

Grail-Diving in Shangrilla with the World's Last Mime by Ken Scholes

Part One

They buried Little Elvis Sanchez in a burned out Volkswagen just outside the smoldering remains of Denver. Reverend Sparkle Jones said a few words. Sister Mika and Aunty Ann sang "Memories" or a near approximation thereof while the Last Mime LeFoie did a nice bit of performance art for dramatic effect.

Then, the Good Reverend urinated on the hobgoblin corpses to keep them from coming back from the dead. He pulled up his dress and squatted like a girl but by now this didn't surprise anyone at all.

Timmy Gallahad watched all of this and wondered if they would succeed in their quest.

When Reverend Sparkle was finished, the troupe, the company, the band, the chosen— whatever you wish to call them—pressed on for Shangrilla.

#

The world was in a bad way.

You've read all about it by now.

That fateful spring morning a thousand, thousand alarms jangled armies and navies, fire departments and police stations, air forces and astronomers to life. Look! Up in the sky! Exactly what they'd looked for, planned for and maybe even hoped for. Until the flying saucers dropped the bombs. Until their drop-pods spilled slathering monsters on the world.

The Great One-Sided War lasted three days and at the end of it, hobgoblin hordes, electric harnesses humming a cheerful hum, ran mop-up on the scant leftovers of the human race.

Reverend Sparkle Jones was one such leftover. And he bumped into another, Little Elvis, on his way out of Portland, Oregon.

"Howdy, Ma'am," Little Elvis Sanchez said, tipping the cowboy hat he'd looted from a Western outfitters shop. He blushed when the Reverend turned to face him. "I mean Sir."

"Ma'am is fine." Reverend Sparkle's make-up had smeared all to hell and he'd broken a heel navigating rubble. "Or Reverend."

Little Elvis crossed himself. He'd been contemplating an oversized RV that he didn't think he could drive. He stood from his seat on the curb and stretched out a hand. "Little Elvis Sanchez," he said, "Retired amateur wrestler."

The Reverend took the hand, squeezed it lightly. "Enchante," he said. "Sparkle Jones. Minister of the Lord and Cabaret Performer Extraordinaire."

Little Elvis sat back down.

Sparkle joined him on the curb, careful to cross his legs. "Got a plan?"

Little Elvis shrugged. "Not really."

“Well. *I* do.”

Little Elvis grinned. “Well, let’s go then.”

“Don’t you want to hear it?”

The wrestler shook his head. “Nope. Let’s just do it. It’s got to be better than just sitting around waiting for the world to end.”

The Reverend opened his mouth to reply when ululating hobgoblins rounded a street corner ahead. He closed his mouth and drew the twin 1911 Colt .45 automatics he’d been saving for a special occasion. Little Elvis hefted an M60 he’d borrowed from an overturned Humvee. Shell casings flew. Guns roared. Hobgoblins fell in piles of bloody meat, sparks popping from their wire harnesses and metal helmets.

Afterwards, Reverend Sparkle holstered his pistols and walked to the RV. Little Elvis moved away towards the corpses, unzipping his trousers as he went.

Sparkle paused at the door. “What are you *doing*?”

“Can’t go yet,” Sanchez said over his shoulder. “Have to pee on them first.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” the Reverend said.

Little Elvis smiled and got to it, splashing his name onto the fallen with practiced glee.

#

Sparkle Jones and Little Elvis Sanchez met Sister Mika and Aunty Ann outside Medford. Sister Mika the Singing Nun and Aunty Ann of Aunty Ann’s Jellies and Jams had already joined forces, piling their Ford Ranger’s bed high with supplies, weapons and ammunition. They sat on the roof of a freeway rest-stop, roasting hotdogs on a hibachi and keeping watch for hobgoblin patrols.

The Reverend saw the line of smoke, pulled in, jumped the curb and drew up close to the side of the building. Rolling down his window, he stood up and twisted.

Sister Mika held an untwisted coat-hanger heavy with the weight of a ballpark frank in one hand and a magnum in the other. “May I help you?”

Jones nodded at her torn and dirty habit. “Sister.” He also nodded to Aunty Ann, an older woman in a calico dress. “Nice dress, ma’am.”

Both women smiled at him. “Saw your smoke. They probably can, too.”

Sister Mika set down the hotdog and waved her hand across the sky. “Lots of smoke these days.”

He looked. Everywhere on the horizon, smudges of gray, columns of darker gray, trickles of lighter gray.

“Do you have a plan?” Reverend Sparkle Jones asked.

Sister Mika nodded. “Hole up in the mountains and wait for God’s Deliverance.”

He grinned. “Your deliverance has arrived. If you have a few extra dogs to spare, why don’t me and my traveling companion here, Little Elvis Sanchez, join you for a bite and explain.”

Aunty Ann scowled and leaned over. She and Sister Mika whispered for a bit back and forth. Finally,

they looked up at him.

“Two questions first,” Sister Mika said.

“Yes?”

“First...you packing heat?”

Sparkle nodded. “We’ll leave the guns in the rig. Second?”

“Second.” She pointed her magnum at the RV. “Do you have any mustard in that thing?”

“Mustard?” he asked. “What brand?”

“Why,” she said, smiling, “the gray stuff, of course.”

And naturally, being that it was the edge of the end of the world and price was suddenly no object, and possibly because he and Little Elvis Sanchez were hungry when they raided those six grocery stores to pack out the Winnebago Roadwarrior, they *did* have the gray stuff along with every other type, color, texture, flavor, brand and off-brand of mustard available on the market.

#

They found the World’s Last Mime, LeFoie, sitting beneath a casino billboard sign near Reno. He sat in a pile of plastic letters from an overturned box near the ladder he had used to change his billing on the sign. His black beret tilted askew, one suspender dangled loose, his greasepaint showed tear streaks. He leaped to his feet as the RV and pickup approached and pantomimed pulling them towards him on an imaginary rope.

Little Elvis rolled down the window, smiled and nodded to the sign. “You really the world’s last mime?”

He nodded, wiping away imaginary tears with an exaggerated gesture.

The Reverend Sparkle Jones scowled. “Be careful, Little Elvis,” he said. “Mimes are a dangerous lot, are decidedly French and are an abomination unto the Lord.”

Little Elvis looked at the Reverend. “This one seems harmless, Padre.”

“You can never be too sure.”

By now, Aunty Ann and Sister Mika had climbed out of their truck and approached.

“You all alone here?” Little Elvis asked.

LeFoie nodded.

“Ask him how he’s escaped the hobgoblins,” the Reverend said.

“I think mimes can hear just fine,” Little Elvis said. “They just can’t talk.”

“Well, not all of us speak French.”

Sister Mika and Aunty Ann rolled their eyes. Little Elvis gave the Last Mime an apologetic shrug.

“Well?”

LeFoie turned his fingers into pistols, firing one and then the other in an over-the-top cowboy imitation.

Then he worked through a half dozen or so exaggerated death scenes.

“Really?” Sister Mika asked.

He shook his head. He pointed to an open root cellar door on the side of the casino.

The Reverend sneered. “As I was saying. French.”

