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A DEARTH IN THE FAMILY

By

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I had tried just about everything to keep people from shooting at me, but nothing had worked. Painting the Zero Emission Transport as an ice cream truck seemed like a good idea at the time, but driving by groups of youngsters while they were waving snack vouchers high in the air, without stopping, quickly gave me away. Turning the ZET into a makeshift Emergency Medical Transport was worse. County dispatch confused me with a real EMT vehicle when law enforcement officers reported seeing me in the area. A man nearly died that day because of the mistake. If my boss hadn't intervened, I'd be in prison.

He said to do whatever I needed to do to protect myself from weapons. I guess he never figured I'd be that inventive. But I decided to do almost anything to save my skin. The ZET had blast-proof glass and tires, and I wore better body armor than the cops had, but I still worried.

Rikki stuck her head out through the garage door. "Dennis. Breakfast."

I stepped into the house to a heaping plate of southern ptarmigan eggs, no cholesterol, potatoes fried in non-fat oil, croc bacon, multi-fiber toast, cranberry juice and a supplement.

"What are you trying today?"

Rikki had her red hair tied back in a grade school girl sort of way, put on a little lip rouge, and some eye color which framed her green eyes nicely. She had apparently been reading the marriage improvement cubes again. She was trying, God bless her.

"I guess not anything. It just hasn't worked. I'm guessing I'm going to have to just take my lumps."

"Take your lumps? One of those lumps could make me a widow. I thought you were going to talk to your boss."

I spoke through mouthfuls of food. "Did. Henry said the armor they issued is the latest made. Only military weapons can penetrate it. Not likely that a private citizen's going to have one of those."

Rikki scowled at me. I stopped shoveling food. "What?"

"Those are awfully big bites."

I dumped the food off my fork and stabbed half as much. "Sorry."

"Didn't we have this worked out? You told me that if Henry couldn't guarantee your safety, you'd leave."

"He guaranteed it."

"Saying that people 'most likely' won't have a weapon to kill you is no guarantee. What if someone hits a joint?"

"Rikki will you stop being such a worry wart?"

"Dennis will you please think of someone else besides what you want?"

"I am. I'm thinking of you and Annie. In three years I can retire and then we'll have all the time to do what we want. As it is I only work five hour days." I wiped my mouth with the napkin and tossed it onto the matching tablecloth.

"In three years Annie won't have a daddy. He'll be swimming in the center of the sun, because that's where they'll be sending your body."

I stood up from the table and put my hand up. "Rikki don't do that. Annie's going to hear you one of these days and you're going to scare her. Now, I have to go. Thanks for breakfast." I kissed her on the cheek. "I love you."

I walked out to my transport, waiting in the garage. I knew Rikki was either slamming dishes into the sanitizer, or starting to cry, but right then I couldn't do anything about it.

The aluminum paved streets of New Angeles seemed more crowded than usual. Probably part of the Sky Train was down again. I punched up the county grid looking for spaces that had the proper lapse time after last seeding. The coverage was pretty thick, our county being mostly suburbs. Why couldn't I have had a county like Jerry Oswald? Plenty of rural space left. He didn't have to map the seeding if he didn't want to. Just start from east and head west and by the time he reached the other border, he could go back and start over without any danger of violating EcoFed land abuse laws. Not me.

I had to carefully log and track all seedings, since I could only work in county designated greenspaces. My log showed over 80% coverage. One large area was open in

the southwest but with the roadway so jammed, it would take over an hour to get there, and just as long to get back. The only other choice for the day was the greenspace near Phil Kick's place, and I wasn't about to go near that psycho. He had shot at me twice already this year trying to protect his small land, on which he was always puttering about.

I pulled at the transport's yoke and headed for southwest. Out my left window, my eye caught a group of teens, playing where they shouldn't be, battling with a swarm of locusts for control of a greenspace. The kids wanted to finish their yardball game and the locusts wanted the dandelions I seeded there. One of the teens swiped at the insects with his bladed stick, and caught one in mid flight, chopping the four inch beastie in half. Good thing I wasn't an EcoFed.

