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The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

The General had a sixth sense about ambushes.

Perhaps it was a result of centuries of experience. Or the equivalent of a mortal's entire lifespan—days *and* nights—spent engaged in actual battle. Or perhaps it was simply the result of having escaped them in the past.

The General had survived in the face of long odds many times before. Of course, the odds were not quite so long as kine historians would record and praise and believe. And in any event, surviving was a far different matter than winning, but such was the nature of the General's own peculiar sense of pleasure that he found something possibly only precisely described as arousing about the loss. Young men cut down around him. Their dreams flying on black wings just as their blood sought solace in the ground.

For years afterward he could wryly enjoy the difference between the heroic stories of the soldiers' last moments and the sullied truth to which he was witness. At Little Big Horn. At the Alamo. At Roanoke Island. At the fall of Constantinople.

And so, so long ago at Thermopylae where it all began, though the General would not admit that to himself now. Perhaps could not, for the less some Malkavians recalled of their Embraces the better. The terrors the Sabbat inflicted upon their newly spawned kind were rumored to be terrible, but what could possibly be more ruinous than the Embrace of a man devoid of sanity at the hands of one de-

void of compassion? Not all Malkavian Embraces were so terrible, of course, but to call this one at least merely inhuman would play lightly with the facts.

As the General made a spectacle of himself, clambering naked up the immense sculpture of *Count Ugolino and Sons*, he wondered at his sanity. Not just because an ambush seemed so unlikely here tonight, though the nerves in his recently regrown tongue tingled with the likelihood of conflict, but because he seemed so in control of himself just now. His actions premeditated and directed. His purpose of finding safety while still remaining within the probable confines of the likely struggle so clear.

And *that* was what made him absolutely certain that death would be his dance partner in the chamber of art tonight. Nothing gave him a greater thrill than seeing others struggle for life, with the exception of seeing others struggle for life and fail. That moment, when defeat and death registered on the faces of the doomed, was so absolute a reflection of the General's own soul that he craved to view it. Better to view it without than to contemplate it within. That moment when a being—mortal or vampiric—entered a slow-motion state as the last ticks of their life's clock ticked away. Only then, during that internally infinite moment, could time properly be given to contemplation of what was being lost.

That preternatural awareness was the same sort that fueled the General's premeditated search for safety. He could already feel a noose constricting

around the High Museum. It choked the vigor and energy from the assemblage and made the sights and sounds crisper and brighter.

The General could not ignore these signs.

So from within the sculpture of the cannibal count—the count who devoured his children—the General beamed a smile at the crowd he entertained and that would soon itself be consumed.

It was supposedly a celebration of the Summer Solstice, an ironic holiday for a Kindred to commemorate, but such infantile humor did not easily desert the recently dead. Victoria Ash, the party's hostess, was not new among the Kindred, but she was a Toreador, and in her kind this variety of foolishness persisted even longer. Or so they made it seem, at least, and the General usually sided with the "at least" viewpoint, especially so in the case of Ms. Ash. She was an adept Kindred, the General concluded.

Nevertheless, he relished seeing her lovely face paralyzed with anguish. Aye, her most of all, he decided, although for no good reason.

As he watched Victoria speak with guest after guest, first a truly young Ventrue, then an encounter with the Brujah primogen and the Malkavian prince, then an intriguing Setite and eventually the late-arriving Brujah archon, the General changed his mind. He sometimes liked to pick a hero, and tonight his would be Victoria Ash. Oh, certainly she would be harmed, but the General decided that she would escape. He wasn't entirely sure of the rationale for this change of heart, but it was something in which he'd indulged in the past. Lone survivors could be as interesting as mass

slaughter.

The General laughed, and the marble mouth of the count cracked a bit. He wondered if this sentiment suggested there was something noble still in him.

He purposefully soured his thought and face.

He hoped it meant nothing of the sort. However, his mind was made up, and, short of sacrificing himself to the slaughter too, Victoria Ash would escape this night. If he leapt from his hiding place and waded through the inevitable conflict for his own salvation, then he would make certain she was ushered to the same safety he sought.

So for a while longer the General watched the Kindred play their meaningless games. "Meaningless" not because their activity was as a whole purposeless, but simply because anything these Kindred did this night would be for naught. The sole exception was departure, and the General noted with interest when the Setite with whom Victoria had spoken and a Nosferatu the General knew as Rolph both left the party slightly before midnight.

