

# **CHILI CHEESE FRIES**

Part I: Beginning

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Based on *The Golden Orb Saga*

### PLEASE NOTE

I have dreamed of this story ever since I was little. I write for the audience. I remember that amazing feeling after watching, reading or listening to a well-crafted and unforgettable story. I would like to provide that same feeling to people around the globe. So, relax, get comfortable, and enjoy the story. Thank you for the opportunity and I hope you return for more.

The only changes to this story from its original Kindle Vella version are the protagonist's name being changed from its placeholder to "Kepler Alfonso" and the surname of Abby being switched to "Soto".

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the world of *Chili Cheese Fries*.

**Peluches is Spanish for “stuffed animals”.**

**Peluches is also what Kepler and his sisters have called their stuffed animals ever since they were young...and even after they came to life.**

## PART I: BEGINNING

Abby Soto continued to take her test inside of economics class. She answered the final question asking for when demand was said to be inelastic. The whole class was taking the same test. All the students leaned over their desks, forearms holding down their individual tests as they wrote with their right hands. Of course, there was one kid in the crowd that had their arms opposite since they were left-handed.

The economics teacher, Ms. Leah, was busily typing on her computer, planning out the rest of the teaching and assignment schedule for the following month when she was interrupted by the ringing of her classroom phone. Ms. Leah answered the phone and had a brief exchange with the secretary. Once it was over, she set the phone back down and looked toward Abby. Ms. Leah let Abby know that she was going home. Abby instantly smiled and happily picked up her belongings. She walked out the classroom door, still with the smile on her face.

Abby walked out the front doors of Phoenix High School but saw no car waiting for her. She headed down the steps curiously, still searching with her eyes. She heard an innocent voice speak to her and looked down to find Ti-Erra, a frog Peluche that looked oddly alien to Earth. He had a soft green outer coat of fur all along his body and a red button over his heart. He looked up at Abby with a grave expression on his face.

Forced Memory Flash.

In Abby's home city, the backdrop of a grand blue sky above desert land, just past a freeway with various spots of emerging brand-new neighborhoods on the dirt, laid still until a white and blue 1961 Volkswagen Microbus traveled across the bottom of the beautiful scene and stopped at some point in between.

The back doors of the vehicle opened, and two young men held the arms of a handcuffed teenager with a dark bag over his head. They pushed their prisoner forward and helped him get down to the desert ground from the elevated vehicle. Two cars stopped behind the Volkswagen. Men and teenagers got out of the two classic vehicles. Among them were two teenagers, one with a short haircut and the other wearing a button shirt.

"Is that the kid?" the one with the short haircut, Michael, asked.

"It is," the other, Slater, confirmed.

"Emilie said to bring him to her first."

"Okay," Slater nodded.

The criminals put their prisoner inside the second vehicle of the two. They got inside the vehicles themselves. The cars started and sped away while the Volkswagen Microbus headed forward in the direction opposite them. The cars continued to accelerate forward now as a convoy, the push and pull of the pistons inside leading to the revving sound associated with classic vehicles. The sand brown desert floor flew by along with its scarce shrubbery. The

convoy headed back toward the city, toward the landmark freeway, and away from the desolate, scorching landscape.

The prisoner with the bag around his head remained quiet and unmoving inside the second car. His arms were folded behind him along with his cuffed wrists. He sat in the middle back seat of the car with two criminals sitting beside him, keeping guard. Little did they know that the driver of this second vehicle was Nolan Luna, a friend of the prisoner. He wore similar clothing to the rest of the criminals who were taking the teenager captive. The expression on Nolan's face changed to one of anticipation as he considered his best options given the situation.

The blind prisoner looked at the criminal to his right. The criminal turned to look at him while the prisoner seemed to stare at him right through the bag. The prisoner turned to his left and seemingly watched the criminal sitting on this side. He seemed to stare at this one a little longer. He then turned back to the criminal on the right just as he moved his arms forward revealing that the handcuffs were now attached to only one wrist. This was allowed due to Nolan having been one of the "criminals" holding him up while he got out of the microbus. A discreet exchange involving handcuff keys had taken place here. The prisoner seemed to look toward his wrists.

"I think you missed one," the prisoner said.

He turned to the right criminal as if he were speaking to him. The prisoner blindly elbowed the left criminal whilst hitting bullseye. The left criminal slumped in his seat.

Michael drove and Slater sat in shotgun within the first car. Michael looked at the rearview mirror and saw the prisoner attacking those that were supposed to be guarding him in the other car.

"Ay, whoa!" Michael reacted.

"What? What is it?" Slater asked as he managed to shoot a look toward the rearview mirror.

The prisoner quickly turned back to his right and deflected a punch with his forearm. He grabbed the criminal's shoulders and headbutted him twice. The prisoner finished the criminal off with one final punch. The right criminal now joined his companion. The prisoner removed the bag over his head revealing a well-built teenager with uniform teeth and a shaved head. This was Kepler Alfonso. For some reason he was bald even though these events took place before the time he shaved his head. Something was wrong here-

Kepler moved forward, climbing past the back seats, and going through the gap in between the front seats right above the storage compartment. He dropped himself into the shotgun seat.

"Okay, everything is going according to plan. Right?" the teenager asked.

"Yeah. Seems so," Nolan responded.

"Where is Octopus?" Kepler added worriedly.

“Already in the other car,” Nolan said seriously.

“Abby?”

“Server room.”

“Good.”

The two friends looked forward again and saw the first car moving back toward their side.

“Uh-oh,” Nolan said.

“Oh, dear,” Kepler dittoed.

They continued to watch.

“And we can’t speed away because...” Kepler began.

“Octopus is in the other car,” Nolan finished.

The two continued to watch the car moving to their side.

“Open the windows on my side,” Kepler said. “I need to get Otto’s attention.”

Nolan pushed down on the two buttons that lowered the windows on the right side of the vehicle. The first car had now moved to their side and was speeding down the street alongside them. Michael opened the window on his side.

Kepler led with his usual cocky and quippy self. “Hey, bro! How have you been?!” he said smiling.

“Stop playing games,” Michael said.

“Nolan here went Indiana-Jones-infiltration on your butt.”

“What game are you playing?”

From underneath the shotgun seat of the first car, blue tentacles began to come out. Octopus had heard Kepler.

“If Nolan is Indiana Jones, do you know what that makes you?” Kepler continued.

“We have the flash drive. And manpower-” Michael said.

Octopus, a blue multi-armed Peluche with a bulbous head, slithered out from underneath Slater’s seat. He jumped toward the back window on Michael’s side of the car and punched one of the two henchmen in the back of the car. With the same arm, he pushed down on the button that lowered the car window then quickly moved toward Slater and removed the flash drive from Slater’s left pocket. All the previous commotion was just to confuse the villains while also providing an alternate escape route. Octopus aimed to jump out Michael’s window but got held down by Michael.

Michael attempted to hold down the strong creature while he squirmed in an attempt to escape. “What the hell-!”

Octopus looked up at Michael.

“What is that?!” Michael screamed.

Octopus threw the flash drive into the second car with his one available arm then jumped onto Michael’s face. Michael yelled in fear. The flash drive sounded twice as it hit the middle storage compartment then the ground. Kepler leaned down to grab the flash drive and put it in his pocket. They finally had it. The first car began to steer off the road unsteadily on the brink of losing control.

