

PROLOGUE

LOS ANGELES

Wasn't no mystery to it.

Jellybean knew where all the customers got to. 'Cept for the neediest fiends, they was all hunkered down in the hovels as evening fell, watching cable news and hiding from monsters.

Jellybean shot a dark, Pepsi-flavoured stream of spit through the gap between his front teeth. A thin tendril of sticky-sweet drool dropped onto his Lakers singlet, staining it. Right now, looking over the empty car lot in front of the Retread Warehouse, the only souls he could see were the ones Stross owned, looking bored with business. Moping around in front of the 'done clinic. And that was some telling shit right there. The corner with the methadone clinic was always busiest. There were a couple of packs of runners here and there, little kids, not running anywhere right now, on account of having no fiends to step and fetch it to.

'Monsters,' said Jellybean, shaking his head.

At first they'd been great for business. Dope fiends spilling out on the streets to party, everyone talking a big game about N'Orleans. And when the army and that dumb cracker kicked ass outside of Omaha? Man, that was like Christmas and Thanksgiving got high and had themselves an orgy with the Fourth of July's hot sister. Fiends were kickin' it. Not just fiends though. Everyone, the whole city. You could hear music all over

and there was fireworks and everyone was out on the street, and then that Super Dave asshole turned up in LA to party in person?

Damn. They banked some foldable currency that day, Jose.

Not much since though.

And not today, that was for damn sure.

Couldn't hear no music now either, but you could see fireworks in the gathering gloom, if tracer rounds counted. You could hear the crackle and hammer of automatic weapons all over LA. Sometimes, like just now, long ropy streams of fire, all orange and yellow, flew up from the earth, racing away into the sky. You heard sirens, of course. But they weren't always racing toward the gunfire. Fat Skin told Jellybean the cops weren't even busting motherfuckers for open carry. Not even hassling, bro! They just pointing, saying, monsters-be-that-a-way-son. Go git.

And that was terrifying, because Jellybean Johnson might not go to church these days, but those nuns they beat the fear of God in deep. And flip over the fear of God you gots your fear of the Devil and all his works.

Devil's work was what happened down N'Orleans. And the Devil's fiends be those sabre-tooth orc motherfuckers with Godzilla's own cojones. Them and the dragons and the fuckin' zombies they got shambling around the ass-end of Nebraska now.

Jellybean searched for the gun at his hip, even though he could feel the weight of it there. He just needed to touch the grip, to reassure himself.

Thing was, the mayor? He'd lost his shit. Weren't one damn monster anywhere inside LA. They all out in the desert getting smoked by the air force. But whitey already freaked the fuck out. Open carry was proof of that.

That's what scared Jellybean. White money was the most powerful gang in the city. It didn't just rule, it was an absolute fucking monarch.

Didn't need demons coming in here to tear this city down. It was gonna tear itself apart because the king gone mad.

Jellybean could feel it coming.

Wait.

No.

He could hear it.

Screaming.

Not just the random screaming of some bitch gettin' schooled by her old man, or someone gone crazy on bath salts or something.

A lot of screaming by a lot of people.

They could hear it down on the corners too, he could see that.

Dog-10 and the King were already weapons out, hard up against cover. Knees bent, Dog-10 leaned into the corner of the 7-Eleven and bobbed his head around, gun first.

Jellybean heard the flat crack of the pistol, slightly muted by distance.

Two shots, a pause, then three.

Then all at once everything broke open down on the streets. The corner crews blasting away at nothing Jellybean could see yet. The runners fleeing, adding their tiny high-pitched cries to the swelling crowd noise that rolled toward them like a big surf.

He fumbled his own weapon free, looking for something to shoot. Jellybean saw movement a few blocks away. Hundreds of people, maybe thousands. All running and screaming, all coming straight at him. The roar of the crowd swelled and swallowed the gunfire. First Tonik broke and then Fingaz, and then all of Mr Stross's soldiers be running.

Jellybean found himself doing a stupid dance, a little two-step. One step toward the rusted ladder that would carry him to the ground. One step back toward the AK leaned up against the roofline.

No way would Officer fuckin' Friendly be letting Jellybean Johnson step out with a Kalashnikov. But that sort of artillery was precisely what a captain needed to own this area of operations.

That's what Stross always called the hood. The area of operations. Didn't matter which hood. It was always the area of operations to Mr Stross.

