

CHAPTER TWENTY

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, Carol realised that that was exactly what she did want to do, more than anything in the world. It seemed exactly right to talk to this stranger, to tell him the whole story. And yet...there was something wrong. She saw Chris in her mind's eye, half-pegasus as he had been that morning, and heard his voice: *Who's this then? What's he want?*

"No," she said with an effort. "I don't think I do. Thanks anyway."

Count Sienkiewicz frowned. "You are mistaken," he said. "You want very much to tell me everything."

Oh, yes, she really did. She could feel the words bubbling up inside her.

But...it wasn't hers to tell. She couldn't. This man, this wonderful, beautiful man who wanted to let her tell him everything, wasn't part of the group.

Chris wouldn't like it. And that was what mattered. More than her own desires, in that moment. A treacherous part of her sneered *Is that really how your life is going to be? Putting yourself second? Letting the man make the choices for you? Standing back and saying "yes dear" like some fifties cliché?*

"No," she said again, and it was like cutting her own arm. "Please don't."

The man was definitely concerned now. "You do not want to resist me," he said. God, his voice was like warm milk, so soothing, so right. Why had she met Chris first? If only...

"Yes," Carol lied, as if wading through boiling lava. "I do. Go away."

"You do not want me to go away." Oh God, why wouldn't he stop? She really didn't want him to go away. He was all she wanted, all she needed. She knew that beyond all question. If she just gave in and told him, shared the dreadful secret, would it really be so bad? Maybe she could go away with him, let him talk to her in that voice for the rest of her life, tell her what she needed to think and believe and do. That would be sweet.

But...

I don't love him.

The inner voice was so quiet, so still, almost completely drowned by the shrieking of her whole being that she should, just once, do what she really, really wanted...but Carol had got used, over the past few days, to recognising and ignoring desires she knew were not really hers.

She loved Chris. This man wasn't Chris.

But he was perfect. He was a god. She knew that if he told her she loved him, she would. If he just found the right words, she would fall open before him like a well-loved book. She stood, shaking with desire, waiting for him to find the right words.

And then suddenly, with a rush of noise, the man wasn't standing in front of her any more. He was lying on the ground several yards away, his cloak torn from his shoulders, and blood oozing from a gash on his forehead. Chris the centaur was standing over him, breathing hard, with one large hoof on his chest.

"Say the word, Caz," he growled.

"How...how did you....?" Carol stammered.

"It was weird," Chris said. "I just suddenly remembered, from when I was being half pegasus, that I'd had a really bad feeling that you were going to be in trouble, and that this was the time. So here I am. So, can I flatten this guy for you?"

Carol's thoughts were starting to turn back into their normal shape, like dials lining up. This man had just casually reached in and twisted them to his own liking. Carol hated him for that. But...

"No, Chris," she said. "I don't want you to kill him. But don't let him talk to you."

Shirinin and Hugh were coming up at a run. "Who's this then?" Hugh said.

"His name's Count Sienkiewicz," Carol said. "I think he's some kind of magician."

"Is he now?" Chris said.

"Rob's going to be really upset," Hugh remarked. "Another hideout blown."

"Let us by all means not tell him," Shirinin said.

He got down beside the inert body and began searching it. Around Sienkiewicz's neck were several pendants of strange design, which Shirinin removed and handed to Hugh. In the pockets of his jeans were a number of slips of thick paper with symbols and diagrams written on them in

various coloured inks, and two pouches containing miscellaneous items; the Russian removed these likewise. The papers tore easily, and the pouches succumbed to Hugh's pocketknife.

"I suggest we consign these items to the waves," he said to Hugh. "They probably act as foci for his powers, and he will be markedly weaker without them."

Hugh nodded wordlessly, and they jogged off down the lane to the sea. Chris and Carol watched as they went in opposite directions as far as they could and then threw their burdens as far out as their arms could propel them.

"I hope that's weakened him enough," Carol said. "Chris, it was terrible. He made me--made me want to help him."

"Well, he's not the only one who can do that," Chris said. "Cover your ears, Caz."

Carol obediently put her fingers into her ears and watched as Chris shook the unconscious Sienkiewicz till he stirred and mumbled, then spoke low and fiercely directly into his ear. She couldn't hear the words, but she could feel the power. She looked away, at the grey ocean.

