

BODY SUIT

by Suzanne Hagelin

The journey you go on is your pain, and perhaps your cure: for you must be either mad or brave before it is ended.

“Out of the Silent Planet” C.S. Lewis

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Stephen, your help has made all the difference in this book, editing, encouraging, challenging, advising—every author’s dream. I have no other way to appropriately credit you except with two heartfelt words: thank you.

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1—BODY SUIT

Mercury—the store not the planet—shone like a jewel, a brilliant, glass enclosed, egg shaped dome, wreathed with clouds, at the center of the Columbian Sky Mall. Walter gazed through the center panel of the curved walls of the most prestigious spacewear showroom in the western hemisphere. He watched for only the most distinguished customers, dressed in a subtle but well stated Orbitwalk suit, his brown eyes snapping with energy and life, black boots glinting dully at the heel with a metallic sheen. Persons of lesser budgets and more common status naturally found themselves siphoned to the side doors where a less ostentatious entry gave them a more suitable welcome.

As a persuasive defender of the theory that extraterrestrial suits were meant to be personal spaceships, Walter specialized in promoting luxury gear like XenoTek and Angyon to the wealthy. He knew his job and was good at it.

“Every model comes with skin stabilizing technology and atmospheric controls for your comfort,” he projected with a friendly, rich voice, gesturing with an aristocratic wave of his hand toward the display floor as he surveyed a handful of visitors who braved the main entrance.

A business man in an Italian suit glanced at him and moved past on the left without speaking. On his right, an older woman with a hardened face and heavy makeup looked toward him expectantly, and he discerned instantly that she would be a tedious burden, impossible to please. He much preferred to attend the attractive woman striding confidently through the entrance directly in front.

She was dressed in classic designer clothes in gray tones with cobalt blue accents; matching shoes and purse. This was the customer of choice. He turned toward her and waited for her approach. Glancing at him, she read his intent and neither responding nor rejecting it, glided into the showroom.

There was something familiar about her.

He followed her into the main area where robotic mannequins pantomimed their way through modeling poses in a dream state; on standby until their warehouse graveyard shift began. Swiveling and moving their limbs artistically, fitted in off-world body suits, they circled by, one after another, in a profusion of designs. They entered through a luminous cloud, traveled around the showroom through waterfalls, rings of fire, neon green orbs that simulated radioactive debris, and departed unharmed down a windy tunnel.

The woman fixed her eyes on one model after another as they paraded by. Her mental chatter jumped from one topic to another at lightning speed in her head, never fixing long enough to really complete a thought. *“Strong enough to handle exposure to natural forces.... Never tearing... warm enough.... I want to look good... forget about the fact that I’m wearing a suit.... What if I can’t afford what I need?... I can’t believe Belymer betrayed me... He should have that suit and look stupid in it... Will I be exposed to radioactive waste?”* and so on.

“Ah!” Walter intoned in a soothing voice next to her, “Such a troubled look for an attractive woman with the entire solar system at her disposal!” He had interrupted her thoughts after watching for a few moments to discern the limits of what she could and would spend once his powers of persuasion and flattery were fully executed.

“Allow me to help narrow down the choices for you,” he offered with raised eyebrows, a nod and a gracious manner that

would've flattered an interplanetary ambassador, "This range of suits is designed for miners and quarry workers and would be entirely unsuitable for a lady of your carriage. Let me just adjust..." Whipping out a flat hand-sized disk, he touched its smooth surface with a few quick taps and the modeling robots narrowed to a certain range of tasteful options within their quadrant. The rest cycled elsewhere.

"There! If you would step this way, Lady..." he paused expectantly, waiting for a name.

"Operative Frandelle, of the..." she hesitated, not really wanting to say 'Mars Expedition' and give away her situation. She had been forced to indenture herself to pay off her former business partner's debts and had barely escaped prison.

"No need to say more," Walter interjected quickly, a model of discretion. He always kept up on the news and her name was enough for him to remember the case. He understood completely where she was going, and what she would need. "I have served many honorable citizens who elected to increase their net worth through service contracts off world." This was his way of adding some dignity to her need for a Hostile Environment Work suit (HEW).

Most HEW customers were adventurous contractors looking for lucrative returns on a year or two of labor somewhere in the near solar system. Those who signed on with the Mars Expedition, the newest and most risky pioneering effort in the world of interstellar colonization and resource extraction, were looking at the greatest opportunities in the galaxy: wealth, new skills, developing new science and technology, being a formative part of the next stage in human expansion. It was a heady prospect for any person willing to take the dive. Walter had considered it himself though not for the best reasons; his desire to escape was stronger than the longing for adventure. A lack of money to buy space gear

had kept him out this time, but maybe by the time the next team was recruited he would be able to afford the suit he wanted.

Operative arrangements were another matter, more of a limited work release program that gave debtors to society a way to pay off non-violent crimes or exorbitant legal settlement costs. Once on site, they were equal to contractors but received no pay until their debts were covered. For most, that could be accomplished in one to two years on the Moon – much quicker on Mars, he was sure.

Seating her in an elegant, white leather chair, and offering her a tall glass of mint iced tea, the rep introduced himself.

“Walter,” he smiled engagingly and took her hand with a warm, friendly handshake. “Honored to be of service, Contractor Frandelle. Let me describe the concerns your new enterprise opens up and the variety of solutions we have to solve them.”

“Thank you,” the attractive woman accepted as she tasted the tea. She usually went by Sil but declined to give him the advantage of her first name.

He began the understated performance that had earned him his reputation in sales, weaving, introducing, alternating, speaking, waiting, and artfully leading her to the one suit he knew she would want the most. It took two hours of interaction and culminated with the now lovely woman standing before him clothed in beauty and style, exuding all the confidence that belonged to a masterpiece.

