

THE END OF LIFE

# BIRTHRIGHT

## CHAPTER 2

---

### MONSTERS

#### KORBAN

I squeezed the trigger again, my gun discharging the last of my bullets with a resounding blast. A bullet whizzed through the air, striking the green creature squarely between its furrowed eyes. Its head snapped back from the force of the impact. A tense pause ensued; even Derek froze, his eyes wide with dread, as the creature slowly lowered its gaze back to us. Fury and rage blazed in its eyes.

Exchanging a glance, Derek and I understood without words. In perfect synchrony, we turned on our heels and bolted. As we fled, we stumbled, tripping over unseen obstacles, yet we seamlessly helped each other up without breaking stride. All the while, the creature stood motionless, watching us with a malevolent satisfaction, as if relishing the thrill of the chase.

Finally, we burst out of the brewery, gasping for breath. We made a beeline for the nearest car—fortuitously, my classic Oldsmobile. I fumbled with my keys, my hands trembling. As the snarling, chuckling green beast emerged from the building, panic surged through me. I jammed the key into the ignition, and with a turn, the car roared to life.

The rumble of the engine momentarily halted the beast's charge. It tilted its head from side to side, much like a perplexed dog, seemingly baffled by the vehicle. Wasting no time, I slammed my foot on the gas. The back tires screeched, struggling for traction before the car shot forward, leaving the creature with its bewildered expression rapidly shrinking in the rearview mirror, its futile attempt to pursue us evident.

“We need a SWAT team for that thing,” Derek exclaimed, his voice edged with panic.

“To hell with SWAT, we need the National Guard,” I shot back, my expression grim. I then added, “Or at least something more powerful than a Glock. What if there are more of them? Our bullets barely bruised it and just pissed it off. I don't want to face that thing again without something as heavy-duty as a .50 caliber.”

Derek, in a desperate attempt for backup, whipped out his phone only to find it completely unresponsive. “Fuck,” he spat, frustration boiling over as he tossed the phone down between his feet. “Battery's completely dead, and I just charged it.”

“It might've been stuck in roaming, trying to find a signal,” I suggested, a note of uncertainty in my voice. I pondered for a moment before a new idea occurred to me. “Could this be an EMP effect from the solar flares?” I speculated, more to myself than to Derek. My brow creased in

thought as I glanced at the dashboard, noting that the clock was still working and my car was operational, which only added to my perplexity.

Reaching for the radio, a sense of unease growing within me, I twisted the knob. Instead of the expected music or silence, an eerie static filled the car, heightening the tense atmosphere. This unsettling moment was suddenly interrupted as I had to swerve sharply, narrowly avoiding a stalled vehicle that loomed suddenly in our path.

Now fully focused on the road ahead, I began to take in the unusual scene unfolding around us. Numerous vehicles were stalled on the road, their lifeless engines causing a chaotic scene. I observed several drivers stepping out, perplexed, lifting their hoods in a futile attempt to diagnose the problem. Others were pushing their cars to the roadside, their expressions a mix of confusion and helplessness. Amidst this chaos, I couldn't help but feel a surge of surprise that my 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado was still running smoothly, unaffected by whatever was causing the widespread vehicular shutdown.

Just as I was processing the bizarre scene, I noticed something alarming in my own car. The clock on the dashboard, which had been functioning moments ago, began to flicker erratically before its lights completely died out. Concurrently, the eerie static emanating from the radio, which I hadn't yet switched off, made a sharp popping sound, then fell silent. The sudden cessation of these electronic functions left an unsettling quiet in the car, broken only by the steady rumbling of the Oldsmobile's engine, still faithfully running amidst the growing nothingness.

Derek exhaled a bewildered, "What the fuck is going on?"

I, equally puzzled but trying to piece it together, ventured, "I'm guessing the solar flare is messing with everything electrical."

"But then why is this car still running?" Derek asked, skepticism lacing his voice as he questioned my hypothesis.

I managed a weak smile in response, patting the dashboard of my car reassuringly. "Old school muscle car, my friend," I explained. "It's all mechanical, no useless complex electronics. Though, I'm not sure if it'll restart if I turn it off. Hopefully, the acid battery will have enough juice to restart it, but that's not something I want to test right now. Let's just hope this solar flare ends soon, or we're in deep trouble." My voice trailed off with a grimace, my mind inevitably drifting to my kids, the concern for their safety etching deeper lines on my already troubled expression.

