

# **CHILI CHEESE FRIES**

Part III: Melanie

Written by Jenner Arriaga

Based on *The Golden Orb Saga*

Past.

There had been nothing especially impressive about Kepler's day at work. It would only be two months before the loop would begin again. He had done many despicable acts and kept them all to himself, a coward. Kepler found himself mixing different types of lettuce together. He hated his job, but it was his fault that the Orb had stopped working. If only he had prepared, planned, spoken, and taken care of things while there had still been time.

There he was, the self-considered brilliant teenager. A group of coworkers walked within his current general area at the back of the store. They all went to the same high school except for Kepler. They knew him and he knew them for they had worked together for a little over two months. Kepler had chosen to get along with them sufficiently enough that a peaceful and somewhat efficient work environment would be maintained. He claimed to not like people, and while he could manage not speaking to a single soul for many years, the notion that he did not care about people or spend time with them was absolutely ridiculous. But he knew that humans only escalated situations at a higher pace than one would expect. And that they were unexpectedly heartless. And that if you gave them a chance, all they would do is fail you.

The group of coworkers moved along. They were laughing but Kepler did not know for what reason. But it did not matter because there she was. The girl that Kepler loved. Melanie. Kepler avoided looking at her at all costs. He knew that once the ball would start to get rolling there was no going back. He never feared being in a relationship but felt deep inside that it would probably be best not to get involved. There was always something. All he had to do was lay low and wait for this thing with his parents to be over. He hadn't seen his mom, dad, or sisters in over four years. They had been taken by a mysterious force from within the realms of the worlds of the Orb and Kepler was too cowardly to face them. His grandfather had told him and his sisters the legends of this realm and Kepler knew that he could not go against them alone.

Kepler had tried to discover more about these figures of legend by entering the worlds of the Orb only to find push back and rising danger. The Peluches lives had even been put at risk despite Kepler's best intentions. He left the multiverse, returned to his Earth, and used the Golden Orb for a despicable and immoral act before it failed to continue working. Kepler assumed that he had used too much of the artifact's power rendering it unusable. In order to ensure that nothing bad could happen to his family, before he had left Earth for the multiverse, Kepler had forced the Orb to put time into a loop. This way whoever the villains were, they could not possibly harm those that he loved before there would remain nothing of them before Kepler could save them. But time is unwavering and unkind. The Orb was so incredibly powerful that it could manipulate time for a while but never control it. Time budged against the powers of the Orb and all the worlds, Kepler's Earth and those within the Orb's multiverse, became stuck in a six-month time loop. Kepler had lived through this loop eight times over. He was no longer a teenager. He was twenty years of age although earthly documents read sixteen. Melanie was a year older than Kepler's documents said he was, but Kepler knew the truth and knew better. He could not be with Melanie for she was not yet an adult.

"Hello, Kepler," the loudest members of the group said.

Kepler turned around to look at them. And that's all he did, just look at them. No response, nothing. *Is this the right method*, he thought, *the right way to go about this?*

All the boy managed to do was feign a look of confusion and weakly raise his arm for a slight wave.

“We just wanted to come say hi to you,” said the coworker who had come up with the greeting idea.

“Oh,” Kepler gave. *That’s it? Nothing more? Should I give more?* Kepler began to panic inside but let not one shred of that present itself on his exterior.

“Kepler, how old are you?” Melanie asked.

“I’m thirty-one,” Kepler said stupidly.

He was able to come up with quippy comments and replies as he always had been able to before. But whenever he was around her everything just came out awkward because he felt that he was doing something wrong. If only he could tell her. He wanted to with every fiber of his being.

Melanie shot him a look knowing this not to be true. “Fine,” she said.

Kepler was no longer in shape. He was just skinny and did not have his previous lean muscle physique. It was in the next couple of months that he would gain weight and learn how easy it would be to do this. He had also not shaved his head yet, not that it mattered because everyone at work saw each other with their work hats on.

“Well, that’s Kepler for you,” the loudest greeting coworker had said. “Only he can come up with a Keplerous comment like that.”

To make matters worse, Kepler had given a thumbs up to that final comment. The four coworkers moved along to get done what they had come to the back of the store to do in the first place. The kitchen lead, Anna, moved into the back of the store.

“Okay, Kepler, how are we doing?” she said as she quickly moved in and around Kepler’s area.

“Um,” he said with no ego, “still working.”

“Okay, let’s move because we have to get to work. We have less than an hour,” Anna said. “And we have those two guys coming. Come on, let’s finish these preparations.”