Sil stood in front of a full length mirror clothed in the burgundy HEW suit. The leather like material framed her figure better than any other suit. Her reddish blonde hair was pulled back tightly in a utilitarian bun from her face and she wore only the faintest makeup, but the effect was startling. It transformed her from a stressed, intense, pale faced, thirty-something woman to a calm, even mysterious, woman with a purpose. She posed, turned,

smiled faintly, looked at her hazel eyes and remembered that they were the feature she was most proud of.

Not bad, she thought. But it's got to be way out of my price range. I have expensive tastes.

“The XT-247 is very popular in the diplomatic circles. Not only is it beautiful and flexible, but it has the highest level of puncture and bullet resistance ever made. We like to say it's ‘anti-assassin’,” Walter informed her with an appraising look. The shade of the suit was adjustable but he had chosen the burgundy to flatter her coloring and he knew it had done what it needed to do.

“How much is it?” Sil asked attempting to be offhanded, hiding how much she wanted it.

“I'm afraid this is one of our most expensive models,” Walter responded apologetically, “I knew you would want to make an informed decision so I have shown you a full range of our Hews. All of them are effective. This one is the best.”

Sil glanced over at the pile of other suits she had tried on and the selection of models hanging that remained to be tried. None of them begged to be owned like this one.

“How much is it?” she asked again.

“With the highest measure of toxin safety, radioactive waste collection systems, uv-ray shielding, air quality adjustments in addition to all our standard features, you are getting top value for your money. Not to mention that it comes with a lifetime guarantee on all parts, and free labor for the first year.”

“But, how much...” Sil tried yet again.

“Consumer Analysis has reported no failures and complete satisfaction with this model from its introduction on the market until today and company stock has skyrocketed because of its sales. No other model has even close to the number of sales on the Moon and it's second on the list for...”

“Excuse me, Walter,” Sil interrupted, a tight-lipped look spreading across her face as the suit’s charm began to lose hold in the face of sticker dread, “I have limited funds and no credit. Don’t hold me in suspense.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Walter effused warmth and sincerity. “I wanted you to understand how great a value this suit entails because, though it is expensive, the offer I can make today is rare. We’ve moved a lot of our inventory and I can afford to be generous.”

Sil became suddenly tired of his game – and Walter saw the look that crossed her face.

“600 universals is over 20% off the retail value and...” he purred in his most soothing voice as she fled shuddering to the changing room.

“I don’t care!” she shot back over her shoulder, “I’ll take the cheapest one that will do the trick no matter how ugly it is.”

“Who am I kidding?” She murmured bitterly to herself as she changed into her own clothing. “My days of style, high society, money, success and respect are over.” She choked back an angry tear and gritted her teeth to shove the wave of discouragement back into its cage in her belly. *Face of steel*, she reminded herself as she returned to the rep, *face of steel*.

Walter matched her chill expression with a stone face of his own. He smelled the threat of a small commission and allowed her the only taste of disapproval he ever extended.

“Of course the BAV-21 has been a sturdy model for generations. We have some refurbished ones that are quite affordable even for the most frugal of speculators...” he breathed disdainfully, letting the last word hang in the air.

She shuddered ever so slightly and grew still, delaying the moment when she must pick up the inferior suit.

Walter was watching her and waiting, comfortable in his role, and completely unprepared for what happened next.

She turned and lifted her eyes. A passing glance in his direction caught him. Her gaze, unguarded, reached him, pierced him, and for an instant he was only human and so was she. He saw her soul and witnessed the desolation that resided there. Suddenly he knew. The sorrow and weariness he had glimpsed was familiar. He identified with the gut-wrenching drama playing out under the surface of her calm exterior. He had lived it before.

His sales brain warned him not to allow the human connection but it was too late. Maintaining an appearance of detachment was still possible, though.

Sil looked away again and picked up the ‘sturdy model’. She felt the heavy material and tried to read the tag.

“Made of metal alloys, organic and composite materials. R26-vx capacitor. Double headed four chambered multi-purpose waste storage, trion technology heating and cooling system...”

Her vision blurred a little and that sick feeling in her stomach began to surface again. This suit, only 47 universals, made her feel like a cow in a trashcan.

Then her mind flashed on her former business partner’s deceitful face and it boosted her morale and hardened her resolve. She couldn’t prevent what he had done to her, but she was still the same person she had always been and knew how to get what she wanted.

“Some contractors have taken an interest in our co-investment plan,” Walter allured gently as he coaxed his compassion into a back corner of his mind, “It requires a mere 20 universals to cover the cost of paperwork.”

He picked up discarded Hews, arranged them on their models and sent them gliding back to the showroom conveyor. This was a task the mannequins usually did for themselves but he found it a useful tactic in making a better sale. There was something compelling about removing options one by one.

“Co-investment plan? What is that?” Sil took a deep breath and entered what she thought of as her transaction-mode. She gave Walter her face of steel, raised an eyebrow and cocked her head slightly. This was a posture she had often adopted when negotiating with clients in her previous life. Separated as she was from her former power, it still had an effect, even on Walter.

He turned to look at her and understood the time had come for solid negotiation. Fortunately, he had himself back in hand and was ready.

“It’s a contract added onto your indentureship. Basically, you add however much time to it that’s needed to cover the cost of the suit after you’ve paid off your debts – before,” he emphasized, “Before earning any money of your own to make a new start.”

“What is the interest?” she shot the words at him in a staccato, fixing a tiger’s gaze on him and pulling herself up tall. It added a sense of danger to the process.

