

# Episode 2: The Dolorous Weight of Pleasantries

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Innistrad: Crimson Vow*

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“Have you seen her yet?”

“No, have you?”

“Terrible, just terrible, to make us wait so long just for her to make an appearance. She might think she’s Lord of Innistrad, but—”

“Don’t say that so loudly, Relio—”

“But she’s far from it! I won’t believe it until I see it myself.”



Voldaren Estate | Art by: Richard Wright

Relio drinks from his goblet. A little blood dribbles down his chin, staining his pure white ruff, which Cordelia warned him would happen. He never listens to her. Don’t feed on wastrels, she told him, but there he went; don’t antagonize the Nusfar simply because they look like children, she said, only to find him dangling blood-soaked candies over the head of a girl at least five times his age. Of all the vampires Cordelia knows, Relio seems the most eager to part with his immortality.

Frankly, she's sick of dealing with it. There's so much else to see. Stromkirk cultist meetings had their own charms, yes, but they didn't have an ounce of this ostentation. Cordelia likes a good prophetic sermon as much as the next woman, but sometimes it's good to see how the other side lives.

Practically everyone's gathered at the Voldaren Estate for the wedding. Olivia's truly outdone herself with the decorating. Cordelia didn't know that was possible. Still, it's hard to argue with the sights. The Voldaren Estate is swirling with red: the carpet red beneath their feet, chased with golden thread; red in the gowns and suits of the attendees per the dress code; red, beautiful and dark, in the tiered blood fountains every few paces. But most impressive were the swirling red petals dancing through the air. Once, centuries ago, Cordelia tended gardens. Watching the petals float in the air reminds her of days long gone.

And it's far better than listening to Relio go on.

He's still talking, but she's no longer paying attention. Something about Olivia letting the Domnathi come. And what was so bad about that, she wanted to ask? Oh, yes, they consorted with demons, but there aren't any demons *here*, or at least none that Cordelia can see, and at least the Domnathi listened to the dress code. Relio came in white and blue. Honestly. His sleeves are already purpling with all the petals, the blood regaining its liquid form when it meets the cloth.

A human walks by, thankfully providing another distraction from her companion's ceaseless chattering. Olivia's fine taste truly is on display tonight—thralls are strapping, lithe, beautiful, and handsome, but never boring. The tray in his hands holds crystal goblets of fresh blood; Cordelia considers for a long moment if she'd be chastised for drinking straight from the tap instead. There are no marks on this man's rippling form. Probably not worth risking it if he's someone's special pet. Besides, there are five duels going on in the hall already, one of which has taken a turn toward evisceration. It's unbecoming to eviscerate someone at a wedding.

Doesn't stop the Nusfar, though. Few things do. As Cordelia picks up another goblet, a boy who looks all of ten drives his hand into a man's chest. She tuts. The victim is Kristoff Laurent, a Markov known for dueling at the drop of a hat—but all the martial skill on the Plane won't save you against the pure predator instinct of the Nusfar. She liked Kristoff, though, as passionate everywhere as he was on the battlefield.

Watching him bleed out now, she feels only the barest trace of sadness. Ah well. Love is as fleeting as a flower, even for immortals.

"And just look at who she's invited. Monsters. I tell you, being a vampire doesn't mean what it used to mean," Relio prattles. "Why, that we're all bowing to this *madwoman* should tell you something."

"Relio, you're a Voldaren," she says flatly.

"That only means I know her better than most! Two hundred years ago we'd never be cavorting with *Domnathi*—"

Relio's next nonsense dies the moment he does, drowned in the blood welling up from his mouth. Like a waterfall, it spills down his chest. He reaches out for Cordelia, but she sidesteps his dying grasp. Three seconds later, his corpse falls with a *thunk* onto the polished marble floor.

Henrika Domnathi, noted demon sympathizer, stands just behind him. Crimson tendrils weave about her fingers. Dark, arterial blood fills her goblet. When she fixes Cordelia with her steely glare, it is all she can do to keep from running away.

