

'My my, who is that handsome young man standing in the corner?' Lady Fransworth asked one of her subjects. The dinner party was quite exciting; many new people to meet, new friends to make, new stories to tell, hear and be made. This moment in particular, to Lady Fransworth, seemed a perfect start to a promising romance.

'Handsome young man, m'lady?' Emily replied, trying to follow her mistress' gaze with her own. She spotted a man, tall and thin on the other side of the room. His suit was plain yet hung over his slender body with an air of sophistication and power. The smoke of his thin cigarette weaved before him in a rich volume, and silently masked his face. All she could see were his hawk-like eyes, sharp and firmly planted on the Lady. He's no young man, Emily thought, late fifties at the youngest, but in comparison to Fransworth here – she paused and glanced at her positively ancient mistress – he was new-born. 'Mister Vondemond, I believe, m'lady. New to the area. It seems he moved here after making quite a fortune with a set ancient relics discovered in Africa. You should be right up his street, I wonder how much he could flog you off for.' Emily didn't say the last part out loud. At least she hoped she hadn't – it had been quite a long night and on the odd occasion Fransworth was preoccupied, Emily had slipped down a glass of wine or two. Her Lady made no remark, but instead continued to look towards Vondemond, a disgusting twinkle in her elderly eye. Either Emily's insult hadn't been spoken aloud or the old bat was more deaf that she had thought.

Mister Vondemond put out his cigarette with a fine air of confidence, tweaked his finely curled moustache, and pursued that which the Lady had to offer.

He had his eyes on her all evening. Watching her, willing her to turn and catch his gaze. She wasn't a particularly pleasant lady to behold, she was old, older than he for he was in his early fifties but could easily pass for a mid forty. She was balding yet tried to hide it with a ridiculously elaborate headpiece, her plump body filled out her dress generously. Under the dress he had spotted a prosthetic leg which she struggled with and so had customised by adding small wheels. She did not walk. She, in a sense, skated. She held a glass of wine in one hand and supported herself on a fancy walking stick with the other.

However it was not her looks that attracted him but something else. She was rich. She was powerful. She had something he desired. Something he had searched the world to find, something which had led him to her. And soon she will hand it over.

Her glance caught his own and held it for a while. One final adjustment to his masculine good looks and he picked up his glass of whisky and stepped forward.

'Lady Fransworth, I believe' He had kept her gaze as he walked over, she was obviously impressed but the young lady next to her watched with disgust. 'My Lady, your elegance and abundance of...' he paused 'character travels well before you, allow me to introduce myself,' He had got the initial reaction he had wanted, her Ladyship had swooned to his charm, the young lady had rolled her eyes and walked away. 'My name is Vontemond. Charles B. Vontemond, and it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.' He took her hand, leaned in and kissed it softly. Once again he had achieved his desired effect.

Emily had gone to the grand dining room of this stately house, leaving the ancient relics to whisper sweet nothings in the ballroom amongst the rest of the guests. She was surprised to find the room fairly empty with exception to the odd couple dotted here and there. Alone she walked through the dimly lit room to the temporary bar which had been standing in the same corner for as long as she could remember.

She sat by the bar disgusted at Mister Vontemond's advance on Fransworth. She was sickened by the thought that any man could take a shine to such an ageing dinosaur as she, and equally that any lady could allow herself to be wooed by such a creepy old man. His reputation had gone before him also. He was a treasure hunter, and not the brawn, rugged type – more the skinny snobbish type that would step on the shoulders of real men to receive glory and fame. She ordered a drink from the hired hand behind the bar and rested her head as she waited for it. She was lucky this bar was so empty, but by the apparent lack of skill adopted by the obviously non-professional, buck-toothed bar man, she was not surprised.

As she waited she thought on her own state of affairs. She worked for Lady Fransworth as a zoo keeper would work for an elephant; caring, cleaning, feeding and the like. However she was just a part time hired hand herself and wondered if she was as bad at taking care of the old lady as the adolescent barman was at pouring a simple drink. It seemed clear that he cared about his job as much as she did hers. Its just a passing phase, she told herself, I just need to keep this job until I have enough money to escape to France.

A sound of clay rolling along the wooden floor grew louder as Lady Fransworth glided towards Emily. She turned and addressed her mistress with tired manner.

'My dear! It seems I shan't be needing your accompaniment tonight,' she said with the giddiness of a school girl, 'Charles will be seeing me home this evening! You may head home when you are finished enjoying yourself here.' She passed over a coin or two as Mister Vondemond rushed over to rush her away. 'Have a drink, enjoy your night!' and with that she had left.

Emily turned back to the bar, surprised by her mistress' generosity. She realised that she spent most social hours working for the Lady and attending her dinner parties for the elderly which left her no time to go and find a real man of her own.

It was at this moment that the adolescent bar man placed a white wine in front of her, spilling it a little. She looked up and saw him smile a smile of crooked teeth.

Goodness, she thought, am I really that desperate?