“4% the first two years, 15% the next and it goes up two points a year after that,” Walter responded flatly, unable to look away, unwilling to yield to her stare. Her transition into a force to be reckoned with, knowing as he did what lay underneath, made her interesting.

“What penalties?” she pressed taking a step closer and leaning toward him. Her eyes smoldered with an animal’s intensity. She became even more compelling.

Walter inhaled deeply before he answered. “The...” he brushed his forehead, sensing a higher risk if he looked away. “The penalty for defaulting before the end of ten years is...” His words failed him and the room felt dark as he searched for the logical conclusion to his sentence. Her proximity was making it hard to think.

“Is what?” she asked with a veneer of politeness, as though she were not the one in control. “Death?” Her eyes blazed with fire and his heart raced.

“Ha...” he gasped lamely but realized she wasn’t joking. The pathos and intensity he had seen in her combined to grip him. Whatever the penalty actually was, she could see no life beyond the ten year default. “Fines, or work penalties if the fines aren’t paid.”

“A work prison,” Sil hissed, releasing him from her gaze and turning away.

Walter reached for his throat unconsciously as though to soothe it and examined her figure with a new respect. He cleared his throat and brushed off the front of his suit attempting to regain his composure and objectivity.

“A woman of your talents would shine better in the XT model,” he urged with undisguised admiration. “There must be a way we can fine tune the contract to make it palatable.”

She continued to stand with her back to him, calculating her debts and the barest of expenses down to the quint in her mind, several times over, as she had been doing night and day since the verdict was handed down. There was no way around it. Six years was the earliest she could pay off the debts. And a suit like this would add another year at least to the indenture.

Swiveling slowly around, first the head, then the shoulders, and finally the hips, Sil locked her gaze onto Walter and the

fascination took hold of him again. He held his breath until she spoke.

“You will take off the default penalties.” She established.

“Of course, it may be difficult but for someone in your situation I will certainly do my best...” Walter hedged, staring into her eyes.

She faced him head on, stepped very close and rested her index finger on his chest. It seemed crazy that she had touched him. The image split in his mind into two parts, one appealing for help; the other tapping him with the point of a sword.

“How much of a commission do you make off the XT-247, Walter?”

“I can’t discuss...” he swallowed.

“How much, Walter?” the finger tapped gently and the eyes bore into his mind; the threat, the appeal.

“15% is often what they give me but sometimes with taxes and fees it’s greatly reduced...” he rattled off, unwilling to move a muscle or even straighten his shoulders.

“A pound of flesh, is it, Walter? Is that the share you get of my two years of slavery in the outer reaches of the solar system? Is that what you live off of? Go to the Bahamas? To Paris?” She continued to stare into his eyes and tap him with her fingertip.

“Paris is nice...” he babbled absurdly, “But I don’t think one sale... well, maybe it helps...”

“Not a drop of blood, Walter,” she smiled disarmingly, stepping back from the personal space she had invaded.

“Blood?” he melted with relief. “What do you mean?”

“One day,” she reasoned, “That’s all. You have spent half a day with me and in those few hours will skim off the cream of a

whole season of my life. My sweat, my torment and loneliness, my agony, everything I have to live on... the staff of life, Walter. Is that all my life is worth to you? A few hours and then your trip to Hawaii?"

Walter was beyond confusion. On the one hand, he was enjoying the strange negotiation and the sense of a sale won without having a clue what she was talking about. On the other, he had seen the loneliness and realized she was battling for her life the only way she could. He had never had an encounter remotely like this before in all his years of retail.

"I would like to see Hawaii someday," he searched for his footing, "but your life is surely worth a thousand trips." He warmed his face with his most charming and dimpled smile.

"Ah!" she said agreeably, "That is so kind! I knew you were an understanding man."

"Thank you!" he nodded slightly, "I'm not sure..."

"So, with the 20% discount you mentioned and your lavishly generous offer to forgo your cut for my sake, I may be able throw myself off the deep end and buy the XT-247..." All her previous anxiety and discouragement were now quelled in the comfortable practice of engagement. For the moment, the offensive indenture contract had become a tool.

"Now just a minute, Contractor," Walter finally picked up on the tightening of the snare around his pocketbook, dissolving the web of enchantment she had begun to wrap around his soul. "I am not willing to work without pay and shouldn't be expected to..."

"A few hours?" Sil's eyes narrowed into slits, piercing his heart with shame, "Years of my life without pay mean nothing but I must sympathize with your morning time of drudgery spent with me? You are paid a salary but it's not enough. No! You crave a pound of flesh... but you have no right to a drop of blood, Walter."

For a moment, Walter was appalled at his own greed – that he had hoped to make a profit off her added years of indenture, and lowered his eyes.

“The company no doubt pays you for charging me interest during my time of slavery, Walter,” she shook her head in amazement, looping the silvery web around him again.

“No!” he protested, caught and snared. “I make nothing off of that!”

“And why should they, I wonder?” Sil swiveled around again with the ease of control she had learned from years of securing her influence. “It doesn’t seem fair...”

“It’s despicable,” Walter complained with a furrowed brow, “I don’t think you should be charged any interest at all.”

“That’s so sweet,” she whipped around and rewarded him with loving eyes full of gratitude. “What would I have done if another rep had come up? No one could have helped me like you.” Walter didn’t even think of resisting the full impact of that thrill and only a strong restraint fueled by concern for his job kept him from sweeping her into a passionate kiss.

In twenty minutes, she walked out with the latest, most expensive Hew suit model on the market, marked down to a cost of 390 universals (less than half the retail price), at zero interest with no default penalties and 150 universals worth of accessories thrown in at the last minute.

