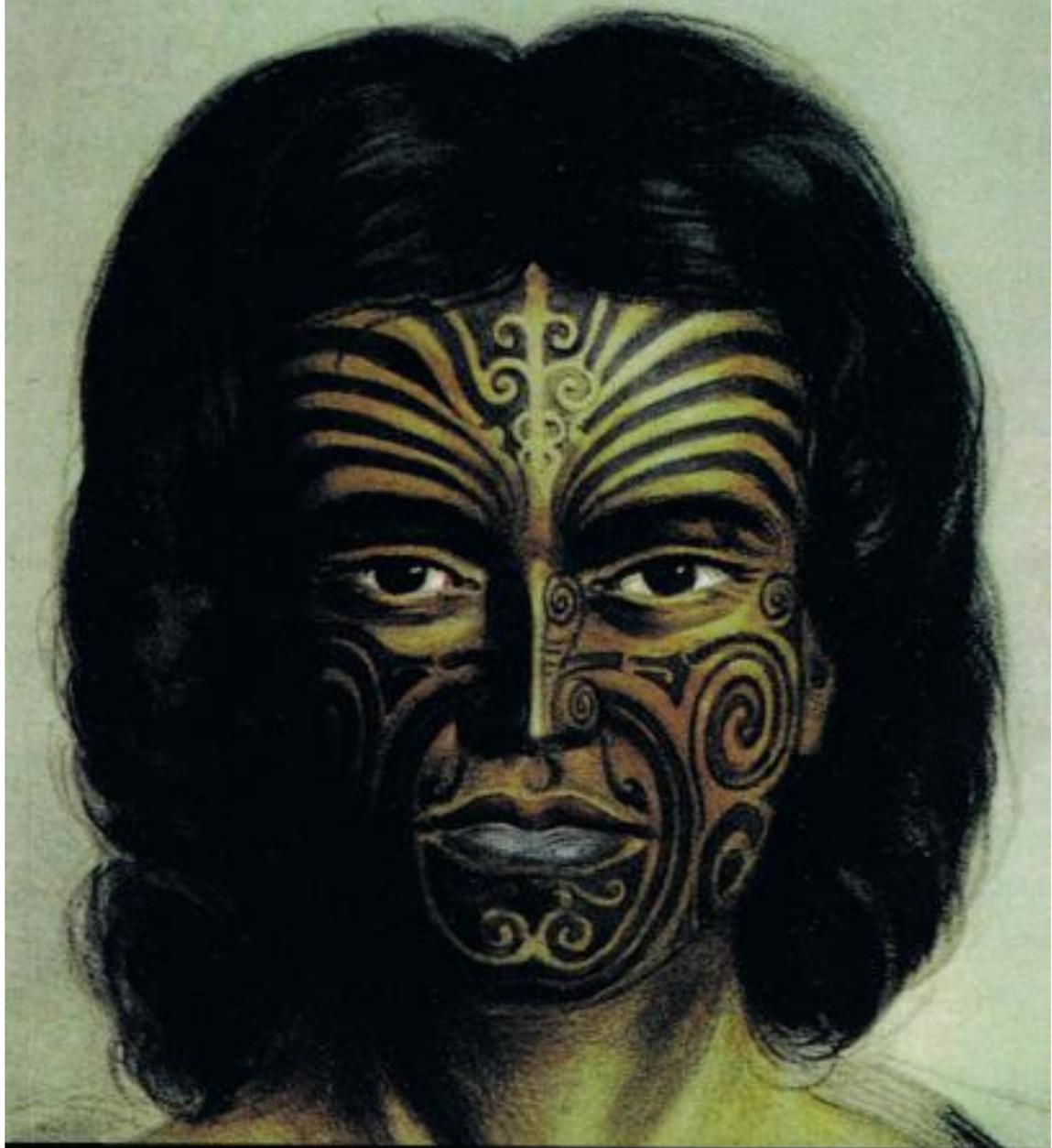


*An End of Honour*



M J B U R R

*An End of Honour*

- a novel of Titokowaru's War.

**M J Burr**

Imprint details

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Editing by Lorain Day.

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This book is for my brother,

**BRIAN HOWARD CLARK,**

another who always put family first.

*'Non Omnis Moriar'*

**NEW ZEALAND**  
**1844-1865**

*He whenua, he wahine i mate ai te Tangata.*  
*Women and land are the downfall of men.*  
- Maori proverb

## **Prologue**

*South Taranaki, New Zealand, March 1844*

The *pa* was doomed. Hastily built of light timber and brushwood screens now sagging in places along the perimeter, only the frantic efforts of its garrison had kept the attackers out. But the final moments were at hand and the leader of the attacking Waikato party gestured to his marksmen, indicating the corner of the palisade he wanted devastated.

Heads nodded and fierce eyes bent to check the priming of their prized muskets, while the leader raised his voice. "Through the screens, and into the *pa*! Quench the thirst of your weapons in the blood of Taranaki, feed the hunger of your bellies in the flesh of Taranaki; satisfy the call of your manhood in the loins of Taranaki women. I give them to you!"

"*Aue!*" his warriors agreed, as they waited in an eye-rolling, foot-stamping frenzy for the call that would send them racing for the palisades and hastily-dug trenches. The leader grinned in fierce satisfaction and swept the shining steel tomahawk he carried down and forward.

The muskets blazed, and before the smoke of their discharge blotted out the scene pieces of the palisade flew off under the impact of the heavy lead balls. Inside, screams were heard from those unwary enough to forsake the cover of their trenches.

"Forward!" The leader leapt into the smoke, his party sliding in behind him in a wave which would smash through the flimsy palisades and on into the lonely *pa*, built in the bush for concealment rather than strength. Through the enveloping battle-haze part of his brain registered the despairing cries of defenders who knew what would come bursting out of the smoke and he smiled, every sense heightened.

From the corner of his eye he caught a shadow racing at him, and his spin to face the threat took him clear of the last shreds of smoke. Closing on him out of the thick bush was a tall warrior, his face and body heavily tattooed, his mouth open in a battle-scream. The leader barely had time to note the charging phalanx of warriors before his opponent was upon him, his long *taiaha* swinging and forcing a sweeping parry from the tomahawk.

*They waited* went through his head. *They waited until our guns were empty, then they charged. Now it's taiaha against mere.* And part of him gave the Ngarauru defenders grudging respect. The tongue of the *taiaha* feinted at his face and he disdained it with a snarl and a diagonal cut at his opponent's head, only to have his cut turned by the long shaft. The Waikato warrior broke ground, reached behind to the flax belt that was his only clothing, and freed a heavy greenstone *mere* with his left hand.

The Ngaruahine warrior's eyes flickered at sight of the club and his blue lips parted in a smile. "Bastard Waikato. That won't save you. Won't save your head, either, because I'm going to take it." The two of them circled each other warily, the befeathered head of the *taiaha* quivering and flickering in and out towards the Waikato warriors's face.

"I'm not interested in yours," came the snarled reply. "Taranaki heads aren't worth sharpening the axe that takes them!"

"That so? Real axes hold an edge because they're good steel. Not like that thing –" he broke off to parry another sweep of the tomahawk. "Sister get that for you, did she, whoring herself to the *Pakeha*? No? Your mother, then? Perhaps even... your father?"

The enraged Waikato warrior stabbed his *mere* at the taunting Ngaruahine's head, who easily jerked it aside, crashing the wide end of his *taiaha* into the other's ribs, bringing a grunt of pain.

"Just the flat side," he explained. "I want you alive... Long enough for my relatives to join me in pissing in your face and all over your moko, because that's all it's fit for... and

then I'll take your head. Oh, it's all worked out. Just like the ambush. Never saw us, did you?" For all his patter he was watching carefully and beginning to see how he would end the fight.

They swept up and down the clearing: cut, thrust and parry; the crack of shaft on shaft like gunshots as they echoed the tearing grunts their efforts produced, until the moment when the jeering Ngaruahine appeared to stumble as he backed away from the sweeping tomahawk. Like lighting the Waikato warrior rolled his wrist and brought the razor head hurtling back the other way at his now off-balance opponent, who miraculously bent backwards at the waist at the last moment, letting the weapon graze his flesh and finish wide out to his left.

The heel of the *taiaha* came up in a smooth, scything sweep to catch the Waikato on the temple. The man's head went back; he staggered back then forward again, in time to receive the tongue of the *taiaha* in a full-blooded drive under his chin. Through the length of the polished staff the Ngaruahine felt the bones of the other man's throat crumble and collapse.

The Waikato warrior swayed, dropped his weapons and clapped his hands to his throat, as if he could force handfuls of air past his crushed windpipe and into his straining lungs, staring wide-eyed at his opponent, who smiled evilly, placed the heel of the *taiaha* on his enemy's chest and said, "I lied about taking you alive. But not about anything else."

He pushed gently and the other man toppled backwards like a falling tree, to hit the ground flat on his back, where his heels drummed as death-spasms mocked his fight for life. The Ngaruahine warrior spat in his direction and turned to look across the clearing, where other Waikato bodies, some still twitching, bore witness to the efficiency of his warriors' flanking charge.

As he watched the last musket-man go down before two of his men, the main gate opened for a dozen defenders to erupt through.

The moko adorning the grizzled face of their leader split in a smile. "That was well done, Hori Kingi. And just in time."

"We heard their guns firing, Uncle," explained the tall warrior. "We watched and waited until their weapons were empty, knowing you would be in cover."

The old Ngarauru chief grunted, and spat. "Cowardly weapons. Unworthy of warriors. In my day, warriors faced each other in the open. Now, low-born slaves who fear their betters kill warriors from ambush. Pah!" He spat again.

Hori Kingi nodded. "The tree that cannot bend before the wind will one day be destroyed by it, Te Taparohe. Now, Ngarauru will have muskets. Waikato muskets. And you should not –"

The other broke in. "You're bleeding, Hori Kingi, and here I stand babbling like an old woman!"

"It's nothing" said Hori Kingi. "Cheap at the price, as he opened himself to my *taiaha* in delivering it."

Te Taparohe nodded. "I saw, and was impressed by your judgement. Just a little closer..."

Kingi smiled. "He tried the same cut twice before, so I knew the length of his arm. It can wait. Food first, and rest. Are any Waikato still alive?"

"Not many," said his uncle. "The warriors of Ngaruahine bite deep."

Kingi shrugged. "Food, then, or slaves. Waikato will serve for one or the other. It may keep them from raiding this way again."

"Or offer a reason for their return," replied Taparohe.

"For revenge?" scoffed Kingi. "The *Pakeha* law will prevent that."

“As it did today, nephew?” said the old man slyly.

Kingi guffawed and slapped him on the shoulder. “Worry about that tomorrow, Uncle. Tonight we feast. But I will take his axe. With a proper handle, he might have been pissing in my face. Which reminds me of a promise I made him. But I’ll need your help for that, because a warrior should always keep his word.” And he led the way to where the Waikato lay sprawled on his back.

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Hori Kingi reclined in the hut set aside for him. Through the door he could see the leaping firelight reflected in the flushed faces of his own Ngaruahine warriors and their Ngarauru hosts. The wound he’d taken pained him more than he cared to admit, and he’d left the victory celebrations as soon as he’d eaten a token part of the ‘long pig’ prepared from the thigh-flesh of the fallen Waikato warriors.

A shadow darkened the doorway and he reached reflexively for the hatchet, but relaxed as a voice spoke from outside the doorway. “Hori Kingi, I am Te Hine-Rangi-Marama, come to bathe your wound and attend to your needs. May I enter?”

“Yes,” grunted Kingi, “and welcome.”

A woman ducked through the doorway, her arms full and shielding a mutton-fat bowl which contained a flickering, smoky light. She smiled at him as she laid down what she carried and began to sort among the items.

“Does your wound pain you?” she asked, and Kingi shrugged.

“Not much,” he said, looking up into a pair of dark eyes. She picked up a strip of cloth, doused it in a gourd of water and gently wiped away the blood that had congealed along the track of the tomahawk’s edge. The wound began to bleed again, but she caught the ooze deftly on the cloth and worked her way along to the start of a slash that stretched right across his chest.

Te Hine-Rangi laid down her cloth and opened a flax packet, which she held to the light while she chanted an invocation to the god of healing. Taking pinch after pinch from it, with sure fingers she packed the salve into the cut until it was sealed along its length. Hesitating for a moment over the deeper entry wound, she pondered a moment before making up her mind and reaching for a curved bone needle and some fine flax threads.

She drew together the sides of the wound over Kingi’s ribs as gently as she could, and looked to see if he was ready. He nodded and took a deep breath as she slid the needle into one side of the cut and quickly passed it through to the other before tying it off. She kept going until the gash was closed along its length and finally spoke.

“There will be scarring. More if you allow the wound no rest, less if you do. Do you understand?”

He frowned at her tone. “Who are you, woman?”

“I’ve told you. Te Hine-Rangi-Marama, daughter of Te Taparohe’s second wife, and a healer of renown. Taparohe has asked me to treat your wound and attend to your needs. Sit up.” There was something about her that made him swallow his resentment at her peremptory manner. She wasn’t young, but her body was slender and smooth, while the tumbling mass of black hair framed a face free of blemish and from which her dark eyes spoke of great wisdom. Kingi levered himself gingerly upwards and sat forward.

Te Hine-Rangi-Marama bound a long strip of flax bandage round Kingi’s chest and, laying both hands on the place where she had tied off the bandage, she repeated the invocation.

“Remember, allow the wound rest or it won’t heal. You must remain in this place for seven days. I will watch over you for that time.”

“Seven days?” scoffed Kingi, “And what would I do for seven days, healer?”

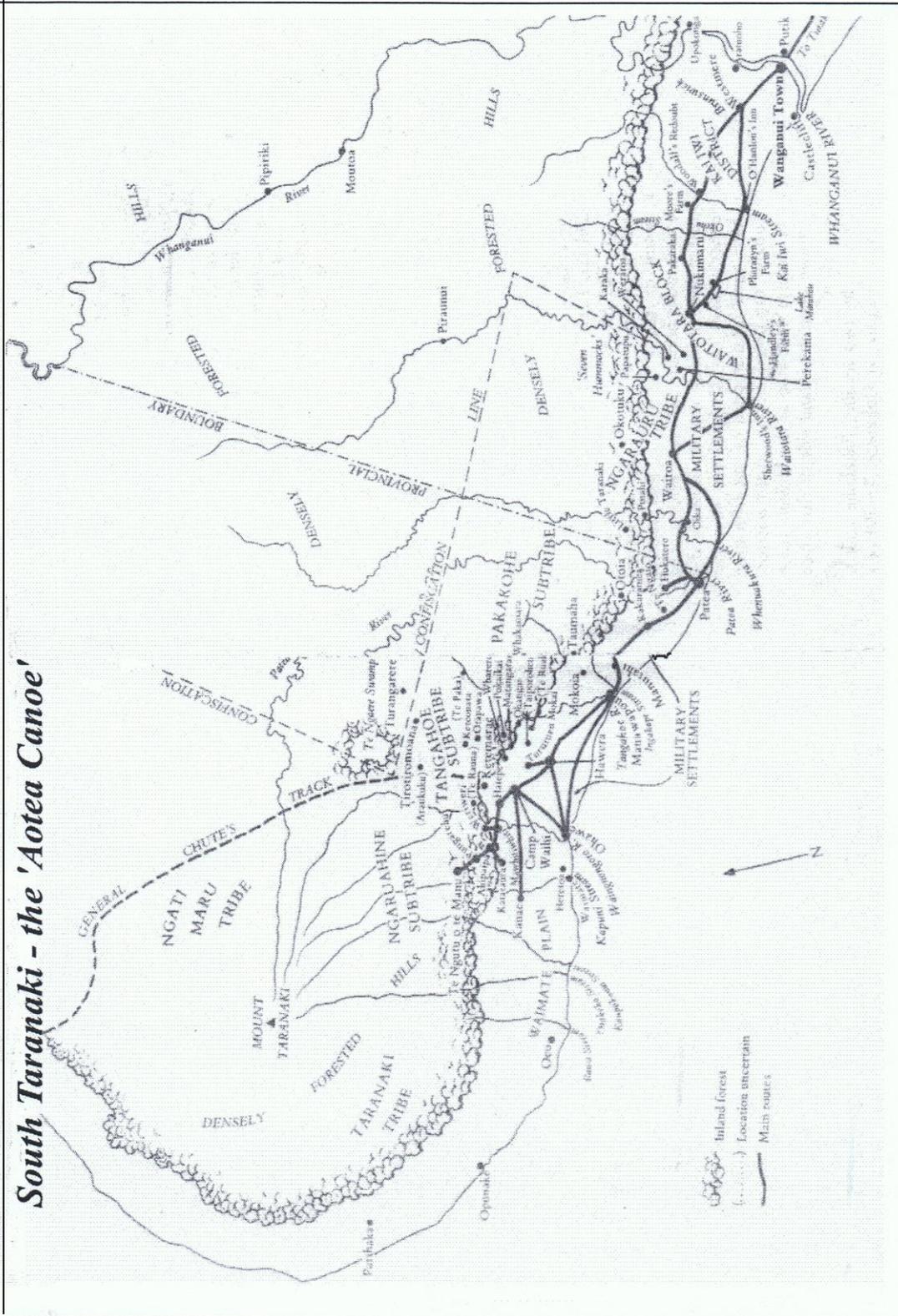
She didn't answer directly. "I watched you when you slew the Waikato leader. You are a warrior of great cunning and vigour, Hori Kingi, and your *taiaha* moves like light across a bubbling stream. I'd like to know more about your *taiaha*, because my people are grateful for it and the protection it offers. For seven days, you can teach me about your *taiaha*."

Kingi frowned, perplexed. "My *taiaha*? Are you mad?" He gestured to where the six-foot fighting-staff leaned against the wall. "That's no weapon for a woman, no matter how much she knows."

She smiled, showing even white teeth. "Not that *taiaha*. Your other one. Lie still, warrior of Ruahine, so your wound doesn't open. The healer can do this." She hitched up the short *piu-piu* that was her only garment, and swung across to straddle him.

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# South Taranaki - the 'Aotea Canoe'



## Chapter 1: New Zealand 1848-1865

Okaiawa, South Taranaki May 1848

The young man had come far and fast. The dust of his journey was caked on his boots, in his trousers, on the heavy woollen shirt he'd put on that morning against the autumn chill and even in the thick beard covering his throat. Now he slapped at the dust as he strode across the marae to the house where a leader lay dying. It stood behind the great meeting-house, a little apart from the others clustered in its shadow, like ducklings around a mother.

The man paused before the door and eased off his heavy leather ankle-boots, grunting in relief as his toes flexed and spread in a freedom they hadn't known for many days. With a final stroke at his beard he ducked through the low doorway into the gloomy interior. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he inclined his head in greeting to the old man who squatted at the head of the low bed supporting the form of another man.

"Greetings to you, Te Ururoa, to your knowledge and your wisdom. Greetings."

The *tohunga's* eyes gleamed, but he made no other acknowledgement of the other's courtesy before turning back to the bed and launching into a droning chant as he flicked water from green plants over the head and chest of the chief who was dying. He broke off, laid aside the plants, and reached into a gourd for more plant material which he held up to the roof in ritual offering before placing the material in his mouth and chewing it. After a moment he spat it into his palm, kneaded the slush with the fingers of his other hand and resumed the chant as he placed the chewed material under the lips of the unconscious man and against his teeth. The *tohunga's* voice rose in pitch as he picked up the plants again then stopped abruptly.

The patient's eyes flickered, and as he blinked his way back into consciousness the newcomer stepped forward so he could be seen. "Father" he said. "Father, it's Joseph. I've returned from Tamaki-makau-rau. I came as soon as I heard."

The figure on the bed considered a moment, its eyes remarkably clear, then asked, "And how did you come, my son?"

The young man blinked in surprise. "By steamship, father, to Ngamotu, then by horse. Are you in pain?"

"No more than the old should be, Joseph. Te Ururoa looks after me well."

Joseph's eyes flickered to the *tohunga*, who looked back at him with undisguised malevolence, and spoke again to the bed. "Father, a doctor comes to the mission at Heretoa. Shall I bring him to you?"

There was a snarl from the *tohunga*. "Can the *Pakeha* replace a heart that is old? Are they so clever? Can their healers say 'Hori Kingi, open your chest so I may place this within?' Your father has opened many a chest in his time, Hohepa, and offered many a heart to the war-god. If you were the son he deserves, you would know this, and stay here in defence of your people rather than dwelling on the marae of the *Pakeha* at Tamaki-makau-rau."

"Enough, Te Ururoa. Enough." The invalid's voice was surprisingly strong. "My son serves his people in his way, as I have served in mine. His are the ways of the future, old man, and his skills the skills of the *Pakeha*. He serves as Hohepa Otene of the white man's church, and he..."

"And you are Hori Kingi of another white man's church," interrupted a clearly angry priest. "How can the ways of the *Pakeha* benefit Maori when not even the white men can agree what their ways are?"

"That is not for..." the other began, but stopped and gasped to clutch at his chest.

“Father!” cried the young man, and jumped forward to lay his hands on the thick welt of scar tissue that ran from one side of his father’s chest to the other. Through his fingers he could feel the faint thready beat as his father’s heart laboured within his chest. The tattooed face contorted in pain.

“Can you help him, wise one?” he asked, and the *tohunga*, his hands busy among gourds and wooden bowls, grunted.

“Of course I can, Hohepa Otene. The ways of our people are mine to know, and mine to use for their benefit. Can you, with your face bare of tattoos say the same of your *Pakeha* ways?” He poured a dark liquid into a small gourd, added water and muttered an incantation as he raised the mixture to the roof. “Hold up your father’s head.”

The *tohunga* held the gourd to the patient’s lips and fed him the liquid in sips. Gradually the twisted face relaxed and the old man’s eyelids began to droop. “He’ll sleep now,” said Te Ururoa, putting down the gourd, “even if his faith in the ways of his fathers is not as strong as it was. You have seen to that.”

Otene’s hand shot out and snatched up the gourd an instant before Te Ururoa could reclaim it. Dipping a finger in the lees at the bottom of the container, he sniffed and then licked it.

“Laudanum,” he pronounced, his eyes locked with those of the priest. “You’re a fraud, Te Ururoa. D’you think my time among the *Pakeha*’s been wasted?”

“I use what I must and what I can,” snarled the *tohunga*. “At least I haven’t forgotten my name or my people. Can you say the same, Otene-who-would-be-a-*Pakeha*?”

“Yes I can. I serve our people in the ways that seem best to me. Before I went to live among the *Pakeha*, I dreamt I stood on the beach where I had gone to gather seafood. And the waves rolled in so I couldn’t reach the rocks where the *paua* were. I ordered the waves to roll back so I could gather food for my people. But the waves wouldn’t roll back. So I asked them to at least stop, and give me time to think. Instead, as I stood there my feet, then my knees, then my waist and finally my chest became wet. And in the end, Te Ururoa, I had to turn my back and walk away to find food elsewhere. I live among the *Pakeha* so I can find those other ways.

“Old man, I do not forget my name, any more than my father has forgotten his. Just as he became Hori Kingi when he embraced white ways, so I have become Hohepa Otene, Joseph Orton. Nothing remains of who I was before.”

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### ***Manawapou, South Taranaki, May 1854***

The talk had surged backwards and forwards for three days now, and attitudes were hardening. To the old priest’s surprise a clear point of unanimity was emerging, and he leaned forward. “It’s Te Rauparaha, and his obsession. He’s managed to work up some of the crowd.”

Otene stirred. “This *kingitanga*, you mean? You think it’s that important?”

“Yes, it’s important,” said Tauke Te Hapimana. “Those who don’t want to see the *Pakeha* take more land are saying Maori must stand together. End the arguments and the memories of what our ancestors did to one another. End the mistrust and the taking of revenge. Become one with each other. According to Te Rauparaha, that will only happen if we stand united behind a king, in the same way the *Pakeha* stand behind their Queen Victoria. That’s why the English have conquered the world, he says. You know he’s met her?”

Otene’s brow furrowed. “Met who?”

“Queen Victoria. Oh, Tamehana Te Rauparaha’s a well-travelled man, and he’s a great talker. He met her in England. He was well received – according to him. It might be true. He’s certainly got a way with him.”

Otene grunted. “His father had a way with him, too, if he wasn’t well received.”

Te Hapimana nodded. “His father was a killer – the best I ever saw. Long club, short club, tomahawk – didn’t matter. I knew the *tohunga* who took off his toes.”

“I thought that was just a story, *matua*.”

“No, it’s true. Te Rauparaha – the father – became convinced that when a warrior sprang at his enemy, the muscles of his little toe moved first. If you knew what to look for, you would guess his intent. So he had his removed, with a sharpened shell.”

Otene’s eyebrows rose. “Well, it worked, Tauke. He died in his bed. About the same time as my father.”

The priest nodded. “Five or six years ago now. And sent many to *Te Po* before him.”

“You think anything will come of this *kingitanga*?” asked Otene.

“Ae. The time’s right, because there’s work for a king to do. Getting the tribes to stand together won’t be easy. Getting them to forget their past will be hard, but if they’ve got something – or someone – they can follow, I think it’ll happen. And the question of land will give the King Movement the impetus it needs.”

“There’s certainly opposition to more land sales,” agreed Otene. “But it’s much more than land. It’s numbers, *matua*. I’ve lived among the *Pakeha*. There are more and more every year; every ship that comes to the Waitemata or the Hauraki brings another hundred – sometimes more. And they keep coming, day after day.”

The old man looked at Otene, his head on one side and the eyes bright in the tattooed face. “And you’ve seen it, Hohepa. Your father was also a man of two worlds, but the ways of the *Pakeha* didn’t sit as well with him as they do with you. Tell me – how long did you live there among the *Pakeha*?”

The man who had grown up under Tauke’s tutelage thought a moment before he finally spoke. “Twelve years, *matua*. Two years after you began to teach me those things a leader must know.”

Te Hapimana inclined his head at the compliment. “But you must have learned many things I could never teach you, Hohepa. Many things, in such a time. What was the greatest of these?”

Otene lowered his head and thought while the *tohunga* waited patiently. At length the square face lifted. “The greatest thing I learned was that the children of Rangi and Papa can no longer hold this land to themselves. There are more *Pakeha* than there are fish in the sea. And if we have no hope of turning them away, then we have to find a way to live with them and what they bring. And that’s why I went to the Mission at Heretoga, to learn the ways of the *Pakeha* from Reverend Skevington. Even as I learned the ways of the Maori from you, *matua*.”

“And did you call Skevington *matua* also, Hohepa?” asked Te Hapimana.

Otene smiled.

“No *matua*, he wouldn’t have been pleased by such a pagan name. To all of us who study the ways of the *Pakeha* church – he was ‘reverend’.”

“And why do you study the ways of the *Pakeha* church, my son?” came the gentle question and Otene paused again.

“I thought the *Pakeha* god must be the strongest. He gave them great ships to cross the world and guns to work slaughter among His enemies. And I saw how the diseases which kill Maori have little effect on them.”

“And you think differently now?”

“I do. *Pakeha* learning is what makes them great, not their god. At Heretua I was able to learn what they learn, and in Tamaki-makau-rau I was able to live amongst them and watch.”

“Is that why you would not accept the tattoo?” asked the *tohunga* suddenly, and the younger man nodded.

“I’d thought a lot about it before the time came for the *moko*. To the *Pakeha* a tattooed man is a savage, to be looked down upon, because they understand and respect no way other than their own. I have no *moko*, so I’m like them and I’ve even preached their religion to them in their church.”

“A great thing, Hohepa. And if the greatest thing you learned of them was their numbers – then what brings them here must surely be great also? So what is it?”

“It’s land. Their appetite for land is as fierce as the struggles of the hooked shark as he’s drawn to the spears. And that’s where we began, isn’t it? We must stop further land sales. And if this idea of Te Rauparaha’s means we stop the *Pakeha* drowning our people, he’ll have my support.”

“Yes, my son” said Te Hapimana, “As it is often said: land is permanent, man disappears. Mind you it’s also said women and land are the downfall of men.”

Years later, Hohepa Otene would remember his words.