Derek, trying to formulate a plan, said, "We should head to the precinct, get some help, maybe even an assault rifle or ten. If anything, maybe we can at least bruise that thing to death with a hail of bullets."

Attempting to inject a sliver of levity into the grim situation, I turned to Derek with a smile that held a darker undertone. "Oh, come now, Nemo," I said, using his nickname in an effort to lighten the mood, despite the fear we both felt. "You're not thinking big enough. I was serious about wanting a .50 caliber."

“Yeah, and where do you plan on getting one? A .50 caliber isn’t exactly standard issue,” Derek replied, his voice tinged with a mix of skepticism and exhaustion.

I nodded in acknowledgment, my expression serious. “I have an idea about that, but you’re right about heading to the station first,” I admitted, though my tone carried a hint of bitterness.

The drive to the downtown precinct, normally a short journey across the river and down another road, became a tedious affair with the increasing number of stalled vehicles cluttering the streets.

Breaking the tense silence, Derek finally spoke up, hesitantly. “So, we’re not going to talk about... you know, the G word,” he ended in a slight whisper.

“The G word? Don’t tell me you’re afraid to say... damn, it even sounds insane in my head,” I muttered, expertly maneuvering around another vehicle abandoned in the middle of the road.

“I guess that’s why they never used the word ‘Zombie’ in *The Walking Dead*,” Derek said with a snicker, though it was more a nervous reaction than genuine humor.

I exhaled, a mixture of disbelief and resignation in my voice. “That thing looked like a goblin. There, I said it. Like something straight out of a D&D campaign,” I admitted, as if questioning my own sanity.

“I was thinking more Tolkien, but I guess you’re the bigger nerd with your D&D reference,” Derek said, managing a smile despite the situation.

I chuckled. “Oh, trust me, if Tolkien is your point of reference in all this madness, then you’re the hardcore nerd. I’m just a modern enthusiast.”

“I suppose you’re right—”

Derek’s response was abruptly cut off as a building nearby crumbled, and from its ruins, a blur of hooves emerged at a startling speed. Derek’s face drained of color as he whipped his head back to the front, his words faltering with fear. “F-Faster. Drive faster,” he stammered.

I quickly glanced in the rearview mirror and saw four long, scaly legs in pursuit. “What the fuck is that?” I cursed, pressing the gas pedal further.

Derek, struggling to speak, sputtered, “Imagine a giraffe, but covered in scales and with an alligator’s head.” He shuddered visibly. “Teeth included.”

My grip on the steering wheel tightened as I processed Derek’s description. “A dinosaur? We’re being chased by a dinosaur?”

Derek, still visibly shaken, managed a response. “Not like any I’ve ever seen, but sure, let’s go with that. Somehow, ‘dinosaur’ sounds a tad less crazy than ‘goblin’ right now,” he said, his attempt at humor thinly veiling the terror in his voice. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Head for the precinct’s parking garage. That thing shouldn’t be able to follow us inside there,” Derek suggested urgently.

Nodding in exasperation, as though confirming that had indeed been my plan, I sharply turned the steering wheel. I accelerated rapidly down the sloped entry, crashing through the barrier arm and into the parking garage with a resounding smash. The barrier arm clattered behind us, echoing through the concrete structure.

As we entered the garage, a deafening roar from the beast outside resonated powerfully within the confined space. This raw, furious roar vibrated through the garage, sending a shiver coursing down our spines.

Derek hesitated before cautiously opening the door, his eyes darting around as he stepped out of the car, gun drawn. Unbeknownst to him, his weapon was out of bullets. Facing the same ammunition shortage, I exited the vehicle with slightly less trepidation, yet remained vigilant. I didn't let my guard down; instead, I popped the trunk of my car and retrieved a tire iron. Deep down, I knew it was a futile weapon against creatures that shrugged off bullets, but it was better than being unarmed.

As we took a moment to survey our surroundings, both of us inhaled deeply, processing the eerie stillness. The parking lot was vacant, an unusual sight given the array of police SUVs and cruisers present. The absence of any personnel or signs of life was disconcerting, adding a layer of oddness to the already tense atmosphere. This unexpected emptiness at a place typically bustling with activity only intensified our sense of unease.

Derek's yell of "Holy fuck" was sharp and sudden, causing me to jump.

