

The Mystery of Markov Manor

James Wyatt

From set *Shadows Over Innistrad*

Jace has come to Innistrad in search of Sorin Markov, one of the three Planeswalkers who imprisoned the Eldrazi on Zendikar thousands of years ago. Despite the dire warnings of Liliana Vess, he has made his way to Markov Manor, ancestral home of the vampire Planeswalker. Without Liliana's help, and with no other leads to pursue, he finds himself on the narrow path to the only place he knows that might offer a hint to Sorin's whereabouts.

Markov Manor was torn apart, opened up and laid out to view like a dissected animal pinned to a board. Spires, halls, buttresses, and turrets were ripped from their moorings and left to hang at odd angles around the sundered core of the manor building.

Jace stood at the end of a long arched bridge that jutted out from the mountainside. Below him was a sheer drop disappearing into mist. Ahead, what was once the rest of the bridge had become a scattering of steppingstones across the void, leading to the entryway of the manor.

"I guess Sorin probably isn't here," he muttered to himself.

Suddenly, he saw the place as it must have once been—an awe-inspiring structure of intricately decorated spires and balustrades, perched like a vulture at the edge of a lofty promontory. His breath caught in his chest as he took in the scale of the...not a manor, no, but a castle. A palace.

And the vision was gone, like an illusion. Scowling, he reached out with his mind, looking for some other intelligence that had forced the image into his mind. No one was nearby, at least not anyone with thoughts he could detect. He reinforced the wards he habitually kept around his mind and surveyed the castle as it actually was.

Did Sorin do this? he wondered. Liliana had suggested that he wasn't particularly welcome in his ancestral home. Either way, the sheer scale of the devastation gave him pause. Not for the first time on this journey, he wondered whether he should have taken Liliana's warnings more seriously.

I should go, he thought, but it drew him in. Patterns formed and dissipated in the drifting stones, some hint that the pieces of the castle were arranged by an intelligent mind, some promise that there was meaning behind the incredible destruction. *It's a puzzle*, he thought, *and puzzles want to be solved.*

Of course, the first challenge presented by the puzzle was how to reach the manor. A vague pathway of steppingstones did not exactly fill him with a sense of safety. Of course, after the time he had spent clambering across hedrons on Zendikar, the drop didn't trouble him as much as it might have.

He reached his mind out to the nearest stone and prodded it. It barely moved. He couldn't push it hard enough to simulate his whole weight, but this first test had provided encouraging results. Stretching his power a little farther, he pushed the next stone, which bobbed only slightly. A third stone proved completely immobile, though he had to acknowledge that the strength of his telekinesis diminished as distance increased.

It was risky, no question. But he had never seen anything like the castle before him, not even on Zendikar, where the law of gravity was more like a guideline. *Puzzles demand to be solved.*

He stepped off the edge of the bridge and planted his foot on a stone that hung in the air. It sank more than he had expected, and his arms flew out to his sides for balance. He brought his other foot onto the stone and lowered his center of gravity. *All right*, he thought. *I can do this.*

He stepped to the next stone, and the next, and again. Step, step.

And then he was standing on a solid bridge again, and the castle ahead of him was intact and stern, looming over him. He pulled his foot back, unsure for a moment what was solid stone and what was an illusion—or a vision, whatever it was.

He crouched and felt around with his mind again, probing for whatever entity was interfering with his senses. Still nothing, and the vision was gone.

Another step and another, one stone to the next, and at last he was across the chasm.

I hope I don't have to leave here in a hurry, he thought.

Looming ahead of him was a towering archway, tall enough that six Jaces stacked head to toe could have fit through. Above and around it crowded a grotesque throng of skeletons, hags, wolves, demons, and things that defied mere names, with a giant vampiric man—the Markov for whom the manor was named, he presumed—overshadowing them all. On either side of him, leering at him, were skulls as tall as he was, and he couldn't be sure whether the whitish stone was actually bone.

