

Eating Chicken and Making Plans

Now that Ace was a “bona fide hero” in the eyes of the employees and management of the KFC on Elvis Presley Boulevard, he could sample the entire menu at his leisure. He’d already had some Extra Crispy and worked on a bucket of Original Recipe. Both had an amazing flavor that was near orgasmic, but the Extra Crispy had the added fun of a crunchier mouthfeel.

Ace bit into the delectable pieces of crispy meat with ravenous envy. His eyes rolled back in his head as he chewed. The delicious juice exploding in his mouth was unlike anything he’d ever eaten. A tingle of electricity wiggled through his body as he swallowed and greedily took another bite. There was a feeling of completeness inside of him he’d never felt before; a oneness with the universe on a near spiritual level.

“If pure love has a flavor,” he said aloud to himself. “This has to be it.”

It was damn good chicken.

Johnny boasted about the secret blend of eleven herbs and spices that seasoned the hand-breaded pieces of chicken. A blend so secret not even the people who make it know its composition. Ace figured he could have Ivan analyze a drumstick with *Betty’s* culinary computers if he needed

to know. Right now he was just enjoying the succulent ride.

After polishing off his second bucket, Ace decided he needed to stretch his legs and asked if he could take a peek behind the scenes.

April led Ace into the kitchen, saying, "So, you really want to know how the sausage is made?"

Ace said, "Sausage? I thought it was chicken."

April said, "It is, dude. It's just an expression. Honestly, it's not all that exciting. It's pretty much how your momma makes it, just on a larger scale and with fancier equipment."

Ace considered telling April he was an orphan, and this was the first time he'd ever eaten fried chicken, but decided against it. He didn't want to bum her out, and he really wanted to know how they made the stuff.

Once in the kitchen, she said, "So there's Rico over there inspecting the chicken. It's real chicken. Don't believe what they say on the Internet."

Ace said, "What do they say?"

April scrunched her nose. "That KFC uses some kind of genetically modified mutant chicken monstrosity with fourteen legs and no beak or some shit."

Rico opened a plastic bag filled with chicken parts. They appeared cut and cleaned but looked like way over one bird's worth of parts, for sure.

April continued, "So, after he checks them to make sure they look alright, he puts them in a basket and dunks them in a brine. That's getting the breading to stick. Dunk that shit, Rico!"

Rico performed the motions as April narrated. "Next, he dries off the chicken a little by tossing the chicken in the basket seven times. Not six times. Not eight times. Seven times. It's kind of freaky, but KFC is obsessed with doing things seven times."

After Rico tossed the chicken exactly seven times, he spread out the pieces in a large tub filled with breading. He covered the chicken with an exaggerated motion.

April said, "Check it out. He does a swimming, swirling motion seven

times in the breading. Count ‘em. We make the dudes with OCD do this ‘cause they seem to get off on the counting thing.”

Rico stopped when he reached seven strokes, then put the chicken in a rectangular basket. He rocked the basket back and forth in a seesaw motion.

April counted on her fingers. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven rocks back and forth. The excess breading falls off, and they leave the perfect amount on the bird. Now, if this was Extra Crispy, he’d dunk it back in the brine and do the breading procedure a second time. And I know what you’re gonna ask. No, you can’t bread it a third time for super duper Extra Crispy. It just flecks off and it cooks weird and nasty. You don’t want to eat it.”

Rico placed the breaded chicken out on a rack, arranging the pieces, so they all fit.

April pointed. “Once the chicken is racked, he shoves it in that scary-ass pressure fryer over there. Ya know, Colonel Sanders himself invented the pressure fryer. Before they used to do it the old fashion way, with big ass skillet and oil on a stovetop. This scary awesome pressure fryer is a modern version of Sanders’ original model. It has a super heavy hydraulic lid and rack system that drops the chicken in three hundred and seventy-five degree scalding ass hot oil and locks in under pressure to cook faster. You gotta be careful over there, man. That oil is so hot it will melt the skin right off your face. Believe me. I’ve seen it happen. Don’t screw with the hot oil.”

Ace nodded like a schoolboy as Rico slid the rack in the empty slot below three full racks in the pressure fryer.

Rico grunted and pushed down on a large handle. The entire apparatus collapsed and lowered into the oil. When the racks of chicken hit the oil, a chorus of sizzles and pops rang out. At the end of his swift downward motion, Rico locked the pressure fryer lid into place, sealing it, and hit a timer button.

April put her hand over her heart and giggled. “Now we wait ten minutes until those suckers are golden brown. Just like the Colonel would’ve wanted.”

Fifteen minutes later, Ace sunk his teeth into a piece of the freshly cooked chicken. April warned him it still might be a little hot, but Ace couldn’t resist.

He took a bite of the piping hot chicken. It was even better fresh out of the frier. He made an O with his lips to blow air out to cool the hot, delicious meat burning the roof of his mouth. He didn’t mind.

