

To Serve in Hell

A prelude to *Heirs of Mars* (2 of 2)

by

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Neil

God, I hate Mars.

Neil Cohen stared up at the huge rotating blades of the vertical windmill. As soon as the first blade swept past, he jogged up the shallow slope toward the turbine with one wary eye on the next blade slowly swinging toward him. Near the top of the mound he had to angle to the right to stay ahead of the blade and then leap the last meter up onto the top of the turbine housing. Here, the three Darrieus blades swirled around him like a slow hurricane of steel and the hollow drums of the Savonius wind scoops whirled about the central axle above him. Far overhead, a web of guy-wires held the mill upright, straining against the keening Martian winds. Neil paused to catch his breath, chest heaving, bent over with his hands on his knees. Every exhalation fogged up his mask, hiding the world behind a white mist. Trickle of sweat ran down his back and legs, making the skin-tight pressure suit chafe even more.

Straightening up, Neil caught a blast of wind full in the chest and stumbled back to the edge of the turbine. He dropped to one knee.

“You okay, Cohen?” Static muffled Alice’s voice over the wireless.

“Yeah.” Neil scrambled to the center of the housing and unlocked the access panel. Inside he saw the mounds of sand and volcanic ash piled up in the corners around the shafts and gears.

“Damn it.” He pulled out his utility knife to poke and prod the filth.

“You see more in there?”

“Yeah. How the hell is it getting in?” Neil swept a light through the dusty haze floating on top of the ash.

“I don’t know. Sanjay found more in Number Twenty-Two yesterday. I think the welds are coming apart. These things are almost fifty years old now.”

“Yeah. I’ll have to bring out the vac tomorrow. Okay, I’m coming back in.” Neil locked up the housing and shuffled back to the edge of the turbine. A blade swung by and he started jogging back down toward the Perrin wind farm hab.

“Step it up, Neil.”

He glanced right and saw the next blade coming around. He hurried, taking long loping strides down the shallow slope. On the third hop, his boot shot out from under him on the loose gravel and he crashed down on his back side.

“Neil! Get up!”

He rolled over and scrambled on all fours. The blade was coming. It looked slow, but only because it was so massive. He had seen a windmill blade smash aside a rover that had rolled too close, and he had heard about much worse from the other farms. Neil dove for the safety line, a yellow rope half-buried in the sand at the edge of the mound. He fell short.

The blade struck his right shoulder and threw him half a dozen meters across the dusty yard. He landed on his back, staring up at the pale rose sky and the tiny golden sun just about to dip below the edge of the canyon walls. His entire right side throbbed and his back ached. For a moment, tiny white spots buzzed through his field of vision, but they faded away and he stood up. His ankle shuddered but held.

“Neil?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Suit’s okay. Looks like it just winged me.” He turned and limped back to the hab’s north hatch with a sharp pain in his right ribs.

An hour later, after unsealing his suit and waving his supervisor’s concerns away, he swung by the cafeteria. He gulped down a steaming bowl of something they were calling stew and he went home. Home was at the end of a corridor so narrow that two slender people had to turn sideways to pass each other. The mismatched floor and ceiling panels had been scavenged from other, older habs or discarded from New Troy for being below tolerance, and they creaked and flexed as he walked over them. The recycled air smelled of sweat and tasted of mold. There were six dorms on his hall and half the doors were open. Neil waved to his neighbors as he

passed them, but everyone had their visors on. Only his footsteps and someone's coughing broke the silence.

His door, like the others, was a dented sheet of metal on two wobbly castors that slid aside with a squeal and a rattle. Inside the three-by-three meter room, Beth had already rolled out the beds and was getting little Jeremy out of his pale blue p-suit. Neil leaned down to kiss his wife before dragging his door shut with a rusty shriek. Lights and shadows from the hall winked through the irregular gaps around the door.

"Alice called." Beth glanced at him, her eyes shadowed and lined, her lips thin and pale. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. It was just a bump." He rolled his arm around to show it was still working, and slipped off his jacket. "How was your day?"

"Fine."

Neil sat down with his back against the wall and pulled his son into his lap. "And how was your day, buddy?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Kay."

"Learn anything in school today?"

"Dad, what's a doggy?"

Neil exchanged a look with Beth. She shrugged, leaving him to think back to his own school days spent in a dorm just like this one behind a visor listening to lectures and trying to play a sim at the same time without his parents noticing. "A dog is an animal. About this big." He held up his hands. "And they're hairy, and have four legs, and a tail." He was pretty sure that was right. At the very least, it was an accurate description of most of the animals he could name.