Walter had landed the biggest sale of the day, but was hardly able to work. His thoughts made no sense. She was impressive. No, he was a fool. She had needed his help and he had kept his cool. No, she had fenced and beaten him. He had been outmaneuvered. She was very attractive. So am I, he reassured himself. But, that hadn’t made an impression on her. She was exciting.

I'm exciting... Walter wanted to add, but it wasn't true. He could have been in that expedition and had hesitated. I always choose the safer way, he reproved himself.

As the sun went down and he walked toward the public transport, he knew this day would soon be behind him and all would be as it had been. The attractive woman would be propelled far into space, immersed in a life of servitude, maybe never returning, her spirit broken, her individuality faded, her beauty erased. And he would forget her.

But Walter didn't *want* to forget her. Her enchantment still held and he didn't want it to fade. He hated the thought that he would never see her again or even know what became of her. There must be a way he could create a connection with her. If he could just come up with a good excuse to talk to her again or stay in contact with her, maybe he could create a link.

But how could a guy like me ever hope to come up with something a girl like her could want? He sighed, leaning his head against the trolley window and gazed into the darkening sky.

Ideas didn't have to be good though, just decent enough for a working sales pitch.

2—PORT

The Walla Walla spaceport was full of people without the condensed feeling of a big city subway station at rush hour. The expansive walls of transparent, platinum-infused glass dulled the racket of trans-atmospheric commuter ships and softened the glare of the August sun. Shops and advertisements vied for last minute impulse shopping decisions; flavor enhancers for the bland inflight food, gaming/sleeping headgear, first aid for weightless ailments, and similar items selling for ten times their value.

Sil sat comfortably in the premier lounge where no one even considered checking her boarding status. Her XT-247 headgear, no more obtrusive than an archaic hearing aid, was streaming a crystal-clear, holographic image into her cornea with sound funneled into her ears. Her own skull formed the antenna and enabled her to speak articulately without moving her lips.

Her eyes looked pleased and her mouth was shaped charmingly with a gentle quirk in one corner, almost a smile. It was one of those looks that the recipient would read as very personal and warm. And though a number of travelers glanced her way hoping to catch her eyes and become that recipient, it was plain she was ‘hollowing’, conversing with someone via holographic chat.

“Why would you want to stay in touch with me?” she cooed like a dove, “I will be hopelessly far away.” She rested comfortably on the leather chair; arms relaxing on the rests, legs crossed, and head tipped, coffee in hand.

“You may need a contact on earth, don’t you think? A business contact?” Walter had dressed in a richly colored plum dress shirt and a dark tie for the call.

“I have no business left on this planet. Everything I had was taken away from me.” She sipped her espresso and savored the cinnamon, wondering if it would be her last taste of it for years.

“You could say I have an investment in you,” Walter smiled disarmingly. “My entire commission went into your future and it makes sense that someday I would benefit from it.” He watched her image as she sipped her coffee again and smoothed her hair with her free hand.

“Oh?” Another faint smile lit her face. Another sip of coffee.

“Drinking caffeinated beverages before an Earth orbit launch is not recommended,” a suave, slightly foreign sounding woman cautioned in the passageways of the spaceport.

“I have some experience in space futures and interstellar investments,” he continued, tilting his head slightly and intentionally emitting as much confidence and trustworthiness as he knew how. “Not as risky as some, I prefer to take a more conservative, stable approach, but I have a history of steady growth and a knack for selecting the right ventures to invest in.”

“I won’t have finances to invest for years,” Sil answered flatly with a hint of brass in her tone.

“It might be of use to me to have another over-space contact to keep me updated,” he added, unable to ignore the thrill he felt at creating a link with her. He knew he was offering her something she would appreciate.

Her eyes locked onto his intently, reaching in and gripping him somehow. Sinking into the fascination she had snared him with a few days before, he began once again to breathe shallowly, his mouth falling open slightly.

“Why should I trust you?” she tested, tossing the empty coffee cup into the de-materializer where it vanished, and leaned forward. Announcements in the background wafted by without interrupting the contest he had begun.

“I’ll give you...” he thrust.

“I’ll need...” she countered at the same instant.

“Access codes,” they landed on the words simultaneously.

“You send them to me now and I evaluate them before I leave or no deal,” Sil jumped to her feet and tossed her head as if to shake off a fly. The muffled tapping of her boot disturbed the focus-field of the executive next to her, who twisted his face in disgust and reset the envelope a few inches away.

“Sending...” Walter reposted, also leaping to a stand. He had set up an interstellar account the day before and had the access ready to link to her eye-Ds and vocal-slots.

“Money upfront,” she hissed, “or no deal.”

“No,” he said, posing for her, knowing only she could see, in a mock fencing stance where his extended hand was the weapon reaching out in a friendly way for the ‘point’. “Nothing illegal.”

“It’s not technically illegal...”

“No.” With the art of holograph, he drew her image closer.

“What then?” she smiled, softening her tone. Proximity merely gave her an advantage. It freed her to wait for him to play his hand.

“You will be behind ‘enemy lines’, as it were, of the Mars industry with access to key information days to months ahead of the public. I’d be willing to reward you with stocks and investments in whatever company you feed me tips about.” Walter restrained the impulse to laugh. He had spent all week trying to figure out not only how to entice her into a partnership but also how to maintain a measure of control in it. The delight at his own cleverness and the excitement of interacting with her was something of a rush. He shifted his pose to a different fencing stance, whipping the friendly hand around a few times as though he held a rapier.

