

The Touchstone

Chapter Twenty– The Arena

“How’d you do that Rua?”

“Do what?”

“You know... appear in my time?” Rua smirked at me and just shrugged his shoulders.

“Matakite how come you were with Ruaputahanga?”

“Who’s that?” I replied.

Rua rolled his eyes around “Ruaputahanga! That atahuua girl standing next to you of course!”

“Huh? That was Maddy!” “Who’s Rua–pootu what-ever?” Rua just shrugged his shoulders again. But this time I jumped on him and wrestled him to the ground!

“Hey French boy!” Stop shrugging your shoulders all the time!” I had Rua’s arm pinned behind his back but Rua was laughing so hard that it was an un-fair contest and so I let him go and we both lay on the ground panting to get our breath back from laughing so much.

“Matakite what is a fench?”

“It’s ‘French’ you doofas! French people are always shrugging their shoulders, just like you! Maybe I should call you Frenchy!

Rua just shrugged his shoulders again and then sprinted off laughing before I could jump up and wrestle him down again.

“Come on Matakite! The tohunga’s waiting for you! We’re going to the arena!”

Suddenly I noticed that crowds of people were streaming down the path that lead past the vegetable gardens towards the area shaped like an old Roman amphitheatre. We followed along with everyone and unlike the last time I was here when everyone was performing a haka, everyone was quickly and quietly sitting down. Most people were gathered in what looked like whanau groups with the old kuia fussing over the young kids and babies. But there were also groups of smaller kids hanging out together. There were teenage girls sitting together in tightly formed knots and then sitting close by and trying to get the girl’s attention were groups of young guys around my age.

We’d made our way down towards where the ariki was sitting next to his wife. They were surrounded by all of the kaumatua. I saw that he wasn’t the same ariki that spoke before the moa hunt. This guy was much older. He wore a long cloak with white feathers woven into it and a skirt or something made with what looked like quills that rippled as he moved.

This guy didn’t need to swing his taiaha around dramatically to draw attention to himself as everybody’s attention was already focussed solely on him.

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It was weird as there must have been about four hundred people quashed into the bowl like arena, but you could've heard a pin drop! Everyone was leaning forward eager to drink in every word!

The Ariki's enigmatic eyes searched out everybody as he spoke;

“Who are our tuis? Who has the smooth call of the huia?”

“Who can roar like Pukehou papa!”

“And who's voice can flex and weave as fluently as the wind?”

He asked this softly almost as if he was talking to himself, but I could tell that this man was well experienced in the ways of getting what he wanted, all with the power of words.

Then he changed his tone of voice as he made a more general announcement; “the summer camp will be at Patea this season and while we enjoy the warm weather, we will feast on the excellent kai moana and grow fat!”

Everyone shook their heads happily in agreement and the babbling sound of people talking and laughing excitedly swirled around the arena like a gust of wind.

The Ariki raised his hand, and everyone fell silent again. “This summer will be extra special because of the oratory competitions that are going to take place at Otautu!”

“Otautu” whispered the crowd!

“And so, I ask again! Who among you are our tuis? Who among you can roar like the mountain? Before the next moon sets, I will honour two tamariki, two youths and the best of the adults with the opportunity to represent us. But I warn you. The competition will be fierce as people will travel from far places to participate in this competition and honour will be made or lost!”

“Go now! There is work to be done before we can journey across the plain to our summer camp at Patea and from there prepare for the biggest oratory competition that has ever taken place!”

Everyone started talking excitedly as they hurried off. The Ariki was standing talking to the kaumatua gathered around him and it was only when the crowd thinned that I got a glimpse of Tohunga Matapo sitting cross legged on the ground behind the Ariki. The crowds moved in front of him again and I lost my view of him only to glimpse him a second later now sitting about 50 meters away at the top of the bowl like arena.

I grabbed Rua's arm, “come on I can see the tohunga,” he's over this way. Weaving in and out of the people rushing past us we made our way to where I last saw him. But when we got there he wasn't there!

Huh? I turned around and looked back across the arena from where we'd come and there was Tohunga Matapo now standing watching us and he was in the exact centre of the arena!

How'd he do that? This time I didn't take my eyes off him as we hurried down to him. By the time we got to him the last of the people had left the arena and it was only the three of us left.

“You have come to us Matakite.”

“Yes Tohunga Matapo, I have come.”

“You are getting more powerful then. That is good. There are lessons to be learnt.” Tohunga’s voice echoed around the bowl like arena. The echoes repeating and underlining each word and then fading away like a question mark.

“Tell me, what have you learnt Matakite?”

The question was so open and so huge in its simplicity that I was momentarily lost for words. Then the tohunga waved his hand over my head and instantly the curved bowl like arena became like a modern 3-D movie theatre. But projected onto the walls were my inner-most memories. I saw my family and many of my friends’ faces for the first time. But my happiness soon turned to shame. I witnessed the many times Aunty had tried to share our history and my disinterested and bored face hovered in front of me. I saw the confusion and hurt in the faces of my whanau as I repeatedly ignored them or angrily shouted out in bitterness at my blindness. Worst of all I saw myself hiding like a child as the Tonga Hake prepared to confront the moa. There was blood on my hands and shame in my heart.

Tohunga Matapo coughed and the images were gone. I stood there still looking down at my hands which were held out in front of me. The blood was gone. But the feelings of remorse and guilt weren’t.

“You are still like a child Matakite. Only a child would hold onto something dangerous and not know when to cast it aside. Your anger is what is blinding you Matakite – not your lack of vision.”

I wanted to ask tohunga what he meant, but Rua, who was standing behind Tohunga Matapo raised his finger to his lips and shook his head ‘no!’

I stood there watching Rua and Tohunga Matapo walk away. I’d gone from such a euphoric mood to being totally bummed out and swamped by my emotions. I felt sort of betrayed in a way because coming back in time was sort of a sanctuary from my real life and now, I could see that it didn’t matter where I went, even hundreds of years back in time, because I still carried Bart’s negativity with me. Far man! What’s a guy to do?

“Hurry up Matakite!” Rua was yelling at me from the lip of the arena, he was signalling for me to hurry.

I shrugged my shoulders, **what the heck!** I thought to myself as I ran towards them. **What the heck!** I laughed to myself as I ran, **‘what the heck!’** I shouted out to no one in particular as loud as I could...

...What the heck!

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