

CHILI CHEESE FRIES

Part II: A Talk With Croc

(or Before the Storm)

Written by Jenner Arriaga

Based on *The Golden Orb Saga*

Present.

I was in the bathroom. I looked at myself through the mirror and picked at the spaces in between my teeth with a toothpick. Due to my teeth separating again after having had braces, but not maintaining good upkeep with wearing my retainers, food was beginning to get stuck in my teeth more often than before. The teeth had parted in the middle again pushing sideways to the edges of my mouth. This understandably angered me, but my anger was becoming unfocused and growing greater than a reasonable threshold considering the subject at hand. I had to learn to calm and control myself just as my parents had taught me and my...others close to me, siblings perhaps due to my vague memory of the degree of love. It was odd how much of an effort they had put into that, but I had always just placed it as being the way parents were, overprotective because they cared. But something was off. How serious it was for them. But apart from that they were normal. As normal as grown-ups raising future grown-ups can be...

I suddenly became a bit lightheaded. What was I talking about? Or who? Anyway, I had left the door slightly ajar, and Croc used his head to be able to push the door open. I heard his footsteps and climb as he made his way to the bathroom counter on which I was leaning against. The handle of the bathroom drawers had served as a sort of primitively constructed rock wall handle group, but Croc always managed. The pieces of food that had been stuck in between my teeth fell into the sink before me. Croc settled onto the counter next to me. I felt Croc looking at me, so I looked down at him. He did not have any antagonistic intentions and was actually just watching me fondly.

“You should have never stopped wearing your retainers,” he said.

“I know. My mistake,” I said as I shook my head.

“It’s okay. You’ll be fine.”

I looked at him once again. He had obviously not come just to tell me that. “What is it, Croc?”

“What information did you receive?”

“Do you come in your capacity as a member of the Council?”

Croc tilted his head slightly and gave me a look. He wanted to make it clear that he was slightly insulted by the fact I thought that he had been using his relationship with me to gain official information for the Council.

“Come on, you know I’m not like that,” he told me. “I’ve known you ever since you were a baby.”

“Mm, I was a little older than a baby.”

“You were still just a kid. You still are one.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“I’m here to protect you guys.”

“That’s kind of why I’m here actually.”

“The Council needs to know what comes next. I have not come in that capacity, but we need to find him. Who knows what might happen to Chili. We need to make sure he’s safe.”

“I got nothing.”

“Nothing-? Don’t lie to me, Kepler.”

“I’m not. I’m expecting information before the night is over.”

“Do you trust the person?”

“If he doesn’t give me what I want, then he is gone.”

A look of worry washed over the reptile. “Gone? Like dead- What is wrong with you kid?!”

It was time to flip the script on him. “Shh, quiet down. I don’t want the Peluches to know.”

“Chicken knows. You told Chicken. So, everyone knows.”

“Then why haven’t they done their sad puppy eyes to me.”

Croc slapped my resting hand with his tail. “Why are you like this? What is wrong with you? You were never like this. You used to be so joyful even up until recently. What happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing happened.”

“I need to know about this lead. Or the Council will find ways to get the information it needs.”

“It’s so funny, isn’t it? The Council. In this little household. Why is a governing board needed within one house?”

“That’s the way we’ve organized the society because we are not allowed to go outside because it is much too dangerous out there. On that we do both agree on.”

“Yes, we do.”

“We should be out there right now looking for him!”

“Then why aren’t you?”

“We’re not human you are. You are the one that has to talk to people.”

“Come on, security guy. You’ll figure something out.”

“Why are you so calm about this?”

“I have learned not to worry too much because that can make situations worse.”

“Agreed. But the worry and urgency here is proportionate to the problem.”

“Patience is key to get what one wants.”

“It is never good to confuse patience with lack of progress.”

“It is good that we are making progress then.”

After some time passed, I found myself walking back and forth along a street lined with trees. I often pulled my phone out of my pocket awaiting a call from Eduardo. I continued to pace back and forth, and no call was coming. Movement suddenly caught my eye. A small furry creature was walking toward me. The small dog’s cute ears were perched up and it immediately stopped once it had seen me. The wary traveler stared at me, and I stared at it. I began to make my way toward the stray dog, but it sprinted away so I chased after it.

I walked into the house carrying the uncared-for puppy. Frog, sheep, shark, and food Peluches among others were eating at the dining room table. They watched me as I passed them by. I headed into the kitchen but avoided going all the way inside in case the dog had something that could spread. Others were eating at the countertop surrounding the sink made for eating within the kitchen. Whispers began to spread through the Peluche crowd as I spotted the Peluche Council, Chicken, and Wabbit looking at me. In fact, those that had been playing cards – Chicken, Hank, Wabbit, and Rocco – asked me if I had gotten any response. I shook my head.