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*But there’s more to it than Te Rauparaha wanting to find us a Maori king thought Otene as he sat outside in the last of the light that evening, over a book he didn’t see but which discouraged anyone from talking to him. There’s something about the Tainui – speaker after speaker of theirs hammered the point about how the Pakeha need to be stopped.*

And they did. There was no doubt about it. Hohepa Otene believed that as passionately as he had done when he’d confronted Te Ururoa over his father’s deathbed six years before. During those six years he had laboured to convince all the *Pakeha* he met, while winning a reputation for steadiness, learning and faith within the Methodist church, of the relationship between Maori and land. And more particularly, the idea that because land was the mother of all, it could never be the property of one.

*And the peoples of Tainui know that too he realised. More than any of us – and so they should. The Tainui lands, set in the valley of the great Waikato river, lay in the path of any Pakeha advance south from Tamaki-makau-rau. Yes – that explains the hard words of Rewi Manga and Tawhana Tikaokao he thought. Tainui’s fighting generals came closer than any to urging armed resistance today. In fact, the tomahawk was Tikaokao’s idea.*

That day, a tomahawk had been passed from hand to hand among the gathering and flourished by more than one speaker as an indication of his intentions towards those prepared to sell. And a Bible had been buried in the soil before the meeting-house as a less dramatic affirmation of the same determination.

*So – are the fiery words of Rewi and Tikaokao an indication of their intention to support us in Taranaki, or are they an attempt to buy allegiance among the tribes of Taranaki for the fight they’ll one day have to make themselves? He shook his head. It really didn’t matter. What mattered, if weapons were taken up, was that they be taken up successfully.*

*Otene, Otene, why do you think this way? You’ve walked in the footsteps of your father, along the paths of peace since he made the decision to do so. You’ve struck no blow since you were seventeen and he counselled you to observe, learn and remember the ways of the Pakeha because a wise man allies himself with those he cannot hope to beat.*

He recognised the truth of this, because he had learned from *Pakeha* only too willing to tell him, of the favours enjoyed by the once-great warrior tribes of Ngapuhi, Te Arawa and Ngati Porou who had embraced the *Pakeha* and his ways because of the economic and political benefits it had brought them. But that was their business, even though the *Pakeha* would insist on pointing out how those tribes had prospered in their subjection.

Another truth he recognised just as strongly was the likelihood of the Taranaki and Tainui peoples preferring death on their feet to life on their knees.

He sighed, shook his head and closed the book. Where should he stand in that? He seemed to have no influence on the *Pakeha*; none of his work in and through the church for more than ten years had earned him the sort of respect that compelled attention, yet he was increasingly looked upon as a leader of his people, and the shade of his father would never let him stand aside from that. If only the *Pakeha* would keep a promise, just once – then how much smoother the path would be.

He felt restless and tense, as he always did when he was troubled, and he knew that the counsel of those in the meeting-house wouldn't help. There was another way he favoured, and as if on cue a woman slipped out of the doorway. She glanced at him and moved closer.

“You're troubled, Hohepa?”

“Is it so obvious?”

“Yes. Your brows come down – so,” and her finger traced a line on his forehead. She smiled, and stepped close to him. “And there are other indications.” He gasped as he felt her other hand.

“Come,” she said, glancing at the curtained door. “Come, and I will give you peace.”

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### **Auckland, September 1855**

There was nothing about Thomas Gore Browne he liked, decided Robert Wynyard. Nothing – and for a career diplomat that was a major admission. Gore Browne had a way of looking down his nose at people that was little short of...well...equine. He also had a way of greeting other people's opinions with the sort of sniff a horse gave as it tested the quality and taste of a new piece of fodder. Not to mention – and here the normally reserved and balanced Wynyard fought a flash of irritation – the fact that Gore Browne's rare expressions of laughter sounded like nothing so much as a high-pitched whinny. Especially when he was judging others – something he liked to do with a readiness that saw him do it often.

*Steady on, Rob, he thought. The man's here by appointment of the queen. He can't be a complete idiot.* And he put down his glass as he sought a reply to the question he'd been asked.

*Yes he can, and he wouldn't be the first* nagged the critical part of his mind. *He's not a patch on George Grey. No balance, no vision. What's he done except hop from regiment to regiment all his life?*

“Interesting question, sir,” he heard himself say. “My own view is that they'd resist.” *And he's bought all his commissions – never been promoted on his merits, which makes it difficult to decide if he has any.*

“Would they though? Really?” came back Gore Browne. “How seriously do we need to think about that?”

Wynyard puffed out his cheeks. “Well, the Tainui people – they're situated just south of Auckland if you recall – can muster six hundred warriors without trouble. Perhaps half as many again if they scraped the barrel.”

“Six hundred?” scoffed the new governor of New Zealand. “Six hundred half-naked savages, Wynyard. How’ll they stand against British regulars?”

Wynyard shrugged. “You may well be surprised, Governor,” he said. “Those of us who live here by Maori permission can make a guess of sorts. And my guess is that six hundred Tainui – or any other Maori – will test anything Her Majesty has in New Zealand.” He held up a hand as Gore Browne began to bridle. “With all respect Governor, you’ll never bring Maori to the sort of battle your redcoats will want to fight. I’ve seen the country south of Auckland – and it’s what you and I would call jungle, for the most part. Oh, it’s fertile enough – but it’s years away from being farmland. And if it’s to become farmland, it’ll need to be by and with the consent of its Maori owners.”

Gore Browne waved impatiently. “Yes, yes, Wynyard. But Her Majesty and the...ah, Maoris have an understanding regarding land. That was my brief from the Foreign Office, y’know. That the treaty Hobson signed made the Crown the sole purchaser of Maori land, with the express intention of stopping them being swindled.”

Wynyard turned away, picked up his glass and screwed his eyes shut for a moment. *He even thinks like a horse. Is that unfair to horses?* He heard himself say, “Yes, Governor, that was the intention. But I’ve been Administrator of this colony long enough to recognise that demand for farmland is greater than the supply. The Crown is undoubtedly the sole agent for the transfer of land from Maori to ourselves – but where does the Crown stand in the matter of land sought by our people and not made available by theirs?”

Gore Browne’s forehead wrinkled. “Eh? What? Why wouldn’t it be available? The Crown’ll pay a fair price. The LMS won’t have it any other way!”

“Yes, Governor, but I doubt the Maori will consult the London Missionary Society before they decide whether or not to sell their land. And quite frankly, that’s what we’re seeing now. Perhaps you’ve heard of the King Movement?”

“Eh? King Movement? What king? Whose king?”

Wynyard stifled a sigh at the very last moment. It was going to be a long afternoon.

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### ***Auckland, New Zealand, November 1855***

Gore Browne glanced at the two men in front of him. “Gentlemen, I appreciate the time and effort involved in your journey to Auckland. I had thought I might travel to you for the counsel I seek, but...” He blew out his cheeks and waved at the paper-strewn table sited to catch the light from the big window.

“Of course, sir,” said the larger of the two men seated across the low table. “One understands the pressures and tribulations of your labour. Eh, Turton?”

“As much as one understands the help available in the Lord to overcome them,” agreed the Reverend Henry Turton in his broad Yorkshire accent. “And Mr Parris and I are happy to assist Your Excellency in any way our poor wit can serve.”

“Reverend Turton, your wit is anything but poor,” replied Gore Browne. “In fact, I have every confidence your joint wisdom will guide me through the process of serving this land to the best effect. And with it, Her Majesty, of course. But I’m remiss, gentlemen, in not offering you some refreshment. Tea? Coffee? Something else?”

Turton cut in swiftly. “Tea would be most welcome, Your Excellency. Most welcome, eh Parris?” His tone defied Parris to suggest anything more stimulating.

A footman appeared in answer to Gore Browne’s tug on a silent bell-pull, and as the door closed behind him Gore Browne shifted his weight in the chair and cleared his

throat. "I spoke, gentlemen, of your joint wisdom. Mr Parris, you are recommended to me as one highly-thought of by the Maori of the Taranaki area; as are you, Reverend. Both of you have an unrivalled grasp of their manners, customs and language."

"Most kind of you, Excellency," murmured Parris.

Gore Browne rose and walked over to the window, his hands under the tails of his long morning coat. Gazing from the window, he spoke almost absently as he watched the activity on the harbour below.

"This is an empty land, gentlemen. I'm led to believe it is slightly larger than Britain, but I know it to hold the smallest fraction of Britain's population. Now, the numbers of its peoples has long been a concern for our mother country, and as men of the world you will be aware that the recent ending of judicial transportation to Australia has only intensified that concern."

He turned from the window and looked at Parris and Turton. "I'm also told, by people who understand the infernal things, that these...these engines that produce steam... need a safety device to release the pressure when it would otherwise cause the engine to burst."

"Ah, yes," contributed Parris. "The term is a 'safety valve' I believe." A bemused Turton wondered what was coming next.

Gore Browne inclined his head in acknowledgement. "My masters in the Foreign Office see a need for the Empire to furnish a...a 'safety-valve' for the mother country. And I'm aware of further sentiment in Whitehall that strategic requirement would have it as no bad thing were the flag to fly in as many parts of the globe as may be effected – with due regard to cost, of course. You follow me?"

They did indeed, and each looked gratified at being admitted to politics at such a level. But after a pause for the serving of tea, Gore Browne was off again.

"I understand the area in question is largely empty. Even more empty than the country at large. Is this so?"

Parris looked at Turton. "Well, Excellency" he said, cautiously, "it was. Certainly. Thirty years ago there was heavy fighting between the Taranaki tribes and those from the north. The result was depopulation."

"Caused how?"

"Some by death in battle. But the majority through flight as the tribes fled south to avoid those armed with superior weapons."

"And the conquerors?"

"Did not stay, Excellency," spoke up Turton. "Their purpose was the taking of slaves, not the conquest of land. Also, what they termed as 'the pursuit of *mana*'. Or as we might have it, 'warrior glory'. They are a warlike people."

Gore Browne sniffed. "So I'm given to understand. But essentially, the people of your area – this Taranaki – gave up their lands?"

"It could be argued so," said Parris, again cautiously. "Much of the Taranaki – and the area around our city of New Plymouth in particular – was bought at the time by an English land company."

Gore Browne nodded. "Mr Wakefield, I believe?"

"Precisely, sir. May I observe how very well-informed your Excellency is?"

Gore Browne waved a hand. "Reconnaissance, Mr Parris. Reconnaissance. Indispensable to success in the military – and elsewhere, from my experience."

"And are you contemplating a military undertaking, Excellency?" asked Turton.

"I hope not, Reverend. The Foreign Office dislikes such expenditure unless results can be guaranteed. But I will not shrink from it if needs must." He put down his cup with a click and pushed it away from the edge of the table.

“Gentlemen, let me be plain. I intend to encourage the transfer of land in this empty province of yours by every means at my disposal, short of outright seizure. And I will contemplate even that, if the law needs to be upheld. Hobson’s treaty made the Crown the heritor of any Maori wishing to dispose of lands by sale.”

Parris looked speculatively at Turton, who stared back at him from his hooded eyes. “Heritor. I see, Excellency,” he said.

“Their future as a race – ” said Turton, then stopped.

“Yes?” asked the governor, as Turton hesitated.

“Their future as a race,” he finally said, “surely encompasses the skills we can offer them. The word of God and the ways of agriculture and service. I’ve long had an eye to the training of these simple folk in ways and customs which will lead them from the depths of their ignorance to the sunlight of God’s word. In which, and under which, all things are possible.”

“Amen to that, Reverend,” echoed Gore Browne, the faintest of smiles escaping from the splendour of his moustache.

“Their possession of land confers something of a spirit of independence on them,” said Parris. “They have a notion – *turangawaewae*, or ‘where we stand’ – which emphasises their link with the land. Separating them from that notion would assist you, would it not, Turton?”

“Oh definitely,” said Turton eagerly. “Anything which turns the Maori from fighting over land to living from it will assist the work of building domestic schools for them. The cause I seek to make my life’s work.”

“There we are, then,” said Gore Browne. “We’re agreed the throwing open of land for settlement can only bring good – to the Empire, to our present settlers and future settlers, and to the native people. Gentlemen, I truly believe the colony will come to watch what we – or rather you – will achieve in the Taranaki with no small interest. And even envy. Reverend, your destiny will be to shape your Church into a great and fruitful partnership with the Crown. And Mr Parris, your skills in brokering the transfer of badly-needed land from native to colonist will, I assure you, soon come to the most favourable attention of the Crown.”

Gore Browne railed privately against the fate which had seen him moved to New Zealand, a political backwater, when reputations were being made and honours won closer to home. Any of my colleagues can fight in godforsaken places like the Crimea he thought, with some satisfaction. But how many of them can deliver the Empire a whole country?

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### ***Okotuku village of the Ngarauru people, South Taranaki, February 1856***

The girl spun high over the stream, swung back on the rope and flung both feet forward to gain greater speed for the release. When it came her feet flicked back up and over her head as she spun backwards, twice, through the air to follow her arms into the pool in a dive that was as graceful as it was precise.

“Aue!” said the woman stripping flax under a tree to her companion. “That one’s more like a bird than a girl!”

“Makes a pretty good fish, too,” said the other, gesturing with her head to where the girl was gliding through the water to the bank. “How old is Marama now? Fourteen?”

“No, Hapeti, she’s not twelve yet!”

“Well you’d know, you’re her mother. But she’s so tall! Easy to mistake her age – bet the boys do!”

“Some of them. But she puts them in their place smartly. Marama knows her own mind, and isn’t bothered sharing it with anyone!”

“Gets that from her mother, along with the legs!” Both women laughed again.

“What’s she doing now?” asked Hapeti and Te Hine-Rangi glanced up. Marama had swum back to the edge of the pool and was treading water while she called to the smaller children who were hesitating on the rope.

“Come on!” her voice floated across to where the women sat. “Just think about flying like a bird! I’ll be here to help you. Come on – it’s easy!”

“She’s always been good with the smaller children,” said her mother. “They love her. Whoopsssss...”

A boy of about eight had taken his courage in both hands and swung out across the pool. Eyes screwed shut, he let go at the mid-point and plummeted like a stone into the centre with a terrific splash. Marama was there in half a dozen smooth, powerful strokes, reaching out for him as he broke the surface, spluttering, gasping and clearly delighted with himself. She helped the breathless boy to the side, making a fuss of him, then looked up to call the others.

“See that? Pare did it – easy, isn’t it Pare? Now who’s next?”

“Me!” shouted an even smaller girl. Te Hine-Rangi smiled.

“She going to take after her mother and be a healer?” asked Hapeti, cleaning the scrapings from the mussel shell she was using on the flax.

Te Hine-Rangi frowned. “I don’t think so. Oh, she’s quick enough – already she knows almost as much as I do about herbs and healing, but I’ve told her very little. Didn’t need to – she’s watched me since she was a baby, and took it all in. That girl learns the same way she breathes, and nothing’s any bother to her.”

“So why won’t she use a gift like that?” asked Hapeti, and Te Hine-Rangi chewed her lip as she watched the lithe form of her daughter scramble up the slope across the stream.

“It’s not that she won’t use it,” she said at length. “It’s just that she can do so much more. Not that she really knows what she wants yet. But I do, Hapeti. I don’t want her to stay here and become someone’s wife and someone’s mother – not that there’s anything wrong with that. It’s what we both are!”

Hapeti nodded thoughtfully. “I think I know what you mean.”

Her friend shot her a grateful look. “That might have sounded a bit...stuck up, but that’s not what I meant. I’ve seen things, heard things in the wind, and...oh, this will sound so stupid!”

Hapeti put down her mussel shell and gently took her friend’s hand. “Hine, it won’t sound stupid. People know the old gods speak to you, and they have nothing but respect for you because of that. And many more believe in your prophecies. So, what is it? What have you heard in the wind?”

Te Hine-Rangi sighed and looked away into the distance with eyes that had gone opaque. “I hear the sound of feet,” she said, simply. “The thunder of many feet; some in the *haka*, others in the noise the *Pakeha* soldiers make as they wheel and turn and stamp. I see trouble. Last night I dreamed my man fought with a *Pakeha* soldier in a red coat; and they fought with potatoes in a field of corn.”

“Good thing too,” exclaimed Hapeti. “You can’t kill anyone with a potato!”

But her friend didn’t smile.

“A time is coming, Hapeti, a time when our people will need their leaders. That’s what I think my Marama should do – learn the ways of the *Pakeha*. Because the *Pakeha* ways will swallow the land as a *taniwha* swallows the creatures of the river and sea.”

“And turn her back on her people?” asked a horrified Hapeti. Te Hine-Rangi shook her head. “What does her father say?”

“She’ll never forget her own. But she’ll learn what she must, and my man, Te Rehi knows that. The church is proud of her *Pakeha* learning and her Christian belief. It’ll send her to Tamaki-makau-rau, to live the *Pakeha* life and learn the things they deem important. And she will return to lead her people. My daughter is going away, Hapeti. Oh, not yet – but in the end, she’ll go away.”

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### ***New Plymouth, Taranaki, June 1859***

The winter rain slashed across the face of the window, but the man standing on the other side of the streaming glass didn’t see it. His mind was elsewhere, reflecting on a conversation of three months before, a conversation that had plainly outlined the governor’s intentions for the province of Taranaki.

Not easily intimidated himself, the square-jawed and broad-shouldered Highlander could recognise an inflexible will when he met one, and he’d met one in Thomas Gore Browne. Aware that his contemporary, Robert Wynyard, considered Gore Browne a shallow buffoon, Donald McLean had been unprepared for the strength of conviction he’d encountered. Gore Browne would shift heaven and earth to bring New Zealand firmly within the Empire, and had made it plain he would begin with Taranaki.

McLean silently congratulated Gore Browne on his choice of sources. Parris and Turton were men he’d have chosen himself, and part of his mind wondered how Gore Browne had come up with them. Not that it mattered, since Gore Browne’s thought had moved beyond what they had been able to tell him.

“New Plymouth,” he’d said, “is what my sailing acquaintances term ‘an ironbound coast’. It has no harbour, and goods must be unloaded offshore and lightered in, which limits one to fair weather. Until ships can unload in any weather, the port – and the province – will not develop.” Gore Browne had stood up and looked at him down the length of his nose.

“Your experience in purchasing native land led to your appointment as Native Secretary. Now Mr Secretary, I require land in the Taranaki which will accommodate the building of a harbour through which that part of the Colony may grow and develop. I am persuaded the province was, until recently, largely empty and there is no sustainable title to the land. I am further advised that the natives of the –” he broke off to peer at a paper – “the Sugar Loaf islands, just off New Plymouth, exist in a deplorable state of deprivation and fear –”

Ah. Mr Carrington’s been busy with you too thought McLean, but he kept his face impassive as he nodded agreement.

“– so that title ought to be readily available. Consider – the province has been emptied of its owners and inhabitants. I am informed that as native custom indicates tenure of land depends upon one’s ability to hold it, such natives as are left there ought to be perfectly amenable to the notion of selling and many have already done so. I scent an opportunity to advance England’s interests and those of Her Majesty’s people at one and the same time. Hence my interest – my very deep interest, I may add – in the discovery of land fit for a harbour in the environs of what will one day be the major city of the Taranaki. You understand?”

McLean understood perfectly, and in the last week information had come to him that would make Gore Browne a very happy man. He stepped over to the door and spoke to one of his clerks.

“Lepper – a wee note, if ye would, tae the three appointments I have for Wednesday, tellin’ them I’m away on urgent business. No, make that ‘the governor’s business’. And send the laddie doon tae the livery stable wi’ a note that I’ll be needin’ the three best horses he’s available. And tell Scown an’ Bothwell they’re comin’ wi’ me tae Waitara.”

He glanced at the tall Maori sitting in the corner chair and broke into the language he’d learned so well while labouring in the Auckland backblocks. “Potae, it’s no night to be setting out again. I’ll lodge you in a tavern tonight, and tomorrow ye’ll take my word to Te Teira. Tell him I’m more than happy with his message. I’ll come to him in two days to speak further about the land he wishes to sell. And tell him to have no fear of Wiremu Kingi te Rangitaake. Or anyone else who wants to put him off the notion, for we are doing the governor’s work.”

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## **Mangere, Auckland, late 1859**

The thunder of the *haka* rolled across the beaten earth of the marae, resounding to the sky and bouncing from the buildings lining the open space. The two men who watched from the edge of the large square mouthed the words as the young men who performed the challenge smashed their hands against chest and thigh.

*“Ka ngapu te whenua – The land is riven by storm  
Ka haere nga tangata ki whea? – Where shall the people stand?  
E Ruaumoko, purutia! – Oh earthquake god, hold fast!  
Tāwhia te tangata! – Oh people bind tightly!  
Kia u, Kia ita! – Be firm, be firm!  
A ita! – Hold, hold!  
Kia mau, kia mau, te whenua! – Hold fast the land!”*

“Right ideas there, eh?” said one, and the other opened his eyes, the sudden gleam of their whites against his heavily-tattooed face for all the world like an opening box.

“Hmmm? Oh yes, right ideas, right words. But is that all?”

The other frowned. “What d’you mean?”

“Will they back up their challenge with deeds, or is it all piss and wind?”

“They’ll do what Te Wherowhero wants them to do.”

The other man snorted in derision. “That’s all right then. Except that Te Wherowhero doesn’t know what he wants them to do himself.”

“Tikaokao, he’s the king. He seeks our counsel and leads accordingly.”

“No he doesn’t. Most of our leaders want decisive action over land sales and we’re not getting any. The King’s sitting in there –” and he jerked his head at the meeting-house – “saying one thing one moment and another the next. Rewi, you’re a legend as a fighting warrior and people listen to you. Haven’t you just said the king ought to listen?”

“I said he seeks counsel and leads accordingly.”

“And what exactly does ‘accordingly’ mean?”

“Whatever Potatau Te Wherewhero wants it to mean” said an exasperated Rewi Manga Maniapoto. “Do I have to remind you that’s *King* Potatau Te Wherewhero – the man who speaks for a united and unified Maori.”

Tikaokao snorted. “But who’s listening? Not the *Pakeha*. More and more land passes to them, and every month I hear of another block sold, and another after that. I know only the governor can buy our land – but does that make it any better?”

Rewi looked at him closely. “This isn’t just about land, is it, Tikaokao?”

The other hesitated. “No, it isn’t. It’s about how many of them are coming here. Co-operating with them isn’t working, because it takes two to co-operate. They’re like flies on shit and the time’s coming...”

“That’s not for us to say, my friend.”

“But it’s up to us to give leadership. And when we’re called on – hadn’t we better be ready? If we want to do it right?”

“What d’you mean?”

“I’m not going to mince my words – we’re the war-leaders of Tainui, and we need to start thinking about how we fight, where we fight, and most of all, what we fight with. Let’s start with where. I’ve got relatives in Taranaki among Te Atiawa, and one of them’s Wiremu Kingi Te Rangitaake. And Taranaki’s fight is everybody’s fight...”

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## **New Plymouth, Taranaki, 7 July 1860**

*Colonel Thomas Robert Gore Browne, CB, Governor of New Zealand.*

*Your Excellency,*

*I have the honour to submit my report into the incident of 23 June inst. at the area known as Puketakauere here in the Taranaki, and I do so in two parts, as under:*

*Item: An account of the action from its beginning to its unhappy end, which may be deposited in your Excellency's official archives and copied to the histories of the forces involved, AND*

*Item: The following. An account and appraisal of the conduct of the said incident, together with an appreciation of its significance. The latter account is for your Excellency's eyes only and is intended to assist you, should you think it germane, in the formulation of policy towards the vexatious question of land transfer within the province.*

*1. In view of your Excellency's decree of 20th April inst. ordering a suspension of hostilities in the Taranaki, there seems little doubt that the action of the Atiawa chief, Te Hapurona, in building a fighting pa at Puketakauere – a scant mile south of our garrison at Camp Waitara – was intended to provoke a response that would in turn serve as a demonstration.*

*2. Any careful appreciation of the natives' building and fortification of a second and ostentatious pa at this site where one already existed ought to have sought a reason. It is deplorably clear that such an appreciation was not made.*

*3. An otherwise sound attacking strategy foundered upon the success of this attempt to draw our forces in upon Onukukaitara, the new, and presumably more formidable, fortification. It transpired that the new pa was virtually empty and a most deadly execution of the attacking force was carried out by Maories well-entrenched among the fortifications of the old pa of Puketakauere, which is nowhere more than forty yards from its newer companion.*

*4. I have interviewed survivors of Col. Gold's attack, and had one veteran of the Mutiny and the Crimea describe the Maori response as 'hotter' than anything he encountered in either campaign.*

*5. There is no doubt that our forces were encouraged to take this action lightly, and it is the writer's opinion that their readiness to break in disorder found some basis in that expectation of an easy victory. In the event, the Maories provided exceptionally strong resistance both on the field and in their savage tomahawking of our men in pursuit. In that context I wish, now, to turn to an examination of this affair's probable significance.*

*6. It cannot be denied that this action revealed great competence among the Maories in areas both tactical and practical. Te Hapurona provoked a battle on ground of his own choosing and directed the course of HM forces' response by outwitting our commanders on the ground in the matter of the empty pa. It seems axiomatic that future attempts to enforce our policies must take heed of the ability of this warlike people to think tactically.*

*7. There may be a strategic dimension also worthy of consideration, and in offering it now I balance the risk of exceeding my brief against my duty, as Commander of HM Forces in the Colony, to advise your Excellency as best I can.*

*For this I return to my first point (ubi supra) and assert, as unequivocally as possible, that the story of Puketakauere will not be lost upon those Natives opposed to a British*

*presence in the land and who gather in the presence of the Tainui chieftain, Potatau Te Wherowhero.*

*Therefore I would argue that the effect of this reverse for us upon the negotiations which your Excellency has commenced with the representatives of this so-called Maori King may be detrimental, and I would counsel your Excellency to show both magnanimity and a spirit of tolerance in negotiations of the immediate future. In that regard, I suggest that the Puketakauere affair be publicly acknowledged and played-down as an unfortunate business precipitated through accident and miscommunication alone, and will not be permitted to interfere with your Excellency's determination to govern the Colony in the interests of all.*

*I have the honour to remain, Sir,  
Your obedient Servant*

*Thomas Simson Pratt  
Major General Commanding HM Forces  
New Zealand.*

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### ***Patea, South Taranaki, February 1861***

Te Hine-Rangi, looked downstream to the surf. "The worst part of the journey will be crossing the river-mouth. The – what does Pouhama call it – the bar?" she said. "And that won't be bad, Te Rehi, because Pouhama's the sailing-master today."

"He's told me twice already," said her husband. "You'll be there in two days, my daughter. Why, you'll be going to church in Tamaki-makau-rau this Sunday. Think of that!"

"Yes, father," agreed Marama, "but I think I'll need to start calling it Akarana, don't you?"

"You so keen to become a *Pakeha*?" teased her father and Marama kissed the leathery, tattooed cheek and laughed.

"Not a bit of it, papa" returned the tall and beautiful girl. "Not keen, but I have to start learning sometime!"

"Whatever you call it" said her mother, "it'll be your home for a while."

"No mama. This land of Aotea will always be my home. Akarana will be where I live."

"Well, at least you'll have the others with you, some family at least. But don't forget us, will you?"

"How can you even say that?" Tears welled in the huge dark eyes and Te Hine-Rangi flung her arms round her daughter.

"I'm so sorry, darling. I didn't mean...I know you won't! What I meant was – don't forget to keep some time for yourself. To think of yourself – and of us, who love you. Don't let the church have all your time."

She was interrupted by a blast on the ship's siren and a roar from the bridge overhead. "Tide's right! All ashore what ain't coming to Auckland!" and an immediate echo in Maori from the wizened face of Pouhama. Then tears began to flow in earnest as eight groups of relatives hugged those departing for the colony's largest city.

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## **Te Morere, Taranaki, 30 April 1864**

Hohepa Otene stared up the eminence known to the colonists as ‘Sentry Hill’ to the redoubt at its summit. From the top there would be a magnificent view over the low-lying plain north of Ngamotu, and he could scarcely believe the *Pakeha* defenders were unaware of the existence of a 200-strong war party at their feet.

He checked the placement of the percussion cap on the elderly musket he carried, and eased the hammer down again to hold it in place before glancing at the man on his right. Or rather, the boy on his right. He knew Te Kahu-pukoro was no more than twelve years old, despite his formidable size. Otene didn’t approve of his participation, but the decision hadn’t been his in the end. And he’d made sure the boy carried as modern a weapon as was available, so that was that.