He stepped into the archway and the stone walls enfolded him.



Foreboding Ruins | Art by Adam Paquette

My footsteps are echoing in the long passageway, bouncing off the walls high over my head. Is someone following me? I stop and listen for anyone's thoughts. The sound continues—not feet on stone, but my heartbeat, each thump preceded by a softer, smaller one.

Of course. Vampires—naturally, they would have some magic designed to alert them of a living person entering their hall. Like the ringing of a dinner bell.

It's too fast. Deep breaths, Jace. Slow that heart down.

I need a light. I stretch out my hand and cup a blue glow in my palm, concentrating until it's just bright enough to light my way without giving my presence away from too great a distance. On either side of the hallway, tapestries rustle as if a wind is sweeping past them, but I feel nothing. I reach forward with my mind and push a tapestry aside. Only bare wall behind it—another illusion.

As if carried by the nonexistent wind, faint sounds reach my ears—laughter, conversation, maybe music. Limping rhythms in discordant keys. Is it possible this place is not abandoned? More likely I am hearing the spirits of the dead. This plane and its ghosts.

I reach the end of the hall, and the sounds cease. It feels like I've just walked into the middle of a party and everyone stopped dead, turning to stare at me. But only cold stone walls return my gaze.

"Why did you come here?" A voice breaks the silence. My voice—did I speak? My mouth is closed, and I just realized how dry my throat feels. But I was just starting to ask myself...

Why *did* I come here? Because she warned me not to? Because she told me it was dangerous? Because I wanted to stare death in the face and live to tell about it?

"Because you wanted to die?"

I know I didn't say that. Again I reach out my thoughts, probing for the mind behind the words. But it eludes me.

I'm not the first living man to set foot in this hall recently. I see it like a memory—whose memory, though? The castle's? Perhaps the voice is part of the memory. He stands here, terrified, knees knocking, clutching something—a book—to his chest, looking up at...I can't tell. Something over...there.

A door hangs open just a crack there, where the man's trembling gaze fell. Damn it, this place is infuriating! Something is altering my perceptions, pressing in on my mind, and I can't find it. And apparently can't stop it. I missed the door, before, and only noticed it because...someone—something?—wanted me to.

A ghost? If one of Innistrad's geists were drifting through the castle walls, would I know it? I'm not sure whether I would have detected its mind or not. I haven't yet had the opportunity to test that. I'll have to remember to do that, if I should happen to see one.

Perhaps I'm walking into a trap, but I climb the steps and push the door, and it swings open with a metallic wail.

...have to get out...

The words spring to my mind unbidden. I didn't think them. Yet I can't detect any other sign of intrusion into my mind—my wards are as strong as ever. Some trick of sound in this place? Or the mind of an ancient vampire Planeswalker, too strong for me to penetrate or to resist? Maybe Liliana was right.

...to kill me...

A snippet of thought, a memory. Someone's memory. Probably the living man I saw in the entry hall—or his geist. There's a cold tingle at my spine, which is completely irrational. I ignore it.

My heart-steps echo louder in this smaller passage. Glaring on the stone walls, my light seems too bright. I let it dim and feel the darkness draw closer.

"Why did you come here?" My voice is harsh, too loud. Yes, that was my voice. Talking to myself.



Clue Token | Art by Cliff Childs

Option one: something is interfering with my memory.

Option two: I am actually dreaming, in that strange fugue state where you flow from one scene to another with no transition.

I don't remember how I got here. I'm in a grand hall, deeper in the castle now, with wind rushing through the halls around me. Stone grinds against stone as massive fragments of architecture wheel slowly around me. It was once a great vault with soaring columns—now it's a floating field of rubble. With hands, faces, bodies protruding from the stone. Dozens and dozens of them, trapped and petrified and encased in the stone.

