

Chapter Eleven

A WAR NOT WAR. DEATH NOT DEATH.
A TRIAL BY RUMOR AND A FORT.



AND SO, on the Jamestown beach, we just returned from the falls and our first meeting with Powhatan, the president of the council, Edward Maria Wingfield, stood before us, dressed in reds and pinks. The badges and medals and ribbons of his station and his titles hung from his chest like caught fish. He wore an iron helmet, which resembled a capsized ship, its pointed ends both front and back like bows, its central metal spine a keel. Wingfield held the others back with a gesture of his arms, reminding them of the dignities of his station and that he must be the first to speak to Captain Newport. Only Lord Percy would he let through to stand by his side, knowing that by birth and politics, the brother of Northumberland was not of trivial flesh.

“They came in heaving clouds of paint and feathers. Gales of arrows they shot. We were unarmed, our guns...,” a voice whimpered, as if expressing embarrassment to stern parents. Wingfield silenced the voice with a look. Others started to speak.

“We’ll have none of that. I am in command. Privilege will speak only to privilege,” said Wingfield, adjusting the tilt of his head and the placement of his hand on his sword. Properly composed, he waited now, satisfied in his control, assured of his station.

It was a nervous group of men who swallowed hard on their mortality and waited as the hull of our boat scraped the gravel of the shore. The shore seemed to groan in annoyance, the small faces of the rocks withdrawing into the soft mud, like the heads of frightened turtles.

“Where’s Newport?” asked Wingfield, his gaunt cheeks blushed in a displeasing yellow, his thin head and nervous eyes looking about, not noticing the man standing in front of him.

“Before you,” said Captain Todkill, cutting away the ceremony to the obvious.

“Ah, Captain Newport,” Wingfield said, as he nodded at the figure in front of him, seeing only his own embarrassment.

Wingfield cleared his throat, as if the truth were a heavy burden for his pipes. “Two hundred savages came at us this morning. Our men engaged in desperate sorties with painted devils. Our guns were all packed away. Our ruin was at hand. It was only after a canon shot from one of the ships blasted a tree, killing several of those fiends, did they retreat.”

Across the clearing that was to be our town, bodies, convulsed in grotesque contortions of pain, lay on bloodstained sheets. Wotton knelt now by one, from whose shoulder a bouquet of five arrows rose. He snapped the shafts and then with his knife, cut away the flesh to free the darts, sewing the wound with a rough thread, covering it then with a plaster of tobacco and wine and sulfur.

“Seventeen of us are hurt and one killed. Them savages smashed in his head, he being just a boy,” said a laborer, scowling back at Wingfield, who turned to silence him.

“In our account, let us not forget the injuries to six gentlemen,” said Wingfield, “who, by the refinement of their bearings, suffer most grievously at the slightest wound.”

As the wind filtered through the transparency of his words, some gentlemen’s heads wobbled in vacant nods, as if on strings. They had agreed with all this before. There was no content to their gesture, only motion. The laborers murmured among themselves in idle rebellion, unhappy to be so discounted, but strangely reassured that they stood so closely to the human manifestation of nature’s order and its power. The land and sea stretched their own presumptions across our sight. In the echo of space we were alone. I could feel the unity of our little band begin to disintegrate into nuggets of individual fear, each man holding to that essential idea, that part of his identity that made him feel unique and whole and safe.

Captain Newport began his address, but I was forced by potent needs to interrupt, as I thought to myself, *Why not take the hour that is lent? Entombed in the perceptions I would rather be. Cradle me. I am a changeling, swaddling through the suffocations of a second birth. I speak in echoes.* My lips pursed in borrowed lexicons.

Now to the crew I spoke, “Toward the success of this great enterprise which we have now begun, I believe we have but one recourse: to forget who we are. All assumptions, all births, all titles,

are monuments to the moment which is passed. We must now strive, in this vastness, to be for each other, that we might be for the ages. Here we must become no one, that we might become one. Here our community will be our history. Here our nobility must rise above its birth. We must become but one hand with one purpose, one mind with one thought," I said, trying to create with my one soul the character of the whole.