How had he arrived here himself? In the end, he supposed, the catalogue of underhand dealing and broken promises by the *Pakeha* had led to him taking the same path as many he respected; the path of armed resistance. He still doubted its eventual usefulness, but told himself the *Pakeha* would deal more fairly with those they respected than those they despised and such respect could only be won on the battlefield.

And it was working. Otene had been part of Hapurona’s brilliant success at Puketakauere and he had learned much about the supposed invincibility of the redcoats. He’d learned even more, in the months that followed, about how to deny the *Pakeha* the country while keeping them penned up in their towns and redoubts. Only *Pakeha* firepower was superior, and he’d already begun thinking of ways it could be countered.

Which brought him back to what they were about to do, and it was with some misgiving that he saw Hepanaia, the Pai-Marire prophet, rise to his feet and begin to chant an incantation, “*Piki rewa, rongo rewa, piki hira, ronga hira...*” for the others, led by the tall figure of Kingi Parengarenga, the popular and respected chieftain of Oakura, to burst in with the ritual prayer of the Hauhau warrior that would preserve them from *Pakeha* bullets, ‘*Hapa, hapa, hapa! Hau, hau, hau! Pai-marire, rire, rire – hau!*’

And to that rhythmic chant the two hundred warriors, disciples of Pai-Marire and its offshoot, the Hauhau, began to trot up the hill, right hands uplifted in the *ringatu* sign that would keep the enemy bullets from them.

“*Hapa! Hapa!*” There was neither sound nor movement from the redoubt as the distance shortened, and cries of jubilation began to rise. “See – their bullets turn to water! Their rifles are silenced! *Hapa, hapa!*”

“The prayer of Te Ua protects us! Jesus Christ, praise on your name! *Pai-marire, rire, rire – hau!*”

Two-score long barrels slid into the sunlight through loopholes in the redoubt. The yells from the advancing Maori grew louder and more frequent, and Otene felt his stomach tighten and his mouth go dry. Beside him Te Kahu-pukoro was screaming to the heavens and waving his right hand when the world collapsed with a thundering crash and a flash of searing light. The first redcoat volley, delivered at point-blank range, tore into and through the advancing ranks like a thunderstorm through standing corn.

Reeling, his ears numbed by the blast, Otene saw more long muzzles thrust through the clouds of smoke and he cringed before the menace of the second volley. “*Hapa! Hapa!*” came from the smoke around him. “*Rire, rire – hau! Hau!*” The chant was no longer rhythmic – instead it was full of dismay, fear and desperation.

Again and again the rifles crashed, each volley blasting into the men who stood swaying and helpless before the deadly sheets of fire. By the fourth volley Otene was on the ground in the sanctuary of a large rock. From its cover he saw the musket-ball blast

bloody from Kingi Parengarenga's back and the tall warrior stagger, spin slowly and drop with his coiled dark-red hair shaking itself loose as he hit the ground.

Beyond him, Hepanaia crouched in the long grass, coughing blood as he tried to raise the elderly *tohunga*, Mohi Tarakihi, who had taken a ball in the stomach. *What are the elderly doing here?* wondered Otene. *What are any of us doing here, warding off bullets with hands? Te Kahu – where's the boy?* He stuck his head up to see better and had just spotted the tall figure of the youth striding uphill when a terrific blow snapped his head back and his right eye-socket filled with blood. There was no pain, not at first, and he slumped to the ground.

*Hohepa, now you die* he thought, and the pain hit him. It was like a red-hot knifeblade, slicing slowly through his right eye and from there across his forehead, so intense he couldn't speak. *Such a silly way to die* he thought, as he felt consciousness slipping away. *I'm not even dying on my feet, for all my fine talk – I'm dying on my knees, behind a rock.* And suddenly it seemed important to stand. He forced himself up to his feet. What can they do to the already dead?

He turned, heedless of the redcoat guns, and a figure blundering past cannoned into him so he fell again. From the ground he saw it was Te Kahu. *Ah, God's good. Which God, Hohepa – the Pakeha one or the Maori? You've never really known, have you?*

But there was something odd about the boy – he was staggering, and even as Otene watched, Te Kahu-upokoro fell. Otene drew the back of his hand across his right eye and cried out at the white-hot spear of pain that lanced through him. He began to crawl back down the slope to where the boy lay. He's moving. Good. Otene reached Te Kahu and croaked, "Where are you hurt?"

The boy gasped through the tears he couldn't hold back, "Shoulder...and my hip. I think I'm hit there too. Why, Hohepa? Why didn't my prayer work?"

"Later," said Otene, carefully exploring his own forehead and deciding the blurring in his left eye was blood from the gash above. His right eye was a sea of pain, and his words to the boy were coming from far away. Fumbling at his waistband he found the water-jack he'd taken from a *Pakeha* body at Puketakauere and offered it to Te Kahu, who shook his head.

Otene looked at his left hand, and found it still clenched around his musket. He drew back the hammer and looked at the cap. It was still there, where it had been a lifetime and a world before. He lifted the weapon high enough to avoid ricochet and pulled the trigger.

"What...what's that for?" asked Te Kahu.

Otene grimaced as he rose to his knees. "So you can use it as a crutch without accident," he gasped. "There's been enough of those today, and crutches are all our weapons are fit for."

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### ***Kakaramea, South Taranaki, March 1865***

Aghast, Otene said "Eighty? So many?"

The man sitting opposite nodded. "Less than half, though."

Otene barked a laugh. "That's good, then. We'll be able to do it – oh, at least twice more – before all the warriors in the Aotea Canoe have become food for rats and birds!"

Patuohe scowled. "Easy for you to criticise, Hohepa. You weren't there."

Otene leaned forward into the firelight to point at the empty socket of his right eye, and snarled "My eye bought me the right to know stupidity when I see it, because I lost

my eye trying to catch bullets in my bare hands! And that was stupid. Almost as stupid as sending two hundred warriors against two thousand redcoats. We can't fight these *Pakeha* in the open! You could have sent two thousand of us – if we had so many – against two hundred of them, and nothing would have changed. Except the size of the heap of dead. When will we learn?"

"We didn't do so badly," Patuohe said sullenly. "The English aren't moving anywhere near as fast as they might. The *Lame Seagull* has turned back for Patea. He's had enough of trying to get through to Ngamotu. He's no warrior. He didn't even attack our *pa* at Weraroa."

Otene waved impatiently. "My friends in the missions tell me the *Lame Seagull* and the new governor hate each other. Don't worry about General Cameron – he's a fighter when he needs to be. And if he didn't attack your *pa*, it's because he didn't think he needed to."

"Why?"

"It might be that he knew some boneheads would come out of the bush at Nukumaru to take on ten times their number. It's much easier to shoot them in the open."

It was Patuohe's turn to bare his teeth. "And you've got the answer?"

Otene held up a hand. "I have some thoughts. Fighting *kupapa* up the Whanganui river in the bush this last year has taught me a thing or two. About overcoming numbers by planning. And thinking ahead. And weapons. What do you think of this..."

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### ***Tongaporutu, on the Taranaki border, August 1865***

Reihana Haupokia exhaled smoke and a sigh of satisfaction at the same time.

"There's nothing wrong with some things the *Pakeha* bring. Why can't they leave it at rum, tobacco and guns and sail away again?"

Tikaokao snorted. "Less chance of that than of you giving up women!"

"Now why would anyone want to give up women?" asked the Maori king's counsellor. "Nothing like the eel trap on a cold night! Or don't you feel the cold now you're putting on weight?"

"Weight? Who me? How long since we've seen each other?"

"Oh... must be at Taiporohenui last year? When Tawhiao went down to consult Te Ua," said Reihana, naming the new Maori king and the respected prophet of Pai Marire.

"That long?" asked Tikaokao, "We're neighbours, and it's been over a year!"

Reihana shrugged. "The king keeps us busy."

Tikaokao nodded slowly. "To what end though? The idea of going to Taiporohenui was to get the prophet's blessing for the *kingitanga*. Something to help tie our peoples together; give us some balance in the face of those bastard Wanganui. And the arselicking Arawa. And has it happened?"

Reihana waved a placatory hand. "We all know it hasn't, cousin. And it probably won't, left to itself. Like his father, Potatau, Tawhiao's an old woman, and Te Ua has his head up his own arse. But we're missing something."

Tikaokao cocked an eyebrow. "What are we missing?"

Reihana exhaled again. "Our Ngaruahine host, Otene. The biggest noise in the Aotea Canoe. He's interesting. Warrior father; quite a warrior himself as a young man. Got the *Pakeha* religion, though, and went to Tamaki-makau-rau. But he came back with different ideas – and left an eye at Te Morere. He's opened a few Wanganui bellies since."

Tikaokao sniffed. "Why're you so keen on someone who can't make up his mind?"

“I wouldn’t go that far. Otene’s respected in Aotea.. He’s schooled in *Pakeha* ways. And this is the important bit. Te Ua’s not in good health and when he dies, Otene has the *mana* and learning to take his place. If he could be made to appear a warrior priest fighting for his people, his land, his God and his king...well...where might it end?”

Tikaokao sat up. “And his king,” he mused. “Yes. He could be useful. At the least he might get Tawhiao off his royal arse and out in front of his warriors. Otene’s people made their support for Tawhiao well known even though in our fathers’ time Waikato and Taranaki were sworn enemies. So what’s he like? What else do you know about him?”

Reihana shrugged. “Shocking reputation as a womaniser. Te Morere took his right eye and a fair bit of his face, but it doesn’t slow him down. Women throw themselves at him. And he’s never been known to drop one. He’ll fuck anything that moves. And if it doesn’t move, he’ll get it moving and then fuck it.”

Tikaokao laughed. “So he’s in the *hinaki* even more than you?”

“Much more than me,” agreed Reihana. “I’m not that lucky! But why’s he so important?”

“Because,” said Tikaokao slowly, “a warrior priest is always appealing. But more than that, he’s come along at the right time. What’s the biggest problem we face?”

“Getting Tawhiao off his arse.”

“And who does Tawhiao turn to most?”

“Rewi. And Rewi’s a spent force. Lost his balls after Orakau.”

“Right again. But Rewi’s *mana* is all the excuse Tawhiao needs for sitting on his hands, and I’m sick of it. More *Pakeha* arrive every day, and we’ll have to deal with them eventually. Now, Otene’s on his own down there in Aotea.”

Reihana’s brow furrowed. “On his own? What do you mean?”

“He’s where the *Pakeha* are even greedier than they are up here, and there’s no *kingitanga* to make them think twice about taking anything they want. Apart from Te Rangitaake in Waitara, there’s no-one in Taranaki to stand up to the *Pakeha*. They’ve seized a sizeable foothold in the land left when our grandfathers emptied Taranaki.”

Reihana nodded as his cousin continued.

“If Otene’s successful in standing up to the *Pakeha* in Aotea – yes, I see what you’re suggesting. That’d get Tawhiao on his feet and out of Rewi’s shadow. And listening to us.”

Reihana grimaced. “But if he fails? That’ll hand it to Rewi and his peace faction on a plate. And Ngaruahine – there aren’t a lot left after so many ended up in our grandfathers’ ovens.”

Tikaokao shrugged. “We risk nothing. While there may not be many Ruahine, we can help them – I’ll send Te Weterere to Kawhia. Now, cousin, wake up those relatives down the coast and get Otene to send me a messenger he trusts.”

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### ***Ngaruawahia, Waikato, October 1865***

Tikaokao looked at the huge man sitting opposite. “And your message?”

“As we agreed.”

“You’re a man of few words, Kereopa, but I need to be sure we understand each other...”

The man known as ‘Big Kereopa’ nodded. “Tainui is willing to join the Taranaki tribes to stretch the *Pakeha* between Tamaki-makau-rau and Wanganui. Tainui will

threaten Tamaki-makau-rau and its immigrant ships while Taranaki shows it can beat the *Pakeha* in his own backyard.”

The eyes flickered among the nightmare tattoos. “And my offer?”

Big Kereopa spoke again. “Tainui has been receiving arms through Kawhia and will provide Taranaki with a hundred carbines and cartridges, with more to be bought by success.”

“More success than they’re having at present,” observed Tikaokao. “The *Pakeha* forages and destroys at will. Where is Taranaki’s manhood?”

Kereopa’s eyes narrowed. “Is that part of my message, Tikaokao?”

The Tainui held up a hand. “No. My memories of the Lame Seagull are many and bitter. I spoke from that bitterness.”

“Ours are no less bitter,” returned Big Kereopa. “The Lame Seagull has flown, but his successor wrings our entrails. We cannot stand against his columns, guided by the traitors of Wanganuis. But with your men and your weapons we can destroy them. And this is the word of our leader.”

“Whose father was a warrior of renown,” mused Tikaokao.

“His son is no less a warrior,” replied Kereopa, “for all that he’s tried to follow the paths of peace. But he must work with what we have. We lack numbers, not resolve. Give us the means of overcoming the *Pakeha* numbers, then we will see who has the better warriors.”

Tikaokao cocked an eye at the big man. “Are you also a general, or just a knowledgeable messenger?”

“I am of the Twelve,” replied Kereopa. “I know my leader’s thinking. Can you be so sure of yours?”

Only a slight flaring of his nostrils betrayed Tikaokao’s annoyance. “As I told you, the king will fight where he sees he must.”

“And you will help him see what he must?”

“Yes. As will your leader.”

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### ***Okaiawa, South Taranaki, early December 1865***

Big Kereopa shook his head. “Not a chance. He turned me down flat. Won’t let even young Waikato warriors come to join us. Tikaokao claims that would link the *kingitanga* with rebellion, and softcocks like Rewi – his words, *matua* - would seize the chance to turn Tawhiao against the war faction.”

“So what’s he offering?” Otene’s anger was obvious.

“A hundred carbines, with ammunition.”

Otene blinked in astonishment.

“A hundred?” he repeated. “How does he have so many?”

“He boasted of his *Pakeha*, a man named Hayes,” said Kereopa, “who is a *goddamn*” – by which he meant an American – “and has many from a great war in his country. So many that Tikaokao offers us a hundred.”

“But no men,” mused Otene. “Men would make a difference. Small groups, under our leaders. That’s what I had in mind.”

“More of a difference than our own, who know our hills and valleys? *Matua*, how long has it been since Waikato drove us down to Kapiti? Your own father fought them here. And wasn’t your own *mere* blooded in a Waikato skull?”

“I know, trusting any Waikato is quite a feat. That’s why I wanted small groups of their young men. Still, perhaps we’re better off without them.”

“And the weapons?” asked Kereopa.

Otene’s eyes narrowed. “The question is – at what price? What does Tikaokao want in return?”

“Simple. He wants us to test the *Pakeha*. He talked about driving the settlers from Tamaki-makau-rau. I think he sees the *kingitanga* ruling there.”

Otene snorted in derision. “That’s ridiculous! The *Pakeha* would never give up their biggest seaport.”

Kereopa was unmoved. “It doesn’t matter what we think, *matua*. It’s what Tikaokao thinks. And at the moment, he’s offering us new guns, as good as anything the *Pakeha* has.”

There was a long silence.

Otene raised his head. “Skevington once used an expression I didn’t understand. I was vain about my English, so I asked him what he meant by ‘Greeks bearing gifts’.”

Kereopa, whose *Pakeha* education hadn’t gone past the mission school at his native Kai Iwi, frowned. “What’s a Greek?”

“A person known for his cunning and treachery. What Skevington meant was, when someone who has no reason to do you a favour, does you a favour, look behind it and ask yourself why.”

“Good advice. So what about the guns?”

“Not yet,” said Otene. “I’m told the Lame Seagull and the governor have fought for the last time, and the Seagull’s going home. Let’s see how things go with his successor.”

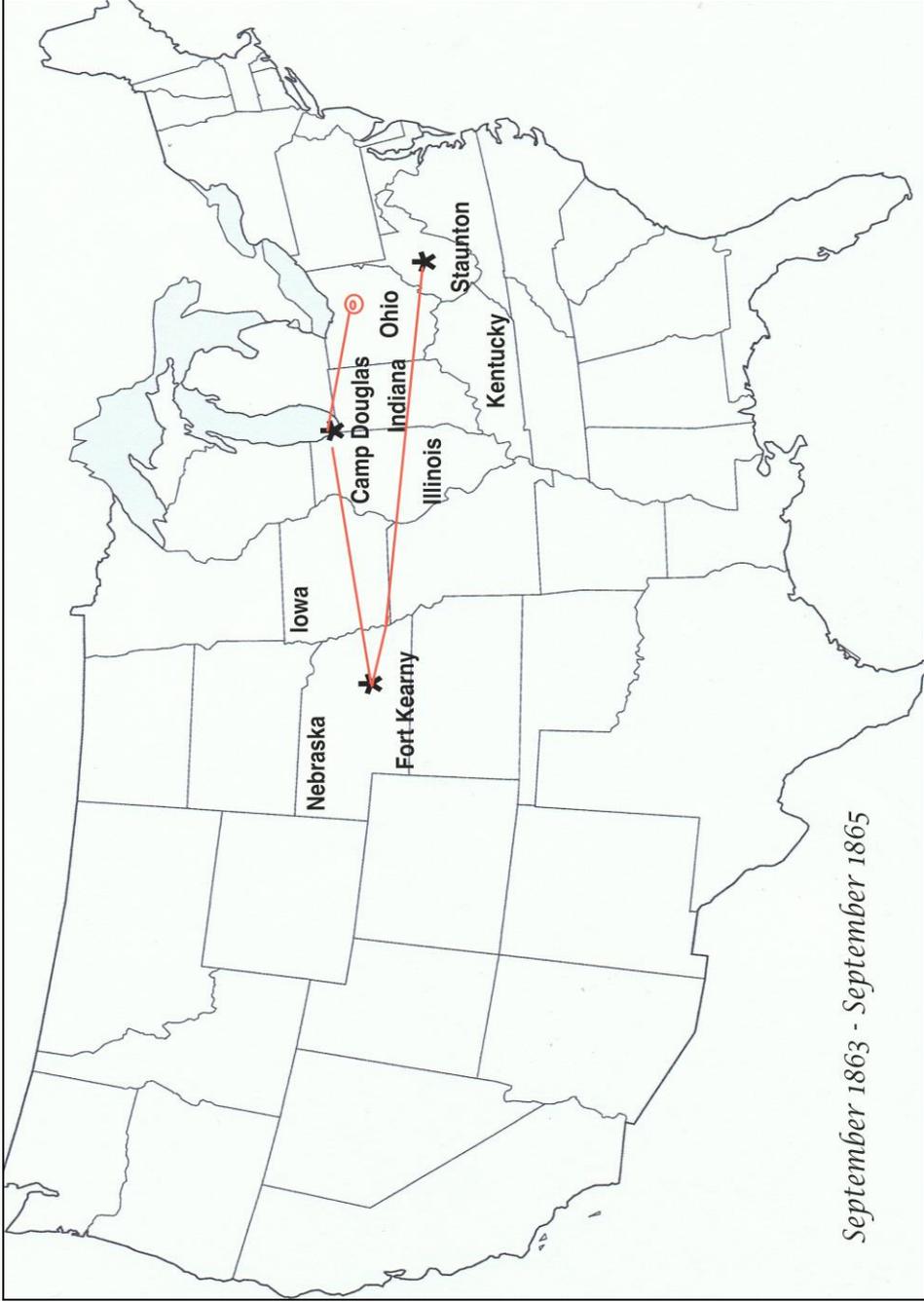
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**AMERICA**  
**1863 - 1865**

*“Saw you a marchin' with Robert E Lee  
You held your head high tryin' to win the victory  
You fought for your folks but you didn't die in vain  
Even though you lost they speak highly of your name*

*Cause you fought all the way Johnny Reb Johnny Reb  
You fought all the way Johnny Reb”*

*‘The Ballad of Johnny Reb’*



## **Chapter 2: America 1863–1865**

*Camp Douglas, Chicago, September 1863*

After all the sleepless nights and days of self-doubt, it was the knife-fight that settled the matter for Hunter. Long aware of what the life of a POW was doing to his troop, he'd considered all the options, and discarded all except one. The unthinkable one.

Escape was out of the question. Six hundred Yankee-held miles lay between Chicago and the heart of the Confederacy. A successful takeover of the camp was similarly unlikely to get past the first shattering volleys the guards seemed anxious to unload on the men in rags of grey and butternut. And even if they seized the camp, the nearest railhead was half a day's march, even for fit men, let alone the horde of half-starved and diseased scarecrows who populated Camp Douglas. The third year of the war between the states had seen the prison camp population top ten thousand.

Ten thousand souls who had already witnessed over a third of their number die from disease, starvation, and the bitter cold of the northern winters. Ten thousand who had endured foul water and fouler earth, overcrowded and verminous barracks where they froze in winter and stifled in summer, ill-dug and hastily constructed latrines, not enough clean or running water and all too much of the other kind. Men who had endured a daily maximum of three ounces of meat, and even less when the camp commander took it into his head to punish real or imaginary escape attempts; men who had contracted scurvy from the lack of vegetables, typhoid fever from the filthy water and typhus from the inescapable body-lice.

And then there was the human factor, although precious little humanity was shown them by most of the reserve and rear-echelon troops the Yankees used as guards. Add to the list gangrene from lacerations inflicted by beatings, dislocations from when 'troublemakers' were suspended by the thumbs, hypothermia from sitting naked in the winter snow at the guards' whim and the ghastly genital wounds inflicted by riding the 'wooden horse' with weights tied to the feet.

Under those conditions, thought Hunter bleakly, suicides were not surprising. With the South bitterly contesting every foot of ground in the face of the Federal juggernaut, attitudes hardened and the guards offered neither quarter nor pity. It was one thing to walk a battlefield with comrades dedicated to the same cause, but it was another to endure the squalor of prison life under sleety northern skies, ignorant of what was happening to loved ones in the Shenandoah, in Galveston, in Tennessee and along the Mississippi.

And even worse than the suicides was the conviction of desperate and broken men that the world they'd known was lost forever. Fights were the rule, not the exception, with bored guards egging on men who were prepared to kill over a place in a queue or an imagined black look. And that brought Hunter full circle. That day one of his troop had had his arm sliced open from elbow to wrist, with a knife improvised from a tin spoon sharpened slowly against a rock dug from the reeking earth of Camp Douglas.

Since their capture in late July and the inevitable end to Morgan's Raid through a thousand miles of Indiana and Ohio, his troop had survived captivity as they had survived warfare – by sticking together and looking out for each other. It had been two of his comrades who had pulled the Arkansas infantryman off Little, and beaten him into unconsciousness. As he felt the outline of the man's crude knife in his pocket, Hunter made his decision.

A winter spent in Camp Douglas would reduce his comrades to the same level as the rest of the scarecrows, and he wouldn't let that happen. Because they were his – his to

lead by virtue of his part in their raising, his to command by their consent, and his to see back home to Staunton, Shenandoah, when it was all over. John Selby Hunter would do all those things with the grave, studied attention that had marked every one of his twenty-three years, and in particular the two that had passed since he led away the troop his father had raised, equipped and offered to the Confederate States of America. Now he faced the inescapable fact that their part in the war was over.

He glanced again at the cattle-yard enclosure, on the top of which were sentry-boxes every sixty yards. Thirty feet from its base, and running parallel with it, was a line of lime-wash – the dead-line – any prisoner who crossed it liable to be shot without warning.

He turned away, his mind made up.

Stretching long arms that hung from broad shoulders and a frame of six feet and one inch, he waited for second thoughts. None came. He paced back to where his second, Filkes, and his troop sergeant, McDonald, were standing in conversation.

“Seth, Johnny, pass the word to the men to get here as soon as they can. We’ve got something to discuss.” They nodded and drifted off in separate directions. Hunter turned back to gaze, unseeing, at the stockade wall and the nearest sentry box.

*Galvanised Yankee.* That was the name for a Confederate soldier who turned his coat to fight for the Union. Painfully aware his own people had rejected the same Union back in 1861, he also knew it was the only way he’d get his men out of the hell that was Camp Douglas.

His thoughts were a swirl of emotion as he watched members of his troop drop from the crowds and move towards him. Peters, rangy and tall, who rode as if he’d been born part of his horse and looking lost without it underneath him; Stowers, fixed in his memory ducking under the slash of a Yankee sabre to empty the other saddle with a backhand slash of his own a heartbeat after; Little, so proud of the position he’d held since the age of twelve as organ-pumper in the church at Staunton, now with his ripped arm crudely bandaged.

Hunter had grown up with them; swum in the same creeks, attended the same school and church, wrestled, climbed, fought, footraced, competed and known joy and sorrow with them. He wouldn’t fail them now, but the thought of what he had to say turned his mouth dry.

Hunter moved them off to the far corner of the stockade near the dead-line and turned to face them. Quietly, he began to outline his thinking.

“Boys,” he ended, “we can’t go on like this – there’s no future in it for anyone. So what I propose is – we serve the Union.”

For an instant no-one spoke, then there was an outburst.

“The *Union*?”

“The *Federals*?”

“The *bluebellies*?”

Sergeant McDonald’s voice cut above them. “Cap’n will have his reasons. S’pose we let him tell us?”

“As I told you,” said Hunter, “we stay here and die in any of five or six ways, or we keep doing what we do in the clean air outside.”

“But against our own kin?” exploded the redheaded Schwass, “Cain’t stomach that, Cap’n. Not fo’ nothin’!”

“No, Amos,” said Hunter. “The Union’ll send us to the west, to relieve their garrisons. We won’t fight our own side. That’s what the Federal major told us last month, y’re recall?”

They did recall. They’d been paraded while the Federal major had appealed for men to “serve their nation rather than just a part of it” and they’d contributed to the storm of jeers and catcalls which had greeted the appeal.

“Galvanised Yankees, Cap’n,” said Stowers slowly. “Cain’t see it, no way.”

“Me neither.”

“Nor me.”

Filkes spoke up. “Selby, going west or going east, doing this is gonna help their cause and hinder ours. Where you reckon the Yankees we relieve’ll finish up, ’cept under Grant?”

“I know, Seth,” said Hunter. “I know. But Morgan took the pick of the southern cavalry with him, got most of it killed and the rest taken. An’ what’ve we seen since they shifted us here? Regiment after regiment of replacements shaking down on the march to the train that’ll take them east. You know what this town does? Chicago’s one big abattoir. One big meat factory, busy canning and sending bully-beef to the Federals so they eat better’n we ever did. Think back to what y’saw on Morgan’s Raid an’ tell me you saw better in Dixie.”

No-one spoke.

He carried on. “Can anyone here see the South winning? Because I can’t.”

The silence was deafening. “Boys, I can’t tell you how this is gonna end, but it’ll end. And when it does, all of us’ll be needed back in the Shenandoah. How’s it help the South, or our kin, or our cause – by dying here? Because we will. Look at them.” Hunter gestured at the crowds of butternut-garbed scarecrows in the stockade.

“Look at any of them. Upwards of thirty die here every week, and that’s no guess – Seth here knows I walk the hospital yard every day. We do no good by being here. Not for the South and not for ourselves. Might’s well take a sidearm and put a round through your head. Result’s the same, only quicker ’n cleaner.”

He glanced into each pair of eyes. “We all know each other, have done all our lives, so leading you’s been real easy. But my daddy fought down in Mexico in ’36, an’ he told me command’s all about responsibility, and responsibility’s about doing it, no matter how hard it is. Till now I didn’t rightly know what he meant. But I do now.”

“I’ve made up my mind to be a galvanized Yankee. I’m gonna order y’all to go along with me. What I figure is, that way the responsibility’s all mine and so’s any comeback later. Anyone who doesn’t come along is welcome not to, ’cause it’s an order I can’t enforce. But if you don’t come, thank you most kindly for your service to the Shenandoah. And good luck to y’all. So – I’m leading this troop into Union service. And those who’ll come with me.”

Peters broke a long silence by letting out his breath in a long sigh. “Cap’n, I cain’t take an order like that. Just cain’t. Knows all y’say’s true, in fact I been thinkin’ so m’self. So I’m coming with you, but not ’cause you order me. You don’t have t’take no responsibility for me. I’m comin’ ’cause you’re right. You’ve always been right. ’Cept for when y’ reckoned y’could wrestle me outta the silver dollar at Staunton Fair, year afore the war.”

There was a guffaw from the group, and the tension went with it. Heads nodded.

“Lew’s got that right,” declared Stowers. “I’m in, too, and I don’t need no orderin’ neither. Anybody not?”

