

Prologue

Tyburn gallows, London, 1613

The bitter wind blew flurries of icy flakes around Shimon's ankles. His feet – bare and bleeding from the heavy chains – were frozen beyond pain. If only the rest of me were as blessed, he thought, a wish that was instantly carried up by the erratic snow, whirling high above the jeering crowd running alongside the prison cart. A minute later it was brought crashing down by a rotten apple that hit him squarely in the chest. He fell back onto the sharp wooden stakes that fringed the cart. Painfully, he steadied himself against the jostling of the vehicle. The crowd shouted words that shot into him as sharp as arrows – 'Spy! Traitor! Devil lover!' The young Spaniard closed his eyes against the angry English faces, shutting out the grinning woman holding up her infant grandson to see the spectacle, the screaming hate that roared down the lane.

He knew he was going to die. He'd seen it. He had been given the gift of the eyes of God. The Eyes of God. He had seen his own burning body and yet he'd chosen not to run. And now his secret hung like an oasis, tantalisingly out of reach, the last hope before death.

'¡Soy inocente! I am innocent!' he shouted, but his voice was lost in the laughter and in the clatter of horses' hooves. Suddenly, the cart swung into a small courtyard hidden behind high walls, guards swiftly pulling the gates shut behind the two noblemen escorting it on horseback, preventing the rabble from entering.

Shimon, looking from under his long matted hair and now far beyond fear, wondered whether they planned to execute him in secret, and if so how?

In the centre of the courtyard sat an ornate lacquered sedan chair, two uniformed footmen stood patiently at either side of it. The curtain across the window was drawn, but the chair, varnished in black and gold, was the transport of a nobleman. Recognising the coat of arms adorning the centre of the door panel, Shimon felt his heart begin to pound pitifully against his gaunt ribcage – a desperate hope flooded his tortured body as he was dragged from the cart to the ground and forced to kneel.

The two noblemen dismounted their horses and approached the sedan chair. One pulled the curtain across, while the other bowed low, the feather plume of his hat brushing against the cobbles as the man inside stepped out.

He stood before Shimon, austere in black, except for the royal emblem of the lion and the unicorn embroidered on the breast of his doublet and a plain silver cross a blatant declaration of the pious hanging over the quilted satin. An expression of both suspicion and curiosity was the only flicker of life in his bulbous eyes. Shimon knew this was the king who had drawn and quartered the Spanish sympathiser and heretic Guido Fawkes, but he also knew the monarch was a father in mourning.

'Does the wizard speak?' King James leaned heavily on a cane, his thin legs chicken-like under the pleated breeches, stuffed like the doublet to guard against the knife of the assassin. Pressing a scented posy against his nose to block the foul smell of the filthy prisoner, he swung around to the taller of the noblemen, Henry Howard, the elderly Earl of Northampton. The earl was about to translate the King's words when the prisoner, a Shimon Ruiz de Luna, a Spanish Jew whom the English had suspected of spying, and, to the earl's great frustration, had nothing humble about his demeanour except for the rags they had clad him in, bent forward, the chain around his ankles rattling as he did so.

'Your majesty, I am not wizard, spy nor alchemist, I am a physic,' he croaked, in English, his breath foul from starvation. 'I come as a friend of England, I come to bring you warning of a war. A war that has not yet happened, a war that will set Christian against Christian, brother against brother, and will poison Europe for thirty years or more—'

'Enough! I will not have my time wasted by such non-sense! You are just a commonplace agitator!' the King interrupted.

'Your majesty.' The earl stepped forward, his aged frame placating, his hands seeking to calm. 'The Spaniard has told us of events that had not yet taken place, and then Time proved him correct. I can't tell you how, but the alchemist has the powers of a seer, he is to be taken seriously.'

'A war! A thirty-year war? How am I to prevent this?'

'We found maps upon his person, perhaps they are clues to the future, your majesty. Think how it would serve both yourself and England to have such information, think how such knowledge would play against your enemies.'

