

BEGINNING

Autumn 1607, Virginia

The priests danced and death was close. It was the worst of times to be a prisoner of the natives. They had brought him to the fire, bound, hunched and weeping, his naked skin pale in the dancing light and his English mutterings strange to his audience's ears. It would soon be over.

'My master will give you gold and precious stones. I mean you no offence.'

Yet offence had been taken and punishment was due. He had been unwise to venture with others from the palisaded settlement. The touching belief that their fire sticks and lead shot would counter any foe was gone. Now rattles shook and drums beat and howling chants pierced the cold night air. As the frenzy built, the sacrificial captive trembled at its centre, recoiling from the painted demons edging near.

Again, the pleading voice. 'Spare me, I beg you. For the love of Christ, have mercy.'

They preferred to play. After all, he was weak and cowardly and no match in a fight; scarcely worth slaughtering to the warrior god Okeus. A priest swayed before him, hissing contempt, his head adorned with deer antlers and his body daubed red and black, his bone necklaces and festooned skins of snake and weasel shivering with the exertion. Always the feet beat time.

So much for a Promised Land! Only that April the colonists had arrived in the territory they called Virginia, a hundred or so of them stumbling ashore to stake their claim, and found an outpost for England. Almost instantly they had been attacked, the feathered flights of Indian arrows raking them from every quarter. Men fell and were buried; the first blood had been shed.

So the newcomers erected earthworks and a stockade of split logs, building their swamp-encircled enclave on a small promontory jutting into the river. But although a foothold had been gained, they had suffered

for it. The fort was a triangle, its boundary patrolled and its angles protected by culverin guns mounted high on platforms. Enclosed within was what passed for a settlement, a single acre scattered with tents and rudimentary shelters with a sailcloth church in its midst. Welcome to Genesis, to disease and starvation and sudden death; welcome to America. The name Jamestown sat bitter in the mouth.

Near delirious with fright, the Englishman knew nothing could save him now. Perhaps his comrades were already dead, either victim of the fever and bloody flux that had come upon the settlement, or butchered and scalped by the marauding savages. As they brought him to the camp, he had seen a wooden pole set between trees, heavy with human trophies. He sobbed another incoherent prayer.

Opechancanough watched. How unimpressive these outsiders were; how foolhardy to trespass in his domain. These wearers of leg coverings were no match for his braves. As military commander of the Powhatan people and defender of their lands, he answered only to his half-brother and ruler of the people, the supreme Mamanatowick, the mighty Chief Powhatan.

Threat lay everywhere. To the north, the raiding canoe parties of the Iroquoian tribes; to the west, the probing attacks of Siouan and their cannibal allies; to the south, other Algonquian fiefdoms like his own, jostling to expand. And now strangers had come across the ocean to establish a meagre colony. He doubted their intention was benign; he suspected their number would grow. Disrespect was a capital offence.

A shaman sprinkled powder onto the fire and the flames leapt in myriad hues. The noise ebbed and, in the quiet, the thin notes of a reed pipe carried clear. Howling now, the prisoner was pegged out on the earth, the archpriest moving and singing around him. Then the priest knelt and, with the sharp edge of a mussel shell, began to joint the body. A shin bone came away and next a thigh, each item deftly removed and raised up to a tumultuous cheer before being cast upon the fire. Expert hands did their careful work, applying the cauterising brand while the reed pipe played.

Shorn of his limbs, the prisoner writhed and screamed as his body parts cooked close by. But the execution was not yet finished. Rolling

the torso onto its front, the priest crouched in a slick of blood and made an incision in the back of the neck. As the scalp and face were peeled clean away, the remnants of the man shuddered and perished. Justice had been done.

A second prisoner was brought, cowering and vomiting as Opechancanough approached. Terror has its own stench. The two men stared at each other, two opposing worlds divided by only five paces. The skin of the native was painted red, the right side of his head shaven, his hair hanging long in a knot to his left shoulder. Keen eyes peered through a mask of white. To the Englishman he seemed a demon in a place of hell.

‘Let me go,’ stuttered the man. ‘I will tell all of your mercy and greatness.’

He would indeed. With a gesture, Opechancanough gave the order. The captive was to be returned unharmed to his own people. He would serve the Powhatan cause well by spreading fear and consternation among the settlers. Opechancanough watched the scrabbling man hurl himself out of the camp, and considered his future strategy. Many seasons past, his leader had consulted spirit guides about his visions of invaders journeying on great swans from afar and marauding his lands. Yet there were several ways to interpret such a dream, and Opechancanough would not be cowed. This foreign tribe had its vulnerabilities: it possessed scant food, it could be manipulated and it would be brought to destruction. Corpses would litter the earth, and he would finally inherit the land as saviour and overlord. He turned away.

In far-distant Spain, deep within the monastic gloom of the Escorial palace in the barren hills above Madrid, another encounter between prisoner and authority was in train. A man was dragged from his cell and up flights of stairs, blinking at the candlelight and gulping the fresh air and wondering at his summons. At least he could content himself that while they still noticed him he remained alive, and if he stayed living, it suggested they might need him.

‘Here we are, confronted by our sins.’

There was nothing regal in the figure or the voice: only the rich sobriety of his clothes defined him as a monarch. Yet although King Philip III of Spain ruled the greatest empire on earth and owned

territories so remote his advisers lacked the requisite maps, there were challenges to his power. Not only did his subjects chafe and agitate, but old enemies also manoeuvred for advantage. He would not forget the names of Queen Elizabeth or Sir Francis Drake, nor the spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham and his intelligencer Christian Hardy. Nor could he ever forgive the perfidious sons of Albion who had provoked his father and ambushed his treasure fleets and harried his Armada to oblivion. Vigilance was essential.

‘Beware. Beware. God sees.’

Philip spoke almost to himself. He was standing in front of a painting, *The Seven Deadly Sins* by Hieronymus Bosch. There at the centre was the eye of God, and Jesus ascending triumphant. Judgement, it reminded him, was ever near.

He broke his gaze. ‘Are we not all of us prisoners of our frailties?’

‘I am also a prisoner of Spain, Majesty.’

‘For good reason, Reino.’ The King glanced at the man, now bound to a chair. ‘We are unforgiving of those who would defy us.’

‘All that I do is for our faith and this nation.’

‘Yet you have threatened the peace.’

True, the captive silently conceded. As an English renegade and agent of Spain code-named ‘Realm’, he had devoted his life to waging war upon Protestantism and his former homeland. During the great Armada of 1588, he had landed in England ahead of the invasion to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. The fates had proven unkind. Undaunted, he had been in London again in 1605, aiding Catholic plotters as they sought with gunpowder to alter history and overthrow King James and his heretic brood. Once more he had been thwarted: because of chance, because of Spanish caution, and because his nemesis Christian Hardy had remained one step ahead of him. Now anxious to pursue diplomacy and maintain benign relations with their former adversary, the Spaniards kept him chained and under sentence of death. A wary calm prevailed, and he was an embarrassment. Yet while he breathed, he still had utility.