Ace thanked April and Rico for the lesson, taking a fresh bucket out to his folding chair in the parking lot near *Betty*.

An hour later, April exited the building with her KFC shirt untucked. She rooted around in a black bag she carried until she found a ring with little metal keys on it.

“Hey, Ace!” April called out as she walked toward him. “Man! You sure can put it away. What? You got a hollow leg or something?”

Ace gnawed on a thigh bone, trying to pick every last delectable bit from it. Then said, “Huh?”

April said, “You’re still at it with the chicken. I’ve never seen someone eat so much chicken in one day. It’s like you’re not human.”

“What do you mean by that? Of course, I’m human.”

April rolled her eyes. “Well, duh. Obviously. So. I saw your pal, Seth —”

Ace interrupted, “Ivan.”

April said, “Right. Ivan. Seth Green’s clone. *Whatevs*. So, I saw he had a pretty sweet jacket on. He’s way into punk, huh?”

Ace said, “We’re both pretty big fans of the rock and the roll.”

She giggled and said, “The rock and the roll, huh? Well, anyway. If you guys want, you should come out to Murphy’s tonight. My friend’s band is playing. Based on your pal’s patches, I think you’ll dig his band. They’re called Joey and the Lawrences. They’re punk as balls.”

Ace tried to riddle out what about balls were so punk. That made little sense. He tapped a finger behind his right ear, the place where his translator implant rested under his skin. Maybe it was having trouble with her dialect or something.

The translator replied to his tapping with a tri-tone chime only he could hear. The chime meant it ran a full diagnostic and functioned at one hundred percent accuracy.

Ace shrugged and changed the subject. He gestured with the thigh bone. "What about watching the KFC?"

April said, "Shit, man. I think it'll be okey. This place has never been robbed after hours. Why would it be? Even crackheads know we don't keep any money on site after we're closed. Look. Just leave the Winnie parked here and I'll drive. What do you say? It'll be fun."

After a moment, imagining why a person with a cracked head would wander around a restaurant parking lot instead of a hospital, he said, "Sure!"

April waved and said, "I gotta go home and wash the stank of the Colonel off me. I'll be back in about an hour to pick you guys up."

April got into a brown Buick Century with rusted out wheel wells and started it up. Immediately, Ace could hear music blaring at full volume. April played air drums for a few seconds and sang along. An enthusiastic man with a powerful voice sang about a girl that was "built to rock."

April put her car into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. Blaring guitars and shouts of "That girl is built to rock!" trailed off into the night with April singing along.

Ace dropped the spent thighbone in the bucket with its eviscerated brethren. He stood, and when satisfied he was alone in the parking lot, he opened the side door on the Winnebago. The dazzler only worked on the exterior, so as soon as he opened the door, *Betty's* side airlock became visible. He shut the door quickly behind him in case any people with cracked heads wandering about might have caught a glimpse. Although,

even if they tried, there was no way they could get in. Only Ace and Ivan could open any of *Betty's* doors.

Ace passed through the airlock and found Ivan lopping in his direction. Ivan had dropped his human disguise and walked on tall aluminum stilts.

Ivan called out, "Yo! Elvis update."

Ace said, "Hey. What's with the stilts?"

Ivan looked down and said, "Oh. They're so comfy I forgot I was wearing them. I put them on in case anyone accidentally bumped into me. I thought it'd be best to be proper human height."

That made sense to Ace. The dazzler would only make it appear Ivan was a normal height, but he would still physically be four feet tall beneath the hologram. It would be a disaster if someone tapped his hologram on the shoulder and had their hand pass right through it.

Ace said, "Good thinking."

Ivan said, "Yeaah! Thanks. So, Elvis update. The med computers say he's stable and his brain activity is off the charts."

Ace said, "What do you mean, off the charts?"

Ivan said, "Like, he's using ninety percent of his brain right now. He has active alpha, delta, theta, and gamma wave patterns. All at the same time. Which should be impossible for a guy in a deep coma."

Ace said, "So? The guy's a heavy sleeper. Big deal. He done that spooky-ass astral projection thing lately?"

Ivan said, "No. Which is concerning me as well. He hasn't done it since we passed Graceland. Check this out." Ivan tapped a computer screen on the wall. He issued a series of commands and the display dissolved into a rotating three-dimensional image of a mansion.

Ace said, "Graceland, I presume."

Ivan nodded. "Yup. So, I compiled this from public records, blueprints, and the standard environmental scans *Betty* grabbed as we passed by earlier. The scans were incomplete because of this." He pointed at a section on the second floor and a glowing sphere in a room labeled

“master bedroom.”

Ivan said with a sneer, “I’ve been researching Graceland while you’ve been eating your chicken.”

Ace waved a dismissive hand. “Whatever man. That stuff is delicious. Why don’t you try some?”

Ivan cringed. “Dude. I’m a vegetarian. You know that.”

Ace said, “Sure, I know. But we’re on Earth. Right? *Irregardless* you should—”

Ivan interrupted, “It’s *regardless*, Ace.”

