

*The following takes place on Day 32, the first day of Strahd's allowed Leave of Absence following session 40.*

The Winery was damp this early, the moisture clinging to their skin as the grass waited for the morning to come and burn off the dew. Magda folded her arms close to her chest, rubbing her elbows to bring back the heat.

"Are you ready?" Jenny Greentooth asked. She had spent a minute drawing a circle in chalk on the patio, intricate teleportation runes within.

"I suspect not," Magda said. She stepped into the centre of the circle and Jenny joined her.

"This had better not take all day, I don't want to miss breakfast," Jenny pointed a wizened finger at her, before stooping and drawing the final chalk line like striking a match.

The chalk circle glowed. Inhaled. Then, burst into life. Magda was pulled back, gasping as the wind was knocked out of her, the world turning to a lattice of diamond, and then, resolving.

It was just as cold, but dry. Magda looked up to see. They were standing on the shore of Lake Zarovich. It went on deep into the dark, a huge sheet of black glass. The treeline in the distance was just visible, and beyond that, the mists. The endless mists.

On their opposite side, southwards, a storm cloud rumbled towards them. The same cloud which had soaked the Winery through the night — they'd overtaken it. She took a deep breath. "Where are we going?"

"Come on," Jenny said. She walked with tottering steps but a speed incommensurate with her age. "Let's get this over with."

Magda followed, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. Not a single person in Barovia should have known her. And no-one from the old days would want her alive.

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The encampment was small, a few hastily constructed huts at most. The people here were still asleep, just as everyone else was back in the Winery. Jenny pointed to the biggest one. "Go on, I'll wait here." She settled herself down on a stump and promptly went back to sleep, leaning on her cane.

Magda swallowed. Walking towards the hut seemed to take an age, as her heart jack-hammered in her chest. She arrived at the door, one hand on the pommel of her sword, and motioned to knock but the fabric walls didn't give purchase. "Hello?" she said, breaking the silence.

There was no response.

Gingerly, she curled her fingers around the cloth covering of the door, and pulled it to one side, enough to make space to step through.

"Hello?" she said again, as her darkvision adjusted to the pitch black of the tent.

An old man stirred, lying in a bed. "Who's there?" A twinge. That accent. Hers. She hadn't heard it in centuries.

"You called me," Magda said. There was something familiar in that voice, but it had been ravaged by age like old wood.

The man coughed and hacked, and a decrepit hand reached for an oil lamp by the side of the bed. He clicked his fingers, and by Prestidigitation, it lit.

If it had been possible for Magda to pale, she would. The candlelight flickered, revealing the old man's face.

"It would seem, Captain, you did not go down with the ship," he said. His eyes were glassy with age, and his skin wrinkled and sagged, pocked with liver spots.

Those eyes. "It's you. My God, it's you."

"When they said," he struggled to sit up in the bed, moving a pillow to support his back. "That you had been spotted in Vallaki, I didn't believe it."

"Aleksandr..." Magda rushed to his bedside, taking one of his hands in hers. His fingers felt brittle.

"I haven't been called that in many years, my dear," Aleksandr smiled.

"But... how?" Magda said. "How did you get here? How are you...?"

"Still alive? I should ask of you the same thing, your Grace. But I fear I know the answer."

"It's..." The shame hit her like a ton of bricks. Suddenly all the justifications she'd been telling herself, all the lies that had compounded for centuries, evaporated. Lies. All of them. "It's complicated."

"We saw your... little accident. The two travellers, in Vallaki?" Aleksandr's face darkened. "By then, we had your physical description. But I thought, 'no'. Not my queen. Not the last heir of Iliadvar. An undead?"

Magda's lip began to quiver. "I've made a lot of mistakes, Aleksandr. I didn't have..." The idea of laying this at someone else's feet felt so wrong she couldn't even make an excuse. "It's been hard. You were all gone."

"We survived," Aleksandr said. "I wish we'd known you were still alive, but there wouldn't be much we could do to see you."

The evacuation. Ten people had escaped from Iliadvar with Aleksandr when she'd burned the castle to the ground. "You fell into the mists?"

"We did. Not that we knew that at the time. We found ourselves here. A long time ago."

"How... old are you?" Magda asked. It had been two hundred and fifty years in Barovia in the outside world. If time moved slower here...

"Ninety one," he grinned. His teeth were still immaculate, and for a moment she could see her lieutenant. A lifetime of memories flooded back in that smile. A different woman, tiny. With a country, and a family, and a home. Complaining to him about grand balls and dresses and sword practice. He'd been like a tree trunk. Dependable. Duty-bound. He'd been like an older brother to her. "Give or take," he admitted.