The King watched him. ‘Have I not reason to have you executed? Would the garrotte not erase a source of trouble from our midst?’

‘Giving counsel is not my strength, Majesty.’

‘Nor is obedience to your King.’ Philip squinted at the man.

‘Yet you bring me here, Majesty.’

Philip hesitated. ‘I am an emperor without rival, ruler of Spain and Portugal and Sicily, Prince of Swabia, Marquis of the Holy Roman Empire, master of the oceans and possessor of dominions scattered wide, from the Philippines to Peru.’ He paused. ‘Yet there is dissonance and mutiny everywhere.’

Realm nodded. So they really did need him alive. There was always a role for men like him, always a troubled corner of the Spanish Main that required his skills. He sat patiently.

‘In every quarter we are assailed: taunted by the Ottoman and pricked by corsairs, challenged in the New World by the traders and merchant fleets of others.’

‘Thieves are always drawn by the lure of riches, Majesty.’

‘And we must safeguard what is ours.’ Philip let his gaze wander. ‘My treasure fleets from the Indies each year bring me some thirty million pesos in gold and silver. Yet I am in default to my lenders and my exchequer totters at the brink.’

‘A vexing thing, Majesty.’

‘Made more so by the English.’

Realm felt his interest sharpen and his heartbeat climb.

‘In the place they call Virginia, they have built a fort and plan to create a colony.’

‘What is their intent, Majesty?’

‘One that bodes no good for Spain. One that would plant the noxious weed of Protestantism, and strangle our wealth with piracy.’

‘Force would soon uproot them.’

‘My Council of State and my Council for War in the Indies do indeed favour that course.’

‘You look to another method, Majesty?’

‘I do not need war with England.’ The dark eyes gave nothing away. ‘I would prefer to engage more subtle and devious practices, the blacker arts in which you are well versed.’

‘You honour me, Majesty.’

‘I do not. But I do spare your life. In exchange, you will give me loyalty and you will bring this infant colony to its grave.’

‘Consider it gone, Majesty.’

‘And you shall consider yourself reprieved.’

CHAPTER 1

They meant to kill him. He saw it in their watchfulness, their movement within the crowd, in that contrived sense of ease that turns to sudden violence. Christian Hardy drank from his pot of beer and checked the windows and doorways. He was no stranger to unprovoked attack, and had faced worse odds than three hired and clumsy street toughs who believed they held the advantage. Still, it was an inconvenience. He took another pull on his drink, rehearsing scenarios and readying to depart. Better to carry the fight outside and lessen the chance of a random blade.

He should have anticipated that his coming voyage to Jamestown would reopen wounds and bring his enemies flocking. It might be the Spanish, or even his former employer, the spymaster Robert Cecil, who had arranged for his murder. Gratitude was short-lived in the world of espionage, and favours were rarely returned.

Around him, the conversation surged as the tallow candles guttered and tobacco smoke cast its haze. Memories slid in of other nights and previous dangers: of the gunpowder plotters he had chased to their doom; of the traitor Realm who had walked a bloody trail through his life. The past always returned.

Out in the street, the night air was chill and smelt of sea coal. The occasional lantern glimmered. Hardy kept a steady pace on the Strand and loosened the leather strap of the Katzbalger at his side. The cat-gutter was his weapon of choice, a short sword designed for the close-quarter savagery of a street fight. From somewhere behind he heard footsteps. He calculated the distance, aware of how close he was to the Duck and Drake tavern in which Catesby and Guido Fawkes had vowed to annihilate the King; conscious of other figures positioning themselves ahead of him. Someone truly had a grudge.

A shout skittered after him. 'Did you think you would go ignored? Did you not trust such a moment would come?'

He failed to answer, and ducked instead into a narrow passage leading to a courtyard. They would follow, believing they had laid a trap. Whoever sent them possessed a touching faith in numerical superiority and brute force. Hardy drew his sword and felt the spike of energy in his gut. These were the moments he relished.

There was a pause, as time and his breathing slowed and his body adapted itself from passive wait to active kill. It had been the same when he had steered a fireship for Drake towards the Spanish fleet at anchor in the Calais Roads; when he'd stood with Sir Richard Grenville on the deck of the *Revenge* and headed straight into the maw of sixty Spanish galleons lying in ambush off the Azores. An enemy's misjudgement could always be exploited.

Funnelled by the alleyway they had clattered through, they were blind and unchecked in their eagerness. The Katzbalger thrust deep. It summoned a scream and the panic of surprise as the first attacker collapsed on the cobbles with a groin wound. Rage could throw an adversary even further. More men rushed in, determined to finish their business. As they raised their lamps to chase off the shadows, Christian Hardy appeared before them.

'There is some mistake, gentlemen. I reserve my displays of fencing for the south bank.'

'Reserve your tongue as well.' A ringleader wielding a cudgel stepped forward. 'We have our orders – to see you dead. You have no chance.'

Hardy removed the dagger from his belt and held it point down, shifting the weight on his feet. 'Who will be the first to take me?' Perhaps they had been promised gold coins for their effort, or only a miserly few pennies. It made little difference.

A large man raised a knife and charged, then fell clutching his stomach as Hardy struck out and then danced back. Two more came on and died in a flurry of blows.

Hardy stooped and wiped his blade on a corpse. 'The contest is unequal.'

'We will yet down you!'

'At what cost?' Hardy peered at the strangers. 'Go to your beds and your women and rise to greet another dawn. There are nightwatchmen afoot and constables to hunt you.'

‘They will sleep soundly through this dispute,’ said the ringleader, preparing to leap forward.

Sometimes the absence of the law provided Hardy with a certain freedom. Yet this, he thought, hinted at a deeper conspiracy, and at those who would stop at little to prevent him from joining his ship. At Gravesend, the *John and Francis* and the *Phoenix* were waiting to take resupply to Jamestown.

Fortunately, it seemed, someone still intended him to sail. From high above the jettied courtyard, a salvo of ash quarrels flew down to find their mark. Hunting crossbows were deadly at close quarters, and his would-be assassins tumbled to the ground around him. As the survivors fled the carnage, Hardy looked about him.

‘Show yourselves, and grant me proof of friendship,’ he called. He had yet to sheathe his sword.

‘Is there not proof enough?’ a measured voice replied.

A shuttered lantern flared in an open window as though the murderous incident was nothing more than a piece of theatre to entertain the gallery.

‘Did enough players die?’ Hardy stared up into the shadows. ‘Was the comedy to your liking?’

‘We are only part way through the night. A saddled horse awaits you, with a mounted troop attending.’

‘I do not need anyone to guard me.’

‘Really?’ Above him, the shadowy figure pointed to the litter of bodies. ‘Prince Henry commands you to make haste to his side.’

Hardy bowed. ‘Then it would be churlish to delay.’

