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Setting the Captive Free

Shouts from the edge of the forest shattered the afternoon quiet. Pocahontas and Matachanna dropped the oyster shells they'd been using to scrape a deerskin pelt. Besides shouts, Pocahontas could pick out the howls and yelps of agitated dogs, along with the chattering of a frightened animal. As she stood craning her neck to get a better view, she saw an intent knot of boys and dogs. Furtive over-the-shoulder looks from the circle of boys told Pocahontas that something was afoot.

"Maraowanchesso!" Boys could be such nuisances. She pulled her sister to her feet. "Look at those boys over there—across the footbridge by the edge of the trees."

"I see." Matachanna squinted her eyes against the bright afternoon sun. "What are they doing?"

"I wish I knew." Pocahontas crept closer. "The way those dogs bark and circle, it must have to do with hunting."

"Where are the mothers?" Matachanna asked.

“They’re preparing the ground for planting—too far away to hear. We’d best go see.” Pocahontas pulled off the fur mantle she wore. It kept her warm on days like today, but she couldn’t move as quickly in it.

Matachanna also removed hers. She folded it and put it beside the pelt frame.

Another round of yelping punctuated by chirpy cries sent the two girls hurrying toward the creek. Pocahontas made her way across the peeled log that bridged the creek first, followed by her younger sister.

The final snowmelt had swelled the creek, but neither girl feared water. Powhatan children swam as well as they walked. The mothers threw their children into water before they could even crawl. They claimed it hardened them off and made them strong. If the babies didn’t enjoy the water so much, Pocahontas doubted the mothers would still do it, toughness or not. Powhatan parents loved their children.

Being a water baby had worked for Pocahontas. She could swim against the swiftest current if need be. Matachanna swam better than many of the boys her age, but she had a long way to go before she could match strokes with Pocahontas.

Of course the girls were just as agile traversing the footbridge, so swimming in the cold waters never entered Pocahontas’s mind. She had nothing but the boys and their mischief on her mind.

One of the boys spotted the girls running toward them and called out a warning to his friends. The boys turned as one, their hands behind their backs. Standing shoulder to shoulder they faced the girls. They were hiding something.

The dogs continued to circle and bark.

“Hush,” the oldest boy said. One of the dogs whined and quieted, but the rest ignored him.

“It’s the princess,” whispered another, his eyes widening.

Pocahontas pushed forward and the wall of boys opened for her. She smiled to herself. It never hurt to be the favored daughter of the most powerful man in all the land.

When she saw what caused the chaos, a familiar tightness gripped her chest. A large *arakun* wriggled against captivity, sputtering and chattering. His masked face registered anger and pain. He worked furiously with his nimble front paws to try to free his leg from the sinew bonds of the trap.

“We caught him in our trap,” the first boy said. “He’s just a *rakun* but a big one. A fighter.”

“We captured him and he is our prisoner,” said the littlest one.

Pocahontas knew she should be used to this. Young boys were supposed to learn to hunt. By the time of their *huskanaw*, their passage from boyhood to manhood, they were expected to be expert hunters. She understood that with her head, but her heart rebelled. For some reason, seeing a captive—whether animal or enemy—always made her uneasy.

She looked the oldest boy in the eye and pulled herself to her full height. “Let him go,” she said in a voice that left no room for arguing.

Matachanna put a hand on Pocahontas’s arm and whispered, “Are you sure?”

Pocahontas ignored her sister. “Let him go.”

The oldest boy slid his wooden knife out of the leather thong around his waist. He sawed through the laces holding the animal.

When finally freed, the animal scurried toward the forest with dogs chasing him. Pocahontas knew the dogs would tree the animal but once up in the branches, the *arakun* would be safe.

She turned toward the boys. “You shall be great hunters someday, but never forget—a brave hunter kills his prey swiftly and painlessly. And he only takes what he needs to feed his people.”

“Will you tell your father?” the oldest boy asked.

Pocahontas stood with her feet apart and put her hands on her hips. “My father would not like to hear that you were torturing the animal. *Arakun* is not our enemy.” She could see worry on the faces of the boys. She smiled. “I will not tell the Powhatan.”