I can remember when my grandpa told me they used to pickle locusts to cut up in public school biology class. Now if you looked at one wrong, it would cost you 500. Of course these weren't the same acrididae. These were their DNA altered cousins.

Thirty years ago, at the turn of the century, all chemical herbicides were banned. Every weed had been able to be controlled through natural methods. And everyone could, except dandelions. Without any competition, the dandelions flourished. Home owners complained. The outcry got so bad that state governors had to call an emergency meeting to deal with the problem. Enter the dandelocust- a genetically altered locust with a taste for only dandelions.

For years, the project was a huge success. The genetic engineer won a Nobel prize for her work. But after just two decades a disturbing trend showed up. Dandelocust

populations started declining at a grisly speed. The insects became so efficient at their work, there wasn't enough food to go around and they became a threatened species.

Enter the Council for Animal Rights and Provisions.

CARP contended that we created the mess with the dandelocust and that we had to find a solution that would preserve the integrity of the species. Enter me. A seeder. One of us for each county in each state. We had fantastic salaries, great benefits and an excellent pension plan, worked only 20-25 hours a week, and were the most hated men in the county. We were hated more than the staffers at the IRS checkpoints along the Interstate, or the owner of Honest Gabe's Used Transport-o-rama.

It was my job to seed dandelion growth in the county so the locusts will have enough to eat. I searched the county for open greenspaces to seed into, but sometimes the seeds over-sprayed onto private property. Home owners said creating my position was no solution at all, that the weed situation was just as bad as it ever was, but now their tax dollars were used to maintain it. Maybe so. All I know is people shot at me more than they shot at cops.

The southwest was much less crowded than the county seat. I had just pulled to the edge of the greenspace when a light flashed on the upper corner of my visor's Heads-Up Display. The transport slowed and the emergency magnet grabbed the pavement holding the vehicle secure. I stabbed the toggle and the visor opaqued, Rikki's 3-d transmission filling my view. "Hello?"

"Hi. Can you talk?"

"I don't know. Can we?"

"Dennis, I'm just scared. Promise you'll talk to Henry again. Please?"

"Honey, I did. He can't do anything."

"Then quit."

"And what do we do about finances?"

A pout traced her mouth. "I don't care. Just tell him you're leaving if he doesn't protect you better. He won't call your bluff."

"Rikki, I can't."

"Then I'm leaving."

Her words smacked me. "Whoa there!"

"No Dennis. Annie and I can't live like this."

"Can't we talk about this when I get home?"

"No. Talk to him today or Annie and I are going to my mother's, and you can play robogardener 'til your heart is content."

"Rikki this isn't fair."

"You're not fair. I wish just once you'd realize that the decisions you make affect me and Annie too. And when you make bad decisions, I have to bear part of the consequences. Everything I decide, I ask myself first how this is going to affect you." She began to cry.

"Now what's wrong?"

"I just don't feel like you love me as much as you say you do. If you did, you'd care more about what your decisions do to me."

"Rikki, calm down for a minute."

"No! You just think I'm being over-emotional. Well, you're being under-emotional. This is it Dennis. It's either your job or us. You can let me know which tonight."

The transmission went dead as she cut the call off. This was not the start of a good day. My visor cleared and I eased the transport back into gear, running parallel to the greenspace. My fingers hopped over the control panel, releasing a telescoping tube from the side of my rig. A fine spray of seed covered the area, followed by an organic fertilizer. At the most, the seeds would germinate in four hours. I finished the two acre area in just under twenty minutes, swinging the transport around to head back to the north. I had a meeting with my boss.

I palmed the sensor pad to my boss's office, the door sliding into the wall with the whistle of compressed-air. I didn't care that he was on the visor. "Henry, we need to talk."

"I'll call you back in a bit." Henry stabbed the control panel and removed his visor, turning to me. "And good afternoon to you. Considering the fact that I'm your supervisor, and that this is my office, do you think you could be even a bit courteous?"

"Look, I'm sorry. Things are kind of in a shambles personally. We need to come to some kind of arrangement about my job safety."

"Please sit down." He gestured to the sensotrack chair in front of his desk. As I sat the chair molded perfectly to my body, distributing my weight for the most comfortable position. "You mean you want to quit, don't you?"