“Octopus come on!” Nolan said. “Kepler get up!”

Kepler leaned back up. He saw Octopus stuck onto Michael’s face like a facehugger from *Alien*. “Otto, let’s go!” Kepler yelled.

The first car continued to veer on and off the road. Octopus jumped again but was held back by Slater and one of the henchmen in the backseats. He yelped when he was stopped but he knew what was more important.

“Go! Go! Finish the job!” he yelled to Kepler and Nolan.

“Otto!” Kepler yelled in despair. He turned to Nolan. “Bump into their side!”

Nolan hit the side of the first car repeatedly. Octopus was pulled over Michael’s lap. The Peluche attempted to hold onto the seat. Nolan hit the side of the first car again. The two henchmen in the back helped Slater pull Octopus while they audibly struggled. Nolan looked through the rearview mirror and saw the criminals in the back beginning to wake up again.

“Kepler! The guys in the back are waking up again!”

“Going,” Kepler replied. He pointed behind him to the first car. “Watch them!”

Kepler climbed into the back and the cars crashed together once more as he went through the gap between the two front seats. He punched the two criminals unconscious again while Nolan bumped into the car once more. Slater and the two henchmen held Octopus down on top of the middle storage compartment. They put their body weight on top of him pressuring him below. The henchmen finally managed to tie Octopus’ arms with zip ties.

“Hand him back, Michael!” Nolan yelled through the window.

“Give me the flash drive!” Michael barked in response.

Nolan heard Kepler gasp: “No.”

Kepler climbed back into the shotgun seat. Nolan looked over to see to what Kepler had gasped. Slater held up Octopus for Kepler to see. The bald teenager reacted to this silently.

“Hand it over,” Slater demanded.

“The flash drive,” Kepler murmured in consideration.

“Kepler, don’t do it,” Nolan said.

“But he has him.”

“Don’t do it. We are so close,” Nolan pleaded.

Kepler looked toward Slater and Octopus.

“It will end the emergence of the crime world,” Nolan reminded Kepler.

“Don’t do it!” Octopus yelled.

Kepler turned to look at Nolan while he contemplated what his next moves should be. Nolan turned to look at him too.

“We’re not going to do it,” Kepler said.

Slater pulled out his blade and aimed it threateningly at Octopus.

“Hit the brakes,” Kepler ordered.

Nolan hit the brakes of the vehicle, and the first car continued forward.

“What?!” Nolan blurted out.

“They won’t kill him. They need leverage,” Kepler said.

“What’s the new plan, then?!” Nolan exclaimed.

Kepler’s eyes raced. He looked at Nolan. “Switch me.”

The two quickly exited the vehicle in order to switch car seats.

“I need to talk to Hank,” Kepler continued.

Nolan and Kepler walked past each other. He tossed Kepler one of two white AirPods. They each put one AirPod in.

“I’ll drive. I’m going to go after them,” Kepler said. “You take the flash drive to the secure location.”

Kepler opened the car door to the driver’s seat. “Hank.”

In the blue sky, a small gray goose Peluche with an orange beak and feet flew above a vehicle.

“Yeah?” Hank replied. He listened to Kepler through his tiny earpiece.

*“Follow them and update us on where they’re headed.”*

“Already on it, dad.” Hank continued to follow the first vehicle.

Kepler floored it. He touched his finger to his ear now. “Abby, can you hear me?”

*“Copy. I can hear you.”*

“How are we doing with the duplicate?”

Abby plugged in a flash drive to a server port and held a laptop as she typed in commands. Ti-Erra floated due to his power of microgravity. He spun with a great smile on his face, enjoying the feeling of weightlessness. Then, he deactivated his power and dropped onto Abby’s shoulder to have a seat.

“It’s going according to plan,” she said. “I will create the duplicate, you have the antagonists’ only copy, and I will destroy the original one from the server to increase our leverage and bargaining power.”

*“Sounds good,”* Kepler replied.

“How’d it go?” Ti-Erra asked.

*“We have their copy, but they have Otto.”*

“They have Otto?!” both Abby and Ti-Erra exclaimed at the same time.

*“Yes, we’re going for him.”* Kepler hesitated. *“I’m going for him. With Hank. Nolan is headed back home, so we secure our ownership of a copy of the information.”*

“Okay. Well, it’s time to get to work then. Get to it.”

*“Heard. Over and out.”*

The information had finished loading on Abby’s flash drive. She was now in the process of deleting the information from the server.

The second car continued to speed across the desert.

“How are you going to convince them to give Octopus back to you?” Nolan said.

“I’m going to get myself caught again,” Kepler said.

Nolan turned to Kepler incredulously. “Wait, what?”

Kepler stopped the vehicle outside of a grocery store parking lot on the other side of the freeway. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. Be careful,” Nolan said.

Nolan exited the car and walked through the parking lot. He grabbed car keys out of his pocket and unlocked his luxury vehicle with them. He entered the car and locked the doors. Once he was about to start the car, he saw two identical twins on opposite sides of the car staring at him through the windows. The Ramirez Twins did not move.

Kepler arrived in the parking lot outside of Topgolf. He got out of the second vehicle and put the keys in his pocket after having swirled them around his index finger thrice. He walked to

the two goons that had been in the first car and saw them headed toward the opening automatic doors of Topgolf. Kepler began to jog toward them.

“Hey, guys!” Kepler called to them, smiling and enthusiastic.

The two goons turned around to see him.

“Hey! Is Emilie here?” Kepler asked smugly.

The two quickly moved to his sides and put the dark bag over his head again. The henchmen tied his wrists together using a white zip tie this time.

“Aw, man. Zip ties are not as fun,” Kepler said nonchalantly.

Kepler turned to the goon that he had elbowed in the face first. “Not as easy to get out of, wouldn’t you say?” he said in a flat tone.

The two henchmen angrily and forcefully moved him through the opening automatic doors. “Ooh, careful, careful,” Kepler cried jokingly.

And after passing from the desert heat into the cool AC air –

“Ooh, it’s nice and fresh in here,” the previous prisoner said in a light tone like that of an innocent child.

Kepler was walked into the highest floor at Topgolf. He was sat before the edge of the floor, in front of the very beyond of the tall and gigantic green-grass golf playing area. Going over the fifth-floor edge would mean nothing good. Before him, Emilie took a swing at the golf ball before her.

With the bag still over his head, Kepler said: “Hey, Tiger Woods could you-”

The second goon removed the bag from over Kepler’s head. Kepler took a moment as his eyes adjusted to the light once more. “There we go,” he smiled.

Kepler and Emilie now saw each other.

“It’s unfortunate to be in an unfortunate position,” she said.

“Saying the same thing twice doesn’t make it sound cool. And you only had Abby and Nolan. Not this many people.”

Kepler looked around and saw Emilie’s ten henchmen in addition to those two goons, Slater and Michael. Kepler nodded at Slater and Michael in a condescending acknowledgement of their presence. Emilie took another swing at a new golf ball.

“Nice swing,” Kepler said.

He continued to glance around the floor. There was nobody else on the floor with them.

“Must be costly to rent out the entire floor,” Kepler commented.

“Only a minor dent for me,” Emilie cleared up.

Kepler looked back to Emilie.

“Where is Octopus?” he asked.

“Octopus,” the villain chuckled. She continued in a normal tone: “Nobody would believe me if I told them that stuffed animals had come to life.”

