

THE END OF LIFE

BIRTHRIGHT

CHAPTER 8

INTO THE LOOKING GLASS

KORBAN

Herman glanced back at me, his expression turning to one of growing panic as his hand continued to disappear further and further into the dark liquid. The surface around his hand rippled, emphasizing the liquid appearance against the otherwise ultra-black surface. In an oddly timed throwback to old movies, my mind likened it to a Stargate, although its shape was more akin to an archway. Yet, that was the closest comparison I could muster for the surreal scene unfolding before us.

“I can’t pull my hand out,” Herman exclaimed, panic rising as he frantically attempted to extricate himself.

I started moving toward him, driven by a compulsion to help yet uncertain of what I could do. My approach was interrupted by a menacing growl, one that struck a chord of familiarity within me. There stood the goblin, its green skin marred by black and blue marks—the clear remnants of bullets that had merely bounced off. It was undeniably the same creature I had encountered earlier.

Regrettably, the two soldiers who had been with Herman and me were off roaming the building, placing explosives wherever they could, aiming to bring down the smokestacks and the crystals forming on them. I had no idea whether that would resolve the issues with the monsters, electricity, or even the strange aurora, but it was something, and I preferred a hopeless cause over doing nothing. That’s why I was the only one available to confront this monster right now.

Whether it recognized me was uncertain, but the creature was clearly engulfed in frenzied madness, its mouth foaming as it snapped viciously, nearly biting its own ear in its frenzy. Amidst its chaotic thrashing, its eyes locked onto mine. Those intense, hate-filled yellow orbs held my gaze steadfastly, signaling a chilling, deep-seated malevolence.

However, this encounter was destined to be different. This time, the fate I had in store for that monster ensured it wouldn’t leave unscathed—no, I was determined to kill the beast. With a wicked grin reflecting my resolve, I clutched the crystal in my off-hand and raised my other hand toward the vile creature. Tiny flickers of lightning danced around me, resembling static electricity, intensifying with each pulse. Yet, in my adrenaline-fueled haze, my focus on the

green bastard before me left me utterly oblivious to the second goblin. It blindsided me like a raging bull, sending us both tumbling straight into Herman and through the Stargate—or whatever it was called. Managate, magical hole, portal, an endless abyss?

ZOE

Ray's cursing continued unabated for several minutes, a time during which I deeply missed having the old pickle jar nearby. That jar, filled with Ray's dollar bills, had funded many of my iced coffee indulgences. Speaking of which, my craving for coffee was intensifying, overshadowing my efforts to concentrate on the present situation as a burgeoning headache from caffeine withdrawal steadily intensified.

Despite my attempts to focus on the immediate concerns, my attention kept involuntarily drifting toward home, where an odd sensation tugged at me. It felt unusual, like sensing the world's pulse within my head without a clear point of reference, similar to feeling the subtle pull when a magnet comes near another. But then again, this sensation could simply be my brain's desperate plea for caffeine. Hopefully, it wasn't a sign of a tumor or anything serious.

"What are we going to do?" Mara inquired, stretching her back beside the open car door. The makeshift bed of toilet paper and boxes had provided little comfort.

"I don't fucking know," Ray groaned, sinking further into the driver's seat. "We could try heading further east to escape this technology dead zone, but it seems to be spreading. Doubt that'll be a long-term solution. Or we could break into a boat house here and hunker down, though I'm not sure how that would sit with the remaining locals—or my mother and grandmother," he added, glancing at Mara.

Our family dynamics were complex: Mara and I shared the same mother, while Ray and Mara were connected through their grandmother. Then there's our dad, or rather, my foster dad, who will always be just *dad* to me. My thoughts might be rambling a bit here. Essentially, neither woman is directly related to me, only through my connection with Ray and Mara. It's the confusing joy of being the adopted one in the family.

