

Prologue

Buda, August 1456

There had once been a thriving town on the eastern side of the River Danube called Pest, a bustling commercial centre that flourished thanks to its position on the flat and fertile Great Hungarian Plain, its crops and livestock feeding not only Pest but also the rest of Hungary. The town was set to become a large city until the Mongols swept into the kingdom. After smashing the Hungarian army of King Béla, the terrible horsemen of the east devastated Hungary, levelling towns and villages and slaughtering their inhabitants. Pest itself was destroyed and its citizens put to the sword. When the Mongols left a devastated Hungary, King Béla returned to rebuild his kingdom. To restore the realm's population he invited German settlers to make their home in Hungary, and established a new capital, this time on the other side of the Danube, across from the ruins of Pest, on the limestone plateau that towered over the river.

The new town, *Castrum Novi Montis Pestiensis* – the Castle of the Hill of the New Pest – was later renamed as Buda, after the brother of Attila the Hun. The Mongols did not return and so Buda's population grew. The original stronghold was expanded and strengthened to occupy the top of the entire plateau, which was shaped like an elongated triangle. The Castle Quarter on the plateau became a town within a city, filled with churches and the beautiful homes of priests, nobles and merchants. Craftsmen, labourers and their families lived at the bottom of Castle Hill, many earning a living by working in the vineyards that surrounded the city, or tending the fields and herds of cattle that filled the plain on the other side of the Danube. It had been over two hundred years since Pest had been destroyed by the Mongols, but during the summer a new settlement had sprung up on the site of the old town. Not a town of stone but a sprawl of canvas, with hundreds of tents filling the area adjacent to the Danube opposite the city of Buda. And flying from the pavilions of the Hungarian lords who had answered their king's summons to present themselves at his capital were a host of different coloured banners showing red and white lions, black boars, silver double crosses, white swans and black eagles. Field stables dotted the encampment and around it were enclosures filled with cattle to feed the thousands of soldiers awaiting orders to march. To where, no one knew as the Ottoman threat had disappeared following John Hunyadi's defeat of Sultan Mehmet at Belgrade the previous month. Hungary and all Christendom had breathed a huge sigh of relief, albeit tinged with sadness, at the news that Hunyadi had died of the plague soon after his crowning triumph.

Hungary in summer was very warm, sometimes oppressively so, but it was pleasant enough in the royal palace atop Castle Hill with its marble floors and columns, large, airy rooms

and wooden ceilings. The teenage King Ladislaus held court in the grandiose Roman Hall in the palace, but more intimate gatherings were usually held in small rooms in the stronghold's northern wing. Ladislaus, curly brown hair falling to his shoulders, sat at the head of the ornate table which was supported by thick oak legs. Beside him was his mentor, protector and captain-general of Hungary, Count Ulrich of Celje. Near the count, and given the honour of sitting next to the king, was the Pope's ambassador, the Spaniard, Cardinal Juan Carvajal. The ambassador had sailed down the Danube from Vienna after hearing about the great victory at Belgrade, to be told of John Hunyadi's death on his arrival at Buda. His original mission had been to impress upon the king and his allies that the removal of the Ottoman threat should not be the prelude to the outbreak of civil war in Hungary between the royalists and the followers of John Hunyadi.

The Spaniard watched as a servant poured red wine into his silver chalice.

'It is produced locally, your eminence,' said the king, raising his own chalice to the cardinal. 'To the Pope's health.'

Carvajal smiled and toasted the pontiff's health, as did the others seated at the table.

'Excellent wine, majesty,' commented Carvajal.

'I'm sure your eminence did not travel all the way here just to sample Hungary's wines,' said the fat individual at the other end of the table, provoking a frown from Count Ulrich.

Baron George Rozgonyi was the same age as the cardinal, though Carvajal was lean and restrained in his lifestyle, unlike the Hungarian noble who over-indulged in everything, from feasting and whoring to fighting.

Carvajal put down his chalice. 'You are correct, my lord. I am here as the representative of His Holiness to appeal to you all not to waste the great miracle that occurred at Belgrade.'

'Waste?' Rozgonyi shot back.

'His Holiness is desirous that Hungary should avoid descending into civil strife, my lord,' explained Carvajal.

'The death of John Hunyadi has lessened tensions greatly, your eminence,' said the tall individual with thick black hair and a square jaw seated next to Rozgonyi.

His name was Nicholas of Ilok and he had long been an enemy of John Hunyadi. A powerful baron whose lands were in southern Hungary, he had resented Hunyadi being made regent of the kingdom, a post he desired for himself. Ten years younger than the cardinal and Rozgonyi, his resentment and sense of injustice had disappeared when he heard John Hunyadi was dead.