There were few to whom Hardy was prepared to swear fealty or bend his knee; few for whom he would shed his blood. Yet his protector and royal patron was sufficiently astute to keep a personal operative close. Prince Henry, eldest son of King James, deserved both public and private approbation and loyalty unto death.

‘You have escaped murder again, Mr Hardy.’

Though only thirteen, there was a gravitas and self-possession that belied the youthful years of the Prince of Wales, heir apparent, the new

Hal, the future of the nation. While the father was a drooling sybarite, mistrustful of all and scared of his own shadow, the son had the touch of a leader. Dressed in black, a sword at his side and a single pearl and lace ornamental collar at his throat, he looked to be both a warrior and a novice priest with his blond hair close-cropped and brown, heavy-lidded eyes.

Prince Henry dismissed his attendants and beckoned Hardy forward. 'So you are unscratched from your endeavour? I am glad you are not harmed.'

'I am pleased to serve Your Grace.'

'There is no one else I would call on.' Henry spoke earnestly. 'Was it not you who saved the life of our Queen Elizabeth? Was it not you who tracked and foiled the conspirators of the great Powder Treason?'

Hardy bowed his head in acknowledgement.

'Yet it has earned you both repute and a surfeit of enemies.' Concern flickered in the prince's eyes. 'I am unsure if they dwell more at the Escorial in Spain, or lurk in the court of my father.'

In a world of rivalry and intrigue, jealousies multiplied and secret agendas were rife. The King resented the popularity of his son; his son in turn had established a separate camp. In place of corruption and dissipation and the squandering of treasure, Prince Henry's world, at the palace of St James, was one of prayer and thought and learned discussion. To enter it was to swear a new allegiance and forsake the values of the old.

Henry rested his palm on the pommel of his sword. 'I know my father, Mr Hardy. He will not allow a colony in Virginia to thrive and provoke a war with Spain.'

'Even though Jamestown bears his name?'

'Such flattery makes no difference. The King is content to see it perish along with those who would support it.'

'And you, Your Grace?'

A smile broke through the solemnity. 'I shall strive to preserve the settlement for England and for posterity. I will do what I can to plant our standard, tame the wilderness and bring the natural savage to our cause.'

'Much lies in our path, Your Grace.'

'Not least that malevolent pygmy Lord Chancellor Robert Cecil.'

Hardy had studied the reports. Jamestown was imperilled. Beset by disease and treachery and under constant attack, it seemed unlikely to outlast a year. That would suit Cecil fine, and accrue him even greater power and plaudits from the King. Upsetting Spain was not conducive to good trade or heavy coffers; a viable colony backed by parliamentarians and City merchants could easily act as a focus for dissent against the Crown. And if the tiny enclave should fail, it would be the ennobled hunchback Cecil who would slit its throat.

The intelligencer prepared to take his leave. 'I will do my duty, Your Grace.'

'Some might wager you will die.'

'They have lost their money before.'

'Be then my senses and my sentinel, Mr Hardy. Defend Jamestown well, and let no one but God destroy it.'

'To arms! To arms!'

Though sick and malnourished, the settlers responded, tumbling once more from their shelters to meet the attack. A bell clanged and the uproar grew, and above it all came the howls of the Indians. The Paspahegh had come in strength. This was their land, their ancestral home, their quarrel. No outsider could settle here and go unharmed; no wood palisade could prevent repeated assault. It helped that the white men were weak and scarcely able to mount a defence. Gradually the Paspahegh would wear down the adversary and restore the land they knew as Tsenacomoco to a world free of foreign trespass. Tonight was another chance to harvest scalps.

'They've breached the stockade!'

'The gate – they are coming through the gate!'

'Stand fast! They shall not prevail if we are strong!'

War cries mingled with oaths and screams and the sporadic report of pistol and musket. *Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.* Kneeling in the midst of the carnage, arms outstretched and his words bellowed loud, the chaplain sought to comfort and encourage. His prayers went unheeded, yet his flock was fighting hard, battling to retake ground and move to the offensive. A bronze culverin disgorged

a canister of shot, its muzzle belching flame and the light dazzling for an instant. No quarter would be given.

Framed in the interior was a running scene of mayhem. Here, President John Ratcliffe discharging a pistol in the face of a native; there, the aristocrat George Percy coolly fencing with another and sweeping aside a sword fashioned from bone to plunge his rapier deep; there, too, the gunner Robert Tyndall improvising with a cannon rod to crush the skull of his opponent. The Indians were losing their advantage.

‘Satan is loosed and the savages infest us!’

A stocky, bearded figure strode untroubled through the chaos. He was not about to yield to fear or permit death to take him. An Indian had the misfortune to confront him and was quickly dispatched with a shovel; a second reached to fit an arrow to his bow and was similarly cut down. Captain John Smith trudged on. In his almost thirty years he had sailed the seas and fought Spaniard and Ottoman alike, encountering all manner of heathens and pirates. Indeed, he had once been enslaved by Tartars, and only escaped after employing a threshing bat to beat out the brains of his master. Experience was rarely wasted.

‘To me, boys. We have them!’ Smith drew and fired a pistol and then reversed it to club a native to the ground. They had to learn, these red-painted warriors who considered the settlers their enemy and had no notion that their wilderness was already named Virginia. If Spain or France or the Dutch had not seized it, England surely would; if territory existed ripe for the taking, an armed merchant from Europe was bound to investigate.

A boy called out. ‘They falter, Mr Smith!’

‘I’m not taking victory for granted.’ The adventurer dodged an arrow. ‘Keep behind, for the savages may yet bite.’

‘What do they gain by this?’

‘It is a mark of intent and a test of their courage. They are probing our defence.’

‘Their losses are high,’ the boy pointed out.

‘Yet they pierce us to the core.’ Smith reloaded his pistol and blew excess powder from the pan. ‘Some here have no fight, and others embrace invasion by the savage.’ There was a gruff disdain in the Lincolnshire

voice, a belligerence that suffered neither fools nor authority. What Sir Walter Raleigh had once claimed for England, Smith had pledged the Virginia Company to help explore and settle and sow. The bloodshed was hardly a surprise.

Sighing softly, the boy pitched forward, an arrow protruding from his chest. Smith knelt briefly at his side and cradled the lolling head. It was a dungheap of a place in which to die, but at least it had been quick. Better a turkey spur or sharpened iron crystal to the heart than the slow agonies of dysentery or the fever. He laid the body down and returned to the fray.

At dawn, to the muffled beat of a drum, the mourners gathered to bury their dead. The night had taken its toll. Four were slain, including the boy. The colonists committed by their brethren to the earth might be considered fortunate to have had an early release from their travails. Out in the woods the savages still taunted. Yet within the confines of the palisade, the haggard band of survivors bent their heads, muttered their prayers and clung on. Ashes to ashes.

‘We shall endure, my brothers.’ As soil was heaped on the cadavers, the chaplain addressed his congregation. ‘We will overcome all privation to walk with the Lord in this land.’

‘We will?’ A gaunt-faced labourer jabbed an accusing finger.