Hunter cleared his throat, and the others gave up looking at each other to look at him. “Thanks, boys. Thank you all. But I’m about to give the order anyway, because it’s how we might be able to look out for each other. I know enough to guess how this might look to... someone not where we are now, say. After I’ve finished, you all can say you were ordered to follow me. And y’all can say y’all heard the order, so each of you listen close and get my words right.”

He took a deep breath and said, “I’m offering ‘B’ troop of the First Virginia Cavalry Regiment, ‘Shenandoah’, to the Union. It being clearly understood that this offer is for

service on the western frontier of these United States only and not in any way against the forces of the Confederate States of America. I call on all of you to recall your obligation to follow your officers where they lead, according to your oath of enlistment. There it is. That's done."

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### ***Fort Kearny, Nebraska, February 1864***

Drawing his cape around him, Selby Hunter lowered his head so the hat-brim took the force of the sleety wind driving the rain into his face and walked down the earthen rampart to the sentry-post.

"You awake, Amos?" He received a grunt in reply.

"Too cold t'sleep an' too wet t'sit down, Cap'n. So I figure I got no choice."

"Half an hour, then all you can eat in front of a fire."

"All the salt pork I can eat still ain't a lot, Selby. But them beans – they're a bigger worry."

"How so?"

Schwass blew a droplet of rain from the end of his nose. "Biddle likes beans. An' when he eats 'em, he blows off somethin' fierce. So I won't be sittin' at no fire, not with Bugler Biddle pipin' his ass in front of it."

Hunter snorted with laughter. "Don't rightly blame you. Mighta been worse though – might still be in Douglas, right?"

"Right. Nebrasky ain't so bad. Even with Biddle in it."

"Never a truer word. Be back in half an hour – less now – to change the guard."

Hunter moved away, seeing in the eye of memory his interview with US colonel Warren W. Callaghan, commander of Camp Douglas, who had jumped at the chance of enlisting a troop of Confederate cavalry. Jumped so high and so fast they'd been whisked from the camp within twenty-four hours, to find themselves re-equipping at a supply depot in Chicago's west side.

And that was where Hunter had been confronted with the first reality of their decision. Bathed and clean, he rejected the blue uniforms neatly folded and waiting for them. The commissary officer had sarcastically pointed out that the Union didn't run to supplying rebel uniforms. Hunter, by then aware of how keenly his thirty-man troop was sought, insisted their grey Confederate clothing be de-loused, washed, mended and returned. After an arm-wrestle eventually involving the commander of the midwest region, the Quartermaster Service had accepted Hunter's contention that, while his Confederates soldiers had agreed to serve the Union, they weren't part of it and were thus entitled to retain their uniforms. Hunter then magnanimously declared they'd be happy to wear new Union-issue underwear, but the concession failed to repair the commissary officer's scowl.

Clad in clean uniforms 'B' troop had drawn arms and been issued mounts, accoutrements, and rations before joining a supply convoy for one of the most remote military outposts on the western frontier – Fort Kearny on the Nebraskan plains. Their arrival in mid-October had coincided with the first snows of a savage winter during which life on the Great Plains had virtually shut down, as wild animals and Indians disappeared and the wagon trains of settlers heading west dried up.

Typically, Hunter spent much of the intervening time talking with the groups of people wintering over in the fort; settlers heading west, homesteaders waiting for spring before taking up their allotments in the newly-declared Nebraska Territory; mountain

men and trappers, flush with money and roistering in a location much more populous than their usual haunts of forest and sky and, most important of all, the regular US soldiers who manned the fort.

To his surprise he'd found them friendly, once they'd mastered their tendency to stare at the Confederate grey, and ready to share their impressions, expertise and knowledge, as one soldier to another. He'd been careful to keep an account of all he'd heard and been told, and in his thoughtful way he'd cross-referenced claim against statement and contention against suggestion before writing his conclusions in a ledger he added to every day. In that way he'd managed to build up an impressively comprehensive body of knowledge for a newcomer to the frontier. What it contained was what Hunter was thinking about as he paced the rampart.

The effects of the Civil War extended beyond the eastern states and were felt by people living on the outskirts of settlement, in places like Nebraska. The demands on manpower posed by the huge armies clashing on the battlefields of the east left the western frontier severely under-manned. The warrior instincts of the Indian nations quickly grasped the opportunity to protect their lands and homes with increased aggression, as the tribes became less willing to tolerate the westbound wagon trains that swept across Nebraska and along the undulating plains by the Platte River, war or no war.

From 1863 Indian attacks along the Platte River increased in frequency and savagery. Arapaho, Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux fell on the wagon trains in retaliation for the federal government's war against the Santee Sioux in Minnesota, and other demonstrations of the white man's might.

The attacks became so severe and so frequent that freighting companies ceased operations and panicked settlers fled eastward. In response to pressure from the ranchers who kept the massive abattoirs of Chicago supplied, the federal government authorised military campaigns against hostile tribes. Fort Kearny, on the very edge of the great wilderness, played a central role.

That was where the 'galvanised Yankees' came in. Hunter would later discover that, impelled by the certainty of a squalid death in conditions no farmer would have kept animals in, some six thousand Confederate soldiers had taken the oath of allegiance to the United States, forming six regiments of 'United States Volunteers'. Operating west of the Missouri River, they restored mail and stagecoach services and provided protection for railways, ranchers, freighting companies and emigrants alike through the Platte River valley.

Despite Hunter's arguments to the contrary, the conviction he was leading his men into treason continued to gnaw at him. But with the die cast and the decision made, he would prepare himself to go forward as best he could. His journal was part of that. Now, he reflected, he'd made the most of that chance over winter. Spring would find him ready.

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### ***Early spring***

Fifteen miles west of Fort Kearny, one of four wagons lay on its side like a discarded packing-case. The others had slewed off the trail and sat pointing into the wilderness, shafts that had once contained draught-horses drooping forlornly. The wagons hadn't burned, but even from thirty yards away a grim-faced Hunter could smell the blood as he sat his mount, watching the Arikara scout jogging back.

The chief scout swung down from his mount. They conversed briefly and Hunter saw the Arikara flutter his hands in the sign language of the Plains Indians, saying something

with an emphatic nod and pointing north-west. Mitch clapped the man on the shoulder and came back toward the hillock.

Half-breed son of a Santee Sioux mother and a French fur trapper, Mitch Boyer was a legend for his ability to get the best out of his Indian scouts; men whose relationship with whites was often touchy and always dependent on their whim. Hunter knew how lucky he was to have Boyer's services.

"Sign, Cap'n," said Boyer in the accent of his native Kansas. "Forty, Pale Horse says." Hunter pursed his lips. "That many?"

"Yep. Pale Horse reads sign better'n most. Anyways – makes sense. Cheyenne got nothing to fear these days, so they're fillin' up war parties with the boys they'd normally leave with the old men to defend the village. Showin' them the ropes."

The scout went on. "They left heading northwest. That ain't Cheyenne territory, which is east and south. I reckon they're riding a big circle – blooding the new braves."

Hunter nodded. "Let's deal with that later. Can we approach now?"

Boyer nodded in turn. "Won't be pretty," he warned. "Cheyenne don't do things by halves. Never did." Hunter ordered two troopers to remain on the hillock, each scanning a semicircle to the horizon, and gave the hand-signal to walk the troop down to what was clearly a charnel-house.

Hunter knew the wagons. They belonged to a group of emigrants from Pennsylvania who had wintered at Kearny. They were Amish, the first Hunter had met, and he had been received with warmth. They had been set on travelling on with the least possible delay, and the efforts of fort authorities to persuade them warmer weather would bring greater numbers to their convoy had foundered in the face of their confidence that God would provide for their safety as they set about His work. In any case, their leader had hinted delicately, they preferred to be alone.

"Won't travel with non-believers, huh?" the fort's second had grunted.

"Something like that," Hunter had agreed, and the second, Captain Docherty, signed them out.

Now Hunter walked his horse towards a wagon he recognised as belonging to one Amos Rhenish, and as he circled it to come up from behind he saw the body of its owner lying across the footboard, reins still wrapped round one hand. The arrow driven deep into Rhenish's side through heart and lungs stood up starkly from the body. Hunter raised his gaze and felt the bile come into his throat; the man's head was a mass of blood, still glistening in the sunlight where the scalp had been torn off. The flies were busy.

His horse shied at the smell of blood, and Hunter urged it closer with his knees so he could peer into the tray behind Rhenish's body. Before he caught sight of the leg he thought he was looking at a bundle of clothes, and it was only by her black apron that he recognised Mrs Rhenish, spread-eagled in the wagon-tray with a cloud of black flies covering her face and head as well as the gaping hole in her chest, where she had been repeatedly tomahawked. They rose, buzzing angrily, and when Hunter caught sight of the blonde tresses on either side of her ears and realised the centre of her scalp had been torn away he turned in his saddle and vomited.

His horse pranced sideways and as Hunter fought for control he looked round and caught Boyer's eye. The scout kned his horse forward and offered a water-jack. Hunter took it, gagging at the sting of whiskey.

"Swallow it down, Cap'n," came Boyer's voice. "Don't taste that good, but it's better'n plain water. That the leader?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Hunter nodded and sipped again. "Children," he managed. "They had five. Three boys, twin girls."

Boyer nodded, then jerked his head at the wagon. Hunter followed his gaze and realised the tumble of Mrs Rhenish's skirts concealed a smaller shape. He reached in and turned back the mass of skirt and petticoat to reveal one of the Rhenish sons, a boy of seven or eight years. Hunter couldn't tell which, because the little body had been decapitated by a tomahawk slash. He pulled the skirts back gently.

"There's another under the wagon," said Boyer. "Dead an' scalped. Three, y'said?"

Long past speech, Hunter nodded. "C'mon, Cap'n. Let's find the boy," said the scout. They heeled their mounts away from the rest of the wagons, each surrounded by a knot of horrified troopers.

"Over there," said Boyer, and spurred forward to where a trio of vultures rose, heavy and protesting, from green prairie grass already replacing the sere of winter, until they could look down at what had attracted the carrion birds.

It was the third and oldest Rhenish boy. Hunter had met him briefly when he'd been introduced by a proud father, and the red-headed fourteen-year-old had spoken briefly and politely before excusing himself to allow the adults to conduct their business.

But his good manners had been wasted on the man who'd taken his life. He lay sprawled on his back, what was left of his face contorted in terror and his hands clutching at the stump of the lance that had been driven through him, pinning him to the ground like a moth to a specimen board. Driven so hard the shaft had snapped, and lay beside him. Like his parents and his brothers he'd been scalped, but unlike them he'd suffered the attentions of the vultures, with the result he now had neither eyes nor a nose, and the teeth in his upper jaw shone whitely through the mask of blood that had erupted from his torn abdomen and scalp to settle on his face and body.

Hunter leaned again from his saddle and retched. Boyer waited for him and handed him the flask again.

"Who did this?" he managed at last. "What kind of people could do it? And why?"

"Cheyenne for sure. Prob'ly Dog Soldiers – they're awful mean. An' why? A warnin', I guess. But who knows?"

By common consent the men wheeled their horses and trotted back to the wagons, Hunter's mind awl. Finally he said, "I'm not leaving them here, and I'm not burying them on a God-forsaken trail. They'll need to be taken back to Kearny."

Boyer shifted the plug of tobacco he chewed on and spat. "Good call," he said. "Folks need t'know we'll look after them. However and whenever."

Hunter summoned Filkes and McDonald with a wave, and ordered two wagons cleared and the bodies placed in them and decently covered. He took a despatch pad and a pencil from his saddlebag and began to write. "Mitch – send a scout back to Kearny with this despatch. I'm asking for two squads and two horse teams to bring in the bodies."

Filkes leaned forward in his saddle. "Can't we do that Selby? It'd get 'em in quicker?"

"Got other plans for us, Seth." He tore the yellow sheet from its pad, folded it and watched Boyer signal an Arikara forward to receive it. The man's head bobbed as Boyer spoke to him, then he wheeled his horse and cantered away.

"Two hours, Cap'n. If Kearny shakes its ass, th'wagons'll be in by last light. Or near enough."

Hunter drew a deep breath. "No hurry for them, not now. But we need to move, and fast. Pale Horse said they went northwest?"

"Northwest, for sure."

"We're going after them. Mitch, you thought they're riding a circle?"

"Reckon so, Cap'n. They're likely gonna hit the homesteaders along the North Platte; maybe dip down t' the Kansas border, maybe even Cozad town."

"Can we get ahead of them?"

“Sure. But we’d be guessin’ plenty. I can talk t’ the boys though.”

“Do that, soon’s we’re through.” Hunter turned to the others. “Johnny, Seth, couple of things are important here. This is what we’re here to do, and we should do it. By the looks on our men’s faces, they’re ready to do it best they can after what they’ve seen. But there’s something else. The Rhenish wagon had five children, and we’ve accounted for three. The twins girls are missing. ’Less they were riding with friends, and their bodies are in the other wagons – Indians’ve got them. Johnny, find that out for me. I recollect being told twins’re important to the Arapaho and the Navajo. That go for the Cheyenne too?”

“Yep,” grunted Boyer. “They’re good luck. No Cheyenne would miss the chance of taking twins.”

“Right.” Hunter made up his mind. “You know their minds better than any of us. Think like a Cheyenne and give me your best guess where they’ve gone...”

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Two days and sixty-five miles later, Hunter took off his wide-brimmed hat and used the big cottonwood as cover to peer round the trunk and through the late afternoon across the hundred yards or so between the hillock where he lay and the river.

“Got all they want there Cap’n,” came Boyer’s voice from his right. “Water, firewood, trees for cover, river in back so they can’t be surprised – just where I’d camp if I was a cocky Dog Soldier on th’ rampage.”

“If they’re in the area,” said Hunter pessimistically.

“Oh, they’re close,” said Boyer. “Two reasons – this here’s the curve they need to ride to get back t’ their territory. An’ they won’t ride further’n they need to.”

“What’s the second reason?”

Boyer spat tobacco juice. “I c’n feel them,” he said shortly, and Hunter knew enough not to comment. “They’ll be here tonight, full of devilment an’ sass, getting’ ready t’ boast to their folks. They’ve counted coup, taken scalps, got white man’s plunder – all they need’s an audience, an’ they’ll be want to be ready for it. They’ll sleep sound t’ night. Why shouldn’t they? Got away with everythin’ so far.”

Hunter glanced at an overcast sky and drew a small telescope from the case attached to his belt. Cupping a hand over the lens to prevent reflection, he slid the glass along the edge of the brush by the river and blinked as a large cottontail rabbit appeared, industriously cleaning itself by the riverbank. Apart from that, nothing moved other than the breeze that blew from the river to the trees where Hunter lay and on to where his troopers were concealed in a wooded depression sixty yards away. Horses had been watered, well downstream, and fed from the forage-bags, The men were chewing on cold rations and grumbling quietly. There was nothing more to do, and that was most of the reason for Hunter’s unease.

If he had guessed wrongly, the Cheyenne could be miles away visiting a hideous death on isolated homesteads and the settlers who farmed them. He closed his mind to the excuse he’d followed the best advice available. Reason and logic, he told himself, had little force in the face of a woman who had been raped and scalped ... the cottontail suddenly bounded across his lens and a moment after a rider appeared on the edge of the brush. Hunter had seen no movement, but suddenly the man was there, sitting his pony like a statue.

Hunter looked into the man’s eyes across the distance between them, noting the streaks of war-paint across the nose and cheeks and on the broad chest. The Cheyenne was a big man with well-muscled legs and arms, close on six feet from the notched eagle-

feather in his braided hair to the moccasins that shod his dangling feet. He carried a decorated lance in one hand, a hatchet was stuck through his waist-girdle and a war-club hung from the bow of his buffalo-robe saddle.

Letting out his breath in a long hiss, Hunter murmured to Mitch and the scout answered softly, "I seen him Cap'n. Don't move." The Indian finished his scrutiny, reined his pony round, and vanished as swiftly and silently as he had appeared. Boyer reached out and clamped a hand on Hunter's arm.

Taking his cue from the scout, Hunter remained rigidly still and watched the scout reappear suddenly ten yards further along the riverbank and subject the treeline to yet another piercing scrutiny before heeling the pony away at a trot. Boyer let go and motioned backwards, and the two men slid away from the skyline until they could stand.

"There y'go Cap'n," said the scout, "here t'night, just like I said. Do we take 'em then?"

And Hunter knew he was being examined.

"Not unless we have to," he said slowly. "Depends what they do. If what you say 'bout them being frisky is as right as everything else, and they start in on their captives ... no choice. But if they don't ... well, getting those girls back's the reason we've come this far, and we need daylight to do that properly. We'll hit them just after sun-up. Tell you more once I've thought it through."

Boyer smiled. He turned to look back in the direction of the troop's concealment, held up a hand and clenched it twice. Two Arikaras rose from the deep grass, trotted forward past the officer and the scout, and took their places under the cottonwood.

"Soon's dusk falls," explained Boyer, "one of them will go see if the Cheyenne set a sentry. Betcha a plug o' baccy to a dollar they won't, 'cause they're almost home."

"I'll take it," said Hunter. "Be a dollar I'm glad to lose."

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The breeze held steady through the night, and now it brought the smell of dead fires and ash drifting down on the line of men lying in the grass behind the giant cottonwood. Just under half the troop was there, each man with his Spencer carbine fully loaded and all made well aware of the need to be selective in what he fired at; one of the points Hunter had made to his men the night before was that there would be no opportunity to reload.

*Come on, Seth, come on* thought Hunter, but chided himself almost immediately. Filkes wasn't a man to proceed with anything but caution, which was why Hunter had put him in charge of the party to storm the camp. They would aim for the captives, from the position into which the Arikara scouts had spent the early hours working them. The peace of the morning was suddenly split by a volley of gunfire and an ululating war-whoop.

Immediately, the Cheyenne camp came to boiling life as braves sprang straight from sleep and out of their blanket to their feet, snatching up weapons and racing for the horse lines.

"At the horses, three rounds each man...fire!" bellowed Hunter, from the centre of the line. Twelve carbines cracked once, twice, three times before the breeze brought the cloud of black smoke roiling back and Hunter raised his voice.

"To your right front, thirty paces...double!"

To the screams of wounded and dying men and horses, the grey line trotted forward down the slope to form across the flat river-plain. The sight brought howls of rage from the Cheyenne, and the drumming of hooves, as those who'd been able to mount heeled

their ponies into a wild charge. Hunter's voice rose from the centre. "Independent, fire at will!"

All down the line came the flat crack of the Spencers as the soldiers fired and moved clear to sight and fire again until their seven-shot magazines were empty. Then the carbines were slung or dropped and sidearms came out as those Indian riders left charged through a grey-clad line that melted before them to reveal a wave of horsemen under McDonald bursting from the woodland to hit the Cheyenne like a moving brick wall. The Indians went down like corn before the out-thrust sabres of the arme blanche, the action dissolving into a melee of individual combats as survivors matched war-club and bow against revolver and sabre.

Hunter gestured to his bugler. "Stick close Jesse, and ..."

He broke off as he saw a mounted brave who apparently had a charmed life as he galloped up, down and across what had turned into a killing-ground, unscathed by the efforts of every cavalryman within reasonable pistol-shot.

Hunter's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man, and at that moment the brave wheeled his horse with a wild scream that was part-challenge and part-rage, and galloped straight at Hunter and his bugler, war-club on high. Mesmerised, Jesse reached for his bugle instead of his revolver as the Indian closed to thirty yards but when he glanced in panic at his officer he saw Hunter, "Cool as y'like," he would later tell his cronies, "sightin' off on that goddamn Injun like he was on th' butts!"

With the pair close enough for the bugler to see the foam round the pony's muzzle, the Remington in Hunter's hand boomed twice and a pair of heavy-calibre shells smashed into the horse's head. It dropped like a stone, dead between one stride and the next. Its rider came out of his saddle, flew over its head and hit the ground only a split-second after the horse. He slid almost to Hunter's feet and the officer stepped forward half a pace to kick the man twice in the head, as hard as he could.

Hunter ripped the pistol lanyard from around his neck and threw it at Jesse. "Tie him!" he snapped and turned back to what was left of the battle. Even as he looked, the last Cheyenne fell and the only creature moving was a riderless Indian pony galloping past the cottonwood tree.

The bugler straightened, and Hunter cast an eye at his work before nodding. "Good job. Sound 'Cease fire', then 'Form on me', Jesse." He reloaded his weapon while the bugle pealed and eased the hammer down into the safety détente as men made their way to him, some mounted and others on foot. McDonald shaded his eyes and peered into a sun that was already strong enough to be dazzling.

"Lieutenant Filkes coming in, Captain" he announced from horseback. "Seems t'have a child on his saddle-bow. Mitch has another one. And Peters. And Little." A wild whoop greeted his words, and the legendary yell synonymous with Dixie was repeated by the half-dozen men coming towards them.

"That the rebel yell, Cap'n?" asked Boyer. "Hell kinda noise is that?"

"Covers the pain we feel" said Hunter, fumbling in a pocket, "when we pay dollars to Yankees."

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Two hours later the Indian sat against the bottom of the big cottonwood, his hands tied and his feet roped. For all the expression on a face that was bruised and swollen from Hunter's boot he might have been sitting before his own lodge. He ignored his captors completely.

Sergeant McDonald approached Hunter. "Two dozen Cheyenne bodies, Cap'n. Six live ones, includin' him." He jerked his head at the captive.

"Thirty all told." Hunter nodded. "That mean Pale Horse was wrong, or are there another dozen or so still out there?"

Boyer spat tobacco juice. "Never known Pale Horse t' be wrong, Cap'n." He looked at the Cheyenne. "S'pose we ask him?"

Hunter nodded, and the three walked across to the tree. Boyer spoke, his hands waving. The Cheyenne looked up, smiled briefly, snapped something and spat.

"Says not t'sleep tonight, case you find out."

"All right," said Hunter. "Ask him his name." To his surprise the Cheyenne answered at length, and ended by jerking his head at Hunter.

"Crow Killer. Wants to know who you are. Says he likes to name his scalps, an' he's gonna take yours."

"Tell him my name. And tell him his scalps are going to kill him."

Boyer spoke again and the Indian turned his gaze towards Hunter and said something.

Boyer turned to Hunter. "*Po-emo-ho-ne-he*" he repeated. "Got y'self an Indian name, Cap'n. He called you 'Grey Hunter' – how 'bout that?"

Hunter shrugged. "His privilege. Ask him why the band attacked the wagon train."

McDonald broke in, "Hell, Cap'n, I guess we all know –"

Hunter cut him off. "Ask him."

Boyer did and the Indian replied heatedly.

"Says the whites are like a stream after the snow-melt – more come through their lands every year. Some settle 'cross the buffalo grazin' grounds, others fence the land an' graze their beasts on the new grass 'fore they drive 'em to the place of many tepees – guess he means Chicago – an' tear up the grass where they pass. An' what he calls th'iron horse on its tracks 'cross the land. An' the towns that feed it and the ranches – oh, he's one pissed-off Indian, Cap'n."

"Well, he won't be much longer. Do Indians share scalps?"

"Hell no. Scalps is their badge of honour. Like a medal. Why?"

Hunter gestured at Crow Killer's leggings, where strips of red hair were neatly sewn down the seams. "Saw those when he turned his horse. In his party clothes, ready to go home. Guess we know who speared an' scalped the Rhenish boy."

McDonald let out his breath in a long hiss. "Ask him why the boy."

Boyer turned to the Cheyenne, whose head went back as he answered the scout.

"Says why not? As near enough a man grown and crossing Cheyenne land, he could expect no less from Dog Soldiers. Told you they was awful mean."

"Tell him this, and say it loud enough for the others to hear. He has no honour. Warriors kill warriors, not children, not women. When he who wars on the weak and helpless came against a warrior, I vanquished him and counted coup on him with my foot because I would not touch such a one with my hands. Tell him. Just like that."

Boyer's eyes widened – the most surprise, Hunter reflected, he'd ever seen the scout display – and turned to Crow Killer who snarled at his words, and spat in Hunter's direction.

"And tell him I will not give him a warrior's death. In his death he'll know the agony he inflicted on the boy, as he dies between land and sky. Johnny, rig a rope with a running noose."

Twelve minutes later Crow Killer sat awkwardly on a pony beneath a tree with a gag secured in his mouth and a rope round his neck, with the other end made fast to a limb above. Hunter nodded at Boyer, and the scout stepped forward to the huddle of bound Cheyenne prisoners, all wounded to some degree.

“*Po-emo-ho-ne-he*, the Grey Hunter, speaks to you,” he said. “Crow Killer will die. He will not sing his death-song, so *Wakan-Tanka*, the Great Spirit, will not hear him and guide him home. Crow Killer will wander in the dark forever. *Po-emo-ho-ne-he* does this because Crow Killer fought with no honour and killed the weak and helpless. Watch.”

Hunter brought down his upraised hand and a trooper hit the pony across the rump. It bounded forward and Crow Killer snapped from its back, jerking to the pull of the rope. His bound hands shot upwards and his arms bulged as he clung to the rope with all his strength to lessen its grip on his throat, but moment by moment his grip weakened as he sucked air desperately through his nose until at length his hands fell back. His face quickly turned purple, his eyes bulged and his body began to jerk convulsively as it spasmed, and continued to do so for most of the four minutes it took him to die.

When Crow Killer finally hung black-faced and still, Hunter stepped up to the horrified Cheyenne. “Some of you,” he said as Boyer translated by word and gesture, “also killed women and children. I cannot tell who, so all will die. But you’ll receive a warrior’s death, after your death-songs are finished. You will choose one to live, to be given a pony and set free to ride to the lodges of the Cheyenne to tell them of today; of the vengeance of *Po-emo-ho-ne-he* who slew six hands full of the Cut-Arms, the Cheyenne, because they killed his women and his children. And your man will carry a warning to the Cut-Arms; a warning of the vengeance that will surely come upon their lodges and their people, as it came upon Crow Killer. Let it be ended!”

Hunter turned to Filkes. “Seth, have the one they choose given one of their ponies. And when they say they’re ready – shoot the rest. Quick and clean.”

*What’s got into you?* he asked himself as he turned away in search of a coffee he needed more than he wanted to show. *Used to be a soldier – now you’re a butcher.* He strode towards the campfire through the trees lining the Platte, halting as he saw the Rhenish girls huddling with two other rescued children in the catatonic silence of their shattered world, and he recognised the answer to his question.

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### ***Fort Kearny, Nebraska, September 1864***

The tall officer with the tired eyes stared from the window, his back to Hunter. “Been a year since you came to us, Selby.” He turned, and looked at Hunter. “And it’s been a good year. You’ve shown yourself to be a fine officer and fighting commander. It took both of those to deal with the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. We’ve had no trouble with Cheyenne since you out-guessed and out-fought them – and they’ve moved out of Kearny territory. And you’ve done no worse with the other bands who’ve felt your arm. Now wagon trains ride from here in safety and confidence, whoever’s commanding the escort. And the Shenandoah cavalry have set the standard, even if we do call ourselves the Volunteer Force. Cigar?”

Hunter thanked him and took one from the offered box, glad of the distraction from what he guessed was coming. Colonel Tobias Hoth, commander of Fort Kearny district and the Sixth US Volunteer Force, had never hidden his appreciation of the flair and dash he’d witnessed when he arrived to watch Hunter drilling his troop in their first days at Kearny and he’d made a point of commenting on every patrol report Hunter had furnished.

Hoth struck a long wax match and waited a moment until the flare had died away before rotating it gently at the end of Hunter’s cigar and then at his own. Toby Hoth was famous for his liking for cigars, and he drew appreciatively on it. “Ah...” he said in a

cloud of smoke, “Virginia tobacco. Is there anything like it?” He stopped, his face reddening. “Please excuse me. Damn rude – my apologies, sir.”

Hunter held up a hand. “No apology required or necessary, Colonel. Fine cigars are their own passport, don’t you think?”

Hoth nodded. “Kind of you to say so. Stupid of me to forget your situation. But that’s what I wanted to talk about, in a way.” He thought a moment, his eyes on the glowing tip of his cigar.

“See here, Selby,” he began. “We both know I’m about to offer you a majority in the US cavalry. Ten years ago, if we were sitting where we are now, you wouldn’t hesitate because you’re a natural soldier. Ten years from now, this’ll all be over and it’ll never have happened. We’ll all be Americans again, and we’ll be doing what God meant Americans to do. Tell me – you ever heard of ‘manifest destiny’?”

