

DAVID HAIR

Book five in the bestselling
Aotearoa series

GHOSTS OF PARIHAKA

**They say the past is
another country.
Some people can
go there.**



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Prologue: A recurring dream

Hemi woke from the strangest dream, his hands gripping the wooden bedposts with all his strength because the wood was solid and real, when nothing else seemed to be.

‘Mother?’ he called, and then clapped a hand over his mouth. He’d spoken aloud in English, a language he’d never learnt in his waking life. Only in dreams.

No-one answered. He looked about the small wooden shed where his family had made their home. After their tribal lands had been taken by the Pakeha government and the tribe had no longer been able to grow enough off the tiny plot that they’d been left with, his whole family had come here, Parihaka, where there was hope. His father and mother, and seven children. He was the youngest.

The single room smelt of smoke and sweat; most of the floor was covered with strewn blankets. The corner beside the chimney was covered by smashed flour pots and crockery. There were beetles and cockroaches milling about the damp clumps of flour. All the other blankets were empty, lying tangled on bare mattresses. He’d been on the only bed, his parents’ bed, but they weren’t here. In his dream they’d all died, years ago, his whole family. He could barely remember their names.

He called again, but there was no reply, just distant thumps and someone singing — a karakia in his native Maori tongue. A song of sorrow and loss. He went to the window with its poorly made glass which was thicker at the bottom than the top as if it was seeping downwards. The panel was cracked and smeared; a muddy handprint marked the outside of the glass. He thoughtfully put his hand to it: it was the same size as his own, and some part of him remembered putting it there, before he fell asleep. A decade or more ago. His reflection in the glass was distorted, but it told him enough. He was young again.

In my dream the soldiers came here and marched us all away. They shipped me and hundreds of others south, to work on the harbour in Dunedin. Many years later, I fell ill. I died in a cave ... and I woke up.

I woke up here. And it wasn't the first time.

Outside, all he could see was another plain wooden shack, as temporary and dilapidated as his own. He glimpsed a face at the window. A young girl, eyes frightened. She vanished back into the shadows, even as he shouted her name.

‘Huia!’

The sudden panic he felt sent a wave of dizziness through him. He clutched his skull. *In my dream I died. Why am I here again?* Then answers reared up like eels, snapping jaws of truths he shied from. He shouted aloud, a wordless rejection of all that had been. The distant karakia fell silent. He seized the door handle and turned it, just as in the distance brazen trumpets blared, and a drum roll sounded.

No! Not again! He dashed to the bed and pulled from under the mattress the flintlock pistol his father always hid there. He checked the priming before shoving it into the pocket of his overcoat and pulling the garment on. He wrenched open the door and stumbled out into the muddy grounds outside. The hard-packed earth turned to slush by the rain. There were no gardens here, no fences, just row upon row of shanty houses, but this was supposed to be just a temporary place, until the government relented and gave them back their lands.

He looked up as the trumpets sounded again. He put a hand to his heart when he saw that the distant slopes above this place were lined with soldiers in black uniforms, like rows of beetles gleaming in the dawn light.

‘Aiiieee!’ A woman’s voice cried from somewhere in the distance. ‘Aiiieee! They have come again!’

Hemi clenched his fists. He looked left and right, contemplated flight, but it seemed to him that

he'd tried that before. And failed.

They caught me and beat me. Then they took me south anyway. But the internal wounds were worse than anyone thought. I bled to death when we got there ... and woke up here again ...

Other men of his tribe appeared, walking like sleepwalkers. Like corpses. There were so few of them. He called to one he recognized, but the man, grey and battered-looking, showed no sign of having heard him. He just tramped slowly through the mud towards the gates. The drums began to rattle, and the soldiers marched down the slope towards the village.

Hemi threw his head from side to side, seeking someone, anyone, who might be in charge. Someone who might know how to escape this nightmare.

'Hemi?' said a small voice.

He spun, to find Huia at the door of her hut. She was fifteen, and wore a European smock dress that had been old and patched before she'd ever been given it. She wore a white flower in her hair and held another clutch of them in her left hand. There was a tragic beauty to her that caught at his throat. 'Huia? Go back inside. Hide. The soldiers are coming!'

Though he spoke in English, Huia understood. Perhaps she, too, had been learning in her dreams. *Except they aren't dreams.*

'I've tried that. It only makes it worse when they find me,' she said in a hollow voice. Her eyes met his. Ancient, ravaged eyes. 'It's better to go and meet them, as we did that first day. It is better not to resist.'

Oh, Huia ...

'We could run,' he suggested, casting his eyes about. 'You and I. Maybe this time we'd get outside.'

'There is no outside,' she replied sadly. 'Not for us. There is only this.' She took his big hand in her tiny one. 'Will you come with me? I'm scared.'

He looked down at her, remembering. *Once we did try to hide together, Huia. Do you recall? They caught us anyway. They smashed my kneecap with a cudgel, just for fun. They still took me south and worked me to death. I can't think what happened to you ... and we still woke up here again next time ...*

'I'm scared too,' he told her, with utmost sincerity.

She gripped his hand and pulled him towards the gates. Other people began to appear, shuffling towards their doom with empty eyes. The harsh trumpets set his teeth on edge. He tried to blank them out.

'Do you remember that first time?' Huia asked him in a small voice, talking to give herself courage. 'The Prophet said they were coming, and that we must not fight, that to resist was the excuse they would use to see us as savages and kill us all. They said we must be greater than them. That we must resist without force. That we must welcome them.' Her voice broke into a small sob. 'We met them with flowers,' she said, waving her posie. 'And they took us all away.'

Hemi remembered it all too well. His father had been a warrior in the Taranaki Wars, and could fight with musket and taiaha. But the wars were over before Hemi had been born, and the punishment had begun. Land stripped from the tribes that had resisted the settlers. Successive governments that spoke of justice but stole nevertheless. *I am of the Ngati Ruanui. I am a warrior. But I was born in the surrender.* They'd settled Parihaka, land claimed by the military. A protest. An occupation. Te Whiti and Tohu had shown them a way to resist without armed struggle. War had failed: the Pakeha were too many, too well armed. The only way to retain land and dignity was to protest peacefully. Their leaders preached. Highlight the evil of the aggressor and so discredit them, until the Pakeha repent their crimes. The settlement had grown to 2000 souls, and the government had begun to negotiate with them. They had thought there was hope.

Then on 5 November 1881 the Native Minister, John Bryce, surrounded the village with more than

1500 soldiers, and marched in. Though the villagers offered no resistance, they were expelled, the women turned out to fend for themselves and the men taken away to do penal labour all over the country. Hemi, like many, had been shipped south to Dunedin. He'd died there, eight years later, living like most of the others in a damp and filthy cave beside the harbour until tuberculosis took him. Except that he woke from that seeming death to find himself back in Parihaka, with soldiers at the gate. Exactly like today.

He gripped Huia's hand tight to fight the panic that was rising inside him. *I can't go through this again*, he thought. Though he could remember now that he had ... at least twenty times.

'Please stay with me,' Huia whispered, as they gathered before the open gates, staring through the portal at the ranks of soldiers coming towards them. 'I don't want to be on my own.'

On a white horse at the head of the soldiers rode a squat white man with a balding scalp and bushy beard. He wore a heavy brown coat and a face like thunder. As he entered the gates he glared about him. 'Where are the rest of you?' he shouted at the silent gathering of Maori that had come to meet him. 'If any are hiding, it will go ill for you!'

'It is Bryce kohuru,' Huia squeaked. 'Bryce the murderer. They say he is a tohunga makutu now, that he can kill with a word.'