"Uh, well..."

"Your wife already called me."

"She what?"

"I think it's rather amusing. Wives usually call bosses to get jobs back."

I didn't see the humor. "Will you excuse me a minute?" I stomped out of Henry's office, down the hallway to an empty office, banging through the door. I snatched the com receiver off the base and stabbed in the number I wanted. Rikki didn't answer, the irritating messaging tone did. The anger drained from me. Was she gone already?

I left the office, dragging myself back to Henry's suite. As I pulled my feet out from under myself, and dropped into his guest chair, the chair sensed my increased weight and nearly threw me to the floor trying to compensate.

"Careful."

I looked up Henry. Good thing I could draw on the mutual respect we had in our business relationship. "Rikki had no right to call you."

"Dennis, don't stress about it. My fourth wife was the same way."

Four? I had a hard enough time trying to maintain a relationship with one woman. How could anyone want to try it four times? "She just doesn't understand what kind of pressure I feel to make things a go for her and Annie."

"So you want to quit?"

"Henry, I don't know what I want. I definitely don't want psychos like Phil Kick shooting at me when I drive by."

"I already told you they can't hurt you."

"And that's it? They can't penetrate the glass and tires or my little polar bear suit so that's supposed to make me feel better. By the way, when it's over eighty outside, that suit is a furnace."

"Take it down to maintenance and have them check the thermoconductor."

"That's it?"

"Dennis, you know that I really like you. But this time I'm going to have to tell you the way it is. Your job is federally mandated. If the position is not full, I'll have the EcoFeds on my back within the week. I don't need a huge departmental fine in addition to everything else I have to deal with. Commissioner Bates is up for re-election this year and he's not going to stand for any scandal."

"So replace me with a newbie, pay me half on my pension, and save the output on a reduced salary for the position."

"That's the problem. There's some kind of weird stigma attached to what you do, like those creepy guys that used to run the funeral homes back in the 1900's. No one has even applied for the job in the last six years."

"Which means?"

"Which means you're stuck. The position has to stay filled, or we'll be in violation of federal ecology laws. That means that someone will have to go to prison. If you voluntarily quit, that someone will have to be you."

"You're kidding right?"

"Not this time."

"Henry this is insane! I have a job I can't quit? You know all through college everyone told me 'Get into civil service. Once you're in civil service you're set. You

can't be fired from civil service.' I never dreamed you couldn't quit it either. When I got this job, I thought all my problems were over."

"The having is not as satisfying, after all, as the wanting."

"So my only way out of this is injury or death."

"Apparently. That's why the department is so intent on keeping you safe. That's why I can guarantee you won't get hurt. And that's why they have no problem spitting out serious finance to protect you with the latest equipment."

"This inhales deeply."

"Huh?"

"Figure it out."

"Oh. Dennis I am sorry. I don't like having to treat you like this."

It wasn't my choice anymore. That hacked me off, but an idea struck my head.

"What if I found my own replacement?"

"No one has applied for-"

"I know six years. But what if someone wanted it?"

"I guess as long as they were trainable and weren't mentally ill, that would be fine.

I thought you were mad at Rikki for riding you so hard to quit. Change your mind?"

"That's when I thought I had a choice in the matter."

"The having and the wanting again. That's what got Adam and Eve into trouble."

"I didn't know you were religious."

"I'm not. I'm pragmatist. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference."

I stepped into the house, and noticed that Rikki was ready to argue again. She sat in her crochet chair, not crocheting, arms folded across her chest, eyes burning a hole in the front door as I stepped through. It was a nice setup. She probably heard the whine of the ZET coming up the metal paved street.

"Your boss was really rude to me on the com today."

I dropped my helmet on the entry way floor. It landed turtle-neck down, making a soft chuff on impact. I looked in the entry way mirror, noticing that I had helmet hair, my short, Indian straight tresses standing out like a dandelion. I frowned. "You put him in a bad spot by calling him and discussing something that you didn't need to talk to him about. It's my job."

"It's our home. And if you won't talk to him, I'm going to. You can think I'm the biggest snot in the west but I'm going to protect what's mine- home, kids and husband."