She laughed, and found she was crying. "Give or take?"

He waved his free hand like there was a fly buzzing about him. "I lost count."

All the men in her family had waved their hands like that. She'd forgotten that. Their entire culture, leaf pressing etched onto them and them alone. She pressed a kiss to his old hand.

"I've missed you, your Grace," he said. "You make an old man very happy."

"Please," she scoffed. "I haven't had a title in over two hundred years."

"You were always my Grace," Aleksandr said.

"Why have you called me here?" Magda said. "Why now?"

Aleksandr rubbed his chest, and reached for a glass of water. "You saved Fang's life," he said, his throat wet. "I sent them to kill you. But Strahd's wizard got there first."

"Fang..." Magda racked her brain. The last few weeks had felt like they'd taken place over the space of a year. [[lol]] "The boys. Naesela. And Flynn." She looked around the hut. "They're from here."

“Flynn was my youngest son. My last.”

“I’m so sorry,” Magda said. “I couldn’t save him.”

“Barovia takes them all in the end,” Aleksandr said, resigned. “This place... it is not good fertiliser. Bad for crops. Bad for people. He lasted longer than the others.” He squeezed her hand. “It is a terrible thing, to outlive your children.”

Magda nodded. Then, without meaning to, she did the arithmetic in her head. “Flynn was... thirty?”

He nodded.

“That means you had him when...” She scoffed. “You dog!”

He shrugged. “Bad for crops. You need to sow more seeds for harvest time.” He smiled. “Besides, what else do we have for fun around here?”

She giggled. “Oh, you have not changed, my friend.”

“Really?” He adjusted. “I’m sure my back wasn’t always this bad.”

“Thank you for calling me here,” Magda said.

“I wanted to see you, before the end,” he smiled. He took a deep inhale of air. “The clerics are doing everything they can, but they are not gods. Even they cannot stop time.”

“I see...” Magda said. “How long do you have?”

He shook his head. “Who knows what tomorrow will bring?” He freed his hand, clumsily, and reached for a drawer in the bedside cabinet. When he couldn’t reach, Magda opened it for him.

Inside was a blue pillow, and on it, a medal. A diamond plaquette on a suspension ribbon, to be worn on the front of a coat. “Take it,” he said. “It’s yours, after all.”

It wasn’t.

It was her father’s. And before that her grandmother’s. “You fool. You kept it.”

“It’s our heritage. The coronation medal of Iliadvar,” he said. “If one of those other armies had taken it, I would’ve died a thousand times.”

She lifted it off the pillow, felt it in her hands. It was heavy. She half-expected to see her reflection as a little girl in the diamond, as she had when she’d jumped into her father’s arms as a child.

But of course, it saw straight through her, showing nothing but the wall behind her.

“I heard that you’re here to end this. To free Barovia,” he said. “A tall task, my lady. But if you do, I would like the devil to die looking up at that medal.”

She almost wanted to put it back. If her family could see her now, they’d put a stake through her themselves.

“We’re so close to the end,” Magda said to herself. “I don’t know if we can do it. We have a plan, but I have no idea if it will work.”

“How long?”

“Weeks, at most.”

Aleksandr smiled. "I think I can last another few weeks." He looked out the open door. Daybreak had arrived, and people were starting to mill about the camp. "I grow weary of these endless mists. I would like... to feel the sun on my face, one last time."

Magda swallowed. "Me too." She pinned the medal to her lapel, then folded the lapel so the medal was hidden.

"This is a good day!" he said, stretching. "Celebration. Bring the wine." He gestured to the corner of the room, where a thick green bottle lay, resealed with a cork.

She smiled, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "You really haven't changed," she smiled sadly. "Body be damned."

He looked her dead in the eyes, the same way he'd done when she was a child. "You have." His face was set, and she felt like she was under a microscope. "Body be damned."

"I will get that sunrise for you. I owe you that much at least."

He saluted. "Good luck, your Highness. And know that if you give into that curse while wearing that medal, Asmodeus won't be able to save you from me."

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When Magda exited the tent, she found Jenny sitting on her stump, fighting with a small dog that was trying to steal her cane.

"Ready to leave?" Magda asked. She was looking around at the passersby, the early risers of the camp who were watching them with suspicion. She tried to ignore that someone rushed into Aleksandr's tent right after she left, no doubt to check if she'd killed him.

"Shoo! Shoo!" With one almighty heave Jenny shook the dog's grip, and brandished the cane so it ran away. "That was quick."

Magda said nothing. She could feel the medal through her clothes, as sure as if it had been a clove of garlic.