Two other henchmen came in and threw a tied-up Octopus before Kepler. Octopus actively attempted to remove his constraints and could not speak due to having his mouth tied shut. Kepler angrily moved forward but was pushed back down into his seat by the two goons from the car chase.

“But Jonathan has been ringing that bell for months now and everyone called him crazy. Which makes me wonder if he is right about one more thing.” Emilie trailed off.

Emilie approached Kepler and pulled out his necklace. Seemingly attached to a golden chain were two translucent green circle construction toy pieces that had been stuck together.

“That is just two LEGO pieces stuck together,” Kepler explained.

“We shall see about that.” Emilie pulled the Golden Orb necklace off Kepler’s neck. “All this power in the palm of my hand.” She squinted in realization. “Why haven’t you used it yet?”

Kepler looked up at Emilie worriedly and feigned a smile. “No reason.”

“Does it work?”

“Yes, it does. I’mma need it back.”

Emilie smiled sinisterly. “Throw him over the edge.”

“What?! No, no.”

The two goons from the car chase pulled Kepler up from his shoulders. Kepler attempted to break free.

“Let go of me!” He turned to Emilie as they walked him to the edge. “Give it back!”

Kepler kicked the two goons away and fell, his head landed just over the edge. He looked down at the abyss of green grass many, many stories below him. He gasped and his eyes widened, and he quickly pulled back from the edge with only his legs since his arms were still tied. He turned to the two goons and picked himself up a tad oddly due to the awkwardness of having his arms where they were not supposed to be.

“Grab the animal!” Emilie barked to her henchmen.

Kepler saw Slater pick up Octopus and growled slightly. Kepler faced his two opponents ready to fight with whatever was in the way. Abby arrived at the location on her motorcycle with her backpack on. Ti-Erra moved from the backpack onto Abby’s shoulder as she ran into

Topgolf after having turned off her motorcycle. She looked around then up the steps and began to run up them. The two goons ran toward Kepler. He remained standing there to face them. Kepler dodged their two incoming swings causing them to alternate sides, now the goons were closer to the edge.

Kepler smiled. “Ha!”

The two goons removed their knives from their holsters.

“Oh,” Kepler said as his eyes widened. He decided to run away from the whole group.

“After him! Remove him from this planet!” Emilie commanded.

Kepler ran along the edge of the floor and saw Abby run onto the floor through the floor entrance doors.

“Kepler!” Abby shouted.

Kepler saw the backpack that she wore. Thinking that she had the copy on the flash drive with her, he asked: “What are you doing here?”

“Drastic times, drastic measures,” Abby replied as she unzipped the bag.

She set down the backpack and a green alligator Peluche with printed scales, Croc, came running out of it, headed toward the henchmen. “They were trying to kill you,” she said.

The henchmen removed their own knives.

“Catch!” Abby called out.

She threw Kepler his knife. He moved his right pinky finger, and the knife flew through the air, handle landing inside of Kepler’s hand. This specific fingerprint-recognizing knife was created by him, tailored to move toward his right hand as if he had telekinesis.

“What about you?” he asked while he cut the zip tie with one snap, releasing his wrists.

“I’ve got my own,” Abby said. “And also, this.”

She rested her right arm by her side on which there is a watch-sized pyro-shooter that Kepler made for her around her wrist. Kepler nodded upon seeing it.

“She has the Orb,” Kepler said.

“Time to get it back then,” Abby replied.

“Okay,” Kepler said a bit wary of the consequences.

Kepler managed to glimpse Ti-Erra enthusiastically waving at him. This prompted him to smile. “Hey,” Kepler said as he waved.

Abby, Ti-Erra, and Kepler turned toward the antagonist henchmen. Kepler double tapped the blue button in the middle of the knife, between the blade and handle. This created a net-like

blue forcefield around the blade of the knife. Abby put down two fingers on the top of the pyro-shooter and left them there for a moment to prime it. Croc continued to take down criminals jumping and climbing around like an oversized lizard while he hit them with his tail and ripped off their criminal group's outfits with his sharp teeth. Ti-Erra, who sat on Abby's shoulder, raised his two fists as if he were about to fight.

Kepler made a run for it along the edge of the floor, right beside the gaping golfing hole. Abby fired her weapon at all of those surrounding her and Ti-Erra. The ones that got hit flew backward and landed on the ground, unmoving. Croc continued to take down henchmen in the background. Five henchmen chased after Kepler now. He threw the knife at the leading henchmen, and it hit his face forcefully, bending his neck at an awkward angle, causing him to fall. Kepler fought the rest in a close-range battle. Abby fired at the henchmen that tried to separate from the mass and join the fight against Kepler. Slater handed off Octopus to Michael and the villain ran away. Croc quickly jumped onto Slater's face and took him down. Abby leveled her arm and aimed for Michael, but he was too far. She quickly fired the pyro-shooter at a line of criminals as if it were an automatic weapon. The weapon read "recharging" as she ran forward. Ti-Erra hung onto her shoulder. Kepler fought all the henchmen after him. After taking down all but two, those left attempted to push him toward the edge. Kepler counteracted with his own push then took them both down with a quick exchange.

Abby checked the shooter on her wrist again. She confirmed that it was still charging. She ran, quickly approaching Michael, and pulled her knife out but kept the blade inside. "Michael!" she yelled.

Abby struck Michael across the face with the metal handle. Then once Michael fell a bit, she struck him in the face twice again. Ti-Erra seemed a bit unsettled. Abby got down on her knee and picked Octopus up. She untied his mouth first.

"Hey, Abby," Octopus said, now calm.

"Hey, Otto," Abby greeted. "Careful now."

"Okay."

Abby flipped the blade out from the metal handle and used it to cut the zip ties which entrapped the arms of Octopus. He jumped up to hug Abby.

"Thanks," Octopus said.

"Yeah," Abby smiled.

Croc got into view as he walked toward the three. He had spit out a bit of villain outfit cloth while he had done so.

"Hey, guys. So, what now?" Croc asked.

After Kepler finished off the final henchman, he turned to look for Emilie. He saw her running for the stairs, himself being too far away to make it in time. He looked over to the edge of the floor and knew that it would be easier to meet her on her path rather than catch up to her.

He quickly and uncarefully climbed over the edge holding onto the net and swung himself for momentum. He let go of the net on a movement of forward momentum and managed to land onto the floor beneath him. He sprinted over to the floor exit leading to the stairs and he caught Emilie here. Kepler punched her in the face, knocking her out. Emilie fell to the ground and Kepler pulled the Golden Orb necklace off her neck and placed it back around his.

Kepler heard quick footsteps headed down the final steps to him. He turned to face Abby, Ti-Erra, and Octopus. The two Peluches sat on her shoulders while she continued to run down the steps.

“Let’s go! They’re waking up!” Abby urgently said.

Kepler instantly followed her.

“Where is Croc?” Kepler asked.

“In the backpack!” Abby answered.

Before they exited the building, Croc popped his head back out of the knapsack to make sure that they were not being immediately followed. Then he went back inside. Meanwhile, on the highest floor of the building, the outfitted criminals began to wake back up.