Ace blinked. “What?”

Ivan said slowly, like speaking to a child, “It’s re-gard-less. Not *irregardless*. That means the opposite of what you think it means.”

Ace said, “What the hell are you talking about, Ivan?”

Ivan raised a finger and said, “You can say *irrespective* or *regardless*, but never, ever *irregardless*. It’s not the correct word, Ace. Never has been. Never will be.”

Ace glared, then said, “... Screw you, Ivan.”

Ivan grinned and said, “Fair enough. Anyway, there is definitely some weird stuff on the second floor of that house. And check this out: no one’s allowed up there. When people pay to tour Graceland, there is a guard at the bottom of the stairs keeping an eye on everything. People who try to go up there are told, quote, that’s Elvis’s floor and was his private sanctuary in life and out of respect, they keep it private to this day. End quote. If you insist on going up there, you can be forcibly removed from the premises and banned for life from returning to Graceland.”

Ivan continued, “Not even the people who work at Graceland are tolerated up there. I read some stuff posted on message boards by former employees. One of them was a guy whose sole job was guarding that staircase. And he was never allowed up there either. Never. The only people who go up there are a few select family members and one special museum curator who brings out items to display every once in a while.

And no one's been in the master bedroom or bathroom since the day Elvis supposedly died. Even when the family was still living in the house. They just sealed up the room on August 7, 1977, and left it that way. Out of respect, they say, but there's something else."

Ivan paused for dramatic effect, then spoke. "That room is sealed with some heavy duty tech. Like non-terrestrial tech. I can't get a solid read on it, so I do not know what it is. But I'll bet credits to crabulons that whatever we're looking for is in there."

Ace said, "Alright. So Elvis's brain activity, his lack of astral projection, and the whatever-it-is on the second floor of Graceland are all connected. How do we get in?"

Ivan said with a shrug, "Well, I thought we'd just go break in. Like, now. Graceland is closed up for the night. Should be easy."

Ace pondered it. He didn't like general thievery, but the longer he sat idle, the longer it was until he got a payday. A real payday. Buckets of chicken were nice, but they didn't spend on the galactic market. Not that he knew of, anyway. Gold would be a much better commodity to exchange for goods and services.

Ace said, "But, look. Let's do it quick. April invited us to go see some bands tonight."

Ivan crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "Oh, yeah? You want to go back to her place and play some tiddlywinks, too, huh?"

Ace said, "What? No! I mean, if you're using tiddlywinks as some kind of slang for sex. Then yes. I mean no. I dunno. I just want to get to know her. Is that so wrong? That I would want to get to know another human being for once in my life?"

Ivan sneered. "Dude. Twelve hours ago you said you didn't care if Earth fell into a black hole. Now you're looking to play house with Mary Jane Watson!"

Ace said, "I ain't looking to play house, Ivan. Just put some moves on her and see where it takes us. That's it. Plus, it's a punk show, and

there's gonna be—”

Ivan perked up and said, “Punk show, eh? Like, a *real* punk rock show? Well, say no more!” Ivan fluffed up his jacket and brushed off his sleeves, spending a little too long over the Ramones patches.

Ace said, smiling, “Then it's settled. Let's go break into Graceland real quick and see what's on that second floor. Maybe we can get this all figured out right now. Then we'll go to the punk show.”

Be a Ritz, Find the El Dorado

Ace put *Betty* into sentry mode and met Ivan in the parking lot of the KFC. With sentry mode activated, a stun blast would render unconscious anyone dumb enough to attempt messing with their disguised smartship.

Ivan activated his dazzler, disguised like the guy April called Seth Green. He casually watched traffic go by and hummed a tune to himself. When Ace got closer, he recognized it as “I Wanna Be Sedated” by the Ramones. One of Ivan’s favorites.

Ace led Ivan south out of the KFC and down the sidewalk of Elvis Presley Boulevard. He said, “You’re stoked about this punk show, aren’t you?”

Ivan said, “*Yeaah* man! Aren’t you? We can see how they do it for real! Maybe we can finally start that band we’ve been talking about for years.”

Ace and Ivan had plans to start their own punk band called The Diesel Dicks, but never got around it because of their demanding schedule touring with Mustache Supernova as stage hands.

As they sauntered down the Elvis Presley Boulevard, Ace recalled the night they first met Mr. Nick, Mustache Supernova’s manager. Ace and Ivan loaded cargo into the back of *Betty*, when the man approached them,

inquiring about the ship's hauling capacity. With the tailgate down, he could see straight into the vast cavernous cargo bay. Mr. Nick stared with wide-open mouths on both of his heads.

Mr. Nick gawked, gesturing with all three of his tattooed, green-hued arms. "How big is it in there?"

Ace said with pride, "Oh, about half a parsec." He didn't actually know the capacity of *Betty's* trailer. Since the cargo bay existed outside of normal four dimensional space, it could, he guessed, hold just about anything of any size. He never read the manual, but then again, he never had trouble shoving anything that needed hauling into her. So, as far as he was concerned, there were no limits.