I know. I've seen him do it. Hemi looked about him. There were fewer than two hundred men here. *When I last woke, there were still hundreds of us. There should still be more of us here.*

An aide hurried to Bryce's side, his boots squelching in the mud. 'Mister Bryce, coming here more than once a year may be a mistake. The take is always poor, like milking a cow too often,' he panted anxiously.

Bryce scowled. 'I need everyone we can lay hands on,' he snapped. 'Tell the troops to round them all up. Women and children too. We're going to take the lot this time.'

The aide looked anxious. 'But master, we don't know what that will do! What if next time—?'

'Button up!' Bryce interrupted brusquely. 'We're at war, Mister Peters. I will not be left undermanned.' He looked about him, then focused on Hemi suddenly. 'You, boy. Come here!'

Hemi looked left and right as those about him shrank back. Only Huia stayed with him. 'Sir?'

'Why are there so few men here, boy? Where are your people hiding? Answer me!'

Huia shrank against him. But Hemi found the courage to look up and meet the man's eyes. The sensation was almost over-whelming. Doubt. Fear. Madness. A warped kind of rectitude, as if the man recognized that all his beliefs were false but he would not — could not — renege on them. It was both pitiable and frightening.

Hemi found his voice with difficulty. 'No-one is hiding, Mister Bryce,' he managed to say aloud in a quavering voice. 'All those who are left are here, I am sure. We are at your mercy.'

Bryce's mouth twisted. 'Mercy,' he spat. 'The time for such weakness has long passed. The Treaty is stolen. War is coming.'

Hemi blinked in confusion. *What treaty? What war? We've had so many ...*

Bryce looked past him, at the young girl whose hand he held. He gave a slow smile of recognition. 'Huia, isn't it? You will come with me.'

The girl shrank behind Hemi, who understood instantly. He balled his fists and his muscles clenched. 'No!' he blurted, shielding the girl with his body as the soldiers spilled through the gates and fanned out.

Bryce looked down at him irritably, as if he were no more significant than a horse tick. 'Boy, you know better than that.'

Yes, I do ... But I have to try, for her sake.

He wrenched his pistol from his pocket, pulled back the hammer, then pulled the trigger in one motion. He saw Bryce's face swell in sudden alarm, and the intake of breath from every person

present. The gun jolted and spat flame, its sharp report bouncing about them.

The lead ball stopped a foot from Bryce, hanging in the air like a tiny moon trapped in orbit. The Pakeha makutu's eyes bulged, as if he'd just exerted himself painfully. He hid his effort with a gloating laugh. 'Fool! Now I'll have to make an example of you.' He opened his mouth to speak, and it seemed to Hemi, who was staring at that impossibly suspended pistol ball with disbelieving eyes, that fire and darkness balled inside the man's mouth, waiting to be exhaled.

Then Bryce spoke one word, a word Hemi both knew and did not. 'Die.'

He felt a dreadful clenching in his chest and a roaring in his skull. His limbs seemed to fail, his knees and spine to unlock, and he simply folded over in the mud, gasping and clutching his head. Behind him Huia screamed, dropping to her knees.

'Damned waste of time,' he heard Bryce whine bitterly, as the world seemed to blacken and fade. 'Let's round up the rest and get them in irons.' The words faded. Only Huia's wailing cries reached him and kept him here. That and the hatred of this man, who'd killed him in half of his twenty possible death lives.

Next time, Bryce, he thought, as the world folded into shadow and became a dream ... from which he woke, gripping the wooden bedposts with all his strength. Because the wood was solid and real when nothing else seemed to be ...

[A surprise dinner date](#)

Matiu Douglas blew his nose miserably, balled the tissue and lobbed it in the general direction of the rubbish bin in the corner of his bedroom. His success rate was less than fifty per cent, not the sort of accuracy that would excite a basketball coach. He rubbed his eyes and tried to decide if he could be bothered getting up at all. Not much of the day was left — it was five o'clock in the evening and he spent most of the day asleep. Outside one of those midwinter southerlies that came direct from the South Pole was howling around the eaves as another squall hit Napier. He huddled a little deeper beneath the duvet to escape the icy air that was overpowering his little heater.

His dad had installed a heat pump in the lounge, but that was downstairs. Mat had been sick for three days and the rest of the week wasn't looking promising. School books were strewn about the floor from desultory attempts to try to at least make his wakeful time useful, but his concentration was shot to bits. His head was clogged, his nose raw from blowing it, and he was bored witless. This head cold had been doing the rounds at Napier Boys' High School that winter, and had unfortunately chosen that week to descend on Mat like a ton of snot. That it coincided with the Maori Studies field trip made it all the worse. After years of resisting taking up Maori Studies before this year, it was cruelly ironic that he was missing the annual trip to a historic marae. This year it was to Parihaka, where the Maori passive resistance to the land seizures of the 1870s had been broken by the Hall government and the Native Minister, John Bryce.

Thinking about Bryce opened up a whole new train of thought. Mat had met the man, and nearly been killed by him. That had been more than a year and a half ago, at Lake Waikaremoana. Not the lake that the tourists and locals knew, but its Aotearoa manifestation. For Mat was one of the few who could travel between the two worlds of New Zealand and Aotearoa. New Zealand meant the modern 'real' world with its cars and smartphones and all the other trappings of the here and now. Aotearoa was utterly different: they called it a Ghost World — a place where the land remembered and retained all that had once been, where long-dead people and mythic beings coexisted in uneasy peace and sporadic conflict. A place where you could come across taniwha and goblins and the ghosts of the long-dead, all made of solid flesh. A perilous land, but beautiful too, as only a world conjured by the collective consciousness of centuries of human memories and dreams could be. A place where the sheer scent of a flower could beguile, and the glow of a sunrise make you weep. A place of danger and wonder.

Mat had been younger and much less experienced when he first met John Bryce. He had only just come to realize that he had unique skills — the powers of the tohunga of legend. Bryce had posed as a tutor Mat had been expecting to meet. He'd manipulated Mat into a deadly situation to exploit Mat's skills unknowingly, and it had nearly worked. But Mat had realized his error in time and escaped Bryce's clutches.

It was not the original John Bryce he'd met, of course, but his ghost. After his death in the 'real' world, Bryce became a vengeful ghost in Aotearoa, and was recruited by Puarata, a deadly tohunga makutu. Puarata gave Bryce the sparsely populated South Island of Aotearoa as his fiefdom, and it was to there that Bryce fled. He was now the last of Puarata's inner circle still at large. Mat strongly believed that he and Bryce would face each other again, one day soon.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes again. *I should get up. I'm starving and Dad's not here, so no-one else is going to feed me.* He groaned and snuffled, but pulled himself up and lurched to his feet. He paused to stare at a bunch of newspaper clippings on his wall, as he did every day — reminders of what he had to do this year.

VENN'S ESTATE MAY RUN TO BILLIONS, one headline blazed, talking about the recently deceased American businessman who had also been a warlock of Puarata's entourage. Mat felt a sense of grim satisfaction knowing the man was dead. Tax officials were now investigating the man's financial empire and pulling it apart. 'Result', as his friend Riki would say.

WHERE IS BYRON KIKITOA? asked another headline, above a story about the missing rugby league star, who'd vanished at the same time Venn died. The papers had no idea of the truth: that Byron Kikitoa was a warlock whose sports career had been built on cheating with magic. Mat burned to bring the young warlock to justice, for what Byron had done to his friend Damien.

TREATY DOCUMENT DETERIORATES, read the third clipping. The original Treaty of Waitangi document, the founding agreement of New Zealand, was reportedly decaying, rotting away, and no expert could save it. Scientists were baffled. Mat could have told them more: that the document they had was not the true original, for the master copy was in the magical world of Aotearoa, and had been stolen by Byron Kikitoa's master, Kiki. He doubted going to the papers with that story would help, though. More likely it'd get him locked up in a psychiatric ward.