He was speaking to her now, and he was human again. She removed her fingers from her ears. Shirinin and Hugh were on their way back, empty-handed.

"He'll sleep for a bit now, then I expect he'll be out of here as fast as he can," Chris said. "I told him if he stayed here he'd die. If I see him again, he will."

"Well done," Shirinin said. "I must admit I would have killed him right away, but then I am a godless Commie, after all. Your way is almost certainly better."

"Yes it is," Hugh said. "Are you ready to come back to the house, Carol?"

"I'm ready to lock the gates behind me, board up the doors and windows and never come out no more," Carol said fervently. "That was well beyond creepy and into obscene."

"We need some help against this kind of adversary," Shirinin said as they started back up the hill.

"I don't know about you, Hugh, but my magic is flimsy at best."

"I don't know who, though," Hugh said worriedly.

The rest of the walk back to the house was conducted in an uneasy silence.

About half an hour later, the man called Count Sienkiewicz stirred, sat up, felt about him with increasing dismay, and finally staggered to his feet and began to run, his stained and torn cloak flapping behind him, out of the village.

Even as he fled, though, he resolved that this would not be the end of it. That creature had done the unforgivable, had placed a compulsion upon him. Upon *him*. It would die. They all would die.

But he was going to need some help.

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Father Krebs sped westwards in a rented Hyundai. He was uneasily aware that Wales, as such, was quite a large area to search.

The local house of his order had been more than co-operative. He had ample funds again, and had been well fed and entertained during his brief stay. He felt once more in command of things. And he felt sure that the hated John Dower had not even his slender lead to go on.

Father Krebs had privately determined to add revenge to the catalogue of sins he would produce for his next confession. Dower would suffer.

And it was just as he was formulating this exceedingly pleasant thought that he caught sight of Dower's car on the road ahead of him.

He gaped, rubbed his eyes and checked the number plate. It was definitely the car he had last seen parked near the Club With A Nail In It.

A moment's thought brought realisation, and anger at his own stupidity. The American would be using satellite imagery. He almost certainly had a clearer idea of the location of the tetrad than Father Krebs did. What he was still doing this close to London, when a whole night had passed, was a mystery to the priest, but it certainly altered the situation.

Father Krebs gunned the engine, changed lanes and drew level with Dower. He caught the American's attention by nearly driving into him, and when the angry blue eyes met his, he signalled to Dower to pull over. It was a gamble, and it paid off. Dower slid to a stop on the hard shoulder and put his hazard lights on. Father Krebs did likewise.

"Hello, John," Father Krebs said cheerfully. "How nice to see you again."

Dower opened his window halfway. "Father," he said neutrally.

"I'm so sorry I did not get a chance to speak with you at our last meeting," the priest went on.

"Things just ran away with me. You know how it is."

Dower did not reply.

"I confess I am surprised to find you not making better use of your lead," Father Krebs said. "I hope you have not suffered any setback."

Dower finally stirred himself to speak. "Just making sure the thing's staying put this time," he said. "I just spent the best part of a week chasing it up and down this pisshole of a country."

"You have its location pinpointed, then."

"Close enough," Dower agreed warily.

Father Krebs considered his next words carefully. Dower needed careful handling.

"Have you considered that we might be in a position to help each other?" he said, trying to get just a tiny pinch of desperation into his voice.

He had struck just the right note. Dower smiled lazily, and fell into the trap.

"Way I see it," he said, "you don't have that much to trade. I know what it is, where it is, and what to do when I get it. What have you got?"

"Ah," said Father Krebs, "but how do you know your information is accurate?"

That shot hit home. Dower frowned momentarily. "I trust my sources," he said.

"But corroboration is always helpful, is it not?"

Dower looked blank.

"I could tell you if what they told you is true," Father Krebs explained patiently. "That would help you."

"Yeah," Dower admitted uncertainly.

"So," Father Krebs said, "what have you been told?"

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"Helicopter," Allie said, squinting up at the sky.

"There's a thing now," Dracul said.

"No," Allie said. "Helicopter."

"What about it?" Wayne said testily. They had turned off the main road and he was finding the going difficult.

