

THE END OF LIFE

BIRTHRIGHT

CHAPTER 7

THE CRYSTAL TOWERS

KORBAN

Leaning against a parked car, I caught my breath, captivated by the mesmerizing dance of pink and blue hues within the crystal in my hand. Its beauty was enchanting, yet its power was terrifying. My gaze drifted skyward, drawn to the aurora's similar swirl of colors, sparking an exhilarating yet unsettling realization: I had wielded magic—real, undeniable magic. This was not merely new but a revelation, a venture into the unknown that defied all established laws of reality. The questions now pressing on my mind were not just “how” but “why” and “what next”?

Yet, in the back of my mind, an entirely different question lingered, more like a hint: Did I even need the crystal to perform what I had just done?

No, I should not dwell on that—my priority is to protect my children. That is paramount. If the soldiers' words hold any truth, the best way to ensure their safety is to halt whatever is happening. Closing my eyes, I took several deep breaths, centered myself, and moved away from the vehicle I had been leaning against. As I did so, I experienced a subtle ripple, a tingle cascading down my body.

“We should keep going,” I asserted, speaking more to reassure myself than to inform the three of them.

I paused, finally registering their intense gazes fixed upon me. Donalds, in particular, seemed utterly shocked, his expression of disbelief as if his jaw might hit the ground. Glancing down at myself, I realized why their attention was so fixed: my body was coated in tiny zaps of electricity, resembling the static electricity you might see sparking off wool. Blinking a few times in disbelief, I watched the electric display. By the third or fourth blink, the phenomenon had vanished as unexpectedly as it had appeared.

With my head still tilted downwards, I raised my eyes to observe Hendrix, Donalds, and Herman, eager to gauge their reactions. “Look, we need to tear down those two crystal towers forming on the smoke stalks, right? So, let's get moving. I've got the firepower now,” I declared, projecting confidence—or at least, the best imitation of it I could muster.

Doc nodded in agreement, though the fear in his eyes was unmistakable. It was evident that he was neither a fighter nor a soldier, just a scientist out of his element. Nevertheless, he didn't object. On the contrary, he appeared fascinated—still terrified, without a doubt, but fascinated nonetheless.

We were all still standing on the top floor of the parking garage, and I had to admit, I was somewhat reluctant to head back down the way we came. The last thing I wanted was to encounter more goblins potentially lurking down there. Unfortunately, the doors inside the attached mall led only to elevators, which were obviously out of service.

However, there was a set of emergency exits that were locked, and I knew they led directly into the theater. A few years back, the kids and I had gone to watch a movie during the winter when a water pipe in the parking garage burst, setting off the fire alarm – that's how I knew exactly where those doors led. With a confident smile, I raised my hand, closed my eyes, and embraced the tingling sensation emanating from the crystal. It was different from the electric blasts I could generate; this felt like a realm of possibilities, as if my imagination could shape reality.

As I exhaled, a smile spread across my face when another burst of lightning erupted from my palm. This powerful surge of energy blasted one of the doors clean off its hinges, folding the metal door in half as it tumbled into the building. I'd like to boast that I was mastering this new magic, but honestly, I was aiming for a fireball—I guess I still need a bit more practice. Then again, perhaps not much more is needed; lightning seems to come quite naturally to me, and I'll happily take it over nothing. Yet, I must confess, wielding fire magic would be incredible. Whoops, there's my inner fantasy nerd emerging. What can I say? Monsters are popping up like it's the apocalypse, but hey, I have magic! I can't wait to show my kids... My kids. I need to set aside these childish thoughts, verify if Dr. Herman's hypothesis is correct, and see if I can put an end to this nightmare.

With a hint of trepidation, we ventured into the mall, cautiously making our way to a series of crisscrossing escalators. Glancing down, it appeared we were five or six stories high. However, if my memory served me correctly, the interconnecting bridges that led to the nearby buildings were on the second floor. I was aware they wouldn't take us directly to our destination, but they would certainly bring us much closer.

It felt surreal to be leading the way with Navy SEALs or Green Berets—honestly, I wasn't exactly sure which they were—trailing behind me with their firearms. I wasn't even certain if their rifles still had any ammunition. Regardless, I was the first to cautiously descend the motionless escalators. I was thankful we were going down; if I had been forced to climb, my knees would have protested the entire way. Another small mercy was the absence of any monstrous roars, unsettling shuffles, or any noise at all, really. The silence within the mall was unnerving, casting an eerie calm over our cautious descent.

However, to my great relief, there were no monsters, goblins, trolls, or whatever else they might have been inside the mall. We encountered no obstacles and successfully made our way down to the second floor. As we traversed the bridge, encased by windows offering a view of the street below, an odd sight unfolded before us. The sun was beginning to rise, and the morning light revealed a dense forest of trees where none had stood before. The cityscape appeared as if it had been deserted for decades, overtaken by rampant foliage, which was utterly bewildering. We had only been on the top floor of the parking garage for a couple of hours—at most—resting and regrouping before making our descent. Yet now, outside was a sprawling forest, teeming with strange, unrecognizable animals wandering amidst the greenery.