#

Timmy Gallahad fired three rounds into the Winnebago Roadwarrior before he realized the hard way it wasn't a saucer after all. Fortunately, he was a piss-poor shot under pressure, completely missing the windshield in his sights. Equally fortunate, the Red Rider BBs pinged off the aluminum siding, leaving only tiny dimples in the paint.

“What the hell are you doing, kid?” Sparkle Jones shouted from the driver's side window.

Little Elvis hustled out of the cab and sprinted for the kid. Zip. A BB stung his thigh. Spang. Another whizzed past his head. Waving his hands and screaming, he fell onto the gangly teenager. Also waving his arms and screaming, the gangly teenager collapsed under three hundred and thirty pounds of angry Mexican.

“Hey, you alien bastards look just like us,” Timmy Gallahad said. “Sorta.”

Little Elvis pinned him, kicking the BB gun away. “Don't make it harder on yourself, white-boy.”

#

“No,” Reverend Sparkle Jones said, smoothing out his dress. “He's the last of the company. I'm sure on that.”

“How do you know?” Aunty Ann asked.

He shrugged. “The Lord told me.”

“He didn't tell *me*,” Sister Mika said.

He shrugged again. “That's because your faith is rooted in a Lie of Satan. And you have poor fashion sense.”

Aunty Ann pointed at the Last Mime LeFoie. “Didn't you say *he* was the last?”

“I was wrong. His Frenchness confused me momentarily.”

“Abominations can do that,” Little Elvis offered. He looked at LeFoie. “No offense.”

LeFoie crossed his arms and scowled.

“What's an abomination?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

The group ignored him. They'd pretty much done so since the BB rifle incident the day before. Sparkle continued. “Besides, the name's a dead giveaway, isn't it?”

“Who's name?” Timmy Gallahad asked. No one noticed.

Sister Mika fidgeted with her crucifix. “So you think it's a sign?”

“Of course it’s a Goddamn sign,” the Reverend said.

“A sign of what?” Timmy Gallahad asked, leaning forward in his lawn chair.

Little Elvis went to the hibachi and flipped the burgers. “I’d have to agree.”

Sister Mika slathered mustard onto her bun. “I can’t imagine we won’t meet more along the way.”

“Along the way where?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

“But we shall not break bread with them nor invite them into our Winnebago,” Reverend Sparkle said.

“It seems to me,” Timmy Gallahad said slowly, “that with the world in such a bad way,” he gritted his teeth, “someone around here,” he looked at Reverend Sparkle Jones, raising his voice to a full volume, “*should have a fucking plan!*”

“Watch your Goddamn mouth kid,” Reverend Sparkle said. Then dinner was served.

After dinner, and after dispatching an unexpected pack of hobgoblins that rushed them from the shadows of an overpass, they went over the plan again.

#

The Holy Grail, Reverend Sparkle Jones reported, was humanity’s last hope. It was also hidden in a faraway mystical place known only by the name—

“Shangrilla?” Timmy Gallahad asked, interrupting. “Don’t you mean Shangri-La?”

“I already asked that,” Aunty Ann said.

“Rhymes with gorilla,” Little Elvis said.

“Or Godzilla,” Sister Mika said.

The Reverend Sparkle Jones pushed his wig up and scratched his thin gray hair. “At least the boy reads.”

“It’s from a book, too?”

They all looked at the kid. Except for Little Elvis, who also hadn’t known that fact.

Timmy Gallahad shrugged. “Treasure Hunter 3: Blood Bath in Shangri-La. It’s a video game.”

And with that the Reverend went back to his story.

—just off the coast of Florida. The grail had lain there, the Reverend Sparkle Jones continued, waiting for humanity’s darkest hour to come ’round at last that it might shine its light into—

“What’s a grail?”

The Reverend sighed. “What? No King Arthur video game?”

Timmy Gallahad kept quiet for the rest of the story.

So Reverend Sparkle Jones told his Knights of the Picnic Table the rest of the story and the plan. First, the grail, the cup of Christ, Jesus’s Juice Cup, was real. Second, it was in the vicinity of a tropical island

off the coast of Florida. (Here, he produced a map with a red magic marker circle and the words SHANGRILLA HERE at the end of a red magic marker arrow and a series of coordinates.) Third, the Lord Himself had told Sparkle the location and the route he must take to bring together the band, the company, the troupe—his grail-seekers.

#

“And that,” closed Reverend Sparkle Jones, “is the plan.”

The Last Mime LeFoie danced a jig.

Sister Mika strapped on her guitar to lead them in a song.

Aunty Ann belched loudly, blushed furiously and apologized.

Little Elvis Sanchez folded his arms and leaned back in his chair to watch his last sunset. Of course he had no idea.

Timmy Gallahad yawned. “It’s a stupid plan,” he said.

Everyone looked at him.

He looked back at everyone. “It’s almost as stupid as peeing on the hobgoblins to keep them from coming back from the dead.”

“That is all Little Elvis,” Sparkle said. “I had nothing to do with that bit.”

Little Elvis scowled. “It works doesn’t it?”

“How many hobgoblins have you ever seen come back from the dead?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

“None,” Little Elvis said, the white teeth of his proud smile gleaming in the twilight. “I peed on every damned one of them.”

Timmy Gallahad rolled his eyes.

After a bit of Michael Row the Boat A-Shore and timeless television theme songs, they took up their various places inside and on top of the Winnebago Roadwarrior, crawled into their sleeping bags and went to sleep.

Little Elvis took the first watch. He sat on the roof, a scoped Winchester cradled in his hands, and watched the stars, inhaled the smells, listened to the mumbles and snores of his newfound friends. When it came time to wake his replacement, he just didn’t have the heart. Somehow he knew that tomorrow everything was going to be very different.

Timmy Gallahad dreamed happy dreams about being shipwrecked on a tropical island with a stranded batch of lonely cheerleaders.

The Last Mime LeFoie dreamed nostalgic dreams about the old days, the blazing sun, the hot sand, the sting of saltwater in bullet holes and gashes.

Aunty Ann dreamed exotic dreams about an unremembered past life she’d had full of camels, magic lamps, flying carpets, wily thieves, all powerful Djinn and strawberry jam.

Sister Mika dreamed big-haired dreams about her high school days in the eighties and the song on the

radio when Jimmy Lance took her virginity thereby convincing her first, that a vow of celibacy might not be all bad and second, that Latin was really a lovely language when blended with pop music.

Reverend Sparkle Jones usually dreamed of sensible pumps, conservative make-up, Liza Minelli and the Book of Revelations. But tonight he didn't dream at all. He heard no voices, saw no visions and woke up in the morning with a sense of doom far stronger than what he'd felt regarding the recent (and now irrelevant) political elections of his day.

#

The next day, everything became very different.

They awoke to ululating hobgoblins, the crack of rifle shots, the roar of motorcycle engines, the repetitious thud thud thud of heavy machinery, exploding concrete and the spang-a-lang of bullets striking metal.

Reverend Sparkle Jones joined Little Elvis on the roof. Little Elvis passed the Winchester to him. "They just showed up...came from the northeast."

The Reverend sighted in. "Hell's Angels?" he asked. "Sporting American Flags?"

"And those there look like Reservists or Regular Army. Looks like they're all working together."

"Glory be." He panned the scope over the moving battle. Bodies on both sides were already piling up. "What the hell is that?"