"Hear, hear," said one of our crew. The other members of the council stared at the ground, building walls of mud with the toes of their boots.

"To be no one is to be nothing!" screamed Ratcliffe. There was a hollow murmur among the crew. It seemed far away, as if sounds were being uttered beneath the ground.

Wingfield interrupted, looking at me in restrained contempt. "Your thoughts are well said in their surface flash, but at their heart there is a treason. Our station at birth is another aspect of God's natural order, as is the king. To forget our class is to dismember that order in treasonable disobedience, an unnatural mutiny against both God and king. For it is that order and its natural light which give our lives their essential meaning, their essential purpose, their divine luminescence. There is no true movement without their pull and no true meaning without their reflection."

"There are no thrones in this wilderness that aren't first built in men's minds. Is not my own God in me?" I replied. My words were like the wind, showing no effect on Wingfield but the distant ruffle of his shirt.

"The question here," said Captain Archer, an almost lawyer who presumed his law, having studied at Grey's Inn, but never succeeding to the bar, "is do we have the authority to build a fort? By our own charter, the king must approve all our laws. Isn't any presumption of that authority a treasonable thought? Can we alone take any action without his consent?" As Archer spoke, his eyes watching Gosnold. Denied the lawyer, he assumed the law. It became the scaffolding of his flesh, the only bone of his imagination.

"We were sent to these shores to found a colony," said Bartholomew Gosnold, his blond hair protruding beneath his helmet, his armor of polished black and gold, always trying to be the lawyer trained to a better law. "Are we not a continent unto ourselves? I believe building a fort is within the limits of our authority, if we choose to read that

authority with good sense in the broadest terms.” Gosnold had been the only one among us who could sway Archer beyond his limits, having been his friend at Cambridge and his captain when they sailed to the north coast of America in 1602.

But Archer would eat his own.

“Do we have the right to make assumption of that king?” he said, on the verge of taking a tantrum to plead his case. As Archer spoke, I imagined several arrows falling at his feet, which I assumed he would kick away as if they were a casual annoyance.

There was a scream from one of the wounded, his pain his only consciousness. He drifted into darkness, anguish still railing in his eyes, as his eyes turned inwards, disappearing into his skull.

Captain Archer was interrupted in his soliloquy by Wingfield, who said, “There is a more important question and that is, simply stated, will the building of a fort seem to these savages a provocative act?”

“I would think that the attack on us this morning would be provocation enough,” said Captain Todkill. “Look about you. Our blood now fills the river beyond this field.”

“We are the English and a civilized nation. We must rise above the mere appearance of war,” said our stout John Russell, his servants huddled behind him, rubbing their hands like nervous vermin at their feed.

Wingfield’s voice rose in chastising thunder. “I might remind our company,” he stormed, “that we are under strict orders from the king himself not to injure or abuse or offend the savages. I believe a fort would be seen by them as a grave offense. Heavy is the weight of this our mandate and heavier still will be the retribution for those who cannot be its champion.”

As each man would cast the nation of the whole from his own limits, I now spoke, setting aside the diplomacies of silence. “Could an ocean ignore a storm? Could a dry leaf ignore a gale as easily as we ignore the ramifications of this attack? Dead things are more alive to the possibilities of their circumstance than we who think and count them rude.”

Captain Archer stepped in front of me. Ever the pudding of a man dressed in his own shadow, he appeared as the everyone no one would notice. Plain in profile, his resemblances without character, a torn cloth beneath a dented armor. “I believe it is inappropriate for

Captain Smith, still under the accusation of treason, to speak on these most important matters.”