King James turned back to the prisoner. After pulling both his gloves up to stop his skin from being contaminated by contact with the Spaniard, he lifted one of Shimon's filthy hands and, turning it, examined both the palm and fingers. His courtiers, the earl and Justice Humphrey Winch, looked on, knowing they had no choice but to indulge the monarch's self-professed ability as a witch-finder.

'Have you interrogated him as a wizard?' the monarch finally enquired.

'Extensively, your majesty,' Justice Winch replied. 'As the marks and bruises on his body will testify, but over and over again he would not reveal the methods by which he has gained this knowledge of what is to come.'

'And the maps?'

'Strange gardens, caves and mountains, perhaps locations of future battles – none of which appear to be on English soil, your majesty.'

'Then they do not concern us. Execute him as a wizard,' the King declared, before signalling to the guard that he wished to leave.

The earl and Justice Winch exchanged a glance behind the King's back.

'Your majesty, we have been deliberating – it might be more politic to make the charge that of spy,' Winch ventured. 'The people have begun to tire of the burning of witches and wizards. The charge of spy has more gravitas. It would also send another warning to King Philip that we will not be toyed with.'

'And I should listen to the people? I am the King, I have divine right.'

Justice Winch nudged the earl sharply in the ribs. Reluctantly he stepped forward. 'Given the popularity of your dear departed son, the late Henry, Prince of Wales, it would be prudent to do so.'

King James sighed. 'Spy it is.' He glanced back at the prisoner, who stared up at him. 'Pity, he has a certain beauty for a Hebrew,' he observed, before turning away.

Shimon, struggling in his chains, threw himself at the monarch's feet. 'But I have brought you a huge gift, the gift of the future! You must listen! Your majesty!'

King James turned. 'I might consider a pardon if you tell me how you arrived at your magical maps and stories of battles and deaths to come.'

Northampton dropped to his heels and grabbing Shimon's narrow matted head, jerked it up. 'Save yourself, Jew, tell the King the method by which you came by this knowledge and you will live.'

'I cannot. If I did so, everything would become undone!'

'Then why come to these shores and demand an audience with his majesty – if not to spy?'

'To stop a war but not betray Time itself.' The consequences of his odyssey loomed over Shimon, and the blind tenacity with which he had pursued his one hope – to find a man with the power and intelligence to understand and use what he had discovered. He thought King

James this man, now he'd lost everything, but there was still the map he had made – carved into landscapes someone in future years, decades, centuries would surely find, then follow. 'What does the prisoner say?' King James did not like this foreign muttering, the hysteria that seemed so unchristian. The earl stood and bowed his head.

'He will not reveal his methods, your majesty.' 'Then he must burn.' 'Burn, your majesty? Spies do not burn,' Justice Winch

interjected. 'This one will,' the King announced, before hauling himself into the sedan chair and pulling the curtain closed. A moment later Shimon was dragged back onto the cart. Outside, the rabble was waiting and the prison cart trundled out again into the jeering. As it entered the lane Shimon caught sight of a woman standing back from the crowd, her black cloak wrapped around her statuesque figure, the long red hair concealed beneath a cowl. Shocked, he stared over at her. He would have recognised her anywhere, and, for the first time that day, he felt terrified. It was his sister's tutor, an Englishwoman who had betrayed his family to the Inquisition a lifetime ago, and one of the reasons why he had been forced to flee Spain.

'¡Maldita seas!' he spoke out. 'I curse you with my death and those of my parents, brother and sister.'

The earl, now back on his stallion and following the cart, noticed the prisoner's sudden agitation. He turned to Justice Winch.

'I still think it a strange execution for a spy.'

Winch, his long face shaped by grievance and avarice in equal parts, spat down onto the cobblestones. Then, concealing a loathing of Catholics – secret or otherwise – he turned back to Northampton, his features now smoothed into neutrality.

'You know how stubborn the King is when it comes to the persecution of occultists. However, by burning him we can be reassured his power as both wizard and spy will be vanquished.'