It was time to prepare the food that would be used by tomorrow’s crew. Of course, the one day that Kepler worked in the daytime was the day that set off the chain reaction that led to his present. The two teenagers that Anna had been referring to had arrived. There was Samuel and Alan. Kepler had seen Alan try to catch Melanie’s eye. Alan planned to quit the fast-food job and commit to low-level criminal activity for cash. He was too stupid and Melanie too cool for it to pass. Or so Kepler thought but would be proven wrong given time.

But the time to deal with Alan would come another day.

Today was the day Samuel was going to screw everything up.

Anna told Alan to head back to the front of the store to help out in a certain area. Alan told her that he did not know where it was located. The kitchen lead told Kepler to show him

there while she continued with the preparations. Alan made some stupid comments along the way to which Kepler faked laughter. Kepler pointed to the area that Anna was referring to and Alan chuckled idiotically as he said that he had been told where it was and was only now remembering. Kepler nodded his head and walked away before he could get any more disturbed.

He froze upon seeing who stood in front of him. Melanie remained.

“Hey, Melanie.”

“Hi.” She moved to push the front of his cap down over his eyes, a move that he had done to her many times before. Kepler smiled and reciprocated the move then mistakenly walked away without any further comment.

Kepler arrived beside Anna once again only to find her having to repeat orders to Samuel multiple times because he wanted to go home without completing instructions. After some time, Anna returned to the busy kitchen joining all the other workers that had remained there, among them the restaurant district manager. Samuel continued to scrub the walk-in freezer failing to make sure that he moved all the water out before it would freeze. While Kepler continued preparations, he noticed Samuel walking in and out of the walk-in freezer. He remember-realized that that the freezer had two doors, one leading to the back of the store and the other leading to the kitchen in the front. The kid had a look on his face, one that Kepler could deduce the meaning behind. Then, Kepler managed to see Melanie and Samuel walk into the back of the store through the freezer doors. The two hid behind racks of hamburger bread as they spoke while standing inches away from each other.

Kepler’s face fell. But he recognized that it had been his choice not to pursue a relationship with her while he was still a teenager. If she were even interested. *Who knows?* But Kepler could not deny his feelings. She was a perfect person. Much to Kepler’s dismay, the preparation was over, and he had to grab rags soaked within sanitizer in buckets under the countertop only to find that there were none left. He had to go to the clean rag basket which coincidentally sat comfortably behind the two teenagers talking at close range behind the bread racks.

Kepler moved past the bread racks right beside Melanie and Samuel. He reached into the bucket for a clean rag but could see the love of his life speaking with somebody which he had seen nothing good about. The moment almost seemed to freeze in time. *Now would be the time to say something. Say something to her. Anything. She means the world to you, and you are a writer. It is unfathomable that you could possibly mess this up.* Kepler paused his think for a moment. *But they are just kids. I am not anymore. I do not have the right to meddle in their affairs even if she deserves better than him...And me. I would only unfairly put a target on her back from villains that I have never met before.* Kepler cowardly averted his eyes and did not say a word to Melanie.

After grabbing several rags, he walked back to where he had been and wiped the surface down. There was only one more preparation to make. Kepler hid his gaze to make it unnoticeable that he saw Melanie and Samuel make their way out the back swinging doors into the short hallway of the lobby where the bathrooms were located. The perfect hiding place hidden from almost every angle, from the lobby to the back of the store. Kepler knew that he had failed. The moment for action had gone and passed. The time was over.

Again.

The four coworkers returned now with a fifth one. “Where is Melanie?” the fifth coworker asked Kepler.

“Um,” he managed and pointed to the back swinging doors.

“Ohh,” the fifth coworker said excitedly. “And Melanie just turned seventeen.”

“Really?” gasped one of the coworkers.

“Oh, that’s right,” remembered another.

*Oh, no. That means...*

“They’re hidden from sight in the hallway. Clever,” the fifth one added.

*Ah, man.*

The restaurant district manager was making his way to the back of the store. The loudest of the coworkers told: “Manager is coming.” The coworkers made their way back to the front. The restaurant district manager walked past the employees and made his way to the back. He grabbed something from the back and saw the two employees talking to each other apparently hiding. He saw them facing each other, standing less than a foot away from each other while they continued to talk.

Kepler turned back to the final steps of his preparation. *If he comes back that could mean one of two things: he sent them away and completely ruined the situation for the bastard or gain him more points with her for standing up against him... Could things possibly get any worse for me?*

But both restaurant workers in the hallway had clocked out. They were still here but on their own time. The district manager walked back through the doors and made his way to the kitchen. Kepler wondered what had happened. He needed an excuse to pass by the doors, any excuse. He quickly finished wiping down the countertops from the final preparation and took the used rags. He passed by the swinging doors and saw the two teenagers through the small windows. They now had their phones out and were exchanging numbers. Kepler quickly looked away so they would not catch him looking. He shot the dirty rags into the dirty rag basket.