“What do you intend to do with my inside tips, Walter?” Sil parried so smoothly he didn’t realize what had happened. “Will you invest at the same level as me? Or will you draw in other investors and take a cut? Will you sell my intel? Will you build your career in the world of interplanetary speculation with my widow’s mite?”

Walter had no idea what a mite was or what his suggestion had to do with widowhood. Operative Frandelle was no widow. He dropped his arms and stood awkwardly, a little disconcerted.

“Well?” she didn’t allow him the luxury of backing away now that the hollowing had been adjusted for proximity. Her finger reached toward his chest as if to tap it. “I can borrow money and hire a broker to do whatever I want.” This was mere boasting. She had tried a thousand ways to make it happen and the difficulties were too great. But he didn’t know that.

“Who would loan you money?” he began, allowing his fascination with her eyes to keep him from puzzling out her position. He was glad for the debate even if nothing more ever came of it, making him both easier and harder to manipulate.

“And why should you sell my tips when I am far more capable of marketing them cleverly?” she reasoned with a gentle tilt of her head, raising her eyebrows and adding warmth to her hazel eyes. All her contacts were burned and her name was mud. No one would touch her tips with an optic link.

Walter didn't know that.

“Let me talk to some of your investors,” Sil maneuvered with a silky voice, “and find out for myself what your standing is among them.” She stroked her cheek in a strange way that put off careless observers in the lounge but filled Walter with a desire to protect her.

His fingers extended slowly and his arms stretched around her image.

“Lady,” he whispered without thinking. “I don't have any investors. I just want to help you.”

It never crossed her mind to gloat. Her image had been so tarnished and her treatment universally cold, that she hungered for kindness. She also feared being vulnerable.

“Operative Frandelle,” she corrected with a hint of irritation, though she also extended a hand toward him and captivated him with a binding gaze. “Are you saying you want to loan me money and be my broker?”

“Operative Frandelle...” he conceded. “Maybe I can spare you the brutal payment the contract demands of you and help you set up something worth coming home to.” He hardly knew what he was saying any more. Now that his preplanned script was ended and her answers had flown far off the page, he let slip whatever came to mind without restraint. He tried to convince himself he was almost in love with her but that was too far of a stretch. He

wasn't really hinting that she could come home to him. It hadn't even occurred to him yet.

"Walter..." she spoke carefully, trying to balance the undercurrent of his attraction to her with the risk he seemed prepared to take. "I couldn't ask you to take a gamble like that – though my business instinct is killer and my intel would be valuable. I could never pay it if an unforeseen crisis wiped out what I borrowed." Her eyes pleaded with him, pulling on that soft side of his heart, blurring the practical half of his brain.

"Excalibur is about to embark. All contract and indentured workers report immediately to the docking bay for clearance and loading." The foreign voice powerfully interposed itself into their hollow. "Repeat message: Excalibur is about to embark..."

Ignoring the offended glares of the elite travelers in the premier lounge where she had been relaxing when her wristband ticket began flashing, Sil gathered her belongings and strode away. The summons broadcast incessantly in her ears until she reached the waiting area she should have occupied all along.

"...Are you there?" Walter's voice broke in when it had finally fallen silent. His tone of anguish was hardly fitting and it surprised her.

"Yes," she answered hesitantly as she got in line. "Only for a few moments longer. Then all communication must end."

"Give me your contact code so we can complete arrangements when you're in space. You'll have daily transmissions, won't you?" He had grown very serious. It wasn't love. It was a frail connection to vicarious adventure and he hated to lose it.

"Sending," she responded straightforwardly, "but, keep in mind that anything over three minutes will cost me and be added to my debt."

“I’ll pay for the transmissions,” he replied artlessly, “You may need the time to talk to family or friends.”

Sil laughed bitterly. “Not likely!” The greedy bunch had all turned their backs on her in their scramble to preserve their own nest eggs – fortunes she had made for them. Not one of them had offered to help her out of the disaster or even loan her funds for the trip to Mars. Every quint was coming from her contract.

“Walter,” she began tentatively, about to let a little humanity show through a crack in her façade again.

“Operative Frandelle, boarding!” burst into the hollow.

“What?” he begged urgently.

“Never mind,” she dismissed him resolutely and flipped off the connection.

Stepping into the scanning chamber, she walked carefully though the various bands of light that confirmed identity, health, financial status, completion of training modules and packing requirements, and an evaluation of her HEW suit.

“Satisfactory,” the examining AI announced and the doors opened before her with a deep whoosh. Air wafted forward, pulling her down a ramp into the tunnel-like passageway. With a silent click the doors closed behind her.

Walter sighed deeply as he found his favorite chair and fell into it exhausted. The sun shone through the open window and a faint breeze ruffled the branches outside.

“Daisy, what’s my status?” he asked his manager, a personal, sibling-D model AI who was an established member of the family.

“Your supplemental retirement fund has been cashed and the universals deposited in your new interstellar account, ready for disbursal,” she began, sitting down in a chair across from him.

“Your vacation ends in three days and the high season begins in two weeks. Sales projected to be 15% greater than last year. You’re expected to bring in over 32% of those sales alone.”

“However,” Daisy interposed in her friendly way, with a sweet smile. “Economic downturns suggest that the increase in sales will not lead to higher profits. Time for you to shine!”

She folded her hands in her lap. Designed to resemble a young woman, barely twenty, her smooth cheeks and bright eyes were the picture of health and cheer. Her blond hair, so real it looked human, curled upwards at the tips and framed her face. She wore a black and white, window-paned dress with sunflowers in the design, white belt and shoes, and a flower in her hair.

“You seemed tired and perhaps a little discouraged from the hollow. Did your arrangements go as planned?” Daisy requested. “Would you like me to talk to the birds?”