Briefly blinded by the sunlight, the four of them shielded their faces with their respective hands. They lowered their hands again once their eyes had readjusted. The friends rushed onto Abby’s motorcycle. Abby inserted the key and turned the motorcycle on, engine revving. Kepler removed the backpack from around her shoulders and placed it on his own back. Ti-Erra and Octopus moved to being on his shoulders.

Abby accelerated the motorcycle away, through the parking lot and to the exit. Here, a speeding car nearly crashed into them, but Abby’s expert maneuvering dodged the crash. A helmeted culprit on a motorcycle behind the car nearly causing the crash saw Abby as she continued down the street and took a left turn. She continued toward a pedestrian area and moved off the street. The motorcycle culprit chased after her. She continued down the concrete paved floor past bystanders that moved out of the way as she headed down. She moved past grass fields and underneath a bridge at high speeds in an attempt to lose her tail. Upon reaching the end of the bridge, she headed underneath a line of tall-standing flags, among them the flag of the state they were in.

Once across this area, she headed back onto the street where two cars dangerously redirected their steer toward her, forcing her to avoid running alongside the lake. Abby now rode on the street against the current of traffic. The cars followed her on the right side of traffic as they weaved between vehicles. The motorcycle culprit continued after her. Kepler threw his knife at the wheels of the motorcycle culprit’s ride leading to the bike launching forward, throwing the rider. The knife flew back into Kepler’s hand. On the other side of the street, one of the two cars chasing after them was accidentally clipped by another car leading to the antagonist’s car flipping. Once she was able to get on the correct side of the street, Abby moved there, and the second car moved in right beside her.

The car windows lowered, and villains began to exit through them. Kepler punched the one out the second half of the car. Octopus scrambled to the driver's window and launched himself through it. A second villain exited the second window of the car and the two pulled Kepler in.

"Aye, yo!" Kepler reacted.

Ti-Erra held on for dear life.

Kepler was dropped into the car and Ti-Erra was below him, making his zero gravity powers meaningless. Ti-Erra lost his microgravity to be able to drop before Kepler. This allowed him to move out of the way in time and he pressed up against the wall of the seat. Kepler fell in front of the seats, where feet would go, narrowly missing Ti-Erra. Kepler jumped up, electric, mercilessly taking down the two villains before they could take advantage of their high ground position. Octopus punched the villain in the passenger seat repeatedly. Kepler was done getting rid of the villains and stood back up – as much as one could inside of the vehicle. Ti-Erra raised himself back toward Kepler's shoulder by using his zero-gravity floating. To make the job quicker, Kepler grabbed Ti-Erra and placed him on his own shoulder.

"Hold on, kid," Kepler said.

"Okay," Ti-Erra replied.

Kepler climbed back out the car window and onto Abby's motorcycle. The two vehicles were quickly approaching a statue, a wall that if they were to hit there would be no scenario in which they would come out alive.

"Octopus!" Kepler and Ti-Erra both yelled in desperation.

The driver of the vehicle would rather exit the vehicle right then instead of fighting Octopus. He opened the car door, forcing Abby to move over a bit to her left, and jumped out of the vehicle. Kepler briefly looked down and watched him tumble past while Abby kept her sights forward. The car crashed into the statue and the momentum transferred to Octopus sending him flying through the windshield. Octopus crashed into the ground and almost immediately afterward a helmeted Duncan picked him up on his own motorbike and stuffed him into his hardcase backpack.

"Let me out!" Octopus yelled within the backpack though muffled.

Duncan sped away. Abby chased after him.

"Ed Rooney!" Ti-Erra pointed at Duncan in recognition.

"Give him back!" Abby growled.

"I can turn the tide of the war with him!" Duncan yelled. "I just need proof!"

"You are just trying to get rich!" Kepler said.

Duncan accelerated his motorcycle and entered through the automatic opening doors of the Chandler Fashion Center indoor mall. Abby followed in after him. The motorcycle chase continued through the food court while those eating within it reacted with much exclaim. Then,

the chase headed to a giant escalator. Duncan headed the whole way down. Abby and her team were rapidly approaching the escalator.

“Abby, don’t do it,” Kepler pleaded. “There’s another way.”

Abby continued forward.

“There has got to be another way! Abby!”

Abby steered the vehicle down the giant escalator just as Duncan had. Kepler and the Peluches’ funny facial expressions were on full display while they traversed the bumpy terrain screaming. The group continued forward, toward another escalator that Duncan was headed toward as people parted way to avoid getting run over.

“I’m going to slide the bike toward him. Prepare yourselves,” Abby said.

Kepler moved Ti-Erra to Abby’s shoulder. “Hold on, Ti-Erra!”

“Got it!” the little frog Peluche said.

Abby made the side of the motorbike hit the ground. She and Kepler slid behind the bike momentarily due to their momentum. Ti-Erra held onto Abby’s shoulder while his face dangerously passed close above the sleek white tile mall ground. The bike slammed into Duncan’s causing him to fall off. He quickly got up and ran up the escalator before him with Kepler chasing after him. Abby and Ti-Erra got back on the motorcycle and sped away to meet Kepler on the other side of the mall.

Kepler caught up to Duncan once he had entered one of the corner stores of the mall that was always located before the escalator. Here he grabbed Duncan and removed his helmet. Kepler then threw Duncan and his back landed on a shelf of clothing display. Kepler punched Duncan unconscious. He removed the backpack from his person and opened it. Octopus came out flying, ready to attack, but Kepler caught him and told him...

“It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Octopus looked at Kepler in relief. “Let’s go,” Octopus said.

“Yes, sir,” Kepler said.

Croc spoke from within the knapsack on Kepler’s back. “Hey, Octopus.”

“Hi, Croc,” Octopus declared.

Kepler, now with Octopus back on his shoulders, headed to and went through the exit of the giant store where Abby and Ti-Erra managed to arrive just in time.

“Skrrt, skrrt,” both Abby and Ti-Erra playfully sounded upon their arrival.

Kepler smiled then got on the back of the bike and they continued on.

In the blue sky, Hank looked down at the car carrying Nolan entering an exterior outlet center parking lot. “Heads up. Goons at a negotiation situation. Beware the weapons.”

Abby accelerated the motorcycle toward and into the outlet area. Kepler tapped Abby on her shoulder twice.

“You heard Hank, right?”

“Yeah,” Abby said.

“Let me go in. Alone,” Kepler said seriously. “I’ve put you and the Peluches in treacherous situations today. No more.”

“We can handle it.”

“When conducting a mission, one usually has a system in place to make sure that things run smoothly and efficiently. That is why there is a leader on every mission, and I am the one here. Listen to me...please.”

Abby nodded. “Fine.”

“Just take me close enough. You know I can talk my way out of it. Villains think I’m silver-tongued, you know.”

Abby chuckled wryly and shook her head. She turned into a small exit of which there were many around the commercial area. Kepler hopped off the vehicle and said his goodbyes to his family much to their hesitation.

Kepler now walked toward the fireplace location alone. The location laid just before the Harkins Theatre. There were sofas and metal tables with chairs surrounding the area for people visiting the outlets to be able to rest, socialize, and eat. The sofas sat on a slightly elevated platform surrounded by a gorgeous, blue-tiled water fountain with sounds of trickling water and a singular fireplace providing another calming sound, this one in the form of crackling fire.

“Hank remain afloat, keep an eye on us, please,” Kepler said.