As the boys ran off, probably to get into other mischief, Pocahontas sat on a fallen tree and turned toward Matachanna. “You tried to stop me, didn’t you? I know you dislike it when I use my position to make people do what I want.”

Her sister sat down next to her but didn’t speak.

“I don’t know why my father—our father—has bestowed such favor on me. I try to use my influence wisely.” Pocahontas laughed. “Well, as wisely as I can, having seen only eleven returns of the new leaves.”

“Of all our brothers and sisters, you are his favorite,” Matachanna said. “He always says, ‘My Matoaka, my Pocahontas, she it is who makes me smile.’” She drew out the words, deepening her voice.

Pocahontas laughed at her sister’s impersonation of their great father. He spoke exactly like that. Her father began calling her Pocahontas—little mischief-maker—long before she

could remember. Her real name was Amonute, though no one ever said that name. Many called her Matoaka, meaning little snow feather. But when her father started calling her Pocahontas, everyone else did as well.

She didn't really make mischief. It was her father's way of teasing her about walking on her hands instead of her feet, turning somersaults, and hanging from the tree limbs.

She thought about her father. Powerful. No other word described the great Powhatan as well. Her father accomplished what no other chief had ever accomplished. He united all the warring tribes into one great nation, Tsenacomoco. It took years of alliances, battles, and strategies, but here they were—at peace.

All the chiefs of those neighboring tribes gathered during *taquitoek*, that time when the leaves turn colors, to bring tributes to the great Powhatan. Pocahontas loved to watch the canoes come ashore piled high with deerskins, *roanoke*, copper, corn, and puccoon root—all for her father. He built a storehouse almost as big as his ceremonial lodge to hold all the tributes.

“Does it seem unfair to you that our father favors me over all his children?” Pocahontas asked Matachanna. Sometimes it worried her. She had more than a hundred half-brothers and half-sisters, including Matachanna, and yet her father showed marked partiality only to her.

“I don't think so,” Matachanna said, studying a beetle crawling on the side of her hand. “It has always been so for me.”

Pocahontas loved this half-sister. Her father had many wives over his long life and many, many children. How glad

she was that one of them turned out to be Matachanna. Her sister. Her friend.

“So you do not think I should have bullied the boys into letting the *arakun* go?”

Matachanna laughed. “I know you. You cannot stand to see anything held captive. I knew as soon as I saw that furry leg tangled in the trap that you would do whatever it took to save that *arakun*.”

“You know me too well.”

“I remember when the warriors brought Nokomias and her people to the village. You couldn’t stop talking about that.”

Pocahontas remembered as well.

In her tenth spring her father sent the braves of her village on a war party to massacre the Chesapeakes. Yes, her wise father, who had made peace with all other tribes—except the faraway Massawomecks, of course. She didn’t like to think about the Chesapeakes. The entire time the warriors had been away, she did everything she could to keep from imagining what they were doing.

Even when she should have been sleeping, she thought about the Chesapeakes. She pictured war clubs, screams, and frightened children. Her heart pounded like a drum in her chest. She could feel the beat of it in her ears. When she woke with the morning sun and still could not put the scenes out of her mind, she made her way to her father’s lodge, the largest building in the village. Several mats had been removed from the roof to let sunlight stream in, illuminating the great Powhatan. The rest of the lodge was dark and smelled of *apooke* smoke. Her father sat high on his platform of mats at the far end with his wise men crowded around him. Those

warriors too old to join the raid stood around the perimeter of the room.

Pocahontas stood tall as she made her way to her father's dais and sat at his feet without speaking.

"I can see that you have a question dancing on your tongue, *amosens*." Her father used the word for daughter in front of all the men, signifying that he welcomed her. She knew that he always welcomed her, but many of his advisors did not approve of his favoritism. Besides being a child, she was a girl—to them it didn't make sense. The favorite should have been a son. Pocahontas had learned to ignore their frowns.

"Great Powhatan, I know that you rule with wisdom, but why have you sent our warriors out to battle the Chesapeake peoples?" Pocahontas knew this was a bold question and so she kept her voice respectful and formal.