"Terribly boring man," she says. "Friend of yours?"

“No. Not at all, Lady Domnathi, not at all,” Cordelia says.

The rumored one-time lover of Griselbrand smirks. “Good. And you are?”

“Cordelia—”

“Ahh, yes, a Stromkirk, aren’t you?” she says. The way she studies Cordelia’s outfit feels uncomfortably like a cat surveying a mouse. “I’ve had *questions* for your kind lately, but it seems no one will answer them for me. Isn’t that a shame?”

There are whispers about what Henrika Domnathi does to people who won’t answer her questions. Faint ones, because everyone’s terrified of speaking them aloud. The Domnathi bloodline is famous for consorting with demons, though to what end remains unclear. And even worse than that, it’s said they’ll do favors for those demons, in exchange for powers of which other vampires can only dream. And when it came to Henrika herself, well

A human thrall wordlessly bends over to drag Relio’s body away. It’s enough to divert Cordelia’s attention for just a second. A primal fear comes over her: she may be a vampire, but so was Relio. She’s not looking to end up like him. If Henrika wants, she could just kill her right—

*Ting, ting, ting.*

Silence rolls over the grand hall like a crimson tide as all eyes land on the dais.

Olivia Voldaren has finally arrived.



Olivia, Crimson Bride | Art by: Anna Steinbauer

And what an entry she’s made! Floating down the steps in her wedding finery, her swirling, haunted sanguine train held aloft by bats! Every gleaming arcane light glitters anew, every one illuminating some new detail: the glimmer of her golden jewels, the glint of her teeth, the glamor of a gown made from the spirits of her oldest victims. In all the time Cordelia’s been alive—a few hundred years now—she’s never seen such sartorial heights. That collar has got to be at least as tall as some toddlers.

Even Henrika’s impressed, a soft *hmm* escaping her lips. She drapes an arm around Cordelia. “What a shame, the party’s begun.”

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“Wh-what a shame,” Cordelia repeats.

But Olivia saves them from any further conversation.

“Greetings, my *dearest* friends, my most *ardent* enemies!” No good can ever come of her sounding so happy. “I see we’ve already had some murders. What fun! I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to have blood sacrifices at my wedding! But what would a wedding be without a groom?”

She holds aloft her glass in signal to some unseen forces. Soon she is no longer alone on the dais: a group of immaculately dressed thralls—most in Avacynian finery, for the joke—emerge carrying an elaborate stone coffin: marble inlaid with gold, crowned by Markovian rays.

The thralls set the coffin down standing up.

In that moment, the ballroom is as silent as it will ever be.

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Chandra Nalaar walks face first into danger.

That’s her usual routine. It *usually* works. Tonight, as she tries to walk past the guards outside the Voldaren Estate, it doesn’t. Instead, Teferi grabs her by the shoulders just as a bird flies into the wall. Whatever magic they’ve got incinerates it right then and there. Crumbles of bird-shaped ash fall where it made contact.

“Well I guess that’s not going to work,” Chandra says.

Adeline stifles a laugh, which almost makes the whole thing worth it. Chandra hasn’t heard her laugh in a while. With some bitterness, she glances to the towering guards on either side of the gate. It isn’t their fault *directly*, but they are part of the problem.



By Invitation Only | Art by: Micah Epstein

Coming right to the front gates was Arlinn’s idea. If there was a wedding going on—and if they showed up in a small group, with Sorin—then maybe they’d be let in. Chandra thought it was stupid from the

get-go. Who ever heard of letting the enemy waltz right into your operation just because they came in fancy dress? But Sorin thought it was worth a shot, too, so here they were.

But as far as she's concerned, the right answer here is to light the whole thing on fire. The guards will scatter, or else they'll get caught, and they can fight this out.