"Look for a sign for--" Tilda was trying to navigate, and was having her own difficulty with the names. "L, L, A, N--"

"It's no good spelling it!" Wayne's dyslexia was a sore point. He half turned to berate Tilda. "Just tell me when to--"

"Helicopter!" Allie yelled. "Ye bloody scunners, *helicopter!*"

"It's coming straight at us!" Frankie yelped.

Wayne executed a textbook emergency stop as the camouflage-painted helicopter slowly descended on to the road in front of them, its rotors whipping the hedges on either side. Sheep that had been grazing peacefully in the fields beyond ambled petulantly away, baaing.

"It's a bloody Chinook," Wayne exclaimed as the hatch in front of them opened and the muzzle of a machine gun surveyed them.

"Don-Jay," crackled an amplified voice. "Get out of the vehicle and step away from it. Bring the stolen equipment if you still have it."

Don-Jay swallowed. "That's my boss," he said to Frankie. "Oh well. It was nice while it lasted."

"You don't have to go, you know," Frankie said.

"Um." Dracul cleared his throat. "Frankie my love, while as you know I am now and have ever been a confirmed anarchist and opponent of the Man in all his forms, I should perhaps point out that this particular form of the Man is pointing a nasty-lookin' gun at my personal self, a situation which--"

"Shame on you, Dracul," Marsha said.

"Now, Marsha--"

"Shame," Tilda echoed, and she and Marsha set up a chant.

"All right! All right," Dracul said. "I'll see what I can do. But remember, you brought this on yourselves."

"Don-Jay," said the voice again. "You have twenty seconds to give yourself up."

"I better go," Don-Jay said. "I don't want you to get into trouble."

"T is a sentiment that does you credit, my bucko, and causes me to consider revisin' my estimate of you," Dracul said. "But this kind of trouble is our own personal briar patch. You sit tight." He hefted the backpack, now once more full, and stepped out on to the platform.

"Croeso yr Gymru, or something!" he cried. "Welcome to the fair and mystical land of me fathers. For while my birth and accent may proclaim me a son of Hibernia, or possibly Hyboria, in spirit I claim sanctuary in the mists and mountains of this very land of Wales. My soul is kin to these green hills, these verdant valleys. My heart yearns after these sheep, though not in any questionable way and I'd like to make that quite clear. Was it not one of the greatest of Welsh poets who said:

To begin at the beginning;

where the wild, wind-winnowed, well-wooded wastelands

wind down to the white-crested waters of the whale-road

and wayne can you get off your arse and do something

in the dim distant darkling of the dying day..."

"I'm doin' it, I'm *doin'* it," Wayne muttered, fumbling with the drawstrings of his medicine bag.

"When the cool, green, cruel green, drool-green sea

drags relentlessly at the sandy Sunday-service skirts of the shoreline

and I can't go on like this all night you know--"

"Don-Jay," said the voice. "Step out now or these men will--"

The voice died, the lazily turning rotors suddenly stopped dead, and cries of consternation issued from the bowels of the 'copter. Beyond it an angry hooting betokened the presence of another vehicle. Dracul grinned, dropped the backpack on the road and swung back on board.

"Reverse, if you can find it, I think, Wayne," he said, and the bus began to back away up the road.

"What did you do?" Don-Jay said faintly.

"Wayne has a positive gift for makin' things not work," Dracul said easily. "They'll be a while sortin' out why their electrics have gone dead and their gears all jammed, and in the meantime we can go another way. Rachel my love, would you be an angel and check Mister Don-Jay for the electronic trackin' thingy which I am morally certain is lurkin' somewhere on his person?"

"Yes, Dracul," said Rachel Kwok, producing from her pocket an ordinary plastic ruler which she waved around Don-Jay as if she were a member of airport security and he a suspicious-looking passenger.

"But why did you give them the backpack?" Don-Jay said.

"A little life lesson for you, young Jedi," Dracul said. "When facing off a more powerful antagonist with nothin' but a stone-cold bluff, always yield something. It soothes their ego and may give you a breathin' space. Besides, the thing was clutterin' up my bus, and were you really that keen to go on humpin' it around the countryside?"

"It is sewn into the hem of his shirt, Dracul," Rachel Kwok reported. "Should I remove it?"

