

CHILI CHEESE FRIES

Part IV: The Storm Arrives

Written by Jenner Arriaga

Based on *The Golden Orb Saga*

Present.

I arrived home after getting out of my Uber at midnight. I had taken off my oily fast-food place uniform and hung it on the wall in the garage. I made my way inside the house in only my underwear and went into the pantry. The house was silent and dark for the Peluches were asleep in the depth of the night. Inside the pantry, I grabbed an unopened grocery store cheese Danish and sat at the kitchen countertop surrounding the sink. I plopped onto the tall chair and slouched my slightly overweight body to reach the pastry. I had done this many nights before for the past two months. I continued to calmly eat the pastry with a fork and knife.

I made my way to the hallway after exiting the shower standing wet in my towel. I considered going to sleep next to the Peluches as I always had but decided differently. After entering my bedroom and grabbing my clothes, I made my way to my parents' closed room. I approached the shut door and opened up the bedroom. I turned the lights on then looked around the room seeing it just as my parents had left it. Where my parents were, I did not know and how they had gotten there did not concern me either. For whatever reason, my past self had decided that it was best not to remember, and it was probably the right choice. I trust myself. Even though I don't remember.

I changed out of the towel and into my clothes. I went to the bathroom in which I had showered to brush my teeth and went back to my parents' room. I faced my back toward their bed and let myself drop backward, landing on their big bed.

This had been their room. I wonder why I would make myself forget. Were they dead? I don't know. I hope not. I can't even remember the past. Well, I can, just not the parts involving my parents or my sisters which should make up the vast part of a young person's memories. I do remember the Peluches though. But not when they were around my parents. It was all very strange and hard to describe but it felt almost like a dream. A fleeting dream. But the memories of the feeling I felt when around my family remained. And when I feel those feelings, I desire for them to come back...but I quickly squash those feelings trusting my past self more than my current self. I don't think the Peluches remember my parents either since they haven't mentioned them. I do remember Abby and Nolan though. Interesting, always when I go down this train of thought it is cut short by a forgetful wave. It hasn't hit yet-

My thoughts were cut short by the vibrating buzz coming from the nightstand. I rolled over to it and grabbed my phone. I had received a text reading "Change of pickup location." Followed by "Meet me at ..." The three dots suggesting an incoming message appeared below the latest text. After reading the final text, I went to sleep knowing that I would find Chili soon. And if I didn't through these channels, I would burn the city down looking for him.

I peeked my head through the doorway of my bedroom during the daytime of the following day. Here I found exactly who I was looking for. Chicken was crazily typing into his laptop as if it were a ticking time clock that would burst confetti that he would detest going through the process of picking up. It was a random thing that only Chicken would think of. Sorry, I was trying to get into character, think like him. I should probably start worrying more about them.

"Yo, Chicken."

Chicken popped his head out from behind the laptop screen. “Yeah, what?” he said, caught off-guard.

“I need a cool, slick suitcase,” I told him. “Could you get me one?”

“Yeah, I got you.” Then he took a moment. “Wait, I don’t know how much money is in the piggy bank.”

But I was already gone. The last thing I heard was him saying something to the effect of “Um. Okay. I’ll figure it out, I guess.”

The night of the day, I had made my way and entered a palace-looking building holding a luxurious fundraiser party. I did not know of any two more contradictory words being put together but there they were. I wore the typical formal clothing for these types of events – a dark suit and tie. I wore the Apple watch that Wabbit had given me and used it for the QR code identifying me to the guards surrounding the palace. I was allowed to enter inside.

The “fundraising event” continued to take place around me as music sounded and people danced and drank wine among other sorts of beverages of the like. A lot of socializing. I never understood how a person could find another so interesting. Especially the type of people that only use you for their own personal gain. I pulled out the case that was pressed between my back and the back of the formal suit I was wearing. The *Thomas the Train* toy-train carrying case would look out of place to anyone who looked in my direction. Thankfully, nobody was. Why I had asked the wackiest Peluche to get me a formal suitcase was beyond me. Now I understood what my dad was talking about...