After a brief chat about Ace's experience as a licensed, bonded, and insured cargo hauler, Mr. Nick offered him a job to transport Mustache Supernova's bass amplifier to a concert on Flodorian Six. The amplifier, the size of a small asteroid, needed something with *Betty's* cargo capacity to haul it incognito. Mr. Nick explained rival bands were dying to get their eyes on the amp before its debut at the Flodorian Music Festival. The need for secrecy was a must, so they required a way to transport it hidden from prying eyes.

After coming to terms, and arriving at the arranged time and space, they learned the amp was not simply the size of a small asteroid, but was, in fact, built *out* of a small asteroid. After grabbing it with *Betty's* grappling beam, Ace got drunk, convinced the collision would destroy the ship. Instead, the asteroid slid into *Betty's* cargo bay with no trouble, and they delivered the amp early and with no extra attention.

The job impressed Mr. Nick so much he hired Ace and Ivan to haul equipment for the entire next tour, The Perpetual Motion Tour.

Since then, they had had little time to think about The Diesel Dicks. It would be a real treat to see a real Earth punk band and get some tips.

Ace and Ivan approached the main entrance to the Graceland Visitor Center. An old jet airplane sat parked in front with the words *Lisa Marie*

written on the side. Ivan, ever the gear dork, rattled off facts about the airplane.

They admired the airplane from the road. A short beige brick wall surrounded the blacktop where the plane sat. Its blue and white painted body gleamed under the fluorescent street lights.

As Ivan babbled on about the interior, Ace really wasn't paying attention until Ivan said something about gold-plated sinks.

Ace stopped in his tracks and turned to Ivan. "He has gold-plated sinks in that thing?"

Ivan said, "Yeaahh!"

Ace thought, *If he's got gold-plated sinks on an airplane, he must be loaded!*

Then, as if answering Ace's thought, Ivan said, "This guy is all about the gold."

Ace said, "Come on. Let's get across the street." He easily dodged the oncoming cars, making a bee-line for a low fence surrounding a patch of grass next to the main Graceland property. Beyond the fence, a six foot high stone wall with iron spikes on top circled the perimeter.

Ace vaulted the little fence and ducked under a tree with low-hanging branches. Cars honked, and tires screeched behind him. Ace peeked over the fence at a chimpanzee on stilts wearing a black leather jacket running across the street. Motorists honked and gawked and pointed. Two cars almost careened into each other as Ivan leaped over the fence and met Ace under the tree.

Ivan leaned up against the tall wall and frantically tapped on the dazzler's controls. "Darn it! Darn it! Darn it! There must be some sort of interference! The dazzler can't hold the projection."

As Ivan worked at the controls, all hell broke loose. The dazzler projected holograms at random. For a few microseconds he appeared as an old trucker, then President Bush, then a forty foot tall fire-breathing dragon, then Seth Green. A beat later, he looked like a series of rotating

columns of light pulsing with every color of the rainbow. Ace shielded his eyes for fear of being blinded and a high-pitched squeal grew louder with each passing moment.

Ivan said, "Crap! Crap! Crap!"

The din pierced Ace's skull, and he dropped to his knees in agony.

Ace shouted, "Turn that damn thing off, Ivan!" but he wasn't sure if Ivan heard him. The squeal was too loud at that point.

Columns of light resolved into a less blinding shapes and Ivan tried to grab the dazzler. He jerked his hands away from the device, suggesting extreme heat radiating from it. Eventually, Ivan grasped it, wrenching it from his body, and let out a scream. He reared back and threw the dazzler as hard as he could. A moment later, it exploded in a huge green fireball. The ground shook, and a shockwave cracked the stone wall.

When the dust settled and the heatwave dissipated, Ace said, "Holy shit! Are you alright?"

Ivan winced, "Yes. But I burned the heck out of my hand. I don't know what just happened there. I've never seen a dazzler do that before. The thing's just a hologram projector!"

Ace grabbed the top of the stone wall and pulled himself up so he could assess the damage on the other side. A smoldering crater dug into the ground about ten feet across. Charred grass surrounded the hole, like the earth itself had vaporized along with the dazzler. The explosion annihilated it entirely. Green and purple smoke hung in the air like the remnants of a novelty smoke bomb.

Ace looked past the smoldering pit towards the mansion itself, illuminated with subtle floodlights. He heard shouts coming from the side of the house. Flashlights blinked on and jiggled as four security guards ran towards the blast site. Off in the distance, the sounds of sirens approaching pierced the sky.

Ace jumped down and motioned for Ivan to follow him. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

Ivan blew on his hands and shook them, trying to soothe the burns.

