

THE EMPATH

Adversity opens for its bearer two doors

Neither is perfect

One is worse than the other

PROLOGUE

"THAT'S ALARM THREE!" the father exclaimed. "You need to hide Con before they get here!"

He'd known this day was coming eventually, but his boss's men were earlier than expected—he hadn't had nearly enough time to prepare. Sharon had not yet acquired the weapons and fuel the two would need to shoot their way out of this. Ti Law rocked an infant in his arms back and forth, silently praying it slept through the commotion.

"No," Sharon shot back. Dread illuminated her bespectacled eyes. "Are you hearing yourself? We're not handing them our baby!"

She did her best to put on a determined face in the hopes that her husband would back down but behind that countenance, her pupils trembled.

"Sharon, we're backed into a corner. It's either one or it's both. After today, you and I will never be happy again, but there is a *chance* one of our kids can be. There's not even a decision here."

"No!" she shouted, her voice cracking. "We'll think of something! We always think of something!"

"In two minutes? There's nothing to do! He's got us, he's got Kai-Gem, but there's a minuscule chance he doesn't have Con. He's all we have."

"They'll kill him!"

Teardrops left glistening trails down her cheeks.

"My love, we've discussed this. The project is sound—I made sure of that much. He'll survive the journey."

"After every concern they ignored? Ti, don't be stupid! They're going to make an example out of him. If you do this, our baby is dead!"

Her bloodshot eyes began to swell as her quivering hands reached out toward their son but stopped just short of him. She couldn't bear to touch him a final time.

"I truly hope—believe—you're wrong. You don't have to watch. Just take Con to the panic room and wait until they're gone. There isn't time to argue."

In an instant, Sharon's face brightened. "Wait, I have something." She tapped her fingers against her forehead, devising the finer points of her plan. "Get the kids to the garage. I'll take care of the rest."

"I'm sorry," Ti said. Behind his back, his free hand closed around a pry bar. His fingers tightened, but he knew using it would be a bridge too far. He let go of the weapon. "I don't believe you, and I won't lose my whole family today."

Sharon didn't see his fist coming in time. In an instant, her horrified expression went blank, and her body crumpled to the ground.

Her husband stood over her, his eyes finally beginning to water. "I'm so sorry. There's just no other play."

He laid Kai-Gem on the couch and lifted his wife off the ground. With only moments to spare, he barely managed to transport her and Con to the closet in their bedroom, setting the infant next to its unconscious mother. The baby boy's face was rife with worry, as though he knew what

was about to happen, that his twin brother was about to be kidnapped, packaged, and shipped off to a far-away colony world. There wasn't time to secure the panic room, so this would have to do.

"Bud, I'm going to need you to be quiet," Ti whispered to his child, smiling through his grief. "I'll be back for you and Mom as soon as they're gone."

Just then, he heard a pounding on his front door. "I have to go now."

He patted the child on the head and smiled once more. When he answered the door, that smile was replaced by his best approximation of a stony grimace. He had picked up the larger child and was clutching him tightly.

He glared at the agent behind the threshold. "Every one of you fucks that go through with this is going to rot in hell."

"Save the melodrama, Law. We want only the children, and then we'll be on our way," the agent responded.

His nose twitched on an otherwise expressionless face. The sorry state of his two-piece suit and glittering sweat on his neck painted a picture of a man who was entirely unprepared for this job.

Law laughed spitefully. "We don't have *children*. Just the one."

"According to birth records, your wife had twins."

"Do I have to spell it out for you? If you had bothered to read past the first page, you'd know Constantine got pneumonia at six weeks; he didn't make it."

"I am sorry to hear that," the agent responded unapologetically. "There must have been a mistake..." He paused. "I'll be taking the child now."

Law begrudgingly handed over the bundle of blankets, glaring the whole time. "Tell your dad he can-"

"You lied," the agent interjected. "Where is the other child?"

"How do you figure?" Law said. "Are you going to make me show you my infant son's headstone? Is that the level you've sunk to?"

The agent listened to the voice in his earpiece for a moment before repeating, "You lied."

Law's face tightened. He did not budge.

The man at the door handed Kai-Gem off to another agent and thrust his foot into Law's chest, producing a characteristic cracking noise and sending the hundred-kilogram man careening to the floor. As Law struggled to draw in a breath, eyes desperately wild, several agents barreled into his house. They tore locked doors off their hinges and threw open cabinets in search of the other baby.

Law closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, rapidly regaining composure. His left hand searched for the discarded bar he'd nearly used to strike his wife. As his middle finger just barely curled around the makeshift weapon, a burly Gneissi officer took notice, swiftly putting an end to Law's actions with a heel to the throat. Ti Law, desperate to save his stashed child, sprang to his feet, but the crushed windpipe, along with numerous strikes from the butt of government rifles sent him back to the ground. He would not recover in time.