He sighed heavily, feeling weighed down by his problems. At seventeen he should have had no worries other than homework, sports and girls. But he was far from your regular high school student; he was an Adept and trainee tohunga, an intermediary between the real and ghost worlds.

He still got head colds though. So much for special powers. Snuffling miserably, he slouched in the bathroom. Twenty minutes later he was showered, dressed and tugging a brush through his hair. He was a lean and well-built boy, in his last year at high school. His colouring was halfway between that of his Maori father, Tama, and his Irish mother, Colleen. His thick wavy hair was black but had a coppery glint in the sunlight, and he got faint freckles in the summer, although it was winter now and only a light dusting of those remained. He was short for his age but had grown muscular from two years of taiaha practice and a dedicated fitness regime. His eyes had a maturity that even adults could find daunting — but then he'd faced things that most people hadn't, like kehua goblins, massive taniwha and evil tohunga.

In the kitchen downstairs he fixed himself a hot lemon drink, and tried to work out the instructions to the meals his dad had left. Tama Douglas was a lawyer and had a difficult case up in Taupo this week, which meant that Mat had to fend for himself this week, sick or not. Mat's mother coincidentally lived in Taupo, but she was a teacher, so she couldn't come down, and as they had both told him, he was old enough to look after himself. Being on his own might have been fun if he'd not come down with this damned cold.

His cellphone beeped, and he put down the hot drink to check the new message. It was from his best friend, Riki Waitoa: <Hey bro. The Naki all good. How u doin>

Riki was on the Maori Studies field trip, of course. The class had taken a bus yesterday to New Plymouth, and had been at Parihaka all day. He wondered if it was raining in Taranaki too.

<Cold sux. Rain sux. Hope u gud>

The reply came back in seconds: <Bin lechered all day. Arse sore earz sore>

Mat laughed aloud. He presumed 'lechered' meant 'lectured', though with Riki you never knew. Although he'd been keen to see Parihaka himself, the programme had seemed to include a huge amount of time locked up in meeting rooms being lectured to by kaumatua, something he'd not been looking forward to all that much. Riki had been very quick to accuse Mat of pulling a sickie when he pulled out of the trip due to his cold. He tapped back: <Sick as dog bro. No fun>

<Skyver> Riki texted back unsympathetically. A few seconds later he added: <Hotties 2 max>

Mat tsked morosely and set the phone aside. Bad enough to be sick, but his best friend was now several hundred kilometres away and apparently surrounded by a bevy of girls. There were other schools doing the same trip including, Riki had been gleeful in pointing out all week, girl-on-

schools. One thing Napier Boys' High was very much devoid of was girls. At times Riki and Mat did envy the co-eds like Colenso High School.

Perhaps I'll watch a DVD. But to be honest, Mat didn't feel like doing anything much at all. That was the problem with being sick: you got time off school but you felt too crappy to enjoy it. On top of that, it was Year 13, his last year at high school, and if he stuffed up his final exams his parents separated or not, would band together to rip him limb from limb.

Still, in fifteen minutes or so he had a pasta sauce simmering and was getting ready to drain some spaghetti. He couldn't tell if it smelt good, having lost his sense of smell days ago, but it looked okay and it was hot. He stretched in pleased anticipation. It felt good to be doing this, mature even, like a foretaste of being grown-up. *It's quite nice being on my own ...*

'Kia ora,' a woman's voice said in his ear.

He shrieked and leapt a foot in the air.



It took what felt like minutes for his heart to slow and his hands to stop trembling. Neither entirely got back to normal though. Not when he recognized his 'guest'.

Her name was Aroha. She was tall, taller than him, and had the regal bearing of a princess. Her long rippling black hair framed a beautiful but imperious face with a stunning green moko pattern on her chin and eyes of burnished gold. She wore a topknot thatched with emerald and white tui feathers and a full-length feather cloak of unidentified and possibly extinct birds. She was barefoot, but showed no signs of being cold or uncomfortable.

'You're cooking,' she said doubtfully.

Mat suspected that Aroha had never cooked in her life. She was the daughter of a tohunga and had been out of circulation for probably four hundred years. Slaves and commoners had most likely done all her cooking for her, and there were extremely complex rules around what tohunga ate.

Mat hadn't seen Aroha since February, but they had exchanged letters — really, really awkward letters, in which Aroha proposed marriage and Mat tried to decline without offending her. Mat and his friends had rescued Aroha and her father the previous year from a type of suspended animation. She seemed to feel an obligation to him, one that she felt was best fulfilled by marrying him. Not that she wasn't an extremely attractive young woman, but Mat liked to make up his own mind about the things.

'Ah, I'm making pasta,' he said apologetically.

She stepped towards him, clearly intending to hongu. Good manners demanded Mat respond, but he had a contagious illness. He sneezed ostentatiously. 'I've got a cold,' he mumbled.

Aroha drew away slightly. 'You are unwell?' she enquired imperiously. 'No matter.' She stepped in close before Mat could react and, as he straightened, pressed her nose to his and exhaled heavily on his face. He tried to pull away, but suddenly his nasal passages cleared as her breath, warm and clean, blasted through his cold and dissolved it.

He blinked. 'Uh—?'

Aroha pulled a martyred face, like a parent who's just changed her child's nappy. 'You should be fine now,' she told him. 'You should take better care of yourself,' she added, as if getting sick was all his fault.

She can cure the common cold ... Aroha 1; Medical science 0!

'Ah, thanks,' he said lamely.

'It is my honour to aid you,' she replied formally. She caught one of his hands and examined it curiously. Mat had unusual fingernails — almost entirely scab-red. He told people it was a medic

thing, but the reality was that they were fingernails given to him by Mahuika, the Goddess of Fire. Aroha wrinkled her nose at them. ‘I do not like her touch on you,’ she said. She let his hand go and went to the stove, peering at the simmering sauce. ‘What is this “pasta”?’ she asked disapprovingly.

‘It’s Italian,’ he said. She didn’t look any wiser. Other countries were a distant rumour the last time she walked the earth. ‘Is there something else I can fix you?’ he asked anxiously.

She frowned. ‘I will not eat. Not here,’ she said. ‘I will await you.’ She strode out of the kitchen leaving Mat bewildered.

Okay, she’s just cured my cold. But why is she here? How did she even get in? She’s not going to talk about marriage again, is she? I barely even know her.

He’d hoped his last letter, sent more than a month ago in May, had knocked this on the head:

Dear Aroha

I am flattered that you have made this proposal, but until we have made better acquaintance, it is not possible for me to give your proposal the full consideration and honour that it deserves. Once I have completed my tertiary education we could perhaps revisit this matter.

His dad had helped draft it, which meant it had read more like a legal letter than a personal one, but that was good too: establishing some distance and all that. He didn’t want to marry her and it was much easier to say that in a letter than to tell her face to face, especially when she was one of the scariest people he’d ever met. *Besides, there’s someone else*, he added softly to himself. Evie’s face flashed before his eyes. He shut down that line of thinking quickly though. You couldn’t tell with Aroha just how much she knew just by looking at you.

In what felt uncomfortably like a preview of what being married to a princess might be like, Mat cleared and set the dining-room table, then finished cooking and served himself the meal, while Aroha waited impassively. He had no idea if she was approving or severely disapproving. *Perhaps she will change her mind now she knows I’m just a commoner*, he hoped.