Little Elvis squinted. "Some kind of machine. It's not one of ours." Large as a building, tottering on four mechanical legs. Multitudes of arms whipped and spun, some sporting blades, some spouting flames and some spitting bolts of electricity. Long tubes protruded from the body of the thing, coughing out mortar rounds in puffs of gray smoke. Large searchlight eyes shifted back and forth beneath a small, spinning antenna.

"Looks bad," Sparkle said. "I think it's going to get harder from here on out."

Timmy Gallahad had joined them by this time. "What looks bad?"

"Let's load her up," Little Elvis said, swinging down the ladder. The others needed little encouragement. Five minutes later, the caravan moved southeast towards Cheyenne at breakneck speed.

Two bikers broke ranks and chased them down easily. They passed the pickup and pulled up to driver's side of the Roadwarrior, motioning for Sparkle Jones to roll down his window.

"Pull over, ma'am," one of the bikers yelled. He rode one handed and waved to the side of the road. The other one waved a submachine gun in the air. "That's an order."

Sparkle turned to look at them. "On whose authority?"

"The United States Army!"

"The army?" Sparkle glanced at Little Elvis in the passenger seat and then looked back at the bikers. "The Hell's Angels are errand boys for the Man now?"

The biker looked uncomfortable holding debate at sixty three miles per hour. He spat out a bug. "It's a short term arrangement. Fate of the world and all that. Just pull over."

“It’s too dangerous,” Sparkle Jones shouted back. “Why don’t we catch up when we’re all a bit less busy?”

The spackle of warning shots fired across the front of the Roadwarrior’s grill changed his mind.

As they climbed from the Roadwarrior, Little Elvis shushed Timmy Gallahad, waving him back into the shadows of the loft with its stacks of rifles, ammunition and canned meat products.

“What is the meaning of this?” The Reverend stepped forward, his dark-lined eyes flashing.

The bikers suddenly noticed his gender and both blushed. “Sorry sir. We can’t let you pass.”

“Not sir,” Sparkle Jones intoned. “Reverend.” He held up his hands, fingers making the sign of a cross. “You do not merely impede me, gentlemen, you impede the Work of the Most High God.”

The Last Mime LeFoie jumped up and down and waved his hands.

By now, Sister Mika and Aunty Ann had joined them. The bikers ignored the rather plump jam and jelly entrepreneur but took note of the lithe nun. “Shame on you both,” she said. Then she smiled and blushed.

The Last Mime’s jumping had become even more frantic now. He kept pointing to the horizon.

They turned and saw it: The monstrous legged and tentacled building-thing turned away from the army and bore down on the Winnebago Roadwarrior instead. And on its heels, the hobgoblin hordes and their incessant ululating followed.

“We have to go,” Sparkle said.

“The Colonel will want to talk to you first. We’re under strict orders—”

Little Elvis pointed at the alien thing approaching. “Can your Colonel take care of *that*?”

“We’re not sure,” one biker said. “He hasn’t been around much lately.”

“Well if *you’re* not sure, *we’re* not waiting.”

And suddenly, the wind whipped up. Something blocked out the sun. A rushing, whistling, whining from the east. A blur of red, white and blue dropped from the sky, streaked across the ground and with a solid clang the mechanical thing lifted off the ground, victim of an unseen uppercut. On the ground, the troops cheered and rallied. Hobgoblins started dying. The metal thing and the streak of red white and blue tossed each other back and forth, bits of metal flying up into the air and landing helter-skelter on charred forests and smoking ruins.

The two bikers grinned. “I think the Colonel’s back.”

Little Elvis looked at Sparkle Jones who in turn looked at Aunty Ann. Sister Mika kept staring at the bikers.

Even the Last Mime opened his mouth to speak but remembered to close it.

“What is *that*?” Timmy Gallahad asked. He’d snuck out in the confusion, his Red Rider BB rifle ready.

“Not what, kid,” the Reverend Sparkle Jones said. “Who.”

Little Elvis Sanchez swept off his hat and put his right hand over his heart. “Exactly.”

The battle lasted eight minutes. Afterwards, they had breakfast with the red, white and blue streak that had so completely pummeled the alien octo-battle-tank and sent the hobgoblins into retreat: The myth, the man, the legend....

Colonel Patriot himself.

Part Two

“Well,” the Colonel said between bites of Colonel Patriot’s Frosted Choco-Balls, “I think you’re insane.”

“I told you it was a stupid plan,” Timmy Gallahad said. He stayed close to Colonel Patriot, his mouth slack-jawed most of the time. He’d heard of superheroes but had never met one.

“No, Timmy,” Colonel Patriot said, patting his shoulder. “The plan is brilliant. The insanity is not letting me join your quest. Heck, I could get to this...Shangrilla, is it? I could get there and back in ten minutes tops, grail in hand.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Colonel. Though I wish to God it did.” The Reverend Sparkle Jones put down his spoon, dabbed his lips carefully to not smear his fresh lipstick. “I know we could use your help. But I also know what we were told.”

“What *you* were told,” Sister Mika said.

“What I was told,” he agreed. “We are the chosen. And time is short.”

Colonel Patriot nodded. “It’s a losing battle. There’s no central government left to speak of. Electronic transmissions are jammed. Hell—” he blushed, looking at the women and Timmy, “—I mean heck, I spend most of my time on the big bots or running messages to scattered pockets of resistance. And they just keep coming back.”

“Have you tried peeing on them?” Little Elvis asked.

Colonel Patriot nearly spit out his cereal. “What?”

“Never mind him,” Aunty Ann said. “Isn’t there anyone who can help you?”

“Yeah,” Timmy Gallahad said. “What about the others?”

Colonel Patriot shook his head. “Gone, as far as I can tell.” He held up his wrist, showing them the unblinking Super-Powered Friendship Bracelet. He looked around to make sure no soldiers were watching and buried his head in his hands, massive shoulders heaving with his sobs. “I watched Kid Sling Shot and the Night Marauder burned to ashes myself during the first wave.”

“Didn’t they retire years ago?” Little Elvis asked.

Colonel Patriot sniffed and pulled himself together. “Oh, someone always picks up the capes and masks we drop.”

In the uncomfortable silence, Sparkle Jones stood up. “Well, Colonel, we really must get going. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

The rest stood. Colonel Patriot extended his hand to the Reverend. “I’ll try to keep them busy.”

Sparkle shook his hand. “We’ll find the grail and then we’ll show these third-rate invaders some good old fashioned Wrath of God.”

“God bless you, Reverend Sparkle Jones. God bless you all.”

Colonel Patriot blasted into the sky without another word.

Timmy Gallahad spat out the dust from his lift-off. “Wow. Now *that’s* a real hero.”

Sparkle Jones walked towards the waiting Winnebago Roadwarrior. “You ain’t seen nothing yet,” he said over his shoulder as he went.

#

No one knows exactly how or why it happened.

Scholars speculate that, far above the earth in the unseen spinning saucers, unimaginable and unearthly masters upgraded their invasion technology.

In short, the hobgoblins became smarter. And more of those nasty multi-legged machines showed up.

#

They were ambushed outside Denver.