"I think we should stay and either convince those two to let us stay or find an abandoned house to break into," I suggested. "Besides, do we even have enough gas in that old car to get us anywhere? I doubt any of the gas station pumps are working with the power outages," I added.

Ray's gaze fixated on the water. Following his line of sight, I spotted a fuel pump used for the boats. He turned back to me, a sly smile spreading across his face. "I think I've got our fuel situation sorted. But we still need to decide where to go next."

“I want to go back home,” Mara interjected. “Nowhere’s safe these days. We might as well be somewhere familiar. I’d even be happy holing up in a grocery store, or better yet, a Costco,” she said, her smile broadening at the thought.

Ray raised an eyebrow. “How old are you again?” he quipped under his breath. “Let’s just lay low here today. We can relax by the water, and tonight, I’ll check out the fuel pump. That thing looks ancient; I’m confident I can siphon some gas from it, power or no power,” he reasoned, then added, “Maybe Dad will turn up before we have to make our next move.”

“Fine,” I exhaled, trying to disregard the intensifying headache.

KORBAN

Like stepping through a looking glass, I tumbled forward through the dark portal, landing on a hard stone surface. Lightning still arching around me, a fact I was most grateful for as the goblin that had rammed into me climbed on top, raising what appeared to be a stone club, poised to bash my face in. Without hesitation, I thrust both hands upward, my palms claspng both sides of its face. The goblin paused, its expression one of confusion. Seizing the moment, I didn’t allow it time to understand my next move, unleashing the strange magic I could now wield as if it were second nature.

The creature’s head exploded in a shower of gore as a blast of lightning erupted from my hands. The only thing missing was me shouting, “Awooga!” The goblin’s body was hurled away, collapsing in a heap a few feet away. Stunned, I stared at my hands, still held up in my best Ryu pose, and noticed something amiss. Glancing to my side, I saw Herman climbing to his knees, readjusting his glasses, his face a mix of fear and wonder. Yet, behind him lay my crystal.

“I—I cast without the crystal,” I whispered, bewildered.

Still grappling with the recent events, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, immediately sensing something unusual—not wrong, but unexpectedly right. The exhilarating sensation I usually felt while holding the crystal, the rush of its power, now enveloped me, as if I had become one with the crystal, or rather, the energy it harbored permeated the very air around me. Overwhelmed by the euphoria, I laughed, marveling at this newfound sensation, pondering how I ever existed without this feeling.

Reopening my eyes, I continued to stare at my hands, still raised in the position they were when the goblin’s head had disintegrated. Summoning that power felt akin to focusing on a limb, inducing a tingling sensation through sheer will, a skill honed from a past meditation course that significantly enhanced my relaxation. Now, lightning rippled around me, calling upon that energy, even more intense than when the crystal was in my grasp. It felt as if I had

merged with the very essence of the air, as if commanding this force was my inherent birthright.

“Hey, Herman! Can you feel all this power?” I called out, my voice laced with excitement, oblivious to the gravity of our situation. The ensuing silence was my only answer. Puzzled, I shifted my gaze toward him; his eyes were locked forward, reflecting a mix of terror and fascination. “Hey, Herman, what’s going on?” I prodded further.

My eyes followed his line of sight, yet I discerned nothing out of the ordinary at first glance. However, that wasn’t entirely accurate. Before us unfolded a cave system, its depths shrouded in darkness. Yet, there was a subtle illumination emanating from the stone itself—faint, twinkling lights resembling distant stars, providing just enough luminescence to reveal scant details of our surroundings.

“You don’t see it?” Herman’s voice broke the silence, his hand gesturing vaguely as he seemed to try and grasp something invisible in the air.

“See what?” I responded, my curiosity piqued. Shifting my gaze upward, still reclining on the ground, my eyes widened at the sight above my head. Floating, there was a hazy translucent message defying all logic and reason.

YOU HAVE ENTERED THE MARSHCRYPT GROTTO DUNGEON!!