‘Uh, do you want a drink?’ He had his dad’s permission to help himself to no more than one glass of beer or wine a day, if he wanted. He mostly didn’t, as, truth be told, he didn’t actually like either and he’d promised Aethlyn Jones, his mentor, that he’d keep away from alcohol.

‘Just water,’ she replied. ‘Alcohol is forbidden,’ she added in a severe tone, sounding disquietingly like his mother. She sat opposite him, watching him curiously as he ate. The silence was awkward. Evidently Aroha didn’t do small talk. Perhaps being locked up for centuries had drained away her words. Or maybe princesses didn’t converse. Either way, his meal was consumed uncomfortably under her wordless gaze.

The moment he finished his last mouthful, she rose. ‘We must talk.’ She turned and walked into the lounge, awaiting him beside the window.

Mat could hear the deep rumble of the surf on Marine Parade, like a slow bass rhythm thundering behind the melody of the rain on the windows. The wind wailed banshee effects across the top. It was a good soundtrack for bad news, which he was almost certain this was going to be.

‘Do you know the tale of the first woman?’ Aroha asked as he joined her, immediately throwing him off his stride.

‘Uh, sort of.’

Aroha went on as if he’d not responded. Her voice took on a storytelling timbre, a recital voice restrained passion. ‘The god Tane desired a vessel for the female essence — uha — from which to bring forth children. So he made a woman from earth and breathed life into her. Her name is Hinahu-one, the first woman. She gave birth to many children, the offspring of Tane, gods of our people.’

many males but only one female. That was Hine-titama, the Dawn Maiden. Hine-ahu-one was content until she was put aside by Tane, in favour of her own daughter. Together Tane and Hine-titama gave birth to humanity. But then Hine-titama came to realize the incestuous nature of her relationship with Tane and she grew ashamed. She fled him, entering the realms of the dark, to escape her lustful father. In the darkness her nature changed, and she became Hine-te-po: Hine of the Night, the Goddess of Death.'

Mat listened dutifully, wondering what Aroha was trying to tell him. The story was vaguely familiar, something he'd heard related on occasion but never really thought about.

'You have to understand, Matiu Douglas, that Hine-ahu-one, Hine-titama and Hine-te-po are the same being, for they share the same uha, the female essence that engendered humanity. By day, Hine-titama walks the earth, bringing life and hope, while at night, she returns to the darkness and comforts the dead. But the third aspect, Hine-ahu-one, the first woman, also remains. She is estranged from Tane and wanders the spirit realm. When the need comes over her, she takes on a body, that of her chosen vessel, and seeks a mate.'

Uh oh ...

'I am the vessel of Hine-ahu-one and her other incarnations,' Aroha said gravely. 'I was locked away by Puarata for many years, and have missed the touch of a man and the fulfilment of a child. My time is coming again, very soon. Only a young man skilled in the arts of the tohunga can reach me and survive our union. I have chosen you to be that man.'

Mat felt himself turning hot and cold as her words sank in. His temple and cheeks were throbbing and his skin was prickling with goose bumps. His throat was so constricted it was hard to breathe. 'U ... what do you mean "reach you". You're here now.'

She shook her head. 'I am not truly here at all. Not in any way that matters.'

He felt his mouth drop open. She looked pretty damn real to him.

'What you see of me is merely a projection. But in December this year, at the solstice, when the moon rises and the Southern Cross is high, the way to my arbour in the clouds will open. You will come to me there.'

'But ... I'll be in Wellington at Wiri and Kel's place in December!' *And I don't want 'union' with you anyway ...*

Aroha ignored him. 'The man that lies with me will be subjected to mystic forces that only the mighty can endure. But they will emerge from that ordeal perfected, their powers multiplied and their body invulnerable. They will become a demi-god.'

What?

'The child of that union will be a mighty power for light or darkness, and shape the vitality of the nature. Too long, while I was imprisoned, has this land been bled, without the renewing touch of a child of mine.'

Four hundred years. While she was locked away the Europeans came and turned the forests into farms. Mat's head reeled with all that was implied by what she'd told him. *And she wants me?*

Aroha stepped towards him and stroked his cheek. 'I warn you, Matiu Douglas, that for this to come about, a man must come to me willingly, with love in his heart for me and for this world. If he does not, then our union will be corrupted. His existing powers will be twisted into makutu, and the offspring I bear will be a monster. Thus it was before, when Kiki came for me, and I begat Puarata. This cannot be allowed to happen again.'

Mat's head reeled. *She is the mother of Puarata? He had faced Puarata, and only luck and powerful help had seen Puarata die. She was raped by Kiki, my new enemy? And now she wants me?* He stepped away, frightened of her and all that she said.

'Do not fear, Matiu Douglas. You are worthy. I have watched you, since you freed me. You are the

one.'

~~He swallowed, floundering for words. *My god, what do I do?* Then another thought: *Aroha Evie's grandmother!* His knees almost went.~~

She stepped close to him again, inhaled and sighed. 'I wish it could be tonight,' she whispered in a wistful voice. 'But my time has not yet come, and I must remain inviolate until then.' She put her arms around him and drew him to her. She had an alluring musky smell and radiated warmth. 'I must warn you, Mat, that there will be others who seek me in December. Others I do not choose. When I am in my time, I have not the strength to protect myself, and desire will overpower me. So you must win the race to reach me. You must!'

He shuddered, but was too afraid to pull from her embrace.

'One especially I fear,' she whispered. 'Byron Kikitoa. He is the protégé of Kiki, bred and raised for this task. You must keep him from me.'

Byron Kikitoa had killed Mat's friend Damien: he was high on the list of people Mat wanted to see destroyed, but that was not exactly an easy thing to do. Kiki was also on that list. He nodded grimly.

Aroha seemed to take his nod as assent to everything. Her face lit up. 'I know you won't let me down,' she whispered. Then she kissed him.

Mat had kissed a couple of girls, including one he cared for very much. But being kissed by a goddess was another experience altogether. It was as if she were radiating pure pleasure and seduction, forcing them into his mind through her mouth. If her arms had not been around him he would have fallen down. As it was, he almost fainted, blasted away by centuries of want. The ceiling tilted, his balance went and he was floating in her eyes, weightless and dizzy.

'I will await you at the spring equinox, at the rising of the moon,' she told him softly. Then her molten eyes narrowed. 'Slay Byron Kikitoa for me, my champion. Destroy him, and come to me filled with love.'

He tried to speak, to protest, but all his words were lost, tossed on the tidal waves of her presence. She engulfed him, overwhelmed him. When her lips finally left his, he could barely tell up from down. She kissed him again, on the forehead like a mother kissing a child, and he simply passed out, falling into a soft, enveloping darkness that embraced him and rocked him into oblivion.



He woke much, much later, and found himself sprawled on the sofa. The wall clock said 11:37 p.m. He'd lost almost five hours, assuming it was the same day. He blinked blearily, too stunned to take it all in. He staggered to the bathroom and threw up, then rinsed his mouth and brushed his teeth, consciously not dealing with all he had been told. Not yet. He went back to his bedroom and sat on the bed, just staring into space. Outside the storm gathered in intensity, but he was barely aware of the creaking timbers and rattling latches, or the lashing sheets of rain which drenched his southern window. He stared at one thing: a tarot card pinned upside down above his bed.

It was called The Lovers, and depicted a man and a woman beside a tree, with a sun-face beaming down on them. That face in the sun was not benign, however. It was a devil face, leering with anticipation as the man and the woman reached for each other.

He knew little of tarot, but he knew what the upside-down positioning of the card meant: it meant the opposite of what the card normally symbolized. Upright, The Lovers meant good things, but upside down it meant separation, frustration and failure. The card had been given to him by the girl he wanted most: Evie — Everalda van Zelle. Puarata's daughter. And it symbolized all the reasons why his feelings for Evie, which grew stronger, not weaker, the more time they were apart, were doomed from the start.