"You always present difficult questions for me, don't you?" He smiled. "I knew you would be a match for me long ago when you were still a baby. The first words you spoke were questions." He reached down and touched her hair. "The ways of men and spirits are difficult to explain."

Pocahontas stayed silent.

"To forge this great nation, this Tsenacomoco, Okeus called us to fight and to make alliances. He told us to take lands and to take people. Yes, *amosens*, we had to take people. We needed to be ready to shoot an arrow into the heart of trouble before trouble could even notch his own arrow."

"But the Chesapeake have been our friends."

"You speak truth. They always acted as friends, but our wise man—our *quiyoughsokuk*—received a powerful dream.

It told him that an invader would come from the land of the rising sun and that they would someday conquer our people.” He took the *apooke* pipe between his lips, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. He handed the pipe off to the man seated to his left and let the smoke drift out his mouth. “How could the great Powhatan not answer that danger? Should I have let that threat to our people grow?”

“But are you sure it was the Chesapeakes?” Pocahontas wondered if the threat could have been the *Espaniuks* from across the waters.

Her father didn’t answer. He folded his hands and closed his eyes—a sign that he refused to talk further about it.

It wasn’t long afterward that the warriors finally came home and crowded into the great lodge. They were still painted for war, white ash slashed with black. They didn’t even look like the men Pocahontas knew. She had been sitting on the dais near her father’s feet, but when they began to regale their listeners with tales of slaughter and triumph, she stood to leave. As she walked toward the opening, she could see them dancing with the scalp locks. They raised them high in the air, giving whoops of triumph.

Pocahontas walked faster. She couldn’t listen. She knew her father did not seek war recklessly and she knew his wisdom was greater than any other *weroance* who had ever served the Powhatan people, but she still could not bring herself to rejoice with her people over their victory.

The next day, a group of returning braves marched a handful of frightened Chesapeake women and children into Werowocomoco. Pocahontas’s brother Nantaquaus returned with the warriors. As one of the favorite sons of the great

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Powhatan, he held his head high, but Pocahontas noticed that he never met her eyes.

One boy they brought back from the Chesapeake raid had skin the color of the palest moon and hair that looked like corn silk. Strange. Pocahontas could not stop looking at him. Did his color mean he came from the water instead of the good red earth? Was he a different creature? No one would answer her questions. Finally her father told her that the boy went to live with the Arrohattoc. She wished she could have touched him.

One of the other children in the group was Nokomias.



“Are you thinking about Nokomias?” Matachanna asked, bringing Pocahontas back to the present.

“I was remembering the day she came.”

“Aren’t you glad our village welcomes captives? Our father treats Nokomias like another daughter.”

“But I don’t understand why people must fight in the first place. If we hadn’t wiped out the Chesapeakes, Nokomias would still be with her own people. No one would have had to adopt her.”

Matachanna stood up. She had little patience for questioning.

“Why can’t people live in peace?” Pocahontas had said those very words to herself many, many times. *Why can’t we all live in peace?*

“Why do you ask so many questions, Pocahontas? It is

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our way. It has always been our way. Our father says we fight so we can have peace at last.”

Matachanna would never understand. She accepted things without question. “Come. Let’s go back into the village and find Nokomias.” Pocahontas crouched as if to push off for a faster start. “I’ll race you to the footbridge.”

“As if I could ever beat you in a footrace.” The words were flung back at the crouching Pocahontas as Matachanna took off. She may have had a head start but Pocahontas would still beat her.

Werowocomoco

Pocahontas, Matachanna, and Nokomias worked side by side, each bending over a different row. They stayed close enough to talk but far enough apart to keep from bumping into one another.

“Shall we make it a competition?” Pocahontas asked.

“With you being the oldest and fastest, I wonder why you would suggest a contest?” Matachanna didn’t smile, but Pocahontas knew she was being teased again. Matachanna was one of the few people in the village who ever dared to tease her.