"Marie said she got one for her birthday."

He looked back at Beth. "Do I know Marie?"

"Pen pal. She's in France, I think."

God. Neil rubbed his eyes. *Why are they still doing that?* He sighed. “Yeah, well, Jer, sometimes boys and girls on Earth have animals, like dogs, that live in their dorms. I mean, in their houses.”

“Why?”

“To play with, I guess.”

“Can I have a dog, Daddy?” Jeremy twisted around to look up at him with his big brown eyes, his little hands digging into Neil’s undershirt. “Please?”

Neil gently unclamped his son’s fingers from his shirt and chest hair. “No, I’m sorry, buddy, we can’t have a dog.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t have any on Mars.”

Jeremy’s eyes narrowed and his lower lip poked out. “That’s what you always say!” He spun and slumped down in Neil’s lap, then kicked, then arched his back and was about to roll out off and smack his head on the floor when Neil caught him and held him close to his chest. Jeremy tried to thrash for a few more seconds, but gave up and just hiccupped with tired sobs. Beth leaned against him with one trembling hand wrapped around Jeremy’s little fist, and Neil clenched his teeth and stroked his son’s hair until the boy fell asleep.

The next morning, Neil awoke to a stiff shoulder and hip, a tender ankle, and crick in his neck from sleeping with his head angled against the metal wall. He gathered his clothes and shuffled to the bathroom at the end of the hall, waited his turn, and did his business. With his suit and skin both slightly cleaner, he wandered the narrow halls, slipping around his friends and co-workers to reach the caf and slump into a seat behind a bowl of...something hot.

Alice sat down a moment later, short dark hair still plastered back from the shower, her green p-suit wrinkled and faded. “Morning.”

Neil nodded. “Looks like.”

“Everything okay?”

“Same old.” He paused, his spoon halfway to his mouth. “It’s just, I don’t remember being so angry when I was his age. Jeremy, I mean. I got mad about the same sort of things, but I don’t remember it being so often. It’s every day now. He asked about dogs last night.”

Alice shrugged. “It’s the same for us with Verity and Sam. Same for everyone, I guess.”

“Maybe.” Neil swallowed his breakfast without tasting it. “I just wish I could ask my folks what it was like, what I was like, back then.”

She nodded. “You said they died in a car bombing, right?”

“Yeah.” Neil pushed his bowl aside. *Fourteen years ago. They never even got to meet Beth, let alone Jeremy. Damn Carties.*

“Strange.” Alice finished her bowl, exchanged it for Neil’s, and resumed eating. “So, did the Carties think one of them was a cloner?”

“I don’t know. Stupid robots. They probably thought the trucker was a cloner.” Neil drained his glass of tepid water. “Just a bad day to be on the road, I guess.” *What are the Carties so afraid of? Clones? Ghosted machines?*

“Oh, speaking of truckers, we’ve got one coming in this afternoon with parts for Number Twenty-Two. Can you give Sanjay a hand with that?”

“Sure.”

The morning passed slowly in diagnostics, inspections, and basic maintenance on the farm’s substations, transformers, and kilometer after kilometer of armored cables. Neil was just thinking about stopping for lunch when the overhead panel chimed and the farm’s avatar, Perry, appeared on the wall. The pale green face smiled and said, “Excuse me, Mister Cohen. Today’s shipment has just arrived in the main garage.”

“Okay.” Neil tossed his tools into his bag. “Tell Sanjay I’m on my way.”

In the garage he found Sanjay chatting up an Indian woman with long hair carefully braided and clipped to the back of her head. They were unloading cases of bolts, brackets, and spars from the center hatch where the truck was parked. He joined them and together they hauled

several heavy coils of cables through the hatchway and dumped them in a corner of the garage among the crates of spare parts and drums of dehydrated food stuffs.

Sanjay went on chatting and Neil noticed the woman wasn't really listening. For a moment he considered rescuing her from Sanjay's company, but the impulse passed. "Well, if you don't need anything else, I'll be getting back."

Sanjay smiled and waved him good-bye. The woman sighed and thanked him for his help. Neil was about to step out of the garage into the hall when another man emerged from the truck hatch. He was short and pale, and his p-suit's pants and jacket weren't quite the same shade of brown. The trucker strode past Sanjay and the woman with just a nod and slipped past Neil into the farm without a word.