“*Yes, sir.*”

Kepler approached Jonathan who sat on the sofa confidently. He was sprawled on it, taking up as much space as needed by him to remain comfortable. He looked up at the sky, wearing sunglasses to block out the sun. Nolan was sitting next to him, wrists handcuffed in front of him, but his mouth not taped shut. The Ramirez Twins stood to Jonathan’s sides while Jonathan’s other henchmen surrounded the area.

Kepler saw Nolan and exhaled nervously. “Nolan.”

“He has been instructed not to speak to you or else...” Jonathan made a finger pistol and pointed it at Nolan. The finger pistol went off. Kepler turned to face Jonathan.

“Hello, kid,” he said.

Jonathan looked toward Kepler. “What’s up, idiot?”

“What are the twins doing here?”

“They are here because we have common interests. The Orb. I need it to grow my company, they need it for...” Jonathan turned to the Ramirez Twins. “Personal reasons.”

“I can’t let you grow your ‘company’. It isn’t really one. You can’t possibly think that an illegal crime organization counts as a legitimate company.”

“As long as it brings in money, that’s all that matters to society, isn’t it?”

“No. You know that if you truly want it to grow.”

“I know. That’s why we’ll be following the Hernandez family playbook. Slowly legitimizing a criminal business is sure forgotten by those in power if generous donations are made to their campaigns.”

“Even that is not legitimate.”

“You’d think. Eduardo is having the time of his life. Not even you, the guy who gets to everyone, was able to take him down. This little ploy that you are undertaking with that information encoded into the flash drive will manage to take everyone down but his family.”

“You do the best with what you have. As long as the flash drive stops this emergence of a criminal culture becoming popular with kids then it is worth it.”

“As long as the kids can provide for their parents, their families, then it is an honest living.”

“Profiting off death is never an honest living.”

“Good thing that you are in a comfortable place to take that position.”

“Are you really going to turn all the kids reaching their teenage years into criminals, drug dealers, manipulators, stealers, and murderers?”

“You forget that I am a teenager myself, Kepler.”

“Jonathan-”

Jonathan stood up, towering over Kepler. He picked Nolan’s arms up which forced Kepler’s friend to stand. “We don’t have time for this. Make a deal for him. You know what I want.”

“I can’t,” Kepler said.

“Why not?”

“Its power seems to be fading. I can’t figure out why.”

“So, it doesn’t work?”

“It does. Just...”

“No reason to have him, then.” Jonathan turned to one of the twins. “Pistol, twin?”

The Ramirez Twin on the right pulled out a pistol.

“Give me time,” Kepler stated quickly.

“You know what to do,” Jonathan told the twin.

“I do,” Kepler said.

He pulled out small metal spheres from his pockets and threw them around the fireplace area. The spheres exploded seconds after hitting the ground leading to a cacophony of explosions all around, criminals and even a bit of stone dust were sent flying everywhere. Jonathan crawled out of the mess while dragging Nolan alongside him. He left his broken sunglasses behind. They ran over to Jonathan’s speedboat on the lake beside the outlet center. Kepler got up shortly after and followed them. They were so far in the distance that he could barely see them, especially considering all the debris in his eye at the moment. Kepler rubbed his eyes with his hands as he ran after them.

Jonathan carefully but forcefully guided a handcuffed Nolan onto his speedboat with one hand.

“What do you actually plan to accomplish here?!” Nolan asked.

“I will get that Orb,” Jonathan said. “Everybody called me crazy when I told them about its capabilities. Even my own brother. But I will prove them wrong and provide them the truth.”

Nolan was now on the speedboat. It was Jonathan’s turn.

“You don’t understand. It doesn’t work.”

“By the current tone of your voice and the look then on your face, I could tell that the piece of information came as a surprise to you.”

“Why are you toying with my life then if you are not going to kill me?”

Jonathan was now on the speedboat and pulled Nolan with him. He moved to the boat’s control panel. “If anyone knows how to make it work, it is not you or Abby. It is *him*.”

“You don’t understand! It could easily be weaponized!”

“That is exactly what I understand.”

Jonathan inserted the boat key and started the water vehicle. The speedboat accelerated forward.

“It is a power much too great for any one man to hold,” Nolan said.

“Then why does he have it?” Jonathan asked.

Kepler hurried to two teenagers and pushed them out of his way much to their vocal outbursts. While they were distracted by their anger, Kepler grabbed one of their jet ski keys and started the vehicle. He chased after Jonathan and Nolan. A henchman that had foot-chased after him was close by and got on the second jet ski to chase after Kepler. The henchman managed to match Kepler’s speed and got beside him. They both accelerated their vehicles to an even greater degree but still remained next to each other. The two fought a hand-to-hand battle while not taking their hands off their respective throttles. Kepler won by managing to get a hold of the henchman’s jet ski key and knocking him off the jet ski by crashing into it and pushing him over the side.

Nolan saw Kepler steadily approaching. He remained silent as to not alert Jonathan.

Jonathan looked back regardless due to the sound of the jet ski. He growled angrily and scarily. “You just can’t leave me well enough alone, can you?!”

“What more do you expect from me?” Kepler quipped.

Jonathan slowed the speedboat down and turned it off. Kepler did the same with his jet ski. He jumped onto the speedboat. The two rapidly approached each other, Jonathan’s footsteps sounding hard on the boat deck.

“Let’s finish this,” he said.

Jonathan took multiple swings at Kepler, but he somersaulted in order to dodge them. Kepler moved back toward the towering young man and methodically punched him repeatedly as he circled around him. Jonathan sent a punch toward Kepler which he blocked with his forearm but was sent hitting the boat wall behind him anyway. Jonathan picked Kepler up by his feet about to throw him overboard –

But Kepler punched him in the liver hard, decreasing his blood pressure. Jonathan fell to the ground. Kepler quickly recovered and moved over to Jonathan, fist raised, ready to punch but he saw Jonathan already unconscious. Kepler backed away, panting heavily with beads of sweat running down his head. He searched Jonathan for the handcuff keys and found them in his right pocket. Kepler found the flash drive in his pocket as well. He walked over to Nolan who had gotten himself up. Kepler unlocked and removed the handcuffs from Nolan’s person. Nolan tended to his hurt wrists when he looked at Kepler with a bit of a squint in his eye due to being across from the sun.

“How’d we do?”

Kepler smiled. “Good. Very good.”

Present.

I finally punched out of another late-night work shift. The time was midnight. I walked to a neighborhood close by with my black pants, shirt, and hat uniform on. I was alone and listened to the calming sounds of the night. **The calm.** But it wasn’t enough to drown out the sorrow and despair and anxiety and feeling of being trapped and helpless. The calming sounds were no longer doing their job and faded into a deafening silence. I felt like a suddenly appearing water level was attempting to kill me, like I was losing breath. I tried to calm myself down by staring into the distance as I thought alone beneath the stars. Then I looked up at the beautiful star-studded night sky feeling a strange calling to what laid beyond it. This was the only moment I felt safe. I felt purpose.

That was the last thing I remembered. Now I was haphazardly laying, face-down on my bed in daytime clothes, jeans and a t-shirt. The only light source in the room was coming from a lamp in the corner. I had arrived home from work. I abruptly woke up and quickly looked around, eyes darting, wondering where I was. I could not remember how I got here but recognized that it was my room at home. I immediately considered my remaining family, the Peluches...but they were nowhere to be seen.

