

The battle for Budapest

prologue

Lydia was the last one to enter the room. Modestly sized, the space was dominated by an oval wooden table and an arc of expensive looking leather chairs. A large whiteboard was mounted to one side, adjunct to one of the narrower ends of the table. Otherwise the walls were a plain magnolia, unadorned and uninspiring - purely functional in the manner of any modern office space. She wrinkled her nose slightly with measured disdain and made an effort not to turn and look as the door clicked firmly shut behind her. At least the lighting had been dimmed, no doubt to suit eyes even more sensitive than her own.

The room was also occupied by people of course. Most likely they were all Kindred too, although she couldn't be sure. She made a point of not catching anyone's gaze, not just out of deference, but also in line with her survival instincts. She didn't even have to look to feel the presence of several men clustered around the head of the table. The other dozen or so people could feel it too - she could see it on some of their faces. She wondered if her own reaction was just as obvious.

One of the elders made a point of clearing his throat and gesturing theatrically around at the chairs. His short blond hair was expertly groomed, and he wore a conservative and expensive looking suit which probably cost more than her car. Although he appeared to be in his thirties she knew he was much, much older than that. This could only be Jan Pieterzoon, envoy of the Camarilla and the Kindred who had called her to this meeting.

"If you could all please be seated," he said, "we shall begin."

She took a seat as instructed, towards the lower end of the table opposite a more average-looking man in a more average-looking suit. The seat to her left was already occupied by a demure, olive-skinned lady in a sari and shawl, while to her right slouched a young-looking male thug adorned in a patchwork of denim and leather.

"Thank you all for coming," Pieterzoon said, now the only one standing. "I realise the circumstances that brought you all here are varied. Some of you come highly recommended, while others of you hope to balance your debt to our great society."

This last statement was met with a grunt from the thug next to her, which was followed by an awkward pause. Lydia did her best not to draw attention to herself.

"Regardless of these circumstances," Pieterzoon eventually continued, "we have gathered you here for one reason only. It has come to our attention that the city of Budapest in Hungary lies open. The former ruler of the domain has suddenly, but publicly renounced his claims to this territory. He has left no brood of progeny and has named no clear successor. The way is open for us to claim this city in the name of the Camarilla."

Lydia watched as the suited man sitting across from her raised a hand. The standing elder nodded curtly, clearly giving the other permission to speak. "Thank you Mister Pieterzoon for this great opportunity," the latter said,

"If it is not too bold of me to ask, what were the circumstances which led this Kindred to give up such a prestigious domain?"

"That is a good question Mister Leighton," said Pieterzoon, "and one for which I have yet to receive a satisfactory answer. What we do know is that he declared his abdication formally in front of a number of residents, that he has not been seen since, and that his known havens now appear to be unoccupied.

"What we also know is that although several other Kindred have already announced a claim over Budapest, none of them are strong enough to offer peace and stability to our kind. Perhaps more pertinently, our enemies in the Sabbat are already moving to establish a stronger presence in the city."

Lydia continued to watch as this last statement elicited reactions from most of the Kindred around the table. There were several frowns and grimaces, and the leather-clad thug next to her made a show of cracking his knuckles. Her gaze was drawn to the quiet man sitting to Pieterzoon's immediate left, who did not react at all. His large frame seemed too small for the chair he was sitting in, and although his clothes were also smart and expensive, they did not seem to suit him.

"The matter is very simple," said Pieterzoon, leaning forwards over the table, "you have two objectives. Firstly, aid us in securing the city and putting a Camarilla prince into power. Secondly, block any attempts by our enemies in securing a foothold in the city."

This time it was the lady to Lydia's left who spoke. "So you would have us fight another war?" she asked. The tone of her voice suggested some doubt or disbelief.

"I realise," said Pieterzoon, "that some of you have skill sets which are not well suited for direct, physical conflict. However, conflict takes

many forms, and with careful application of pressure and influence, one might not need to engage in physical violence at all. A number of strategies were deployed successfully by us in New York recently to great effect, and they will serve us well in Budapest."

The thug to Lydia's right scoffed at this. "So," he grunted, "we are to serve as your cannon fodder? Again?"

Pieterzoon gave an almost imperceptible shrug. "Skill sets shall be matched to appropriate tasks. Lithrac here will be co-ordinating the military aspects of this endeavour." He gestured to a seated man on his right in an overcoat and fedora that Lydia hadn't really noticed up until now, who nodded at everyone around the table. "I suggest you take up any tactical concerns up with him."

The thug glowered, and he leaned forward in his chair as if to argue but suddenly fell back in his seat as if he had been struck. "Know your place, cur!" The command emanated from the large man that had caught her eye before. His feigned disinterest had been discarded for a strange and unsettling stare, fixed pointedly at the Kindred next to her.

"Ah yes," said Pieterzoon, "please allow me to introduce you all to Lord Bulscu, elder of clan Ventrue, who will be serving our group in an advisory capacity."

The various members of the group nodded or murmured their greetings. The Kindred opposite Lydia however pushed himself from his chair and fell to his knees as if overcome by awe. "Lord Bulscu!" he cried, "it is such an honour to be graced by your venerable presence!"

Bulscu shifted his gaze to this new target, who immediately became similarly transfixed. "I detest fawning supplicants," he said, his voice like gravel turning in a steel drum.

"I had heard," said the woman to Lydia's

right, "of your demise Lord Bulscu in Russia at the hands of the Sabbat."

"A rumour," the Ventrue said simply in reply.

Lydia could feel her own Beast rising in response to the tension in the room. Pieterzoon was worrying his knuckles, no doubt feeling himself that the order of the meeting was in danger of disintegrating. "Ladies, gentlemen," he said, "If we may continue?" Bulscu did not reply, but casually leaned back in his seat, releasing the other Kindred from his grip.

"I will be handling the financial aspects of this operation myself," said Pieterzoon, "and I am glad to announce that Miss Van Cuelen here will be assisting us with any more esoteric matters that may arise."

The blond man gestured across the table and Lydia felt all eyes turned to her. It was possibly the most uncomfortable moment of her entire existence. "Clan Tremere is at your disposal," she said, wishing the meeting could be over already.

As if sensing her thoughts Pieterzoon moved to draw the meeting to a close. "Transportation awaits you outside," he said, "that will take you to the airport, where a private jet will take you onto your final destination. Each of you will be given a portfolio containing identification, maps, and other useful intelligence. Sustenance will also be provided should you require it. If you have any questions we would be glad to discuss them upon your arrival."

There was a clanking sound from the exit, indicating that the door had been unsealed and that the meeting was over. The assembled Kindred began to file out in silence. As Lydia got up to leave she suddenly found that Bulscu was beside her. Before she could react he held her eyes with his fearsome gaze.

"Witch," he said, "stay close to me. I will need you at the castle. And in return for your aid I will reward you handsomely."

Lydia wasn't sure what to say in response, but then Bulscu was gone, his large frame gone through the doorway. She wasn't sure that she wanted to help the elder, but then she realised not helping him would likely have far greater consequences.

Her Regent had warned her that something like this might happen. She sighed, straightened her blouse, and moved outside into the night.