Mister Vondemond had paid for the cab back to the Fransworth Residence and the Lady let them both in. It wasn't very far and would have been an easy gliding distance for the Lady if he hadn't bought her a few drinks. She couldn't go very far without falling. Curbs were an issue, he had realised. Curbs and road sides and any cobble. The cab was the easiest option.

She had welcomed him into her home and he passed through the large doorway into the hallway of the house. She led him into a spacious living room where a grand fireplace adorned one wall, and well stocked bookshelves lined the others. In the middle of the room stood a long, decorated couch accompanied by two wing-back chairs. Vondemond was directed to sit as Lady Fransworth rolled over to a large bookshelf which also served as a drinks cabinet. She poured him a whisky, told him to 'sit tight' and disappeared to 'freshen up'.

Once he was certain she had gone, he put down the glass and rose to his feet. The treasure was here, he was certain of it. And now that he had his chance, he would bloody well take it.

He quickly searched the living room; the shelves were lined with an array of books,

ornaments and liqueur, but not what he was after. It was true that he had never seen the item he searched for, in fact he didn't actually know what it was. All he knew was that it was old. Ancient, to be precise. He would know it when he saw it.

Having swiftly glanced over any possible hiding place, he was quickly making his way through the grand hallway to the next room when he stopped suddenly. A small white cat sat in his way. He looked at the cat with a peculiar stare, the cat looked back and cocked its head aside. It was a funny looking creature, more ball of fluff than cat. Its features were undersized and almost lost amidst a large puff of soft white hair. It seemed a docile creature, expression blank and emerald eyes that appeared to look in different directions. Vondemond decided to pass by quietly, not sure if it was actually looking at him or not. He walked by. The cat turned and, in a simple manner, followed.

The man walked hurriedly but silently from room to room, the cat slowly plodded after. Vondemond had done this sort of thing before, in fact he considered himself quite professional at the task in hand. Seeking and plotting. Searching for any treasure, he would sketch on the blank pages of his mind a blueprint indicating well estimated floor plans and distances. On the sticky notes of his mind he would also jot down anything that caught his eye; unlocked windows, possible hiding grounds, security systems, booby-traps, and the like.

The cat plodded on behind with a mind full of warm fluff that tickled as it moved its head. It smiled.

After a short while a thought sprung to Vondemond's mind like a well toned athlete delivering an important letter. A letter that said 'In her leg' and nothing more. He called off the rest of his search of the lower floor and headed up the stairs. He followed the tuned voice of a lady bathing with glee. A voice that suggested that once, long long ago, a young Miss Fransworth had been classically trained but it had never amounted to much more than bathing song.

The bathroom was en-suite of the master bedroom on the first floor. He opened the door ajar, and glanced in. It was clear.

He passed through and at once was stopped. He looked around. The room was a standard ladies chamber. A four-post bed in the centre with vanity chests on either side covered with jewellery, wigs, perfume and the like. The odd thing about this room was that each wall was covered, inch by inch, with portraits of felines. Painting after painting of cats, kittens, alone or in families, every colour, every breed, every angle. All with eyes that seemed to follow him.

The small cat which had been following him all this time had eyes that seemed to follow nothing. Or at least if they followed anything, they would be following two completely different things heading in different directions.

Vondemond's eyes struck a wooden leg with wheels attached. The logic here: something so precious and perfect would be the sort of thing you would want with you at all times. On closer inspection the timber was heavy and solid. No good thing could find hiding place in such dense wood.

Frustrated the man let out a grunt and threw the leg aside when his eyes happened upon something he hadn't at first noticed. A small wooden box lay upon a cabinet amidst perfumes and hair pieces. A small wooden box with elaborate metal details and locked by primitive padlock. Covered in ancient carvings, he knew he had stumbled upon that which he did seek.

The singing stopped. But he did not notice. Eyes fixed on the small box, he carefully made his way forward. He reached out his hand to touch the item.

'My dear!' the voice made him jump. He spun around so quickly he almost lost consciousness. And there before him, his fate on crutches. Lady Fransworth was wearing nothing but a towel. Not even a wig. 'If I had known you were this keen I wouldn't have kept you waiting!'

The odd strand of natural hair still on her head wavered in the air as she giggled to herself. She gave him the eye, and without moving dropped the towel.

Of all the things he had ever done over his long career as treasure hunter, cat burglar and playboy, there were few that made him actually hate himself. Laying with Lady Fransworth was one of them.

The next morning the Lady woke alone in bed. On the bedside table she found a note.

'My Dearest Lady Fransworth,

It is with regret that I should leave you at such an early hour, but it seems my work has caught up with me and unfortunately this is a task I cannot leave undone. Urgent business must be attended to urgently.

However, it would be my greatest pleasure if you were to meet me tonight. A well respected friend of mine is hosting a fund raising gala in aid of his gambling addiction and I would be honoured if you were to join me. You will find the details written on the reverse of this note.

I hope to see you soon, and once again I apologise for my early disappearance.