"What is happening?" someone shouts. I start, pulling back into the shadows and casting my mind around to find the source of the voice. But it grows into a clamor of many voices, dozens of them, and screams, mingled with raw pain and fury, a glimpse of a white face with fierce eyes—*I will repay...*

And it ends in stony silence.

I turn my head, and I'm face to face with a vampire, mouth open and fangs bared. I actually jump before my brain manages to tell my body that the vampire is dead and embedded in the wall. Embarrassing.

They're all vampires. Heirs, I assume, to the Markov who built this place. They are strikingly inhuman in death: gaunt faces, sunken eyes, jutting fangs, feral features—ugly. One near me is surrounded by a mahogany picture frame with a golden plate at the bottom, except the whole wall is upside down, and the nameplate is far above my head, too far to be read. Tatters of canvas hang from the edge of the frame. I lift the canvas, mindful of the vampire's fangs, and the remnant of the ancient portrait, two red eyes in fading paint, stare back at me. I let the canvas drop—

Did the stone vampire just blink?

I step back and suddenly there are hands all around me, clutching at me. I scream and struggle against the vampires' grasp, but they are too strong. I can feel their hunger in their hot breath, but they wait

—and their sire approaches. This must be the one, Edgar Markov, the ancestor of all Innistrad’s vampires...

No. This is not happening, not now. The hands clutching at me are motionless stone protruding from the wall, and the approach of the vampire sire is just a memory. The dead man’s memory.

It must be his geist, or else some sort of psychic echo of his mind lingers in this place. Perhaps the geist is pushing into my mind, forcing these thoughts on me. Or perhaps it’s my own sensitivity picking up the stray thoughts. Or, again, maybe I’m dreaming.

I’m walking. I don’t know where to, and I can’t remember if this is the way I came. Option one—yes, I considered those.

There are so many dead vampires here. Liliana was right—if I had come here earlier, they’d have torn me apart. I wonder if that’s what happened to the man whose memories I seem to be experiencing.

In a narrow hall, I see my own face suspended in stone, horror imprinted on my features.

No, it’s *his* face, bearded and blank-eyed. The man from the entry hall. One human amid all the vampires. What are you doing here, you idiot?

He’s holding a book.

His stone hands clutch the book protectively to his chest. It’s wrapped in blue leather, held shut with a red and green strap of silk. It’s out of place here—not just in this castle, but on this plane.



Tamiyo’s Journal | Art by Chase Stone

A white face, shining like the moon, leans close to mine. Her lavender eyes gleam with excitement as she explains a theory to me, about something she calls “cryptoliths.” Is she the one touching my mind? I reach for her mind—she’s not there, of course. I feel around again, searching for the intruder—something lurking at the very edge of my awareness?

It’s his memory again. The writing in the book—it’s a journal—is hers. He couldn’t possibly know or understand what she is: one of the moonfolk from Kamigawa. A Planeswalker. It will take a little more time to puzzle out her writing.

I flip to the back of the book, blank pages, and move toward the front until I find the last writing—but this isn't the careful script of Kamigawa. It's written in a different hand, probably his. Jenrik—he wrote his name at the start, when he took over, after she entrusted the journal to him and sent him here.

To his death.

I'm cowering in a secluded nook as the sounds of the vampires' feast drift through the castle, the limping rhythms and harsh laughter. I can't get out. They know I'm here, but they're toying with me, stalking around like cats outside a mouse hole, waiting for me to show myself.

This is tiresome. I might be able to learn something from his memories, but I don't need to feel his fear, his abject terror. My heartbeat has not slowed, and it has grown louder, at least to my ears.

What am I doing here?

"Looking for Sorin," Liliana says. Her voice is too loud for this place. "Looking for death."

"I'm looking for this," I tell her, holding up the journal. But she's not here. Why would she be here?

This is not good. Liliana is mine—she belongs in my mind. Somebody pried her out of my mind and used her voice against me. How is this happening?

Option two, that I am dreaming, seems increasingly likely. I would like to awaken now.

"You should go," Liliana says. I should go.