‘Be certain of it, brother. For God is with us and will bring us to salvation.’

‘He brings us no food.’

‘Reward lies in heaven.’

‘And death here.’

It was a verdict delivered with a ball of phlegm spat into the earth. Others joined in, their voices loud and their objections coarse. The grim conditions and ceaseless threat had done little to foster unity. Dispute was common and would rapidly spark to violence. The gentlemen despised the labourers and the labourers detested all; and religious divide pitted one side against another. Papism was there, and so too were the Puritans. Condemned men were a fractious breed.

‘We believed this was a colony. Instead it has proved to be our prison, and it will be our grave.’ The first labourer spoke angrily.

The chaplain raised his hand. 'Repent of your sins and you shall be saved.'

'Speaks a charlatan and fool.'

'One that seems well fed.' A mutinous growl rose in the hungry ranks. 'One that deems himself better than the rest.'

'Let us see if he swings better from a tree.'

The mood darkened. Small wonder Edward Wingfield, the previous incumbent as president, had lasted only weeks in office. He was now under arrest.

A musket blast silenced the noise. From behind the smoke John Smith emerged.

'What curs are we to chase our tails and turn upon each other? Why should I risk my life to find you provisions while you waste your effort on this?'

'You are not our master.'

'Yet I speak the truth.' The adventurer cradled his gun and stared pugnaciously at the sullen faces. 'United we may survive a while, but divided we are damned.'

'Are we not already so? God has forsaken us, and even the redskin savage has abandoned this pestilential site.'

'We shall find new places. We will grow and spread and prosper.'

'A quaint notion, should you care to peer about.' But the heat had gone from the confrontation and in its aftermath stood a patchwork of dispirited and hollow-eyed men. Relief would not come from England for months. Who knew if any of them would live long enough to see it?

'I must applaud your steadfastness, Captain.' Insincerity seeped from the lips of President Ratcliffe. 'I would never have thought you would be the saviour of the hour.'

Smith bridled. 'I do as I must, Ratcliffe.'

'You will know to address me as your president.'

'I see you as you are, Ratcliffe, and I discern only a viperous snake.'

Ratcliffe and Smith eyed each other. As always, the lawyer Gabriel Archer stood at the president's shoulder, whispering his sly counsel. They were a dangerous combination. Smith stood his ground.

'Over what do you preside, Ratcliffe? A stinkhole that decays within your grasp?'

'Accusation will bring you only harm, Captain. Sedition and mutiny are punishable by death.'

'I have no fear for myself.' Smith indicated the crude fortifications. 'What vexes me is the ease with which the natives invaded our position. Are they blessed with friends within these walls?'

'Once more you are too free with your thoughts and tongue.'

'I will be freer with my knife should I discover a base traitor.'

'Be of more use to us, Captain.' It was more a command than a suggestion. 'Take the shallop and crew to raid upriver and bring us bushels of grain.'

Smith shouldered his weapon and strode off with his entourage. He would rather face the challenge beyond the fort than the stalemate inside it.

He noticed the youngster hunched on an empty bran barrel with his head clutched in his hands. 'Why are you weeping, boy?'

'It is my friend Jack Ashley you have buried.' The whisper was hoarse and the eyes bruised by tears.

'There is little comfort save that God now tends him.'

'Jack wished to live and make his mark.'

'Though he rests in a grave, he has accomplished much. For he is a founder, an English soul who laid down his life for our future. Be not down-cast.' Smith reached out a hand to lift the chin of the boy. 'Your name?'

'Edward Battle, sir.'

'So be true to it and to the memory of your friend. Battle is a finer thing than whimpering surrender.'

'I will remember it, sir.'

Smith bent down to speak low in the boy's ear. 'Remember, too, that you must stay alert and breathing. Our trials are just begun.'

He strode off to the waterfront. There were stores to load and gunpowder to collect and men to be mustered. It was time to prove the settlement was not finished; to bring justice down upon the natives and seize their harvest.

In the distance he could hear the faint chant of the deserters carrying above the ramparts.

'Guard your backs and watch your front. We have come to avenge and to take.'

As his men spread out in a fighting line, Smith scanned the deserted village, waiting for the ambush. He relished the simplicity of his task. He had no need to contend with John Ratcliffe or Gabriel Archer here; no need to police the insidious squabbling and gnawing hunger, or the attempts to besmirch his name or reputation. There was an honesty in wearing a wool coat, in holding a musket and smelling the woodsmoke. Captain John Smith would show the Indian that the English were not done.

'If they come, it will be from the thicket over there.' Smith nodded to his right.

Scattered about were native homes, their frames constructed from bent saplings and their shelter provided by animal skins. Fields had been cleared in the woods and fishing runs set along the river. European eyes stared with envy. Should the local tribes refuse to yield, it was likely to prove their funeral.

Behind the dense thickets of oak and sassafras, the arrayed might of the Powhatan empire might be hidden. The settlers had learnt enough to know of the supreme leader; had heard from returning and traumatised captives about the barbarities heaped upon their fellow countrymen. The savages intended to terrorise. Smith could also play such games.

'They are close, boys. I smell it.'

He was right. The Indians emerged now, chanting, their bows and clubs raised. Against the autumn trees, their painted skins were a ribbon of moving colour. A dozen Englishmen faced them, muskets loaded with cartridges of pistol shot to decimate the enemy when the skirmish came.

A soldier inched his finger for the trigger. 'They dance prettily enough.'

A second soldier made a final check of his wheel lock. 'Let us see how well they fight.'

'Steady, boys.' Smith kept his voice low. 'They will soon take us at a rush.'

'It will be a shame to spoil their plumage.'

'A greater one if we are trounced. Use every trick and give no quarter.'

Their ritual complete, the natives charged. In the vanguard was a priest emitting piercing cries and shaking a small effigy of a deity before him.

The doll would blunt the aggression of the strangers, would protect the village and ensure the arrows of the warriors sped true.

It did not work. The face of the priest blew apart and his cohorts dropped among the plumes of smoke and shot. Now it was the turn of the English to advance. They had drawn their swords and pistols and worked the field, swiftly and systematically dispatching the wounded and chasing down the stragglers and the brave.

There remained the grain store to pillage and further dwellings to explore. One of the Englishmen paused at the entrance to a hide, his attention caught by a native girl hiding inside. He had never seen such beauty, such perfect limbs, such full breasts. To a European starved of the sight of a woman, she was a vision. He reached in to touch her. It earned him a bone knife thrust to his throat and he fell to his knees choking on blood.

Reinforcements crashed through, eager to avenge. They could do nothing for their comrade twitching on the rush-strewn floor. But the girl was different. She sat mute with defiance in her eyes, the evidence of her crime in her hand. It would be a waste not to seek some form of revenge.

‘You murderous siren.’ A settler began to unfasten his britches. ‘I will show you the best kind of swordplay.’

‘First you take from us, and now we take from you.’

