

The Penthouse

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When the squid-freaks asked if they could land a team on my penthouse roof, I wasn't surprised. I'd actually been expecting them to ask sooner. The only thing more unsettling than the carnage of the squids' arrival has been the silence emanating from that building ever since. I'm not surprised someone wants to know what's going on in there.

Still, when my lawyer called with their request, the first thing I thought of was you. Of all the great times we had in that place; all the saucy evenings and sweaty mornings. All the times we stayed up all night talking and watching the sun rise over the city. Of the night you died there—the night the squids came.

I told them they could go ahead, but that I'd be coming with them. I'm not about to let a bunch of squid loving nerds turn my place upside down. Besides, I left in quite a hurry and I wouldn't want them finding anything—unsavoury. The bedroom's on the top floor anyway and there's bound to be all sorts of love-related flotsam and jetsam about the place. I won't have you embarrassed in front of strangers, no matter how long it's been.

Now that I'm here it's certainly stirred up memories. It doesn't look the same, of course—the place is dismal with the overcast sky filtering in through dirty windows. But somehow the gloom still reminds me of the late evening light when you used to turn up, a ding at the elevator announcing your arrival. That's where they were—with the elevator—when I stepped into the bedroom. They seemed very interested in getting the doors open, so I thought I'd leave them to it.

It was just as we left it, moments before you died. The sheets were all rumpled and the pillows were on the floor. Your lingerie was scattered here and there and my jeans were in a pile. My favourite belt was still threaded around those

jeans—I've been wondering where it got to. Your earrings were still on the bedside cabinet and seeing them transported me back to that night. You didn't need to bring Martha into it—we were doing just fine without involving her. I suppose women like you are always jealous of men like me, but that's no excuse for bringing marriages into the equation. The funny thing is, I divorced Martha last year—she got jealous, just like you—so if you could have held out another few months we might have been able to avoid all the nastiness. Who knows, you might even still be alive.

I unreeled the belt and wrapped it around my fist before tucking it into my jacket. I didn't bother with your earrings. Voices from the hallway reminded me I wasn't alone and I returned to the living room to see what was happening. The two heavily built troopers were back guarding the weedy old man and the younger, nervous looking one.

"No luck with the circuit breaker then?" I didn't really care, but they were all looking at me expectantly.

"No—not really. The power's dead—which you'd expect—but, I mean, well—the power's dead."

He certainly did seem very nervous, but that's probably because he's not used to talking to celebrities. That makes a lot of people nervous.

"My...assistant is correct, I'm afraid Mr Nobal. We'll need the ropes to get down the elevator shaft, but we did at least manage to open the doors. Well done boys," he nodded to the two soldiers.

"Fine by me. Just make sure you don't break anything." That was supposed to be a joke, but they all just looked at me as if I was speaking French. Squid-freaks, they're only interested in one thing.

"So, Mr Nobal, what happened here on that night?"

My God, is he talking about you? No, of course not.

He's talking about the squids. Being here without you must be making me jumpy. I glanced at the wall where you died. No sign of it--no sign of the blood. Just a small dent in the plaster where your head hit it. The old man glanced behind him to see what I was looking at and then turned back. I couldn't read the expression on his face.

"Well, you know the story. Everyone here was minding their own business when suddenly--bham! The squids came down, landed their ship right on the roof and tore through the building killing everyone in their path." I shrugged. "You know the story."

"It's a wonder you survived at all, Mr Nobal, when so you many young women--and men--lost their lives. You must consider yourself very...l-lucky."

"Yeah, well, what can I say? I've got a safe room out the back. Not everyone can afford that kind of thing, but--well, I own the building so I can have whatever I want. It's not luck pal, just money."

He stared at me blankly for a moment and then asked, "I see. Yes. So, you were alone then, that night?"

Yes, of course I was alone. Why's he asking me that? I know you were there, but then you went and brought up Martha and so you died and then I was alone. Yes.

"Yes."

"Ah."

A noise came from down the hall and I jumped like a freshman at a dog fight.