Because of her powerful father, people often either treated her with excessive respect or else they were timid and hesitant. Pocahontas worked hard to overcome this by trying to be natural with people—by joking and teasing everyone into friendship. Nantaquaus once observed that her funny songs, somersaults, and antics were her way of trying to put people at ease. He probably wasn’t far wrong.

“I don’t want to race,” Nokomias said. “This is my first

time to help with planting and I want to do it right. I have to keep repeating, “Two bean, two squash, three corn; two bean, two squash, three corn.”

“We ought to make up a song to help us.” Matachanna loved to sing. She started to hum a tune.

“It would work except you both keep talking and before I realize it, I’ve planted three squash, two corn, and three bean.” Nokomias sighed.

Pocahontas laughed at her friend. It hadn’t been that long since Nokomias came to Werowocomoco. At first she seemed like one who walked in her sleep, but Pocahontas kept talking to her and including her whenever she and Matachanna played. Before long Nokomias began to talk a little. Never about her village or her people, but about whatever they were doing.

It was a start.

Recently, she had even begun to laugh once in a while. One of the mothers, Alaqua, had made a home for Nokomias in her lodge. Pocahontas was glad Nokomias had a new mother to watch over her.

“Why do we plant three kinds of seeds all together?” Nokomias asked. “In my village we planted the corn in one plot, squash in a different plot, and beans in yet another.”

Matachanna looked at Pocahontas. That was the first time Nokomias had mentioned her village. Pocahontas recognized it as a big step.

“We plant them all together because the corn grows strong and tall and makes a pole for the beans to climb. The squash grows fast and broad, shading the tender shoots and keeping the earth moist.” Pocahontas put another seed into the furrow.

“And there’s something about planting them together that feeds the earth,” Matachanna said. “Before we planted them together the mothers say we had to move our fields more often. Now they all grow stronger.”

“So why do you plant two squash seeds, two beans, and three corn? Why not just one of each?”

“You ask almost as many questions as Pocahontas,” Matachanna said.

Pocahontas pitched a soft clod of dirt toward her sister’s head.

“Ouch!” Matachanna picked up a clod of her own and weighted it in her hand for a moment before letting it fall back to the ground. “We plant two beans, two squash seeds, and two kernels of corn to give the earth one for growing and another one to keep if she desires. If earth decides to send both shoots, we pluck the weaker one out of the ground to make room for the strong one.” She stooped down and laid the seeds into another furrow.

“And we add the third kernel of corn because no matter how hard we work to keep the crows away, they always seem to steal at least one of the kernels of corn.” Pocahontas eyed her sister moving ahead and increased her own rhythm. *Two bean, two squash, three corn; two bean, two squash, three corn . . .*

They did work hard to keep the crows away from the fields. In the middle of the field stood a platform called the scarecrow hut. The young boys took turns in the hut, scaring off the crows. They flapped their arms, danced, shouted, jumped, and even threw pebbles. Despite the ruckus, the determined crows still managed to dine on corn kernels.

“Why don’t we push the earth over the seeds after putting

them in the furrow? It would save us having to come back to cover them,” Nokomias asked.

“That’s where the real secret comes,” Pocahontas said. “See those mothers with baskets by the river?”

Nokomias shaded her eyes and looked toward the river.

“They are waiting for the boys to fill the baskets with fish from the nets,” Pocahontas said.

“Yes. They’ll come behind us and put a small fish in the furrow with the seeds and then cover the earth over the fish and seeds.” Matachanna continued working down the row.

“A fish?” Nokomias looked confused. “What grows out of a fish? More fish?”

Pocahontas and her sister looked at their friend to see if she were teasing, but when they saw that she was serious, they both burst into laughter.

“The fish does not sprout like a seed,” Pocahontas said as she kept laughing, pacing her words between gulps of air.

Matachanna interrupted so Pocahontas could catch her breath. “The fish rots in the ground and becomes food for the corn, squash, and beans.”

Nokomias couldn’t help laughing as well. “Everything is so strange here in Werowocomoco, I would not be surprised to see fish bushes growing right up with the other.”