It was do-or-die time on Innistrad. On the way here, their group rallied whomever they could get to join up. Turns out, it's a lot easier to do when there's a plan, and when that plan involves crashing a vampire party. There's a lot of anger out there on the moors and the heaths and the cliffs, a lot of fire just looking for something to consume.

Chandra knows all about that.

The ranks of mounted cathars lying in wait will charge right in. Sigardan priests will start their chants, bright prayer wrapping about the gathered townspeople like the wings of angels, and that will be that. There'll be no hope for any of the vampires. Scoop up the Moonsilver Key and go.

But when things seem simplest to her, they're often more complicated to everyone else. Looking on the faces of her companions—only the five of them, the rest concealed not far off—she gets the feeling that must be the case here, too. Especially Sorin. He looks like someone slipped vinegar into his serving of blood, which is impressive given that she didn't think he could possibly look any more sour. First time for everything, she supposes.

"No one enters without an invitation," the guards say. Olivia Voldaren must have selected two vampires whose voices could perfectly harmonize for just this job, because they do, and it is the most sonorous dismissal in all of Innistrad.

"What about if we all come in with him?" Arlinn asks. She looks handsome in her wedding outfit, but then she looks handsome in most things. Still, she's got excellent taste: a well-tailored oxblood jerkin, sprigs of birch embroidered at the collar, her red-slashed sleeves ending in fresh-pressed white cuffs. A fur mantle worn over one shoulder adds a woodsy touch; knowing her, she probably took down the bear herself. It is nice to see her all cleaned up—like seeing your favorite aunt at a party. "He has an invitation."

"One person per invitation," the guards intone together.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Chandra says. "Not even a plus-one?"

"You can definitely afford to let more people in," says Kaya, gesturing at their gilded armor. "It isn't a matter of scarcity."

"And if you want to make sure all of Innistrad bows to its new lady, then you need investment from *everyone*," says Arlinn. "You can't just invite vampires."

"It's bad form," agrees Teferi.

"One person per invitation."

Chandra wants to scream. The answer's so simple. Just go in, right? Just go in.

But there are wards all around the place—wards the witches haven't been able to crack and the priests haven't been able to dispel. The vampire army is there as well all along the watch towers, waiting for any sign of unrest. Who knows how many of them have magic of their own? Who knows how hungry they are? Sure, Arlinn and Adeline managed to put together a small army's worth of people—but was everyone ready to come to blows here?

Right here, right now?



As much as Chandra wants to fight, she can't ignore the cost of it out in the open like this. Without the key, or the immediate hope of the key, it's going to end like the Harvesttide Massacre.

That day carved itself into her mind, and the scar of it will remain for years, she's sure: the bodies lying out in the balmy orange of the setting sun; their blood, red as cranberry wine, seeping into the festive costumes they'd spent so much time putting together. Dressing as werewolves and vampires was meant to be an act of defiance. To see their bodies lying broken instead Battlefields were sickening enough on their own.

But these were innocent people. Barely grown, some of them.

And when she thinks of them—no, no. They can't just walk in.

Maybe Adeline knows what she's thinking. The cathar's hand is a comforting weight on Chandra's shoulder, as is the faint smell of leather that always announces her presence. The parade armor she's wearing is swoon-worthy enough, engraved with Avacynian symbols, but she always smells so good, too. "Patience rewards the virtuous," she says, "but I admit, it's difficult sometimes to be virtuous."

"Tell me about it," says Chandra. Best not to let it linger. "Real shame, though. Here we are, both looking sharp, with nowhere to go. I was promised a party."

"A party? Is that all this is?"

The deep voice hits like a punch to the ribs. Chandra doesn't flinch. In some sense, she's happy he's finally paying attention to the world around him instead of brooding. "I mean, it isn't *just* a party," she says. "I'm trying to lighten the mood, Sorin."

"I'm certain this is all a fun romp for you, Nalaar, but I'll remind you, there are adults present," said Sorin.