Traffic on Elvis Presley Boulevard was light, but far from deserted. After a green fireball erupted into the sky, a few cars pulled over to rubberneck. A group of about ten people gathered at the closed Graceland gates, craning their necks to get a look at the commotion. No one paid attention to the man and the leather-clad chimpanzee on stilts running down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

When they got back to *Betty*, Ivan rushed into the sickbay and thrust his hands under a diagnostic wand. As the med computer worked on Ivan, Ace checked Elvis's condition. Ace was no expert on the medical readouts, but as far as he could tell, Elvis had not improved. The man remained catatonic and with crazy brain activity.

Ace reached over to lift Elvis's eyelid because he had seen Hawkeye Pierce do that to unconscious patients on the wartime medical TV show *M*A*S*H*. Just as his finger was about to touch the eyelid, an alarm blared, causing Ace to jump back like he had just touched a hotplate.

Betty's voice blared over the audio system. "Security alert! A human female is approaching the port side airlock. Stun blast will begin in five seconds."

Ace said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! *Betty!* Abort sentry mode. Damn it, Ivan, I thought you turned that off when we came in?"

Ivan gestured as best he could while keeping still for the med computer tissue reconstruction module to work on his damaged hands. He said, "I was a little busy with my hands being burned to a crisp!"

Ace said, "Man. Sorry," and peeked at Ivan's hands. Blue light highlighted the burnt skin, making them look like the surface of a frozen asteroid that a fireball had blasted. The wounds closed, but it would be at least an hour before he was back to normal. "You doing all right?"

Ivan said, "*Yeaah*. The med computer just shot me full of narcotics, so in a second I'll be as high as a kite. *Ooo*. There we go!" His voice smoothed out into a lilting sing-song.

Ace patted Ivan lightly on the shoulder and said, “Lucky you.”

A video display showed April approaching *Betty* from the outside.

Ace said, “Soooo... the punk show?”

Ivan slurred, “You crazy kids go have fun. I’ma stay here and play doctor with robonurse here.”

Ace said, “Alright, buddy. You hang in there. Looks like it’ll be a while before Nurse Chapel has you patched up. Try to stay still and don’t go too heavy on those narcotics. I’ll need you fresh and daisy when I get back.”

“You got it, pal!” Ivan swayed a little and spit when he said “pal.”

Ace exited *Betty* through the aft airlock so April wouldn’t see him. He didn’t want her to get a glimpse of the uncloaked interior.

April waved when Ace appeared around the front of the *Winnebago*. She shouted an exaggerated, “Are you ready to rock?” throwing her hands up in a gesture with her index and pinky fingers extended, and her thumb covering the middle two fingers. It reminded Ace of two antennae.

Ace thought, *Must be some kind of greeting gesture.*

He mimicked her hands and replied, “Yes, ma’am. I am!”

April changed the gesture to be her middle finger extended upright and said, “I thought I told you to cut out that ma’am shit, dude,” before dropping her hands to her side. “Where’s Seth-Ivan?”

Ace said, “He burned himself pretty badly, so he’s, uh, seeing a doctor right now. Getting patched up.”

April said, “Damn. Is he all right?”

Ace said, “Yes. He’ll be fine.”

April squinted. “He didn’t go screwing around with the pressure fryers in the shop, did he? ’Cause I warned you about that hot ass oil. I saw it melt the wrapper off a Snickers bar once.”

Ace said, “A Snickers bar?”

April said, “Yup. Some dumbass rookie wanted to make a fried Snickers bar. Like at the county fair? But the jackass didn’t unwrap it or batter it

first. He just tossed it in the oil. It melted that fucker, wrapper, and all, into a pile of brown goo. We had to use skillets and the stovetop to make the chicken until Johnny got the pressure fryer cleaned out.”

Then she spoke in an exaggerated accent, making her sound vaguely like a prospector from an old Western movie, “It was like Frontier Land up in the KFC that day, I tells ya.”

Ace said, “No. It wasn’t anything like that.”

April said, “Alrighty then. Come on then, hop in my chariot.”

Ace followed April to her Buick Century. The black jeans she wore hugged her bottom, but he forced his eyes to look away, trying to be a gentleman.

When they climbed into the car, April asked him, “You a Red Hot Rebellion fan?”

Ace shrugged. “Never heard of them.”

She looked genuinely shocked. “What?! The hardest rockin’ band in the world? Jimmy Thrillwell? Blind Tone Deaf Dougie J? Andris Rebellion? Ringing any bells?”

Ace shook his head. “Nope. Sorry.”

“Well, get ready to live, dude.” April turned the ignition and pulled out a silver disc from a square plastic case. She inserted the disc into the slot of a device on the dashboard that looked like an inmate from an insane asylum had installed it. Multicolored tape, rubber bands, and crumpled up KFC bags filled the gap beneath the component and the dashboard holding it in place.

But it functioned. As soon as April hit play, audio pumped through speakers in the doors and in the car’s rear. She increased the volume to an earsplitting level as the music kicked into a hard-driving four on the floor backbeat with a wall of sound comprising heavily distorted electric guitars. After the initial shock of energetic power chords pounding him in the face subdued, Ace tapped his foot and bobbed his head to the beat.