"Lose the entire shirt," Dracul ordered. "Dik, you're about the right size and musical taste. Time to sacrifice one of your shirts to the cause. Come on, Don-Jay me boy, off with it."

Don-Jay, in a daze, pulled off his shirt and felt along the hem. There it was, a small round lump. The insane old bat had had him bugged for months, maybe years; if one of his shirts had one, it was a sure bet the other two did. He watched as Tilda took the shirt and flung it into the hedge, and accepted with a nod the faded "2112" sweater Dik handed him, in the same dreamlike state.

As he did so, the bus reached a crossroads, and Wayne, not without some relief, selected a forward gear and took them down another road.

Meanwhile, back at the helicopter, there were now three cars, a tractor and a supermarket lorry, all getting their money's worth out of their horns.

A sweating technician emerged from the innards of the machine.

"It's no go, skipper," he reported.

"Do you have to talk like the Boy's Own Paper, Crowden?" his captain said wearily. "What d'you mean, it's no go?"

"The electrics are all fused solid, and without them we can't start her up. Also, there seem to be iron filings in the gear box." Crowden swallowed. "Instead of gears."

"How the hell could that have happened?" The captain turned a worried face to his passengers. "Could it be this thing we're after?"

Professor Gefarr shook her heavy head. "Elementary techno-shamanism," she said.

"The, ah, Nazis experimented briefly with such things in the war," Pricklow put in. "Though interestingly enough, the project was headed by an expatriate Briton, a Professor..." He frowned.

"Professor Denzil Grahame-Lynne," Gefarr supplied. "The army at least used to install safeguards against such interference. Presumably they have been abolished by some ministerial idiot who saw no reason for them."

"I'll get on to HQ and organise a crane," the captain said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Only way we're going to shift this pile of scrap. Great advertisement for the modern armed forces, I don't think."

"Grahame-Lynne?" Crowden repeated. "You mean as in..."

"Yes, all right, sergeant," the captain snapped. "Get back in there and salvage something."

"And we will need another vehicle," Gefarr said. "It is imperative we continue the pursuit."

"I'll see what I can do. Though considering what it's going to cost to mend this one, I think you might find that a bit of a long shot. The bean counters tend to get edgy if you don't manage to make one chopper last at least a week." The captain snorted as one of his men retrieved the backpack. "Anyway, you've got your bag of tricks back, so I'd call that mission accomplished. Now if you'll excuse me, I think my sergeant needs my assistance."

Gefarr sighed. "Pricklow," she said, "this is your fault."

"I'm sorry," Pricklow said humbly.

"I should have terminated Don-Jay years ago but for your insistence on keeping him."

"My apologies."

Somewhere deep inside Pricklow, a little voice was screaming unspeakable obscenities. But that was perfectly normal. He was used to it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The occupants of the house at Abergenu spent the rest of the day in subdued manner. Carol's encounter (which it had not, after all, been possible to conceal from Rob) had cast a pall over them all. Nobody felt inclined to suggest any more experiments with the tetrad. Chris was dozing over a book in the drawing room, and from somewhere in the bowels of the house the sound of ping and pong indicated the presence of the two spies, sublimating international tensions through the medium of competitive sport. Rob and Carol were pottering aimlessly in the kitchen, wiping things that did not need wiping, not speaking.

Suddenly Carol started and stared into space. Monica's face was there in her mind's eye, as clearly as if she were standing there.

"I meant to call Monica," she exclaimed involuntarily.

"What?" Rob was equally startled.

"It went out of my head." *Or was pushed. Along with everything else.* "I should give her a call."

"Use the phone in the office," Rob said greyly. "Might as well. No point trying to keep this thing a secret. I think Chris's grandfather was right. It's too dangerous to use."

"Rob, you know that's not true. You heard Uncle Aris. That's just putting the problem off, evading responsibility. And in any case, the only way to deactivate it now is to kill Chris, and if you try that you'll have me to deal with. No, I'll go down to the village again. I'll be safe this time. Sienkiewicz is gone, and none of the others are here yet. Stop wallowing in self-abnegation and start thinking about supper."