Jellybean stood, dancing from toe to toe, at the broken, grimy parapet of the Retread Warehouse, with his mouth hanging open as a human tide washed over Stross's area of operations. You could see those peeps were running from something. So many of them screaming, looking back over they shoulders, sometimes stumbling and tripping when they turned. Getting ploughed under, trampled by the madness of the herd.

Well, fuck Stross and fuck his operations, Jellybean decided. He turned and ran as fast as his stumpy, overstuffed sausage legs would carry him toward the creaky ladder that would deliver him to the ground. He had time, just enough time he was sure, to jump into his ride and lay down some tyre smoke headed for anywhere but here.

He had no idea what the crowd was running from, but it had to be something as bad as N'Orleans. Had to be monsters for reals this time.

His hand drifted to the gun at his hip as he made the ladder and put his foot on the first rung. But of course he couldn't climb down while he was holding a big-ass .45.

And then he understood that he couldn't climb down at all. Because he was too late. The monster was already here.

Standing – no, floating! – actually floating like a magic motherfucker directly below him in the dark, shaded lee of the Retread Warehouse.

Jellybean didn't stop to take in the show. He got a quick impression of some long thin streak of evil misery, somehow drifting a foot or so above the ground, and his balls crawled up into his body and kept on going. They crawled so high, so fast, they might have choked him if he hadn't reacted with the quick wit and immoral ruthlessness that had allowed him to rise so high in the esteem and organisation of Mr AOR Stross.

Without thinking on consequence, Jellybean Johnson aimed the silver-plated big-ass Colt and unloaded half the clip directly into the melon of that spooky floating motherfucker directly beneath his feet.

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Dave's gun dropped to the floor with a loud, metallic clatter. He flinched, expecting it to go off, but it didn't. He had carefully removed the magazine and thumbed the safety on before warping out of the underground garage to infiltrate the Russian consulate. If by infiltrate, you meant put a wrecking ball through the place.

'What the hell!' Trinder yelped. The dark-suited spook flinched too, although whether at the sound of the gun landing on the concrete, or at the sight of Dave disappearing and then reappearing in the literal blink of an eye, he could not say. The agents flanking Trinder reflexively dropped into a shooter's stance, each reaching for their weapon. Dave knew them from Las Vegas. Comeau and the woman called Madigan. They both realised what had happened at the same time, and he saw the uncertainty in their eyes. They had seen him do this before. The man, Comeau, was the first to lower his gun. Madigan followed only when Trinder gave her permission to stand down.

'Sorry,' said Dave, nodding toward the pistol he'd dropped on the floor. 'Told you I'm not great with guns. An uncle tried to teach me, when he was sober, which wasn't often. He did show me how to turn it off though and take the bullets out.'

Trinder, not really hiding his disgust, was about to speak when the rumble and crash from the half-destroyed consulate building rolled over them. Probably a supporting wall or another part of the second floor collapsing. The sound of smashing glass arrived as a tinkling counterpoint to the deep bass notes of his demolition work. Trinder looked more shocked than he had when Dave performed his little magic trick of popping into and out of the world. A cell phone buzzed, and Trinder took a BlackBerry from his pocket. He looked at the screen, not really paying attention. He turned it off. His eyes, bloodshot and a little jaundiced now that Dave looked, darted up toward the street.

'What the hell did you do out there?' he asked. He sounded almost fearful.

'Yeah, about that,' Dave said. 'The whole sneaking into the embassy thing didn't go so well.'

Agent Comeau took a few tentative steps toward the garage ramp, his knees bent and his shoulders bowed as though he expected this building to fall in on top of them too.

'I think the Russians are going to need another consulate,' Comeau said when he was able to see something of what had happened up on E91st Street.

Trinder looked as though he had been poleaxed, and Dave even felt a little sorry for him. He himself was still coming to terms with everything that had happened, and he'd at least had some time to get used to the idea. Enough time to sneak into the consulate, explore the building, track down Karen Warat and destroy a couple of rooms – the better part of a whole floor really – fighting her at warp speed. Enough time to all but get his ass handed to him before Lucille saved that same worthless ass. And how she'd managed that, he still couldn't say. Time enough to get beaten to a broken and bloody pulp, to recover, to fight to a dishonourable draw and then to cut a deal with Warat, or Varatchevsky, or whatever her name was, and to return here to the garage under the Office of Special Clearances and Records. Or under a building these guys leased, at any rate. He doubted this was Trinder's actual Death Star.