I looked around to see if I would catch a glimpse of the person I was meant to rendezvous with. After searching with no results, I walked to the open bar. The bartender saw me as I had been approaching and had become increasingly wary of what situation might occur, remember what he had observed was a teenager approaching an open bar. Obviously, he could not read, or maybe even begin to register, the *Thomas the Train* carrying case. Once I made it to the bar, I set my “suitcase” atop it.

“Hello, I am here to meet Nico. Would you happen to know where he is?”

“No,” he said, “but I could ask around.”

“Thank you,” I told him, “I would greatly appreciate it.”

As I watched him walk off a teenager approached me. They stopped beside me.

“I don’t think that you are of drinking age yet,” said a familiar voice.

I turned as I said: “No, I wouldn’t be drinking anyway-” I realized who it was before I finished turning my head to face them.

“Abby,” I said.

“Hey,” she said.

“What are you doing here?”

“I should be asking you the same. Why’d you shave your head?”

I sucked my teeth to signal a faint hurt of my pride.

Abby pointed at my teeth. “Your teeth! They were perfect!”

“I stopped wearing my retainers.”

“Your acne is coming back. I think you have bumps on your head. Are you cleaning the razor properly?”

“You notice everything!”

There was a moment of silence as the two of us looked forward again. To show that she had also noticed my gaining of weight, Abby pushed two fingers into my stomach to bother me. She was like my sister Alejandra bothering me for no reason. Wait, I remembered my sister’s name-! I winced then turned to Abby. She had a defiant and mischievous expression on her face. Abby punched me on my shoulder. So, I punched her on hers, only harder than she had punched me. She lunged at me attempting to put me in a headlock. I maneuvered my way around and but her in one instead. Somehow, she quickly put me in an equally unfortunate position. We fought like siblings and even argued while fighting.

“You are so childish,” Abby said angrily.

“No, you.”

“Stop it.”

“No, you,” I said again just to bother her even more.

Abby grabbed my nose and held it shut.

“Stop it!” I said.

“Shouldn’t have been born with this Romano nose.”

We finally stopped fighting and tried to fix ourselves to look the part of elegance in uniform with our surroundings again.

“You are so unprofessional,” I said to continue digging at her.

“You started it. Everybody is probably looking at us right now,” she quickly said back.

I shrugged her comment off. “Nobody gives a care. Look around. It’s normal for them.”

Abby gave the room a quick glance. The party continued. No one cared.

“See?”

“Seriously, what are you doing here?”

I grabbed my *Thomas the Train* toy case from the bar counter. “I’m here to pick up a package for a mission.”

“A mission?”

“I’m not back in, just doing this once.”

“Kepler-”

“Don’t scold me-”

“Kid, listen to me.” She took a beat. “I’m here to deliver a package.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to do but look at her. “I thought you were out.”

“I thought the same about you.”

“So, you’re back in?”

“No, they said simple hand over during lunch at school. Nico sent me.”

“Nico? He’s the guy who had leaked your position as revenge for you giving out the information on him.”

“Oh, that was him? See that would have been nice to know but you had to do your usual protect-Abby-and-Nolan crap before we separated.”

“Are you doing a voice? I feel like you’re doing a voice.”

“Of course, I’m doing a voice! Do you not hear my intonations?”

“Your what?”

“*Intonations.*”

I started laughing.

Abby raised a finger at me. “Kid, you better stop laughing or I’mma slap you.”

“Sorry,” I said and cleared my throat to stop laughing. Once my giggles started, they did not stop, and she was *not* playing. My face did not deserve to pay the price. “Things have not been going according to plan.”

“Kepler look around. And not like in second grade, ‘Look, Alice is looking at you’ and you do your stupid oaf,” she deepened her voice to mimic mine, “‘*What?*’”, then she returned to her own, “and turn your whole body to look at her.”

I turned to look around glancing around at the party discreetly, joining her.