"Some of the adults could use a laugh," Teferi says. "Chandra's proven herself time and again. She's earned her right to joke around. This isn't her homeworld, either—she could have ignored the summons, or left after Harvesttide. But she's here."

Sorin looked down at the invitation in his hands. He furrowed his brow. Chandra thought he looked just like a moody old portrait, which made her laugh, because he'd hate to hear that. She was at least quick enough to bite her lip to stifle it. No matter how ridiculous Sorin is as a person—or how much she might dislike him—it's hard to imagine what she'd be feeling in this situation.

"Will you be all right in there alone?" Arlinn asks him.

"I can try to follow you," Kaya offers.

It's a funny thought, a little ghost Kaya hovering around the sullen Sorin. Chandra knows it doesn't work that way; Kaya isn't *really* a ghost, so at most, she'd be following behind him at full size. Still, somehow the image feels right. But what feels right, too, is the way he sighs and shakes his head.

"I've been alone for centuries," he says. "This will be no different."

She wants to ask him what he means because he won't be alone. He's related to a bunch of people in that place. Must be someone in there he likes, right?

But as he strides between the guards, Sorin doesn't have the air of a man who likes anyone.

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Sorin walks alone.

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The guards on either side of him must think otherwise. With the barrier secure, they opted to escort him to the castle, sending messenger bats for reinforcements to replace them at the outer gates.

Every one of his footfalls is echoed by theirs—the sharp tap of his shoes on the marble floors, the soft clatter of their armor. If they chose, they could move as soundlessly as moonlight through the darkness. But instead, there is the steady rhythm of their steps for company.

And soon, their braying.

“You didn’t adhere to the dress code,” says one. Sorin does not know his name, nor does he care to. “The colors were specified in the invitation.”

Towers floated atop chunks of rock on either side of them. Within each of those towers, a host of Voldarens and their guests pour blood for each other. The scent of debauchery reaches him even here. He wonders if all of them are adhering to the dress code. In the distance, the churning sea continues ever on its course, ignorant to what occurs here.

He says nothing.

Petals of blood land on his cloak, coloring the frost.

Onward through the gates of the castle, filigreed with the Voldaren symbol and Olivia’s silhouette within it. The sheer audacity of the woman. If egos alone could conquer, Olivia Voldaren would have long since carved her throne from the bones of Innistrad.

Tonight, she will.

The woman at the door looks him up and down with clear disgust, as if his finery is somehow less appropriate because it is black and gray. Sorin might not have the patience for vampire politicking, but he knows well enough how to dress. Unlike many of these whelps.

“Your invitation?”

He hands it over, fuming though he may be. They knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was. Olivia must have told this girl to act in such a way—a simple fledgling at the door to welcome all the lords and ladies. Had Olivia picked her for the way she pouted? For the utter disinterest in her voice?

“Go ahead.”

A younger Sorin would have bristled at this.

But he is older now, and tired. The sooner this is over with the better.

Onward through the doors, where music swallows him whole. Enthralled musicians play near gilded fountains of blood. The piece is at least three hundred years old by his count; everyone here knows it. And, indeed, there are some who dance to the tune, even here where the party has not yet begun. The green light filtering in through the windows lends everything an eerie cast, as if he is watching a painting in place of people.

But then it comes, inevitable as the outside tides—one of the revelers gets hungry, wanders over, and tears out a musician’s throat.

Really, some of these guests can’t be counted as people. To be given over to your desires so thoroughly that you cannot keep yourself from ruining the entertainment is to be less than human.

And they are all like this. Yes, for thousands of years, they have all been like this.

“Sorin? Is that Sorin Markov?”

He keeps walking.

The hallways of the Voldaren Estate are meant to confuse. It's one of Olivia's oldest tricks: get the revelers drunk by one means or another, tell them they absolutely shouldn't wander off, make a few people disappear when they do. There are more geists in the Muttering Corridors than there are pages in all of Olivia's library. Each one a victim of hers. Each one wandering these weird halls, where doors sometimes lead to sudden drops and stairs are given to rearrange.