And now Aroha had placed her finger on him, and made demands that he was far from ready fulfil. He groaned aloud and massaged his temples. His cold might be gone, but he could feel headache coming on that was probably going to be just as bad.

And then the phone rang.

The legend of the Wooden Head

‘What are you reading, Evie?’

Everalda van Zelle glanced up at her mother, Florence, who’d just got home from a shopping trip to the boutique clothing stores in Devonport. Outside it was windy and raining but her mum had regular get-together with her friends in a café near the pier every week, and always came back with something new to wear. It drove Evie’s father, a particularly stolid Dutch Protestant, to distraction. Evie didn’t mind though — she got the hand-me-downs.

‘It’s just an old book on Maori mythology,’ she replied, brandishing the ancient hardcover.

Evie was freshly showered, her curly brown hair damp and heavy about her shoulders. She had a pugnacious but pretty face with a snub nose and freckles — and only one eye. Her left eye was a blank white orb, concealed behind a leather eyepatch. She hated it, though it was also what made her a seer. Once she’d been given the choice of being healed, but losing her seer’s gift. She’d thought about it seriously, but in the end had declined. Her gift might not always be pleasant, but it was addictive.

‘Oh,’ her mother said, immediately losing interest. Her general view on things Maori had always been that if you didn’t think about them, you could ignore all that awkward messy stuff they always seemed to be protesting about. Ancient land confiscations and water rights and discrimination and all that. In all honesty, Evie had felt much the same way until just a few months ago, in February, when she’d learnt some uncomfortable truths about her genes. She’d always thought she just tanned well, but no, it turned out that she was an adopted half-Maori. Her adoptive parents had never told her. Not just any old birth parents either: her parents were Puarata, a tohunga makutu — an evil wizard to all intents and purposes — and his witchy Pakeha sidekick, Donna Kyle.

Evie had always known that magic was real, right from her earliest years when she could see little things unfolding before they happened. That ‘gift’ had been strengthened hugely after a vicious blonde woman had poked her left eye out when she was nine. That had changed her in many ways, but had also created a career for her: she now ran a fortune-telling booth in Victoria Park Market.

It turned out that blonde woman was her real mother, not Florence. That had been a very nasty shock. Especially as Donna Kyle was a wanted criminal in two worlds.

Two worlds: in many ways the biggest shock of all. Alongside the real world that she lived in was another place: Aotearoa. A place that was like a memory bank of all the things that had been, where historical places and extinct creatures still existed. More than that: it was a kind of afterlife, where dead people dwelled if they had some great affinity to their land. Maybe really religious people went to heaven, but those who loved their land went to Aotearoa. And even more than that, Aotearoa was also a cultural repository: mythical people and beings dwelt there too, created and sustained by the beliefs of those who lived there.

The final, terrible shock of that February had been to learn about her father: his name was Puarata and he had been the most feared evil wizard in Aotearoa. He was dead now; that was the only good thing people could say about him. Hence the reading: she’d found a book with a legend in it about Puarata, and had been reading it over and over, trying to understand who and what her real father was.

‘Mum,’ she asked, ‘do children always turn out like their parents?’

Florence van Zelle visibly squirmed. ‘There is a little of our parents in all of us, darling,’ she replied brightly, as if it was a well-rehearsed answer. She displayed her shopping bags. ‘Want to see what I bought?’

‘Later.’

Her mum looked a little hurt, but grateful she’d dodged the question. Evie didn’t ask again —

had been a little cruel to ask and she regretted bringing it up. Her parents had been made to promise never to tell her she was adopted, and they'd been good to her. Hinting that she might know the secret was hurtful.

Once her mum had gone, Evie settled back into the armchair, studying the legend again. The tale was called 'The Wooden Head'. It was about a magical carved wooden head which was greatly feared because it could kill intruders by emitting a terrible scream when they approached. The carved head was controlled by a tohunga makutu called Puarata, who ruled a pa at a place called Sacred Mountain. Someone had scrawled a Maori translation, 'Maunga-tapu', in the margins. Evie had looked the name up in an atlas, but there were a lot of places called Maungatapu in New Zealand.

Eventually another tohunga, a good guy called Hakawau, had come to try to put an end to Puarata. He'd taken a friend, and they'd fasted along the way, which seemed important to the magic. Once they arrived at Sacred Mountain, Hakawau had detected invisible troops of evil spirits guarding the pa, and had sent his own spirit guardians to do battle. Hakawau's spirits had won and destroyed the evil spirits, which somehow meant that the Wooden Head was drained of power, so when Puarata called on its powers to slay Hakawau, it failed. Hakawau and his friend then entered the village. The villagers had tried to give them food, which if they'd accepted would apparently have killed them, but they refused it, causing the spell to rebound and strike Puarata and all his followers dead. The danger was over and Hakawau returned home a hero.

The tale told Evie precious little about Puarata. He seemed to be just the standard bad guy of fairy tales, with deadly powers and a fatal weakness that a hero could exploit. *But he's also my birth father.* She put the book down, frustrated.

She closed her eye and a face filled her mind: Matiu Douglas. Tousled dark hair, golden brown skin, a serious but attractive face with a glowing but seldom-used smile. In February when Donna Kyle had come to claim Evie, it was Mat who'd been her protector. He'd guided and defended her through the deadly struggle that had ensued. Donna was imprisoned in Aotearoa somewhere now, and had degenerated into some kind of vampire-like creature. Evie never wanted to see her again.

She wished Mat was here right now. Wished she could hold him close again, kiss him again as they had for those precious few hours before the death of one of Mat's friends and the revelation of Evie's true parentage had driven them apart. She missed his voice, his eyes, the way he talked, the way he moved; everything about him really. But Puarata and Donna had both tried to enslave and kill Mat. She wasn't sure he would ever be able to trust their daughter.

There was a tarot card on Evie's bedroom wall: The Lovers. It symbolized her relationship with Mat, and for now, it stubbornly remained inverted, meaning the relationship was wrong. Every night she stared at it before turning out the light, hoping that in the morning it might have righted itself. For the four months since she'd seen Mat, it never had.

She could wait. Her adoptive parents had indeed left their mark on her. They'd shown her patience and support. They'd shown her that good things sometimes take time. They'd shown her that love was faithful and forgiving.

When Mat was ready for her, she would be ready for him.

Winter sun painted the scene in brilliant acrylics — bright blues and vivid greens. The sky and the earth, Rangī and Papa, in a warm embrace. Clouds scudded across the sky like wind-tossed cotton balls. The song of greeting, the *karakia*, rose and fell as the schoolboys and girls either listened attentively or eyed each other speculatively. There were more than a hundred students lined up in ranks before the marae, contingents from the Maori Studies classes of nine different high schools.

The song of greeting ended and a big sunny-faced man bellowed: ‘Hey, *kia ora*; *kia ora*, everyone! Welcome to Parihaka!’ His smile was so infectious, it spread from mouth to mouth in seconds. ‘Come on in, we’re all waiting to meet you!’

As spontaneous cheers broke out, the least-disciplined school groups simply welled towards the gates of the marae. That didn’t include the students of Napier Boys’ High School; they were under the watchful eyes of their teachers, who had immediately lifted warning hands. There was an order of proceedings, and that included ‘ladies before gentlemen’.

This gave Riki Waitoa and his mates a good chance to eye up the girls from Gisborne’s Lytton High School as they filed into the marae.

‘Hey, Rik, ain’t your chick from Gizzy?’ Billy Simcox whispered. Billy was half Riki’s height and twice his width, and played tight-head prop for Napier Boys’ First XV. ‘She here?’

