignoramus! And the Kingpin only hires the best! You know what that means?”

Joe had scooped up a couple wooden fragments from the bar. He stepped close to Frost and said, “It means Fisk is grossly overpaying you.”

Joe briskly rubbed the timber together, creating a spark that ignited into flame...

Bud Tomaccino sought refuge in the lobby of a health club across the street.

When he saw Hell’s Hole explode into sky-bound flames, he cursed himself for all the trouble he realized he was causing. How and when had he become such a horrid person? And now his weakness of character had cost the life of a good friend. How could he even begin to make amends? Frightened health club patrons around him scampered about dialing loved ones on their cellphones. However, it was a cinch that someone would be calling 911 if someone hadn’t already done so. Bud couldn’t be here, but where to go from here? It was obvious that running wasn’t an option. The Kingpin’s network was inescapable. Clearly, the stupid case of money wasn’t worth all this. Bud wondered if maybe he should just return to New York and face the consequences like a man. He’d made a mess of everything worthwhile in his life, so what the hell was there left to preserve? Bud walked outside, the heat of the blazing structure across the street kissing his face like an ex-lover. He stared at the flames, pondering the possibility of just walking straight into the hungry blaze, letting the fire consume him and the worthless money for which he’d connived and finagled.

A patch of darkness appeared in the fire. The darkness seemed to dart into the air, over the flames, then descended earthward, about to drop right on top of Bud Tomaccino.

Joe Fixit—his pants barely a couple of stitched-together tatters, his gray skin covered in burn-blisters that shriveled up and healed right in front of Bud’s eyes—shook the pavement as he landed.

“J--Joe? You’re alive? I thought--!”

Joe interrupted Bud’s stuttering. “Save it, Tomaccino. We’re heading back to the Silver Cloud. I got clothes there.”

“I don’t know, Joe. I think I’ve caused enough trouble here. This ain’t like the old days, when I owed a bookie, and you’d step in and handle any creeps that threatened me. This is a new world order, and I had no right to bring it to your doorstep.”

Joe was nearly healed. He straightened his back and declared, “You definitely coulda done things differently, Bud, but this Kingpin can’t send super-powered muscle into Vegas and not expect to be dealt with. Vegas is mine! It’s my piece of the pie on this forsaken ball of mud. I claimed it long ago, and I’m not letting go of it! Banner’s got his science labs, and the lettuce-head has his mountains and his grassy green acres of singing birds to pacify him. But the Vegas life is my only piece of mind, and I’m not giving it up!”

Tomaccino was confused. “Who are you talking about? Who’s Banner? What grassy green fields?”

“Nevermind, Bud. My body has cooled off enough. Get on my back and hold on tight. I lost all my train tokens in the fire.”

Tomaccino did as he was asked. Moments later, Joe Fixit’s mighty leg muscles were propelling them across the Vegas skyline.

TO BE CONTINUED...