

TALE?

The sound of the whistle blowing sent the men back into the mines, like Pavlov's dogs salivating when a bell rings. Only the men were not doing it because of positive reinforcement, as in the dog's case. They were answering the call to work because they know what will happen if they do not.

Dexter Semptil was such a man. When he was nine years old he started working in the mines to pay off the family debt. Back then, he remembered as he climbed into the tunnel, work was easier. There was no mandatory thirteen hour work days as there is now. The debt twenty years ago was much lower, but as time marched on the interest on the debt led to a quadrupling of the original debt. It is now so large that most families have had to sell almost everything they own to the state.

Donning the necessary safety equipment, he propelled his rig into the deep shaft, alone in his assigned tunnel and with a heavy quota to meet. At the end of a day's work, each worker is expected to yield 16 1/2 tons of ore a day. Those who did not meet the quota stayed until they met it. If they reached quota early, the Overseers raised it higher to keep them working. The management just raised Dexter's quota to 20 3/4 tons a day, because he usually works beyond the necessary tonnage; a practice the authorities do not like. As the ground shook beneath the rig, Dexter powered the drills at the front router. Mechanically, he eased forward on the thrust as the drill bit into the wall of rock, boring a huge hole. The process spewed a great cloud of ash and dust. Though no more than usual, his low resistance and the nearly twenty years of enduring the soot had taken their toll on him. He began coughing violently.

"I'm getting too old for this," he muttered. He tasted the fine particles of chondrite inundating his mouth. The grit nearly made him gag. "Get out of 'em what you can

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while you can," he murmured remembering the mine motto. He spit on the floor of his cabin disrespectfully.

"Semptil!" bellowed the radio. "What's the holdup?"

Damn those Overseers, thought Dexter. They saw him take a break. Quickly, he made up a good excuse for his rest.

"There's something wrong with the water jets. They're not cutting down on the dust like they should," he lied.

"Do not screw with us Semptil! We can see via the remote that the unit is functioning. However, if you claim it is not working, then working it is not," the Overseer proclaimed as it remotely turned off the dust inhibitor.

Angrily, Dexter powered up the drill and rammed it into the rock, spewing dust and soot in quantities that he had never experienced. The sediment quickly overloaded the filters, and they clogged. Cut off from air, Dexter collapsed.

Minutes later, revived, he found himself looking at a meditech. "What happened?" he asked.

"You suffered from chondritic inhalation and near asphyxiation," the technician answered stoically. "But there is a bonus for you. You get to go home and see your kid, without pay, of course."

"But you know what will happen," protested Dexter.

"Yes, but you need the rest. You only have two weeks left until you retire. No one else has ever made it this far. Don't blow it. You can always,...well, anyway, go home and see your kid. That's an order," commanded the master medical technician.

Too exhausted to protest, Dexter rose and was led to the transport waiting to take him home.

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Later, as he looked down upon the landscape, the scars of the cataclysmic battle that took place nearly fifty years ago still pockmark the planet. With the colonial entry approaching, a smile slowly crept across Dexter's face. He is going to see his son for the first time in weeks. The anticipation of seeing his son was great. Happily, he slowed his craft to a stop and exited it. Carefully, so as not to make any noise, he entered through the back door and tip-toed to the study to see the day's messages. As he read them, his joy turned to depression. Being three months late on the mandatory revenue enhancement duty, he hoped the state would not find out about his not working a full day. They had, and it was clearly spelled out what they expected of him. Dexter somberly poured himself a drink.

Unexpectedly, his five years old son, Jimmy, jumped into the study, startling Dexter. "Boo!" yelled his son.

"Don't you ever do that again," he scolded the child who had nearly caused a heart attack.

"I'm sorry," sulked Jimmy.

"Hey, that's all right," comforted Dexter. "Aren't you going to give me a hug?" he invited tenderly.

Dexter squeezed his son lovingly, preparing himself for what he had to do. "Isn't it past your bedtime?" he asked.

"Yes," admitted Jimmy.

"Well, go upstairs and I'll be up in a minute to tuck you in, O. K.?"

"O. K.," said his son who bounded up the stairs.

Dexter gained his composure for what he needed to do. He went up to Jimmy's room and tucked his son in.

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