“It went well enough,” Walter responded. “I think it may lead to something, but we didn’t complete the negotiation.”

“Yes, I could use some birds,” he added.

Daisy leaned out the window, opened her mouth and sang flawless bird song from her memory banks. Joyful, beautiful chirpings came from her lips and soon, several little feathered creatures had accepted the invitation and began to sing for her. She smiled, pointed her face to the window, and grew still.

The cat, too old to be a threat, but still feisty enough to think about it, jumped into Walter’s lap and settled down to listen and watch.

“Ah! My old friend,” Walter murmured to him. “Are you the one that has made me a home body and kept me from venturing beyond my own planet?”

The old friend purred and said nothing.

3—SERF

“Contractor housing is straight ahead,” the same voice that had made the earthside spaceport announcements sounded in her ears. Sil wondered if it was provided by her suit.

“Is there a bathroom facility I can visit first?” she asked the voice. Visual imaging in her optical nerves showed her the way to the closest one. It was filled with clean, sterile, compact stalls without any color or design; utilitarian, functional. Simple instructions on the door taught her how to use a toilet in low gravity, and cold lighting blanched her face as she mist-cleaned her hands, making a ghostly reflection in the mirror.

Returning to the stream of operatives disembarking from the inter-lunar transport shuttle, she headed to her assigned room. Her contract started immediately at 0800 the next day. Work details would be handed out at breakfast and she would be serving the Guam Base guests for the next two months. This was considered a reasonable period to learn about the company that owned her contract, adjust to low gravity and settle into the practical aspects of her indentureship.

“Guam is a fully equipped miniature city orbiting in a wide ring around the earth roughly halfway between the moon and the terran sea level,” the welcome clip in her room explained in a warm friendly voice. She was so relieved at having the bunk room to herself that she hardly listened to the recording. A bed, closet, drawers, desk and chair, made up the meager furniture of her quarters, with just enough empty room to stand in the middle and take one step in each direction.

“Generous funding from Director of Science Kaldeen has made the luxury of the base’s many amenities possible,” the clip continued. Gentle, happy music lapped around the tiny room almost warming the cold gray walls and white furnishings.

“Where can I find Supervisor Mandel?” Sil interrupted the welcome. “Is it possible to speak with him right away?”

“You must be thoroughly processed before ascending into the public regions of Guam to speak with company leaders.” The female voice shifted subtly, less benevolent and slightly more authoritative. “Do you wish to proceed with the welcome or continue it later?”

“Later. What must I do to finish processing?”

“Place your hand on the blue lit door panel and stare into the light. You will be screened.”

She placed her right hand on the panel and gazed into the blue light. A light tingling in her skin was all she noticed of the panel of tests that were executed in the space of half a second.

“Identity confirmed. DNA sampled, T-cells stored, length of life calculated, subject quality assessed for company project participation.” The voice uttered calmly, growing more sterile.

“Operative Frandelle,” it continued, “Do you agree to all aspects of the contract that was delivered to you in its entirety? Do you have any objections to make to any of its restrictions, limitations, parameters, promises or factors?” The voice lowered in pitch and increased its air of command.

“Are you referring to the contract I reviewed with my lawyer on earth during the enacting of my verdict?” Sil questioned uneasily, dropping her arm to her side.

“The contract is the same, but some of the parameters were to be received after you left earth due to their confidential nature.

These have been added to your data banks and can now be reviewed at any time.”

Touching the belt at her waist, Sil summoned her virtual computer screen.

“Show me the Operative Parameters that have been added to my contract,” she subvocalized.

Two hundred and seventy six pages opened before her.

“It figures!” she snapped in disgust, throwing herself down on the bed and stretching out. She might as well be comfortable if she was stuck reading all this.

After several pages of extremely tedious verbiage, she lifted her eyes to the door panel.

“What if I have a problem with something listed here?” she challenged.

“You have already signed the contract and bound yourself to it. The company will make a record of your objection and in the event of a lawsuit, it will be taken into consideration.” Was that a sneer in the welcomer’s voice?

“What if I don’t understand something? Will you explain it to me?”

“Yes. I have the capability of providing explanations within certain limitations.”

“Which are...?” Sil demanded in exasperation.

“Based on my programming and your level of clearance.”

“Clearance? It’s not like this is a military operation. It’s a private enterprise serving investors and stockholders.”

“I can’t say,” the welcomer countered absurdly, “Your employee status doesn’t give you access to that information.”

The narrow pallet was beginning to feel a little firmer than was comfortable and the lack of windows seemed suddenly constricting. There wasn't even a bland piece of art projected on the blank wall.

“Do I have to approve it all now?” Sil asked glumly, “Before I can complete processing?”

“Processing will only be considered complete when you have finalized your contract. Until then you have access only to the operative quarters.” The room grew a little dimmer as the instructions continued. “Your Guam work assignment would restrict you to this level and you would have no job assigned for Mars. Those who complete processing are placed in a queue for assessment.” The voice was no longer clearly feminine. It seemed to be dropping gradually in pitch with every sentence.

“Meaning all the good jobs will go to those who are processed first regardless of their qualifications? Is that what you're saying?” She sat up in alarm.

“That is correct.”

“Do you know what my skills are? Do they understand what I could do for them and how I could help to make this operation profitable?!” her voice rising as she jumped to her feet. A metallic ring echoed as her toes bumped the edge of the wall.

“All of that is meaningless until you accept the terms sent to you.” The voice responded flatly.

Sil looked around her room distractedly, measuring the width, breadth, height; noting the vent and the gentle flow of clean air that blew through it, the crisp lines of the shelves and doors, the neutral colors of the room, almost colorless actually.