Count Ulrich nodded to the young king.

‘We too desire peace, your eminence,’ said Ladislaus, ‘though we also desire the papacy’s support to achieve it.’

Carvajal was perplexed. ‘I do not understand, majesty.’

‘The Hunyadi family is now weak, your eminence,’ said the red-faced man beside Nicholas. ‘We can deal with them easily enough. But does the Pope still support the renegade Leon Muller?’

The question had been posed by Ladislaus Garai, who was not only a baron, but Palatine of Hungary, a position of immense power and prestige, second only to the king himself.

‘Leon Muller?’ queried the cardinal.

‘You heard,’ sneered Rozgonyi. ‘The renegade who sits in Szeged like a stinking dung heap. We all know he was the lapdog of Pope Nicholas.’

Carvajal smarted at his tone. ‘The *late* Pope, God rest his soul, was fond of the Count of Thrace, it is true, and sent him aid in his battle against the Ottomans. Pope Callixtus also has a favourable opinion of the man who fought beside John Hunyadi at Belgrade.’

‘Man? He is nothing but a lowborn wretch who deserves excommunication, banishment and death on the scaffold.’

All eyes turned to the handsome man with immaculately combed black hair who had spoken the words with venom. His green eyes settled on the cardinal, fixing the Spaniard with a hard stare. Count Ulrich chuckled.

‘This is Duke Gottfried of Swabia, your eminence,’ stated the king’s captain-general, ‘who has brought an army of valiant crusaders to fight the Ottoman infidels.’

‘The king also appointed him governor of Szeged,’ added Rozgonyi, now quite drunk, ‘a city illegally held by Muller. And he’s no noble, as my friend Duke Gottfried has pointed out.’

‘Duke Gottfried holds a legal document appointing him governor of Szeged,’ said the king, his voice soft, even childlike, ‘which means Leon Muller’s occupation of the city is not only illegal, it is treasonous.’

‘And treason carries a death sentence,’ grinned Rozgonyi.

‘Perhaps I could visit Szeged to persuade Count Muller to leave the city and thus avoid bloodshed,’ suggested Cardinal Carvajal.

‘No,’ hissed Gottfried. ‘He must die.’

The king, Ulrich and Rozgonyi were nodding in agreement but the cardinal noted that Ladislaus Garai and Nicholas of Ilok were staring into their chalices. After a few seconds, Nicholas looked at Count Ulrich, the power behind the throne.

‘Hungary cannot afford to be plunged into civil strife, your grace,’ Ulrich said to Gottfried. ‘Leon Muller has the support of the Hunyadi family and any move against him will only prompt the Hunyadis to rally to his cause.’

‘So what?’ said Rozgonyi dismissively. ‘There is no John Hunyadi to lead the family’s army, which has been weakened in the recent battle with the Ottomans and the subsequent pestilence at Belgrade. We should march against the Hunyadis and Leon Muller and rid Hungary of another plague.’

‘I am in agreement with your lordship,’ smiled Gottfried.

Cardinal Carvajal took a sip of wine. ‘When did your grace arrive in Hungary?’

‘A while ago,’ answered Gottfried evasively.

‘And got only as far as this city before the Ottomans were defeated,’ said the cardinal.

‘How sad you and your fellow crusaders must be, your grace, to have missed the opportunity to fight the infidels, leaving it to protégés such as John of Capistrano and John Hunyadi to win a place in history and earn the love of the Lord.’

‘What’s he saying?’ asked a drunken Rozgonyi.

Gottfried bristled at the implied insult. ‘I obeyed the king’s order to remain at Buda until the royal army had been assembled, your eminence.’

‘Is John of Capistrano also dead?’ enquired Count Ulrich, eager to change the subject.

‘My wife wrote to inform me he is at Ilok,’ said Baron Nicholas, ‘though sadly he is in a greatly weakened physical and mental state.’

Carvajal crossed himself. ‘Alas. I fear his great age and the years spent living as a poor preacher have finally caught up with him.’

‘We all mourn for Friar John,’ said Baron Garai earnestly, ‘but the fact remains that affairs in Hungary need to be settled sooner rather than later.’

‘Beginning with the traitor Leon Muller,’ said Duke Gottfried.

‘We should march on Szeged without delay,’ roared Rozgonyi, whose inebriation made it doubtful he could stand unaided, let alone ride a horse.

‘I agree,’ said Gottfried, who seemed to have taken control of the room.