I whirled around at the sound, only to see the long-necked, alligator-headed creature attempting to reach into the parking garage. Fortunately, its neck couldn't extend nearly far enough to reach us. Nonetheless, the sight of the massive creature's head snapping and growling was a terrifying spectacle.

Gazing at the monstrous sight, Derek spoke in a meek, almost disbelieving tone, "I don't think we're dealing with a normal solar storm."

"Come on, there has to be someone in charge inside," I muttered, more to myself than to Derek.

Clutching the tire iron, which felt more symbolic than useful in my grasp, I led the way with Derek close behind. The two of us cautiously entered the dimly lit precinct. The usual illumination was absent; even the emergency lights failed to provide guidance. Neither of us had a flashlight, and our cellphones, with batteries completely fried, were of no use. We found ourselves relying solely on the sunlight filtering in through the windows, casting long, eerie shadows across the halls.

The silence was profound, broken only by our cautious footsteps. The absence of even a single flickering light added to the unsettling atmosphere of the building, which now seemed entirely abandoned.

"Where is everyone?" Derek whispered.

“I don’t know. Let’s head to the armory to see what we can salvage. Hopefully, we can secure something with a bit more stopping power than our Glocks,” I whispered back, my voice tinged with urgency yet cautious, aware that any sound could attract unwanted attention.

Moving with deliberate silence, we navigated the precinct, which felt eerily like an abandoned building. It was clear that either the staff had not shown up for the last shift change, or those who were present had decided to flee in the face of the unfolding chaos. The usual buzz of activity that characterized the precinct was replaced by a haunting stillness.

My primary focus was on arming ourselves more effectively. I was determined to find better weapons and ammunition before making my next move—to safely retrieve my kids. As we advanced, a nagging worry lingered in the back of my mind about whether my car would restart amidst the bizarre and unexplained events unfolding around us.

“Look there,” Derek suddenly whispered, his voice tense as he pointed to a red splatter that marred the wall.

“Shit. Nemo, I don’t think we’re alone,” I muttered, a sense of dread washing over me.

Our hearts sank as we rounded a corner and were confronted with a ghastly scene. Bodies were suspended upside down from the ceiling, skinned in a grotesque display. A monstrous humanoid creature, its skin a sickly greenish-gray and covered in boils, was methodically slicing the flesh from a woman’s body. Both of us recognized her with a jolt of shock—she was the city mayor.

“Screw this!” Derek exclaimed, terror overriding his sense. “I’ve got to get back to my wife and kid,” he blurted out, panic seizing him as he turned and fled in the opposite direction.

Cursing under my breath at Derek’s rashness, I quickly dove into a nearby office just as the creature let out a thunderous roar. I low-crawled to a desk and hid beneath it, my heart pounding. The heavy, ominous footsteps of the monster echoed just outside the office, each one sending a shudder of fear through me as I lay there, hoping desperately to remain unnoticed.

With each heavy footstep of the creature fading into the distance as it pursued Derek, I lay motionless under the desk, my eyes tightly shut. In this moment of relative solitude, amidst the heart-pounding terror, my thoughts instinctively turned to my three children. Their faces, a vivid image in my mind’s eye, brought a surge of determination.

Amidst the chaos and danger, a resolute promise formed in my heart. I vowed silently, with every fiber of my being, that I would make it back to them. This unwavering commitment to my children became a beacon of resolve in the darkness, a guiding force that steeled me for whatever lay ahead.

## RAYMOND

"Hardly anyone showed up to classes today," I remarked to Zoe as we settled into our seats for our first period class.

"I don't think our teacher even bothered showing up today," Zoe replied, a faint smile playing on her lips.

As Zoe leaned back in her chair, she subtly masked a grimace, the result of a sharp pain in her side. Her health had drastically deteriorated recently, bringing her to a point where she felt constantly drained. Nevertheless, she managed the best smile she could muster, determined not to let anyone see the full extent of the never-ending pain she was enduring. And yet, it pained me deeply to witness the struggle she tried so hard to conceal.

"So, do you think they'll cancel classes today, or get us a substitute teacher?" a student pondered aloud, breaking the classroom's uneasy quiet.

"Ugh, my phone's dead," another student grumbled, fiddling with their device.

I glanced down at my own phone, only to groan in frustration as it refused to turn on. Looking up from my lifeless phone, I noticed a classmate settling into the seat in front of me, spinning around to face me with an enthusiastic grin.