April played air drums on the steering wheel and sang along as she

drove. They pulled out onto Elvis Presley Boulevard and headed north, away from the KFC and Graceland. She punched down the accelerator. The Buick grumbled and shook as it propelled them down the road at forty-five miles per hour.

Once the song ended, she turned the volume down so they could talk. “Pretty good, right?”

Ace said, “Absolutely. That was one dandy rock ‘n’ roll song!”

April said, “You kinda talk weird, you know that? Where are you from?”

Ace stated it matter-of-factly. “You know, I’m not really sure. I was raised in an orphanage. I never knew my parents or where I was born.”

April spoke with a touch of embarrassment. “Shit, man. I’m sorry. Sore subject, huh? New topic, then. What brings you to the fair and illustrious city of Memphis, Tennessee? Home of Elvis Presley, the Blues, and the best goddamn barbeque in the universe!”

Ace contemplated the last statement about the best barbeque in the universe for a moment and was about to ask April how she could verify that claim. Did she have her own spaceship? Did she really travel outside the Milky Way Galaxy? That was a feat he’d never heard of anyone accomplishing.

Instead, Ace said, “We came to, *uhh*, see Graceland.”

April said, “You some sort of Elvis super fan or something?”

Ace said, “No. Not at all. I mean, he’s the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, you know? So, of course, I’ve heard of him. But to be honest, I’m not really well-versed in all his music, and I don’t know much about his life.”

April said, “Well, you came to the right place. You can’t so much as spit without hitting someone with expert knowledge of the King. ‘Specially in these parts.” April spoke with a strong twang for the last part. Then switched to her normal speaking voice, “Take that guy, for instance. I think that’s the fourth Elvis impersonator we’ve passed since we left the

KFC parking lot.”

Ace followed her gesture and craned his neck as they passed a man dressed in a white high-collared jumpsuit encrusted in rhinestones standing on the sidewalk. The man practiced what looked like martial arts forms and then quickly stopped. He waved his hands wildly at them as they passed.

Ace said, “Elvis impersonator?” as the man rescinded behind them. He could’ve sworn the man was yelling at them.

April said, “You know, we don’t really have as many as Vegas, but there are a few. My brother’s one. But don’t hold that against me. He’s the weirdo in the family. He and some of his friends hang out in the KFC from time to time. Kinda weird dudes. They seem to me to have a creepy fetish with Elvis. But man, are they devoted.”

April continued, “One guy, who I finally got to admit that his real name was Wally, told me that, quote-unquote, *true* impersonators believe that they are chosen by The King to continue His work. And that they judge themselves on their authenticity and their ability to channel Elvis’s true essence. These are the hardcore dudes who don’t do it for money. Their mission is to spread the message of The King. Wally is one of those guys who doesn’t just do an Elvis act. He lives Elvis, dressing as the King and spreading His word by their example. Whatever the hell that means.” She took her hands off the wheel to make quick air quotes around the words “lives Elvis.”

“Damn, man. There’s another one.” April pointed at another Elvis impersonator wearing a black leather suit. The impersonator appeared much younger. Like the other, he waved his hands wildly and shouted.

Ace said, “Looks like he’s trying to talk to us. Slow down.”

April reduced speed and turned the music off as they approached the Elvis impersonator on the sidewalk. Ace tried to roll down his window so they could hear what the impersonator.

April said, “Ah. Shit, man. Here. I gotta do that for you. Your side

is broken.” She hit the control on the driver’s side door to lower Ace’s window.

There was no sound, but it looked like the man was shouting at the top of his lungs.

“What the —?” April decelerated the car to a crawl. They slowly rolled past the “shouting” Elvis impersonator. Although the impersonator made no sound, Ace could tell the man repeated the same thing repeatedly. Ace was pretty good at lip reading. Since Ivan’s media stash had a limited amount of movies and television shows, Ace sometimes liked to watch them with the sound off. Just to see if he could still tell what was going on.

And what this young, fresh-faced Elvis impersonator mouthed, repeatedly, was, “Ace. Be a ritz. Find the El Dorado.”

Billy, the Punk Rock Elvis Fanboy

Ace stood at the back of Murphy's Pub, leaning against the bar and sipping a Pabst Blue Ribbon from an aluminum can. The beer was no Dark Star, but it wasn't half bad either.

April posed a relentless series of questions to Ace after leaving the Elvis impersonator. Questions Ace was not in any mood to answer.

Although Ace liked April, he wasn't about to inform her was a man from outer space looking for a supposed gold hoard and the means to save the not-dead King of Rock 'n' Roll's life.

Ace accepted the blame for April's inquisitiveness. He told her what he had lip-read from the Elvis impersonator.

April asked repeatedly, "You sure he was saying your name?"

An expert lip reader, Ace was sure.

April said, "Okay. What am I saying right now?" Her lips moved, but no sound came out.

