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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 foot-bridge, 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 *taquitock*, 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 Chesapeake. 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 Chesapeake. 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 Chesapeake. 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 Chesapeakes 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 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 Chesapeake, 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 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.