I brushed aside Archer’s suggestion. Blind to myself, I craved the blindness. Anger would not be my epitaph, as I said, “What have our lives become if we do not build a fort to defend ourselves but good sense orphaned to a word? But there are other words, words that birth a thought, which, given the sinew and muscle of action, become the flesh of reputation, and when recounted by others, become our history — the spirit of all our purpose. We must seize that purpose. We must live those words. We must build the fort, for ourselves, for good sense, for our enterprise.” There were cheers. Hats were thrown in the air. The council stood silent. “I would follow if others would lead, as I would now lead if others would follow.”

“Lead us and we will follow,” was the cry. Wingfield tried to quiet the crew. I spoke again. I could not let my future moments lie in shallows and forgotten graves with a council buffoon. I pressed my argument until I felt the sword of my intent hit the bone of their stupidity. “Thoughts may war, but here, beneath the talk, there is a desperate reality. We cannot last a week without a fort.”

“The fort must be built,” said Captain Newport. “When my three ships return to England, you will have no defensible place, no place to retreat in time of attack. You will be alone, without hope of rescue.”

Wingfield began to protest that the power of the council was being usurped. “General opinion sits on no throne when it speaks to matters of the state. Only the council can decide if it has the authority to build a fort, and if it does, whether such action serves well both God’s purpose and the king’s commission.”

“The king in London has his advisors, as he has his Parliament,” spoke Reverend Robert Hunt, a friend of Hakluyt, appointed chaplain of the expedition in his stead. Hakluyt then fifty-six, Hunt twenty years his junior. “Why should the council here not listen to those whose lives are most directly affected by its decision?”

“Here,” said Ratcliffe, addressing the whole company, “we are under siege, not only by the savages, but by the very immensity and loneliness of the land. It is as if the land, this great hollow nothing, could call from our skins ourselves, evaporate our minds into the wind. All of us are endangered.” Ratcliffe held his hands close to his chest. “Without the discipline of English resolve and English custom we would simply dissolve from ourselves into the land and become

one of her demons, the very savages which we now face. Would any among us now rip the English clothes from his back and dance naked in the wood with these fiends? Would we betray our souls for a song? Not now. But the wilderness is a subtle seductress. She perfumes the mind with forbidden thoughts. We must protect ourselves. We must be more English than any Englishman has ever been before. Distill the essence of ourselves into our government. Only by holding to the last codicils of our law, the last decrees of our divine council, can we form an iron identity that no pagan wilderness can plunder." Even as Ratcliffe spoke, his body trembled, his voice wavered, his teeth chattered, as if the meaning of his words hid other meanings desperate to be heard. Ratcliffe held his arms across his shaking chest, squeezed them tightly, holding his body together, fearing, I suppose, that even as he spoke his body might explode into a geyser of hysterical sparks.

I watched Ratcliffe, wondering what his words denied that his actions would affirm. "All power to our council and our king," he screamed. Others echoed his salute. One of Ratcliffe's band yelled, "Ratcliffe will save our souls, as he will save our lives. Ratcliffe should be the president." Our company disintegrated into a cacophony of words and fragmented phrases, gradually quieting to a steady buzz, as if a tribe of bees were tearing apart their hive.

Wingfield fumbled with the decorations on his chest, lifted the ribbon of one hanging metal, kissed the gold color of its coin. The certainty in himself renewed, he spoke. "I was chosen to be on the council by the king. My name was placed in a sealed box, opened a few days ago, as you know. That commission I do regard as sacred."

"Then why do you deny Smith his seat?" Todkill yelled, his powerful shoulders, his armor dressed for war. "Wasn't he chosen also?"

"Captain Smith still stands accused of treason. Until that charge is resolved, he will not take his seat." Wingfield started to walk away.

"When will those charges be resolved?" Todkill asked, his young face already scarred by service in the East.

"In England. By trial," said Wingfield.

"No. I want to be judged here in the face of my accusers." I addressed the company. "Are those who seek my destruction so cowardly that they must hide behind an ocean, shielded by distance, to make their slanders? Let them stand before me, here, that all may see my innocence."

