

WELCOME TO
HELIOS ONE



A LOVE
& DEATH
PRELUDE
BY FRANK
MARTIN

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Welcome To Helios One
A Love & Death Prelude
By Frank Martin

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By all metrics, there should have been no difference between waking up on Earth and waking up at Helios One. The temperature was perfectly set at a refreshing seventy degrees, gravity aligned meticulously at nine point eight meters per second squared, and a breathable atmosphere composed of twenty-one percent oxygen. The conditions were just what the human body needed. And yet for Dr. Neil Collins, none of that compared to opening his eyes and taking in a dark, lifeless landscape like nothing on Earth.

Although lifeless was a bit harsh, even by moon standards. For the past fourteen months, since he first arrived at the lunar base positioned on the moon's dark side, always hidden from Earth's view, Neil barely had a moment's rest. The station wouldn't be officially complete and a hundred percent operational until next year. Still, scientists and workers were constantly arriving in droves to populate the facility and get it up and running.

When Neil first arrived along with his wife Tammy, Helios One felt like a ghost town. There were more drones working outside to collect regolith, the station's main building material, than there were humans living in it. The station was designed to house thousands, a true and lively community filled with families running up and down the halls. But in those early days, only a hundred individuals called the place home. Neil would often walk the halls and barely see a soul. Only two--perhaps three people would cross his path as he ventured for one side of the station to the other.

He couldn't imagine the madness one might be driven to if they were forced to live there all alone.

But that time was in the past. Now Helios One sat at about half occupancy, enough to fill the halls with constant commotion and chatter. Neil imagined how busy the station could get with twice as many people roaming around. Part of him felt nervous. As director of Helios One, every soul within these walls would be his responsibility. It took a lot of guts and a strong backbone to accept such a job. After all, if anything were to go wrong at humanity's first civilian space station, the tragedy would fall squarely on his shoulders. But the role also filled him with a sense of pride and excitement. They were there to make history, even if it was under dire circumstances.

The plans to build Helios One stretched way before Neil was even born. The aim was to conduct novel research in space, far from Earth's atmosphere that could taint a discovery. Situating the base on the moon's dark side allowed scientists to escape the planet's constant stream of radio signals and other cosmic interference.

It was called Artemis back in those days, named after the lunar missions that brought humans back to the Moon in the early twenty-first century. But that was before humanity discovered its Sun was weakening. The star's gradual decline was slow and subtle at first. So much so that many didn't believe it was happening. But as time went on, the writing was on the wall. The sun would eventually die. Not in some far off, unknowable future. It would happen in humanity's lifetime. Unless someone found a miracle. And that was why the station was renamed from Artemis to Helios, to put an emphasis on their ultimate goal. Nothing short of solar salvation.

All that was running through Neil's mind as he stood in the shuttle bay's viewing room. It was a relatively small space, about the size of a lounge. Neil stood at the window at the front of the room, a large pane of glass that stretched the entire wall. From this position, he had a clear view of the entire hangar. The space was massive, large enough to fit several shuttles as they went to and from Earth.

Neil couldn't recall how many times he stood in this exact spot and watched a new set of arrivals exit their shuttle. The journey wasn't particularly pleasant. Most people would be in a bad mood after spending several days in a fairly enclosed space, but those who signed up for life at Helios One were aware that comfort didn't come with the job.

Like clockwork, the hangar door was lifted and the shuttle made a smooth landing inside before coming to a perfect stop. A moment later, the hangar re-pressurized, the shuttle door opened, and its occupants began exiting the spacecraft, all with smiles.

They were all strangers to Neil, but that would change in the coming days. From the moment they arrived, Neil would make sure they became familiar with his face. They had to. Helios One only worked if everyone living there understood that they could count on him. No. More than that. They had to understand that they could also count on each other.

One could say they were living on the most dangerous environment on Earth, except they weren't on Earth. On the Moon, any error, even the slightest, could endanger them all. The place needed to run like a well-oiled machine, every individual a cog operating at maximum efficiency.

Which was why Neil's adrenaline spiked like it did when an alarm began blasting throughout the hangar.

All the new arrivals, who had been out of their shuttle for a whole fourteen seconds, began looking around with frightened confusion, wondering if they had done something wrong. Neil wasn't as concerned. Without a red light flashing, he knew the problem was somewhere else. But that didn't make it any less serious.

He reached backward to tap the communicator on the wall. "Talk to me, Cheryl."

Helios One's head of security replied through the speaker a moment later. "It's Gene, Dr. Collins. The door is malfunctioning in airlock six. He was replacing a broken panel on a solar array and--"

Neil immediately burst out the door and sprinted down the hall. There was no reason to wait for Cheryl to finish. He had all the information he needed.