The Winnebago Roadwarrior hit a sand-covered plank of nails and squealed to a stop with four flat tires. The pickup slammed into them from behind. The hobgoblins, now armed with garden tools, golf clubs and table lamps, poured out of nowhere.

The Reverend pulled his pistols. Little Elvis worked the pump of a sawed-off Remington. They both made for the door and Reverend Sparkle Jones broke a heel when he kicked it open. The Last Mime LeFoie broke out the small kitchen window and fired off a few bursts from an M-16 he’d found in Cheyenne before following the others out the door. Timmy Gallahad ignored being told to stay put and not touch anything. He grabbed the Winchester and shimmied out the driver-side window and onto the roof wondering if the scope would improve his poor aim under pressure.

Hobgoblins, popping and sparking, were dragging the women from their pickup when Little Elvis roared and charged them. Sister Mika struggled for her magnum. It went off, kicking out her hand and throwing back one of her captors. Aunty Ann banshee-screamed and set about with a machete she always kept nearby.

“Let my people go!” Reverend Sparkle Jones yelled, firing off the pistols into the horde.

Little Elvis waded in, swinging the shotgun like a club until he stood over Sister Mika. Then he scooped her up and tossed her easily into the back of the pickup. He climbed up behind her and pumped buckshot into the hobgoblin horde, cutting them to shreds.

The Last Mime LeFoie rolled beneath the Roadwarrior and started firing careful rounds into kneecaps, his face a mask of pure glee.

Timmy Gallahad puzzled out the lever-action rifle, sighted in on a hobgoblin nostril suddenly the size of a manhole. He started to throw up at what happened next but then thought better of it, worked the lever again, and found another nostril.

Fifteen minutes later, the women turned their backs while the men limped around finishing the job.

Afterwards, they zipped up (except for the Good Reverend of course) and took stock of their situation. Little Elvis held a field dressing to his cheek, soaking up blood from a laceration. “One spare,” he said. “Four flats.”

Sparkle Jones straightened his wig. “We could run on the rims until we find a tire shop.”

Sister Mika crouched by the plank and its upturned nails. “They’re getting smarter,” she said.

Aunty Ann side-stepped a puddle to kick a golf club out of a clawed hand. “They are.”

“Sounds like we need to get smarter, too,” Little Elvis said. Everyone looked at him. “Maybe we should get off the roads.”

“We need bikes,” Timmy Gallahad said.

Now everyone looked at the kid. Reverend Sparkle nodded. “Good thinking.”

They had moved most of their essentials from the Roadwarrior to the bed of the pick-up when the Last Mime LeFoie started jumping up and down, pointing at something behind them.

They saw the cloud of dust moving over the rise of highway. They heard the thud thud thud of machinery. Something shrieked through the air and a Volkswagen erupted into flame. A building-sized box with waving tentacles crested the hill.

Sparkle Jones looked worried. “That didn’t take long.”

“What do we do now?” Sister Mika asked.

“We run for it,” Aunty Ann said.

LeFoie pantomimed his agreement.

“We’ll never make it,” Timmy Gallahad said.

Sparkle Jones looked at the truck and then at the oncoming octo-battle-tank. “We might.”

“No,” Little Elvis said, a strange look washing his face. “No, you won’t. This is it, gang.” Without another word and without looking back, he climbed into the Winnebago. They heard the door lock behind him.

The strange look migrated to the Reverend’s face. “What are you doing?” he shouted.

The engine roared alive.

He yelled again. “Little Elvis, what are you doing?”

The Winnebago rolled off towards Denver, away from the invaders, flat tires slapping the pavement. It picked up speed. Now whooping hobgoblin sounds became background noise for the approaching machine.

The Winnebago made a wide turn in a grocery store parking lot, still building speed, now coming back.

When the Roadwarrior flew past them, wheel-rims sparking, they saw Little Elvis’s idiot grin and dark flashing eyes.

Mortar rounds whistled and exploded, tearing up chunks of asphalt and dropping trees. The Winnebago

barreled on, faster and faster.

Hobgoblins bounced over and under the Roadwarrior as it raced forward. Little Elvis made minor course-corrections as the octo-battle-tank tried to sidestep at the last possible moment.

The Winnebago slammed into first one and then another of the long metal legs and he threw the RV into a wide skid and rolled it. It went down, raising dust and smoke when it struck the ground. They heard Little Elvis's shouts above the noise of the thrashing arms and hobgoblin howls. Then, as the dust settled, they saw him scrambling over the fallen thing with a tire iron. It lurched to its feet, fell, lurched again. In a fit of final desperation, it turned its blades and flames onto itself in an effort to dislodge its unwanted Mexican.

"For God and Grail," Little Elvis shouted, bringing the tire iron down on one searchlight eye and another. Burned and bloody, he swung on the spinning antenna like an angry T-ball player.

And then Little Elvis—first of the grail-seekers to fall—fell.

The Reverend Sparkle Jones worked the actions on his twin Colts. He pulled himself up to full height and the wind caught his dress. He stared at the troupe, the band, the company, the grail-seekers. Then, without a word, he turned and raced after Little Elvis.

The Last Mime followed first, fixing a bayonet to his M-16.

Sister Mika shoved her Magnum into the pocket of her habit and hefted Little Elvis's discarded Remington. She set off at a brisk walk.

Aunty Ann, a machete in one hand and a 9mm Berretta in the other, caught up to her.

Timmy Gallahad stayed put. He dropped to the ground, reloaded the Winchester, and took careful aim.

The battle that followed was the bloodiest yet. They fought the battle without speaking. They fought it with tears coursing down their cheeks and teeth clenched with determined rage.

They fought it and prevailed.

And when they were finished: They buried Little Elvis Sanchez in a burned out Volkswagen just outside the smoldering remains of Denver.

#

The next morning they found a Harley shop on the other side of the burning city.

"Can you all ride?" Timmy Gallahad asked group.

"Of course," said Aunty Ann.

"A bit," said Sister Mika.

The Last Mime Le Foie snorted in a disparagingly French sort of way and rolled his eyes as if to say "Mais oui."

Sparkle Jones bit his lip.

"Reverend?"

“A little.” The Reverend looked uncomfortable. “Some.” He paused and looked down, embarrassed. “Not at all,” he said in a quiet voice. “Not even a bicycle.”

And so they found one with a side-car and Timmy Gallahad, still a year away from his driver’s license when the world fell apart, became designated driver.

Everything had changed at Denver. The death of Little Elvis punctuated the devastation of their world. Some maintain that the shock of losing friends, families, neighbors, pets and everything else finally wore off. By now the smoky haze smudging the sky had taken on a burnt-pork and wood-smoke smell as the invaders burnt the bodies in pyres by the millions in the still warm ashes of the fallen cities.

The troupe loaded up saddlebags and compartments with ammunition, food, clean socks and sleeping bags. They left the highway and avoided cities, stopping only to siphon gas out of abandoned cars when they needed it. Occasionally they saw ragged bands of survivors moving under cover. Twice, they saw tall building-like shapes moving on the horizon. At night, huddled underneath the stars without a fire, they saw searchlights sweeping the ground and the glow of large, distant fires.

They talked a bit about their losses. They talked a bit about their hopes. They curled into sleeping bags, taking turns with the watch, and slept fitfully because of their dreams.