“Justice for Smith. Justice for Smith...now!” came the chant. A press of faces, both glum and determined, blocked Wingfield’s path. “What about the fort?” cried a voice.

“The gentlemen of the council will consider in due course,” said Wingfield. “We are not common rabble and will not be coerced by those who are.”

But frustration is the noose to those who wildly speak. Still no path opened for Wingfield. He tried to push away bodies as if they were a tangle of tall grass. Their flesh would not yield, as Wingfield screamed, “In a wilderness, I am the government by law, by birth, by privilege. I was elected by the chosen council. I will be obeyed.” As he screamed, Wingfield’s eyes protruded from his head, sweating lunacies as they drank the light.

An angry groan moved through the crew. A beast in the mind had been awakened that now was on the scent. Captain Newport tried to calm the men. “I know these words of the president speak more to his determination than to any sense. As to the fort, I am appointed to absolute command while this company is at sea. Since no town has been built, I assume we are still at sea, in spirit if not in fact. Therefore, I order the construction of a fort...at once.”

“Mutiny is the beast which is now upon our flock,” raged Wingfield. “This is mutiny and treason.”

“It is a wise captain who knows the haul of his own sails. The wind is only born to enthrall the wise,” said the old mariner with his leathered skin, his eyes alive with the inner fire of some cold and icy light.

Captain Newport gently raised his hand to quiet the speaker. “Jonas,” was the only word Newport spoke.

Wingfield turned to stare in hate upon the old mariner. He could have had the man flogged, his back so cut he could never stand again. It would bring a measure of appeasement to Wingfield to inflict some wounds. If Wingfield thought the man weak and easy without cost he could have had his violence upon him. Such is the cowardice of power. The battle hardened mariners now moved to close about the old man, as if they were a cloak, their hands upon their swords.

Newport spoke. “Old Jonas adventured with Drake some thirty years and knows many a haunted tale of the sea, and even of this coast.” Wingfield did not consider of a merry tale, but saw no easy practice of his will to have the old man punished.

“I have been to this coast twice before and know it to be ever protective of its lost,” said the old mariner. “This place births mysteries, its flower ripens secrets in its seeds.”

Wingfield ignored the old mariner’s words, considering on the will of the company and the matter of the fort. “I am not so casual to all this as some may think.” Wingfield pulled a cape over his shoulder, straightening its creases, tightening its fit, armoring his body against the world with the cut of his pink cloth. “I will not be that fracture that drains his life into this land,” he raged, as rounded cannonballs of clouds slaughtered the light as they passed across the sun. His hand smoothed the ribbons of his shirt. Feeling his own touch emboldened Wingfield, allowing him to yield in protest. “I know who I am and what I am about. Build your fort!”

“And Captain Smith?” questioned Reverend Hunt.

“His trial will be within the week. Captain Gabriel Archer will be the prosecutor.” A path now cleared. Wingfield walked through it toward the ships, which rocked on their foundations like hollow toys.

Chapter Twelve

I AM PLAYED A TRIAL. GENTLEMEN WILL STARVE US YET.
A POISONED CUP. A TAVERN. DRAKE BEGINS TO DRINK.



USK HAD COME to ease the day. Around the fire our company sat. The old mariner stared into the flames, remembering other heat and other light. “I was with Drake in Panama in 1572,” he said, his face glowing more brilliantly in the excited sparks of a momentary flare. At the edge of the fire’s stain the night surged in a darkened surf. The molten light hung upon us, as the weathered sailor then told the tale I only knew in parts.

And oh my years do drift their passions into gray and I think back on that long ago as I write the mariner’s tale. Man is the only creature who can draw an image of himself or who has the need. My written history the ear that holds the mariner’s voice. I am his last quill. His last resurrection. Memory is the man. Remembrance is his food. I