"Ray, my man! I watched your latest TikTok," the classmate exclaimed. "That Demidicus suit was freaking awesome."

"What's this?" a girl nearby inquired, her curiosity piqued.

The classmate leaned in closer, his smile broadening as if he was on the brink of revealing a secret. "Ray here is a big-time influencer. When he's not busy pranking his dad with that hilarious garage parking stuff, he's masterfully crafting 3D printed cosplay armor. But his latest creation? It's on another level—he collaborated with a YouTuber smith to forge this wicked suit of armor. Imagine Ironman and Darth Vader had a kid, and that kid decided to cosplay as a Spartan Warrior with a D&D warlock aesthetic. Epic, right? And the best part—the whole suit is made from Damascus steel."

I felt an urge to roll my eyes and nearly corrected the Vader reference to Doctor Doom. However, preferring not to delve deeper into a conversation about my cosplaying, I simply maintained a polite smile. As the class continued discussing my projects, I reflected silently. My unique approach to cosplay involved blending various pop culture characters to create something new. My breakthrough moment came when I cosplayed as SpongeBob dressed as Batman. It was an elaborate foam costume that nearly caused a heatstroke, but it catapulted me to fame, earning me my first million followers.

"Yo, Zoe, want to go to prom with me?" the student sitting in front of me turned to ask my sister.

She gave him a faint smile. "Thank you for the offer, Jake, but I'm not going to prom."

I struggled to hide the smile on my face as I saw him look so deflated. Zoe had never shown interest in dating anyone. Heck, I couldn't even tell if she was interested in boys or girls; she just seemed so indifferent, looking at everyone as though they were mere children to her.

A deafening explosion erupted outside, instantly silencing the room. The blast violently shook the high school, causing a wave of shock and disbelief among the students, who were surprised that

the windows remained intact. In the immediate aftermath, the fire alarm blared briefly, lasting for nearly a whole second, before it too succumbed to the sudden power outage, leaving the school engulfed in darkness.

“What the hell,” someone exclaimed, their voice a mix of confusion and fear, echoing the sudden uncertainty and apprehension that filled the air.

In the enveloping darkness, a girl's voice, trembling with fear, cut through the silence. “Y-You don't think it's an active shooter, do you?” she whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear. The terror in her voice mirrored the growing anxiety in the room.

I stood up from my chair, stretching to ease the tension. With a determined tone, I declared, “I for one don't want to wait around to find out. I don't know about you guys, but I'm getting the fuck out of here.” I turned to my sister, “Zoe, come on.”

Zoe sighed in response, her attempt at humor masking her discomfort. “You owe the swear jar when we get home,” she said with a strained smile, carefully rising from her chair while hiding a wince of pain.

“Ugh, don't say anything,” I groaned, my mind on the inevitable contribution to that damnable pickle jar. I slung my backpack over my shoulder as I made my way to the classroom door. Upon opening it, I was met with a chaotic scene of students scrambling to exit the building. “What's going on?” I yelled, trying to make sense of the pandemonium.

“A plane crashed in the football field! Apparently, all the planes in the sky are just falling out of it,” another student shouted back over the noise.

Zoe, piecing the information together, speculated, “Must be the solar flare. It's knocking out all the power in everything. We should pick up Mara and head home.”

“Yeah, you're probably right,” I agreed, nodding. I stepped into the bustling hallway, with Zoe following closely behind. The urgency of the situation was palpable as we joined the stream of students hurrying out of the building.

Upon exiting the school, Zoe and I quickly made our way to my car. Zoe paused, squinting as she looked skyward. “What's that?” she asked, her tone laced with uncertainty.

I joined her, staring upward. In the sky, there was a large, indistinct silhouette that at first glance resembled a plane. However, something was off—the wingspan seemed to be changing, almost as if... flapping.

“I don't want to find out! Let's just grab Mara and get home,” I urged, my voice marked by a growing sense of urgency.

I quickly ushered Zoe into the car, driven by an urgent need to escape the bizarre and unsettling scene. Reaching for the start button, I pressed it, hoping for a swift departure. To my dismay, the electric car remained silent and unresponsive. It wasn't unusual for me to be unable to tell when it was running, but this time was different. A wave of panic washed over me as I repeatedly pressed

the button, each attempt meeting with the same lifeless result. Frustrated and anxious, I let out a curse, mentally adding another contribution to the pickle jar.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed, my frustration boiling over as I smacked the steering wheel with all my built-up frustration.