“Now that would be fun,” Pocahontas said. “Can’t you see the fish wriggling to get plucked off the vine and thrown into the river?”

The girls continued to laugh and talk as they finished all the rows for the first planting. During spring and *nepinough*, they planted three different times. That meant that there were

three different times of harvest as well. They usually picked corn all through the summer.

This year, however, the mothers kept looking at the sky. “Where is the rain?” they whispered over and over.

Every morning the women woke early to spread a circle of *apooke*. They stood inside the circle to greet the sun, hoping to appease whatever god had decided to withhold rain from Werowocomoco. Without rain it was a tedious job to go down to the river and bring water in clay pots to water the seedlings, but if they didn’t keep them moist, a starving time would come upon their people.

Each day when the girls finished their hard work, they played just as hard. Sometimes they swam or fished. Sometimes they just dug their toes into the sand at river’s edge and talked. Other times Pocahontas took the lead and had them turning cartwheels and jumping from rock to rock. She had learned to flip her body in the air without using hands. Every time the other girls tried this, they landed flat on the ground. Wherever the three went, laughter followed.

It was unusual to see the three of them sitting quietly, but on a warm morning several days after the planting was finished Pocahontas took the basket of *roanoke* beads she’d been saving and divided them into three piles so each of them could fashion a new necklace onto *pemmenaw* thread. Their people wore many necklaces. Pocahontas loved to wear all of hers at one time and hear the click, click, click of beads as she walked.

“Wait,” Nokomias said. “I have something for our necklaces.” She ran toward her lodge and within minutes came back with a small leather pouch.

She took out three blue beads, handing one to Pocahontas, one to Matachanna, and putting the third on her pile of *roanoke*.

Pocahontas had never seen anything like it. She held it up to the sun. She turned it over in her hand. It was smooth and cool to the touch. She thought it looked like a small cylinder of water with a hole lengthwise through the center for the thread to pass through. “*Waugh!* This is beautiful. Where did you get it?”

“Did you see the boy, Micah? The one with yellow hair?” Nokomias paused as the girls nodded. “He came with some of his people to shelter with us.”

“From what tribe?” Pocahontas asked. She’d never seen any people who looked like the boy.

“Not a tribe. They came from across the Great Water. From the land toward the rising sun.” The girl shook her head. “They came and brought tools, copper, and beads like this, but they brought no food.”

“Did they plant corn?” Matachanna asked.

“Not right away. And when they began to plant, most of the people were already sick and starving. Only a bit of the corn grew. Bald spots covered much of the field. Those ears that formed came too late.”

“How did they come to be with you? How did you get these beads? Where is the boy’s mother?” Pocahontas stopped. Nokomias did not often talk of her village. Pocahontas had as many questions as the *apasoum* has babies, but if she persisted, would her friend stop talking?

“Our people took the last of the strangers into our village to keep them from dying. Micah’s mother became my friend. I

helped her learn our language and she helped me learn some of hers.”

Pocahontas wanted to hear the faraway language. Later she’d make sure Nokomias taught her words from the strangers.

“When I showed her how we tan hides and make clothing she gave me these beads.” Nokomias picked up her bead. “She called them ‘glass.’”

“It is beautiful.” Pocahontas kept turning her bead to see how the sun made sparkles on it.

“You are my friends. I want you to share this gift from my friend Anna.”

Pocahontas didn’t ask what happened to Anna.

“Thank you,” Matachanna said. “It will make the prettiest necklace of all.”

“You honor us with this gift.” Pocahontas’s hand closed around her treasure. She would string this bead-like-water onto her necklace. She would remember Anna and Nokomias forever.



“If you help me finish my canoe, I will take you for a long trip, out toward the Great Water.” Nantaquaus, Pocahontas’s brother, had walked over to the center of the village to find the girls. Nokomias had been weeding the cornfield with Pocahontas and Matachanna, but he hung back as he spoke.

“Yes, we’ll help you,” Pocahontas said, including all three of them with a sweep of her hand. “You do the burning and we’ll do the scraping.”

“You go. I need to get back to Alaqua,” Nokomias said, backing toward the village.