Ace concentrated on her lips and spoke without thinking, "You are the weirdest cute guy I've ever met."

Ace suddenly felt a rush of heat course through his body and stammered a little.

April grinned.

Ace composed himself and tried to think of something witty to say when a voice called out from behind them. “April Sassy Molassy!”

April’s smile dissolved into a scowl.

The voice belonged to a pockmarked young man with a nose ring and dark eyeliner, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt adorned with a skull. Large spikes protruded from the skull forming of a jagged mohawk. The words “The Exploited” flanked the skull. The man’s own dyed blue hair spiked up in a similar soaring mohawk, mimicking the skull on his T-shirt. He ran up and grabbed April in an awkward hug.

April squirmed her way free and pushed the man back. “Yo! Hands off the merchandise, Billy!”

Billy laughed, sounding like a weasel caught in a meat grinder. “Whatever, Sassy Molassy!” He blew a series of vigorous smooches at her.

April feigned disgust and said, “In your dreams, Bilbo Baggins!”

Billy cradled his own face with his hands and batted his eyes. “You know you want me.”

April spat, “You wish. Where’s your brother?”

Billy said, “You mean your lover boy? He’s out back. They just pulled up and are about to load in the equipment.”

April said, “Cool it. You know me and Joey are just friends.” She turned to Ace and said, “Seriously, we’re just friends.”

Billy let out an exaggerated coo. April smacked him on the side of his head, saying, “Shut up, Billy!” His mohawk vibrated from the blow for a few seconds.

When Billy mimed drawing a zipper over his mouth, April said, “So, Billy. Meet Ace Tucker. Ace, meet Billy Baker, drummer for Joey and the Lawrences and a total dweeb. You guys should talk. ‘Cause even though he makes himself out to be this punk-as-balls punk rock renegade, he’s a total Elvis Presley fanboy. Anything you want to know about the King, this guy probably knows.” She gestured at Billy, who struck a karate pose.

April continued, "I'm gonna go say hi to Joey out back. Hang loose for a minute, will you? I'll be right back."

Ace agreed, and April meandered through a light crowd, exiting through a door at the back of the bar.

Billy said, "So, you got questions about the Big E? I'm your guy," and went through a whole karate routine before settling down on a bar stool. He patted the empty stool next to him, then ordered two Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Billy took a sip from his can and said, "Whatchu wanna know?"

Ace sat on the stool next to Billy and said, "Thanks for the beer. Well, does Elvis have anything to do with El Dorado?"

Billy said, "El Dorado? Like Eldorado, the car? Cadillac Eldorado? Sure, man. Elvis loved Cadillacs. He had tons of them, including several Eldorados."

Ace stopped mid-sip and put his beer on the bar. "Wait. Eldorado is a car, not a place?"

Billy said, "Well, it's both. But if you're talking Elvis and Eldorado, then you're talking Caddies, man. See, in the 1950s, few things symbolized success and the American dream more than a badass automobile. And Elvis's affinity for Cadillacs was legendary. He was not only the King of Rock 'n' Roll, but he was also the King of Cadillac buyers, purchasing at least a hundred during his life. And he didn't just buy them for himself. He was well known for giving gifts of automobiles to friends, family, associates, and even complete strangers. Sometimes he would drive them himself for a few days before giving them away."

Ace said, "Huh..."

Billy nodded and said, "He owned just about every model of Cadillac. Except for one of the most iconic models, the 1959 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz. It is highly sought after by collectors today because of its giant fins and slick, streamlined design with unique sweeping chrome trim that decorated the side of the car. But I digress..."

Ace said, “So, if that was the coolest car at the time, why didn’t he have one? He was obviously loaded, right?”

Billy raised a finger and said, “*Ahhh*. There’s the real mystery, isn’t it? Most people say he didn’t have a ‘59 Eldorado Biarritz because he was in the army at the time. He was stationed over in Germany during the Korean War. But some Internet rumors say he *did* own one. And not only that, but it was his favorite car of all time. He would just drive it at night, and he kept it in a secret garage somewhere on Graceland. See, old tunnels are running beneath Graceland. Legend has it that they were old Underground Railroad tunnels that the original owners of the mansion used to smuggle runaway slaves to the North. When Elvis bought Graceland and did some remodeling, he found them. He would use them to sneak out to secret locations all around Memphis. Like some kind of Bat Cave network or something!”

Ace tried hard to follow the logic of underground train routes, somehow being connected to caves where bats lived. The more Billy talked about the secret and bizarre sides of Elvis’s life, the more it made some kind of weird sense.

“Ace. Be a ritz. Find the El Dorado” the Elvis impersonators said. Not “be a ritz.” Biarritz! Eldorado Biarritz.

Ace still did not know how a unique car could have something to do with saving Elvis’s life. Yet, the more he learned from Billy, the more convinced he became things were about to get even stranger.

Over another round of Pabst Blue Ribbon, Billy regaled with more bizarre tales from Elvis’s life.