Riki shook his head regretfully. ‘Nah, she goes to Gisborne Girls’, bro. And she only does Computer Studies and Maths and that kinda stuff anyways.’

‘She sounds pretty smart, eh? What’s her name?’

‘Cass. Yeah, she’s smarter than Bill Gates and Einstein rolled into one. And hot with it.’

Billy chuckled and nudged him. ‘You’re jus’ making that up, man. There ain’t no chick like that.’

‘None you’d ever meet. That’s cos you’re a forward and spend all your life pushing a scrum machine. Only backs get the hot chicks, man.’ Riki played right wing for the First XV, and was proud to be a fast, cool and sexy back.

Billy chuckled. ‘Yeah but all backs are wimps, so your babes are always disappointed, until they meet a real man.’ He poked Riki in the chest. ‘A prop, in other words.’ He might have said more, but then he looked across the line of Lytton students. His gaze locked on a tall, stately Maori girl with long flowing hair, standing a little apart from the others, and he lost his flow. ‘Phwoar,’ he managed eventually.

Riki made an effort to not stare as well. Cassandra was his girl and, besides, watching Billy’s eye bulge and his jaw drop was pretty entertaining. ‘Hey, now I know why you’re a tight head, bro.’

‘Why?’ Billy growled, still staring at the girl.

‘Cos your head’s so tight your eyes jus’ popped out.’

Billy grunted. ‘Get behind me, woofier. I saw her first and I already know how sweet it’s gonna be.’

Riki glanced back at the girl. She was looking back at him and Billy and tossed her head when she saw him, making her hair do this rippling thing like a shampoo advert. *Well, she’s hot, I’ll grant that.* ‘Man, you’re dreaming. She’s looking at me, not you.’ *And I’m not looking back. Really.*

‘You always think that. But who pulls at parties?’ Billy tapped his own chest. ‘I’ll tell you who.’

‘Whatever, cuz. The only girls at your parties are your seventeen sisters.’

Billy snorted. ‘And your sisters too, bro.’ He laughed and punched Riki’s shoulder. ‘Hey, where’s your super-serious mate?’

‘Mat? He’s got the lurgy. Laid up at home.’

Billy nodded thoughtfully. ‘Matty Douglas: he’s spooky, man. His paintings are weird as.’ He shrugged. ‘~~But his dad is, like, the best man to call if the cops raid, so say no more, eh?~~’

‘Mat’s cool. He’s jus’ operating on another plane.’ *Literally*. Riki glanced towards the nearest teacher, who was waving their class forward. ‘Time to go in.’

‘Thank Christ for that,’ said Billy. ‘If that Lytton chick sees me talking to you much longer, she’ll think you’re my girlfriend.’

‘You’re a funny bugger, Simcox.’

‘I’m a comedian from way back, Waitoa.’

The Napier boys filed into the marae and pressed noses with all manner of kaumatua and kuirangi before being let loose on the grounds. The visit to Parihaka was the annual Maori Studies trip, one open to Year 11 and up. It was Riki’s third trip, but his first to Parihaka. The class had been reading up on the place, of course: towards the end of the Land Wars, a multi-tribal group of Maori had settled at Parihaka in protest at the land confiscations. The government had reacted by sending in the troops, led by the Native Minister of the time, John Bryce. There had been no deaths, but the people of Parihaka had been forcibly removed and most of the men sent to do prison labour all over New Zealand. It wasn’t the greatest crime in history, but it was a dark deed nevertheless.

Riki had a more personal grievance against the place: nearly a year and a half ago, Mat Douglas had taken him to the magical other-land, Aotearoa, where long-dead people were still alive, or the ghosts were. That included John Bryce. Bryce had tricked them and damn near killed them.

If you’re somewhere near, Bryce kohuru, you better watch yourself.

As the boys and girls milled about, Riki lost track of Billy Simcox and let himself drift to the edges, looking about him. There wasn’t a lot to see — just a big flat open space where apparently the original occupiers had built their huts. After they’d cleared the village, the colonial government had razed them and built a fort instead. *I wonder what’s still here, on the Aotearoa side ...*

‘Kia ora,’ a resonant female voice breathed in his ear.

He turned, and all thoughts froze in his head. It was the Lytton girl. About an inch shorter than him, with a face that wasn’t classic beauty, but something more: timeless. Noble, even. The sort of face you saw carved in marble. Her hair was a lustrous cascade of ebony, glowing in the light. And her eyes! Riki caught his breath. There were flecks of gold in her irises, floating in slow circles.

‘Would you like to hongi with me?’ she said softly, with just the subtlest hint of teasing, as if this was all just a game to her. Up close there was something familiar about her, but he couldn’t place it.

‘Uh, sure,’ he said, staring into her stunning face and sighing, as thoughts of Cass were somehow erased. Yeah. Absolutely. He pressed his nose to hers and met her gaze. About then, all rational thought ceased to function ...

Which was why, twelve hours later, he found himself creeping from the dormitory just before midnight.



Riki waited until everyone in his dorm was asleep, then with barely restrained excitement, slipped out of bed, grabbed the little shoulder bag he’d stuffed his clothes and runners into, and tiptoed toward the door. The girl’s eyes seemed to beckon him. Finally this dead-dull field trip was going to be exciting!

Sure, the kaumatua telling them about Parihaka had been funny and informative enough, and walking around the Parihaka site had been kind of evocative, though it was really just an empty field with a big monument now; none of the original buildings or fences remained. He’d hoped for more. Most of the boys had got pretty restless, and started silently flirting with the girls. That had led to lo

of giggling and winks. He'd mostly stayed out of it, because all he could think of was that girl from Lytton High. He hadn't spotted her all day, it was driving him nuts, but she'd said to meet him by the memorial at midnight. No way was he not going to do that. He felt feverish for her, unnaturally so perhaps, but he couldn't ignore the craving. He'd texted Mat around six o'clock, to tease him, wolfed down dinner and then waited like an unplugged appliance until midnight rolled around.

Billy Simcox was snoring like a pig farmer. *See ya, prop-boy!* He slipped out the door and darted into the toilets just before the heavy tread of a teacher sounded around the corner. The boys were at dorm on the nearby marae, and the girls were not far away, boarding at the local school. He worked the door silently closed as the teacher went by, hurriedly changed into his outside gear, then shouldered his bag and clambered out the window. The night air was bitterly cold, a wicked westerly off the Tasman Sea slapping his cheeks, but he barely noticed. His excitement rose as a tiny flame flickered beside the old-fashioned wooden fence of the marae. He darted into the lee of the next dorm. As he crept below window level, he could overhear grown-ups laughing over something and someone strumming a guitar. He had to hide from two teachers smoking in the doorway, but once they were gone the coast was clear. He dashed into the shadows, leapt the fence easily. The monument waited looming out of the misty darkness.

He was a little early, so he pulled out his cellphone. Time to crow a little. He thumbed the speed dial. It rang twice, and then a dazed voice answered. 'Riki?' Mat Douglas's voice. He sounded spaced out, like he'd done some pot. Mat didn't do drugs though, so it was probably the effects of too many cold remedies.

'Mate, guess what?'

The line went silent. Mat eventually responded in a flat voice. 'Don't play games, man. I've just had the weirdest evening, and—'

Riki was barely listening. 'Mat, I've just snuck outta the dorm.'

'What? But ... why?' Mat was the sort of guy who pretty much toed the line on rules and stuff. Came of having a lawyer for a father, Riki supposed.

'Just for the fun of it, bro.' He was suddenly embarrassed to confess the truth, or mention the girl at all. The first creeping sense of unease stole over him. *Why did I agree to this?*

'You take care, man,' Mat admonished.

