

The Touchstone

Chapter Twenty One – Preparation

For the next few days Rua and I spent a lot of time watching everyone getting prepared. People were busy getting provisions organised for the trek across the coastal plain to Patea for the summer. But mostly there were groups of people banded together practicing in the hope that they would be one of the lucky ones to be chosen for the honour of representing Turuturu Mokai at the oratory competition. People were mostly working in whanau groups, and the person working on their speech would be surrounded by family members guiding and encouraging them.

“Start again, start again” old Koros would be admonishing their mokos. “From the beginning, but slower now!”

There would also be singing and taiaha competitions at Otautu and so Turuturu Mokai was a whirlwind of noise and activity that went on late into the evenings.

The Bart part of me had wondered why many people were telling the same stories. He’d noted when they’d watched different people practicing that even young boys or girls would freakily recite word for word the same story about the creation, the migration or their whakapapa and even pause in the same parts that the more experienced adults did. But as Matakite I instinctively knew the importance of our oral tradition and how it kept our history preserved.

The skill was to tell the story correctly to preserve tradition, but in a way that stood out! So some people sang, or used the taiaha or their looks and presence to embellish a story. I was amazed at the level of enjoyment that everyone seemed to get out of all the korero. It didn’t matter whether people were young or old or men or women, everyone was totally getting into it.

Tohunga Matapo and Rua were often doing stuff together and so I got to hang out by myself a lot which was cool. I still couldn’t get over the fact that I could see! Having spent my whole life as Bart being completely blind it was a luxury for me to see anything. What I loved best of all was looking at girls! They were so beautiful. I don’t mean I look at them like an old pervert with my tongue hanging out. I just like looking at them because they are so different to guys and, I don’t know! Just totally different! When I look at a pretty girl my body kinda goes on hyper and I feel stronger and bigger. It’s a weird feeling but I like it.

Turuturu Mokai’s close to modern day Hawera and so it’s about 6 kilometres from the sea. Instead of walking across the plains all of the really old kuia and koros were taking the shorter walk to the sea and then were going by waka down the coastline. But all the rest of us were going to walk across the plain to Patea which would take about a day and a half.

I felt a sting on the back of my leg, Rua had quietly crept up behind me and then he’d whipped me with a piece of flax catching me on the soft skin behind my knee.

“Rua you little shit!” Come here! I yelled at him as he darted away from me. We raced the whole length of Turuturu Mokai in between the palisades as we sped towards where Tohunga Matapo lived, but I just couldn’t quite catch him!

“Okay I give up!” I panted as we came towards the final bend. We stood together with our hands on our knees as we got our breaths back.

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“What’s tohunga want Rua?” Rua panted back at me; “he’s asked that we come back so that he can give us our instructions before he heads off with the oldies to travel down the coast.”

Tohunga Matapo was sitting and watching some of women lowering kite of kumara into the food storage pits that were in the same area that he lived in. He looked towards me and gestured with a wave of his hand that I was to sit next to him.

I still found the smell of his hair unnerving as it was a rich pungent smell. Tohunga had never ever washed his hair as his head was tapu. The old Tohunga’s skin though was fragrant with oils and I could smell what smelt like incense wafting from his cloak when he moved. These nicer smells couldn’t quite block out the smell of his hair though!

We watched the women for a while. The kumara pits were deep and had ladders that went down into them and the entrance ways were framed in wood. I thought they looked like hobbit holes.

“Matakite, tomorrow I will leave with the other older people to journey down to Patea by waka. My old bones couldn’t handle the walk across the plain” he chuckled. “You will find it hard to believe that I was once a young man and could have run between here and Patea in an afternoon he quietly boasted!”

“Were you always blind Tohunga Matapo?” The tohunga thought for a bit before he replied.

“When I could see, I was blind and when I became blind, I could see – does that answer your question Matakite?”

“No Tohunga Matapo, I do not understand.”

What I really wanted to say was something more like this though; you SOB! Talk plain English man!

I don’t know whether Tohunga Matapo could read my mind as he burst out into laughter!

Still chuckling he told me that I’d understand what he’d meant one day!”

Whatever! Crazy old guy!

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