“Fuck me,” Hendrix muttered, gaping out the window.

“Seriously,” Donalds echoed, sharing in the disbelief.

Hendrix adjusted his glasses, continuing to gaze out. “Fascinating,” was all he managed to say.

Doubt began to nag at me, and I couldn’t help voicing it. “Maybe we should turn back and wait for the military or National Guard to show up.”

“It might be a few days if they have to come on foot, maybe even longer, considering all our advanced weapons are useless in these electronic dead zones,” Hendrix pointed out.

“I doubt even a nuclear detonation would be effective,” Herman interjected, prompting a prolonged, heavy silence among us.

“Shit,” I sighed, the reality of our situation sinking in. “Well, come on then, we still have a ways to go.” Without waiting for a response, I turned away from the window and continued, not looking back to see if they followed.

The remainder of our journey was enveloped in silence, but eventually, we reached the end of the walkways connecting the buildings. What lay ahead was the descent to the street level, a prospect I was not looking forward to. Trying to shake off my nerves, careful not to let the crystal slip from my grasp, we descended the final staircase and stepped back into the open. We were greeted by an overgrown green space that seemed surreal, reminiscent of a scene from Planet of the Apes, yet infused with a whimsical, fantasy-like quality. Had our situation not been so gravely serious, I might have considered the scene beautiful.

A deep, menacing roar echoed from across the street, its source obscured by the dense vines and shrubbery entangling a few abandoned vehicles. Instinctively, with a mere flick of my wrist, I unleashed a bolt of lightning as if it were second nature. Seriously, it felt as intuitive as flipping someone the bird. That electrifying “mighty bird” zipped through the air, striking something that emitted a loud yelp. I paused, listening intently. The sound of hooves

clattering against asphalt followed; whatever creature I had zapped seemed to be hastily retreating.

“Damn, I wish I could do that,” Donalds muttered, eyeing the residual energy coursing around my body with envy and awe. “I’ll have to get my hands on some of that crystal once we reach the objective,” he added, with a look of glee in his eyes.

“Same,” Hendrix simply agreed.

Our journey to the crystal towers continued in a similar vein, with me casually unleashing zaps of electricity. Remarkably, it became even easier each time, an astonishing fact considering how naturally it had come to me from the start. Finally, we arrived, standing before the two smoke stacks, now even more heavily encrusted with crystals than before.

“Are you sure that taking down these towers will set things right?” I questioned, the enormity of our task looming over us.

“Nope,” Herman responded, his eyes alight with the kind of fervor only a true science enthusiast could have at the prospect of unraveling a great mystery, much like a kid eager to dissect a frog.

“I’ve still got the explosives,” came a murmur from one of the two men behind me, either Donalds or Hendrix.

I wasn’t fully attentive to which of them had spoken; my thoughts were preoccupied with the goblin that Nemo and I had encountered inside the old steam plant. This memory sparked a wave of concern for Nemo’s current situation—whether he had managed to evade the troll-like creature we had encountered in the precinct. It wasn’t like I could just go on a quest to find Nemo—no, there were bigger stakes at hand. I needed to focus on ending this nightmare, to halt the chaos unfurling around us, before I could even think of anything else, including getting back to Ray, Zoe, and Mara.

With a tentative first step, I re-entered the place where my ordeal had begun. My eyes moved sharply, surveying every corner, every shadow, prepared for the goblin that our pistols had only managed to injure before. This time, I was determined things would be different; this time, I was resolved to finish off that creature for good. But as I neared the railing overlooking the basement bar, there was no sign of the creature. Inside, the scene mirrored the outdoors, with new vegetation sprawling across the interior—from moss to climbing vines, nearly everything was draped in greenery. Some flowers even emitted a bioluminescent glow, casting an ethereal light. It would have been quite pretty were it not for my pressing intent to bring the entire building down.

“Do you hear that?” Herman’s voice came from just over my shoulder, startling me enough that I spun around, glaring at him.

“Jesus Christ, I nearly shit myself,” I blurted out.

“Sorry,” he responded with a sheepish chuckle. “But do you hear that soft hum? It sounds like it’s coming from below,” he said, gesturing towards the basement.

Following his direction, I cautiously made my way downward, one hand extended and the other tightly clutching the crystal, ready to unleash a bolt of lightning at the first sign of danger. What I encountered was akin to an archway, its center filled with an absolute darkness so profound it seemed to absorb light itself. It was akin to that ultra-black paint that reflects no light, but this was different—it had a depth that seemed endless, a void that was palpably vast.

“Umm... What in the hell is that?” I whispered, unable to hide my bewilderment.

“I have no clue,” Herman admitted, his voice tinged with a mix of curiosity and caution as he passed me to step up to it.

“I don’t think you should be going near that thing,” I cautioned.

However, my warning seemed to fall on deaf ears. Driven by curiosity or stupidity, Herman reached out and placed his hand on the black surface. Astonishingly, his hand slid through the darkness as if it were liquid, leaving us both bewildered.

Over the humming I was only now noticing, I barely heard him murmuring to himself. “What have we found?”