Hunter smiled. “I’ve heard the term. Kind of old-fashioned these days though, isn’t it?”

“I can’t follow who decides what is and what isn’t fashionable, but the idea’s as sound as it ever was. One day this country is going to spread from coast to coast. It’s inevitable. And the US needs men like you. Men with your skills. Your leadership.”

Hunter blew a plume of smoke before he answered. “Toby, I’m a farmer before I’m a soldier. ‘Ten years ago’ you said. Ten years ago, I was fourteen and I’d just got my first real rifle. Never thought of being a soldier. And ten years from now, while I don’t know what I’ll be doing, one thing I do know – it may be over, but it’ll not be forgotten. I can’t see the South winning. Never could. But that makes it all the more important I go back. To my place, my kin. To rebuild, not to take other folks’ land. Not to fight other folks’ wars. To look after me and mine.”

He drew again on the cigar and looked at the two inches of ash on it to avoid Hoth’s eyes. “I’m truly honoured by your offer, and flattered by your words. But... I’m not my own man. Saving my men for rebuilding the South is why I got them out of Douglas. And we’ll earn our keep, pay our bill, till the war’s over. But one day it will be over, and we’ll be going home.”

There was silence in the room until Hoth drew a deep breath. “Respect your feelings, Selby. The day this war is over, I’ll draft your travel orders personally. And you’ll keep your weapons.”

Moved, Hunter acknowledged the courtesy, but Hoth waved him aside. “Can’t abide the horse-liniment that passes as whiskey here. But I’ve got some wine I think ain’t likely to rot your teeth. Not too much anyway. Like to give me your opinion?”

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### ***Fort Kearny, Nebraska, mid-October 1864***

This winter, like the last, promised to send temperatures to new depths and Hunter was glad its ravages kept settler and Indian alike indoors and off the trails that had become ever more contested, even in the relatively brief time his troop had ridden from Kearny.

The demands on his time weren’t excessive, but he insisted upon daily inspection of men, equipment, quarters and stables during the times the weather ruled the outdoors. For much of the remaining time he addressed his journal. Boyer provided most of the material as the volume grew into something of a tome; the half-breed found the cavalryman’s interest in the lore of the Plains as flattering as it was surprising.

Ever the thinker, Hunter reminded himself of the need to look after his relations with the other officers based at Kearny and, although he couldn't altogether avoid the drinking that seemed to constitute their chief relaxation, he made a little go a long way. During one cold afternoon with a screaming wind blowing snow horizontally against the ramparts and tormenting the sentries, the cards and whiskey came out in the mess.

A group of subalterns was playing a noisy game of whist as a change from the endless round of draw poker, but from the noise they were making it was clear the rules of the ancient game were only partly understood. Stifling a sigh, Hunter laid aside the book he was reading and glanced up to catch the eye of an artillery lieutenant. Wheeler lifted an eyebrow in the direction of the group and murmured, "Boys being boys, eh Selby?"

"Better in here than out there, Seb, for all that."

"Guess you're right at that," replied Wheeler. "What you got there?" nodding at the book.

"A book on soldiering. Written by a German – Clausewitz – no, von Clausewitz. It's called '*On War*'."

"Any good?"

"Some. Most of it's head-splitting hard going. Sort of book that stays with you though."

"Like?" queried Wheeler, not sure where the conversation was heading.

"What he says about how bigger numbers creates mass on the battlefield."

Wheeler snorted. "Don't need a German to point that out."

"He also talks about the tie-up between politics and military objectives."

"Maybe y'could explain that to the next set of Arapaho you spank!"

Hunter pulled a face.

Wheeler struck a pose. "Let me tell you, suh," he said, thumbs in his suspenders, the very picture of a hickory-stump orator, "I say, let me tell you – yes you suh, th'admirable gennleman with the matching feathers 'n warpaint outfit. Put down that hatchet 'fore the demands of manifest destiny require me to kick yo' painted ass. Put it down, I say, an' move quietly aside, y'hear now? Tellin' you fo' the last time – I knows th' Grey Hunter hisself, an' believe me, y'don't want me t'call him over."

Hunter threw a cushion at Wheeler's head and the artilleryman ducked as he assumed an injured expression. "Why, dang me! That what y'think of manifest destiny?"

"There's that term again. Seems to me it's caused more than enough harm."

Wheeler frowned. "How's that?"

"As it's been explained to me," said Hunter slowly, "it means America's right to expand from sea to sea, over anything and anyone in the way. And that's what does the harm. Way I heard it, that's what caused the war with Mexico, and the ruckus over Texas."

"You could look at it that way, if y're a Whig."

Hunter waved impatiently. "Whigs, Democrats, this newfangled Republican thing – all labels. Labels mean y'don't need to think. I believe it's every man's duty to think for himself. That's why my great-granddaddy fought England. Twice."

"It's the way of things," said Wheeler. "This book says everything changes over time, an' those that handle change best – plants, birds, men, animals – they survive an' those that can't or won't change, they go under. Get left behind."

"You believe that?" asked Hunter

The other nodded. "You're a farmer. What happens if y'don't keep up? Y'sow by hand 'stead of by machine?"

“But it’s asking a lot of people to change a whole way of life.” Into his head came the memory of Crow Killer protesting about the invasion and rape of Indian land and hunting grounds – *oh, he’s one pissed-off Indian.*

“You know I ain’t a religious man, Selby. But I know some who say it’s our duty t’bring the Indians into the modern age. And that’s surely going to need them t’change. Hell, we’ve signed treaty after treaty with ’em. Ain’t as though we’ve taken their land and given nothing back.”

“I wonder how much a treaty means to a man who can’t read or write and lives by hunting and farming. What happens if he doesn’t want to be brought into the modern age.”

Wheeler’s face seemed to close. “Then he goes under to make way for those who do.”

There was silence for a moment. “What’s this book anyway?”

“It’s a work of science. *‘On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.’* By an English natural historian, Charles Darwin. Religious man too, I do believe.”

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### ***The Shenandoah Valley, West Virginia, July 1865***

Hunter recognised there had been damage, as the column of horsemen wound through the valley in late afternoon, but nothing compared with the devastation they had witnessed in Tennessee and North Carolina. Here none had been made homeless by fire, or huddled in the hastily-built shelters they had seen on their long ride through a ravaged South. And, Hunter reminded himself, their route had skirted the areas worst affected. Like the ruin wrought by William Sherman in Georgia – a trail sixty miles wide and three hundred miles long.

True to his word, Toby Hoth had mustered the Shenandoah troop out of the Volunteer Force within a month of Lee and Grant meeting at Appomattox Courthouse, and the orders he’d given Hunter made specific mention of his company’s right to carry weapons. Beyond his word, Hoth had authorised not only their possession of Union mounts but a string of remounts. Hunter had protested at such generosity in the face of Hoth’s likely shortages in manpower and resources, but the colonel had smiled and reminded him of the services he had performed for the Union on the western frontier.

“If your conscience troubles you, hand in the mounts to the Union Commissary at Staunton,” he said. “Staunton fell to the Union last June, to a Union force commanded by a namesake of yours, David Hunter. I’ve got despatches for you to carry to the Union commander, whoever he is now, and they’re the reason for your rail warrants. Warrants covering the despatches, the courier, and the escort to the courier, y’understand. No idea if there’s railroad tracks left anywhere in the South, but if there are, the warrants’ll get you aboard.”

Hoth’s pessimism had been well founded, and they had ridden from the Tennessee border; part of a river of grey flowing home to the South. Hunter thought of the scarecrows of Camp Douglas and wondered how many of them died under northern skies, dreaming of this journey; home from a lost war to an uncertain future.

Jesse Little nodded at a party of field hands. “Lincoln reck’ned he’d freed the nigras. What d’you make of them, Cap’n?”

Hunter looked across to the party of hoe-wielding negroes among the rows of cotton. “Beats me Jesse,” he said, scratching at the welt of thickened skin the hat-cord had raised under his jaw. “Might be slaves, or they might be working for wages.”

The bugler snorted. "Cain't see no-one bein' able to pay wages, even if they wanted to pay a nigra. Might be workin' for keep."

Hunter nodded, and squinted at the sun. "Seems t' me we'll find out soon. We'll be home tomorrow."

"Not tonight?"

"Best not. How many barrels you reckon your old man'd offer a mounted man coming out of the dark?"

John McDonald guffawed, and Little nodded. "Like enough, Cap'n. Tomorrow it is."

In fact, Hunter had carefully set their pace; he wanted another night with the men he'd known in childhood and led in war. He told himself it was necessary for him to drive home the message he wanted to leave them with, but another part of him was honest enough to recognise the pleasure he'd find in their company, one last time.

After they'd eaten and the corn flask was being passed round, Hunter hitched himself forward at the fire, cleared his throat and noted how quickly the conversation died. *They're waiting for it* he thought.

"Boys, when we sat down tonight we were 'B' troop of the CSA's First Virginia Cavalry Regiment. The Shenandoah. When we get up, we'll be just a group of ex-soldiers going home. We did what we could and we fought all the way, and no-one beat us. Remember that. Nobody beat the Shenandoah. Our army gave in, but we didn't. We were ordered to surrender after Morgan's Raid, and we were mustered out of the Volunteer Force with honour three months ago. We can look any man in the eye, and spit in it if we want."

There was a snicker of amusement. "Fact is," he resumed, "as soldiers, we take orders. Y'all took one from me when you followed me into Union service. I gave the order, and I'll be responsible for it. You held to your promise to follow me because of your oath to the Confederacy, and the last order I'm giving you is for you to remember that fact and cling to it. No matter what."

This time the murmur was louder, and it took both hands to quell it. "There's one other thing, but it's personal, not military. We're ex-prisoners. Also true we're ex-soldiers. But I hope we'll never be ex-comrades. Leading y'all has been easy for me because of that. So thank you. I've given my last order, so this is a request. My name's Selby from now on, just as it's been all our lives. And when that corn flask gets to me – if Seth there ever lets it go, that is – I'll drink to you; my comrades, my command, but most of all my friends."

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An hour after the following dawn saw them clean, shaved and with their uniforms as presentable as they could be made, breaking camp and back on the road to Staunton. Located at a natural crossroads in the valley, and the centre of a small but efficient railway network, Staunton had been an important part of the Shenandoah's function in the Confederacy's logistics chain. The town's industries had made things as diverse as boots, clothing, blankets, carriages and wagons while the surrounding farms and plantations had contributed hugely to the area's pretensions to the title of 'Granary of the Confederacy'.

And that was why, on June 6 the year before, the Union had sent Major General David Hunter and ten thousand men to strike a mortal blow to the secessionist states. They destroyed the railway station with its sidings and workshops; the warehouses, factories and mills, and seized every stitch of clothing and ounce of food they could find. The taciturn Hunter wasn't noted for his sense of humour and took seriously Ulysses Grant's instruction to devastate the Shenandoah so completely 'a crow flying over it'll need to carry its own provisions.'

A humane and cultured man, however, David Hunter saw no need for destruction in its own right and spared the fabric and buildings of Staunton; which was why Selby Hunter and his men saw damage rather than ruin as they approached their home.

The formalities were briefly concluded. Hunter reported himself and his command to Colonel David Myrers, Union officer commanding the area and handed over his despatches. When Myrers opened them in Hunter's presence the personal letter included caused his eyebrows to climb to the level of his thinning sandy hair. Myrers looked up at Hunter, seated across the desk.

"Captain Hunter, Colonel Hoth's account of your service and conduct does you the greatest credit. As it happens, I knew Toby Hoth at West Point, and I greatly respect his views. Toby would like me to dismiss you and your men to their homes, permitting the retention of horses and weapons in view of your status as emergency peacekeeping agents. Do you agree?"

Hunter blinked. "Certainly, sir, and I can also speak for my men." Hunter knew the horses would be a godsend to men struggling to make farms productive again, and their weapons would provide some sort of reassurance during times that were bound to be unsettled, in the aftermath of a bitter war. He silently blessed Toby Hoth's foresight and kindness.

After that, the end came with a rush and within an hour Hunter was riding alone up over the ridge road to where his family home lay surrounded by the plantation his great-great-grandfather had hacked out of wilderness to name 'Clawton' after his Devon home.

He drew rein at the top of the last ridge and looked down at his home. Though Clawton had been a success from the first, the original owner, Absolom Hunter, had been so occupied in making the wilderness produce rich Virginia tobacco he'd been happy to live in a log cabin, and it had been his son Jericho who'd decided the family fortune was sufficient to begin the construction in white stone of the elegant building that stretched, long and low, below him. Hunter gazed down at Clawton and recalled his father's hand on his shoulder.

"Always pause and look at it, son. See it and honour old Absolom and Jericho. And see you carry on their work because, as my daddy said to me, they gave their lives to the dream and for their descendants. And that's you, Selby, same as it was me."

Hunter swallowed a moment, and heard another voice in his head. Boyer had offered him a piece of the wisdom of his mother's people when Hunter had gone to him with his journal for the last time. Boyer had mentioned an old man of the Santee who had once urged his charges, among them the little half-breed boy, to *Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.*

Hunter had been moved by such wisdom, and Boyer had shrugged. "Didn't understand it at the time. He was slicin' buffalo liver, an' all we wanted was a piece t'roast on the fire!"

And now, Hunter's world had turned. The Confederacy was dead and what would replace it remained to be seen. He put heels to the horse and rode down to his home.

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### ***Clawton Plantation, Shenandoah Valley.***

Helena Renais Hunter swept into the room and the men came immediately to their feet. At just under fifty years of age she was still a striking woman. The beauty that had broken a string of hearts in the Louisiana of her youth was still evident in the proud

carriage of a regal head of auburn hair atop a lissome and slender body that gave no indication of the six children she had borne. She wore a dark green gown bare of any ornament except a lace frill at collar and cuffs, and the effect was stunning.

Helena smiled at her surviving children – Selby, Augusta, Joshua and Lydia – and at the man who came swiftly forward to bow, seize her hand and kiss it in one flowing motion.

“Madame Helena,” said Gaston Duprix in the accent of his native Anjou, “tonight you are the final blessing of this wonderful day. Is she not, my dear?” The darkly pretty woman by his side smiled and nodded.

“Oh, you Frenchman!” smiled Helena with a toss of her head. “But this is a truly wonderful day. Selby, my darling, how proud your father would be to see you now!”

*And he’d know what’s put those lines on your forehead and the grooves at the corner of your mouth and he’d know what to say to you and what to ask. And what not to ask. God, give me the wit to know too.* She smiled again into her own green eyes in the lean and weatherbeaten face, and stretched up to kiss him.

“Take your father’s place, Selby.”

“Mother, I’m not sure...” he began, but she put a slender finger on his lips.

“Today’s a beginning as much as an end. That’s why I’m not wearing mourning... it’s time to look forward. So let’s begin with our first-born doing what his father and mother raised him to do.”

Selby Hunter reached for his mother’s hand and raised it to his lips as Gaston had done. Helena inclined her head over his bow as she reached for his face with her other hand.

*Oh my dearest, darling son, men like you are the hope of this house and all of the South...* she thought, but broke it off to smile at him as he straightened. “Agamemnon,” she called.

From the doorway came the reply, “Madam Helena?”

“I do believe we’re ready to begin,” she said, turning her head to smile at the gigantic black butler who stood in the doorway. “You may pour. Mr Selby has a toast to propose.” The party sat, and the tall crystal wine decanter disappeared in Agamemnon’s huge hands as he moved from place to place, leaving behind him a ruby-red glass that shone and twinkled in the light from the chandelier.

Everyone looked at Hunter as he stood. “To Clawton,” he said, as had his father before him. “To the house that shelters us, feeds us and gives us purpose. May the family who lives from it never forget the others who live from it also. May they remember with gratitude their debt to a loving and all-seeing God, who makes all things possible.”

“God, who makes all things possible. Amen,” came the response that had echoed there since the Puritan Jericho Hunter had formulated the toast over a century before. Hunter set down his glass with a click, caught the eye of his brother Joshua and winked before he threw his coat-tails out of the way and sat down.

He looked around, seeming to see them all for the first time. Everything’s different, he thought. Nothing is the same.

His brother Josh – four years his junior, full of devilment and fortunate to survive a fall from a tree that left him, at the age of ten, with a leg so badly broken the doctor had recommended amputation. And perhaps he’d been right. The leg had set badly despite the best efforts of a series of doctors; but it had meant that Josh had been spared a role in the military.

Augusta. Two years Selby’s junior and with her mother’s regal bearing, his sister had been betrothed to William LaRosse, heir to a plantation on the other side of Staunton, until their plans to marry in June of 1861 were interrupted by the guns of Fort Sumter.

LaRosse had quickly carved a name for himself as a cavalry leader as intuitive and brave as any in Southern grey, until he'd died leading the charge that swept the Union cavalry from the field at Chickamauga.

A Christmas gift in 1850, his baby sister Lydia was closing in on her fifteenth birthday and Hunter couldn't stop looking at her, searching for the crop-haired, breeches-wearing, tree-climbing tomboy he'd left behind. There was no trace of that in the heart-shaped face framed in ringlets that watched him from their father's level grey eyes down the table and she smiled, before pursing her lips in a kiss.

Bemused, Hunter blew one back and raised his glass. There came a chuckle from his right and Hunter looked round at Gaston Duprix, who missed nothing.

"Oui!" said the man who'd given Hunter his skills with weapons, "Miz Lydia no longer climbs trees, it is true, but she 'as found other ways to shock us, eh ma p'tite? And soon she will break 'earts, I think. C'est ça, my love?" This across the table to Sarah, his wife, who nodded and smiled.

Sarah hadn't spoken since the death of her first husband and twin sons in the last great cholera epidemic. The medical explanation was that the shock had robbed her of the power of speech, but Hunter's father put it more simply. "A broken heart, but Gaston's doing his best to mend it. And Gaston's best – in anything – is pretty damn good."

Hunter knew that for himself. Gaston Duprix had been a cornet of hussars in the personal entourage of the legendary Ney, Marshal of France and Napoleon's 'Bravest of the Brave'. Following Bonaparte's downfall, Duprix had escaped France to come to America. There, he found employment at one of the military schools catering to the sons of the Southern well-to-do. In 1836, while still a bachelor, he answered the call of the bugles in the Texan Revolution.

In that confused and confusing conflict he found himself on foot during the battle of San Jacinto after his horse had been killed and had answered a call for help from a cavalry officer, pinned beneath the body of his dead mount. Duprix had stood over him, coolly using the half-dozen pistols crammed into his sash as necessary while the trapped man reloaded the single-shot weapons as fast as he could, until the tide of battle rolled off in another direction and Duprix could slit the man's saddle-girth to help him wriggle free.

When Duprix helped him stand upright it was immediately apparent the man's knee was damaged, so Duprix eased him back down on the horse's body and looked around. Just then a Mexican lancer appeared on the fringes of the battle, and the rescued man was horrified to hear Duprix raise his voice, wave his arms at the cavalryman and release a string of obscenity.

"Attention, *gilipollas!* Hey, over here! You – *hijo de la chingada!* This way, *cobarde!*"

Stung by the attacks on his manhood and parentage, the lancer obligingly wheeled his horse, dug in his heels as the ten-foot ash pole came down and charged. Duprix stood his ground until the lancer was committed, clicked the hammer of a pistol back to full-cock, raised his arm and sighted carefully. With the ground quivering under the thundering hooves he fired, whereupon the lancer threw up his arms and followed the top part of his head backwards over his horse's tail. The horse slid to a stop and stood trembling and snorting.

Duprix walked a step or two to the animal, spoke soothingly and blew into its nostrils until it calmed enough to stop trembling. "Why the hell...what did y'do that for?" came from the man on the ground, white with shock.

Duprix shrugged a very French shrug. "We 'ave need of 'is lance, for you, at the very least," he explained. "And I thought per'aps 'is 'orse as well, because in the Grande Armée, our 'orses were trained to stand. Now – zut! – we 'ave both, non?"

“What if you’d missed?” asked the cavalryman

Duprix sniffed. “One does not miss, *m’sieur*,” he said. “It wastes powder and ball. And this one of the new percussion locks is yours – and *vair*’ fine. I did not think it would misfire. Now – can you mount?”

By then the battle was mostly over, and Lowell Hunter found his knee freeing up with every step he took using the lance as a crutch, as they picked their way across the field to the rear area where a harassed surgeon slit his pants, looked at the leg, forecast even greater swelling, and prescribed rest.

Hunter had heard the story dozens of times, including the part where Duprix had later consented to be the young officer’s servant, companion and orderly to take account of their growing friendship. Lowell Hunter had brought Gaston Duprix home to the Shenandoah as a secretary, tutor and general factotum on the Clawton plantation.

The softly-spoken Frenchman had been Hunter’s tutor in arms since the day of the boy’s tenth birthday. Hunter had learned to fence with foil and sabre and to shoot with shotgun, fowling-piece, rifle and pistol; all of it to Duprix’s exacting standard of perfection. When he complained of being unable to reach the Frenchman’s standards, his father would smile at him and ask, “Selby, m’boy – how much of a man’s head you reckon you’d see between a horse’s head and the tip of a lance? I saw a man put a ball right in that gap one day – ever tell you about it?” And Hunter would grit his teeth, turn away and try harder.

Now Gaston Duprix was manager of the Hunter plantation. A fortnight before Hunter and his troop had been captured in Ohio, Lowell Hunter had died of the yellow fever he’d contracted during a visit to the port of New Orleans on war work for the Confederacy. His mother’s letter breaking the news was the only one Hunter had received in all his war service. Small wonder, he thought with a wry smile, that he’d lost touch with his little sister.

And now here he was, master of Clawton by the terms of his father’s will and his mother’s wish. Home, with squalor and horror as far behind as hunger and despair. Home, to face the adjustments demanded by the new masters in Washington. Lincoln had promised ‘peace and reconciliation’ and had been shot for it. Did that mean a lifetime of difference and enmity, or would Toby Hoth’s conviction come to pass?

He caught a world of love in his mother’s eyes as she looked down the table at him and raised her glass. As he raised his in return he was in no doubt of where his life’s work lay.

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### ***Pleasant Valley, Virginia, August 1865***

The man in the centre of the table looked up and nodded. “You been found guilty of the charges facin’ you, an’ we’ll pass to sentencing. Before we do, I want to say I’m not surprised you don’t carry yourselves as soldiers. Soldiers’re men of honour. Men who trust in their comrades. Men who’re fit for their comrades to trust in them.” He paused for a sip from a glass of water.

“You gave that up when you ’listed with the federals, you scum. When you betrayed yer homes, yer families and yer cause for better treatment. Better treatment from men who’d set a nigger over you. Over yer families, too – not forgettin yer womenfolk. What kinda southern men are you? Why, y’cain’t even stand up straight!”

One of the two men facing the four seated at the table tried to square his shoulders, but the other, shorter, man spat on the floor and raised his bound hands.

“Like t’see you stand up straight Luke Jacobs, after your boys traded on these t’slap you round. Fact is, none of them got th’balls they was born with.” He spat again. “Come to it, nor’ve you. Want to cut me loose an’ try me?”

“This is a court of law, not a saloon,” spoke up the cold-eyed man on the extreme right, who wore the insignia of a Confederate brigadier-general. “A military court.”

“The hell it is!” snapped the bound man. “Your army’s dead as the Confederacy – it’s got no horses, no guns, no soldiers no more – an’ it ain’t got no courts neither!”

“You saw to that, Horne!” said one of the others, leaning forward. “You helped make it happen when you freed a Yankee soldier to walk into Dixie. You proud of that?”

“Weren’t you listenin’ to me? No, you weren’t. None of you. You weren’t listenin’ ’cause ain’t nothin’ we c’n say will change yer minds. You’d made up yer minds ’fore we wuz dragged in here. This court’s illegal as hell, but yer don’t cover yer faces. Think I cain’t work out what that means?” Horne spat again on the floor.

“Shoulda thought of the penalty for treason ’fore you betrayed yer country, boy.”

“I fought fer my country till I couldn’t fight no more, Jacobs!” shouted Horne, “An’ I couldn’t fight no more ’cause a Yankee shell busted my head an’ laid me out in a trench till I woke up a prisoner. You ever get that close, you rear-area quartermaster fuck? Did you?”

“All the more reason you should have stuck in Elmira Prison,” observed one of the two behind the table. “Gentlemen, we’re wasting time. Mr President?”

Jacobs nodded, and ran his tongue over his lips. “Joshua Horne. Amos Guthrie. You’ve been found guilty of aiding an’ abetting yer country’s enemies in that – ” he peered at the paper before him – “you did, with pre-dee-termination bind y’self to give your allegiance and faith to the Washington government by serving its Volunteers as infantrymen. Any reason why the sentence pree-scribed by milit’ry law should not be duly passed?”

“Godssakes, Luke – I got a family!” protested Guthrie, his voice shaking. “That’s why I joined the fed’rals. Couldn’t do them no good in Hellmira, could I? An’ I ain’t no coward. I went back into combat. Fought the Injuns out west.”

“And freed Union soldiers t’help free nigras, Guthrie. Like I said – settin’ them over yer families an’ yer womenfolk.”

He turned his attention to Horne, who straightened.

“F’m what I hear –” said Horne, “wasn’t no nigger got set over your missus while you was fightin’ yer desp’rate war somewheres in Jeff Davis’ back pocket up there in Richmond, Jacobs. Was th’ Jewboy butcher up the valley keeping her in sausage. Thought you was a good ole Dixie boy, Jacobs – how come yer missus got sech a taste f’r pork?”

“Jesus Christ almighty!” roared Jacobs, erupting to his feet. “I’m gonna cut yer...”

“You’re going to behave with the sort of dignity this court demands,” bawled the brigadier. “Sit down, man, and pass sentence!”

Jacobs glared at him but sat down, shaking, and pronounced sentence of death on both men. “To be carried out immediately, back of this building,” he added, a gleam of triumph in his piggy eyes. “And since th’ officer commanding the firin’ party delivers the coody-grass, reckon that’ll be me.”

“Good fer you Jacobs,” returned Horne. “Reckon you’ll be second again, then. Think ’bout that next time ya wag yer sausage.”

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**Clawton, Virginia, August 1865**

The point leapt at his face and Hunter beat hard into a high parry in *sixte* to force the blade out of line before driving his own point down to the chest. Got you! But the riposte was met and swept aside by an overhand slash left to right from *octave* into *septime*, and the chuckle that came with it did nothing to ease his frustration.

“Light blades bend unless you take them on the *forte*, Selby. And for that you must come forward. Forward in the lunge, no? And forward in the parry *aussi*. You knew this when you were twelve, I think.” His opponent disengaged and stepped back. “I knew where you’d engage on your blade after your third parry. Too much sabre, *mon brave*. Too many rigid blades. Too much edge and not enough point. Remember *l’arme blanche*? You’ve used that on the battlefield, *sans doute*. Trust the point. But get it into line first.”

Hunter shook his head. “Gaston, you never change. You’re a rock.” *And you’re seventy, at least. You must be if you rode behind Ney.* “As you say, I’ve been using a sabre. Foils aren’t common where I’ve been.”

“*C’est ca*. But if it could teach the *sabreur* nothing, I would not ’ave taught it to you. Never despise the foil!”

Hunter smiled and swept his foil up to his face in the salute. Duprix did likewise, tucked the foil under his left arm and held out his hand. “Something ’as come to me, Selby. Something you must know. Tell me – you recall William Pickens?”

“Sheriff Pickens? He’s been militia captain longer’n anyone in Augusta County, and he’s uncle to one of my troopers, Billy Stowers. Why?”

Duprix told him. Pickens had been told by his opposite in Pleasant Valley of two deaths, both the claimed work of something calling itself the Association of the Southern Cross.

“Executed, rather than murdered. Eyes blindfolded, ’ands bound behind, chests torn apart by gunshot, each man with a wound to the head.”

“Death by firing-squad,” Hunter mused.

Duprix nodded. “And Pickens told me both men ’ad served with the US Volunteer Force. And ’e said ’is informant had told ’im news of other deaths – in Virginia, and Tennessee. There are rumours of a ’igh-ranking officer encouraging returned men to seek vengeance on such soldiers as yours.”

“My men followed their orders,” Hunter retorted. “I know, I gave them.”

“A fine point, but not one likely to stop these people, I think. Sheriff Pickens ’as also spoken of beatings and lynchings of blacks who ’ave celebrated their freedom too loudly.”