Billy’s eyes gleam wildly as he spoke. “Did you know that there was a UFO sighting when Elvis was born? You believe that shit? A freakin’ UFO was hovering right over his house when he was born. Both Elvis’s father and the doctor who delivered him saw it. They said the house was bathed in this weird blue light and it stayed there up in the sky for about an hour while Elvis’s momma was giving birth.”

Ace tried to feign shock and hoped he did a convincing job. “UFO? Nah. UFOs ain’t real...”

Billy said, “Yes they are! And it gets weirder. Elvis had a twin brother, but he was stillborn. They got a memorial to him in the meditation garden at Graceland, but he’s supposedly actually buried in a little grave in Tupelo. But some people say the twin, Jessie, is buried at Graceland. They exhumed his body from the original grave to transport it, like, twenty years later. But get this. The body hadn’t decomposed at all! You believe that shit?”

Ace admitted, “Well, now that is weird.”

Billy said, “And check this out. Elvis would sometimes tell stories about when he was a kid, and he was visited by extraterrestrials or angels.”

Ace scratched his jaw. “What? Seriously?”

Billy said, “Yup! I read about it in a book called *Alien Rock: The Rock ‘n’ Roll Extraterrestrial Connection*. I got it from the library. What? I got a library card.”

Ace hid the flutter in his stomach. The book’s title hit close to home. Having a thriving rock scene was a prerequisite to gain entry into the Galactic Union. When he realized he paused too long, he said, “No. Of course, you can read. Sounds like a cool book, is all. I’d like to read it.”

Billy said, “Yes, you do! It’s pretty badass. All the greats had UFO experiences. John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix, even Marilyn Manson! Anyway, the first time they contacted Elvis, he was in a closet, being punished for doing some stupid shit. You know how kids are. He must’ve been like four or five years old. And while he was there in the dark, he said he felt this *presence*.” Billy accented the last word with a flamboyant, magician-like gesture.

Then Billy continued, “He said there was an invisible person in the closet with him and he saw visions of a beloved man in a white jumpsuit singing and reaching out to throngs of ecstatic followers. It wasn’t until

much later that he realized it was himself he was seeing. He saw his own future as a great entertainer.”

Ace tapped his finger on the can of Pabst and tried to riddle through it all.

Billy took a long drank from his beer, then almost spit it up as he remembered, “Oh! Elvis also had telekinetic powers. There have been a few stories of him moving shit with his mind.”

“Like what?” Ace knew several telekinetics. Handy folks to have around.

Billy said, “Clouds mostly. And ashtrays... Oh. And he could heal the sick!”

Ace scoffed. “C’mon, man. Now you’re just messing with me.”

Billy’s brow knit from the severe bullshit face Ace threw at him. “No. For reals. There are reports of him praying over sick people, and they would have dramatic recoveries. Look it up, man. Shit’s out there, man. You just gotta know where to look!”

Ace said, “Alright, calm down, man.”

Billy lowered his voice and said, “I’m just saying. The truth is out there, and it’s way stranger than fiction.”

Ace would have to agree with him on that last account because, at that moment, a chimpanzee wearing a leather jacket covered in punk rock patches stormed into the club.

Ivan Chimpanov ran up to the bar where Ace and Billy sat.

Billy slid off his barstool and squatted down to take a better look at Ivan. “Whoa! Fuck yeah! A monkey! Is he your pet?”

Ivan punched Billy square in the nose and said, “I’m nobody’s pet, jerk!”

Billy’s mohawk spikes wiggled a few times as a gusher of blood sprouted from his nose. He dropped to his knees, sobbing and attempting to hold back the crimson flood pouring down his face.

Ace grabbed Ivan by the collar and rushed him outside. “What the hell,

man? What's going on?" A taxicab sat idling by the curb. The driver glanced at them and then darted his gaze straight forward. The cabbie sweat profusely even though it was a chilly night and had the windows rolled down.

Ivan shook Ace's hand off with an exaggerated shrug. "We've got some serious problems, Ace! Get in the cab."

Ivan smoothed and re-smoothed his jacket's sleeves and fidgeted with the zipper. The chimp's eyes flitted around and his breath was haggard.

Ace took the hint and climbed into the taxicab's backseat.

The cab driver spoke with forced enthusiasm and a slight British accent, "And a good evening to you, sir!"

Ivan climbed in behind Ace and slammed the door. "Shut up, Pradeep. Just drive us back to the KFC as quickly as you can. No speeding. We don't want to draw any more attention to ourselves."

Pradeep, the cab driver, said, "Of course! Right away, Hanuman!" He put the car in drive, and signaled, before carefully pulling out into traffic.

Ace said, "Ivan, what the shit is going on?"

Ivan glanced over his shoulder like a prey animal watching out for predators, then said, "Let's just say there's a reason I didn't take *Betty* to come get you. We've got a little problem back at the KFC parking lot!"