

THE GOLDEN ORB: PRELUDE – VOL. 1

CHAPTER NINE

Written by Jenner Arriaga

Kepler raised his bruised face to gauge the situation better. Jonathan moved before him in a stance meant to impose dominance.

“Anymore quips now?” he said.

“One more punch and I’d be drooling,” Kepler responded. He looked up at Jonathan then cleared his throat. “None more.”

“This is not your fault,” Jonathan continued. “You did not bring this upon yourself.”

A look of relief washed over Kepler’s face. *They don’t know about me and Thomas, PI.*

“But this is happening to you because of your proximity to Nolan Luna. You are friends with him. And, from what I understand, you grew up with him. You know his parents work for the Hernandez family.”

“What are you talking about?” Kepler asked.

“Come on, it’s no secret how corrupt this city is.”

“I mean about Nolan’s parents.”

Jonathan ignored him. He needed to decompress, get things off his chest. “Fascinating how corrupt the city is, huh? One of the leading candidates running for mayor is under the payroll of the Hernandez’s.”

“There is no way that is true.”

“Just because you want it to be doesn’t make it so. My family will be taking over this candidate. You need to make us a way in.”

“No way I would do that.”

“We’ve been watching you, Kepler.”

Kepler mouth became slightly agape.

Jonathan continued: “We know what you love most and all that jazz. Your mother... Your father... Your sisters...”

Kepler shook vehemently in his seat. “You leave them alone!”

“Shh, shh, shh,” Jonathan said with powerful calm. “Work with me and they won’t be harmed.”

“I won’t let you hurt Nolan’s family either.”

“Who said anything about hurting them? We will just be pointing them in the right direction. We’ll probably do a better job than Governor Redford. But if you fail to do what I ask, then your family will receive the consequences.”

“I will mess you up.”

“You don’t have the manpower. And something else... I hear you have live stuffed animals. Sentient beings.”

Kepler shook his head in denial. “No.”

“As far-fetched as it may seem, the world can do something with that. It seems you care for ‘em now. You are their very own pop-pop.” Jonathan turned to his employees. “Search the house.”

Marc and Mr. Isaac headed toward the home. Kepler did not react in any way that would give away his position as being real.

“We took a bet that they weren’t telling the truth. Saw wrong,” Jonathan said. “A mirage.”

Kepler tensed. Mr. Isaac and Marc entered the home again through way of the sliding doors. Upon entering the doors, they removed hidden guns tucked underneath the back of their shirts. Some of the tinier stuffed animal Peluches hid underneath the living room sofas in their childish innocence as the humans’ large feet loomed dangerously in the background. They nervously watched the Barden henchmen’s feet as they made their way through the living room.

Chicken, Wabbit, a small tabby cat that moved like a spider - Spider-Cat, and a cool brown and white cat - Gato hurried through the hallway, slipping on the winter cold tile. They passed by a hallway closet where Peluches were closing the door as they planned to hide inside. One of the Peluches, a red octopus, motioned for Chicken and his crew to hide inside with them.

“Come inside!” Captain Fitz said.

They heard the walking footsteps step into a run when the Barden henchmen moved forward into a location where the closet hallway would become in their view. Captain Fitz and Chicken both turned and saw this.

“Save yourself!” Chicken said.

Up ahead, the cute, upright-standing child elephant Jake ran into the dark bathroom with a group of Peluches. Jake motioned to Gato to follow them.

“Gato!”

Since the bathroom entrance was up ahead, Gato and those with her would be able to make it. Chicken and Gato picked up Wabbit and Spider-Cat, Chicken with his hand-wings and Gato with her back and altogether stumbled into the darkness of the restroom. Jake hung out the door of one of the cupboards beneath the sinks as he helped them unto the slightly elevated platform of the cupboard interior. Chicken, Gato, Spider-Cat, and Wabbit all rushed into the cupboard one after the other then Jake shut the cupboard door. Marc and Mr. Isaac maintained their upheld pistols as they traveled through the hallway now, getting ever closer to finding the truth about the Peluches. They approached a position where Kepler’s bedroom will be to their right.

Hank – a little gray goose with orange webbed feet, Croc - a medium-sized green alligator with his belly to the ground, Bear, and Leonidas- a maned lion- rushed to the corner of the bedroom where other Peluches were piled on top of a dark black sofa. Croc slithered to the cramped area behind the sofa. Hank flew to the top of the pile and laid unmoving. Bear and Leonidas sat on either arms of the chair, taking up much space due to how large and tall they were.