Hunter’s face set like stone. “Something wants doing about this.”

Duprix raised an eyebrow. “*Eh bien*. Then please go armed. With pistols, preferably – until we ’ave improved your fencing, at least.”

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The clearing in the wooded hillside had been a favourite of Hunter’s since he was a boy. It was reached by negotiating a long stretch of hillside studded with a profusion of she-oak, walnut and sycamore, before a rider could mount again to follow the rock-strewn path beside the stream.

The clearing ended in a sheer cliff-face looking out across the valley to the distant Blue Ridge Mountains, and it was a place where Hunter had long been able to pretend he was the last person left in the world.

That, in fact, was where he’d been for the past two hours as he mulled over the news Duprix had offered him two days before. Too much, he decided, to believe that

Appomattox had brought an end to the sort of pig-headed conviction which had seen the southern states break away from the Union in the first place. Or that it would ease the minds of white men who counted the numbers of black faces around them, now no longer restrained by the laws which had underpinned slavery for generations.

Now the pig-headedness had taken a nastier turn, going underground. Duprix told him the two men murdered in Pleasant Valley had both been snatched from their property as they worked. "That cannot be done without someone seeing or knowing something. Go armed, Selby, wherever you go."

And he was, feeling the reassuring weight of the .44 calibre Remington handgun dragging at his hip; the pistol he'd asked for when the Union rearmed his troop at Chicago. Even so, he wasn't in the slightest –

The ring of metal brought Hunter to his feet and the Remington sliding from its holster in the same movement. It was hoof on stone, and even as it flashed through his head that he'd no line of retreat, a rider came round the corner and several things happened very quickly.

The rider's eyes widened as he saw himself confronted by an armed man; his horse whinnied, reared, plunged and threw him. Hunter fired twice as the man hit the ground and the horse skittered away into the stream.

"Lie still!" roared Hunter over the echo of the shots, but the man scrambled to his knees, his hands raised above his head and wincing as the muzzle of the Remington scanned slowly past him.

"I'm unarmed, sir..." he began.

Hunter cut him off. "More fool you, mister. Now – stand up!"

The man climbed gingerly to his feet and reached down for his hat, snatching his hand back as he saw what lay beneath the wide-brimmed US Cavalry officer's hat. He looked up, wide-eyed as Hunter holstered the Remington.

"That's why you need arms," said Hunter dryly. "A breeding pair of timber rattlers sleeping in the sun. He's bigger than most by about two feet, but that just made him a better target."

The newcomer smiled uncertainly, glanced down again, spun away and vomited. Hunter left him to it and walked into the stream to catch the reins of the man's horse, noting the US Cavalry brand on its shoulder. He unhooked the round canteen from the saddlebow, tipped out the brackish contents and filled it from the stream before leading the horse back to the bank.

"Here." He offered the canteen. "Are you alone?"

The man nodded, raised the canteen and swallowed long and gratefully. "What happened?" he managed.

"Your horse stepped close enough to wake them; they rattled, your horse threw you, and you fell nearly right on top of two pissed-off rattlesnakes. Sorry if you were set on talking them out of it, but..."

The newcomer's smile was shaky. "I'm in your debt, sir, and thank God for your skill with firearms." He held out a hand. "It hardly seems adequate, but thank you. I'm Jocelyn Ward."

"John Selby Hunter, Mr Ward. That a British accent?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. But I wasn't born there, Mr Hunter."

Hunter held up a hand. "Wasn't prying. Just being neighbourly. This here is my land."

"Good lord, Mr Hunter, I didn't mean to imply you were prying. I hope you took no offence."

Hunter handed him his reins. "My horse carries something just right for a close shave, Mr Ward. Shall we?"

Later that afternoon, sitting on Hunter's original rock with the flask of spirits between them, it emerged that Jocelyn Ward, who preferred to be called Joe, was a surgeon who had completed his studies in London in the summer of 1862 and deferred his return home in order to "gain further experience" in America's war. As a trained surgeon he'd been something of a rarity among the physicians of the Federal armies, where less than one in twenty had any surgical experience.

Hunter hesitated and said carefully, "We were lucky, I guess. None of my troop ever needed a field hospital. Tell the truth, we didn't hold the sawbones in much regard."

"Sawbones. Now there's a telling word. They call us that because that's all they see us do. But they don't know how little choice we have. Did you ever see what a half-inch ball of soft lead does to skin and flesh when it tumbles through a hip, or a thigh? It smashes bone four or five times. If the owner's lucky, the damage is confined to one limb, or if he's really lucky, to half a limb. Then we can amputate – not because we want to, but because we can't rejoin or reset bone in that condition. And if we try, infection'll kill the patient. Ever smelt gangrene? Ever have a man plead with you not to take his leg or his arm and have to tell him that if you don't then he'll die because we can't keep the wound clean while it heals?"

Hunter looked at him and saw no trace of the man who'd vomited in shock at the sight of two dead rattlesnakes.

"We see those things daily. Smashed limbs, mangled flesh, boys who should be at school sobbing with pain, screaming for their mothers. Small wonder some of us use this too much," and he held up the flask. "Doctors become doctors because they cherish life and health, and every day we're asked to clean out, patch up, sew, bandage and work around powder stains and dried pus." He shook his head, blinked and seemed to come back to himself.

"I do apologise. Didn't mean to run on like that. Especially to someone who's seen as much as I have."

"I haven't, Joe" said Hunter. "Not like you. But – you're on your way home, you said? Where's home, if it's not England?"

"Home is New Zealand," said Ward, and laughed at the look on Hunter's face. "Go on," he said. "Ask away. Where's that you're about to ask?"

Hunter grinned. "No offence, but – where's that? It's not in England?"

"Not by a long way," said Ward. "About half the world away. Heard of Australia?"

"Nope," said Hunter helplessly, and Ward sighed.

"Right," he said. "How much is in that flask?"

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### **A week later**

*I, John Selby Hunter, lately captain of 'B' troop of the First Virginia Cavalry Regiment, 'Shenandoah', of the Confederate States of America, want it known that I volunteered that troop for service in the United States Volunteer Force in September 1863 by reason of their sworn oath and obligation to follow where a lawfully-appointed superior led.*

*I further want it known that I led the said troop in action on the western frontier of these United States between September 1863 and June 1865 before leading them to their home depot in Staunton, Va., in July of 1865 following the cessation of hostilities between the United States of America and the Confederate States of America.*

*It follows that the responsibility for any and all of the actions referred to above rests with me, and to that end I set my signature below.*

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Hunter had never seen the Frenchman so rattled.

“This is a challenge, Selby!” he spluttered. “For that is ’ow they’ll see it, the men ’oo do these things by night. These ’andbills, they are all through the valley – on trees, in store windows, on notice-boards...you ’ave flaunted yourself in their faces – they must come after you now, you see? They must!”

Hunter’s chin lifted. “They can see it how they want! I had that handbill printed to back up the order I gave my troop – the order they obeyed. Well, I’m balancing things a little, that’s all. And as for me, I’m ready for them, so let them come!”

Duprix wasn’t impressed. “You’re ready for them? Oh *bien! Et bravo!* What of your mother, a widow? What of your brother, a cripple? What of your sister ’oose man is dead? Hein?”

Hunter bridled. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

Duprix exploded. “*Mort de ma vie!*” He calmed himself with a huge effort. “Selby, men ’oo rule by terror are as good only...only as the fear they can cause. They cannot ignore your challenge. So they will come for you. But – *regardes-toi* – you are no small’older to be snatched from a lonely field! You are not ’elpless, but a warrior ’oo carries weapons. So what will they do? I tell you what I would do.” He paused for breath, and the intensity in his voice was worse than his earlier anger.

“I would come for you by night, and I would burn you out. ’ow many nights can you sit and wait for them, even with your weapons? And what ’appens to the widow and the cripple and the bereaved when the shots an’ the shouts come an’ the windows they explode? ’ow ’ready for them’ will they be? You protect your men at the expense of your family! Why do those you love deserve this?”

His words struck home like axe-blows. A black cloud of despair dropped on Hunter as he realised, within two heartbeats, what he’d done.

“Selby, you’re a man of ’onour. You live an’ fight as you’ve been taught by your father, another man of ’onour. But men ’oo break the law to inflict their own law, they ’ave no use for ’onour. They ’ave ’atred, deceit, betrayal an’ these things they use to ’ave their way. So we must plan an’ we must do this swiftly.”

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Two days later, Selby Hunter sat in concealment on top of the ridge where he could see in all directions, and though the practised sweep of his eyes was as definite as the rifle across his knees, his mind flicked between the gathering dusk and the scene in Helena’s drawing room the day before.

Helena Hunter had glanced up at her tall son, stretched forward to kiss him and lingered a moment, staring at his temple.

“What is it, mother?” smiled Hunter, raising a hand to his face.

“I do believe you have your first grey hairs, Selby. Just by your ear. And you know, that’s exactly where your father began to go grey!”

“I’m in the best of company then. Did you bring me in to tell me that?”

“No, dear. Gaston and I have been talking.”

Hunter scowled. “I can guess what he’s been saying, and I don’t want you to worry, because there’s just no --- ”

“At my request, darling, Gaston has made it his business to find out how many of these deaths have occurred. Twenty-three. In Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee. There’s some sort of... of...movement seeking out men who did what you’ve done and murdering them.”

“What does it say about the men responsible, if they can’t understand why an officer would want to get his men out of a Yankee prison camp?”

“It doesn’t matter how stupid they are, my son. What matters is that their stupidity is likely to be fatal unless –”

The soft knock interrupted her and she called, “Come in Gaston.”

Duprix looked grim. “Lexington, and two in Culpeper. It grows worse. Madame. ’ave you spoken to ’im?”

“We were just doing that,” said Helena, and Hunter saw the blood had drained from her face. “Please sit down. Both of you.”

Helena drew herself up as the men sat. “Selby, I agree with Gaston’s conclusions that these men, this Association of the...”

“Association of the Southern Cross.”

Helena nodded. “...that these men will take you too. Your handbill was exactly what your father would have done, and I’d expect you to defend your men. That’s the man you are, and I honour you for it.”

Hunter opened his mouth, but Helena lifted a hand. “But I’m your mother, so I love you as much as I honour you. And after the weeks of despair your father and I endured before we knew you were in a Yankee camp... I’m not going to see you die. Dearest son...you must leave Clawton.”

Hunter came to his feet. “I’m not running from cowards! No-one will run me off Clawton! Father would turn in his grave...so would grandfather ...”

Duprix’ voice cracked like a whip. Hunter had never heard the soft-spoken Frenchman speak so deliberately or exactly. “Even if you put your mother through the pain of seeing you snatched and murdered, you cannot promise that no other member of this family will share your fate. Nor that this house will survive. You recall our conversation, yes?”

Hunter lowered his head like a bull. “That’s not going to...” he began, but Duprix cut him off with a gesture.

“*You*, who led your schoolmates to war. *You*, who delivered them from captivity; *you*, who led them home to their families; *you* who failed them in nothing – why do you hesitate to do for your own family what you do for them? Your presence will draw evil down on this house, an’ those you love! Would your father have hesitated? Hein?”

He turned to Helena, who was fighting back tears. “Madame ’elena, I say no more. Only my love for you and M’sieu Lowell’s children makes me speak as I ’ave, and if I give offence, blame my ’eart...” He clicked his heels and sought her hand, raising it to his lips.

Alone in the dark, Hunter sighed. He couldn’t defend his family alone. Mobilising the men of his troop – his ex-troop he reminded himself – would negate the very protection he’d sought to give them through his order and the handbill, and make targets of any who sided with him.

If he left Clawton, his family would be left alone and Duprix’ connections would ensure the safety of their property. And it wouldn’t be forever. Toby Hoth’s words came back. *Ten years from now, this ’ll all be over and it ’ll never have happened. We ’ll all be Americans again, and we ’ll be doing what God meant Americans to do.* Whatever that was.

Hunter cautiously eased his right leg and glanced at the sky. Moon was going to be full that night. He’d wait until it set before he moved.

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### ***Two days later***

“Welcome to our home, Mr Ward,” said Helena, extending a hand. “I’m Helena Renais Hunter, Selby’s mother, and I offer my apology for not being here to receive you.”

“No apology required or even appropriate, Mrs Hunter, for I’m delighted to meet you,” returned Ward, bowing over her hand. “On two counts, actually.” Helena raised an eyebrow and smiled, as Ward hastened on.

“I haven’t known Selby very long, ma’am. And when we met he saved my life. Had he not done so, I would never have had the opportunity of meeting the people of whom he’s so very proud. Having been introduced to his brother and sisters, I can now see why. And to be introduced to a family member who bears the same Christian name as my own sister is – well, surely providential?”

Helena clapped her hands and smiled again. “Really, Mr Ward? As you say – providential! We were destined to meet. Selby, won’t you please ring for Agamemnon? Mr Ward has no glass and I’m about to create a thirst by asking him to tell me absolutely everything there is to know about New... New Zealand? And we can carry on over dinner, so...if you please?”

“Ma’am, I hadn’t thought to stay for dinner,” returned a flustered Ward. “I’m not suitably dressed...”

“Mr Ward,” said Helena firmly, “We don’t stand on ceremony here and your attire is just fine for our table. Isn’t that so, Selby?”

“Best just do as my mother says, Joe, because you will in the end. Save your breath to tell us about New Zealand.”

So over dinner Ward told the Hunters about his family; of his father grown wealthy through cornering the import-export trade flowing through the major city of Auckland; of his sister and brother; of his wish to become a doctor and the consequent journey to his grandparents’ homeland for the necessary studies. Of his decision to interrupt his journey home to serve as a battlefield surgeon and of the experience he’d gained. Finally, he told of being attached to Major General David Hunter’s division for the Shenandoah campaign and of how, with the war coming to a close, he’d been left in the Staunton garrison.

“Where I now lance boils and dispense medicines. And daily give thanks that’s all I need to do after so much of other kinds of doctoring. But it’s time to take my experience home.”

Josh stirred. “And will there be much call for your experience, sir?” he asked, and Ward nodded.

“I fear so,” he said. “We’re a young country with no medical school to train doctors. And there are never enough, because not all doctors want to practice in the back of beyond. When you consider most of New Zealand is like your own western frontier, why yes, there’ll be call for my experience.”

“And is your leaving...imminent, sir?”

“Yes, it is; after three years my service is finished. Not that it was ever official.”

Helena smiled. She raised her glass in a salute. “A mother thanks you for the men and boys you’ve saved to return to their mothers, whether those boys wore grey or blue. We would be pleased if you’d regard Clawton as your home for the rest of your stay in the Shenandoah.”

“Why thank you, Mrs Hunter,” said Ward. “There’s nothing I’d like better.”

So Jocelyn Ward became a daily visitor to Clawton. Lydia appointed herself Ward’s guide to the estate and was noticeably ready to step into the breach if the tall New Zealander’s visits found Hunter temporarily hard to find.

The reason for Hunter's absences lay in his quiet and methodical preparation for leaving Clawton. In Josh and Duprix, he knew he had a team capable of running the estate for the three years he estimated he'd be gone, but Josh's disability and the Frenchman's age combined to ensure his wakefulness on his lonely spells of sentry-go at nights. There he ran over in his mind what he knew of the circumstances of the only people he fully trusted – the men he'd led to war.

*A fortnight later*

"Well," said Ward. "Caught you at last – how does it go? They seek him here, they seek him there; that damned elusive Selby's..."

"Everywhere," grinned Hunter. "I know and I apologise. Had a bit on my mind lately. No excuse though – you mustn't have long left, and I ought to be a more considerate host. You decided yet? When d'you go?"

"Soon's you're ready," replied Ward, and it was a moment before Hunter realised he'd heard him correctly.

"Joe, y'don't need my permission..."

Ward cut him off. "And I wasn't asking for it. Just asking when you might be ready to go."

"Me? Where'm I going?"

"New Zealand, I hope. You have to go somewhere, from what I hear."

Hunter turned in his saddle and squinted at Ward. They were on top of one of the highest parts of Clawton, with fully half of its acreage spread out below.

"Though I can understand why you'd be reluctant to leave this," went on the New Zealander, "just wait'll you see the New Zealand bush. That's putting it nicely – the New Zealand 'jungle' would be a better word. Right there on the outskirts of –"

"Seeing what kinda jungle?"

"The New Zealand jungle," said Ward patiently. "The whole country's –"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You coming home with me, of course."

Hunter looked at him again, opened his mouth, closed it again and nodded. "Lydia. Little sister's been talking, eh?"

"And why not?" returned Ward equably. "She loves you, you're in trouble; she can't help you herself so she asked someone who could. Isn't that reasonable?"

"No, it's not," snapped Hunter. "You're a friend, and it's not reasonable to burden a friend with anything like this. Lydia should've –"

"Asked me sooner, I know," said Ward with a grin. "If you go into hiding – not that you would – it doesn't remove a threat to your family as an option for bringing you out of hiding. In fact, that holds true for anywhere you go in this country, vast though it is."

"On the other hand," he went on as Hunter fell silent, "if you went abroad, and let it be known, these people, these ... whatever they call themselves ... will have their triumph, and they'll leave Lydia, Augusta, Helena and Josh alone because there's no need to do anything else. And this sort of thing won't last forever. The law will catch up with them – and best of all, you'll be alive to see it."

*Ten years from now, this'll all be over and it'll never have happened. We'll all be Americans again...*

"And there are a couple of other reasons why you should swallow your pride and come with me. Want to hear them?"

Hunter sighed. "Seems I'm going to anyway, from Lydia if not from you. You still putting water in that canteen, or have we taught you civilised ways, Ward?"

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“Joe Ward’s made me an offer. Says he’d love to show me New Zealand. It’s a young country, far away from anywhere and surely far enough from the US to satisfy what passes for honour among the Association of Southern Cowards.” He saw tears come to Helena’s eyes, and he stepped forward and hugged her.

“And they’ve found gold there, Joe says, so I may come back rich!”

Helena responded to the feeble joke. “I’m pleased to hear you talk of returning, my darling son,” she said unsteadily. “How...how long...do you think?”

“Three years. At the most. I’ve planned on three years, and I’ve done a few things with that in mind...” He went on to outline how he’d engaged Lew Peters, of his ex-troop, to take his place on the plantation. As the youngest of four sons, Peters had little to hope for from his own family’s resources but Hunter had always found him steady, resourceful and cool in a crisis. “He’s got a way with animals, and Clawton’s going to need draught animals to replace the slaves. Gaston – Lew will work under you and Josh, and I’m going to leave the whys and wherefores to you three to work out.”

One other thing needed to be said, and he hesitated a moment. “If the reason I’m quitting Clawton holds up, this’ll never be needed. But just in case, I’ve arranged for John McDonald to...look after the place. And you all. With some of the troop.”

Augusta frowned. “Didn’t you just say Lew Peters was doing that?”

Josh spoke up from the window seat. “No, sis. Selby means something else.”

“Right. John’s arranging a detail to spend nights here, until he thinks it’s safe. That’s the least – the very least – I can do, because I’ve put you all in a danger I hope never comes to pass.”

He swallowed, and looked round the room at the family he’d dreamed of returning to for so long. “The least I can do if I have to run is have the people I love protected.”

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### **Late November 1865, longitude 130° West, latitude 10° South.**

The dolphins skimmed effortlessly along the wave crests, showing off to those who watched, every now and then calling attention to their antics, with a piercing squeal that echoed across the foaming wake of the barque *Rona*.

Hunter had lost count of the number of days a steady wind out of the northeast had driven them relentlessly down the Pacific, but Captain William Hayes had found the barque’s best point of sailing; she was creaming along on a port tack with a curling, frothy bone in her teeth, the dolphins racing to keep up.

Hunter stood at the after rail and gazed back at the tumbling wake as he reflected on the whirlwind events since he and Ward had ridden from Clawton to take passage on a mail-clipper out of Norfolk. They had raced down the east coast in seven days, but then lain becalmed in the lee of the great island of Cuba for another three while their square-bearded Nantucket master alternated between cursing the weather, whistling for a wind and snarling at Ward’s sly remarks on the blessings of steamships.

At last they’d put into Colon and taken the short train-ride across the Isthmus to Panama, where they’d waited a fortnight for passage down the Pacific. It arrived in the form of the *Rona*, a barque trading down the Pacific and into Auckland under Captain William Hayes, referred to by the bartender in their hotel as ‘Bully’.

“We can be in Auckland for Christmas if we take passage on the *Rona*.” noted Ward. “Otherwise it might be late January. Let’s see what we think of ‘Bully’ Hayes tomorrow.”

Hayes had passed muster impressively. Both had found the huge blond sailor charming, polite and businesslike. He explained the ship's proposed route and assured them his goal was to reach Auckland far enough before Christmas to discharge cargo, replenish supplies and be ready to sail just after the beginning of the New Year. "And not to do much but enjoy the weather in between," he'd noted in his flat New England accent.

He'd shown no undue curiosity in his passengers. By agreement, neither had been forthcoming about the purpose of their journey, although Ward had admitted to being a returning New Zealander and Hunter had indicated he was to 'try his luck' in the colony. So here they were – across the equator and bowling down the vastness of the Pacific into weather that smiled on them day after day, closing in on the islands of the South Seas.

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### ***Nashville, Tennessee, also late November.***

The short, dapper man raised his glass. "We'd be honoured to have you, General. A man of your stature – why, any cause you supported couldn't fail to prosper."

The big man opposite frowned, shook his head and stared down at his own glass. "I'm no general any more, John. Come to it, neither are you. Not since Appomattox."

The other waved a hand. "A technicality," he said. "You're Nathan Bedford Forrest, and a legend. Always will be. Private soldier to general officer – hell, you *are* the Confederacy. Why, even the bluebellies respect Nathan Bedford Forrest."

"Good of you to say so. But y'see, that very word's where I stick. Reckon I've heard a few things 'bout your cause that don't rightly sit with respect. No," he said, holding a big and scarred hand palm-down over his glass, "I won't have another. I want to hear what you say about your Association first."

John Gordon, in the uniform of a brigadier-general of the Confederate States of America, raised an eyebrow and carefully set down the decanter. "What've you heard?"

"Killings. Nigras beaten, raped, lynched. Men – our men – snatched by night or off lonely farms to face a drumhead court-martial, tried and shot."

Gordon smoothed the wings of his cavalry moustache. "I won't deny there have been times when things have gotten...out of hand. But I've been present at every one of those courts-martial, to see order kept and justice done."

"You can't have a court-martial if you ain't got an army. That's vengeance, not justice – and anyone involved is no law-giver, he's a murderer. How legal's a rape? A lynching? That the cause we're fighting for now? That where Ol' Dixie is these days?"

"Now hold on! Nathan, if you want to blame someone, blame that sonofabitch Lincoln. He freed the nigras three years ago. Not 'cause he loved 'em – hell no – just to keep England from joining the war on our side."

Forrest narrowed his eyes. "A good soldier obeys the law."

Gordon smiled, thinly. "Can't agree with you there. This here United States was founded in defiance of the law. Ninety years ago. You heard of the Declaration of Independence?"

"That was back then. We've just surrendered 'cause we been beat. Our industries are in ruins, our fields got more weeds than tobacco or cotton. Hell John, all the ditches and fencelines through the South look like Sherman just passed by. It sure ain't the time to offer the Yankees any more of an excuse to kick us in the ass."

Gordon smiled again. "Just my point, Nathan. Look –" He pulled his chair closer to the long refectory table. "There's trouble with law and order clear through Dixie. Some nigras have let their freedom go to their heads, taking revenge on whitey. When the

Yankees busted us they also busted our economy. Even owners who're good to their nigras can't pay them. And we ain't allowed to work 'em without paying 'em, courtesy of our blue-bellied friends."

He paused to sip from his glass. "White folks are pissed right off, and worried. Blacks are uppity, demanding this and insisting on that. Same all over Dixie, and folks are solving it their way. 'Course there's going to be beatings, lynchings and all the rest. We're fighting for our way of life."

"And your point, John?" said Forrest.

Gordon smelled victory. "My point is that we need the kind of discipline, order and leadership that'll see our way prevail. What made your cavalry the best in the South. The kind of leadership only a legend can provide. That's my point. It good enough?"

"You want me to head an organisation with blood on its hands?"

"No. I want you to head an organisation that'll *replace* all th' ones with blood on their hands. Hell, why'm I telling you 'bout how bad we need a command structure? Look – y'know I'm from Pulaski, Tennessee. Well, half a dozen of us get together regular to yarn over old times. Anyway, I got to thinking that organisation, through the South, could be how we could stand up against the scum the Yankees are sending down here and what they stir up 'mongst the nigras."

Forrest was silent for a long time before he nodded at his glass. Gordon picked up the decanter and refilled both. Forrest looked at his and then at the man who'd ridden the battlefields of the past four years as one of his subordinates.

"I'll think on this, John. I surely will. But one thing I'll tell you now, and that ain't going to change. No-one who soldiered for the Confederacy's going to face another court-martial, y'hear? So call 'em off. No more."

"And if we can't keep order through sweet reason ... 'mong the nigras, I mean?"

"We'll deal with that when we get to it. We came second in April last. We ain't coming second again."

Gordon smiled broadly and raised his glass. "You're sounding like a leader already."

"And what'm I about to become leader of?"

Gordon shrugged. "The whole damn South I hope. But for now – we call ourselves the Circle of Friends. Only, one of us with more learning than sense, persuaded us to use the Greek name. So we're the *Kuklos*."

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### ***Aboard the 'Rona'***

Whether the main hold had been incorrectly loaded or Captain Hayes changed his mind, Hunter never discovered. If Hayes had changed his mind there was no hint of it in the tongue-lashing he delivered at the foot of the *Rona*'s tiny quarterdeck.

"So move it!" he raged at three crewmen, who shifted from foot to foot. "Get a block rigged. And fucking quick, because I smell a squall coming!"

"Wouldn't we be better to wait, Cap'n?" offered one.

Hayes snarled at him. "Wait? 'S your fucking idleness caused this. Wait on this!" And he drove a hamlike fist at the sailor's head. The man dropped like a stone.

"Pick him up," he ordered the others. "Put the useless bastard on the end of the rope an' let him sway the boxes up on the tackle. He can pull his weight one way or the other. Now move!" He stamped off to the bow while Hunter and Ward stood on the quarterdeck above.

“Guess we know why that barkeep in Panama called Hayes ‘Bully’ ” murmured Hunter, taking the cheroot from his mouth. Not the first time I’ve seen him set about his crew.”

“Ah well,” replied Ward. “His business I suppose.”

“I’m glad we didn’t tell him ours,” said Hunter, as they watched the men swaying the bales of trade goods up out of the depths of the hold to set them against the lee rail.

Up came a series of long rectangular boxes, each one bearing a stencil proclaiming it to be farming tools, to be placed against the weather rail while the bales of trade goods were brought up from the lower hold. One of the rectangular boxes swung wickedly on its way back in under a gust of wind as the squall began to make itself felt, striking the thick timber coaming of the hold and splintering along half its length.

Hunter found himself staring at the butts and breech mechanisms of what were undeniably Spencer .56 carbines, the sort his troop had used against the Cheyenne, while the cursing crewmen fought the block and tackle to get its swaying, kicking burden under control.

“Well *fuck me!*” came a roar from the bows, and Hayes came stalking towards the cringing hands, his face a mask of fury, his big fists opening and closing like claws. He strode clear of the pirouetting crate and stopped dead as he saw what Hunter and Ward could see. His eyes swung to the two passengers on the quarterdeck, and back to the sailors. When he spoke, his voice had lost its fury.

“Get a bight on that case. Handsomely! And get it back in the hold. You useless, pox-ridden wharf-rats can get in after it and box that cargo up again. Now!” He glanced again at Hunter and Ward, and turned away towards the bows.

Ward let out his breath in a long hiss. “The good captain’s unhappy.”

It was a moment before Hunter answered. “You got trouble in New Zealand?”

“Not for a couple of years as far as I know. You think that’s where the weapons are going?”

“They’re going somewhere,” said Hunter slowly.

“Perhaps they’re intended for the government.”

Hunter just looked at him. “They’re US weapons, Yankee, at that. Mean to say the English have given up making carbines? We both know where they came from – and I saw some of those boxes loaded in Panama.”

Ward nodded. “And the ‘farmtools label’ means it’s not a lawful transaction, even if we could think of a reason for a government purchase being carried in a two-bit barque. And we’ve seen it. Where does that leave us?”