“I am Companion,” the voice informed. “That is the name you will use to address me as long as you are a member of this venture.”

“You’re giving me orders?” Sil gasped. She had never debated an AI as an equal before, let alone as an underling. Her arms crossed involuntarily as if she were cold, but the ambient temperature was quite comfortable for sleeping quarters.

“The title is meant to inspire trust between us. My architect thought it better than Taskmaster which is what I actually am. I have access to your headset as well as all the speakers in the base. Your first assignment is to complete your processing. For the next eighteen hours, until you report for duty at 0800, you have the freedom to interact with me or not. After that, I will define the context for our communication at all times.”

A fear she had never known before slipped into her chest and pressed on her lungs. She had never been deprived of the refuge of silence before. She had always had the privilege of quiet within her own mind. This AI was calmly telling her it would be able to broadcast in her ears at any time.

“Companion...” she spoke carefully, dropping her hands to her side and breathing deeply, trying to slow down her heart rate. “What is your normal context for communication with operatives like me?”

“Most of the time, the operatives and I find a middle ground we both find acceptable. As long as they listen to me during working hours, I maintain silence during off hours.”

“That sounds reasonable,” she replied cautiously, “Will that arrangement work with me?”

“Once you have completed your processing, I will answer that question.” Companion said. The once female voice had morphed into a male tenor with an emotionless timbre. It was melodic but without a hint of human warmth.

Resolve to crest every wave that threatened to capsize her came to her aid once again, as it had so many times before and her eyes began to flash intensely as she thought furiously.

“Could I accept the parameters now to finish processing and then come back and review the document carefully? Would I still be allowed to voice objections?”

“Objections can be made at any time.”

“Will they carry any legal weight?”

Companion hesitated. Strange for an AI, Sil thought, why would they program hesitation? Was it really an AI? Was it being managed by a live person? Was the program allowed to defer to a person because it was programmed to never lie and a lie was needed?

“There is insufficient data to answer that question,” Companion stated. “The occasion has never arisen and is considered unimportant.”

Sil crossed her arms and tapped her foot rapidly. Two, three deep breaths, and she reached a decision.

“Companion,” she ventured, “I want to register an objection in the document.” She saw it being added to the page in her virtual screen as she spoke. “I object to the severely limited time and opportunity given to me to read these parameters and agree to them. I believe that I am under duress at this time because of my fear of being stuck with a job I am not suited for on Mars.

“Furthermore, I reserve the right to read this document in the future and add objections for an indefinite period of time up until the completion of my contract and the pay-off of my debt.”

She swiveled on her heel, took a step and continued.

“If legal action is initiated at any time in the future, by either party, the company or myself, I require that all my objections be

included in the court records and allowed into consideration, whether recorded in this document or by some other means on Mars.”

She turned and walked two steps in the other direction, then faced the door panel again. Though she guessed Companion wasn't really in any particular direction, it pleased her to interact this way. And actually, Companion automatically accepted her pattern and chose to record the visual from the door panel.

“That is the restriction I am adding to the contract in order to complete my processing. Companion, do you agree?”

“On behalf of the Mars Venture Conglomerate and the specific company that owns your contract, I record your restriction and accept your processing. You may now exit the operative region through any of the exit doors and have access to the public regions. You are seventy-third in the queue for interviewing with Supervisor Mandel and will be summoned when the time for your appointment approaches. Welcome to Guam!” The tenor voice mellowed with a hint of friendliness while articulating the last sentence.

“Seventy-third?” she bit her lip in frustration. “Really? Have I been that slow to complete processing?”

“Of the three hundred and forty six operatives contracted for employment, seventy two of them took care of processing in the waiting area in Walla Walla and the others are putting it off till later. Most have not read more than a few sentences of the document.”

“I could have done this on earth?” she uttered wryly.

“If you had proceeded to the general operative waiting area on time, you would have had the opportunity,” Companion said. Sil was sure she heard a smirk in his voice.

Blast! That's what she got for grasping at a few final moments of elite status before becoming a bonded worker! That—and a sore bladder because of the espresso she drank just before take-off.

She opened the door to her bunker. “How much time do I have to explore?” she asked before venturing out.

“At least two hours, possibly three,” Companion affirmed calmly.

Companion! Sil snorted to herself as she climbed the ladder to the bunker hallway. More like Compression, she thought.

“I am oblivious to insults,” Companion's voice commented softly in her ear. “And, no, I am not reading your mind. But I have worked with people enough to recognize the meaning behind small gestures.”

“I request silence until it is necessary for you to speak to me,” Sil said icily, infuriated by the invasion of her privacy and the demeaning interpretation of her manner. It hadn't been meant as an insult, but as humor to cheer herself up.

Shaking off the annoyance, she popped out into the corridor and began heading toward the exit to the public regions as fast as she could in low gravity. It was more than comical and she chuckled to herself as she leapt forward step by step in what felt like slow motion. Her lightly gravetized shoes clicked into contact with the corridor floor and snap-released with each stride. Compared to most of the new arrivals, she was graceful as a gazelle with the sophisticated programming of her suit. The others were either leaping with too much power and banging into the ceiling or battling their legs, grabbing them in their hands to free them from the deck, and tipping into the wall and snap-clicking into a crazy position with a foot twisted around behind or even on the wall itself.

The corridor opened into a wide common area where operatives could mingle, be fed, receive orders, and enjoy a break during off hours. Comfortable chairs, tables, misting fountains and fake garden plants were spread out in an English garden design. Sil ignored them and sped to the main chutes.