The earl glanced over at the shivering prisoner. Despite the marks of torture on his hands, feet and face, and despite the shower of rotten fruit and ridicule raining down, the Spaniard had managed to stay upright, his thin frame infused with a dignity Northampton would normally associate with religious martyrs and not foreign heretics. Wizard execution and all other manner of witch-burning were practices the earl only supported in public and then to appease King James, who'd taken a personal interest in such persecution since his days as a Scottish ruler, when he had even written a book on the subject: *Daemonologie*. It had been because of political pressure that the earl, now an elderly statesman of seventy-five, had agreed to represent the King at the execution at all.

'Nevertheless, Justice Winch, 'tis a pity you did not manage to squeeze the location of the Spaniard's great "treasure" out of him during his interrogation. I have it on good authority that the King wanted the treasure himself to present as a gift to King Philip of Spain.'

This time the judge did not bother to address the earl to his face but kept his eyes fixed on the swaying prisoner.

'If there is any great treasure ... Besides, my dear Northampton, can't you see that it's because Ruiz de Luna was able to use his wizardry to block his pain that I failed to procure the information you needed. If his great treasure involves witchcraft, 'tis perhaps better his secret dies with him. When England fights it fights with Christ by its side.'

'Amen to that,' the earl added, just to clarify where his own politics lay.

Before them the narrow lane suddenly opened out into the town's marketplace. Beside the gallows a huge pyre of wood had been constructed with a pole rising up through the middle like a ship's mast. Already the crowd stood waiting, oblivious of the snow gathering upon their heads and shoulders, faces sharp with anticipation.

Leaning forward, out of hearing of the King's guards who rode with them, Northampton snarled into the judge's ear, 'Just remember, Winch, such magic might be mistaken for courage. If there has been treachery afoot here, I promise

you I will find it. And if not me – History. At the end of the day she will judge both of us and that day, my friend, is not far for either you or I.’

The guards were already helping the prisoner off the cart and towards the unlit pyre. Stumbling and near fainting, Shimon was pushed through the crowd who’d now fallen silent as if the proximity of death awed them. Some even reached out and touched him as if to bring them good luck, their outstretched arms a forest of strange affection, while others spat and muttered prayers. It was not how Shimon had imagined. He had seen a greater glory, one in which his last confession had been heard loudly and defiantly across the town plaza. He reached the platform. A masked executioner stood by the piled wood, a massive, muscular man, sinister in demeanour.

As Shimon was led to the stake he tripped. In an instant the executioner was by his side, helping him up.

‘Steady, lad,’ he whispered, his gentle voice belying his threatening presence, as he tied Shimon to the stake.

A hooded priest approached offering him his last rites. Shimon shook his head. Immediately the crowd began to murmur in disgust – such a refusal proved the alchemist guilty. One man cried out, ‘Satan worshipper!’ Ignoring them, Shimon looked up into the pewter sky – utterly alien from the blue heavens of his homeland – and began to mutter his own prayers, in Hebrew. So intense was the discourse with his God, he barely noticed the whoosh of the igniting stake the executioner now held.

Glancing over at Northampton, the executioner waited for the signal. The aristocrat nodded solemnly. In a strangely graceful gesture the burly man bent and lit the pyre. In seconds it was transformed into a flaming sun against the grey of the city square.

‘The eyes of God, the eyes of God,’ Shimon said, over and over to himself, the flames now lapping at his feet. He stared out into the captivated crowd, searching for a face, his final solace.

At last he found her, standing at the back, her pregnant form hidden beneath a robe, her Basque features hooded against English eyes. Uxue. Their gaze met, and, though weeping, she smiled. Or was it his imagination? Then she held up a pendant for him to see – he recognised the symbol instantly. His secret was safe. Finally, Shimon surrendered to the searing pain that had begun shredding his feet and legs, before losing consciousness. The earl crossed himself, thankful that the writhing figure now hung limp. He turned back to the crowd, his gaze searching for the dark young woman he’d seen the spy exchange glances with, but she’d vanished.