“Who is that?” Wabbit asked sweetly about the dog that I was holding.

“I have to go to work in an hour,” I told her hastily to make it clear that I had practically no time.

The kitchen smelled of good, tasty food. My stomach growled at the scent. Crazy Joe wore a white chef hat while he handled multiple boiling pans on the stove top.

“Crazy Joe, do you know where we have the extra towels?”

“Extra towels? Why?” He looked over and saw me holding the small creature.

“A runt.”

“What?”

“That’s not a puppy. That’s a runt.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Cool beans. Where’d you find it?” Crazy Joe turned back to multitasking as he spoke to me.

“She was walking along the road.”

“Mmm. Does she have a name yet?”

“Um. Perrita. That way you guys can practice rolling your R’s.”

“Nice. The towels should be- The extra ones should be where we keep all the blankets. You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah.”

“In the closet.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“For sure.”

I exited the kitchen and moved past the dining room table into the small hallway.

“Hey, Dad!” I heard from the table.

The Peluche hopped off the table onto one of the seats. Mr. Foxe sat there so the Peluche landed on his lap. He moved from Mr. Foxe, a trustworthy and upright standing fox that had a much rounder face than that expected for a fox, toward me. The cute gray rat Peluche hopped once again onto the tile floor and made his way to my side. This was Ratatouille. My sisters... Who? Ratatouille, right. I had incorrectly assumed that Ratatouille was the name of the film’s lead character when it was actually the name of the meal that he had prepared at the end. But the name stuck, and we love Ratatouille very much. I love all the Peluches. I just haven’t had time for them lately.

Ratatouille followed me as I headed my way to the bathroom. I entered the restroom and closed the door behind me not before he had dashed in.

“Perrita,” Ratatouille said as he practiced rolling his R’s. “She looks very tiny and dirty.”

“Yeah. It seems that no one has taken care of her,” I said. “Get on the counter so that she doesn’t eat you.”

“Eat me? She seems too nice to eat me.”

Ratatouille took a look at Perrita. She was staring at him intensely and licked the outside of her mouth.

“Oh my gosh!” Ratatouille exclaimed comically and he quickly climbed onto the bathroom countertop.

I gave a short chuckle and moved closer to the shower/bathtub. Ratatouille traveled a little further on the countertop as well to continue to get a good look at Perrita. He ran past the place by the sink where Croc had settled earlier and moved to the edge closest to the dog and me. I showered the dog having difficulty getting through all the dirt and grime stuck in her fur, but the clock was ticking, and I had to go to work. I assume that it took only twenty minutes and Perrita looked like she had been taken care of her whole life. I grabbed her and wrapped the extra towel around her. I used the hair dryer in the bathroom closet to dry Perrita’s fur. Once I was done, I lifted the sides of her mouth to check her teeth.

I walked back and forth within my room. The Peluches and I shared my bedroom. They slept on my queen-sized bed, and I slept on an inflatable mattress beside it. When both were in the room there was barely any room to walk around so I had to always make sure to deflate the mattress every morning. There were no Peluches in my room at the moment since they were all either finishing up dinner or playing in the living room. They understood the rules and knew not to break anything. Perrita was with them and while this was on my mind I did not much worry for I knew that the Council would be keeping a watchful eye on her and were more than capable of taking care of her and protecting the Peluches. This was just for now while I was preparing for work...and anxiously awaiting Eduardo’s call. Maybe I should call off work and show up at his front door. But I needed money. The Orb was no longer working, and I couldn’t use it to get food

and supplies from other worlds, so I had to use regular money gained from a normal job in the real world.

When was Eduardo going to call? Who knew what my Chili was going through. He had helped raise me and now what am I doing to help him? What was wrong with me-?

Star walked into the bedroom and eyed me.

“Sup, Star,” I said with an upward nod.

“Don’t ‘sup’ me, Kepler,” he said.

I dropped my gaze. “Yes. Sorry.”

“Come with me,” the turtle said. He quickly started to move out.

He led me toward the backyard doors. I passed by the Peluches having fun and they waved at me as I passed them by. I should be spending time with them, caring and expressing my love to them but they reminded me of what I had done and only made me feel guilty. I saw Croc, Ratatouille, and Mr. Foxe seated at the sofa watching TV. The smaller Peluches played with Perrita while Octopus and Panda supervised. Wabbit spotted me.

“Hey, Daddy! When are you going to spend time with us?”

“I’m busy, bunny. I don’t have time right now.”

“Oh,” Wabbit said sadly.

“I’ll let you know,” I lied.