“I’m sorry, my emotions got the best of me.”

“For sure. They did.”

The two continued to spot the onlookers.

“Did you ever meet this girl named Melanie?”

“Melanie?”

“Never mind.”

“You see them, right?”

“I do.”

“Looks like Eduardo’s rival group. Do you think Nico is trying to weed him out?”

“I’m not sure yet. You have the package, right?”

“Yes.”

“I think it’s time to go.”

“I think so too.”

“Shall we?”

Abby offered me her bent elbow. I accepted and we moved away from the counter, toward the exit after I had grabbed my *Thomas the Train* carrying case.

“They are following us,” Abby said.

“Just keep swimming, just keep swimming, just keep swimming, swimming, swimming,” I quoted to her but also to sooth me, it had been a while since I had done this. I had stayed out of trouble to keep the Peluches out of danger, so this was making me increasingly nervous.

“Gadgets ready?”

“Um...I don’t have any.”

Abby shot me an incredulous look.

“I’d parted from all of that.”

“And yet here we are.”

“I will make sure to keep Nolan away.”

She developed a furrowed brow. “He’s involved in this?”

I gave a nervous and sing-songy: “Umm...”

The two of us looked forward just in time to see an onlooker incoming.

“No killing, Abby.”

“Mm.”

She’d think that if we’d been set up by organized crime, bloodshed was inevitable, so I was made nervous by her unspecific answer.

“Abby,” I said seriously.

“What?”

The sleek shriek of a blade had cut through the air aiming for me. Abby took a step back. I dropped the “suitcase”. I grabbed the antagonist’s arm in midair and disarmed him from his blade by providing counteracting hand motions on the top and bottom of the antagonist’s armed digits. The knife clattered to the ground. I punched this antagonist one hard on the head then twice on the torso in rapid succession. Then, I kicked him hard on the side of his knee with the

pointed tip of my dressing shoe. Antagonist one collapsed as another approached, also bladed, and I dodged the two swings by ducking twice.

Abby picked up the “suitcase”. She quickly moved toward the bar and picked up an empty beer bottle that had been left on the countertop.

I held antagonist two’s arm and trapped his head in a lock. I forced antagonist two toward a protective barrier separating the slightly raised section of the ballroom from the lower one. Antagonist two pushed against this barrier with his foot forcing me backward toward an incoming antagonist one. I pulled myself off the ground and used my weight to force antagonist two to the ground in a somersault fashion. As we fell, antagonist two attempted to stab my face, and the dodged blade vibrated a sound as it became stuck on the ground right beside my own eye. I quickly got up and kicked the knife, sending it into the side of the bar.

“Heads up,” Abby said.

Abby threw the glass bottle at me. I caught it then moved swiftly to smash it against antagonist one’s face. This pushed him over the separation barrier. Antagonist one fell below and onto a table, breaking it. Patrons within the fundraiser exclaimed as screams began to erupt. Antagonist two and I exchanged quick blows. I managed a hard blow to the antagonist’s chin, sending him to the ground.

Abby rejoined me and handed the suitcase back. We walked down a few steps. Abby preemptively attacked antagonist three. She bent his hand backwards, forcing him to drop the knife, forced his arm behind him, and hit the side of his head with the bottom handle of his own knife.

Antagonist four ran at them but I kicked him into a chair. Antagonist five decided to join in as well. Abby and I fought the two separately, exchanging various maneuvers. Eventually, Abby pulled me back by my shoulder and the two antagonists stabbed and sliced each other. I reacted to the accidental stabbing with a wince as Abby pulled me away by grabbing my suit’s tie.

“Let’s go, kid,” she said. “They’re criminals.”

I watched in horror. “But this city used to be good,” I said.

“We don’t have time to reminisce,” Abby continued. “Let’s go.”

We left the ballroom just as I managed to glimpse antagonist five get back up. He watched antagonist four bleed out from his guts. Antagonist five removed the knife from his shoulder and headed toward Abby and me.