“Guys? Bunny? Chicken? Rocco?” I called out loud.

The feelings of despair and drowning were returning. An immaculate cage of my own decisions. I made my way out of my room and found myself in a darkened hallway. I spun around and witnessed the bedroom doors around me shutting themselves. All of them except for one...my parents' bedroom door...I made my way to this one open door slowly and carefully. A severed leg slithered its way into the room. I attempted to run away but my surroundings seemed to contract and keep me in place. The hallway lights suddenly turned on. I stopped and turned toward my parents' room that seemed to be calling to me, whispering in my ear. I continued to walk toward it as the murmurs continued. The door of the dark room slowly creaked open –

And I awakened with a yelp inside my bedroom. I immediately sat up and looked to see the Peluches asleep soundly and safely on my bed. Now sure that my family was safe, I laid back on my air mattress close to their queen-sized bed as best allowed by the room. I closed my eyes and attempted to go back to sleep even with the lamp in the corner of the room turned down to its lowest level.

The following day, Chicken and I headed back home from our rendezvous point while the boiling sun shined upon us. I had told him to call Croc, but the stubborn child had gone instead. I unlocked the door of my home and set Chicken down on the ground after locking the door again behind me.

“Okay, go back to school now, okay?” I told Chicken.

“Okay,” he agreed.

I had forgotten that the Peluche Elders were on rotation to teach the younger Peluches but I would remember that later. I had too much stuff going on in my head at the moment.

“Meeting!” I yelled, loud enough to sound throughout the house.

Chicken flinched. “Geez, Logan Roy,” I heard him murmur.

Much to my surprise, the Peluche Council had already assembled - made up of the Elders - Star, Panda, Octopus, and Croc.

“Where are the rest?” I said poker-faced.

Chicken comically popped up into a seat from underneath the table. “I can join.”

I did my best to suppress that fatherly joy that my children making me smile gave me successfully. My face remained serious and unchanged. “Chicken, get out of here.”

“Aw, man. It was worth a try,” he said.

Chicken jumped off his seat and walked away as slowly as possible.

“Chicken,” I said sternly.

“Okay, I’m going,” he said disappointedly and quickly walked away.

“Wabbit would like to say hi,” Croc said. He was seated on the dining room table like all the others.

“We don’t have time for this right now. Where are they?” I said.

“Not here evidently,” Star said. He was a turtle Peluche with star symbols on his war-scarred hard shell.

“Well, clearly,” I said in a snarky tone.

“We could do without the sarcasm,” Panda said. She was a black and white Peluche who stood on her four legs.

“Where is Mr. Duck?” I asked.

“He said that he had to run some errands,” Octopus said.

“Errands-? What errands?”

“Could we proceed without the two? Would this be acceptable?” Star asked.

“Guys- team-” I seemingly couldn’t form a sentence. “Chili is missing. I do not know where he is, and I am currently conducting reconnaissance in search of him.”

“How long have you known this?” Panda asked.

“Since this morning,” I answered.

Croc turned to look at the clock on the wall beside him. “It is practically midday,” he said.

“I’m working on it.”

“We need to be working on it together,” Octopus said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it. I’ve always got it. It’s under control. I always have it under control,” I said.

“Which brings us to our next topic,” Croc said.

“Next topic?” I asked blindsided.

“We do not think that you are in a suitable state to be leading the Peluche Council. And as such we are conducting a vote of no confidence.”

“What vote of no confidence?! I bet you don’t even have the votes.”

I looked around at the Elders sitting on the table. They began to look amongst themselves, and their faces told a different story than the one I thought was written.

“No. Don’t do this,” I said, the despair seeping within me again.

“Star?” Croc said determinedly.

“As the eldest Peluche of this Council, I motion for a vote of no confidence against the head of this council, Kepler Alfonso,” the turtle said.

“What?!” I exclaimed. The air seemed to have been knocked out of me.

“Everyone in favor of this vote say ‘aye’,” Star continued.

“Aye,” Panda said.

“No. Whatever. This is not happening,” I said.

“Aye,” Croc said.

I looked over at Octopus. “Octopus,” I pleaded.

Octopus looked at me. “It’s for your own good son,” he said painfully.

I shook my head.

“Aye,” Octopus finally said.

“Well, guess what. Two members are absent so that means something, I’m sure. There should be seven votes-”

“It’s over, kid,” Star told me.

“And that was four...” I trailed off.

“The vote pool would have shrunk to six,” Croc explained, “due to Chili being unaccounted for because he’s missing.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be security guy,” I snapped back. “Why is he missing?”

“We’re sorry Kepler. Whatever you are going through-”

I interrupted Panda. “I’m not going through anything-”

“We will be by your side always,” Panda tried to console me. “We are your family-”

“I’m not going through anything! Just-!” Unable to truly tell them the full extent of what was happening, I growled in frustration and stormed off into my room.

I aggressively opened the door of my room. It slammed against the wall behind it and bounced back closing itself. Chicken, Wabbit, Rocco, and Hank, who were playing cards on my bed, immediately turned to face me.

“Daddy!” Wabbit said happily as she jumped up to hug me. I lowered myself a bit so that she would be able to reach me. “I haven’t seen you in so long,” she said. We hugged for a moment, and she placed her head in the nook between my neck and shoulder. She was only a baby. “You got a haircut,” she said. Her voice came out muffled due to her face pressing against my chest.

“Yeah,” I responded softly. I waved to the others. “Hey, guys. Where are the others?”

“They’re having a recess break outside since the Elders were with you. Mr. Foxe is watching them,” Hank said.

“Oh. Okay.”

“How’d it go?” Chicken asked me.

“Not- Not well. I was kicked out of the Peluche Council.

“What?!” they exclaimed.

“What are you going to do?” Rocco, the mischievous yet shy raccoon Peluche, asked.

“There’s got to be something you can do,” Wabbit said.

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “And there are tough times ahead that they are going to have to deal with. Chili is missing.”

“Chili?!” Wabbit cried. “Who knew about this?”

Chicken shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah! Who knew about this?” He cleared his throat then saluted me as if he had done a job well done.

I shot him a look, but an idea sprung into my mind. “Wait a minute.” I turned to find Hank thinking along with me.

“The short story,” we both said as we pointed at each other.

We moved toward my shelf, and I grabbed my published short story with plain black front and back covers. The title read *One Sunny Day: A Multiverse Story*.

“Press,” I suggested. “We could do press.”

“Get in the public eye,” Hank added.

“Tell them our situation and use the money made to fund the search.”

“I thought that we could not reveal ourselves to the public for safety reasons,” Wabbit said.

“Wait, yeah, we can’t,” I concurred. “If the world even catches a glimpse of you, they will want you for all the wrong reasons. Or am I being selfish? I don’t think so, I’m actually considering the consequences.”

“We know. We believe you,” Wabbit told me.

“Why did you publish the book if you were not even thinking about selling it?” Chicken asked.

“I wanted to hold it in my hands,” I answered him. Then I called out: “Pete.”

Pete’s head popped out from behind the doorway. “Yeah?”

“Could you get the mail?” I asked.

“Got it,” he replied. Pete disappeared.

“Thank you,” I called out after him. I turned back to those that I was speaking to. “Local news stations would be good. But results are not guaranteed, and we need immediate results. Maybe I should reach out to old friends.”

“To repair friendships?” Hank asked.