The lead agent almost began to worry his overseer was mistaken until he saw the half-closed closet door. He drew the door open to find the infant Constantine silently shuddering next to Sharon Law's unconscious body. He lifted the child from the ground and exited the house, leaving the front door open.

When he reached his car, he told the driver, "This one goes in storage. The big one's going to Earth." He briefly froze as new orders came through the radio. "Dad's bored with the Law parents. Once we're out of range, you can torch the place."

Agent Charles Lash resisted the urge to look back as the home was enveloped in flame.

CHAPTER ONE

My World

MY ASSAULT KNIFE flicks open with a deliciously satisfying *click*. In an instant, the man's demeanor shifts from smug to stunned.

"Please, man," he pleads. "I won't tell anybody it was you. You can have the seeds. Shit, you can have everything! Just don't hurt me!"

"I would never do that," I say. "I'll make it quick. No need for pain."

"No, no, no!"

The man limply raises his arms to block my swing, but his defense is in vain. My blade embeds itself deep in his temple and his eyes go dark. I wince briefly, but my aim is almost perfect, and the sharp pain subsides after just a moment, leaving only a light throb that I can largely ignore.

"Nothin' against you," I remark, dropping the dying body to the floor, "but I know how this goes."

I rummage through his house in search of anything that might be of use: seed packets, soil, scrap metal, assorted foodstuffs, the like. I bag all I find up and thrust it over my shoulder. As I make my way home, I remain vigilant, avoiding any of my neighbors who might be spending time outside on such a lovely day.

Thus far, we've all maintained an unspoken agreement to leave each other the fuck alone, a notable exception being the corpse I just created. This particular guy, whose name I'm about 80% sure was Henry, has given me the gift of becoming a problem causer. He won't be missed by many. Still, a dead guy tends to make the community apprehensive, and I can only afford to pick fights when I have a damn good reason. For the entire walk, I keep my eyes down, not daring to call extra attention to the suspiciously large bag I am carrying.

The asphalt has stayed largely intact but every step over what used to be cement produces an irritating crunch. Rows of cohab houses turn into campus stores and cafés, now used as lodging by folks who naturally spread out after everything went to shit. A couple of blocks further, and I am once again surrounded by student housing, though these buildings were part of a hasty expansion project and as such are distinctly cheaper than the home I just robbed.

The front door swings open with a light pull and my bag takes its rightful place on the living room floor. I pull off my sun protection gear, exposing a few fresh, sweat-drenched cuts on my face to the stinging air, simultaneously appreciating that my nose is no longer boxed in with two years' worth of body odor. I run my hands through my five centimeters of hair, slick it back with sweat, wipe the grime off on my pants, and drop my ass on the couch.

There I sit, staring at the empty wall across from me. 'Empty' isn't technically accurate, but a half-dead potted plant isn't exactly the pinnacle of entertainment. The rest of the room is more of the same, covered in dozens of ugly plants and bleached, cracking paint.

A pitcher of water rests on a shelf behind me. *Fuck, I forgot to close it*, I think. Without looking, I reach back and twist the lid on to prevent evaporation. I consider opening a pack of dehydrated noodles when I feel a sharp pain in my right hand.

Blood streams down my finger.

“Goddamnit!” I yell, clutching my hand. “Scott! What did you do?”

I rise slowly and shuffle toward the kitchen. Scott stands at the grimy counter, staring at the area where his left index finger had been a moment ago.

“What the hell, man?” I say as I grab our only clean towel off the crust-covered oven.

I wrap the towel around his hand, hoping to contain the blood, wincing in pain as I do it. The towel turns a bright crimson almost instantly.

“I- I-” he stutters. “I was trying to mince like that VidCam guy. My hand slipped.”

He gestures to a butcher’s knife on the cutting board.

“Fucking hell, Scott-Kane,” I say. “You couldn’t have tried that while I wasn’t home?” My finger continues to bleed. “Other people get hurt when you do shit like this—you could stand to think about me once in a fucking while.”

Scott’s finger will have grown back within the week, so I waste no time worrying about it.

We don’t really know why, but Scott and I are different from the rest of the people on campus. Given enough time, Scott can regenerate a lost limb or digit. As a result, well, he sure seems to have a lot more accidents with that goddamn knife. I wouldn’t even care anymore were it not for the fact that every time he hurts himself, I have to feel his pain too.

“It’s really great that when my roommate stabs himself, I get to be the one that bleeds. No, seriously. I fuckin’ love it,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Sorry,” he murmurs. “It was an accident.”

“It’s an accident every time,” I hiss. “Every goddamn time.”

“Sorry,” he repeats, his eyes downcast.

“Yeah, that makes it better.” I scowl. “I’ll go into town and pick up more beef. No amount of cooking is getting me to ingest your radioactive blood.”

I leave the room without giving him a chance to reply. I grab one of my empty backpacks and put back on my sun suit, a repurposed hazmat suit from one of the university radiation labs. Without it, my skin would burn to a crisp the moment I stepped outside. Even protected, the sunlight nearly blinds me as I exit the front porch.