Pocahontas could see a look of understanding come over Nantaquaus’s face.

“Wait, Nokomias,” Nantaquaus said in a gentle voice. “Sit here.” He pointed to a rise of soft grass.

Nokomias lowered her head but did as he asked. She hunched her shoulders and crossed her hands in her lap. The other two girls sat near her. Nantaquaus sat down as well, folding his legs and grasping his moccasin-covered feet.

“Nokomias, I forget you are a captive in our village. I forget that you witnessed what our warriors did to your people. I come and I ask you to help like a little sister, but I forget.”

Nantaquaus’s directness surprised Pocahontas. In all the time she and Nokomias had been friends, she’d been careful not to mention the massacre of her village. She didn’t think of her as a captive anymore. She’d already become part of their village.

Nokomias didn’t speak. Neither did Pocahontas or Matachanna.

“When you back away from me, I understand. You are remembering me that day at your village.” Nantaquaus paused.

Nokomias kept her head lowered.

“Our great Powhatan, my father, sent us to rid our nation of a threat. As we obeyed those orders, we did not think of our brothers, the Chesapeake. But on the march back to our village, I thought of little else. I had long hours to watch the faces of our captive women and children.”

Nantaquaus’s words surprised Pocahontas. Maybe she was not the only one who hated fighting.



Nokomias looked up at Nantaquaus.

“I am a warrior. I am the son of my father. A warrior begs not for mercy from a captive.” He stood up, pulling his young body to its full height. As he started to walk away, he heard Nokomias’s voice.

“I will help you.” She said it in a whisper, but her words were clear.

Nothing more was said. The girls followed him to the river’s edge where he had banked the dugout canoe he was finishing. He had chosen the trunk from a tall, straight cypress tree for the canoe. To hollow it, he had spent many days burning the inside. It took a long time because the heart of the trunk was still damp with life. The fire needed to be carefully tended so that it only consumed what Nantaquaus wanted it to consume.

“You are almost finished,” Pocahontas said. Both ends of the *quintans*, the canoe, were rounded so it could glide through the waters. Nantaquaus had worked pitch onto the outside of his canoe to make it waterproof. The inside only needed the finish scraping to make it smooth and remove the last of the charred wood.

The girls took the scraping tools made of sharp oyster shells and went to work. They scraped and talked and laughed. The hours sped by. When they finished, Nantaquaus looked it over. “It is good.” He smiled and walked around it again and again. “Tomorrow we take it on its very first journey.”

Pocahontas went toward her sleeping lodge to find Matachanna’s mother. Her own mother had died when she was small, so the other mothers cared for her—mostly Matachanna’s mother.

She found her outside, grinding corn with some of the other women. “Tomorrow we plan to join my brother as he takes out his new canoe,” Pocahontas said. “He invited Matachanna and Nokomias to come.”

“Where will you go?” the mother asked.

Pocahontas knew the mothers would want to know where they were going and how long they would be gone, but she didn’t need to ask for permission because children in their village were given freedom to explore as long as their work was finished.

“We will go down the river until we reach the mouth near the Great Water.”

“You must take food for the journey,” Alaqua said. “I will put some *ponepone* in a basket and some dried *weghshaughes*. You can pick berries on the way.”

Pocahontas could barely sleep that night. As the moon rose above the village, she watched it through the opening in the roof matting of her sleeping lodge. Matachanna’s regular breathing told her that her sister had no trouble sleeping.

How beautiful the moon looked. She thought about the stories her people told about how the *Gitchee Manitou*—the Great Spirit—created the moon. When He finished He spoke the words, “It is good.” He was right. It was very good.

Gitchee Manitou, I wish I knew You. I have so many questions to ask You. You are the Father of all people, and You are more powerful than the great Powhatan. I want to know You like I know my father.

Something stirred within her. Maybe it was because she was excited about going with Nantaquaus to the very edge of



land. Maybe not—but she sensed she was on the brink of something important.

A change.

As sleep began to wrap around her like a warm mantle, a whisper drifted into her dream, “*Amosens*, I have given you a heart to know Me. Search your heart.”