Dave had done all that in the space between two of Agent Trinder's heartbeats. But for Hooper it had taken nearly three-quarters of an hour.

Nothing had changed in the basement garage. Trinder and his goons hadn't moved, except for a step or two backward in surprise at Dave's magic act. The same cars, mostly black SUVs, were still parked in the same slots. The elevator doors were closed, the car still up on the fourth floor where OSCAR had offices. But outside on the street all was violent disorder. Screams, honking horns, the muted thunder of the Russian consulate imploding. It had to be messing with Trinder's head. Had to be messing with all of them.

'You might want to run up there and grab your mole,' Dave said. 'That little girl you had holding the door open for me, if that's what she was doing. I put her out on the street. She's probably freaking out. It looked like one of the embassy guards had figured out she was up to no good and, you know, since I just demolished half the building they're probably going to want to beat her with rubber hoses or something while they ask her about it.'

'Agent Madigan,' said Trinder, rubbing his eyes. 'If you would.'

The woman in the black pants suit said, 'Yes, sir,' and hurried up the ramp, holstering her weapon as she went.

'Anything else I need to know, like what the fuck happened?' Trinder said.

Dave shrugged and pushed gently at the gun on the ground with the toe of his boot, carefully turning the muzzle away from Comeau.

'Had no trouble getting in,' he said. 'That little cutie you had on the inside just held the door open for me. I wandered in, had a look around. Didn't see anything on the ground floor, just a bunch of office workers. There were a couple of gorillas guarding a staircase down a hallway, so I checked it out. Poked around upstairs, found your spy, or you know, she found me. There was no warping around her. She hadn't slowed down at all. Matter of fact, I'd have said she was chock

full of 'roids and amphetamines, she moved that quick and hit that hard.'

Agent Comeau, a wiry-looking Mediterranean type, rejoined them from the foot of the ramp where he'd been trying to keep an eye on the street. He looked Dave up and down. A very sceptical look.

'But you're okay now? And you don't have her with you. So what happened up there?' Trinder jerked his thumb toward the street.

'She pretty much kicked my ass, damn near killed me, in fact,' Dave said, hefting the splitting maul up into the palm of his hand. 'Lucille here is the only reason I'm still alive.'

'Oh, this is not good,' said Trinder, mostly to himself. He was looking at the ground, his eyes sweeping back and forth as though he might find something there to help him.

'Nah, it's okay,' said Dave. 'I got better.'

'That's not what I meant,' Trinder snapped. 'I understand it's the case, Mr Hooper, that you weren't particularly good at listening to Captain Heath. But you're not even listening to yourself. You just told us that one of the most dangerous hostile agents ever set loose in this country had no trouble defeating you in close combat. *You*, the superhero.'

The way Trinder said 'superhero', it sounded as though he didn't really believe it. Dave got that a lot.

'Well I wouldn't say she *defeated* me,' he said. 'She just kicked my ass is all. And look, I gave her plenty to be gettin' on with. So in the end we called it a draw.'

'Where is she now?' asked Trinder, sounding very tired.

'I dunno,' muttered Dave, reminding himself of one of his sons. When neither of the OSCAR men looked happy with the answer he followed on. 'I think she was going to go talk to her boss.'

Comeau's eyes went wide and Trinder stared at him.

'She what?' The senior agent's voice sounded small and cracked.

Dave held up his hand, forestalling the ass-chewing he sensed was coming.

'Look, she knew all about you guys. It's not like I gave away any secrets or anything. She obviously knew about you because she escaped when you tried to arrest her. Remember that? When you fucked everything up?'

Trinder did not look as though he appreciated being reminded of the bungled raid at the art gallery opening a week or so earlier. On the day the monsters crawled out from the UnderRealms.

'Yeah, she's got your number, buddy,' Dave said, grinning at him. 'But I don't think you have to worry. We had a talk. All she wants to do is go home and kill monsters for mother Russia. Thresh. And Morphum, and Krevish and Djinn. She doesn't like you much, Trinder, but she doesn't think you're a monster. Just an asshole.'

Trinder was about to say something when his eye was drawn to the ramp, which Madigan now hurried a young woman down. The pretty little secretary Dave had removed from the consulate before he and Warat had torn the place down. So, it looked like he got at least one thing right today. Trinder waved Madigan and her young charge past and they hurried toward the elevator, which pinged open just as they arrived. Another woman stepped out, dressed in the dark suit Dave was coming to think of as a uniform for these guys. He recognised her instantly from Las Vegas. He knew his notoriously sketchy memory had received an upgrade from his recent embiggening, but there'd have been no forgetting this chick. A smoking hot Asian, with half her face covered in some sort of tattoo. Dave had to adjust his grip on Lucille, moving her slightly to conceal the sudden, unseemly bulge in his black combat coveralls. His memory wasn't the only part of him that'd got a tune up.