Town is bustling, which is to say, there are three people strolling down the powdery sidewalk, each likely ready to defend themselves at a moment’s notice. The ground is cracked and crumbling, far too dry to support all but the most resilient plant life. If you want to survive, you keep plants in every room of your house to keep oxygen levels up. If you’re smart, you don’t buy or trade for them. You wait until someone causes trouble with the community, then you kill them and take everything they owned. I have done this many times now; I’m arguably exceptional, particularly now that I’ve learned how to end a life without too much pain.

I suspect that I could only spend a limited time outdoors before succumbing to hypoxia but I don’t have much interest in testing that hypothesis. Staying outdoors is dangerous on its own given the ozone layer’s been blown to shit and thousands of other dangerous chemicals have taken its place.

I observe my surroundings and take note that one of the passersby approaching me is eyeing me through her visor, possibly a friend of Henry’s. I pretend not to notice, but I already know what she’s about to do. I inhale deeply as she strolls by me, waiting for her to make the first move. It happens as soon as she is directly behind me. I will admit, I’m immediately impressed she can

perform a backflip in a hazmat suit. Her leap places her mere inches in front of me. My surprise wears off and I react, bouncing backward and assuming a defensive stance.

“Come with me quietly,” she says, her tone oddly insincere, “and we’ll keep things peaceful.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I ask.

“Come with me quietly,” she repeats, “and you won’t need to worry.”

“Yeah, screw off.”

I loosen my stance and attempt to push past her. Instead of responding, she yells, then throws the first punch.

Her technique is both crisp and strong, her fist plunging deep into the center of my stomach. I double over, seizing the opportunity to grab her legs. She topples to the ground and I waste no time. I slice a hole in both of her sleeves with my pocketknife and before making the mistake of killing a woman in public, I run. In the background, I hear her pained yelling and feel a slight burning sensation in my forearms that fades as I create distance between us.

I stop running once the pain has subsided and trudge my way through the last few blocks to Methane’s compound. I couldn’t begin to explain how he did it, but the man managed to take control of a now-dysfunctional military base after the bombs hit, wasting no time asserting his dominance over the college town of Viscomb. He refuses to provide lodging, though he has plenty of space, and he charges ridiculous amounts in trade for the most essential commodities.

Despite our best efforts, no one has been able to kill him thus far. He isn’t especially skilled or strong so far as I can tell. In fact, he’s clearly out of shape and at least a foot shorter than me. Instead, he’s got weapons: sabers, guns, rockets, really any kind of firearm or explosive that still exists nowadays. I’ve made several attempts to get the drop on him, the bullet scars on both legs and a seemingly permanent stabbing pain in my left shoulder serving as tangible evidence. Luckily, he hardly seems to care how often we betray him. Within 24 hours I’ll hobble back in for more food and he’ll gladly pretend nothing ever happened.

“Hey, Meth,” I say as I enter the visitor center.

He simply nods in response, uncharacteristically quiet. A faint stinging in my cheek and eye socket as well as a bloodstained apron on the counter tell me he has already survived an assassination attempt today.

I browse his wares for a minute or two, taking note of a rack of patched-up hazmat suits and a haphazard pile of bottled waters I may want to pick up later. Eventually, my eyes come to rest on a beautiful slab of beef in a lightly refrigerated storage compartment. To clarify, beautiful only indicates that it isn’t shriveled and rotten, far surpassing my expectations at this hour. I bend down and pick it up with my gloves—it comes entirely unpackaged, necessitating that I trust the cooking process to a legitimately insane degree.

I wipe off some dust and crumbs and set the slab down on his counter, then sling my bag off my back. I pick out a few usable pieces of scrap metal and lay them on the counter as well. Scrap metal is the most consistent thing Meth accepts as currency. If street rumors are to be believed, he’s building himself a wicked set of armor, though I have no desire to comment on such theories.

He nods and shoves the meat toward me. “Good payday today,” he says. His nose twitches as he speaks, a nervous tic he hasn’t exhibited in at least a year and a half. “Slaughtered a big one last

week, sold a bunch of this shit to that group of traders that passed through. You're getting the last of the good stuff. Almost a shame it's wasted on you."

I don't say a word. I take my beef and begin to leave the store, turning over Meth's awkward behavior in my head. *Why was that so weird?* It should have been obvious—Meth has never mentioned his dealings with other survivors. Respect for privacy is one of his only positive attributes. Something is up.

I start to turn. "Hey, what's your ang-"

BOOM! The shotgun catches me at point-blank range. I'm on the ground now. I blink and he's standing over me, the quivering barrel aimed directly at my throat.

The last thing I remember before blacking out is a tingling, burning sensation in my forearms.

If you enjoyed this excerpt and aren't angry that I just switched to Comic Sans, you can find a couple more chapters on my Patreon for \$1!

Regardless of whether you click the link, I am deeply grateful that you would take the time to check out my work. I hope you enjoyed it. More to come soon!

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