

EXCERPT FROM 'SILENTLY IN THE NIGHT'

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Looking down from low orbit, a small patch of green stood out among a rugged landscape of huge rocks, craggy mountains and brown plains that had suffered bombardment by meteors for millions of years. Near the verdant fields, surrounded by waving palm trees, stood a black dome with several circular ports around its periphery. Close by the dome was a star-shaped swimming pool containing crystal clear water and around the pool, flowers of all shapes, sizes and colors bloomed in profusion.

Inside the dome, Jeremiah Curzon glanced furtively at his wife, Samantha, as she stood admiring herself in the mirror. The tunic she wore looked fit to burst at the seams. It wasn't as if she overate; so maybe it was just the place. Alien worlds had funny effects on humans. God only knew how they had managed so far, but they had—the first of the pioneers with their very own giant asteroid, feeding the Martian masses from fertile soil nurtured from barren rock.

When they'd arrived his wife had been young and pretty, so sure of their future together. But life had soured; mutual understanding had been swallowed by the bleakness of their surroundings, love muffled by the desolation. However, they could not yet afford to go back to Mars so they were stuck; stuck with the asteroid and its artificial air and gravity—and stuck with each other. Except, of course, for Jed.

Jed was their humanoid. He helped in the fields, sowing, reaping, picking and digging. He also helped with the housework. In fact, they regularly argued as to who should have Jed, when and what for. And usually Jed decided for them, basing his decision on the logic of necessity. If it wasn't for Jed, Jeremiah thought, he'd have brained his wife months ago.

"You going out today?" The drone of Samantha's voice from the kitchen.

"For about three hours. Got some fruit picking to do."

"Taking Jed?"

Jeremiah played it safe. "I'll need him a couple of hours. I'll send him back if you like."

"Sure," muttered his wife.

"See you later then."

She didn't even look up as he left the room.

Jeremiah whistled cheerfully as he sauntered down the path which led to the fields. He loved it out here, away from the cramped and enforced domesticity of the dome and endless ancient holomovies and—yes—away from Samantha.

Jed followed along behind as he always did, keeping a respectful distance as he was programmed to do. He tried to copy Jeremiah's whistling but soon gave up. His voice-box was just not designed for it.

They arrived at the crop fields and stood together admiring the results of their labour.

Several tracks ran down the fields, like spokes of a wheel, and on the side of each stood fruit and cereals in testimony to their efforts.

"Well," Jeremiah said to the humanoid, "here we are again."

"Yes," Jed replied. "And a lovely day for it to."

Jeremiah laughed and looked at the sky, dark blue with a bright yellow sun. It was, of course, always a lovely day for it never rained, never even got cloudy. What you saw today was what you got tomorrow. The crops survived on one watering a year, brought in as a huge lump of ice from the belt by a freighter which also delivered his and Samantha's basics for living. Jed, of course, required nothing other than to exercise his body and, on occasions, his mind.

"Best get to it," Jeremiah said.

Later, as he sat back on the conveyor and gazed around, watching Jed at work in the fields, Jeremiah's mind worked feverishly. All this was his, his and Jed's—she had done nothing to create it. All she did was keep the house clean and Jed could easily do that. They didn't even have sex anymore. She was, in fact, a liability.

Four hours later he sent Jed home.

"You're very late," Samantha said as Jed strolled through the door, "but now you're here you may as well do something useful." She thrust a vacuum brush into his hand. "Go and clean out the yard."

"Yes, Samantha," said Jed.

Samantha grimaced. "Do you like me, Jed?" She unzipped her tunic to reveal the fat flesh of her thighs. "Do you like my legs?"

"I do not like you or dislike you, Samantha." Jed said.

She flushed angrily. "You'd do as I told you though?" The cogs in her mind were on overtime.

"Yes, Samantha," Jed said, smiling.

"Good. Now get in the yard," she said. "No wait. What share of field work does my husband do these days?"

"Seven point eight percent, Samantha."

"Thank you, Jed. You may go now."

Samantha hastily zipped up her tunic, grunting with the effort. She needed to think, to plan. What was it the ancients said about a woman's weapon? It would have to be today, while she had the courage.

Jeremiah stopped as the dome came into view. The sky had grown dark and the air was beginning to pinch at his face. He gazed at the pool, wondering why he didn't use it much, considering it was summer every day. *When she was gone*, he thought. Perhaps then he would use it more often.

He had made the decision. It was now or never. She'd have to go tonight. There was a

crowbar lying by the gate and he picked it up, felt its weight in his hands.

Rounding the gate, Jeremiah saw a figure crumpled on the lawn. Initially, in the waning light, he thought it was Samantha but, as he ran towards it, he saw that it was Jed. He cradled the broken head in his arms.

"*Jed, Jed boy,*" he whispered. Tears welled in his eyes and he glanced fiercely towards the homestead. She must have done it! He saw red and raced through the door.

He burst into the diner and saw his evening meal laid out. He sped into the kitchen, brandishing the crowbar—still no Samantha. Then he heard a scream.

She was in the lounge doorway staring out to the yard. Jeremiah stopped in his tracks.

"You murderer," she sobbed. "You filthy killer."

They stood a few feet apart, an infinity of mistrust between them.

Another voice suddenly cut through the air.

"Samantha, Jeremiah, this is Jed. I hope this will avoid any misunderstanding." The recorder hummed from the corner of the lounge. "I have decided it would be for the best if I terminated my existence here. My presence over the last year seems only to have created discord. Maybe you will now find each other again. Goodbye and good luck."

Man and wife stared at each other. Seconds seemed to pass like hours. Jeremiah felt the cold steel of the crowbar in his hand. Could Jed have used it to stove in his own head? He dropped it to the floor with a clatter.

Samantha's eyes shot to the meal on the table and her face grew pale. The spectre of long, lonely months ahead spurred her into action and she shot towards the plate.

"Your meal will be cold, Jerry," she said abruptly. "I'll dispose of it and prepare you another."