"I talked to him."

"And?"

"It's stay or jail."

"How can he do that? It's illegal."

"It's the federal government." I explained Henry's dilemma. After she realized that I tried to do something, her face softened.

"So do you think you can find a replacement?" By this time she had moved into the kitchen and was cutting up vegetables for dinner.

I called to her from the viewing room. "I have a really good idea." I glared at the Link-Up. "480 channels and nothing on."

She brought in a plate of steaming veggies and sword bass, and some decaf iced tea.

"So if I do find a replacement, what do we do for finances?"

"Why not go into business for yourself?"

"Doing what?"

"Dennis, you're a smart guy. It's one of the reasons I married you. You could do just about anything."

"You told me I make bad decisions."

"I said you we're smart. I didn't say you had a lot of wisdom. There's a big difference you know."

"So what do you expect me to do then?"

"Good grief! The LU is full of all kinds of commercials on making a living. You're 35. A lot of men are retired at your age already."

"I could retire in three years if I stay on with Henry."

"I can't take three more years."

"Okay. I'll find a replacement then find a business to start. Happy?"

"If you'll really follow through."

"I will. I will. We have any ice cream?"

"You haven't finished your dinner."

"It's good but it's not what I want right now. I think I want junk food."

"So what's not new? No we don't have any."

"I'm going to go get some. Want any?"

"It'll raise your cholesterol."

"And I'll take a pill. Want any?"

She huffed. "Strawberry cheesecake."

I figured there were plenty of people who wanted a cushy job and they hadn't applied because they couldn't believe no one would leave. They were probably waiting for the announcement that I was going to retire before they figured they'd have a shot. Much of New Angeles looked so different after the quake. But neighborhood stores like the one I was headed to provided a small thread to the past. I liked walking because outside of my thick work jumpsuit, I had anonymity. No one hating me or shouting profanity or even shooting at me. I could become one of the members of society again. I was free. The sky was just settling to dusk and an orange flicker caught my attention a block away.

Bums. Or rather, the homeless. Everyone called them Bums, with a capital B. But being part of the local government, I had to watch my mouth or I'd find myself out the door with no job, but no pension either.

I guess I should have been more compassionate. Rikki and I had suffered a few financial setbacks and we were aware more than most people how someone could end up as a Bum. But with the massive amount of government funding going for retraining, relocation, and rehabilitation of these guys, I didn't see how anyone could still live in this condition. There was the common belief that it was just the way they wanted it and that no matter how much was offered, nothing could be worth giving up their freedom. Some just didn't know how to handle an opportunity, EQ skills being so low and all.

An opportunity.

Did I hear what I said? My brain started the idea moving. Somewhere in that group was my replacement. I galloped halfway before slowing down. Transients were a suspicious group. No need to frighten them. I could hear the compressed whine of a prosthetic exo-skeleton somewhere within the group. I walked over slowly. Most of the group backed out of the light that the barrel gave off. Two stepped forward, shoulder to shoulder.

"Who 're you?"

The speaking man wore a new hat, contrasting with the rest of his dress. "I just want to talk."

"What fer?"

I could tell he was putting on a Bum's accent. "Well, I'd like to offer someone a job."

"Hey boys," shouted the man with the hat, "did you hear that? Mister Clean wants to offer us a job." He turned back to me. Okay Mr. Clean, what's this job?"

"Uh... first I have to know that I can trust you. I could get in big trouble for being here."

"Trust us? Sure you can Mr. Clean. Why we're so grateful that you saw fit to come over here and talk to us at all, we'd do just about anything for you. Thank you for wanting to liberate one of us out of our pitiful state."

"I'm going to level with you. When I tell you who I am, you'll probably want to tear me apart. Just please don't hurt me."

"You mean you're seriously worried that we would hurt you. You're stupider than you look." Some of the men moved back into the firelight. "Tell us Mr. Clean, what's so bad that we would care in the first place, and attack you in the second?"

I swallowed hard. The heat from the barrel had taken most of the moisture out of my throat. "I'm the county Seeder."

By their reaction I could tell that even out here, that meant something. I explained that I needed someone to fill my shoes, and wanted someone that I could teach the ropes to.