Aunty Ann was back in the desert wearing her veil, riding her camel and thinking about her second wish—a dark eyed man accessorized with a large palace in a desert oasis.

Sister Mika re-lived that five-minute fumbling with Jimmy Lance trying to figure out Peg A, Slot B and what those Latin words in that song meant.

The Last Mime LeFoie dreamed of deep water and killing.

Timmy Gallahad drank coconut milk, ate fresh crab and played every version of doctor, spin-the-bottle, post office and truth or dare imaginable to man with a cadre of eager young women beneath a tropically brilliant sun.

The Good Reverend dreamed about the grail. How it would glitter as it tossed back the light. How it would thrum and tingle with holy power. How it would look with a pair of sensible pumps, a white leather purse and a conservative dress. And how he himself would never get the chance to see it.

But then again, he’d known that all along.

#

They crossed Kansas and Missouri without incident and finding the Mighty Mississippi’s bridges blown or barricaded, they crossed on an antique ferry somewhere between St. Louis and Memphis. The Last Mime LeFoie fired it up with practiced confidence and piloted them across while doing a drunken sailor imitation. Reverend Sparkle Jones kept his eyes closed the entire time, white knuckling the railing. No one asked and he said nothing.

They re-stocked canned food, women’s shoes and ammunition at a Buy-Mart Big Box Everything Store on the outskirts of Paducah.

The Klan Survivalists opened fire on them as they tried to leave the store. They abandoned their shopping carts and ducked back into the gloom, hiding behind empty cashier stations, racks of candy bars and end-caps full of products that had recently become irrelevant.

“We’re a-watchin’ the back, too,” the recently appointed Grand Wizard shouted. “So why don’t you

make it easy on yourselves and send out them three women you got?”

“And what happens if we do?” Reverend Sparkle shouted, yelping as Sister Mika kicked him in the ankle.

“Why...we’ll let y’all go, naturally. The world’s suddenly found itself in a shortage of White Power.”

“No. What happens to us women if we come out?” Reverend Sparkle asked.

Low voices discussed this. “Uh, *mister*—”

Sparkle Jones interrupted. “Not Mister...Reverend.”

“Reverend.”

More discussion.

“We don’t play that way, Reverend. You’ll be free to go as well.” Yet more discussion as the conservative elements of the movement expressed dissenting views. “As to your women-folk, we’ll take good care of them. They’ll live like royalty in our New Jerusalem. They’ll do their part to rebuild our pure race on this Earth once my brethren and I have eradicated these Unholy Extraterrestrial Hostiles.” The Grand Wizard paused, giving his words time to set in. “So what do you think, Reverend? The easy way or the hard way?”

“I am afraid,” Reverend Sparkle said, “that *we women-folk*, as you so quaintly put it, have both a previous engagement and a higher calling.” He loaded a fresh clip into his pistol. “So we will decline your kind invitation.” He punctuated his sentence with three rapid shots that shattered glass, spanged off asphalt and thudded into a Sparky the Vibrating Turtle ride positioned near the door.

“Get ‘em boys,” the Grand Wizard said.

The Last Mime LeFoie dropped the first Survivalist to cross the threshold. Aunty Ann took out the second (as well as a gum and rubber snake dispenser near the turtle.) Everything paused for nearly a full minute.

They heard the sound of boxes falling and metal clanging from the back of the store. The Reverend and Sister Mika re-positioned themselves, pistols drawn, and watched the shadows.

Timmy Gallahad loaded a .38 revolver he’d recently liberated from the store’s glass display case. Sparkle had told him to start small, work his way up. Apart from everyone dying, he found the New World Order simultaneously liberating and invigorating in ways no video game could ever touch.

A rack of deeply discounted women’s plus-size clothing jumped and fell accompanied by the sound of cursing. The cursing turned to screams as Sparkle put a few rounds in the stumbling redneck.

Sister Mika, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, took care of his skulking partner where he crouched in the lingerie.

“I don’t have time for this,” the Grand Wizard yelled.

“Then don’t do it,” Sparkle Jones shouted back. “It’ll go easier for you if you don’t. We’re on a job for the Lord Most High.”

History at this point becomes a bit murky. We know that the Grand Wizard Toby and his Klan Pure Whitehood Survivalist Confederacy had the stated intent of taking the grail-seeker women for their own.

Because of this, speculation abounds as to why what happened next happened at all. Most believe that more conservative elements within the short-lived movement, taking issue with the notion of an ordained cross-dressing minister consorting with mimes and nuns, exercised their democratic right to dissent. Others believe it was simply a sad, stupid mistake perpetrated (as per usual) by sad, stupid white men between the ages of sixteen and sixty.

Regardless, at that moment, something small, egg-shaped and metal landed inside the store and rolled under a candy display.

And the Last Mime LeFoie surprised them all by uttering his first words of the journey...yay, his first words of the past twenty seven years. "Grenade!"

They scrambled.

Hot metal, smoke, melted chocolate, fire, a deafening boom followed by a crystalline ringing.

They looked around at each other, waiting for their hearing to return, trying to figure out what had happened and what seemed out of place.

Sister Mika noticed first that Aunty Ann was missing.

The Last Mime also noticed and duck walked back to the cashier stations, rifle raised. Sparkle Jones followed. Outside, they heard arguing.

"—the hell you say, Jim Bob. They elected me, fair and square, and if you don't like it you get the fuck out."

"I'm not going in. Billy Joe and Ike and Larry and Paul went in and they ain't come back out."

"You threw it and I say you're going in."

When Jim Bob did poke his head around the corner of the doorway, face outlined by light from a hot Kentucky sun, it made the Last Mime's work that much easier. He didn't stop there. As if, somehow, speaking had opened up some blocked red river between his ears, he continued his duck walk to the door and poured around the corner with vengeful grace.

The others gathered around Aunty Ann, holding her hand, wiping the blood out of her eyes and off her mouth, while she whimpered and cried and asked where her legs were.

Pop. A scream, the thud of something heavy falling. Pop. Another scream. Boom—a high caliber rifle going off. Pop.

Aunty Ann's lips quivered. "Come here," she said to Timmy Gallahad.

Timmy Gallahad wept. He stepped forward, knelt, and let her clutch his hand.

"Listen." She coughed, spraying blood. "Do not despair on that Dread Day in your Hour of Need." She licked her lips, fighting for breath.

Timmy waited. She said nothing. "Yes?" he finally asked.

Aunty Ann fixed her eyes on his. "If you rub it," she said in a hoarse whisper, "he will come."

Then, as the double entendre took root in her fading mind, she blushed furiously and died.

And after the Last Mime LeFoie returned, they buried Aunty Ann of Aunty Ann's Jams and Jellies in a frozen food cabinet of the Paducah Buy-Mart Big Box Everything Store, marking the place with stuffed animals and jars of raspberry preserves that bore her smiling likeness on the labels.

When they finished, they went outside and Reverend Sparkle Jones hiked up his dress.

"These ones don't come back," Timmy Gallahad told him.

Sparkle Jones nodded. "I know that. But I'm willing to make an exception."

This time, even Sister Mika joined in.

Hobgoblins howled to the north of them when they fired up their bikes and turned towards Atlanta.