'Gotta go, Mat. I'll tell you all about it when I get back. See ya.' He thumbed off the connection. The wind rose, making him shiver. This suddenly didn't seem like a good idea at all. But creeping back with his tail between his legs would hurt his pride, and he didn't want that girl to think he was chicken.

'I'm here,' he whispered into the night.

A tall shape rose up before him, eerily close. 'You came,' she said, as he jolted in surprise.

'Far out, you're quiet!' he exclaimed.

She smiled without opening her mouth, circling him with an intrigued look on her face. It was as if she was measuring him up or something. Only the pale moonlight lit her face, but somehow her eyes caught the light in an unnerving way. They held a rainbow gleam, like oil on the surface of a pool. 'I wondered if you would have the nerve.'

He was having to turn slowly to keep her from vanishing behind him. It was unsettling him. *Was I here again?* He felt a surge of guilt, and wondered why he hadn't felt it before. *Cass deserves better.*

'Who's Cass?' she breathed, her words making his pulse rate double. She was behind him somehow.

Uh oh. He turned sharply. 'My ... my girlfriend,' he stammered.

'What's that like?' she asked, her head lowered and her face half hidden by her tumbling locks. 'I

my world, there are no “girlfriends”. Only maidens and wives.’

He blinked. ~~*Oh hell, she’s not from around here ... like, really not from around here.*~~ ‘Uh, loo miss, I think I better get back. This isn’t a good idea.’ He turned quickly away — and she was standing right in front of him, her right hand extended towards him in a crooked gesture. He flinched, his head in his mouth. ‘Where are you going, Riki Waitoa?’ she asked with a kind of malicious coyness, like a cat teasing its prey.

‘Jeez, lady, I don’t know who you are, but I know where you’re from, and—’

‘Do you? Do you indeed?’ She flashed closer in an eye-blink, her nose millimetres from his, her breath on his cheek. It was frosty cold. ‘Then let’s go there!’

‘No! Wait!’ He tried to back away, but her hand grabbed him and suddenly the world lurched. He felt a swirling of cold winds and fizzing energy about him. A subtle swirl of deep emerald phosphorescence spiralled about them; the world altered. The air felt warmer and smelt sweeter, heavy with saltwater and loamy earth. The moon glowing above was different too; it seemed to contain a carved face. Only she remained constant. It was an alien sensation, but one he’d felt before: when M had taken him into Aotearoa.

She tittered with cold laughter. ‘Welcome to Te Po, Riki Waitoa. The land of night. The land of death.’

He shook his head, frightened. ‘No, this is Aotearoa, I’ve been here before!’

She laughed again, a little more derisively. ‘And what did you think Aotearoa was?’ She glided away from him, inhaling deeply. ‘When the goddess comes upon me, this is my realm.’

The goddess? He stared, and then a number of things clicked into place. ‘Hine-te-po: Hine of the Night.’ *The Goddess of Death.* He began to back away in earnest. ‘Why have you brought me here?’

She half-turned away. ‘That is for you to find out.’ She flashed to a point ten yards away, barely visible in the darkness. ‘Have fun,’ she added, with a cruel lilt in her voice. Then she was gone.

‘Hey!’ He dashed to where he had last seen her. ‘Hey! You can’t just leave me here!’ The wind rustled through the trees like a dry laughter. ‘Hey! Come back!’

There was no sign of the girl ... woman ... goddess.

Oh shit!

If this was Aotearoa, he was in the Ghost World’s version of Parihaka. That couldn’t be good. Not after all that had happened here in the past. But if it wasn’t, then where the hell was he? ‘Hey!’ he called forlornly.

To his shock, a male voice called back from the tree line in a raspy, low-pitched voice. ‘Keep your voice down, you idiot!’

That stopped him in his tracks. The voice was familiar. He felt a sudden relief: *No, I’m not in Aotearoa, I’m just lost in the night-time in an unfamiliar place. The dormitory is probably just over the rise. Riki, you idiot, freaking out over nothing at all.* ‘Who’s that?’ he whispered, pitching his voice to carry.

A tall shape broke from trees at the top of the rise. ‘Riki?’ the newcomer whispered, with hoarse emotion. A big youth with shaggy hair and a pale face was revealed by the stray light of the distant buildings. ‘What the hell?’

You’re kidding me! Riki felt tears sting his eyes. ‘Damien?’ He threw his arms around his friend. ‘Damien, mate!’ They hugged roughly, slapping each other’s backs. ‘How’re you going?’

‘Me? I’m bloody awesome, man! Having the coolest time. Me and Shui — man, I can’t wait to introduce you — she and I ... words fail me. Life is so good!’ Damien laughed. ‘Life — ha! But what the hell are you doing here?’

Riki shook his head and stared at his dead best friend. ‘Life’ might be good for Damien, but it wasn’t really life at all. Damien had died four months ago, stabbed through the heart by Byron.

Kikitoa. Though Damien had been reborn into Aotearoa afterwards, he would now never grow older, never have children, and could only return to the real world for a few hours at a time lest his spirit be destroyed. He was a newborn ghost. That he had found a girl — Mat had told Riki about Shui, who they'd met in the north in February — was great, but there was a lingering sense of tragedy Riki couldn't shake. 'That's cool, man. Awesome ... I'm here on a school trip.'

Damien raised an eyebrow. 'A school trip? Nah, you're in Aotearoa. It's good to see you, man,' he added fervently. 'But you look like someone just jiggled on your grave.'

'I'm ... it's just a shock. There was this chick and I think she tricked me into coming here.'

Damien raised his eyebrows. 'Yeah? That's pretty weird, cos this Maori chick I met in Paihia said to come here if I wanted to learn about what was going on at Parihaka.' He shook his head. 'I've been down here with some soldiers, trying to suss this place out.'

'A Maori woman told you to come here?' Riki shook his head, trying to jump-start his brain. 'That's real pretty?' *A goddess, in fact ...*

'Yeah, sounds like the one.'

Riki swallowed. This was getting worse. *But it's Damien ...* He couldn't help but smile, despite the shock.

Damien patted his arm. 'Shui is here too, man! You gotta meet her.' He clutched Riki's shoulder. 'Jeez, it's really you!' He nudged Riki. 'Hey, how's it going with you and Cassandra?'

Who? Oh, yeah ... He started guiltily. *That chick, she put a spell on me, I swear!* 'All good, mate. Super good.'

Damien threw him a sly look. 'Are you guys ... you know, doing the wild thing?'

Riki pulled a coy face. 'That'd be telling.' But then his boastful side took over and he winked and gave a quick thumbs-up. Last school holidays he'd visited Cassandra in Gisborne, and it certainly had got a little wild, in a very, very good way.

Damien whooped loudly enough that Riki threw an alarmed look back over his shoulder at the marae, but no-one seemed to have heard. 'I knew it,' Damien crowed. 'Just knew it!' He slapped his hand onto Riki's shoulder. 'Chicks are totally awesome.' He pulled Riki into the heart of the surrounding darkness. 'Shui?'

They entered a small grove of cabbage trees. The sweeter, fuller smells of Aotearoa seemed to be clinging there. A small figure was crouched beside a well-hidden little fire. As they saw the glow, the figure fired them a question in a language Riki didn't know. The voice was female and the cadence was Asian.

To his surprise Damien replied in what sounded like the same language. Then he switched back to English as the tiny girl stood, the fire revealing coppery skin and flat Chinese features, small and perfectly formed. She wore boyish European settler clothing, a cotton shirt and rough trousers, and had a pistol jammed into her belt. She grinned welcomingly at Riki. 'I Shui,' she announced with a giggling tinkle that he immediately liked.