The transaction seemed fair to them. She tried to rise and was clubbed with a sword hilt. One of the men clambered to bind her arms behind her as his companion sought to spread her legs.

‘She tries to bite,’ the first man said. There was a vicious laugh. ‘I welcome spirit in a hellcat.’

A forearm pressed into the girl’s throat. ‘Do you ask for Sodom or Gomorrah, whore?’

She could not answer. They would break her. Hands explored her skin, breath feverish, accompanied by grunts and oaths.

A new voice interrupted. ‘Call yourself a Christian?’ Smith pushed the muzzle of his pistol hard into the neck of his sprawled subordinate. There was real anger in his tone. He would not tolerate his men descending to the level of beasts. The pressure did not ease. ‘You would bring shame upon our kind?’

'She is nothing to you.'

'Yet I would kill to guard her honour.'

'What honour is this?' Contempt was spewed through clenched teeth.

'The savage is scarce human.'

'Then why prey on her so?'

'Our brother is slain by her hand.'

'Violating the girl will not bring him back.' Smith kicked the man aside. 'To your tasks, before my font of mercy dries.'

Out in the open, the butchery had ceased and the men busied themselves ferrying baskets of grain to empty into the waiting hogsheads on their craft. They moved urgently, watchful in case of an enemy counter-attack. Perhaps in future they would learn to trade with beads and copper instead of lead.

Stooping to retrieve the discarded effigy of the native god, Smith placed it against the trunk of a black maple and pierced it through with a nail. The redskin people would understand the message and remember the visit. They would be wise to choose peace over conflict.

Incarceration had done little to diminish the questing mind and restless energy of the prisoner. In the past, he had been a courtier and favourite of Queen Elizabeth; a seafarer and a privateer. Now he was landlocked and held in the Bloody Tower. It was how many a glittering career finished for the political rivals of Robert Cecil, but Sir Walter Raleigh would not allow it to destroy him. He would smoke and write and dream of better times, and count in the new inmates condemned to the Tower of London for their imagined treason. To breathe, it seemed, was almost as great a crime as plotting against the King.

Christian Hardy watched as Raleigh inserted a folded note inside the collar of a small greyhound and sent the dog on its way to the prison lodgings of the Earl of Northumberland. The nobleman had been caught in the trawl for suspects in the aftermath of the Powder Treason. His distant cousin Thomas Percy had been a key conspirator, and with all the plotters dead, the vengeance of the state had fallen on prominent figures left behind. It suited Cecil to tie up loose ends.

'Permit me my petty diversions, Christian.' Raleigh straightened and smiled. Outwitting his gaolers was one of the few pleasures remaining for the ageing adventurer. There was still the intellect, the joy of risk, the contempt for those who would impose their rules.

'Had I the power, I would permit you a ladder.'

Raleigh laughed. 'No one would countenance a ghost like me treading the streets of London once more.'

'I would pay in gold to witness the face of Cecil at such an event.'

'How does our little pygmy?'

'As eager as ever to please the King, and amass power for himself.'

'Take care, Christian.' Raleigh gave him a warning glance. 'Cross him and you will suffer.'

'I suspect he has already tried to kill me.'

'He will try again. What he wants is peace with Spain, and Jamestown does not help this.'

'My ship lies ready at Gravesend.'

'Cecil will perceive it as a further slight that you take the shilling of Prince Henry and snub his own patronage and the kindness of the King.'

'I am to guard the settlement against danger.'

'You would do well to remember the threat that is here too.' Raleigh unstopped a hip flask and took a nip of firewater before offering it to his friend. 'Eau de vie from my private still, the best in all of England.'

'I shall miss it when I make landfall in Virginia.'

'Perhaps you are safer there.' Raleigh took back the bottle. 'The Earl of Northumberland has sent out his younger brother to ensure one of the line survives.'

'It is said George Percy is a frail weakling, a wastrel runt of the litter given to fits and convulsions.'

'Virginia will make him a man.'

Virginia was Raleigh's touchstone, his discovery; the territory he had named after his beloved Virgin Queen, a concession stolen and then ignored by Robert Cecil. Here at last was a venture to exploit what he had found, a chance to return it to the centre of things. Grey stone walls could not imprison hope or ambition.

'I swear to you, Christian. Though I write the history of England, there will be no greater or more lasting moment than Jamestown and the birth of an English colony.'

'Others are less confident.'

'Leave them to their doubts and petty spite. There will be gold in the Appalachia, an inner sea, a passage through to the Pacific and the riches of the Orient.'

'How can you know this? We do not even have a map.'

'Its steps may be faltering, but the child will grow.'

Outside Raleigh's quarters a lion roared, its anger hanging distant in the air as it paced the confines of its pen. The royal menagerie held many exotic beasts at the Tower. At least, Hardy thought, the animals would never face the ritual gutting and hanging on the scaffold; at least their severed heads would not be placed on spikes for the delight of the speculating masses.

Raleigh embraced his old friend. 'Triumph in Virginia might win me freedom, Christian.' He pulled a small leather pouch from a purse and tossed it to the younger man. 'Take this with you. Seeds of Spanish tobacco. What I steal from King Philip, I gift to England.'

Hardy left the prisoner to his thoughts and dwelt instead on his own. He had once believed he might emerge from the shadowlands of espionage, but too much blood had been shed and too many secrets absorbed ever to let that happen. He could never again be an ordinary citizen of England.

As he acknowledged the guards and retrieved his sword, passing beneath the raised portcullis, he considered how few men escaped the consequences of political machination and religious divide. It was simply a matter of degree and the level of injury suffered. He crossed the bridge spanning the moat and stepped to the world outside.

The English renegade known as Realm stood on the ramparts of the Castle of St George and stared out over the city of Lisbon. Once, an Armada had gathered on the Tagus River below, setting out with invasion in its heart and holy crosses emblazoned on its sails. How long ago it seemed. In this very fortress he had trained the sharpshooters tasked

with the assassination of Queen Elizabeth, watched as they picked off captured English crewmen stumbling panicked through the courtyards. Too bad such effort was squandered. But he was not given to regret. There was always another day, another operation; and now there was the news to digest that Christian Hardy was preparing to depart for Jamestown. Soon he too would embark for the place his enemies called Virginia. The eternal game continued.

CHAPTER 2

‘I know what you bring, Hardy. It is trouble and not luck.’

His reputation had preceded him. The intelligencer stood with the doughty admiral on the poop deck of the *John and Francis* and watched as his pair of oak chests was brought aboard. So many expeditions had started this way. The creak of the blocks and rigging, the shrill call of the bosun whistle, the grunts and shouts of men putting their shoulder to the capstan. All were familiar and redolent with memory. Once it had been Sir Francis Drake beside him, bracing as his *Revenge* took the weather gauge and heeled to attack the Armada; then it had been Sir Richard Grenville, mortally wounded and propped against a toppled cannon, having plunged his ship into the heart of the enemy. Today he prepared to depart with a different seafarer. Captain Christopher Newport was himself a veteran, a commander trusted by his crew and respected by the King, a survivor of combat with a missing right arm as testament to his courage.