Neil watched him veer to the left at the end of the hall. *Strange. Maybe he's looking for the bathroom. Which sounds like a good idea right about now.* With nothing but more repairs waiting for him, Neil shouldered his bag and followed the trucker. The man in brown wandered past a bathroom and turned into a cafeteria where Neil saw him speak briefly to a woman by the dirty bowls, and then he hurried out.

Very strange. Neil approached the woman. "Hey there, Evelyn. Did you know that guy just now? The trucker?"

She shrugged. "Not really. He's not one of our regulars. He was here last year, though. Back in June, I think."

"June." Neil frowned. *Nothing special about last June.* "Maybe he was here for Marco's funeral. Maybe he's family." Marco Iancu had left behind more family than most. *Two sons, a daughter, and six grandchildren. Lucky bastard.*

"I don't think so. I think he was here before that. Maybe a week before Marco died."

"So what did he want just now?"

"He's looking for Pham Lien. Must be a fan of hers," Evelyn said.

Neil froze. Marco had died a slow but not uncomfortable death at the age of eighty-one. Pham Lien wasn't twenty yet, but the poet had been dying a rather public death for years thanks

to some congenital disease. Rumor was that she didn't have much time left. *And now this trucker shows up to see her right before she dies, just like he went to see Marco. He's got to be one of them. He's got to be cloner.*

Neil hurried out of the caf and found a quiet corner where he could tap the wall and mutter, "Call Orson Grimes and Tom Aaronson." A moment later two green lights showed the other men were online. Neil wet his lips. "I found one. He's here. Right now."

"One what?" Tom's voice was distorted, no doubt from some tool clenched in his teeth.

"You know what. What we've been talking about. One of *them*."

After a pause, Orson said, "You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be without actually seeing him do it."

"Where is he?"

Neil leaned closer to the wall to whisper, "Pham Lien."

"The sick girl? Christ, you're serious." Tom's tools clattered on the floor. "I'll be there in two minutes."

"Me too," Orson said.

The green lights winked out and Neil shoved his tool bag into a nearby locker. He slipped his utility knife into his jacket pocket and walked as calmly as he could down the narrow hall.

Same filthy clothes every day. Same sludge to eat. Same work, year after year. Same fight with Jeremy every day. And every night too tired to even touch Beth. God, how long has it been since I saw her naked?

Neil quickened his pace and his hand tightened around the knife.

Tiny rooms, tiny halls. Sand and ash and dust everywhere. The feeds from Earth are all sweetness and light, all sunshine and puppy dogs. The feeds from the other habs are just one horror after another. Decompressions. Collapses. Explosions. Carty attacks. That's what I'm giving Jeremy. That's the life my little boy will have. And not a damn thing I can do about it.

He squeezed the knife.

Except this. I can do this. For mom and dad. For Beth and Jeremy. I can do this. If the damn Carties want a dead cloner so badly, then I'll give them one.

Neil turned the corner and saw the trucker moving slowly down the hall, checking the dorm numbers to his left and right. Neil swallowed. "Hey, you."

The trucker turned just as Neil heard heavy boots thumping up the hall behind him. Glancing back, he saw Orson and Tom hurrying toward him. They already had their knives out. Neil felt suddenly safer and stronger as he said, "You. You're looking for Lien, right? Because you're a cloner, right?"

The man in brown held up his empty hands. He flashed a wry smile. "I think you've got the wrong man. I'm just a humble poetry lover."

"Yeah, right." Neil saw the club strapped to the man's leg and considered the distance between them. *I can get him before he pulls it.* Yanking his knife from his pocket, Neil lunged down the hall at the trucker with Orson and Tom close on his heels.

The trucker whipped out his club and smashed it across Neil's hand before he even got close. Neil had half a second to clutch at his broken fingers before the club connected with his head, and then his knee, and suddenly he was lying on the ground. The floor spun lazily even though he wasn't moving. Neil tried to sit up just as something heavy landed on his head and shoulders, slamming him back down again. He tasted iron and copper in his mouth, and he choked as he felt a tooth floating across his tongue.

Suddenly he was hauled up and Orson was dragging him back down the hall. They were shouting and swearing, but Neil was still gasping for air, his leg refused to hold him up, and the world kept tilting to the left. He looked back and saw the trucker hurl Tom into the wall once, twice, and then he threw Tom down the corridor at them. The wind farmer crashed into the floor, crawled up to his knees, and staggered after Orson.

As they stumbled around the corner, Neil spat out a mouthful of blood. *I couldn't even do that right. I'm pathetic. I hate this place. God, I hate Mars.*

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