Zoe, observing my outburst, waited patiently for a few long seconds, allowing the tension to dissipate slightly. Then, breaking the silence with a soft smile, she said, "Looks like we're walking."

Nodding in agreement with Zoe's suggestion, I stepped out of the car, closely followed by Zoe. We were in luck; the middle school where Mara was attending was conveniently close, merely a short walk away across a thin street, with only the school's soccer and baseball fields separating us. Our walk took less than ten minutes, slowed slightly by Zoe's struggle to match my pace.

Reaching the middle school, we saw it was in lockdown. I let out a low whistle. "Just our luck," I said, the annoyance clear in my voice.

Zoe nodded towards a nearby window. "Her classroom's that way. We knock, get her to notice us, then she sneaks out one of the back exits," she proposed.

I raised an eyebrow. "Think they'll just let her walk out during a lockdown?"

Zoe grinned. "Mara? She's not exactly the follow-the-rules type."

Chuckling, I added, "You're the only one she ever listens to, you know that, right?" My words carried a bitter playfulness.

"Of course, I'm the awesome big sis," Zoe said with a proud smile.

As we neared where Mara's class was located, I pressed my forehead against the window, cupping my hands around my eyes to reduce the glare and peer inside. Zoe, watching me, couldn't help but laugh. "Next one," she corrected me gently.

Muttering a couple of choice words under my breath, I moved to the next set of windows. Before we could even take a look inside, Mara burst out of a nearby emergency exit, a flustered teacher trailing behind her. As soon as Mara spotted us, she rushed up to Zoe for a hug. I gave the teacher a casual wave, who stood there, clearly unsure of how to react.

"We're taking her with us. Bye!" I called out cheerfully, ignoring the teacher's protests about calling the police. The three of us walked away, leaving behind a bewildered teacher in their wake.

"What's going on?" Mara asked, her curiosity evident rather than fear.

Zoe quickly explained, "Massive power outages from the solar storm. It's even knocking planes out of the sky, which is pretty scary."

I chimed in, "Yeah, we saw this huge plane like fifteen minutes ago. It looked like its wings were flapping or something."

“Really!” Mara’s eyes widened with excitement.

Zoe, trying to provide a more rational explanation, said, “We’re not sure what we saw, to be honest. Could’ve been the aurora messing with our eyes.”

I added, “Anyway, my car won’t start. Looks like we’ve got a five-block walk ahead of us to get home.”

“Awww, walking home sucks,” Mara groaned.

Suddenly, a massive roar echoed through the sky, startling us. Zoe instinctively pulled Mara closer, while I looked around, trying to identify the source of the sound.

“Probably another plane crash,” I guessed, my tone trying to sound reassuring, even though the thought was anything but comforting.

The walk home for Zoe, Mara, and me was an oddly serene yet eerie experience. The streets were quiet, devoid of moving vehicles. People stepped out of their cars, some pushing them to the roadside, while others simply left them where they stalled, before beginning their own journeys home. Among them were high school students, some facing several miles of travel, which could take half a day or more on foot.

As we neared our home, Zoe’s exhaustion became more apparent. Her steps were slower, and she seemed to be pushing herself to keep going. Mara watched her with growing concern, her eyes filled with worry for her sister.

Amidst this quiet anxiety, the sound of Mr. Jefferson’s car rumbling in his backyard pierced the silence. He was absorbed in working on his old car, seemingly unaware of the day’s chaos. This familiar, mundane scene offered a brief respite from the day’s surreal events.

Another thunderous roar tore through the sky, drawing our attention upwards. To our astonishment, we saw a plane—or what we thought was a plane—swooping down with what unmistakably appeared to be flapping wings.

“That’s a fucking dragon!” Mara exclaimed, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and wonder.

“Language,” Zoe instinctively scolded, her big sister mode kicking in, before the surreal reality of what we were witnessing fully dawned on her.

For my part, I almost wanted to point out that it looked more like a wyvern than a dragon, but I quickly realized that such distinctions were trivial in the face of the unbelievable sight unfolding above us.

“We should go to my grandmother’s cabin,” I muttered, my gaze fixed on the winged beast soaring in the distance.