“No. For their connections,” I said. “Who was teaching today?”

“Panda,” Wabbit said.

“Panda, right. She’ll be back in shortly. Watch,” I said surely.

I made my way to the door of my room and opened it once again. The Peluche Council stood outside my door, ears having been pressed against it, and now that it was gone, they had all fallen down.

“There she is!” I exclaimed as I pointed at Panda. “Excuse me, guys.” I stepped over them as they picked themselves back up.

“Kepler, whatever you are thinking of doing, don’t do it,” Croc opined. “It’s a bad idea.”

“Noted,” I said arrogantly.

I walked away while Croc sadly watched. “Ah, kid,” I heard him say softly behind me.

As the sun shined upon us, a spaghetti western wind blew between us. Rocco, Chicken, Wabbit, and the crazy-looking purple dragon Peluche sporting a goatee, Crazy Joe, watched me. The wind continued to blow through the Peluches’ fur and Crazy Joe’s hair. I walked to the oversized tarp covering a cheap vehicle parked in my backyard.

“It’s strange. Most people with patty-flipping jobs use their money to buy a new phone, AirPods, shoes, or maybe even save up for a car,” Crazy Joe said.

I removed the oversized tarp off my undersized dirt bike that had taken much too long to make work.

“You bought the cheapest form of transportation that still was not a car,” Crazy Joe ended.

I got on the bike and pushed the ‘on’ button. Then I made sure the gas line dial was in the right position and pulled the choke up. I cranked the throttle thrice and put my foot on the kick starter. I pushed down on it multiple times and the vehicle started. I accelerated out of the open backyard gate and other Peluches closed it behind me. I turned multiple corners making my way through my neighborhood. I made it out and shifted into a higher gear as I headed to a neighboring suburb.

Moments later, I had arrived at the rendezvous point, a cul-de-sac in the neighborhood. I turned off my bike and made my way to my friend Nolan who was confidently and comfortably leaning against his dark Chevrolet Tahoe.

“Look who decided to come back from the dead.” Huh. Nolan had quipped. “And, whoa, what’s up with the haircut?”

“Hey, kid. I just need you for your connections,” I said.

“Wow. I feel so used. Like a tool,” Nolan feigned hurt, but I figured there was some truth behind that.

“Don’t take it too personally.”

“We probably should talk about it. You’ve put on weight.”

I had arrived before him and his SUV. We were now face-to-face.

“Why did you push me away, kid?” Nolan asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied.

“No, see, that is just not going to cover it.”

“Rough patch. I don’t want to talk about it yet-”

“We probably should. You’ve put on weight. You’re not coping well.”

“I need your help. I’m running out of time.”

“What are the details?” Nolan asked with some hesitation in his voice.

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. Please, work with me. Let me build your trust again.”

Nolan considered. “What do you need?”

“Your connections.”

“What, you can’t get them?”

“Not this person.”

“Who?”

“I’m thinking Eduardo.”

Nolan squinted a bit incredulously. “The crime world?”

“It is closer in distance to what I need. More chances of having had contact.”

“The smuggling underworld?”

“That is what I am thinking. That is the only way he could have been kidnapped, because no word of him is on the street.”

“You’ve done legwork?”

I nodded, hoping that my silence would make it clear that I could give him nothing more.

“Okay so what are your parameters?” he asked.

“I would be willing to exchange a bit of information, maybe do some private detective work but no missions.”

“Why not missions? Missions are fun.”

“No. No, missions. I’m out.”

“So am I but things change. I could be point man. Or you know, who has always been the best at point? Abby.”

“No,” I shook my head.

“What? You pushed yourself away from her too? All your friends?!”

“Let’s not make a big deal of this.”

“Why not?”

“Can you do it or not?”

There was a momentary beat.

“I can,” Nolan confirmed.

“Now?” I asked.

“This is urgent, huh?”

“Life or death stuff.”

“Hmm. Okay, let’s go. Can you leave your- little- uh- Keplermobile here?”

“Yeah. My pockets are incredibly deep. That’s why I flip patties,” I said as we walked closer to his car.

Past.

Some time ago, Kepler had stood on the rocks in his backyard below the pink-orange cloud-filled pre-evening sky. This Kepler had just started sporting his shaved head and was beginning to gain weight. He stared deeply at the water falling from an irrigation dripper into the soil next to a leafy green plant. The cold, unchanging expression on his face remained as seconds passed. Kepler continued to think profoundly about the consequences of the actions that he had just taken.

Present.

The Tahoe came to a halt in the middle of a non-rocky desert. One could get down on one knee and run their hand through the sand, almost as if it were from a beach. Nolan and I exited the vehicle. We turned to the roaring engine of an incoming muscle car.

“Is that him?” I asked.

“Yup,” Nolan said.

The muscle car flew past us. And began to circle around.

“He’s a big fan of *BCS*, if you couldn’t tell,” Nolan explained.

“No, yeah, I noticed,” I replied.

After two circles and having lifted a cloud of dirt, the muscle car made a purposeful drift and came to a halt. Nolan and I waved our hands before our faces in an attempt to move the falling dirt away from ourselves.

“I’mma fart a brick after this,” I stated.

The criminal Eduardo Hernandez exited the wilding muscle car with a suave and menacing stare. He turned to the two of us while we were still coughing up our lungs. Then the following conversation took place in Spanish.

“You look like a Harkonnen!” Eduardo said to me.

“That was great,” I responded sarcastically.

“Very nice,” Nolan said.

“So, for what reason have I been called?” Eduardo asked demanding.

“Well, Kepler, here, would like an inside line into the smuggling business,” Nolan said.

“Really? The famous Kepler. What turned you into a rotten apple?”

“He’s not turned. He’s really here just to-”

Eduardo shushed Nolan by pressing a finger to his own mouth. “He can speak. Right?” He turned to me. “Or does this mouthpiece speak for you?”

“Uh, no,” I answered warily.

“So, what is the proposition?”

“I would like an inside line into the packages that are going in and out of the state. Something precious of mine has been stolen.”

“I don’t think you heard the question right. What do I get in return?”

“I was told that there would be no quid pro quo.”

Eduardo chuckled. “Come on! There’s always quid pro quo. Don’t twist my ankle here, buddy.”

“I think that the correct phrase is ‘don’t twist my arm’,” Nolan chimed in.

Eduardo shot Nolan with a menacing psychopathic look.

“I’m out. And I only worked for the good guys,” I told the criminal.

Nolan interjected in an attempt to deescalate the situation. “Uh-!”

“Careful now. You are not making the deal any more unsour for yourself,” Eduardo told me, ignoring Nolan.

“These were not the terms,” I clarified.

“Then you can go elsewhere. If we haven’t bought them already.”

“What exactly would you want?”

“What do I want?”

Eduardo condescendingly grabbed my shoulders. “I want you to do what you do best. A mission.” He patted the sides of my shoulders hard thinking that it would intimidate me.

“I am not committed. One job and I’m out,” I told him.

“You are desperate, aren’t you?” he teased.

“Give me the details.”

“I’ll send them to you. We know where to find you.” He began to walk away. “As to when and where, that is for me” – he pointed at himself – “to decide.”

Eduardo got to his car and opened it up. He pointed at me, smiling. “It’s good to have you back man.”

He turned away once again, started the car, turned to give me one last smug smile, and shut the car door. Nolan and I watched as he drove away.