Yours,

Charles B. Vondemond

P.S. You are a very, very generous lady in the bedroom.'

She lay back with a smile. Last night had been the best that she had had in over two months and had to tip her cap to Mister Vondemond.

Vondemond had heard stories of the treasure. Some said it would bring blessings, others said it was cursed. Stories of it causing the fall of empires, of it granting desires, of it having the power to change the past or simply cook a decent meal. One story he heard, a story solely based on the treasure, said that it didn't even exist. One thing was for certain, though, and that was that every story contradicted each other, no one could agree on exactly what this thing was.

And that made it a thing of legend.

To Charles B. Vondemond, the status of 'legend' was not something to be taken lightly. It was a status to be earned, a status to risk everything for, to risk anything for. It was a status far beyond any other. Legend begot legend. Legend is deserving only of legend.

And Charles B. Vondemond had burglary skills that were themselves stuff of legend.

The night was dark, but it wouldn't have been a problem otherwise. Fransworth House was amidst a quiet estate. The locals, like Fransworth herself, were old and never ventured far from home. The area was clear and, with aid of a near by tree, a tall, slender man in black leapt with graceful agility to a small ledge underneath a window. Vondemond had noticed that the windows were not often locked. He opened the window and entered the house.

The window opened into a small chamber adjacent to the master bedroom. He lit a small candle to light his way. Before long he was stood once again under the watchful eyes of a thousand cats who had seen too much the night before. His own gaze focussed on the ancient box as its carvings danced under the flicker of candle wick.

He placed the candle on the bedside table next to the ancient box and fussed in a pocket for his pick lock. At that moment he felt a second presence in the room with him. He turned and saw the reflection of two emerald green eyes. The cat. Suddenly it was upon him, scratching and screeching, clawing and biting. In his shock Vondemond had responded slower than usual. Somehow the cat had managed to claw its way to his face before he had realised what was happening.

In the dark he tore the creature from his head and flung it with force against a portrait on the wall. He heard the smash of the glass and the thud of flesh as the cat's body fell to the floor. He felt the burning, itching pain of his wounds, and the warm blood slowly making its way down his face.

His attention once again laid on the box, he quickly picked the lock and placed his tool beside the burning candle. With a softness he caressed its lid with both hands and opened the treasure.

An explosion of power pulsed through his body and threw him across the room. The force had shaken the cabinet and framed felines, it had unbalanced the candle which engulfed a headpiece in flame.

Vondemond's eyes adjusted as the new, fierce light lashed violently against wall and bed post unleashing new flame on all it touched. Then he saw it. A shadow pure and black in front of the flame, it writhed in agony and crashed around as a creature bound by ropes furious to break free. This shadow which emanated from the box as smoke from cigar threw its weight blindly smashing portraits and fighting amidst the flame, yet Vondemond could make out no detail, just the purest of darkness. From its figure, unknown shapes or limbs or tentacles writhed around with the same agony, from its head what seemed to be worms or snakes slithered unceasingly and violently lashed out against the walls. More structured parts, almost like huge spiders legs clawed from behind the nightmare. They tried to cling to the wall, but the uncontrollable struggle of the beast forced them away.

In Vondemond's terror he was silent and could only watch. The once unconscious cat was now awake and spitting in defiance of the beast. It seemed to turn towards the sound like a blind man to a call. It leaned towards the screaming cat in a back breaking manner, slow and purposeful. The worm figures on its head moved back and flowed behind. With the movement of a cobra, the darkness attacked head first and the cat was no more. This was when Vondemond re-found his voice, with a hoarse yet shrill cry of terror.

The beast instantly faced the noise, the fires blazing all around it, yet still no definition could be made. The sharp shiver which chilled his spine made the man knew it was looking right at him. He felt his very soul defiled and all emotions of sadness came crashing in like waves of a dark sea on an unforgiving shore. He lay still on the floor where he was knocked and wept uncontrollably as the monster purged his mind and brought forward dark and repressed memories. He could see the faces of those he had beaten, used and hurt in the darkness of that monster. They screamed in pain and with one voice called for his own bloody murder. He saw the shadow's edge jut as though breaking from binding rope and at last it had broken free. The monster unfolded huge spider-like legs of deepest darkness before Vondemond. And at last it attacked.

Darkness crept beyond any light of the fire now cremating the bed and vanity chests, combusting with the perfume bottles and whisking up the wigs as flimsy tissue. Darkness crept along his face and under the blood pouring down and into the wounds from which the blood came. Darkness slid up and peeled back his eyelids and covered the perfect round of his eye balls like a thick oil. It slid into his ears and up his nostrils and gagged his mouth and filled throat and Vondemond knew he was dead.

Lady Fransworth returned home that evening with a young gentleman she had met at the fund raising gala. She returned to find her house in flame and though for a while she was horrified at the loss of her possessions, she had realised that life did go on. She stayed with the young man from the gala until she was able to restore her home and had forgotten all about that handsome young man, Charles B. Vondemond.

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