Damien hugged her, his boyish features alive with pleasure. 'This is my girl,' he said, willing Riki to approve — which Riki did wholeheartedly. When Mat had told him about how Damien had died, something inside him had perished too. But Damien had been reborn into Aotearoa and had also found love — or at least lust and infatuation. That was a decent silver lining to a dark cloud.

'It's great to meet you,' he told the girl, and hugged her. She was skinny as a bird and about as tall as one. 'Fantastic!'

She beamed at him. 'Fanta-chick,' she repeated, testing out the word. 'Cool, bro,' she added solemnly. Clearly the language lessons were coming along, in both of their tongues.

'You learning Chinese, bro?' he asked Damien.

'Cantonese, man. Yeah. I'm pretty useless, but we get by. We've got all kinds of ways o

communicating,' he laughed. Then he sobered up, throwing a wary look about him. 'Hey, let's kick out the fire and get under cover, man. You never know with this place who's about.'

They stamped the fire out and covered it with dirt, then Damien led them through the thin bush that fringed the dip where Parihaka village lay. The night sky was cloudless, and as his eyes adjusted to the moon and starlight, Riki found he could make out more of the shape of the land. Mount Taranaki rose in a perfect triangle, filling the eastern sky. The distant murmur of the sea was borne by the west winds. The night seemed empty, but gradual signs of life revealed themselves like magician's tricks: an owl, a morepork, swooping by.

They found a vantage point above the village and sat, taking care not to be silhouetted against the ridgeline. Shui smiled shyly at Riki and cuddled into Damien's arms. They looked good together.

Riki returned his attention to Parihaka village below. It looked desolate, utterly empty. Riki leaned towards Damien and whispered, 'What's happening, mate?'

'We're not sure, man.' Damien licked his lips. 'You know what went down here, right? In November 1881, Badman Bryce brought in the troops and carted everyone away. In Aotearoa even legends like that have a kind of echo effect — they re-enact themselves, usually on the anniversary of the event. But recently, it's been repeating itself more often. And ships keep coming up from the south, taking people away. The locals got worried and sent a request for help to Governor Grey. Grey sent a cutter down from Manukau to check it out. I asked to be on the mission after this Maori chick talked to me about it. We came south on a coastal trader called the *Wallaby*. We got here three days ago. Grey sent a sergeant called Bain and a squad of soldiers.'

'Find anything?'

Damien shook his head. 'Sergeant Bain's got the lads down at the coast, cos someone told us there was another ship lurking there. The *Wallaby* is in port at Moturoa — that's the Maori name for the northern Aotearoa side of New Plymouth. She's going south in two days' time.' He pointed towards the village. 'The thing is, the Maori village isn't usually here: normally all you find is the military camp, the one they built after 1881. But something — or someone — is making Te Whiti's village reappear.'

They stared down at the darkened village. 'Wish Mat was here,' Riki admitted eventually. 'This is more his line than ours.' The three of them had been involved in some dangers together in Aotearoa before — usually Mat did the thinking and the magic, and Damien and Riki did the fighting. 'He would know if there was something going on.'

Suddenly Shui murmured and jabbed a finger towards the south corner of the village. A stab of light had flashed momentarily, once, twice, then nothing. She muttered something to Damien in Cantonese.

'What do we do?' Riki asked.

Damien stood, pulling Shui to her feet with him. 'We go check it out.'

Riki grimaced. 'Uh, mate, how am I going to get back to my world?'

Damien grinned. 'There's a portal not far away, but let's check that light out first, man. Won't take a mo. And hell, I haven't see you in ages. Don't go yet.'

Riki exhaled. *This is dumb, especially as that chick seems to have gone to some trouble to get me here, and Dame too.* But he found himself nodding anyway. The excitement of the hunt was taking over. The three of them crept silently down the slope and through a gap in the wooden palisade that fenced the village. Up close the housing was not Maori in style, but very roughly built in a European manner, with none of the care and diligence of traditional Maori whare. The buildings looked half-broken and there was a strong air of decay. Rot and stale urine. Old foulness. The earth was muddied, the few tufts of grass having been trampled back into the churned dirt. Shui sniffed meaningfully; Riki smelt it too: the thin whiff of wood smoke. There was a fire burning, somewhere near, but they could see no flames.

They crept between the buildings, as quietly as they could, until they found a hut whose window was broken; through the crack leaked the faintest thread of smoke. Damien nudged Riki and pointed to the opposite shack. For an instant, Riki thought he saw a girl's face, with a white flower in her hair and huge frightened eyes. Then she vanished back into the darkness of the hut.

'You take that one and I'll take the smoke,' Damien whispered. He flicked open his coat, revealing a navy-issue cutlass. He pulled the short sword out, while Shui drew her pistol and primed it with calm competence. Riki wished he had a weapon.

'Got a spare?' he whispered.

Damien shook his head. 'Stay behind me if anything happens.' He jabbed a finger at the door of the hut where the girl had vanished. 'Let's do them at the same time.'

Riki found himself trembling with nervous tension, but not fear. This wasn't his first time in Aotearoa, and not the first time he'd faced danger. And, anyway, maybe nothing would happen ...

Yeah right.

He slunk towards the door of the hut, waited until Damien reached the opposite one, and then laid his hands on the handle. Shui stood between them, pistol held in a two-handed grip, barrel pointed skywards like someone from a police drama. She looked the calmest of the three of them.

Damien nodded, mouthing: *One, two, three.*

He opened the door silently and tried to penetrate the darkness of the hut. Opposite he heard voices, but before he could look away a girl emerged from the darkness. She was Maori, maybe fourteen or fifteen, with a sadly beautiful face. She wore a shapeless smock and held out flowers. White camellias, like the ones in his mother's garden.

'Please don't kill me,' she said in a tremulous voice. 'I'm so tired of dying.'

What the hell?

Then from outside someone shouted, and three shots boomed and echoed about them. Riki flinched and spun in time to see Shui throw herself sideways, her pistol disgorging thick smoke. On the opposite doorstep, Damien was pressed to the wall. Beside him was a big Maori youth with tousled hair and hideous scars all over his bare torso. Damien called, his voice high-pitched, 'At least six men, dude. We've got to roll!'

Riki grabbed the girl's hand. She flinched from him, tried to pull free. 'Come on,' he told her. 'We've got to go.' But she tore her hand free and backed into the shadows. Outside there were more shots. Musket balls tore at the timber of the huts.

'Come on, Rik!' Damien shouted. To his alarm Riki realized his friend's shout came from further away. 'Please, you've got to come,' he implored the girl. He lunged at her, but she was too fast, darting to the ground and slithering like a lizard to a place under her heavy wooden bed. 'Damn girl!'

'Riki!' Damien shouted, from further away. More gunfire. Shouting voices rang out, far too many.

That better be Dame's mates coming to the rescue. He fell to his knees. 'Please, girl. Come with me. We've got to get away. Bad men are coming.'

She looked at him hesitantly. He held his breath as she stared back at him from the deepest shadows, only her shining eyes clearly visible. For an instant he thought she was about to give him her trust and come. But then the door crashed open behind him. Too late. He rose as a burly shape in a long coat appeared in the doorway. The man held a musket, but he didn't fire it. Instead he smashed the butt towards Riki's head.

Riki was his school's champion taiaha fighter. He didn't have a weapon, but he knew how to dodge and how to use his body in a scrap. He dropped under the blow and scissored his legs at the man's knee and ankle. The man crashed to the ground beside him. Riki rabbit-punched him in the nose, rewarded by a wet crunch beneath his fist, then rolled clear as the man bellowed furiously. The gi

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