In his azure-blue eyes and handsome features traced by the scars of conflict, Newport detected in Hardy a soldier or spy set apart from ordinary concerns. His orders were to transport and protect the man and not to ponder why. Peace with Spain meant a surfeit of cashiered officers seeking new lands and opportunity.

He glanced at the intelligencer. ‘How light you travel.’

‘My needs are few and indulgences less.’

‘Thus speaks a true soldier.’ There was a nod of approval. ‘If it is harsh challenge you desire, you will find sufficient in Virginia.’

‘I am told you were reluctant to return.’

‘Reluctant?’ A snort of near mirth. ‘Look at your fellow travellers, Hardy. Tell me if they fill you with hope.’

‘From poor beginnings may come improvement.’

‘Not at Jamestown. It is waste ground, a latrine into which we tip our most quarrelsome and absurd.’

‘Some would wish it survive.’

‘Others that it would not.’

Hardy surveyed the final preparations of the crew. 'What then persuades you to keep it resupplied?'

'I live in hope there will be gold and minerals, and I may take my share.'

'It is as noble as any motive, Captain.'

'What then is yours?'

'Perhaps hatred, or remorse, or love of the fray.' Hardy rarely delved too deep. He did not like to revisit in his mind the scene at his home off Fetter Lane, the image of his wife, Emma, butchered by Realm. There were other memories, too; the vignettes that threaded together to make the whole. Fra Roberto, his childhood mentor, the belligerent priest who had fought the Turk during the siege of Malta with a crucifix in one hand and a sword in the other, later hanged from a tree by the Inquisition; his own mother, whose hand he had touched in a Lisbon dungeon, burned at the stake for some imagined heresy; his toiling as a slave in the silver mines beneath the great mountain of Potisí. All his loathing led to Spain.

Newport bellowed an order and returned to Hardy. 'Where we go is hell.'

'I have visited worse.'

'Never a place so replete with rogues and scoundrels. Among our company here are tailors. I vouch it is shrouds they will be asked to make.'

'Each to his own task.'

A quizzical look. 'I received a sealed note from Prince Henry. He demands I take great care of you.'

'His Grace is kind.'

'His kindness adds a further burden to my duties.' There was a hint of complaint. 'My mission is the resupply of Jamestown and the safety of my ships.'

'It is not my intent to hinder it, sir.'

'You are the kind of man for whom repercussions are not foreseen.'

'At least I may promise adventure.'

Newport grunted, part intrigued and mostly vexed by the passenger he carried. He cast a glance towards the *Phoenix* and noted the longboats clustering at her bow, readying to edge her from the wharf for the estuary. It might be the last time either vessel glimpsed the other. Still, the challenge of the open sea made it worth the hazard. The breeze was steady and the tide running and everything was stowed. It was the morning of 8 October 1607. Departure was imminent.

Beside him, Hardy put his fingers to his mouth and directed a loud whistle to the shore. A final crew member had been summoned. Racing up the gangplank, a brown, athletic dog leapt to join his master and to introduce himself to all. Buckler was aboard.

The captain watched the proceedings with an air of resignation. 'We have yet to put to sea, and already we have been boarded by a pirate.'

'An Irish one at that.' Hardy stooped to welcome his companion. 'As sentinel or ratter, you will find none better.'

'There will be rats aplenty for us all.'

The moment had come and the order was given, and with pennants flying and to the dip and pull of longboat oars, the two ships swung towards the sea.

One observer witnessed the event with particular interest. He sat awhile in the saddle, his gaze fixed on the diminishing specks until they vanished from view. This was no chance sighting. His eyes had recorded the details and committed them to memory, and his mount would now carry him to his rendezvous. He pulled on the reins and wheeled the animal round, encouraging it to a canter.

He made swift progress, heading west across the marshland for Kent Street and the approaches to the flow and bustle of London Bridge. There was always traffic, the carters and drovers and merchants thronging to enter the City. He was just one more anonymous figure on an errand. Navigating his way across, the messenger threaded up to St Paul's and crossed the Fleet Ditch at Ludgate. Then a northward track past Newgate and the tenements and scrub fields beyond. It was a route often taken by the condemned, by those conveyed by tumbril for their last drink beside the church of St Giles and their appointment with the gallows at Tyburn. Everyone had their stations of the cross.

Dismounting in a tavern courtyard, the rider entered the building and climbed the stairs. Sufficient eyes watched to ensure there was no unwarranted interruption. He knocked at a door and entered.

'They sail, my lord. The *John and Francis* and the *Phoenix* together.'

'A stirring sight, I am certain.'

His audience might have intended to mock, but deciphering the words was hard. The small hunchback with the inscrutable gaze was not given

to revealing secrets. As spymaster and Lord Chancellor and the power behind the throne of England, Robert Cecil liked to be informed. Where there was a hidden priest, his roving pursuivants would sniff the papist out; where there was conspiracy, his agents would report it. A year before, Guido Fawkes and the surviving gunpowder plotters had been butchered on the scaffold. It was Cecil who had orchestrated this; Cecil who had gained reward and had his status reinforced. He would stay watchful, for it paid to be guardian of the King.

The messenger was dismissed. Gesturing to a plate of sweetmeats and raising a glass of claret to his lips, Cecil addressed another man richly garbed and seated opposite.

‘You hear it for yourself, Don Pedro. Supply is now sent to Jamestown.’

‘It is news that scarcely pleases.’ The Spaniard reached for a sugared almond. ‘Some might regard it an aggressive act, and in violation of our treaty.’

‘No violation occurs and no aggression is intended.’

‘Yet one hundred more settlers head across the ocean.’

Cecil paused. ‘I have scant powers over the Virginia Company, Don Pedro.’

‘A legal ruse and a convenient excuse.’ Scepticism was etched upon the features of the Spanish ambassador. Don Pedro de Zúñiga had learnt to mistrust the protestations of the English. They were emollient enough, speaking soothing words and seeking diplomatic resolution. Even King James had recently played the charming host in an audience at Hampton Court. Denial could not alter the truth.

Cecil leant forward. ‘We must not allow a local dispute to mar our friendship, Don Pedro.’

‘Global ambition begets wider conflict, my lord.’

‘Then it is fortunate that Jamestown has no value.’ The Lord Chancellor drank more wine. ‘Be assured, we shall not intervene should you direct force against the settlement.’

Zúñiga smiled. ‘You are casual in delivering a sentence of death.’

‘Consider me well practised.’

Jamestown would perish, for that was ordained. The nascent colony was little more than a hobby of Prince Henry and a pipe dream for romantics, an ill-dreamt-of conceit that might fester and become a sore.

No one could know for sure if that small wooden stockade in Virginia would grow into a centre of religious and political dissent. This was why King James hated it so, and his servant Cecil had leaked the details of its paltry defences to Madrid.

The ambassador studied the diminutive Englishman. 'Christian Hardy still lives.'