Wabbit nodded slowly. Pete’s head popped out from behind the sofa.

“I brought the mail, sir,” the green bird said.

“Thank you, Pete,” I said, “could you please put it on the countertop next to my stuff?”

“Of course,” he said.

Once we had reached the backyard sliding doors, Star looked up at me.

“I’m not as agile as I used to be,” he told me.

“I got ‘em,” I said.

The magnet Peluches rushed in, climbing on the wall. Jungle, Monkey, Giraffe, and Tiger looked to us with smiles on their faces. They had the ability to climb due to their strong grasps and muscles as well as the magnets they were born with inside of their hands and feet. Or at least the hands and feet that an animal would have, paws and all that. They gracefully swung and worked together to open the yard door, unlocking and opening it for us. Both Star and I thanked them for their actions. They welcomed us. Star and I walked outside.

“So, what are we doing?” I asked him.

“Whenever I get anxious or worried, whatever level that is, whether great or small, nature always calmed me. I would like to pass this knowledge down to you. See all the plants we’ve

laid out and the canopy that we've put up? It is a preemptive strike on negativity and an excuse to be outside in nature, hear the leaves rustle, and wind blow. The crickets chirp. The silence of the night sky."

"It's not night though."

"We are doing it a bit early. Grab the hose, turn it on."

"Okay."

I walked to the hose and made sure the nozzle was shut. Then I turned the knob counterclockwise. I could feel and hear the water traveling through the flexible tube and walked toward Star with it as it unspooled behind me. I crossed my fingers in my mind hoping that it would not become tangled. Star stood underneath a canopy giving shade to a square-shaped area. Underneath the area were about six bigger-than-usual vases, with a wooden barrel exterior design on them, containing various types of plants such as a small leafy green palm tree and green aloe vera.

"Water them methodically and calmly. First water the soil then sprinkle water up top."

I nodded to Star and did as he had asked. Leaves rustled. Wind blew. The sun was beginning to set. The scenery was calming but I was picking up on a scent. A poor one.

"What is that smell?"

Star immediately looked to the aloe vera and saw that one of its arms had been cut off.

"Oh, seems like somebody used one."

"Used what?"

"The aloe vera. It has healing properties."

"Stop playing."

"'Playing'. I'm not 'playing'."

I chuckled. "Ha ha!"

He smiled. I guess that he was happy that I had smiled at something.

"Kepler, we have to talk," Star said.

"Yeah. I'm all ears to you. Always. You know that."

"I...I don't know how this is going to come across. But I have to tell you like a concerned parent. I have raised you ever since you were little. I was there by your side protecting you. I have watched you grow over the years and shine brightly like a star while doing so. You still shine bright. But you've changed inside. I don't know what led to this change, but it is concerning everyone. Not just the Peluche Council. Everyone. Even the little ones are catching up on it. Wabbit is the most concerned of them all. Think if your own parent..."

Star lost his train of thought and began to collapse a little. I quickly dropped the hose and moved to him. I helped him remain standing.

“Are you okay?” I asked worriedly.

“Yeah. I don’t know what happened.”

“Are you good? Do you need water or something? We can go back inside.”

“No. I’m good. Finish watering the plants while I talk to you.”

“Understood.” I resumed what I had been doing before.

“What was I talking about?”

“That Wabbit is concerned.”

“Yes. I don’t stand over you every second of every day, but we are your family. If something is wrong, you have to let us know so we can help you correct them. If somebody is bothering you, we will deal with them in a peaceful and civil manner, you just have to let us know. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said.

I quickly got into my work uniform since it was almost time. It was a fast-food place uniform meaning dressing pants, non-slip shoes, a black shirt, and the branded company hat. I saw a blur of black and white to my right prompting me to look in that direction.

It was Wabbit.

“Hey, Dad!” she said happily.

“Hey, you!” I responded with equal enthusiasm.

“I would like to give something to you.”

“I don’t have time right now, bunny.”

“But I’ve been wanting to give you this for a while now.”

“Wabbit if I could, I would but-”

“It’ll only be five seconds.” She waddled over to me, her cute ears attentively perched on her head. She was carrying a long rectangular box with a white outer cover.

“I’ve been saving up for this,” she said with outstretched arms.

She handed me a sealed Apple Watch, an old model.

“I know that it is an old model, but it is all I could afford,” she said sweetly. “I hope you like it.”

I received the boxed smart watch and nodded my head. All the guilt of being away from her and them rushed into me. It was up to me to change.

“Thank you, Wabbit,” I told her. “Truly. I really appreciate it. I know that it seems that I haven’t had time for you guys, but it will be over soon. I promise.”

“You promise?” she said.

“I promise,” I confirmed.