Part Three

They holed up in a farmhouse, having grief, spam and canned peaches for supper.

"I'm not doing this anymore," Timmy Gallahad said, wiping his bloodshot eyes and drinking the syrup out of the can.

"Spam's better fried but I don't think a fire is a good idea," Sparkle Jones said. His eyes were red, too.

Timmy tossed his empty can over the back of the couch. "Not the food. The quest. I'm not doing it anymore." He stood up, hefting the rifle. "Tomorrow morning, I go my own way."

"Son," the Reverend said, "I know it's hard. But it's a calling. It's *your* calling. And callings are neither easy nor easy to cast aside."

Timmy Gallahad looked at the troupe, the company, the band of grail-seekers. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and shook his head more to himself than anyone else. Sniffing, he wiped his nose with his sleeve and walked out of the house.

Sister Mika stood up. "I'll talk to him."

Sparkle Jones nodded. He pulled the lever on the lounge and the foot rest popped up. He lay back, watching the Last Mime wipe off his makeup for the night.

Jones took off his wig and scratched his scalp. "I know about you," he said with a quiet voice.

LeFoie looked up, a blank look on his face.

"I had my suspicions, of course." He nodded to the M-16. "You're awfully handy with that."

LeFoie shrugged and went back to scrubbing his face.

"You're not even really French, I'll bet," the Reverend said, more to himself. He yawned and stretched. "Special forces, I'd say."

Now the Last Mime looked up, eyes narrow. Slowly, he rolled up the sleeve of his black and white shirt, exposing his bicep and his tattoo of a cartoon frog wearing a sailor's cap and sporting an M-16. Over the top and underneath were the words *The Quick...or the Dead*.

Sparkle Jones saluted half-heartedly. "I was Army, myself. Severely hydrophobic. But all that wool in the summer was just sinful. And I found the skirts rather unflattering."

LeFoie nodded, spreading out his sleeping bag.

“I reckon,” the Reverend continued, “that you know where all of this going?”

Again, the Last Mime nodded.

“Good,” Sparkle Jones said. “That boy is the world’s last hope.” He chuckled and then repeated something he’d told the group not so long...and yet forever...ago. “The name’s a dead giveaway. So you keep him safe.”

For the third time, LeFoie nodded.

“And I’m glad you’re not French. It pleases me.”

That said, Sparkle Jones slipped into sleep.

#

“Just until Atlanta,” Timmy Gallahad said in the morning.

“Then I’ll head north and see what I can find.”

No one argued with him.

They pressed on.

Meanwhile, far above them in metal compartments filled with foul-smelling yellow clouds, otherworldly minds ran upgrades on their invasion program and the hobgoblins below twitched and jerked with sudden know-how pumped into their skullcaps from on high.

#

Outside Atlanta, when they ventured onto a highway in search of another Buy-Mart, a Crack Commando Hobgoblin Assault Force opened up on them with weapons looted from the local National Guard Armory and pillaged from fallen U.S. soldiers.

Fortunately, they were terrible shots due to a lagging satellite signal.

Still, what they lacked in quality they made up for in quantity. Bullets thudded into the ground, clipped LeFoie’s little French cap, shattered the headlight on Sister Mika’s bike and popped the left front tire of an abandoned SUV.

They swerved away and opened their throttles, putting distance between them and the invaders. They skirted the city, stopping in the suburbs to the southeast.

“Now they’ve got guns,” Sister Mika said.

“No shit,” Timmy Gallahad said.

“We’re running out of time,” Sparkle Jones added. “They’ll be driving soon.”

Timmy Gallahad kicked a rock. “Makes no sense to me. First, they come at us with nothing. Then tools, sticks, golf-clubs and those walking things. Now they’re shooting guns.”

“It’s simply economic,” the Reverend said.

“Huh? We’ve killed dozens of them. That can’t be cheap.”

“Not economic like money. Economic like the thrifty management of resources. And I don’t think we’ve killed any of them, really. I don’t think the hobgoblins are our invaders. I think they’re just puppets on electronic strings.” Sparkle Jones paused, then continued. “They’re only putting forth the effort they *need* to put forth. They’re using our own weapons against us. They’re upgrading their technology when they need to. And I’ll bet those giant walking things are recycled out of salvaged wreckage.”

“Pretty weird strategy after traversing vast reaches of space,” Timmy Gallahad said.

The Reverend offered a grim smile. “That’s why we call them alien.”

“So what now?” Sister Mika asked.

Reverend Sparkle Jones climbed into the side-car of the Harley. “We turn south. We’re not far now.”

Sister Mika and the Last Mime LeFoie climbed onto their bikes as well.

Timmy Gallahad stood alone. He kicked the ground again, watching the rocks and dust move. Then, he looked up and stared into Sparkle Jones’s eyes. “I meant it. What I said yesterday.”

“Fine,” Sparkle said. “We’ll talk about it at dinner.”

Timmy Gallahad kicked more dirt. “No. I’m leaving. Now.”

For a moment, no one spoke. Sister Mika bit her lip, looked at the Reverend and then back at Timmy. “I know it’s been a lot to handle, Timmy.”

Timmy snorted. “A lot to handle? *Tenth grade* algebra is a lot to handle. This is.... This is....” He started to cry.

Just as he did, another Crack Commando Hobgoblin Assault squad broke cover and opened fire.

“Get down!” Sister Mika shouted, throwing herself at Timmy. The two of them went down hard and lay still.

The Last Mime LeFoie dropped prone, his M-16 popping.

The Reverend climbed from the side car, tugging at his pistols. A ricochet clipped his arm, tearing the sleeve of his dress and leaving a long red gash. Blowing blond hair from his face, he raised both Colts and started squeezing rounds.

Sister Mika kept Timmy pinned. “Just stay put,” she whispered. He struggled against her, wanting into the fight, but she was strong and nearly dead weight. Finally, he gave in. He felt something warm and wet on his stomach.

“Sister?” he asked.

Her eyes were closed. They fluttered open. “Timmy?”

“Are you shot?”

She smiled a sweet smile. “Just a little.”

The Last Mime ran silently after the last of the hobgoblins. The Reverend ran screaming beside him.

Timmy lay still. “How much is just a little?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Really?”

She kissed his cheek. “No. But listen to me.”

“Yes?”

“Be a good boy and find that grail for me.”

He opened his mouth to say no, to say fuck this, I’ve watched my friends and family and planet die and I’m done now. I’m going away. I’m going someplace where I can be a kid again. But instead, he said: “Okay. I will.”

She said something he couldn’t quite understand. “Remember those words.”

“What?”

“The song that was playing when I lost my...*you* know.”

He didn’t know.

“Virginity,” she said, chuckling.

Timmy Gallahad blushed. “Your...? I thought—”

“It wasn’t that great. That’s the night I decided to become nun. Just don’t forget, down the road that you must travel.”

“Forget what?”

“Kyrie eleison,” she said. “It means Lord have mercy.”

Then Sister Mika the Singing Nun died.

#

Hobgoblins in Humvees chased them into Ft. Lauderdale. Octo-battle-tanks closed in from the north and south in an attempt to cut them off. In the last day, their aim had improved exponentially. Bullets zipped and zinged past the speeding motorcycles as they raced towards the canal and the burned out houses that lined the strip of waterfront.