“Carrying a Remington each” said Hunter. “Didn’t like that second look he gave us. Not at all.”

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Bully Hayes shot the noonday sun and Hunter watched his lips move as he bent over the chart. Looking up, Hayes caught the other’s eye and nodded, before turning back to his task. Hunter moved a step or two across the tiny quarterdeck and glanced at the chart before exchanging pleasantries with the captain about the weather and the strength of the breeze.

Hayes’ mind was clearly elsewhere, and he moved to the lee rail to speak to the crewman who’d cast the log while he had been busy with the sextant. Hunter turned to see Ward about to mount the quarterdeck stairs.

“There you are, Joe,” he sang out, moving towards the steps. “Bring any cheroots? Left mine below.” They moved forward into the bows as Ward offered his cigar-case and Hunter made a big show of pointing out something on the horizon before bending

forward to the Vesta cupped in his friend's hand. He murmured, "Notice anything 'bout our heading?"

Ward shaded his eyes and squinted at the horizon. "Can't say I have... Why?"

"Been watching our captain take the noon sight for the last four days," replied Hunter, pointing again. "Thought we were heading a little more to the south. Got a look at the chart today, and we're definitely heading well south of southeast. No, don't look at the sun. Hayes is still on the quarterdeck and I can feel him watching us."

"That heading a bad thing?"

"Not by itself, but I noticed the change the day after we saw the carbines. Kinda coincidental. Another thing – the heading I saw today is taking us well southeast of those islands where we were gonna trade. Recall what the deckhands were doing the day we saw the weapons?"

"Shifting cargo to get at the trade goods," said Ward slowly.

Hunter grunted.

Ward continued. "We could always ask him."

Hunter chuckled. "You'd trust a gunrunner to tell you the truth?"

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In the event, they were forestalled. Halfway through the afternoon, Hayes approached them.

"Gentlemen, either of you familiar with yellow fever?"

Hunter didn't miss a beat. "Yellowjack? Hell, Captain, we're engineers, not doctors. But I've seen it. You, Joe?"

Ward admitted to having seen it in the diggings. "Why?" he asked.

Hayes looked solemn. "Reckon we've got it aboard."

"Helluva time to find it," said Ward. "Where are we?"

"About seven days from landfall," answered Hayes. "Be obliged if you gentlemen'd take a look."

They exchanged glances before Hunter spoke. "That safe?"

Hayes nodded. "Hasn't broken out nowhere else, and I'm not even sure it's yellowjack. That's why I'm asking your opinion."

Ward nodded and Hayes led the way to the crew quarters, where a man sat by a cot on which another man twisted this way and that, clearly in the grip of fever. As they approached, the attendant dipped a cloth in a pannikin of water and applied it to the patient's forehead. He cried out, either in pain or relief, and appeared to fall asleep.

"Been like this for two days," said Hayes. "What you think?"

"Looks mighty like it," agreed Hunter quickly, and his foot pressed Ward's. "What d'you reckon, Joe?"

Ward bent over the man. He felt for the neck pulse, listened to the ragged breathing, and felt in the man's armpits. "I'm no expert, but there's fever here all right," he replied, with a glance towards Hayes.

"Probably a good idea to keep up the wet cloth," he said to the man by the bed as the three of them moved away. "Better safe than sorry, eh?"

"Sure looks like yellowjack to me," said Hunter. "What now?"

"Been thinkin' 'bout that," replied Hayes. Was it Ward's imagination, or did he sound eager?

"Auckland'll keep us cruising round for at least three weeks, till they're sure we're clear. And I don't rightly blame them," he said, sincerity shining from his face. "Now didn't you folks want to be in Auckland by Christmas?"

Ward pulled a face. "We won't be if we're quarantined."

“That’s my point,” said Hayes triumphantly. “I reckon we’re clear. Hasn’t broken out nowhere else, so I reckon we’re no danger to no-one. But Auckland ain’t going to believe that, so they’ll quarantine us. Three weeks, minimum.”

He looked at Ward and Hunter. “There ain’t no need for you folks to miss being with your kin at Christmas. We was goin’ to make a call at a place called Kawhia just after we left Auckland, but what I’m thinkin’ now is we go there first, unload what we got for the Mission, and set you gentlemen ashore. From there, y’can get a coastal steamer to Auckland. Or even get there overland. ’Course, I’d refund part of y’r passage money. Wanna think about it?”

“Sure,” said Hunter easily. “Yellowjack ain’t a good travelling companion. Get back to you once we’ve chewed it over.”

Hayes nodded and moved away to the quarterdeck. Ward and Hunter moved, just as naturally, in the other direction. “Get the feeling,” asked Hunter, “our good captain wants shot of us?”

Ward nodded grimly. “It’s a feeling I can almost trip over. Same’s I nearly tripped over your foot back there in the foc’sle.”

Hunter chuckled. “Thought your medical outrage might get the better of you. What was wrong with the man?”

Ward sniffed. “Chronic malaria. Not yellowjack, although the symptoms are alike. He’ll be on his feet again in a couple of days.”

“So no need for quarantine?”

“Quarantine my arse!” scoffed Ward. “The only way you or I could catch anything off that man is if he turns into a mosquito and bites us!”

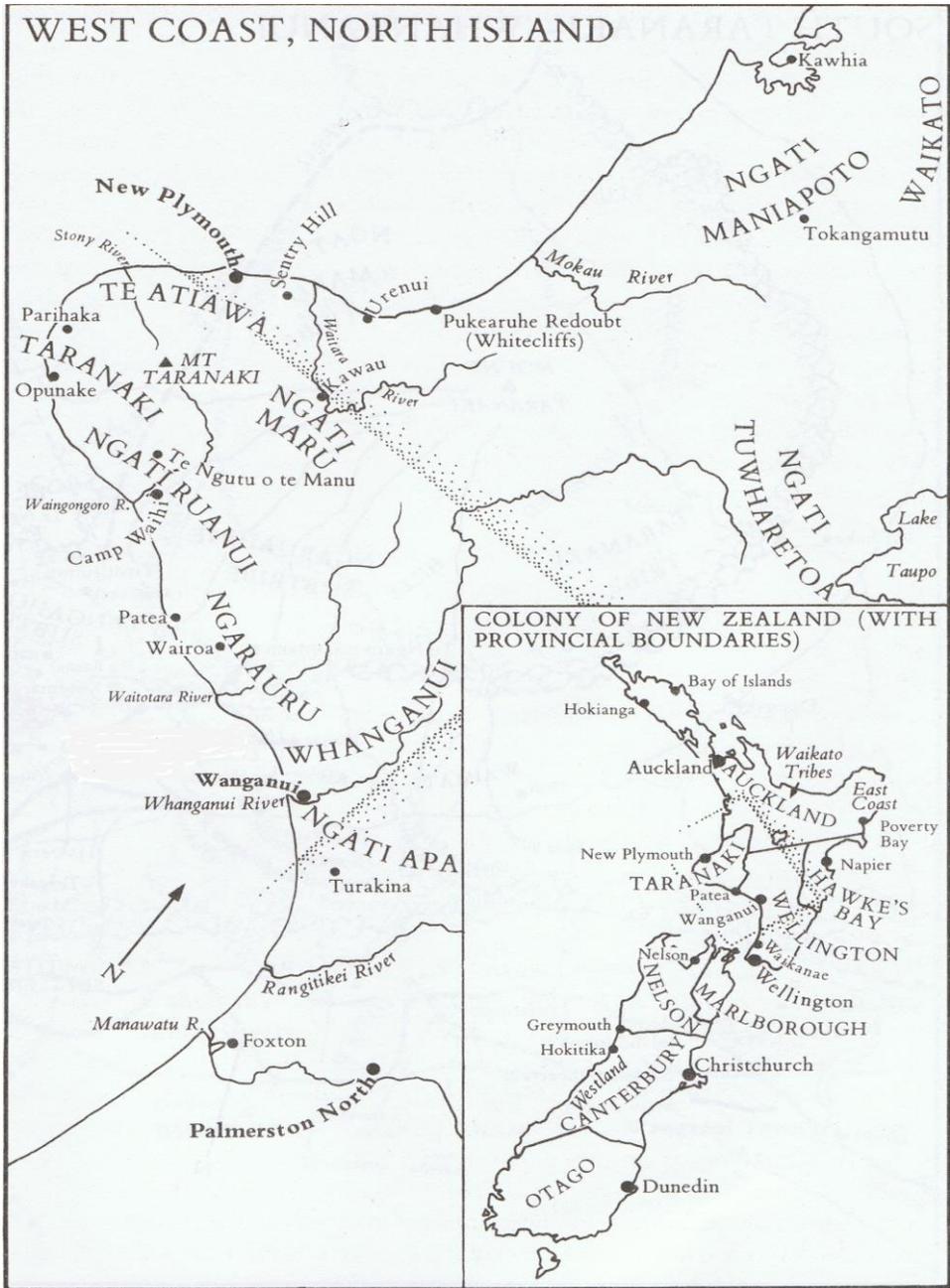
“Good job we’re mining engineers,” mused Hunter. “If Hayes had known you’re a doctor, he might’ve tried something less subtle than convincing us we’re aboard a plague ship. Because I’ll bet a silver dollar to a bent nickel he doesn’t mean for us to see your home town. He’s looking to make a landfall somewhere else first, and I guess we don’t have to think too hard about the reason.”

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**New Zealand**  
**1865- 1869**

*'And how can man die better  
Than facing fearful odds,  
For the ashes of his fathers,  
And the temples of his gods?'*

*Thomas Macaulay: Lays of Ancient Rome*



### **Chapter 3: New Zealand 1865**

*Kawhia, December 1865*

The *Rona* glided under topsails alone across the broad harbour lying beneath its sentry hills. Ahead was a sturdy plank jetty on which figures waited to catch the heaving-lines that presently lay coiled at bow, waist and stern. Opposite the jetty, across the harbour, was a surprisingly large and white-painted wooden building that was clearly the Wesleyan mission Hayes had mentioned. Dead ahead and midway between jetty and mission was a stockaded settlement, and through his short field-glass Hunter could see buildings within the stockade.

“Reeds,” he pronounced to Ward. “Looks like reeds, bulrushes, whatever you call it. See for y’self.” He held out the glass, which a laughing Ward declined.

“I’ve seen a Maori village – *kainga*, they’re called – before. But while you’re looking, and since you’re the soldier, see any new fortifications? How would you defend this place?”

Hunter frowned, looked at his friend and raised the glass again to scan the stockade in detail. “Couple of towers there, sure enough, but no fresh timber I can see. Looks old. What’s your thinking, Joe?”

Ward glanced around and lowered his voice. “Those carbines have to be the reason for us putting in here. This vessel wouldn’t stand a Customs inspection. So where are they going? No warfare here, and the locals aren’t obviously preparing to defend themselves, so who is?”

Hunter glanced at Ward with respect. “See what you mean,” he muttered. “Time’s coming when we might find out.”

He let his mind rove back to the landfall three days to the southeast, recalling the massive headland to starboard and the huge harbour Hayes had referred to as Port Nicholson sliding past on the right. Then a northerly turn and an overnight passage had brought them the beauty of a green and thickly-forested land with, at its core, the wonder of a symmetrical cone with an unbelievable patch of white at its summit, even in the sparkle of a summer morning.

Hunter looked at its breathtaking beauty, as it thrust upward to a cloudless sky, and Ward had murmured “Cook – that’s Captain James Cook, one of England’s great sailors – named it for the First Lord of the Admiralty. Egmont.”

A sharp command broke his reverie, and he looked round at the men tailing on to the ropes and bringing the topsails sliding up to be furled on the yards above. *Rona* shivered as she turned for the run-in to the jetty under Hayes’ hand, and the way fell off her.

The Maori who stepped off the gangplank into the ship’s waist stared at Hunter and Ward with a curiosity bordering on arrogance. He was a short man, enormously broad across shoulders and chest but with no trace of the belly to match what Ward could only guess was early middle age. Even a surgeon’s eye couldn’t discern age under the intricacy of a full facial tattoo, while the man’s shoulders and upper chest were a riot of blue tracery.

He wore a short skirt of a reedlike material, which rustled as he moved, decorated in horizontal strips of colour. It was held in place by a woven belt, through which was thrust a curved bone club of some weight, with edges bearing the marks of a sharpening stone. His jet-black straight hair was piled at the back of his head and held in place with a bone comb. The only ornamentation he wore was a feather beside the comb.

The native glanced at the two passengers while he leaned on a long, decorated staff shaped like a paddle at one end, with the other carved to resemble an out-thrust tongue, and both men would later recall the hostility in his dark eyes. He turned to Hayes in

greeting, and the captain replied in the same tongue, speaking for a full minute before indicating Hunter and Ward.

The Maori's black eyes slid back to the pair and stayed there as he grunted a response to Hayes, who nodded and spoke again before turning to his passengers. The native called something over the side to one of his own on the jetty, and the man turned and set off along the track.

"This here's Te Wetere," explained Hayes. "He draws a bit of water round here and among his people, the Tainui. He's a servant of the Maori King."

"The... what?" from Ward. Hayes hastened to explain how elements among the Maori had decided that, since monarchy obviously served the *Pakeha* well, it might benefit Maori to have their own version and had found a leading member of Maori society to accept the kingship.

"King Tawhiao is son of the first king, Potatau Te Wherowhero. Court's not far from here, and Te Wetere's travelling back today. He'll see you on your way."

"We thought we'd take that coastal steamer you spoke about," said Hunter. "Country looks fairly dense."

Hayes said smoothly, "We've missed the last steamer until late January. And the roads are fine, just fine. You'll be ridin' the milit'ry road the Limeys built when they invaded Te Wetere's lands. Oh, it's all over," he assured them. "Good as gold now." He moved to the rail to bellow to the shore party to lock off the mooring ropes and stand down.

During this recital Te Wetere's cold eyes flickered from Hunter to Ward and back again. The boxes marked 'agricultural tools' had been swayed up from the main hold and piled on the jetty. At a dozen carbines per case, Ward estimated a gross, and together with what he assumed to be boxes of cartridges, they made an impressive pile.

A bark of command drew his attention, and he looked past the jetty to see a line of porters shuffling along the track. Something about the way the porters moved caught his attention, and on looking more closely he saw their feet were bound. They were being chivvied along by warriors armed with staves of the sort Te Wetere carried, who were clearly not averse to using them. The line drew up to the pile on the jetty, boxes were swung to shoulders and in moments the doleful koffle was heading away around the harbour.

"Bet me," muttered Hunter to Ward, "those farming tools ain't going past the village."

"No bet," came back Ward. "We won't be here to see." He slanted his eyebrows to where a group of heavily tattooed warriors leaned on their staves and watched them.

Hayes approached. "Gentlemen, I'll bid you happy travelling and wish you the best for the season. Te Wetere will take you on to Auckland." Hunter saw the man sent off earlier coming back astride one horse and leading another. "Y'r transport, by the looks. I've had your valises brought up. Te Wetere wants to get t' the milit'ry road tonight."

Ward saw their travelling valises lying on the deck outside their quarters.

Hayes went on. "B'lieve I owe you some money." He produced a wash-leather bag and took out four silver US dollars, which he pressed on Hunter.

Hunter looked at him for a long moment. "Give the money to your friend, to pay for the horses. Reckon we'll stay at the mission awhile, until we get our land legs back, then go on when we're rested."

Hayes' eyes flickered and he spoke at length to Te Wetere, who looked at Hunter, said something and turned away to step onto the jetty. Hayes spoke again. "Te Wetere says the mission's closed. The missionaries've gone t' their up-country stations. Ain't gonna be open till they come back and he don't know when that might be. It's best y' go with my friend here."

“Reckon so,” said Hunter. “C’mon Joe, grab your valise.”

As he turned to pick up the long soft case, Hunter hissed from the corner of his mouth, “Do just as I do, but do it fast!”

Fortunately Ward had the presence of mind not to react, merely muttering the response which had swept the Union armies during the war. “OK.”

Hunter straightened, hefting his valise in one hand and turned to Hayes, holding out the other. “Thanks Captain Hayes, and fair winds.” He smiled. “Might see you in Auckland. It can’t be that big a place.”

Ward followed suit, then walked down the gangplank and along the jetty to where the horses were being held, one of them by Te Wetere, who was snapping instructions. With a shock, Ward saw the beasts weren’t saddled but before he had time to work through the implications, Hunter sang out, “Joe, catch!” His valise came sailing through the air before Hunter vaulted across the back of his animal. “Here!”

Ward had the wit to toss him one valise and then the other, and to board his own mount. “Ready?” asked Hunter passing over Ward’s valise and looking hard at his friend.

Ward realised *Do just what I do* was imminent. He nodded.

Hunter snapped, “Let’s go!” and kicked Te Wetere in the head as hard as he could.

The man fell away with an explosive grunt; Hunter grabbed the bridle and dug in his heels. The horse exploded forward, Ward an instant behind, but the Maori nearest to him sprang at the horse’s head with a shout. Ward lifted his foot and straight-legged him in the chest, and the man fell under the flailing hooves. In an instant of shouting, cursing chaos, the two men shot clear of the boiling mass, clinging crazily to bridles and manes and clutching the long valises across their fronts.

Two hundred yards beyond the jetty, a track curved away uphill and Hunter, half a length in front, angled towards it, kicked his beast in the ribs again, and thundered over a crest to leave the commotion along the jetty behind.

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### ***Epsom, Auckland, New Zealand December 1865.***

The final notes of the Chopin nocturne faded into the evening twilight and it was a moment before the rush of applause broke the magic of their passing. The girl at the piano bobbed her head shyly in acknowledgement and then stood up, one hand caressing the deeply-polished timber of the instrument, the other holding back her full skirt as she curtseyed.

“Miriam, you’re a jewel!” said Theophilus Ward, stout and bewhiskered, bowing over the hand she offered. “I do believe you’d charm birds from trees with those fingers of yours!”

“At the very least, Father,” chimed in a pretty blonde girl coming past Ward to embrace Miriam, “birds from trees, fish from rivers, rabbits from their burrows! Dr Ramage?”

“Without doubt!” smiled the small dark man with the curling muttonchop whiskers. “That piece must be played accurately and swiftly if it is to be played at its suggested tempo. Now, while notes may be the building blocks of music, timing and phrasing open Chopin’s soul to us. Miriam, my dear, do tell us how you do it?”

Miriam blushed. “It’s very kind of you to say so ...” She thought for a moment, her bottom lip between perfect white teeth. “I have a sense of how the music wants to go, and once I have that sense I let it take me. My fingers release the notes.” A thought struck her,

and she went on. “It’s as if I were swimming in the river at Okotuku; when I’d get into the current and let it sweep me along. Then, my arms and legs just... kept me in the current. Yes, like that.”

Shock showed on the faces about her. “Well, I certainly hope you won’t venture into any more rivers, Miriam!” said Mrs Ramage. “They’re fearfully dangerous, aren’t they dearest?”

The doctor nodded vigorously. “Absolutely, my dear. Why, it’s a rare week when I don’t conduct a post-mortem on some poor wretch fished out of the harbour!”

“Oh, Miriam’s an excellent swimmer!” said the blonde girl, sliding an arm through Miriam’s. “She spent her early years as a child of nature, didn’t you my dear? Swimming, riding, climbing trees, diving for ... what did you call it Miriam? I can never remember.”

“*Kaimoana*,” said Miriam. “Sea-food. Oysters, *paua*, mussels.”

“Oysters?” queried Ramage, his eyebrows in danger of losing themselves in his hair, “Not too many, I trust. They’re apt to be hard on the digestion. I must say you’ve left all that behind you most successfully. You play like an angel, my dear.”

“We’re all proud of Miriam,” said the blonde girl. “She’s done so well since she came to live with us. She’s a young lady now, and the little mission girl has quite gone, hasn’t she?”

A shadow passed across Miriam’s face, but she smiled and said, “It does seem far away. I’ve almost forgotten the taste of *kaimoana* and *kaanga-wai*. As for horse-riding.....”

“But Miriam dear,” laughed Helena Ward. “It’s not a month since we rode round One Tree Hill with Mr Logan Campbell!”

Miriam wrinkled her nose. “That’s not proper riding. That was walking a horse! Real riding is hanging on by a rope bridle and your knees, and kicking the horse in the ribs when you want him to turn. And as for the jumps...”

“By your knees? Jumps? Kicking him in the ribs?” squeaked Mrs Ramage. “You mean...you’d sit...astride, Miriam?”

“Certainly, Mrs Ramage,” returned Miriam. “One must ride astride when one doesn’t have a saddle. One falls off otherwise.”

“Doesn’t have a... Henry, might I have your arm? I feel a little...”

“Mrs Ramage, there’s a chaise-longue just behind you,” said Helena, the soul of concern as she took the doctor’s stricken wife by the arm, but the look she sent Miriam held more suppressed laughter than concern.

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### ***Inland from Kawhia***

Ward’s mouth was still dry. “Well,” he said, a touch shakily, “that’s cleared the air.” They were resting the horses after they’d exploded through the bush until the track had petered out.

“No choice,” said Hunter. “We weren’t going past that village anyhow you look at it. No saddles – so how were we going t’ride to Auckland?”

“Maybe they would’ve saddled them in the village.”

Hunter scoffed. “Then why didn’t they when they had the chance, with Hayes’ dusky friend in such an all-fired hurry? And while we’re asking questions, why does a closed-up mission station have smoke coming from what I can only assume is a bakehouse chimney? Because that’s what I saw through my glass.”

“No steamer,” mused Ward. “No mission. No way out because Hayes knows what we saw.”

Hunter nodded grimly. “You’ve got it, Joe. But none of it will matter if his friends get us before we get to the law. Any ideas?”

“We’d make better time along the beach.”

“And that’s just what I’d think if I was chasing us. We’ve no idea where we are, but we need to get north, and along the beach is the quickest way. Hayes can cruise just offshore and sic his painted friends on to us. Or put some ashore in our path. I reckon we double back to pass behind the village. Say northeast. There’s a military road somewhere in there, unless Hayes was lying about that too, and where there’s a military road, there’s military. You fine with that?”

Ward nodded. For the rest of a long day the two fugitives picked their way through dense bush, heading well east of north as far as they could judge from infrequent glimpses of the sun through the forest canopy.

“We lost them, d’you think?” whispered Ward as they dismounted.

Hunter shook his head. “No, I don’t. We’ll have left sign of some kind, and if they haven’t found it yet, they will.” He glanced up at the sky, miraculously clear of foliage. “That way,” he said, pointing. Ward took a fresh grip on his bridle and fell in behind.

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### ***Epsom, Auckland, the same day***

Theophilus Ward beamed. “You really should enter, Miriam my dear,” said. “You have so much talent. Won’t you consider it?”

“Oh Mr Ward,” said Miriam quickly, “I doubt if I have the skill...there are so many other fine players. Why, Miss LeFleming has at least three other pupils who would score much higher than I ever could!”

“Then we’ll have you groomed for the competitions by Miss LeFleming!” cried Ward. “I’ve no doubt there are things she can teach you that are especially relevant to competitions. Would extra lessons overcome your objections?”

A flustered Miriam had nowhere to go. “Certainly Mr Ward. If it will make you happy.”

“Happy and proud, my dear!” cried Ward, seizing her hand. “You’ll be a marvel, and a wonderful example for your people.”

“What’s this? Enter for what?” enquired Dr Ramage, looming up with a restorative glass of punch for his wife.

“The Auckland Competitions, Doctor,” explained Ward. “They started a year ago, when you were still in China, bringing the Word to the heathen.” He hastened to explain how the competitions, a series of artistic and cultural events in music performance, dancing, composition, oratory and painting, were due to be held again in February. “And I’m in the course of asking Miriam to take part. What d’you think, Doctor?”

“Admirable idea, Ward!” cried Ramage. “My dear, you’ll carry all before you – you simply must enter!”

Miriam forced a smile and inclined her head.

“And she’ll win,” claimed Helena. “She might be Maori, but she doesn’t need to fear anyone I saw in last year’s competitions. Miriam will be such a good example for our Maori. Everyone will see what a difference proper education makes to people we have a duty to help.”

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### ***Inland of Kawhia.***

Ward woke as the pre-dawn darkness gave way to a pale greyness spreading from the east, and stretched limbs stiff and cramped from a night of fitful dozing.

“Time to go,” said Hunter, in a voice low enough to match the menace of the morning. “You hungry?”

“Trying not to think about it,” grunted Ward. “Doing fine until you spoke.”

Hunter chuckled. “Put it behind you. Te Wetere and his boys can move faster than us, and if we’re going to get to the road it’ll have to be today or never. If we get there we eat – if we don’t we won’t need to.”

Ward nodded ruefully and Hunter moved ahead through the trees. The ground sloped uphill and soon became steep enough to require them to lead their horses slantwise across the slope. They battled upwards for most of an hour until the terrain began to level out and the bush thinned.

Conscious of the skyline, Hunter handed over his reins, dropped to his knees and crawled forward to peer through the last screen. He found himself looking down into a valley, and what he saw made him turn and beckon his companion forward.

Ward tied off the horses to a low branch and moved forward to lie beside Hunter. He looked down into a hidden valley, sheltered on all sides by steep hills. There was movement at its far end and Hunter’s glass resolved it into knots of warriors gathered round trees. As he watched, the groups fell away, leaving a solitary figure bound to the trunk of each tree. The warriors moved down the valley, laughing and chattering as they drove half a dozen more captives before them.

Tracking the warriors through the telescope, Hunter grunted as he picked up a group of three or four warriors breaking open a pile of familiar-looking cases to pull out carbines and cartridges, but it wasn’t until one ducked behind a captive and a blade flashed before the man shrieked and fell to the ground, that he realised what was happening. Knives and tomahawks appeared in the hands of the other warriors and in an instant the grass was littered with writhing bodies, each hamstrung behind the knees.

Laughing, the warriors walked away from their victims and took a carbine from the man who stood behind the cases, doling out the sleek weapons. As the man handed over a carbine, Hunter twisted the focus ring and gasped as the nightmare tattoos of Te Wetere himself leaped down the instrument at him. Just then the man looked up, and for an instant it seemed as if the malevolent black eyes looked directly into his own.

The moment disappeared in the flat and familiar crack of a Spencer and the figure bound to the nearest tree jerked, cried out and slumped forward. That encouraged a perfect fusillade as warriors sighted and fired at the helpless live targets.

Hunter choked and passed the instrument to Ward, who flinched with the jerk of each body, and after what seemed a lifetime, the last figure slumped in its bonds. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth in horror, Ward handed back the telescope.

Worse swiftly followed. Te Wetere cried out a command and swept his staff towards the hamstrung captives on the ground; a carbine cracked and one of the targets screamed and jerked convulsively into the air, blood spurting between his fingers as he writhed in the agony of a stomach wound. Another man three strides away had both knees shattered as two marksmen fired together and roared with laughter at the result. Ward shut his eyes while the slaughter raged, and when Hunter turned his face towards him, his skin was the colour of cream.

Shocked beyond measure, Hunter scanned the group as the carbines stopped barking and the last screams faded into gurgles. There didn't appear to be as many warriors as before, and Te Weterere was nowhere to be seen.

"How can human beings do that?" whispered Ward.

"He ain't human," answered a bleak-faced Hunter. "That Te Weterere's one soul-less nigra, and if a man gets half a chance at him, he should do the world a favour and take it."

Even as he spoke, something was nagging at the back of his head but he thrust it away and tapped an ashen Ward on the shoulder. "Let's go. They're down there and we're up here."

That simple decision saved their lives.

They struck into the bush on the best heading they could judge from the hilltop, and Hunter decided the thickness of the New Zealand bush and the difficulties of travelling through it merited a healthy respect. For all the power of the morning sunlight, there were places where it couldn't penetrate the forest canopy held up by truly magnificent trees, places as dark and black as...in an instant of sickening clarity he realised what had been nagging at him.

The vision of Te Weterere's black eyes as he seemed to stare down the telescope into Hunter's own. The Maori had been staring at him, for by the foulest of luck he'd glanced up to see the sun sparkle on either the glass or the brass casing. Hunter cursed himself for forgetting Mitch Boyer's admonitions about cupping a cautious hand round the end. He'd been facing directly into the rising sun...Hunter realised what Te Weterere's disappearance meant.

"Joe, mount up!" rapped Hunter, swinging aboard his horse and grabbing Ward's bridle while his less agile friend did the same.

"In this? What on..."