'Anyway,' he said, trying not to think about the tattooed hottie, 'there's no way you can stop her from getting home.'

Unless a sniper puts a bullet in her head, I suppose.

'If you could live with 50,000 nuclear warheads pointed at you for so long, I reckon you'll cope with a treacherous blonde and her samurai sword. She's going to tell her bosses the same thing about me, which you may not care about, but I do.'

Both Trinder and Comeau turned their attention fully back to Dave.

'You didn't think I'd thought it through, did you? Because if you have a hard-on for taking Varatchevsky out of the game, it has to be a lay-down certainty that your opposite number back in the USSR feels the same way about me. Right?'

'It's not the USSR anymore,' said Trinder.

'Beatles reference,' said Dave as the exotic young woman hurried up to them. 'Anyway, my super friend and I have agreed we won't be doing any more UFC cage matches. In fact, we're going to catch up in an hour or so, after she's talked her guys off the ledge, and we're going to swap information. The thing she killed, this big-ass Thresh daemon, it's not like Urgon. It knows different things, which seems to mean that she knows different things. It'd be cool if she and I could compare notes and –'

'Absolutely not,' Trinder barked. He spoke so abruptly, so loudly, that the young woman who was jogging toward them flinched. It was a more obvious reaction than the slight flush Dave had seen on her caramel-coloured features, the widening of her eyes, when she'd got a whiff of ol' Super Dave's secret sauce. 'You can't share intelligence with an enemy agent.'

And then Trinder froze. His teeth, yellowed by nicotine, bit off the end of the last thing he had said. His nostrils flared and his eyes slitted, giving him a dangerous canine appearance.

'What the hell?' said Dave, and then realised someone other than him had hit the pause button. Comeau was frowning, hands on hips. The Asian chick had been caught mid-stride and was actually floating, suspended a few inches off the concrete floor. Dave could see now that she wasn't Vietnamese as he had thought, but some mix of races which had passed through Southeast Asia at some point, with a good pinch of African-American stirred into the melting pot. The doors on the elevator from which she had emerged were starting to close, and he could see Madigan and the shoulder of the young Russian woman through the gap. He looked back toward the ramp, surprised, yet not at all surprised, to find Colonel Varatchevsky, still rocking her spanky black motorcycle leathers, striding

down from the street. A sword hilt poked up over one shoulder.

Dave's first thought was that she had come, or been sent, to retrieve the traitor, the secretary he had rescued.

'I thought we were gonna be cool,' he said. It sounded like a protest, a weak one. He didn't see how he could stop her taking the girl back without an explosion of cartoon violence that would bring this building down around their ears just like the Russian one.

'I heard what Agent Trinder said. You can't share with the enemy,' Karen smiled.

She took her foot off the accelerator – it had to be her; Dave had done nothing – and they dropped out of warp.

'Yes he can,' she said, raising her voice, addressing Trinder directly.

The tattooed female agent gave a little squeal of surprise as she landed and found the enemy in their midst. Trinder cursed and Comeau drew his weapon again but Dave put a hand on his arm. Comeau's draw seemed inhumanly fast, until you understood what 'inhuman' really meant.

'Don't, man,' said Dave, easing the agent's gun arm back down. 'She'll kill you before you can even squeeze off a shot.'

'I will,' said Karen, a statement of fact, not a threat.

'Stop her, Hooper. Put her down,' Trinder demanded.

'Stop her doing what?' Dave asked. 'If she was going to do anything, it'd be all over by now.'

'Mr Trinder, sir?' It was the Asian girl. Trinder seemed even more unhappy at being interrupted than he was at finding Karen Warat in his basement. Probably, Dave thought, because he knew he could safely shift his ire on to his underling.

'What?' he snapped.

'It's Washington, sir,' said the young woman. And then she faltered in her already nervous delivery, her eyes flicking toward the Russian spy, before being drawn to Dave. Always to Dave.

Colonel Varatchevsky spoke before Trinder's agent could continue. 'She came down to tell you what I came to tell you, Hooper,' she said. 'The monsters are back. They're here. In the city.'