But the trick of it is that the Voldaren Estate follows Olivia's whims.

And she is as predictable as she is loathsome.

On some level, he knew this was going to happen. Something like this. During his ignoble prison sentence, she was already making ludicrous grabs for power. It was only natural that someone so nakedly ambitious would hit on the idea of a political marriage. And once she'd had the idea, there were few on Innistrad who could offer her an increase in power. Henrika loved revenge more than power; the Falkenrath had no one to offer; Runo Stromkirk would sooner give himself to the unknowable beings of the sea. That left Sorin—unattainable to her—or his grandfather.

He should have known.

The closer they come to the ballroom, the more people they run into. Thralls who do not dare to look at him. Fledglings who do so with abandon, as if the act of laying eyes on Sorin Markov is something so profoundly profane as to change the course of their ageless existence.

"That's him, the man in the rock," they say. "How *droll* !"

"Shouldn't he have a mouth like a Gorgon?" He's familiar with the term, but only in passing. The Falkenrath had earned a new name for themselves.

"He's handsome, for such a fool."

They giggle as they flit by him, mouths red with their last meals. Glasses clink together. Behind him, the guards' armor keeps clattering; above him, petals of blood float on clouds of music.

Silently, he thinks of all he has done to enable this life they lead.

He hates it here.

Onward, to the ballroom itself, a space so wide it is difficult to imagine how it fits within the castle's architecture. The moon alone could not provide ample lighting; spectral yellow-green magic fills in the gaps. Dancers, duelists, lollygaggers, and layabouts—there are hundreds of them gathered, and all are reflected upon the polished marble floors. Fountains of blood offer succor and inebriation; chained thralls offer something a little *fresher* for the connoisseurs among the crowd.

A lithe man by the doors blows a horn.

"Announcing the *extremely welcomed, very honored* , Sorin Markov!"

He thinks, not for the first time, of murder.

But he knows what will come of that, surrounded here by those who want to see him brought low. All Olivia must do is say the word. Then they will all descend upon him, crows to the carrion, and all the sangromancy on the Plane will only buy him another few moments. Meanwhile, Arlinn's ramshackle coalition will wait outside none the wiser.



So, he does not kill the crier, and he does not kill any of the people who turn to look at him then. How many eyes are upon him? He does not know, but he can feel every one like the tip of a dagger across his flesh.

But the stake in his heart comes when he looks upon the dais.

There's no mistaking it: that is his grandfather's coffin.

And that woman, cloaked in the roiling souls of her victims, is Olivia Voldaren.

Silence reigns in the house of abandon.

Even from here—even across the ballroom—he can tell when she begins to smile.

"My *dearest* Sorin," she calls. "What a *delight* ! You're right on time."

He scowls. A wave of restrained laughter rolls through the crowd. He doffs his cloak, casting it behind him, walking down the aisle to his grandfather's stolen coffin.

"Olivia, it's always a pleasure," he says. "I see you've spared no expense."

"And why should I? This joyous occasion deserves only the finest, wouldn't you agree? I wouldn't want your grandfather to wake to anything less than the best."

He cannot keep himself from clenching his teeth together.

But he continues. One step, another. Falling petals. Clinking glasses.

Olivia snaps her fingers. One of the thralls hands her an ornate knife.

"Ask him yourself, if you like," she says. "It'll only be a moment."

"What you're doing is madness."

"Madness? Oh, my dear boy, this is the wisest thing I've ever done," she answers.

The daggers shift then, the crowd's attention now on Olivia. With a small flourish, she rakes the knife across her arm. Old blood, potent blood, blood dark as the night around them, drips onto Edgar Markov's coffin.



Art by: Volkan Baga

The red chandelier above, the red carpets below, joined by the woman in her red wedding dress, the red blood on the white slab coffin.