The cardinal glanced at the king and Ulrich, who were both nodding like lapdogs. But their reaction came as no surprise to Carvajal. Duke Gottfried was a Habsburg, the powerful dynasty whose tentacles were spreading into every corner of Christendom. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick, was a Habsburg, as was King Ladislaus and Count Ulrich. Habsburgs ruled Austria, large parts of Germany and now Hungary. No wonder Duke Gottfried could speak so candidly

in the presence of the King of Hungary. Indeed, the German's apparel made him look more the ruler than the pale and timid Ladislaus.

All those at the table wore clothes designed to show they were both wealthy and members of the aristocratic *élite*. As in every other aspect of life, there were strict rules when it came to the clothes worn by nobles, churchmen and commonfolk. All men wore a doublet, but to appear in public wearing only a doublet, together with shirt, hose and footwear, indicated an individual was either dressing informally, or engaged in physical acts, such as labouring, and thus showing his social inferiority. A man was not considered properly dressed unless he was wearing at least three layers of clothing: shirt and hose, a doublet, and a gown or its equivalent. This rule enforced the social hierarchy since the poor could not afford all three layers. But even if a commoner by some dint of good fortune was able to purchase all three items, the materials used in their manufacture indicated a wearer's wealth and social position.

Everyone aside from the cardinal was wearing a doublet with padded upper sleeves to give the appearance of wide shoulders and a narrow waist. That said, not even the finest tailor in all Christendom could fashion a doublet to give George Rozgonyi or Ladislaus Garai a narrow waist. But they both wore silk doublets with metallic threads, the upper sleeves padded with cotton rather than cheaper wool. All the nobles wore doublets with sleeves that opened from the wrist to over the elbow, fastened with laces and buttons, as well as short robes made from dark crimson velvet and lined with ermine. But Duke Gottfried's attire was on a whole new level of sartorial excess. His doublet was gold silk damask with a metallic thread, and his short robe was a loose, voluminous affair of golden-yellow damask lined with silk, closed with brass hooks and eyes.

'I do *not* agree,' retorted the cardinal. 'May I remind everyone at this table that the Ottomans have suffered a reverse in fortunes, but they have not disappeared. To plunge Hungary into civil strife would only allow the sultan to rebuild his army and launch another assault on Christian Europe. Peace in Hungary is surely better than war.'

Ulrich leaned in to whisper into the king's ear.

Ladislaus cleared his throat. 'We are also desirous to see peace prosper in Hungary, your eminence. We will therefore extend the hand of friendship to the Hunyadi family, on condition it surrenders the cities of Szeged and Belgrade to the crown, and also withdraws its soldiers from Transylvania.'

Rozgonyi grunted something unintelligible, Baron Garai shrugged his approval and Nicholas of Ilok nodded.

'And what of Leon Muller and his band of cutthroats, majesty?' probed Duke Gottfried.

The question took the young king by surprise and he floundered for a reply. It was left to Count Ulrich, the most powerful baron in all Styria, the domain immediately south of Austria, and the man who ruled King Ladislaus and therefore all Hungary, at least those areas not under Hunyadi control, to reply.

‘The Swiss mercenary and his fellow mercenaries will be ordered to leave Szeged immediately,’ stated the count. ‘If they refuse, they will be declared outlaws and a price will be put on their heads. If they prove intransigent, they will not leave Hungary alive.’

‘It seems a poor return for years of fighting the Ottomans,’ reflected the cardinal.

‘Hungary cannot tolerate an army of mercenaries operating outside the crown’s control within its borders, your eminence,’ said Baron Garai.

‘Leon Muller was hired by John Hunyadi and was loyal to the former regent,’ stated Nicholas of Ilok. ‘Now Hunyadi is dead, his loyalty is only to himself. It was a gross miscalculation on the part of John Hunyadi to make the Swiss mercenary Baron of Szeged.’

‘That commission is null and void, my lord,’ said Count Ulrich. ‘Duke Gottfried has been appointed to that position by the king.’

‘So the good people of Szeged are exchanging one foreign military leader for another,’ remarked Carvajal mischievously.

‘My army will not be billeted at any cost to the citizens of Szeged, your eminence,’ said Gottfried testily. ‘As soon as a new administration is put in place, I will be leading my army across the Danube to do battle with the infidels.’

This brought a smile to the cardinal’s face. ‘The Pope will be greatly heartened to hear this, your grace.’

‘And I will be marching beside him,’ slurred Rozgonyi.

‘The whole army camped around this city will be marching south to the Danube,’ declared Count Ulrich, ‘which is why it was mustered at Buda. But first, we will clip the wings of Hunyadi power and remove Leon Muller from the city of Szeged.’

‘How long will that take, my lord?’ asked the cardinal.

‘I expect the matter to be resolved in a matter of days, your eminence,’ replied Ulrich.

The Count of Celje was right, though not in the way he had anticipated.