Her brisk tone seemed to revive him a little. He started poking about in cupboards and the huge American-style fridge-freezer. Carol put on a coat and a red tam o'shanter, let herself out and walked down the drive again in the gloaming. The boats were back on the shore, and a few

people were about; she was surprised to notice that one of the anonymous-looking houses actually seemed to be some sort of hostel. She'd thought the Welsh didn't believe in pubs.

The old-fashioned phone box was clean and unvandalised; one lone graffito, much faded, said PLAID CYMRU. Carol closed the door and picked up the receiver. There was the usual brief moment of panic as she searched for change, and then she dialled Monica's number and heard the ringing tone.

"Monica Fleming, beep if you're sexy," said Monica's voice.

"Hello?" Carol was disgusted at the shakiness of her own voice.

"Carol?" Monica said, her voice rising almost an octave. "Oh my God, Carol, where are you?"

"Safer if I don't say. Are you all right?"

"Perfectly, darling, only worried sick about you. I went back to the Club yesterday, no, day before, and they said you'd all gone, left without warning. The little man was terribly miffed. No forwarding address, no note, nothing."

"Things got a bit hectic."

"More than they were before?" Monica laughed, and Carol almost burst into tears. "Is Chris okay?"

"Chris is fine. For the moment. We've made some progress."

"Tell me where you are and I'll come and join you. I should never have left, darling. I was a rat and a coward."

"No, you were right. It's been..." Carol swallowed. "You're much better off out of it. I miss you horribly, but I've got to be strong and--" Carol broke off. Something subliminal had impinged on her awareness. "Monica, is there someone there with you?"

Monica's laugh was almost perfect. "I wish. No, just me on my lonesome, watching sci-fi on the telly and drinking wine. Sad lady personified. Come on, Carol, where are you? I want to meet up. I'm sure it'll be safe."

"Monica, I have to go. My money's running out. Stay put and think of me. I'll call you again." Carol hung up before Monica could speak again. She really wanted to cry now. Was there no part of her life that was safe from this horror?

There had been someone there. She had heard a man cough. It wasn't the television. Monica had one, but she never watched science fiction unless forced to, usually by Carol. That had been a clue.

And she was helpless. Stuck here in the back of beyond. Nothing she could do. Nothing anybody could do, except wait for whichever set of nasties, out of the seemingly infinite numbers, got to them first.

The phone in the phone box rang, shockingly, harshly.

And Carol shoved open the door and ran, sobbing, all the way back to the house.

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"No answer, General," said the uniformed man, replacing Monica's phone in its cradle.

"I apologise, Ms Fleming." General Grigori Karolides of the Second Hellenic Army Corps, craggy-faced and dark-skinned, with a voice like brushed velvet and just a hint of an accent, smiled. "You performed your part to perfection. Sadly, the same can not be said for you." He turned to one of the other five soldiers in the room, drew his handgun and fired. There was a sound like a sneeze, and the man gave at the knees and fell to the floor, a neat hole in his forehead just above the left eye, blood pooling from a presumably much larger hole in the back.

"And thus," Karolides went on calmly, "we find our patience rewarded. Were you able to trace the call?"

Another soldier looked up from a laptop. "We have narrowed it down to North Wales, General."

"North Wales," Karolides repeated. "Well, that is something at least. Get rid of that--" indicating the body "--and bring the car round. We shall take Ms Fleming with us. She will provide us with leverage." Two soldiers picked up their late colleague and manhandled him out of the room, checking first to ensure the corridor outside was deserted.

Monica glared at him. "And the blood on my carpet? Which is Axminster, in case you were wondering."

Karolides smiled back blandly. "I do not care, Ms Fleming. You see, there are weightier matters at stake here than your Axminster carpet. This irresponsible young man, this Chris Kyriakou, has

stolen something of great value from my country, something which belongs to the Greek people, and we have come here to get it back. And you will help us."

"Why should I help you? And where do you get off invading our country anyway?"

"Invading?" the general echoed. "Why, Ms Fleming, whatever do you mean? I am merely visiting your country, with a small retinue of staff, to assess and evaluate certain new developments in tactical weaponry. A perfectly innocent little outing, which also enables me to indulge my passion for your English fish and chips." His smile vanished. "Do not force me to utter clichés like some alien from your television sci-fi. If you do not help us, I shall treat you as I did my unfortunate subordinate there. It is really that simple." He extracted a cigar from a slim metal case, lit it with care and blew smoke at the ceiling. "We may have come late to the party, but we shall leave with the greatest prize."