The last moments of my nightmare flashed before my eyes. I was back in the hallway. The door of the dark room slowly creaked open – The whispers continued to call me to my parents’ empty room – I cautiously approached the dark room and managed to stand before it for a moment as I tried to look and listen inside. Suddenly, dark rope reached out like the tentacles and tendrils of a faceless beast. They grabbed my arms as I attempted to pull away and fight back. It grabbed my legs next, knocking me to the ground. I yelled as I attempted to break free only for the appendages to pull me into the darkness.

Past.

The darkness surrounded them until the movie theatre lights glowed up upon the film ending. The lights revealed Kepler sitting next to his beloved sisters Ilsa and Alejandra. The credits to *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* played on the giant theatre screen while Kepler turned back to face his parents sitting in the row behind them. The Entity’s all-seeing eye seemingly looked at them from behind.

Kepler’s father, Pedro, shot him a thumbs up from the corner seats of the back most seat row while his mother, Andrea, took her phone out.

“Good thing there were still seats,” Pedro said almost as if it were a dad joke.

“Picture time!” Andrea said.

“Oh, no,” Alejandra said.

With the seating order from left to right being Alejandra, Kepler, then Ilsa, Alejandra quickly got out of her seat and moved to the empty reclining sofa chair next to her mom. Her father motioned to her to move next to her sister and brother with a smile on his face. Alejandra shook her head with her own slight smile.

Ilsa and Kepler got up from their seats and turned to face the camera on their mother’s phone while they held their individual selves up with the top of the seat’s back rest. They posed for the photo with smiles on their faces as they put their free arms around each other’s shoulders. This Kepler had a short, clean haircut, uniform teeth, and a lean muscle physique. This was a true flashback not the beginning’s forced memory flash that will be explored later (the events of the beginning flash drive mission truly happened but Kepler’s current image was projected onto them).

Andrea took the two siblings’ photo. A brief flash of light. Ilsa and Kepler moved from their seats to stand around their parents and sister. Pedro looked at Kepler.

“I liked the movie a lot. I think it’s the best one,” he said.

“Really?” Kepler asked. “Interesting.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I think three or six.”

“Three? What’s three?”

“The one where he jumps across the hole on the bridge,” Alejandra said.

“Oh,” Pedro said.

“The one where they blow your car up,” Ilsa said.

“Oh, yeah,” Pedro said finally remembering. He remembered the bridge battle scene from *Mission: Impossible III* where a missile hit the bridge and the explosion launched Ethan Hunt backward, sending him flying into a white Dodge Stratus. Pedro used to tell his children when they were younger that they had used his car in the scene. The kids were old enough to remember the previous vehicle. Of course, he just wanted to spark their imagination and see that look of childish wonder that every parent wants to see on their child’s face while they discovered and explored the world together. Pedro even had a photo of him in his early thirties standing in front of his white 2003 Dodge Stratus while he hugged his small and smiling children.

“My favorite is *Fallout*,” Ilsa said.

“Yeah!” Kepler agreed.

Kepler and Ilsa high-fived.

“That’s the only right answer,” Ilsa joked.

“My favorite is two,” Andrea said.

“No!” Ilsa and Kepler exclaimed playfully.

“I’m just kidding,” Andrea chuckled. “My favorite is *Rogue Nation*.”

“Which one is yours, Alejandra?” Pedro asked.

“I like *Ghost Protocol*,” she said.

“That one is a very well-paced thriller. But the perfectly paced one, I think, is *Skyfall*,” Kepler said.

“No bro, that’s not even one of them,” Ilsa teased playfully in Spanish.

Kepler smiled, taking back what he said slightly. “No, I know, but I’m talking about spy thrillers.”

“Oh, okay, then,” Ilsa continued in Spanish.

“The pacing allowed by the story, acting, cinematography, editing, and camera angles,” Kepler said. “Brilliant.”

Andrea looked around and saw the theatre room emptying out. “We should probably go,” she said.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Pedro agreed.

The three siblings led the way out of the movie theatre room with their parents following close behind, hugging each other. They headed down the stairs with lights along the outer line of the steps that allowed for an easier awareness for navigation.

Ilsa was asking the important questions. “*Skyfall* or *Casino Royale*?”

“Oof,” Kepler said. “I don’t know.”

“Why do you do this to us, Ilsa?” Alejandra asked.

“Come on, it’s a good question,” Ilsa chuckled.

They turned the corner and headed down the ramp to the exit of the room.

“They’re both really good,” Kepler said.

“I like *Skyfall*, it’s more action packed,” Alejandra said.

“I don’t know, I feel like *Casino Royale* is better. I don’t know what it is about it because they are both very well structured.”

They headed out the doors of the theatre room, underneath the digital screen sign with the *Dead Reckoning Part One* poster and film showtime. Their parents continued to follow close behind.

“The structure of *Skyfall* is not only very good but allows the movie to be very rewatchable,” Ilsa commented.

“Yeah,” Kepler agreed. “*Casino Royale* is thrilling but plays at times like a drama and then like a romance film at the end. It has an odd structure but it’s the story that makes it work.”

Ilsa nodded.

“I do wish that *Casino Royale* had that Roger Deakins cinematography,” Kepler continued. “I feel like that would make there be a clear winner. Everything matters while making a movie. Everything.”

“You’re dead now,” Alejandra told Ilsa.

“I know,” Ilsa said.

“It felt kind of weird, no? Like too forced,” Kepler said.

“Like someone needed to die?” Alejandra asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wasn’t that kind of the point though?” Ilsa said. “That the AI gets whatever it wants because it knows how to manipulate situations to get its desired outcomes.”

The family moved through the crowd and passed the alcohol bar. A stone’s throw away behind them, customers bought popcorn, sodas, and joyfully talked in line with their family and friends as they waited to watch a grand film of their choosing.

“I didn’t really feel that urgency with Esai’s character though,” Kepler said. “Like Ilsa is obviously a skilled fighter whereas Grace is not yet he didn’t take down Grace but managed to kill Ilsa. It made no sense.”

“Maybe they wanted,” Alejandra said, “to get the point across that Gabriel didn’t want to kill Grace but wanted to kill Ilsa instead.”

“It didn’t really feel like that. It felt more like Ilsa could have taken out Gabriel with her skill, so it was really risky for the Entity to put him in a situation like that,” Ilsa disagreed.

“Yup, there was no guarantee,” Kepler dittoed.

They pushed through the doors leading to the exterior of the theatre. It was a fortunately cool evening outside, and the stars shined brightly upon them. Alejandra kept the door open for her parents then joined her brother and sister soon after.

“If there ever were an Entity coming after you guys just know I would stop at nothing to protect you,” Kepler suddenly said.

Ilsa playfully teased and Alejandra joined soon after by putting her hand on Kepler’s shoulder.

“Okay, okay,” Ilsa said. “Calm down there. It’s never gonna happen.”

Alejandra smiled. “We’re going to be fine. Nobody’s going to come after us. We live peacefully.”

“I love you guys,” Kepler said, meaning every letter.

“We love you too,” Ilsa told him without skipping a beat.

“We do,” Alejandra agreed.

The cars in the parking lot became closer as they continued forward, and their parents were still joining them in their walk toward their car. Their conversation would continue as they headed to eat at a restaurant close by, seemingly just another normal family.