He braced himself then for a reckoning within this chamber, but he knew as he prepared that the time was not quite yet. However, the urgency of that departure confused him. Perhaps it was simply his anticipation making him edgy. One would think that centuries would bring patience. Especially centuries often spent in torpor.

When a darkness so thick and sudden it flooded the room like a raging river overcame the party, the General was actually surprised. It was a

delicious feeling being startled like that, and one he'd not felt for a long, long time.

The cries and screams were indeed muffled by the odd darkness and the General realized before someone sounded the nature of the threat that the Lasombra were surely behind this. The Lasombra and their Sabbat allies. It was an ambush of their hated Camarilla foes, a group to which the General's own bloodline belonged. The General decided that he would wait a moment longer before joining the fray. He at least needed to acclimate his vision to the virtual absence of light.

The slaughter that ensued was grisly and brutal. And swift. So fast that it could be completed in such time only by beings that were more than mortal. And the General didn't budge from his position. At first he convinced himself that it was not fear that held him back. Instead it was prudence that held him in check.

But as the massacre unfolded and gouts of blood washed the white floors and walls, the General admitted that he liked much better being the sole Kindred among a pack of kine when such slaughters took place. His safety was much more assured, in fact virtually guaranteed, in such circumstances. Even so, he still did not truly register fear, and he still found ample time to watch the terror work its way across the mouths and faces and eventually into the eyes of a score of Kindred whose undead lives were being snuffed in a heartbeat.

In fact, the General began to take mad delight in this carnage. He used his powers to keep the battle clear of the statue within which he'd found refuge, and the weak-minded Sabbat warriors could

not dispute his efforts. He then became so overwhelmed attempting to observe all the details of the struggle that he nearly lost his chosen co-survivor to an obscene creature bashing her with a fleshy appendage.

He felt her mind grasping about for assistance, but she was so alarmed and confused that she could scarcely have called her own name aloud, let alone determine who might save her. So the General helped her. It was a little matter for such an aged Malkavian as himself to give voice to the terror and chaos of her thoughts. The voice still had no spoken component, of course, and such would not have been heard over the din of the battle in any event, but it summoned assistance nevertheless.

A young Toreador the General had spied regarding Victoria with great fondness earlier was close at hand. No hero, but he would act more quickly by virtue of his proximity than the General might from afar, so it was he who kicked at the head of the beast and saved the Toreador primogen.

The General continued to watch as the young Toreador was hauled away by a tentacle formed of darkness. Meanwhile, Victoria slipped from beneath her would-be mauler and found brief refuge within a small room formed of the temporary room dividers used to break up the wide-open spaces of the top floor of the High Museum.

She did not, however, achieve this glassine asylum without the notice of others. A wounded war ghouel seeking easy prey noted the woman's escape and plodded forward on legs as massive as the pillars on any plantation home. Blood oozed

from a trio of severed limbs, but the freakish creature still sported four arms, and all were tipped with jagged claws.

There were no other saviors for Victoria Ash this time. In fact, there was almost no one at all. The only Camarilla vampires still battling were the very odd couple of Prince Benison and the Brujah archon Julius.

The General acted swiftly. Still naked, he pulled himself from the statue and streaked to intercept the path of the war ghou. The beast barely had time to register the General's assault before the blood-flushed Malkavian was upon him. Blood served to augment the General's strength to untold levels, and the force of his blow was such that no mortal or even ghouled mortal could withstand it. The Tzimisce masters who had stitched the war ghou together could not anticipate a blow so terrible as this.

As if he were battering down a door with his fists and forearms, the General piledrivered into the ghou's chest. The beast hurtled backward and crashed into some of its kind already feasting on the streams of Camarilla blood.

Without pausing, the General threw aside one of the dividers and prepared to scoop Victoria Ash into his arms and carry her to safety. But she was not within. The trap door in the floor was apparent to him, but it would probably escape the notice of the enemy for some time. He doubted anyone else was paying attention to the floor.

The General pirouetted and, edging delicately around the chaos, returned to his sculpted sanctuary. The war ghou he struck had not regained its

feet. The rush of the battle throbbed in the General's ears, but he knew his life would be forfeit if he attempted to escape now.

So he watched and listened.