'An inconvenience and an oversight.'

'Was he not one of yours? Your most prized intelligencer and feted guardian of the kingdom?'

'We dwell in different times.'

'There is ever a need for such men, my lord.'

'Some are privy to too many secrets.'

'Thus you discard him and he finds fresh employ.' Zúñiga allowed himself another sweet. 'Perchance he will be as dangerous abroad as he proved to be in England.'

'Accidents may happen, and a blade strike when least expected.'

'He has shown himself resilient.'

'It is rare I lose a battle.' There was a pledge implicit in the statement. Cecil raised his glass. He and the Spaniard had an understanding and several common interests; a desire to resolve outstanding issues without recourse to war. Neither the English nor the Spanish monarch enjoyed frittering their wealth on hostilities and shot. This was where diplomacy had its merits.

Reassured, Zúñiga took his leave. As his unadorned carriage rumbled north towards his Highgate residence, he sat alone in its dark interior and considered their discussion. Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, was no easier to read than usual. The little pygmy was forever an enigma, a master of falsehood and bluff. Yet the ambassador too could trade in deception. For even as he swayed here with the progress of his vehicle, out at sea the renegade Realm was bound for the eastern coast of the Americas. In matters of espionage and international rivalry, contingency planning was essential.

Early evening, and an escape attempt was in train. It had been a mistake to confine the troublemaker to the pinnacle, to hold a prisoner aboard a

vessel newly rigged to sail up the James River. Yet prison facilities in the settlement were lacking, and keeping malcontents offshore provided an easy solution. It was November 1607. A man named George Kendall was arranging a breakout.

‘Are you with me, brother?’ He spoke in an urgent whisper.

‘It is either the sea or the savages.’ Assent came with a grip of the hand. ‘You have the wheel and my support.’

‘Then we move quick, for tide and time are pressing.’

They had little to lose but their lives. The sentence for such a misdemeanour would be a flogging or a rope about the neck. Survival was a similarly dismal prospect, for there would be a long winter and the committal of more bodies to the earth. England did not care and would not miss them; England was to blame. Desperate now, Kendall and his skeleton crew would commandeer the pinnace and set course for Spain.

‘What happens here?’ a voice called from the shadows.

The challenge was followed by a scuffle that turned in an instant into a full-throated affray. The prison guards would not go quietly. Somehow the anchor was raised and sails unfurled and the boat tacked to move downriver. But now a longboat was in pursuit. A cannon fired and a heavy round skimmed close. With a shudder, the pinnace grounded itself on a sandbar.

To furious shouts and residual violence, the mutiny was quelled and the exodus halted. There would be no transatlantic voyage this night. A bruised and bloodied Kendall was taken ashore and dragged inside the fort, a crowd materialising to vent their rage.

‘Hang him now!’

‘I have a rope. Let us string him from a tree.’

‘First he should be scourged and branded and forced to make a confession!’

But formalities would be observed. In the flickering light of a brazier, the chief accused stood before his judge, President Ratcliffe.

‘At whom do you stare?’ Kendall snarled at the other settlers. He would not be cowed by the starving and baying company about him. ‘Had you the balls or backbone, you would do as I.’

Ratcliffe cocked his head. ‘Run away?’

‘Yes, run. Flee this pestilential sty and slough off every vestige of its memory.’

‘In law that is deemed mutiny.’

‘While in Jamestown it is sense.’

‘You stand condemned by deed and word.’

‘Who is not in these parts, Ratcliffe?’ Kendall looked about him. ‘Who is pure of heart and motive? Who is as he seems?’

‘So tell us, Kendall. Where would you flee to?’

The man glared defiantly. ‘Spain. I would reveal everything to them, to the last barrel of powder and ounce of shot.’

‘Your charge grows from mutiny to treason.’

‘I know you, Ratcliffe. You are no better than I.’

‘Take care how you speak.’

‘Or I may die?’ Kendall sneered. ‘It is you who must be careful, *Catholic*.’

There was momentary bewilderment in the crowd, then a weary resignation. So many here had secrets and agendas and even assumed names. Most in Jamestown had left something behind. Ratcliffe turned to his henchman, the lawyer Gabriel Archer. ‘I hear no defence from the prisoner.’

‘Nor any grounds for clemency.’

‘Our case, then, is closed.’ Ratcliffe looked to the senior echelons. ‘We cannot brook such treasonous acts. We are tasked to make an example.’

Kendall protested. ‘On whose authority?’

‘That of the Virginia Company and letters patent, and the council here that elected me. You will be taken beyond these walls and shot dead for your offences.’

In the ensuing commotion, the babble of voices rose to cheer or vent their spleen. Due process was an affectation, a luxury reserved for those with full bellies back in England. Virginia had its own kind of justice.

As the noise of the mob abated, a gap opened in its ranks to reveal the figure of John Smith. Attended by his shallop crew and dressed in his weather-stained coat, the adventurer held a dead turkey in each hand.

‘Each time I return, I bring provisions. Each time I return, I find a settlement at the brink.’

Ratcliffe offered no welcome. ‘Order is restored, Captain.’

‘At what cost?’ Smith dropped the birds and turned to walk away. Already the ravenous had switched their attention from the prospect of an execution to the imminence of a feast.

The ground was hard and the air chill on the morning George Kendall was marched out and tied to a stake. The settlement was witnessing its first act of capital punishment. A show of sorts was required. After all, the man was a troublemaker and deserved his fate. So the drum beat loudly, the firing squad paraded and the curious jostled for the clearest view.

‘Do you confess to your crimes and repent of all sin?’ The chaplain spoke in a sonorous tone. ‘Do you stand before God and ask His forgiveness?’

‘I do.’

‘Are you ready for His judgement?’

‘I am.’

‘Then go in peace and may the mercy of the Almighty be with you.’

At five paces, the executioners could not miss. Four muskets discharged, the sound abrupt and the smoke heavy, the wooden post shattering on impact. In the ringing silence, the eyes of the gathered were wide, directed towards the grim remnants of a human through the haze. For a time, discipline had been restored.

Over the next two weeks, the atmosphere in the camp became calm and the men went back to their duties. It allowed Smith once more to consider a return to exploration. Gathering together his crew and provisions, he set off to discover the Chickahominy, a tributary of the James River.

Forty miles upstream, he was ambushed. Wanderlust and recklessness found him bound helpless to a tree.

The adventurer gazed now at the natives arrayed against him, their bows drawn. He would not aggravate the situation. That he was still alive was something of a miracle. Sprawled beside the shallop were the corpses of the crew he had posted as guards, their firearms scant protection against the blizzard of arrows.

The bows lowered as Opechancanough appeared. He had stepped into the clearing accompanied by his personal retinue of forty warriors. These were his hunting lands. For a while he studied the intruder whose progress

he had tracked. The English were not so impressive when denied their loud weapons and held fast with twine.

'You are John Smith?' He spoke slowly in the Algonquian tongue and saw that the captive understood.