“What are we looking for?” Timmy Gallahad yelled above the gunfire and roaring engines.

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

And they did. It loomed above them, a massive crystalline cathedral stretched high above the ruins, casting back bright sunlight. The bombs had spared none of its neighbors but somehow, it still stood.

“Is that it?”

Reverend Sparkle Jones twisted in his seat, fired a few rounds behind them. “Yes. She’s waiting for us there.”

“Who’s waiting?”

Sparkle Jones reloaded. The driveway, blinding white cobblestones beneath a gold archway, was coming up quickly to the left. “Turn here.”

Timmy took the corner, the bike tipping as he did. The driveway forked, one path leading to the cathedral and another to the burned out remains of an equally massive parsonage.

“I saw her on TV once,” the Reverend said. “She’s a beauty.” He pointed to the right fork, towards the remains of the parsonage. “There. That way.”

The Last Mime rooted through his satchel, pulling out one of the hand grenades he’d looted from the Kentucky Klan Survivalists. He pulled the pin with his teeth and tossed it back over his shoulder. It landed beneath the Humvee and pitched the vehicle into the air with a whomp. It exploded a second time as the gas tank caught fire.

“Down there,” Sparkle Jones shouted. He pointed at the boathouse.

Timmy cut the bike left and braked hard. It careened to a stop, burning rubber.

The Reverend Sparkle Jones leaped out of the side car and blasted the deadbolt out of the boathouse door. “Get our gear onboard, Timmy, and get the main doors open.”

LeFoie put his Harley into a low slide, the metal sparking on the cobblestones as he drew Sister Mika’s magnum and shattered the windshield of another oncoming Humvee with three well-placed shots. It tore past them, plowed into a flimsy wood railing and flipped over and into the canal, wheels spinning. The thud-thud-thud of machinery grew closer as the octo-battle-tanks drew near.

“We’ve got maybe two minutes,” the Reverend told the Last Mime.

LeFoie nodded, holstered his pistol, and ducked into the boathouse. Reverend Sparkle Jones stood watch while Timmy loaded the boat and LeFoie fired her up.

Timmy looked at the big bright words painted on the stern and bow. *God’s Deliverance*, it read.

Sparkle Jones grabbed Timmy as he rushed past with a satchel of canned food. “Take this.” He pushed the map into his hands.

“But—”

“This is how it goes, kid,” the Reverend Sparkle Jones said, pulling up his pantyhose. “I saw it in a dream. Get on board.” He drew his Colts. They gleamed in the sun like twin Excaliburs.

Reinforcements showed up. Hobgoblins spilled out of trucks, taking up positions. Large metal legs crashed into concrete down the street as mortars thumped to life. A fire blackened palm tree exploded to their left.

The Reverend Sparkle Jones looked at LeFoie. “Remember what I told you.”

LeFoie nodded.

“But—” Timmy said again.

Sparkle Jones gripped his shoulders and pushed him forcibly towards the waiting yacht. “Go save the world, Timmy Gallahad. I have work to do.”

Timmy scrambled onto the bow. The Reverend unhooked the rope and tossed it to him. LeFoie started backing the boat out into the sunlight.

The last time they saw Reverend Sparkle Jones, he was charging the hobgoblin horde, pistols blazing, belting out show-tunes at the top of his lungs, his back to the water. When the sunlight caught the highlights of his wig, he looked like an avenging angel in a conservative dress and sensible shoes.

#

They looted a dive shop before entering the Atlantic.

Timmy stood watch on the dock while the Last Mime LeFoie grabbed gear and topped off the fuel.

With the sun setting behind them, they turned south towards the grail.

#

Timmy Gallahad stretched and yawned. “Already?”

LeFoie nodded.

Timmy Gallahad sat up in the bed. It was his first bed in a while and though the rock and pitch of the yacht had been hard to get used to, he’d slept through the night.

He grabbed a can of Coke from the refrigerator on his way upstairs.

The Last Mime pointed at a small island.

“You’re sure?”

He nodded. LeFoie motioned Timmy over to a chart spread out over the small table, then unfolded the Reverend’s map. Using a grease pencil, he triangulated their position.

He tapped the position with the pencil as if to punctuate it.

“Okay,” Timmy said. “What now?”

The Last Mime climbed down from the pilothouse and stripped down. His pale skin, scarred and pocked, was nearly the color of his grease-painted face. He strapped on a knife and sat down on the gunwale to slide into the air tank and wriggle into his fins. He pulled down the mask, fitted his regulator and gave Timmy a thumb’s up.

“What do I do?” Timmy asked.

The Last Mime shrugged, then tipped over backwards.

When Timmy looked over the side all he saw were bubbles.

#

Ted’s Lady of the Lake lay on her side at a hundred feet. The Last Mime kicked down to her, gave the shipwreck a cursory inspection, and carefully entered her main cabin.

Fortunately, Mrs. Sandowsky—wife of oil tycoon Theodore Sandowsky who had actually wrecked the yacht intentionally upon hearing of her husband’s indiscretions with their pretty young Cuban dog-walker—had it engraved, making it easier to find. Ted’s Holy Grail, an oversized coffee mug really,

lay beneath a pile of broken porcelain plates in a cupboard next to the sink. LeFoie grabbed it and returned to the surface with the hope of mankind clenched tightly in one fist.

#

The Last Mime LeFoie handed the grail to Timmy and climbed into the boat.

Above them, the sky twisted and bent. Large spinning disks descended, graying the morning light.

“I don’t know what to do with it,” Timmy said.

LeFoie watched the saucers come down. Rays shot down from their bellies, hissing into the waters. One of them meandered in their direction, boiling the ocean as it came.

And Timmy remembered.

Rubbing the grail furiously he chanted Sister Mika’s song. “Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.”

The grail changed. The pewter peeled away in light. A massive, bright being took form before them.

It looked around, scratching itself and stretching. “What’s up boys?” the being asked.

“Are you a genie?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

It laughed. “Nope. My name’s Bubba. I’m an Angel of the Lord.”

“Bubba?”

Bubba nodded. “I guard that there grail now. Used to guard me a garden but I lost my job on account of some meddling kids.” He leaned in, his eyebrows catching fire from the fierceness of his eyes. “You a meddling kid?”

Timmy Gallahad took a step back. “Uh...no sir.”

The Last Mime LeFoie shook his head as well.

“Then you might should toss that grail over the side and let me get back to sleep. Took me two thousand years to find this job and I don’t mean to mess to it up.”

“Well,” Timmy said, “actually we need your help.”

“I’m not a helping angel. I’m a guarding angel.” Bubba put his hands on his hips. “There’s a difference you know.”

Timmy Gallahad frowned. “But the world’s in a bad way—”

Bubba waved him off. “I don’t guard the world. I guard the grail.”

The bow of the yacht caught fire.

“What about now?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

Bubba shook his head. “Boat sinks, grail sinks. I don’t see a problem.”

The Last Mime LeFoie grabbed up a fire extinguisher and put out the flames.

And suddenly, the heat ray cut out and a booming voice from Heaven filled the air. "GIVE US THE GRAIL," the voice said.

Everyone looked up.