Hunter cut him off. "Mount, man! Follow me!"

Once Ward was seated, Hunter dug in his heels and thundered off downhill, craning round to see Ward lose his hat to a low-sweeping branch as he ducked under to stretch along his mount's neck.

Hunter did his best to pick a zig-zag path down the hill, but finally left the route to his horse and trusted in the beast's sure-footedness, trying not to think of the consequences of a fall.

Halfway through a turn Hunter felt a droning rush of air just ahead of him and saw a nearby branch fly into splinters as a bullet struck it, but he was down the bank and turning across the slope before he truly realised he was under fire. A horse screamed, there was an echoing crash and over the bank above him in a tangle of arms, legs, thrashing hooves and flying valises, came Ward and his mount. They hit the ground in front of Hunter, who was sawing desperately at his bridle as he tried to stop, then slid away down the slope to Hunter's right, coming to rest against a tree.

Hunter's beast came to a skidding halt and he was down in a flash and scrambling across the slope to where Ward's horse lay still. He groaned as he saw his friend's lanky upper body jammed between horse and tree with his legs pinned under the animal's dead weight, but as he approached Ward levered himself up on his elbows and his eyes widened.

"Behind! Left!" he screamed, and Hunter spun round, the Remington sliding into his hand a split second before the Maori looking down from the top of the bank made up his mind to launch himself, tomahawk in hand. The crash of the Remington and the impact of the .44 ball turned the intended dive into a backwards stagger and he dropped from view, his axe falling at Hunter's feet.

Two more warriors came over the bank, one from either side, and Hunter spun left and right, fanning the single-action weapon's hammer to take them both in mid-air. The twin reports blurred into one and the heavy slugs at such short range punched the men backwards against the slope. But as a fourth came over the top the revolver misfired and the warrior landed, bounced and threw himself at Hunter, who could only hurl his weapon into the man's face and dive for the tomahawk he knew he had no chance of snatching up before the Maori's lethal staff crashed down on his head.

As he cringed in anticipation of the blow, there was the crash of a .44, a thin high scream and the clatter of the staff falling across the exposed roots of the tree that had stopped Ward and his horse. Hunter rolled over, axe in hand, to see Ward holding a smoking pistol two-handed over the body of his horse and the Maori screaming on the ground. A white-faced Ward thumbed back the hammer, fired again and the screaming stopped.

Hunter dropped the axe and snatched up his revolver, clawing a full cylinder from the pouch on his belt and fumbling to change it as his eyes roved the bush above. Nothing moved on the slope as he snapped the load home and spun the cylinder.

"You stuck?" he called over his shoulder.

Ward said, shakily, "Working on it, Selby. I think..." His voice fell away in an agonised grunt. "Ankle. Over a root, feels like. Under the horse. Might be broken."

Hunter cursed under his breath. "Better your ankle than your neck. This any use?"

From his belt he drew the Bowie knife he'd bought in Panama and offered it to his friend. Ward swapped pistol for broad-bladed knife and began to rummage down the inside of his right leg and under the horse's body as Hunter prowled the area, a Remington in each hand.

There was no sound. Hunter looked down at the four bodies sprawled on the ground in disbelief that so few had been sent after them. That Te Wetera might have split his hunters into smaller groups in order to counter the possibility of Ward and Hunter moving from the spot where the flash had betrayed them made sense, but so did the idea of moving ahead of hunters who were presumably racing towards the sound of gunfire. Hunter hurried over to Ward who raised a white face to him. "Nearly there. Can you pull me free?"

Hunter nodded, uncocked the revolvers and passed them to Ward. "Take these. And a couple of deep breaths."

In the two minutes that followed, Ward fainted from the pain of his broken ankle sliding between an exposed root and the weight of his dead horse, but at last the foot fell into the trench he'd been able to dig and Hunter pulled him free. It had taken all his concentration, and was why he failed to see the shadow racing towards him until the very last moment. When he did, he dropped without conscious thought to his knees and hurled himself shoulder-first into the looming shadow.

Something whickered through the air above his head, a heavy blow on his cheekbone filled his head with dancing stars and a body toppled over him. Hunter rolled to his feet, clawed for his revolver and found an empty holster. At his feet was the axe he'd already dropped, and he bent to snatch it up as the Maori who'd sailed over his head bounded snarling to his feet, his long staff already whistling about his head.

He paused, looking first at Hunter and then at the unconscious Ward, and grinned. It was a smile of anticipation rather than mirth, and he spat something Hunter didn't understand before jumping forward and feinting at Hunter's head. He swept up the tomahawk but met only empty air as the warrior dragged the staff away and brought it round in a sweeping cut at the knees. Hunter jumped back, realising too late the cut had been clumsy enough to be an obvious feint. This time the Maori laughed aloud, slid both

hands to the centre of the staff and revolved it like a windmill so that first the boldly-carved head with its riot of brightly-coloured feathers, and then the broad, polished tail with its sharpened edges, spun and wove in a deadly pattern centred on Hunter's head.

Hunter realised the man was taunting him, but all he could do in the face of the staff moving as fast as light was to retreat, leading him away from Ward to the edge of the sloping clearing. When the warrior stopped Hunter broke forward to the left and offered a backhand cut at what was, after all, a wooden shaft.

With contemptuous ease, the Maori stepped inside the sweep of the axe and batted it away, leaving no doubt that, when he wanted, he'd be fast and skilful enough to disarm and kill Hunter. Looking for any slight advantage, Hunter circled, as the eyes in the blue-graven face never left him, reminding him his failure to holster at least one of the Remingtons was likely to kill them both.

He began to weave a cross pattern of his own with the axe... across, up, down to the right, over and across again in a simple figure of eight. Twice he wove the pattern, stepping to his left in a dance the Maori copied, sneering. Then Hunter hurled the axe, underhand, into the Maori's face as hard as he could throw from the bottom of the pattern. The warrior's head snapped back and his staff moved like lightning to catch the spinning tomahawk in flight and send it sailing into the bush. Hunter watched it go with the sickening knowledge he'd been outguessed and outfought, and he looked back into cruel amusement in the savage dark eyes.

The warrior grinned again, took two deliberate and precise high-kneed steps sideways, his staff held vertically before him like a knight's sword, and Hunter could think of nothing he might do to avert the death that yawned at him. Then the man stopped. Stopped dead, shock on his face, staring at Hunter. He opened his mouth, but no sound came. What came instead was a great gout of blood, so sudden, so violent and so colourful Hunter saw it in his mind's eye for years after.

Sliding from the centre of the man's chest, came a bloodied length of steel which grew longer and longer, and the Maori began to tremble so violently a transfixed Hunter could hear the man's teeth chatter. The staff fell to the ground and the eyelids blinked like lantern shutters among the pattern of whorls and lines on his face before the Maori went rigid, blood coursing from his mouth and cascading down his chest. His dark eyes closed.

There was a grunt of effort from the undergrowth and suddenly the Maori was pitching forward, arms wide in a ghastly embrace Hunter leapt back to avoid, to crash face-first to the ground. Through the screen of undergrowth came eighteen inches of razor-sharp bayonet, triangular in section and bloody to the socket, then thirty inches of Enfield barrel, and finally a large, bearded man in a flat cap and a red coat with the stripes of a sergeant on one brawny arm.

"Another two fookin' inches lower, that fookin' axe would've had me," said the apparition in a voice that was unmistakably Irish. Hunter could only stare at him, and it took a groan from a recovering Ward to break the spell.

"Yiz all right then?" continued the soldier, "No more of yez is there?"

"No," said Hunter through a haze of unreality. "Just us."

The giant nodded, then turned to his rear flank. "Here!" he bellowed. Another rifle appeared, with another redcoat behind it, and another and another until a dozen filled the clearing. Ward was fully conscious by now, and a newcomer in a blue Navy coat bent over him, taking in the dead horse and the twisted ankle at a glance.

"Bad enough, but your boot saved it from being worse," he said. "By the way, I'm a doctor."

"Now there's a thing," said Ward. "So'm I," and fainted again.

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### ***Epsom, Auckland***

Miriam was more than a little troubled. Theophilus Ward's request ran counter to her own inclinations, for by nature she was much more reserved than Helena and less inclined to seek the limelight. However, she told herself, she owed the kindly merchant much for the four years of home and comfort he had offered her through the Church. Not to mention the music.

To the girl who missed her home and her own kind more than she would ever admit, the piano lessons with the middle-aged spinster Emmeline LeFleming were oases in a desert. No, she corrected herself, life with the Wards was hardly a desert – but the piano gave her a purpose at the same time as it offered the sort of challenge Miriam found irresistible. She was realistic enough to know she had the aptitude Helena didn't – the piano called to something inside her; something that needed to find expression in freedom.

In the four years since the steamer had taken her from Patea, Miriam had travelled home only once a year for her parents and family to exclaim over her height and her emerging beauty, and to congratulate her on the *Pakeha* learning she had absorbed as effortlessly as a sponge. And that was part of the trouble.

Miriam was as natural a student as she was a musician, but Helena made a little effort go a long way and Miriam had long-since learned to hide the extent of her learning in order not to put the Wards' adored daughter in the shade. Helena's personality, wealth and social position would always get her through life, but Miriam wanted much more than simply getting through. She had a relentless hunger for learning, which came in part from knowing every opportunity might be her last.

In the past year satisfying that hunger had become more difficult. Hard though the Maori girl had tried to mask the differences in achievement between Helena and herself, Helena showed in ways both subtle and unsubtle that she, at least, had recognised them. In the main this took the form of praising Miriam's skill at this or that, always with the implication that any credit for her achievement was due to the Ward family's patronage. As firmly as she put such thoughts from her, Miriam found them returning more frequently and they were a part of a decision that was half-forming, to return to Okotuku.

It was long overdue. She was rising twenty-one; by the standards of her people she was overdue in assuming the duties and responsibilities of an adult. Quite how she would discharge them she didn't know, but as the daughter of Te Hine-Rangi the Healer, she knew she was destined for some form of leadership.

She would please Mr Ward by playing in the competitions. And sometime after that she would quietly travel home to Okotuku. It was time. Her adventure was drawing to a close.

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### ***The Waitemata Harbour, Auckland, 20 December 1865***

Pulling down his hat-brim against the glare, Hunter said "Mighty pretty, Joe."

Ward looked at the bush-clad slopes of his home as they opened up from the water. "You know, often in the hell of those operating-tents I'd close my eyes as another man was brought to my table and summon up this picture. Or the sea from the town, or I'd be walking through bush I hadn't seen for seven or eight years. It always helped. And then

I'd take off another leg, or an arm. You know what happiness is? Happiness is realising a ball's gone right through a man's limb without hitting bone. You can put him under, clean out the wound, sew him up and thank God he'll live."

Wordlessly, Hunter put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

Ward grinned self-consciously. "And here I am," he said ruefully, "a wounded hero coming home from the wars on a crutch. What will my family think?"

"They'll think how glad they are t'have you home," said Hunter, "and they won't even notice the crutch, you --"

"Dr Ward! Mr Hunter! How are we this morning?" came a voice from behind and a step on the deck of the sixty-foot armed ketch HM *Swallow* announced the arrival of Lieutenant Andrew Gowrie, ship's surgeon and the man who had supervised loading an unconscious Ward aboard two days before.

"Better by the minute, sir," responded Ward, "Thanks to your setting of my ankle."

"Less said about your ankle the better," retorted Gowrie, a cheerful young man whose complexion indicated he didn't share the commonly-accepted naval surgeon's practice of consuming enough alcohol to float his ship. "Since, that is, I told you to stay off it for a week. And what do I find? I appeal to you, Mr Hunter..."

Laughing, Hunter held up his hands in mock surrender. "Gentlemen, I'm a simple soldier who hides when he sees a sawbones. No good asking me!"

"It's getting on for eight years since I was home. Damned if I'm going to be carried ashore!" snorted Ward. Their rescuers had been a party from *Swallow*, alerted by Te Weter's target-practice while they were cruising close inshore.

"Word's been about for weeks of guns coming into the country destined for the Maori King's mischief," Hunter had been told by James Pettigrew, the youthful and enterprising commander of *Swallow*. "And since we were out of Wellington after the celebrations to mark its new status as the colony's capital, bound for Auckland en route to Sydney and back on station, it seemed only proper to sniff around a harbour open to such mischief."

Hearing musket fire, Pettigrew had landed four shore parties with instructions to strike inland for an hour and return. It had been Ward and Hunter's good fortune that the party commanded by a fire-eating sergeant of Marines named Geordan O'Gara had come ashore three hundred yards from the clearing where their own drama had been played out. They had doubled through the bush on hearing Hunter's shots, with O'Gara's bayonet making a timely appearance.

Gowrie had pronounced Ward's ankle a clean break, its severity lessened by the constrictions of his riding-boot which Gowrie had, regretfully, cut away. When Ward awoke during the process Gowrie applied chloroform and checked the limb's alignment before setting it in a plastered bandage, much to Ward's amazement on awakening.

"Heard of it," he said, peering at his foot. "Never seen it though." Gowrie promised to take his colleague through the process before they reached Auckland.

And here they were. *Swallow* was to take on fresh provisions and packets of despatches for the Governor of New South Wales and sail within three days, wind and tide permitting. Pettigrew had written his report of the incident and secured Hunter's promise to add to it for the purpose of the apprehension of William 'Bully' Hayes.

"My report to the Governor will include your offer, Mr Hunter, so when time permits...? Although I would be surprised to see Hayes venture into Auckland knowing what he knows of your escape. It may well be I lay *Swallow* alongside him myself. I do hope so!"

Ward broke into his reverie. "There, on the wharf. Carriages – and I'll wager they're for hire. Now, that's something new!"

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An hour later, in Gillies Avenue, Epsom, Ward greeted the Maori girl with the basket of cut flowers at the driveway entrance. "Which one of the maids are you?"

The girl frowned. "My name is Miriam. Is there something I can do for you, Mr ....?"

"There certainly is, Miriam," said Ward. "If Mr or Mrs Ward's about, can you ask them to come to the front door please? Two gentlemen wish to speak with them."

"Mr Ward is at his business premises," said Miriam, in tones that would have chilled water, "but I'll see if Mrs Ward wishes to receive you. If you'll wait here, please."

"Do believe my charm's fading," murmured Ward, looking appreciatively after the tall girl as she disappeared within the house. "Come on. Welcome to 'Rosemount', Selby. Let's walk up."

"What d'you expect, Joe?" offered Hunter, hefting both valises as they moved forward. "Two bearded ruffians turn up out of nowhere in the middle of the day when respectable folks are about their business. What a house!" he said, looking at the spacious and gracious three-storeyed building nestled among the oaks, poplars, planes and beeches that threw their shade across the sweeping expanse of lawn in the early afternoon.

"It's good to see the old place again – I fell out of that oak more times than I can remember. I was luckier than Josh though, every time. Maybe because I never got past the fifth branch?"

Hunter chuckled, but stopped what he was about to say as the tall girl reappeared on the topmost step leading up to the front door. Behind her a woman in early middle age peered at Ward and Hunter, took a step forward, peered again, frowned and descended one tentative step before clapping a hand over her mouth, letting out a muffled shriek and flying down the remaining steps to fling herself at Ward, in a tangle of arms and skirts.

"Jocelyn ... it's you, it's really, really you...oh, my son, my darling son!" She burst into tears as Ward teetered on his crutch, trying not to put any weight on his plastered foot while he embraced her.

"There, Mother, there," he soothed. "Yes, it's me and I'm home, safe and sound. And it's so good to see you ..."

"We had your letter a month ago" she babbled, "but you couldn't be sure, of course you couldn't, but we hoped...oh, how we hoped...oh Jocelyn!" She burst into tears again.

"Mothers!" came a voice from the steps, and both men looked up to see a beautiful blonde girl wearing a paint-stained smock smiling at them as she descended. "Welcome home, brother. I'm really not sure about that beard, though...Miriam, help me off with this thing!" And the taller girl moved to undo the laces as she held both arms up.

"Helena?" Ward sounded dazed. "It can't be!"

The blonde girl struck a pose, head on one side. "And why not?"

"Because you're not that tall. Or that grown up. Or that beautiful. You're short, with pigtails and freckles. And you squeal, something awful!"

"Usually because a brother with no gentility whatever, used to sit on me and tickle me until I screamed. And the same person, Mr Hunter, has no notion of good manners, because he hasn't introduced us. I'm Helena Ward, your loutish companion's sister. And as you've probably guessed, this is our mother...Mother, may I have a turn at my brother, please?"

Mrs Ward burst into laughter. "Of course, darling." She relinquished Ward and extended a hand to Hunter, who bowed over it. "Mr Hunter, I'm so sorry. Please excuse my carrying on so. Whatever must you think of us?"

"What do I think, ma'am?" said Hunter. "I think it's not every day a son comes home from distant parts, so a mother's permitted a little licence. And as my opinion comes from recent experience, I'm sure it's pretty close to reliable."

“Introduce us, Joss! Or shall I do it myself?” Helena was mopping her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Heavens, Selby, I’m sorry!” exclaimed Ward. “Mother, Helena, this is John Selby Hunter of Clawton in Virginia, America, a gentleman who’s accepted my invitation to see a little of a land he’d never heard of when he saved my life.”

“Joe! Really!” from Hunter in embarrassment, but Ward waved him to silence.

“True, every word,” claimed Ward, waving his crutch, “and that’s not all of it –”

“Jocelyn!” exclaimed Mrs Ward, her hand going again to her mouth, “What have you done to yourself? Helena, fetch a chair...”

“No need to fuss, Mother,” said Ward. “I’ve broken my ankle. Quite straightforward and clean – and that’s a medical opinion! Tell you all about it tonight, eh?”

“Dinner promises to be famously interesting,” said Helena, and Hunter found himself looking down into deep blue eyes in a heart-shaped face framed in curling blonde ringlets. “I can’t wait to hear of all this, Mr Hunter.”

“Selby, please, Miz Helena,” said Hunter as he bowed over her hand and Helena turned on her widest smile.

“Gladly, Selby. How fortunate you have manners enough for my brother too!”

“How long, sister dearest, since someone sat on you and tickled you till you screamed?” inquired Ward ominously, and they all laughed.

“You’d never manage, Joss. There are two of us now, and you’re damaged,” said Helena, nodding to Miriam and Hunter realised with a start the tall dark girl had stood in the background throughout their welcome without anyone having addressed a word to her.

“Joss, Selby, this is Miriam Terry, my companion,” said Helena off-handedly and although Hunter noticed the error in the etiquette of introduction he put it down to the excitement of the moment and bowed in Miriam’s direction, as did Ward.

“Miz Terry,” said Hunter. “Please forgive our assumption that you were a servant. We had no idea –”

“Of course you didn’t, Mr Hunter,” she said quickly. “We hadn’t met, and it was a perfectly natural assumption. I’m delighted to meet you, and to welcome you to New Zealand.”

Straightening from his bow, Hunter found himself looking almost directly into a pair of dark brown almond-shaped eyes under a high and wide forehead, exposed by a black and glossy mane of tied-back hair.

“Delighted to be here, Miz Terry, and to be welcomed by such lovely and gracious ladies,” said Hunter, and her full lips parted in a smile. Her fine-boned face had high cheekbones, a straight nose and a firm jaw that dimpled as she smiled.

“Please call me Miriam, Mr Hunter. I trust your voyage from America was agreeable?”

“It was...unique,” said Hunter, glancing at Ward. “Wouldn’t you say, Joe?”

“It was all of that,” agreed Ward, putting an arm around his mother, “and it’s a long story, so if you don’t mind I’ll wait until Papa and Joseph can share it. They’re at the office?”

“Not for much longer,” said his mother. “Miriam, send the gardener’s boy down into the city. He’s to tell Mr Ward a surprise awaits him at home; he should close early, and bring Joseph right away.”

Miriam departed and as Ward hobbled up the steps he commented, “City? My, aren’t we doing well!”

“Well, you can’t have a capital *town*, Joss,” said Helena, offering him her arm, “And we are pre-eminent, despite what they may say in Wellington!”

Dinner that night lived up to Helena's expectations. "Well, I never," said Theophilus Ward a moment after his younger son fell silent. "That's an amazing tale, my boy. Isn't that so, my dear?"

"Absolutely frightening, Theophilus. How *fortunate* you were, Jocelyn, to get away from those *dreadful* Maoris!" said Mrs Ward.

"Well, I wouldn't have if it hadn't been for Selby. He dropped three of them in mid-air with me pinned under a dead horse, then faced another with only a tomahawk."

Hunter was hot with embarrassment. "My mistake brought them down on us in the first place, and you shot the one who mattered. Your marines did the job and saved us, so if we're going to raise a glass to anyone it should be them."

"We can certainly do that," said Ward senior, and suited deed to words. "But mind you, there wouldn't have been a job for them to do but for your actions."

"Hear, hear! I'd call them heroic." Helena's eyes shone as she looked at the tall Virginian.

"How *unlucky* you were to take passage with a man who could *betray* his own kind to sell weapons to those...*savages*," said Mrs Ward.

"Indeed, Mother," agreed Joseph Ward, a younger version of his father and already balding at thirty. "They're cannibals, you know, Mr Hunter."

Hunter blinked. "Really?" he asked, and from the corner of his eye he saw Miriam looking fixedly at her plate. With a flush of embarrassment he said, "Ah...how interesting...perhaps the ladies..."

Mrs Ward bounded to her feet. "We'll withdraw and leave you to your port and cigars. I've coaxed Miriam into showing us a piece she's considering for the competitions, so don't be too long my dear."

The men rose as the ladies left the room and settled down again as the Ward's butler produced a humidior.

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The next day Hunter sat in shirt-sleeves in the summer-house at the side of the curving front lawn, having made up his mind to write the report for the Governor he'd promised Pettigrew, exactly as he would have written a report for an army superior. The decision had caused him some soul-searching as he wanted to get the business of corresponding with what was, to him, a foreign administration, exactly right. Taking up his inked pen, he placed a sheet of paper on the writing-slope and wrote:

*To the Right Honourable Sir George Grey, KCB,  
Governor of New Zealand,  
Princes Street,  
Auckland.*

*Your Excellency,*

*In furtherance of my recent promise to Commander James Pettigrew RN, I have the honour to report what I lately witnessed aboard the barque 'Rona' under the command of Captain William Hayes during a voyage from Panama to Kawhia, New Zealand.*

He sat back and read what he'd written with satisfaction. Yes – he was off on the right note, and if he continued in ...

“There you are, Selby!” came a voice from his right, and he turned to see Helena tripping towards him across the lawn. Hunter put a paperweight on his sheet and stood in greeting.

“I trust you slept well? I confess I didn’t; your adventures quite *filled* my head and chased away any chance of sleep!”

“I regret that, Miz Helena, and apologise,” said Hunter.

She laughed. “You shouldn’t apologise for my silly girl’s head – it’s so easily turned at the thought of such excitement.”

“At the time we were too busy to have much sense of excitement,” said Hunter. “Speaking of Joe, I missed him at breakfast. Is he well?”

Helena pouted. “Not terribly. His ankle is troublesome, and when I went to see him he’d decided to rest it.”

“Very wise,” said Hunter. “The doctor aboard *Swallow* was of the opinion that the excitement of homecoming might lead him into taking liberties with a recent break, so perhaps it’s as well. Won’t you sit down, Miz Helena?”

She accepted with a smile and settled into a seat opposite him. “Joss is absolutely in awe of your skill with arms. He tells me that your prowess with firearms has twice saved his life. Please don’t think me unladylike, but...may I ask how you came by such skills?”

“I was taught by an old-time expert,” said Hunter, feeling himself colour. “Someone who fought under a Marshal of France.” And he told Helena about Gaston Duprix. One thing led to another, and it was an hour or so before he realised her ingenuous questions were skilfully milking him of most of the details of his family and life at Clawton.

“But what a coincidence your mother’s name is also Helena!” she exclaimed when he fell silent. “You’ll think me silly, I suppose...but it makes me feel as though I know her!”

“She felt the same when Joe admitted the coincidence.” Hunter smiled. “We have a lot in common, and I hope he won’t mind my speaking for him in this report.”

And nothing would do but Helena must read what Hunter had written. “Oh, it’s so military, Selby, and so *brisk*.” Then, blessedly, she got to her feet and announced she would stand no further in the way of what she was sure would be of *huge* interest to Sir George Grey, “a friend of the family, and quite often here, you know.”

Hunter’s protestation that her company was more than welcome earned him a beaming smile and a curtsy before she set off back to the house.

Hunter settled himself again with a sigh, and bent to the task of describing their voyage from the moment when they recognised what the agricultural tools really were; the yellow fever incident which was clearly a ruse to justify putting into Kawhia rather than Auckland; Hayes’ attempts to commit them to the care – or custody – of Te Wetere; their flight and witnessing of the sighting-in of the carbines; and finally the pursuit which had been resolved by the intervention of the party from *Swallow*.

Yes. It was all there, crisply expressed, and he felt happy enough with it to end:

*I am, Sir, your obedient servant and I speak also for Mr Jocelyn Ward who is, at this moment, indisposed.*

*Yrs. faithfully,*

*John Selby Hunter*

He folded it, reached into the writing-box for an envelope and addressed it before sealing the letter into the envelope with a blob of sealing-wax.

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“Of course you must.” Mrs Ward was adamant. “It will inconvenience no-one, Selby; in fact your errand is *timely* as I wish to look after my son – ”

“Mother!” said Ward in exasperation, “I’ve broken my ankle, not my neck! There’s no need to fuss!”

His mother’s tone was steely. “You may lecture me on a mother’s *duty* Jocelyn, when you have children of your *own*.”

“But not if you know what’s good for you,” put in Helena, mischief dancing in her eyes.

“I’ve not had the pleasure of spoiling you these eight years,” continued Mrs Ward, “And I wish to hear *no more* about it.”

Hunter pointed a forefinger at him, smiled and pulled an imaginary trigger, as Ward groaned. Miriam and Helena smiled.

“In fact,” said Helena brightly, “Miriam has a class this afternoon, with Miss Le Fleming – in Jermyn Street, very close to where Selby needs to go.”

“As I wished to say before your brother *presumed* to know better,” said Mrs Ward, “Miriam will take the carriage to her class, and if you, dear, and Selby accompany her, his report can be delivered to Government House and I shall be able to *look after* Jocelyn.”

“And while Miriam is acquiring brilliance,” said Helena, “I shall show Selby something of his new home.”

Helena was as good as her word. While Miriam attended her class the Ward carriage ground the gravelled roads of the central city and bumped and rocked its way up Queen Street across the sunbaked ruts on the banks of the Horotiu stream.

“I’m sure this is much more primitive than anything you’re used to,” said Helena as the springs of the landau sent her lurching against Hunter’s shoulder, “but Father says work is to begin soon on a design created by the eminent surveyor and roading engineer, Mr Felton Mathew.”

“I’ve ridden rough roads in carriages before,” said Hunter gallantly, “but never with such a knowledgeable or charming guide.”

“Selby, you’re such a gentleman,” laughed Helena. “Your business at Government House took no more than two minutes. Did it go well?”

“As far as I know. I had no mind to keep two beautiful ladies waiting, so I handed in the report and left. If there’s more, they’ll need to chase me – but either way, let’s see the sights, because I’m done with it.”

But he wasn’t.

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### ***Rosemount, Epsom, Auckland***

Although Hunter made no pretence of being a religious man, there was something he had always liked about Christmas. He decided it was the closeness and warmth engendered by the presence of family, the exchanging of gifts – even the common belief in divinity made human.

Perhaps Mrs Ward felt the same, or perhaps that Christian woman and mother simply went out of her way to welcome another woman’s son into her home. When the family gathered round the piano on Christmas Eve after the servants had been given the evening off, she asked Hunter to help her hand round cake and sherry. Under cover of setting out a tray she asked very quietly, when he had last spent Christmas at home.

“Ah...1862, ma’am.”

Mrs Ward's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, your poor, poor mother," she whispered. "How awful for you both! Selby, you must consider yourself one of us. I want you to write to your mother and assure her you spent a wonderful Christmas here. Will you promise me, please?"

Deeply touched, Hunter promised he would.

The next day Theophilus Ward asked the family to join hands and listen to the grace "...and bring to the family of our dear friend Selby, the knowledge he is well and safe in the bosom of ours..." Hunter felt Helena's hand squeeze his own and a quick glance was greeted by a secret smile from her. He squeezed back.

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