"Mister," said the hat man, "honesty goes a long way out here and now I'm going to give you some. I think it's down right insulting that you would come out here and ask for our help, after you figure out that no one else in this county wants your stinking job."

I hung my head.

"I think it's lousy that you would have never even considered acknowledging us if anyone you consider half way respectable would have been a tiny bit interested."

I heard the whine of the decades old exo-skeleton again and looked up to see a man moving across the back of the group. The human top-half of him was dressed in tattered combat fatigues, decorated with a few Congressional Medals of Honor. The bottom half of him was a wheelchair with spidery, mechanical legs for movement instead of wheels.

"And it's lousy that you buy into the stereotype that everyone has about us. I'm going to tell you something that those Federal program morons haven't figured out: we are here because we want to be. And that doesn't make us stupid, or lazy or worthless. If the opportunity was still available, we'd probably all be homesteaders."

I turned to leave.

"Don't run off Mr. Clean. You need to hear all of it."

I stopped and faced the barrel.

"See Joshua over there? He was back in the late 20th century what you would call a Wall Street Wizard. But the grind chewed him into bits. He had lots of money, but his wife decided he wasn't the kind of husband he should be. So she took it all, and he quit fighting. He'll tell you he sleeps better at night now."

I squinted to see Joshua raise a bottle of sun wine to his lips.

"Sure he drinks a lot, and the do-gooders from Detox come by each week and stuff chemicals down his throat to filter his blood. He quit fighting them after a while too."

Joshua let out a belch.

"He's still got a great mind. Try and beat him at chess. You can't. Bobby Fisher might not have been able to. And Adnan. He owned a huge business, until his family drove his wife to suicide. See, there were these unspoken rules that each woman was supposed to know and live by. Adnan's mother expected absolute compliance and loyalty. Lizzy couldn't deal with the frustration of trying to please the unpleasable. So she took a bunch of pills. Detox didn't get the call in time. Adnan still cries himself to sleep."

Adnan spoke up from the edge of the firelight. "We have portable places to sleep, and every night the change transport spills coins in the street for us to collect. The church folks come by with soybutter sandwiches, and new 55 gallon drums for our fires. Of course they don't realize that no self respecting Bum would use a new barrel. And now

they have started making them out of stainless steel, so they won't rust. If they don't rust, we can't use them. But we don't want to hurt their feelings so we stack them in the alley."

I eyed the man with the exo-skeleton. "How about the veteran over there?"

"Poor Old Lou? Leave him alone mister. He's not so bad off. Not as bad as he'd be doing your job. He's been shot at enough already."

Probably true. I turned away ashamed. But before I did I offered them all my currency, which they happily took. I walked home forgetting the ice-cream.

"What about your brother?" I asked Rikki two days later. "He's into that Post-quake-retro-90's-enviro-planet-nature- thing. Maybe he's got some ideas."

"I can try the Chat channels and see if he's on."

He was and Rikki asked him to call us when he was finished. I talked to him about an hour later. He sounded shocked that I would ask for his help or advice on anything. I guess that was the nature of our relationship. He explained that according to restrictions now in place, a volunteer lobbyist could not hold any type of paid government job, local, state or Federal, without jeopardizing their status as a lobbyist. Unlike my job, lobbyists positions were in high demand. And everyone knew that lobbyists received stipends, which paid very well despite the position being volunteer. It would probably be impossible to convince someone to leave their Capitol Hill position to work on a local level. I was really out of options.

Two weeks later, the pressure at home was really building when I backed the ZET into a Personal Transport. For some reason, the PT didn't register on my on-board sensor net and I rolled right over it. The situation could have been better if the PT wasn't registered to a city official for use during work hours. Even if it had been his own PT, things wouldn't have been so bad, but this was his work vehicle. Now there was a claim between the city and the county. And some things hadn't changed much since the turn on the century.

Henry called me into his office and lambasted me. It was one of the few times I have ever seen him really enraged. For me it was the last straw. I was done with this job and its stigma, done with playing politics and done with Rikki's constant dissatisfaction over my job. I headed to the workshop where I decide to work on the plan I had been forming in my head for the last two weeks.