I can't get out.

I climb the stairs with their plush red runner, back the way I came, and push open the door at the top. Howling winds blow up over and around me and everything spins. My arms flail in empty air and I stare down into the misty depths below, sure I'm going to fall, until my hand catches the doorjamb and I pull myself back.

This is not the way I came. Obviously.

Something is interfering with my memory. I thought I remembered coming down the stairs to the great hall—perhaps that was Jenrik's memory as well. I need to sift through, sort out which memories are his and which belong to me, but I feel like I don't have time for that.

Interesting. Why do I feel so rushed, in this apparently empty castle? Checking yet again—I can't find another mind, but the sense of urgency only intensifies. Just some strange effect of the place, I suppose, deserving of further study...some other time.

Huge double doors stand partly open in the vampire-studded walls. Did I come through that way? Inside is a space like a chapel. A sculpture, similar to the relief that towers over the castle entrance, dominates one whole wall. Again the master vampire stands over the scene, carved into the wall, only this time he is more human, less...inhuman bloodsucker, I suppose. Others stand around him—some carved into the wall, some half-emerging like the once-living vampires in the great hall outside, and some freestanding, with their backs to me. They're dressed like aristocracy, but there is a hungriness to their poses. The dozen of them circle an altar where an angel lies bound, straining against the ropes as the master holds a knife, poised to open her veins.

Drinking an angel's blood in some kind of ritual—it seems like a recipe for something horrific. If Edgar Markov really is the first vampire of Innistrad, and if that's him holding the knife, I wonder if I'm witnessing the birth of the vampire race on this plane.

The knife slashes and glowing silver blood erupts from the angel's neck. The twelve draw closer to feast—Edgar first, catching the blood in a silver goblet before drinking it. I can only watch as the life slowly drains from the angel and new life takes root in the perpetrators of this crime.

Wiping her chin, one of the twelve looks over her shoulder at me. Either she is inviting me to join the circle, or she is planning to drink my blood next. In any case, I stumble back out of the room, a final glance over my shoulder confirming that the vampires have returned to their motionless poses.

I need to go. I can't get out.

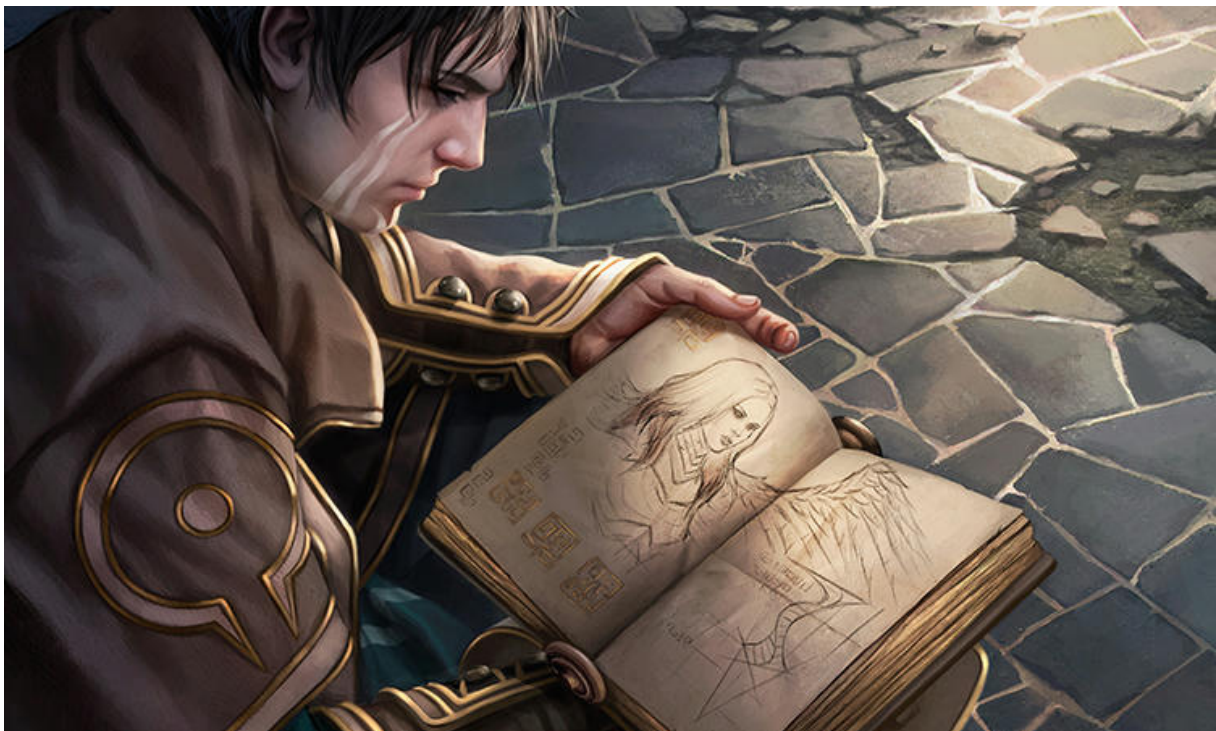
My feet take me to another hall. It looks familiar.