"GIVE US THE GRAIL, TIMMY GALLAHAD." Above them, a saucer hovered. A small gray man with an oversized head materialized in the pilothouse. He held something like an egg-beater with a pistol grip in his hand.

LeFoie reached for his M-16 and the egg-beaters whirred to life, evaporating the World's Last Mime in a puff of yellow smoke.

"What do you want with it?" Timmy asked. A wind whipped up on the water, pitching the boat.

"SPECIES ARCHIVE SEVEN THREE OH OH FOUR TWO DATA RETRIEVAL SECTOR SIX SIX FIVE INDICATES ARTIFACT IS UNACCEPTABLE THREAT LEVEL TO OVERKEEPER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM." Static hissed. Then Reverend Sparkle Jones's voice filled the sky as well. "Go ahead, you alien bastards, do your worst to me. But once Timmy Gallahad has the grail, you'll have the Holy Combat Boot of the Lord in your extraterrestrial ass." Then a scream. Then silence. Then the booming voice. "GIVE US THE GRAIL, TIMMY GALLAHAD."

Bubba looked pissed and impatient. "Ask them what they're going to do with it."

The voice did not wait for Timmy to repeat the angel's question. "THE GRAIL MUST BE DESTROYED."

Bubba looked at Timmy Gallahad, looked back at the saucers and popped his knuckles. "Now that fella done went and said the wrong thing," he said. "Let's get 'em boys."

The little gray man flew into pieces as Bubba shot through him.

Flashes of light like meteors blazed across the sky as angels took form around the globe, blasting through the saucers like lawn darts through kleenex. It rained metal. Around the world, hobgoblins twitched, jerked and fell over.

Part of a flying saucer landing strut hit Timmy Gallahad in the head and he fell over, too, dropping the grail back into the Atlantic Ocean where presumably it still lays.

Their work finished, Bubba and the Heavenly Host went back to sleep.

#

Timmy Gallahad looked around.

A double-wide trailer sat in a clearing full of unkempt grass, yard gnomes, miniature windmills and old tires. Outbuildings and wrecked cars in various states of rust and repair surrounded the trailer. Pine trees surrounded the clearing.

Above, a hot sun blazed in a perfect sky.

Timmy climbed the creaking wooden steps onto the deck. A hand-painted toilet seat hung near the doorbell, the words *God's on His Throne...All's Right With the World* stood out on it in gold glitter.

The door opened and Little Elvis smiled out at him, waving for him to come in.

Timmy went inside.

The living room was a hodge-podge of mismatched couches surrounding an empty recliner. The Reverend Sparkle Jones, Sister Mika the Singing Nun, Aunty Ann of Aunty Ann's Jellies and Jams and the World's Last Mime LeFoie stood up as Timmy entered. All of them were dressed to the nines in clean dresses, habits, mime-gear and western wear.

Little Elvis Sanchez pushed a bottle of ice-cold Yoohoo into Timmy's hands.

For a long time, no one spoke. They just grinned at him.

Finally, Timmy Gallahad broke the silence. "So this is how it ends?" He looked around at troupe, the company, the band, taking them in one at a time. "I told you it was a stupid plan."

Somewhere in the back of the trailer a toilet flushed.

An old man with an enormous beard shuffled out. He wore purple velour track pants and a black t-shirt that rode high above his beer gut. The shirt bore a faded psychedelic butterfly and the words *Lorenz Rules!* in flaking letters.

"Sit down, sit down," the old man said, waving to the couches as he plopped down into the recliner. He looked at Timmy Gallahad. "You were saying?"

Everyone sat. Timmy Gallahad looked at the old man, then shook his head slowly.

The Reverend Sparkle Jones cleared his voice. "I guess you'd like an explanation?"

Timmy shrugged. "Is there one?"

The Reverend glanced at the old man. The old man smiled and raised his eyebrows. Sparkle Jones looked at the rest of the grail-seekers. They nodded for him to go on.

"You see, Timmy," he started, "life is full strange events, unexplainable situations, quirky people, nonsensical problems and ridiculous solutions that, on the surface, seem meaningless and random and perhaps even silly."

Timmy's face went red. "You mean like traveling across the country battling vicious alien invaders with a mime, a nun and a cross-dressing minister in order to find a Goddamn coffee mug?"

"Well," the old man said, "it seemed clever at the time."

Timmy glared.

Reverend Sparkle went on. "And beneath the surface of it all, if you look carefully for it, you'll find meaning and—"

Timmy interrupted with a snort. "And all this time," he said, "I thought it was a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

The Reverend's eyebrows shot up. "You know Shakespeare?"

Timmy Gallahad's brow furrowed. "Shakespeare? No...Macbeth 5: Deathmatch in Dunsinane. Sheesh."

Everyone rolled their eyes except the old man. He chuckled.

“So,” Reverend Sparkle Jones continued, “what I’m trying to say is that how a thing ends is not nearly as important as what it means.” He shrugged. “Life’s a journey and all that.” He looked over at the old man. “How’d I do?”

The old man gave Timmy Gallahad a long look. Then he took a long drink of his Yoohoo. “Hell if I know,” the Lord God Almighty His Own Self said, “I’ve been writing this damn thing forever and I still don’t know what it means.”

“You don’t?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

The Lord shook his head. “Nope.” He leaned forward. “But I do know how it ends,” he said.

“How does it end?” Timmy Gallahad asked.

#

It ends like this:

First, he heard lapping water and the grind of wood on stone. Second, he heard voices. Timmy Gallahad opened his eyes and stared up at a blue sky so bright it hurt. His head throbbed in time with the beating sun. Voices?

“Of course it’s a Goddamned sign, Mary Lou,” one of the voices said.

“It must be,” another said.

“You think so, Sue Ellen?”

“Look, Amy Jo, what did Sister Margaret tell us?”

A pause. “Um. ‘Don’t worry, girls, you’ll win next year if you practice really, really hard?’”

“No, you idiot. When she and Father McMurphy left us here,” Sue Ellen said.

Timmy Gallahad shifted, not sure what to do.

“Um. She said ‘Wait for God’s Deliverance?’”

“Exactly! And what does that say right there?”

“God’s Deliverance,” Amy Jo said.

“It’s a sign,” Sue Ellen said.

More voices echoed agreement.

“Of what?” Amy Jo asked in a meek voice.

Sue Ellen sighed. “Think about it, Amy Jo. We may be the last girls on earth. The Lord sent us this boat so that we can get off this Goddamned island, find us some boys, and re-populate the world.”

Timmy heard nervous giggles. He sat up and went to the gunwale. The yacht had drifted into a lagoon and caught on some rocks. A dozen cheerleaders, their St. Catherine’s cheer uniforms ripped and torn, exposing lots of suntanned curving skin, stood on the shore near the bow of *God’s Deliverance*. Slowly, first one and then the others looked up at him.

Their cheer-captain, Sue Ellen, stepped forward, her big blue eyes growing wide with wonder beneath her sun-bleached hair. "Are you the last boy on earth?" she asked, biting her lip.

The rest of the cheer-squad blushed and looked down at the sand, then looked back up at him. He took a moment to meet all of their eyes with his own and smiled reassuringly at them.

Finally, he smiled at Sue Ellen. "You know," he said, "I just might be."

And he lived happily ever after.