If someone caught me, I end up in jail for sure. But I knew I had to damage my light armor and get someone to fire off a couple of rounds at me. The stress of the incident along with the failing of the armor would allow me to be able for emotional disability. If I played it right, a judge would allow me retirement. It was a low and sneaky way out, but I really didn't care.

I pulled the suit out of my ZET and hoisted it up onto the workbench. I couldn't damage the chest area, a stray shot might get through to my body and kill me if it hit me in a vital spot. I pulled out an old-fashioned sledge that we kept around for nostalgia. Pneumatic mini-rams did the job better now, but the pattern of their blows would be too

easy to figure out. I needed random strikes to mask the damage from detection. I pummeled the arms, legs and back of the suit five or six times, until the brittle armor started to bend like weakened fiberglass used to. All that remained was to find someone to shoot at me. That was the easy part.

P. D. Kick's yard was less than 3 kilometers away, and my palms started to sweat heavily. I knew that if he was home, it would be no problem to get him to react to me. The ZET glided past his yard and I looked to see if he was putting about on his small land. No sign of him. I maneuvered the ZET to the far end of the greenspace near his house and extended the telescopic nozzle to dispense seed. Out it came. The ZET crept closer to Kick's yard and I knew I had to stop the spray late to spill some of the seed over the retaining wall.

A half a liter of seed went into Kick's yard before I could get it stopped. I didn't need that much. I yanked the ZET to a stop right in front of his house. I was really asking for it. I pulled out the hand operated de-germinator, which looked something like the metal detectors that people used to use on the beach. The device would automatically locate and nullify any seed in Kick's lawn. I took care to scan every part of his grass and got so involved in what I was doing, I didn't see the barrel of the scattergun slip out the window, pointing at me. The blast caught me in the small of the back and knocked me to the ground. Everything went black.

The neurologist told me it wasn't just the force of the blast alone, or the way I fell that left me paralyzed. Mostly the problem came from the impact of the weakened armor punching into two of my vertebrae and tearing them out of position. I really didn't care. I knew what the friends of the transient veteran meant. As sick as it sounded, I was better off. The county provided me with a pension and the exoskeleton they paid for would allow me to spend up to eight hours a day mobile, with my family. I did have a little trouble at first with Henry.

"Dennis," he said one day when he came to visit me, "the Scientific Investigator's report shows that the force of Mr. Kick's blast was not enough to frag that armor the way it did. He would have had to have been standing right behind you with the muzzle pressed right into your back. Energy burns on the window sill support his story that he shot you from the house. Anything to say about that?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, so it's coy is it? I don't feel like playing today so I'm dealing my hand open. For some unbelievable reason, you tampered with the suit's structural integrity. A few weeks with the suit at county crime might turn up something. And I could stick you on the encephalograph and run a battery of questions at you. But that's expensive and if nothing comes of it, it'll be my butt in the sling."

I stared at him waiting for the rest of it.

"I don't give a rip if you started this business rolling yourself or not. I have a position to fill to keep the EcoFeds off my back and since I have things already worked out with your replacement-"

My eyes grew huge.

"-as far as I'm concerned there is no investigation to follow. If you did cause this whole mess, I suppose that losing the use of your legs is punishment enough. Give my best to Rikki when you see her."

Like I said, he approved the pension. At times I felt like a crook for taking it, then I remembered all the grief I had to put up with for free, and my conscience crawled back into its rightful place in my skull.

"You know what Caroline told me?" Rikki asked a few days after I had been released from the hospital. "That Mister P.D. Kick was fined 75 for discharging a weapon within the city limits. 75! And you're disabled for life and he could have killed you."

"Well hon," I said from behind my nostalgic newspaper, "sometimes things have a way of working themselves out. I'm home now, and we don't have to worry about finance and I can spend more time with Annie."

She smiled weakly. "Dennis you were almost killed. I'd like to see how the fact that Kick is still at home waiting for the next guy is going to be worked out. Someone's going to have to die before that guy is stopped."

"I don't think so." I turned the paper around so she could see the page I was reading. It showed P.D. Kick's picture with a caption, and his title as new county seeder.

"Oh," was all she said.