

The Touchstone

Chapter Twenty-Three – The Heavenly Smell

“Can you smell that nice smell?” I asked Rua in between big mouthfuls of my food. Rua sniffed the early evening air, I don’t know what it is, but it smells nice! Let’s have a look after we’ve eaten he said as he took another big bite out of the flesh of the baked kiore.

It was one of those perfect summer nights when you feel like the twilight will last forever. Rua and I were feeling satisfied after our day of walking and the feast we’d just eaten and now we were following our noses to try and track down the source of that awesome smell.

“Hey you two! Over here!” That guy Rongo who we’d meet earlier was signalling to us from behind a small whare.

“Hey Rongo what are ya doing? What’s with all the secrecy?”

“My Kuia said I wasn’t allowed to speak to you, but I don’t care!”

I just shrugged off what he’d said because I thought it was just to do with our being tapu and I didn’t give it any thought until later. Much later.

“Rongo do you know what that nice smell is?”

“Yeah! This is Kakaramea! This is where the toa come to prepare for battle and to get anointed!”

“Anointed for what?” I asked as I hadn’t heard of this practice and because I was Tohunga Matipo’s acolyte I generally knew a lot of stuff!

Rongo puffed out his chest and started to tell us the history. “When toa are preparing for battle they will come here! They will then anoint themselves with fragrant oils just like you would with a dead body!”

“Yuck! Why’d they do that?” Asked Rua.

“Yeah why?” I echoed as I was totally fascinated.

“Because” said Rongo theatrically, “they’re willing to die in battle!”

“So why the oils I asked?”

“So part of the tangihanga (funeral preparation) is already done!” Rongo gleefully announced. “The toa are so brave that they don’t care if they die in battle and they’ve even prepared themselves for death by rubbing in fragrant kawakawa and taramea oil onto their skin!”

“Do you wanna come and see? If you two are brave, I’ll sneak you into see where our tohunga prepares the oils!”

Rua and I looked each other. Both of us were thinking about Tohunga Matipo and how angry he'd be if we were caught doing something we weren't supposed to be doing! But we both broke into a big grin at the same time and turned to nod our heads to accept Rongo's challenge.

The three of us skirted around the edge of the bush surrounding the pa. We'd just had to stop for a bit as Rongo found it hard to breath if we ran too fast.

"See that whare all by itself over there?" Rongo said pointing towards a whare that was half hidden in the shadow of the dense bush that it backed onto. "That's where our tohunga lives!"

We could smell all sorts of pungent fragrances now and the pleasing smells drew us in like moths to a flame.

"Where's your tohunga?" Rua whispered to Rongo.

"He'll be with the other kaumatua entertaining all the manuhiri (guests)! Come on!"

We ran in single file across the clearing and into his whare. The inside was lit by a small fire that was set in the middle of the hard-earthen floor. We'd soon found an assortment of wooden and stone bowls filled with different oils and unguents.

Rua'd found a red ochre paste that had a heavenly smell that he was dabbing onto himself. I grabbed the pot and smeared lines on my face like an American Indian and was whooping around and around the fire making indian wa wa wa chants and Rua and Rongo were laughing so hard that they had tears rolling down their faces!

The next minute a ruru flew into the whare and flew about our heads! Its wings were beating us about the head!

Then we heard a roaring voice shout out 'te tiki atu (get out)!'

"Run!" I yelled, "come on let's get out of here!" Rongo and Rua didn't need to be told twice though and were already out of the door and I was hard on their heels!

We'd raced to hide in the bush surrounding the pa and we were all rolling around on the ground laughing our heads off when Rongo's old kuia stormed in amongst us!

"Get away from him you bloody kehua!" She screamed in her wavery old voice!

"Just you keep away from him!" She'd clutched Rongo to her huge bosom and was dragging him off.

"Nan!" We could hear Rongo's muffled cries 'get off me!' "Nan!"

"Far man, that was so bloody hilarious! Did you see the look on that old woman's face?" 'Keep away from him you bloody kehua!' I mimicked in the old woman's wavery voice later on that night as we settled down to sleep by our camp fire.

Rua just grinned back at me. The fire light was flickering on his face making his eyes eerily appear as dark hollows.

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“Do you know why she called us kehua Matakite?”

“No, I don’t have any idea! I suppose it’s her idea of an insult or something! Do you know something you’re not telling me Rua?”

Almost impossibly Rua’s smile widened into something that looked like that Cheshire cat’s smile out of Alice in Wonderland.

“Goodnight Matakite.”

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



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