Each drip makes him angrier. Every instant that woman's foul blood runs along the carvings of his family histories is an insult. *His grandfather*—his grandfather, who created everything these people so value! His grandfather, who created them, used as a simple political tool.

He knows what is going to happen. The grooves run all the way to the inner workings of the coffin. Any moment now, that woman's blood will drip onto his grandfather's lips. The rush of it will leave him overwhelmed—and, worse, her own memories and emotions will mingle with his.

Sorin was so careful whenever he woke his grandfather. He'd wait and wait until his own storm of emotions had settled, he'd keep his mind trained on pleasant memories, he'd do whatever was necessary to see that his grandfather woke comfortably. To wake from slumber is a frightening thing, much as no one wants to admit it.

And now his grandfather is going to wake tasting that woman's blood, thick with ambition, surrounded by these *insects*

It is, in the end, a childish thought. Perhaps the most childish thought he's ever had—and certainly the most childish thought he's had in recent memory.

But it is there, at the core of all this, a single thought that echoes and echoes.

He doesn't want to lose his grandfather.

He doesn't want to see his grandfather get hurt.

In all the Planes, no one had known him longer. No one knew the story of his life so well, from his childhood to his ascendancy, his failures to his triumphs.

No one else remembered anymore. All the others were dead.

The realization is the flame, his rage the powder. The instant he has the thought is the instant everything changes. The explosion incinerates all caution.

Sorin charges ahead.

The guards are there to meet him, four standing with spears interlinked. Mice before cats have more hope of survival. When Sorin pounces on one, he tears out their throat before the two of them even hit the ground. Two of the others he freezes in place, their blood stopping in their bodies. He readies to leap again, toward Olivia—

But in his haste, he's forgotten the last man.

A thick, heavy chain around his neck chokes his progress, yanking him backward like a collared dog. If he can go just one more step, he could stop Olivia in place, stop this whole ritual.

But the guard drags him one step back, his feet tripping over the bodies.

Sorin snarls. His eyes lock on the sight in front of him: the coffin, the blood, Olivia's smiling face.

One more step

Another guard joins the first, another Blessed Silver chain around his chest.

He strains forward.

A third guard. A fourth. More and more pile on, faster than his magic can work on them, faster than he can stop them.

All he can do is try to reach them—and watch.

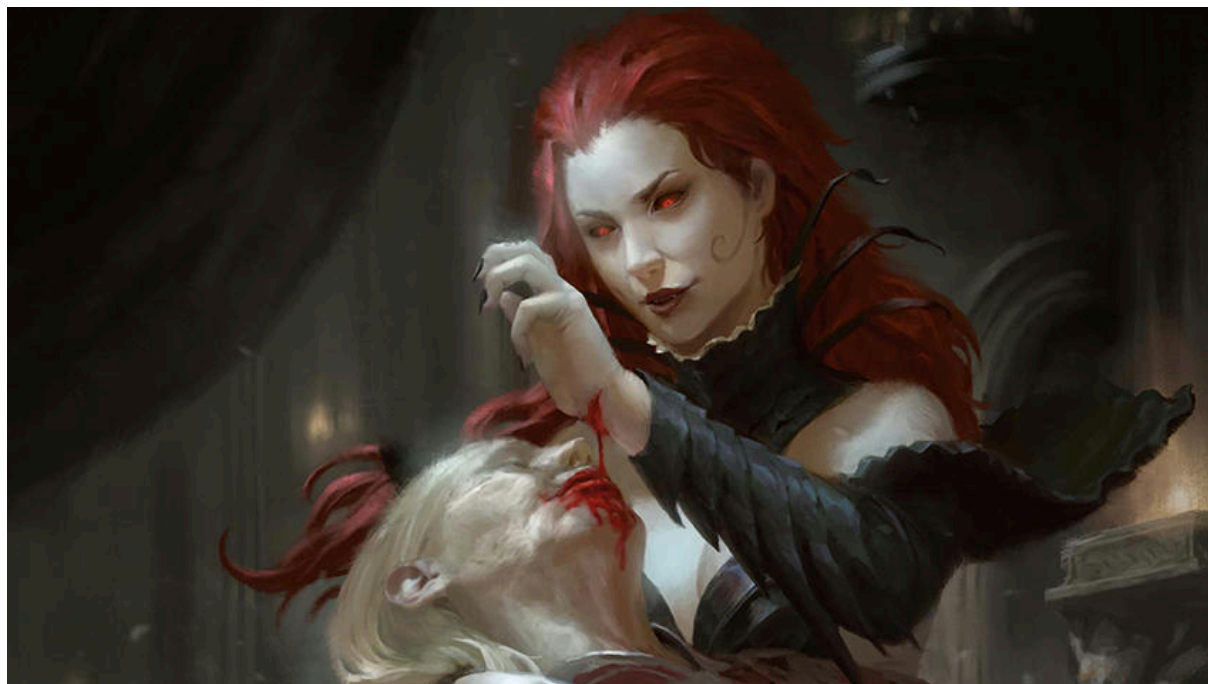
Watch as the coffin slides open and his grandfather emerges from within. Edgar Markov does not survey the gathered crowd, nor his restrained grandson—he has eyes only for Olivia Voldaren.