"Why are you here?" I hear again. Is it Liliana's voice? No, my cracked lips sting from forming the words.

"I came for this," I say again, fingering the book.

"What's so important about that book?"

I don't know. I open the book and look through the pages for an answer.



Pore Over the Pages | Art by Magali Villeneuve

An angel's face stares back at me. Is she judging me for not intervening to stop the vampires' ritual? Idiot. She's a drawing in a book, and that was—an illusion, a vision, or a memory drifting through this place. An old, old memory.

Beside the drawing is another sketch, showing one of the weird, twisted stones I've seen a few times since I've been here. There's a schematic quality to the sketch, and I wonder if the author of this journal is responsible for the stones. There's magic in them, manipulating mana flow.

But I puzzle out the words on the page; they're about the angel, Avacyn. Clinical and carefully lettered, as if to underline the weight of the words: Sorin made her. Sorin wanted to protect the humans of Innistrad so the vampires wouldn't overfeed on their blood. Innistrad's incarnation of purity and goodness was manufactured by a vampire Planeswalker to maintain the balance between powerful predators and helpless prey.

Angels—Liliana mentioned angels, suggesting that they're even worse than the werewolves that attacked me. I took it as just another one of Liliana's snide remarks. She never did like angels. But the writing is suggesting something else.

“The angels have gone mad.” My dry throat croaks in the echoing hall.

Sorin Markov made Avacyn. Avacyn ruled the angels. The angels have turned on the human populace. And someone tore Markov Manor to pieces.

Option one: Sorin has gone on a rampage, destroying his ancestral home and turning his angelic creation against Innistrad’s people.

Option two: someone has challenged Sorin, destroying his ancestral home and turning his angelic creation against Innistrad’s people.

Both options are slightly terrifying. But either one would explain Sorin’s absence from Zendikar. And either option points to the angels as a way to find Sorin. And this book explores the madness of the angels. Closing it and clutching it to my chest, I say to no one, “This will help me find Sorin.”

As soon as I get out of here.

The next hall is familiar, and I know where to go. It all makes sense, more and more with every step I take away from the heart of the castle: the place is full of psychic residue, snippets of memories both recent and ancient. Jenrik came to the castle carrying the journal, but as the vampires were about to catch him and feast on him, someone ripped the castle apart and trapped the vampires—and poor Jenrik—in the walls.

Here’s the entry passage. I take one last look behind me:

So, so dark. And I feel a presence in the darkness, a hunger, a desire. But still no mind. I reach out and feel...nothing at all. A void.

I turn my back on the darkness, pass through the soaring entryway, and leave Markov Manor.



Jace, Unraveler of Secrets | Art by Tyler Jacobson