'I am he.' The soldier was careful in his reply. 'I come in friendship and to trade.'

'Yet you bring us fire and death, from the mouth of the river to the falls.'

'I will pay with precious things.'

'Though you prefer to steal.'

Smith would brazen it out. 'Take me to your emperor, Powhatan. We shall be as brothers and fight our common foes.'

'It is you that is the enemy.'

'Would you spurn the chance of riches? Turn your back on the wealth and power I may bring?'

His words deserved consideration. A flurry of snow speckled the head of the Indian.

Smith waited, sweat pooling at the base of his spine and blood seeping from the flesh wound to his thigh. He would not show fear, yet he felt the intensity of the Indian's eyes and the sharpness behind them, the raw authority vested in this imposing figure. Decisions over life and death were as commonplace as skinning a deer.

Without a word, Smith's ropes were cut. It signalled the start of a progress in which the Englishman was marched, either as prisoner or prize. He went along without complaint. There were miles to cover, the landscape wild and desolate, the swamps frozen and the trees stiff with frost. The adventurer had intended to explore, and now he was taken to a place far beyond those he had ever known.

'See what is become of invaders.'

Others had plainly pre-empted him. As Opechancanough pointed, Smith stared. He had not expected such a dramatic reacquaintance with a fellow colonist, to find the scalp and skinned face hanging on display. It was a salutary reminder that he was not among friends. Yet the savages had come in force to greet him, were dancing and howling before a central fire and forcing him to sit. Maybe he was an honoured guest; or maybe with the bread and venison they proffered on wooden platters they meant to fatten him for the pot.

Opechancanough crouched beside him and passed across the ivory compass taken when Smith was seized.

‘Tell me of this.’

‘It is what we call a compass.’

‘A thing of magic? A summoner of spirits and Manitu?’

The soldier held the device flat in his outstretched palm. ‘Like an eye, it directs me where to journey and finds me when I am lost.’

‘I cannot touch what moves within it.’

‘It is sheltered by glass.’ Smith tapped the cover. ‘There are many things I and my people will explain.’

‘Show then the direction in which your settlement lies.’

Smith was happy to oblige. Standing to take his bearings, he squinted at the compass and jabbed his finger towards a clump of mulberry. ‘Follow a straight path and you will reach my camp.’

‘And your canoe?’

A further pointing of the finger. ‘You may return to it there.’

The native commander appeared satisfied and the demonstration ended. Smith had other tricks in hand. He wished to show himself useful. Certainly he had attacked villages and inflicted casualties with sword and musket. They respected a fighter. But parley had its place and understanding could be created. He asked for the other objects taken from him, and raised the pen and notebook in his hand.

‘With these I may summon things from my people.’

‘For what do you ask?’

‘A cloak and cap and coloured beads.’ Smith proceeded to write. ‘Accord between us must go rewarded.’

‘You make marks and they will conjure gifts?’ Suspicion slid into Opechancanough’s eyes.

Smith tore out a page. ‘If you fetch messengers and bid them hasten to Jamestown, upon their return they will carry each thing I have demanded.’

‘You will die if they do not.’

Worse deals existed. Arrangements were made and the runners set out, heading across the frozen wastes. Smith marvelled at their hardiness. Had the natives possessed guns or steel blades, Jamestown would already be razed and its inhabitants cut to pieces.

But Opechancanough was not finished. He desired to learn more, to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the strangers. They covered their legs and bodies and yet shivered in the cold. He allowed the bearded and pale-skinned man his pistol and stepped back to join his braves. Should John Smith pose a threat, he would bring a storm of arrows on himself.

A target was selected. Smith would not be hurried. He applied powder, rodded home the ball and then cocked the firing mechanism. Hitting a tree at ten paces was no insurmountable test.

The gun malfunctioned with a snap, the wheel lock failing to strike the pan or create a spark. The Indian commander stayed motionless. Then the arrows flew and the same tree was raked in a choreographed display of force.

Smith was seized and a new trek began. He called over his shoulder, 'Where do we head? Where do you take me?'

There was no answer.

Standing in the fighting tops at the zenith of the mast, Hardy scanned the scene below: the vistas of rainforest stretching to the mountain peaks; crewmen toiling to heap bananas and pineapples on the white sands; a longboat splashing to ferry the commander of the *Phoenix* ashore for conference with Captain Newport. A man could lose his focus in the warm embrace of Dominica and the Caribbean. Jamestown would afford less comfort.

His dog Buckler was on the beach engaged in chasing a ball with sailors, his barking faint and enthusiasm infectious. The Irish terrier had befriended all and acquired new tricks on the voyage. Even Newport had coursed him from beak to stern and delighted in the ease with which he took the obstacles. It left Hardy to other things: to rumination on the objectives of his mission.

He slipped the sealed letter from the pocket of his canvas jerkin, glancing at the wax cipher of Prince Henry before breaking it to study the pages folded within. They contained his orders, and gave a warning of what he might encounter. Names were included. The intelligencer committed them to memory and then let his gaze wander back towards the

shore. Buckler was still wheeling in frantic play. It was better to dwell in ignorance, safer to be a canine than an officer on a secret task.

Realm too thought of his mission. Yet he was distracted, drawn by the gruesome spectacle of an African slave master beating a negro to death. It took a while for the victim to succumb. After the screams and moans, the man made futile attempts to ward off the blows before eventually his quivering limbs became still. It was ritual slaughter. Killing was so easy.

Here in Havana, no one would wonder at such things. Casual brutality was the norm. Many of the weak or sick taken in raids and then thrown into the holds of ships along the west coast had already been dumped overboard in passage across the ocean. Slavery was a business that allowed for a certain attrition. Once arrived, the surviving human merchandise would be penned and sold and branded for onward march to the interior, or for voyage to further islands. Demand from the plantations of sugar and tobacco was insatiable. Cuba was the key, the rampart of the West Indies and gateway to the New World, a heavily armed sentinel to protect the territorial interests of the King of Spain. That king must be nervous. Outside the town, additional defences were being built and within it the wood houses were proliferating.

‘They are known as Imbangala.’ A senior lieutenant from the caravel had joined Realm and now indicated the black slave master. ‘Woe betide any they hate.’

‘Who are they?’

‘Some claim they are the spawn of the fallen angel; others that they are demons expelled from hell by Satan himself for the level of their savagery.’

‘We appear to have found a use for them.’

‘Without them we would have few slaves. They are African marauders, the warriors that raid villages and collect the natives.’ His laugh was harsh. ‘I have seen one scoop out eyeballs with his thumbs and another cut free a heart to eat raw.’

‘Then I will speak to them.’

A restraining hand gripped his shoulder. ‘Keep your distance, Reino. You cannot count on their response.’

‘Nor they on mine.’

Realm approached the African and paused, his stare brazen and unflinching. If the black slaver perceived it as a challenge, the man remained silent. He turned slowly, the corpse prone and bloodied at his feet. The Imbangala nodded. It was a meeting of minds.