He smiles at her.

Sorin strains to remember his grandfather smiling like this before now. It's beatific, pure, and all the more horrifying for that. He's smiling like a *child*.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and Sorin," Olivia announces, "I present to you my handsome, perfect betrothed: Lord Edgar Markov."

He takes her hand. For long, horrible moments, he drinks the blood from her wrist. Only after this does he rise from the coffin.



Edgar's Awakening | Art by: Joshua Raphael

Done with his meal, he dabs at his face with a handkerchief. Now he turns to face the crowd, now he takes in the sight.

“Grandfather!” Sorin shouts. “Grandfather, she’s controlling you—”

It is only then that Edgar regards him, and only as a man might regard his unruly pet. The smile from only moments ago sags into sympathy. “Sorin, please. You’re ruining the festivities.”

“The festivities?” Sorin repeats. He can’t think of anything else to say. There was a small hope tucked away within him—a hope he hadn’t even acknowledged—that Olivia’s charms might fail to ensorcell his grandfather. Could it truly be so easy as this?

His grandfather shows no signs of changing course. Olivia snaps her fingers; a host of thralls spring to action. Like spiders weaving a web, they swirl about him, helping him piece by piece into his wedding finery.

Sorin’s stomach sinks. He realizes, faintly, that the guards have stopped holding him back. He could move now if he wanted.

But he can’t summon the strength.

Not as Olivia takes his grandfather’s arm, not as the guests smile at him.

“Why the long face? It isn’t as if you’ll be alone on the groom’s side,” Olivia says.

He’s too worn down to dignify it with a response.

But she makes good on her word—he won’t be.

There are other coffins. He has so many relatives; it’d be impossible to store them all at Markov manor. Many slumbered on their own properties.

And they hadn’t escaped Olivia’s notice.

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Olivia flits from one coffin to the other like a mad honeybee. A few drops is all it takes to start the process of waking the ancients. Somehow, despite Edgar being her promised husband, she never seems to take her eyes off Sorin.

He wonders how much she knows. He wonders if she's picked them out by hand, the ancestors he most detested. He suspects that she has. It wouldn't be a difficult thing to do—he's rarely seen eye to eye with the rest of his family.

He isn't sure when it happens, but it does, perhaps by the time his third aunt wakes from her slumber to sneer at him.

Sorin Markov looks away.

One by one, his family passes him by. One by one they kiss his cheeks and demand he does the same. All the while they say nothing, for there is nothing to be said.

There's a wedding on, after all, and talking with Sorin always ruined the mood in Markov Manor.