Kepler clocked out and walked out of the store with his spirit knocked out of him. He spent the evening thinking and sullen. His parents and siblings had already been taken by this point in time and only the Peluches were around to console him. But in typical Kepler fashion he told them nothing, not even the Elders who were currently acting-parents. Come bedtime, Kepler could not sleep. He tossed and turned in bed. The image of Melanie haunted him and the things that she would be doing without him. All he wanted to do was care for her, love her, and give her the world. Kepler could not do it anymore. He had lived through the moment eight times over. And not one time had he done something differently. He was afraid of the butterfly effect but more than that wanted an excuse. He got up from the inflatable mattress and walked out of the dark bedroom. Croc pretended to still be asleep but lifted up one eyelid as he watched Kepler walk out.

Kepler ran out of the house in the clothing he had slept with. He had decided that he would run until he collapsed. *You failure*, he thought to himself. He continued to run west, the shadows weaving in and out from above him as he traveled on the sidewalk outside of different neighborhoods. Kepler continued on his straight path and ran miles to the first of many commercial areas. It was only a little past midnight, and all the stores were closed. Only silence and the homeless could be heard. Miles later, Kepler had reached the next section of neighborhood darkness after the first commercial area. Then, another commercial area followed, and he continued in another long patch of darkness.

He reached the newly built commercial area that reached both sides of the road and moved past it. Sweat dripped down the sides of his face and his clothes were drenched with perspiration. He moved past the landmark freeway and headed forward into the ultimate darkness where there were no homes, only large empty lots. Here his legs began to shake involuntarily, and he finally collapsed onto the ground. Kepler tried to get up, but his body did not permit him. He laid there for a moment, stuck again and not being able to do anything about it. Feelings that he had felt too many times before.

When he was finally able to, he got up and had to travel the whole way back home.

The first time that this had happened, he did not know that he would have to live through those moments over and over again, but he could have chosen different paths, made different choices, but did not. He did not know if he had just been coming up with an excuse not to act or if he had been telling himself the truth that whoever had been around him at any point in his life would have a target on their back. But he did know one thing. Why he was willing to go through the months he worked with her before the moments that had just unfolded again and again. Just to be able to see her again for the first time, her beautiful spirit, the smile on her face, and the sparkle in her eyes.

It had been just as magical as the first time.

Present.

The time was midnight. I walked out of the fast-food location where I currently worked. The lights turned off behind me and I headed to the neighborhood close by just as I had done many times before. My sulking place, I called it. I was walking on the dirt path beside the sidewalk when my phone suddenly began to vibrate.

I took my phone out of my pocket and saw that there was no caller ID. It was gonna be Eduardo. Finally.

“Hello?” I said into the phone.

“Hello, Kepler,” the unknown voice said.

“Who is this?”

“Eduardo said that he would keep in touch. Meet us where you usually just stand around and sulk.”

The unknown speaker ended the call. I considered this for only a brief moment then continued forward. Upon setting my sights on the entrance of the neighborhood, I entered it. I approached the sidewalk walkway in the middle of a small grass field bookended by two

lampposts where a teenager over six-foot-tall stood waiting for me with two henchmen under the Hernandez family company payroll. Who knew what their company did at this point. Honestly, I didn't care. Let the crime propagate. The most forward standing teenager was Nico, Eduardo's right-hand man. I now stood before him and looked up at him.

"What is this?" I asked. "A spook tactic?"

"Did you get spooked?" Nico said.

"No."

"Then, it wasn't one."

"Well, just don't be Orwellian Big Brother stalking me like a creep, okay?"

"We smuggle things. That is our business, to keep an eye on things."

"No, your boy does much more than that now." I took it back. "Not just your boy. His whole family that started that operation. They're laundering money, paying off officials, have them in their pocket, throwing elections with computer technology owned by shell companies. All to the highest bidder. I bet that you are not even getting a cut of that."

"Like *Ozark*?"

"Just like in *Ozark*."

"If you think that getting me to turn on my buddy is the way you gain the upper hand here, you are sorely mistaken. Here is the package." Nico showed me a rectangular orange envelope with a bulge due to the material being transported inside.

"What is it?" I asked.

"That is none of your concern," Nico told me. "Your orders are to not look inside the package. Eduardo also wants it to be delivered in a silver attaché case. We leave that to you to deal with."

"What does the journey look like?"

"Just delivery from Point A to Point B. I'll text them to you. Your Point A will have someone give you the package. This is just so you know how it looks like." Nico moved it out of my sight and into his pocket. "Are we good?"

I just nodded. The three young men walked to their car and drove away leaving me there alone. Just the way I wanted to be.