

The Touchstone

Chapter Fifteen – The Moa Hunt

The next thing I knew Rua was shaking me awake.

“Come on Matakite! Get up and let’s go.”

I had had my dog skin cloak over my shoulders for warmth while I’d been sleeping but now I quickly rolled it up and tied it securely around my waist. It was really bright, but the light was from the comet as we were up much earlier than the sun would normally rise.

We ran back up the wide track to the main pa where our hunting toa were already chanting their karakia. They were praying for protection and success. Each of the men was so focussed that it was almost as if their individual selves had disappeared to be replaced by one body. I know I haven’t described that well! What I mean is that all twelve guys now worked together like they were all in sync with each other’s thoughts.

After the final karakia the leader raised his patu in the air and shouted out “The Gods are with us! We will be victorious!” and all the toa roared in agreement! Then they turned and ran out of the pa in single file. Rua and I had to really work to keep up as they ran at a good fast pace. Some of the toa held maiere (short spear) which were about 3 meters long and all of them had a patu tucked into their waste band.

We headed north-west in a route tracking towards Pukehouapa. Even though there were fourteen of us we barely made any noise as we ran along the bush track. The bush became incredibly dense in some parts and so sometimes we had to move slowly. One of the old warriors back at Rangatapu had told our leader to head towards the area known as the ‘forest of goblins’ as this was where the last of the moa were known live.

It took us the whole day to pass through the low-lands where the giant tawa and rimu trees grew. But by nightfall we had reached the outskirts of the forest which was on the eastern side of Pukehouapa.

It must’ve been late, but no one wanted to sleep! If anything, the toa had become even more energised! Rua and I watched as they spread out and started stalking quietly through the forest. Old vines and mosses hung down from the trees and deep pools were filled with green weeds that were ready to suck any unlucky person under!

My skin grew slick and wet from all the moisture in the air and I quickly grew cold. It was easy to see why this area had been called the forest of goblins as it was spooky!

Rua and I followed Tonga Hake as quietly as we could. At one point I stepped on a twig that cracked under my foot and Tonga swivelled around to see what’d made the noise. Our faces were only about a meter apart and we looked into each other’s eyes. Tonga Hake quickly broke eye contact with me and took off to catch up with the rest of his men.

The forest was now quiet except that every now and again bird calls would echo through the forest. This wasn’t the sound of real birds though it was our hunting party communicating with each other!

Night had fallen long ago, and the comet now lit the forest in a weird ethereal light making all the mosses glow on the trees and movement appear where there was none.

All the toa were now laying hidden in-wait for the moa.

Suddenly a deep raspy boom could be heard echoing among the trees.

If you've ever heard the drum like sound a kakapo makes in its chest, it was kinda like that, but heaps deeper and much louder. Rua and I'd hidden under some bushes and I could feel him shake with fear and I noted to myself that I was making a weird panting noise. Swallowing loudly, I shut my mouth and looked eagerly towards the area where the booming sounds were coming from.

From our hiding place we could clearly see Tonga Hake. He was behind a log and you could feel the energy coming off him in waves. He was like a coiled spring all his muscles were tensed and when he turned his head to look past our way we could see his how his pupils were dilated with anticipation.

We heard a movement to the right of us about 20 meters away. Something big was crashing through the bush! Rua and I looked at each other in fright and then hunkered down as much as we could.

Suddenly the bushes parted and there in front of us was this gigantic bird. I had no real expectation of how huge a moa was, but this one was colossal! It towered about the height of almost three men above us! It had reddish feathers except that to me it looked more like course fur.



Tonga Hake jumped out in front of the huge bird and called out a challenge!

The huge moa was furious! It stood on its left leg and lifted the other in the air ready to strike. It also made a booming sound in its chest and extended itself up as far as it could and boofed out all its feathers so that it looked even huger!

The moa's legs were thick and stumpy, and it had big claw like feet! The other hunters had gathered and were surrounding the bird.

But it was Tonga Hake who was the first to rush at the moa raising his spear to strike! But the Moa had already sprung at him and had quickly gouged him with its thick clawed toe, right in his stomach!

Rua and I clutched each other in shock! The moa then lumbered past Tonga Hake and all the toa followed it striking it with their patu and spears!

No! I cried out as I raced towards Tonga Hake who was lying whimpering on the ground. He was clutching at his guts that were escaping between his fingers. Christ in heaven, help us! I cried out. Rua and I fell down beside Tonga Hake and I tried to help push his guts back into the huge gash that had split his whole stomach open.

Tonga Hake just kept staring at me. Rua and I glanced at each other as we knew that he was dying. Never had I felt so useless. After a while I just held Tonga Hake and started singing a waiata to him that my mum used to sing to me when I was young. I didn't know what else to do. Then Tonga Hake spoke to me.

"I saw you spirit boy" he said. "You've been following me, and I knew in my heart that you were a sign that I was going to die."

I was confused by what he was saying, and so I told him that he was the bravest of all the toa and that his name would not be forgotten.

I couldn't believe that I was holding a guy just a little older than me as he was dying. I even felt the exact moment that his life left his body because it suddenly became heavy in my arms. In that same moment that Tonga Hake took his last breath I heard the roar of the toa and the screams of the giant red moa as she also died.

I let my head fall back and let my screams of anguish mingle in with the toa and Moa's cries.

The comet was now directly above us and the whole forest was lit by an eerie red colour and it truly felt like I was in hell.

Then I felt myself start to disintegrate ...and I slipped away ...leaving young Tonga Hake's ruined young body...500 years behind me.



Free-style area - mum/dad or other whanau: write or draw something for your kids or moko's.