Many people were being knocked back as they tried to enter a chute, obviously still unprocessed, but Sil breezed through, leaping into one of the windy tunnels and rocketing up to the public level. I love that feeling, she gloated to herself, zooming ahead of a crowd.

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, as they were called, opened before her in breathtaking, majestic splendor. It was a series of hydroponic domes cascading above and below linked by slides, stairs, and even swinging ropes for the playful guest. Sunshine, filtered through protective glass, was streaming into the domes like liquid light, pooling and flooding the gardens. Some were tropical, with birds, lizards, insects, trees and flowers mirroring famous jungles of Earth. Some were crisp, towering forests with redwoods, cedars, and trees of the Pacific Northwest. Some were filled with farm beds, lush with an abundance of food, vegetables, fruits, bushes, trees, vines, herbs.

Water, rich and luxurious, poured over in streams from one dome to another, sparkling with light. The music of nature in all its glory filled the panorama.

“Whoa!” Sil exclaimed out loud in spite of herself, riveted to her place as she gaped at the sight. After a few moments she noticed the people, the shops and cafes, the reading nooks, the chess and game tables, and shaking herself, she set out to explore. The ropes begged to be tried first.

It was barely two hours and one cappuccino later that Companion summoned her for the appointment with Supervisor

Mandel and gave her illuminated directions. She had visited only a few of the domes, since she lacked the access to the higher and more inviting levels, but she had already mapped out the sections she hoped to work in for the next two months.

Once again, Sil found herself in a queue with ordinary people, waiting for an appointment that would apparently not last longer than five to ten minutes. She rehearsed what she would say and avoided eye contact with anyone around her.

Soon the door swiveled and her name was announced and one person exited on the left as she entered confidently on the right. The office was relatively small and functional with bland furnishings that melted into inconsequence next to a breathtaking window with a startling cut-out view of the earth and myriad stars. It was like a bizarre commentary on the pitiful inferiority of the human business being conducted within the confining walls.

Mandel was a shriveled, red faced, shrimp of a man that sniffed periodically when he spoke. He barely glanced up at her from the skill sheet displayed on his monitor.

“Business, finance, marketing...*sniff*... we have little use for any of this on Mars,” he began unceremoniously.

“I read people and manage them very well. Also, I’m an excellent operations analyst, able to improve and streamline procedures, redistribute funds, resources, and people, for their most effective use...” Sil assumed her most persuasive air of confidence, exuding strength and competence, with a hint of a smile.

“It hardly matters,” Mandel sniffed and rubbed his nose with a cloth, without deigning to give her even a passing glance.

“Mars is certainly a very costly venture and with my experience, I am sure I could help increase profits in a number of ways, if I had the authority to examine and evaluate – and make

changes to the operation.” Sil crossed her legs and resisted the urge to cross her arms, as well. Something about this wasn’t right at all.

“Let’s see, how much do you weigh on Earth? A hundred and fifteen pounds? Hardly enough to break rocks even with the machinery... *sniff*... No medical background, no computer tech,” Mandel seemed to read very slowly.

“I am quite skilled at computer tech,” she countered, straining out the irritation that tried to creep into her voice.

“Not the kind we would be interested in,” he responded blandly. “No, uh... feminine skills, parenting, mothering, fostering, babysitting, not even cooking or cleaning...”

“What?” she gasped, horrified, “What are you saying? What are you talking about?”

“There is a small circle of ambassadors, executives, and master scientists on hand who have a use for personal staff... *sniff*... but other than that, all the jobs are extremely functional with no skills or previous experience required.”

“I speak several languages...” she whispered, not realizing she had begun to wring her hands anxiously. She had never done that before.

“We have automated translators and all the latest technology,” he fixed his little eyes on her appraisingly, as though noticing her for the first time and scanned her with a squinty glare. “Do you have any courtesan skills? That could be an alternative for you. We would provide...”

“No!” she spat out, her eyes growing wild and her fists clenching. “Absolutely not!”

“You are assigned to the mines,” he responded resolutely, clicking something on the screen and waving her away without another glance.

“You must be joking,” she fumbled, “Would you really ignore everything I have to offer and make me a common worker in the mines?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he spun his chair around to give her his back.

Sil stood and walked slowly out of the room. The fear she had begun to feel in the bunk gripped her chest again and rose to her head, throbbing like a headache, chilling her fingers and making them tremble.

“I have no control over what’s happening,” she said softly as she passed through the swivel door and moved like a shadow toward the wide public avenues that so recently had delighted her.

“I have more control than you do,” Companion sneered in her ear.

“You don’t sound like an AI,” she snapped back and for a moment she was sure a living person had spoken.

“I was programmed by real people,” Companion responded cleverly, and immediately she doubted what she had known instinctively in her gut.

“Companion, do you have any influence on the assignment I get here at the base?” she asked, adding some respect to her voice in case it was programmed to be offended or flattered by small things.

“I can add your name to a specific work group but ‘real’ people will be assigning jobs,” he replied coolly.

“I would like to work in...”

“You have been placed in the food service group and I see no point in switching you,” Companion stated.

Sil hesitated, debating within herself whether showing annoyance or submission would be more effective with this AI.

“I...” she ventured tentatively.

“...have no skills in mechanics or electronics or space repairs, or gardening, or sewage management,” Companion suggested. Sil gulped at the ‘sewage’ reference.

“Ok,” she surrendered. Actually, that was the one she would have requested. “I request silence till 0800.”

“Silence from me till 0700 when I will wake you for breakfast,” the AI corrected.

Sil merely nodded and set out to explore as much as she was allowed before necessity drove her back to her quarters for sleep.

End of sample