Mr. Isaac and Marc entered the room, pistols raised and beginning to lower due to no motion being detected by them. They stopped right before the tower of stuffed animals on the single-seat couch and completed the lowering of their weapons. Marc and Mr. Isaac turned to look at each other.

“I don’t see anything,” Marc expressed.

“No movement,” Mr. Isaac concurred.

Leonidas and Bear turned to each other ever so slightly – in a manner imperceptible - to see if they agreed on the best steps forward. And they did.

Kepler breathed nervously while Jonathan continued to stand before him. He saw the changes in expression of Jonathan’s face. Jonathan turned to the house. *What is going on in there?*

“How are they doing over there?” Kepler said aloud almost as if he had been reading Jonathan’s mind.

Jonathan’s face became stern and dangerously quiet. He moved to face Kepler once again.

The stuffed animals of large creatures roared and cried out as they launched themselves at Marc and Mr. Isaac most resembling the carnivorous animals from which they were modeled.

Bear clawed the pistols away from them in one swift motion. The English teacher and the young man yelled in fear and ran for their lives, headed back toward the backyard.

Jonathan and Kepler heard the roars from inside the house diminished in volume by their passage through the house walls. Jonathan turned toward them, pensive and uncertain about what might happen next. Kepler heard crunching footsteps upon fallen winter leaves in the neighboring backyard -- there were people outside. He looked back at Jonathan, just the criminal's back, while he thought. Jonathan heard the crunching of the leaves as well. He immediately spun to Kepler.

"Don't even think it," the heir to the crime family throne said.

"Help-!" Kepler began.

Jonathan kicked Kepler into the pool with the bottom of his foot and the seventh grader yelled on the way down. Kepler, hands and feet still tied to the chair, sank to the bottom. He attempted to hold his breath while the natural timer of his oxygen began to run. Marc and Mr. Isaac ran through the house, past the living room, and back into the backyard. They sprinted toward the backyard walls while the forest and grassland beasts continued to growl toward them, their pointed, hungry teeth visible.

Jonathan saw his workers being chased by what seemed like fur-covered carnivores. He could not believe his eyes. "What the hell...?"

Croc crawled between the henchmen's legs and made his way past Jonathan, biting at his right leg tendon before he majestically dove into the swimming pool from the backyard floor. Croc broke the surface, snout first.

Jonathan fell unto his right knee. Mr. Isaac and Marc ran past him. From where Jonathan had fallen, he faced the Bear and Lion hungrily running toward him and his criminal workers and snarling at them angrily. The criminal son reacted, fearing for his life.

"Aah! Oh, shi-!" Jonathan attempted to walk away, scrambling with his one useful leg. "Help me!!" he wailed to his workers.

Jonathan's attempt to scramble away had left him turned toward Marc. Marc grabbed Jonathan by his closest arm and shoulder and pulled him up. They quickly faced the direction of the wall -- their salvation. The only thing they saw of the English teacher were his legs as he finished the climb over the wall and fell hard upon the compact dirt on the other side.

Croc cut through the water like a blade through butter as he rapidly approached Kepler. The teenager's vein was visible through his forehead as he was nearly out of air... The aquatic Peluche bit the binds off Kepler's ankles to the chair legs and hands to the backrest. The zip-ties snapped away. Kepler's survival instinct kicked in and he immediately darted toward the pool surface. Croc watched him swim away and now, with the mission being done, calmly swam to the surface.

Jonathan and Marc managed to climb the backyard wall before the snarling predators reached them. The two of them also fell hard on the other side of the wall, especially Jonathan who damaged his hurt leg's ankle even more. They followed Mr. Isaac who was sprinting for his life, far out, almost to the end of the neighborhood suburb street, and approaching the main road.

Kepler broke the surface of water, breathing heavily as he held on to the edge of the backyard pool. He saw all the Peluches have exited the home and were approaching him with looks of concern. Kepler continued to gasp for air, reaching for a consistent and normal pace of breath. He became tense as the events that would now unfold were moved into an unknown territory manipulated by those governed by vice.

"Now they know you live."

In the Soto household, Abby and Thomas were watching television together on their couch. The evening news played with the newscaster currently speaking.

"Authorities are asking that the public be wary at night hours after discovering that multiple homicides may be tied to the same killer. News of this serial killer are still new and emerging..."

Thomas turned to Abby. "We are going to have to take Kepler home after school now. He shouldn't be walking about."

"Yeah," his sister agreed.