"Check it," said the old fart and one of the meat-heads stomped over to the elevator doors. He walked back quickly, fingering his weapon.

"Nothing we wouldn't be expecting, sir." I think he was sweating.

"It's just that--well, I heard that you weren't alone that

night, Mr Nopal. I heard there was someone with you that night.”

This was too much. “Listen Mr...whoever-you-are, I don’t care what you think you’ve heard or where you think you’ve heard it, but I was alone here that night, no woman, no nothing, just me, myself and I. The squids came and I ran for my life, just like everyone else. End of. Now, are you here for your precious squids or are you here for me? Because if it’s me, I’ll call that chopper back right now and you and your cronies can leave through the lobby. Crystal?”

He looked back at me with eyes like cold marble—smooth, implacable and completely unaffected by my presence. I don’t think he was intimidated by me at all, which is strange. People like that either have something over me, or have nothing to lose.

“Quite, thank you Mr Nopal. Thank you for confirming that you were, in fact, in the company of a young woman. You were here with that woman, and she died that night. You did not find space for her in your safe room and she died here along with countless others. I assume your safe room is bigger than a box? I assume you could have taken her with you, given the state of your bedroom? I assume, therefore, that you meant her to die. That you abandoned her to these...creatures. Am I correct, Mr Nopal? Am I correct?”

I’m not sure what frightened me more: this insane fanatic of yours or the noise that echoed out of the lift shaft again. This time, it rang and reverberated. It was getting louder—something was coming up. Old-fart went as white as a sheet and the two meat-heads ran to each side of the room, bringing their weapons to bear. As they were taking up their positions—and I remember these final few moments very clearly—the old man dashed for the roof and the younger

one made for the drinks counter. As he was stumbling past me he slapped me on the shoulder as if he was wishing me luck or something. Probably hero worship. Even so, once this flurry of movement subsided I found myself standing in the middle of the room by myself. I might as well have had a bullseye painted on my chest.

It felt like I was standing there for hours, even though only a second or two could have passed. The trooper to my right dropped to one knee and raised his weapon's sight to his eye. Small-fry was taking a slow-motion dive towards the counter. It's funny how you can recall the finest details about moments that define your life. Just like the moment you died. I didn't want you to die, but holding Martha over me like that is not my idea of a joke. You don't get to where I am by letting your squeezes blackmail you. I remember your face going blue and the trickle of blood from the back of your head against the wall. My hand around your neck felt like an embrace and I remember wondering what to feel. Disappointment, mostly, I decided. Disappointment that you'd ruined things, disappointment you'd forced my hand, disappointment you'd died. It was like I watched myself do it, like I was an outsider. A lot like now. I can see the tentacles lick round the edge of the lift doors, see its shiny beak loom out of the darkness. Its glistening antennae flicking this way and that before all focusing on me. I notice the blinking light on my shoulder from the patch that little-puff stuck there. Bait. That's what I am, just meat on a hook.

They're cowards, all of them. The two soldiers are sitting there like lemons, not firing a shot. The young one is hiding behind old vodka bottles. The old one is probably already on the roof. People like them deserve to die. Contemptible, really.

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“Fire! Fire, goddammit!”

The older man didn’t need to shout twice, because the two sweating soldiers had squeezed their triggers before the first syllable had left his lips. Shortly thereafter the alien creature lay in a pool of its yellow blood, which was slowly mixing with the haemoglobin oozing from the flesh its beak was buried in. Once it was all over, the only sounds were that of two panting men cradling their cooling weapons, which were clicking gently.

“Do you think it’ll work?” came a voice from behind the drinks counter.

“Yes of course it will work you fool, who’s going to question how he died with that thing’s muzzle in his chest?”

He spat, although it wasn’t clear which corpse he was aiming for.

“You did it Dad, we finally got him, we got him for her.”

The older man nodded in triumph, but seemed to shrink at the same time.

“Yes, we did...we did it for your sister...that sick pervert—he even admitted it—we did it for your sister...contemptible...”