He nodded to the fifth soldier, who stepped forward and swiftly administered an injection into Monica's neck. Her eyes widened, and then she went limp in her chair as the smoke detector in the ceiling triggered the fire alarms throughout the building.

Karolides bent close and studied her. "So it does work that fast," he remarked. "I never believed those movies. All right. Let us go."

The man with the laptop closed it and put it under his arm, while Karolides and the other soldier picked the inert girl up and half-carried her out of the flat to join the grumbling, milling crowds on the stairs.

In the confusion, nobody saw them leave.

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"I wish you'd answered it," Hugh said ruefully.

"I was *scared*," Carol repeated. She was sitting by the fire in the drawing room of Abergenu House, with a blanket around her, shivering and clutching the mug of sweet tea Rob had made her, and she still felt frozen. "Do you actually get that? I don't have ice water in my veins like you do. I'm not a secret agent."

"If I only had my phone I could try to find out who it might be," Vassily said.

"Who cares?" Carol said bitterly. "It's just everything. This is my life now. This *fucking* tetrad has got into my job and my home and my friends and my life and everything and--and I just want it to stop, all right?"

"Caz, I'm sorry--" Chris began.

"No, no," Carol said. "I don't mean it, Chris, *I'm* sorry. I'm not thinking straight. I'm just so worried about Monica, and you, and me, and I--I can't even--I--I can't--"

"Caz," said Chris, and his voice was different. She turned to look at him.

There was a star on his brow, and his hair was purest white. That was all she really had time to notice before she met his eyes and fell into them.

It was bliss. Pure, timeless ecstasy, in the literal sense. All her fear, her anger, her guilt, were gently taken out of her hands, turned round and given back to her, so that she could see them for what they truly were, aspects of her love, her courage, her loyalty. Clarity came to her like a lover and melted into her being. She could see now the energy she had squandered in merely feeling bad about feeling bad about feeling bad, an endless recursion of waste. Nothing concrete had changed--the situation was as it was--but she could face it now, see it for what it was, something outside herself. For the first time in her life she truly knew in her heart that the universe did not revolve around her, and the joy of it was beyond words.

She also knew that this state of being must end, that she would lose, for a span, this clarity and certainty, and while that was a sadness, it was also acceptable. Nobody could remain like this indefinitely and still be part of the world. She took two deep breaths, letting them out slowly, and turned away from Chris.

He changed back. Carol turned back to him, met his eyes--ordinary, dark, beautiful human eyes--and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

Hugh had sagged into a chair. Vassily was still standing, but weeping openly, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Rob, standing in the doorway, came forward wordlessly and hugged a somewhat startled Chris.

"Thanks," he said, sounding near to tears himself. "I was feeling so--"

"Uh, no problem, mate," Chris said. "Um. You can let go now."

"So that's the human/unicorn edge," Hugh said shakenly. "Quite an experience."

"I just thought it might help," Chris said.

"Help?" It was Vassily Shirinin. He laughed. It sounded wrong somehow, out of kilter. "Do you know that you could make a fortune as a cult leader? People would give you their entire worldly wealth for just one glimpse of what--" He stopped, and made a visible effort to regain his self-possession. "I don't know if I can ever forgive you for what you showed me just now," he said. "I will try. But it will be hard."

"Sorry," Chris said, bewildered.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned it's all good," Carol said. She felt more in control now than she had for days. "Whoever's got Monica, they had plenty of time to trace the call, so they'll be on the way here, and they'll probably bring her along to try to coerce us into handing Chris over. That'll give us a chance to get her back. And if you think about it, the more different people are here trying to get to us, the more likely they are to get in each other's way."

"Um, Carol," Rob said. "I see your point and that's great and all, but this place isn't built for a siege and we aren't exactly soldiers."

"We don't have to be," Carol said. "We can handle anything human that comes against us without resorting to force. Chris will help us find ways. And as for the magic stuff--"

There was a knock on the outer doors. Everyone jumped except Carol, who went briskly out into the hall and opened up.

"Yes?" she said.

"Bob-a-job, miss?" said Dracul von Ryan.