While running at full speed, Neil calculated that he could probably reach the airlock in under a minute. It took him just forty-six seconds.

Through a small window on the door, Neil peered into the airlock, which was drenched in a flashing red light. Still in his spacesuit, Gene lied on the floor, shouting and screaming while trying to pull his boot

free from the exterior door. When the door dropped, his leg must have dragged and gotten caught. A careless mistake.

It didn't take Neil's numerous degrees to realize he had to make a decision, a rapid one at that. He could rush into the airlock and try to pull Gene's boot free. But doing so would put his life at risk, not to mention the lives of everyone on the station if he couldn't free Gene fast enough. With the door propped open, there would be nothing separating his bare flesh from the vacuum of space.

Then again, Gene was still in his suit. He would be fine there, at least for a little while. But who knew if his foot could last until then. There was a good chance if Neil didn't act fast, Gene would end this day as an amputee. Not to mention the fact that the airlock was rapidly losing pressure integrity.

There wasn't any choice. Neil had to step in, consequences be damned.

He took several long gulps of breath, filling his lungs with as much air as they could hold before manually overriding the airlock's safety mechanism and rushing to Gene's side. The trapped man instantly began thanking him, but Neil tuned it out. Nothing had been accomplished yet. And besides, Neil couldn't say anything back, anyway.

He just got right to work, pulling on Gene's leg, praying he could wrestle it free from the steel door's massive frame. But nothing. Not even a budge. Neil kept at it, though, closing his eyes and bearing down as hard as he could.

It took a second, but Neil was surprised to sense Gene's leg start to give way. It even felt a bit easier, as if Neil suddenly gained a burst of strength. It wasn't until he looked up and saw another man in front of him that he realized someone had come to their aid.

With the stranger's help, Neil fought even harder, and together, they pulled Gene's entire body back into the airlock, allowing the door to finish closing and the room to repressurize.

The two rescuers fell back exhausted, desperate to suck in the new oxygen that began flooding the space. Gene started apologizing, but Neil still tuned him out.

"Just relax," Neil said as he struggled to get up. "We'll get you over to the infirmary as quick as we can."

Gene took the advice and laid back completely. Neil stumbled out of the airlock and already saw a medical crew sprinting towards him. Cheryl must have called them as soon as she realized Neil had left mid-conversation, which was exactly why she had the job.

Everyone at Helios One needed to be able to think on their feet, to step in whenever and wherever they were needed. Just like the mysterious man who exited the airlock after Neil.

Having greeted every new arrival personally, Neil knew all the faces on this station. But this one was different. It was a face he barely recognized from a photograph, meaning the man had been a part of the new arrivals.

Stringing together where the stranger came from in his head, Neil realized this man must have saw Neil leave the shuttle bay's viewing room when the alarm went off and bolted after him. He must have trailed Neil to the airlock, running at full speed just to keep up, an incredible feat by any standard.

Without missing a beat, Neil approached the man with his arm out. "That's one way to get acquainted with the station."

The man wore glasses and was a bit gangly, his hair parted evenly down the middle. He stood strong and sure of himself, but his eyes held an odd shyness as he shook Neil's hand. "Just figured there was help to be had."

"I'm Dr. Neil Collins, director of the station," Neil said, introducing himself.

"Dr. Will Umbra," the man replied with a veiled smirk. "My wife Elena and I are part of the Solar Deprivation Program."

"Then welcome to Helios One, Will," Neil added. "We're lucky to have you."

Will nodded as the smirk on his face grew wider. "The pleasure is all mine."

After their greeting faded, Neil made a mental note to remember the name. He loved the man's initiative. Helios One thrived because of individuals ready to jump into action. One might say it was necessary when living in a dangerous environment.

But a station also requires people who are able to fall in line and play their part of the larger machine. It didn't--wouldn't--couldn't tolerate mavericks or rule breakers. For better or worse, a man willing to dive head first into an unsecured airlock did things his own way.

So whether he liked it or not, Neil was going to have to keep an eye on this Will Umbra. He had to. For Will and his wife may end up getting them all into trouble some day on the horizon

About the Author

Frank Martin is a comic writer and author that is not as crazy as his work makes him out to be...seriously.

Since his writing career began, Frank has had multiple sci-fi and horror novels published by Severed Press and Crossroad Press. He's also released several comics including Pipe Creepers, The Macabre Motel, and the comic series Grimm Space, which features a wide ensemble of artists. Frank's recent novel, Shattered, was published by Three Furies Press. His work with Gerald von Stoddard, published under the Third Contact Comics imprint, includes A Thousand Cuts, Immortal Coil, as well as the graphic novel Love & Death on the Dark Side of the Moon.

Frank currently lives in New York with his wife and three kids. For more of his work you can visit his website at www.frankthewriter.com.