

ARRAS, FRANCE, WEDNESDAY 3 OCTOBER 1917

The last few nights had become noticeably colder, however the days were still warm and at least the weather, if nothing else, was reasonably pleasant. Of all the places to be in this war, he found himself, late one afternoon, beneath a crude sign reading: CHRIST CHURCH. It was at the opening of one of many caverns and tunnels named after New Zealand towns and cities that webbed beneath the town of Arras in northern France.

He stared up at the sign while drawing on his cigarette; the acrid smoke catching in his lungs with familiar satisfaction. 'From Christchurch to CHRIST CHURCH,' he mused as he exhaled a curl of billowing blue-grey.

'Welcome home, mate,' a jocular soldier called as he passed by and entered the darkness of the tunnel. Hōri could recognise a kiwi anywhere, despite his accent, by the inexplicable bright red piping on the shoulders of their uniform. 'Something for Fritz to aim at,' he thought ruefully.

Not feeling particularly welcome, he removed the bayonet from the end of his rifle. Stepping over the rudimentary rail tracks that rounded into the tunnel, he carefully placed his rifle and knapsack against the earth wall. He looked up again at the crossbeam with CHRIST CHURCH incongruously emblazoned in the centre. To the left was the main supporting pillar, about two feet wide. With his bayonet, he began to carve. The fresh timber was soft beneath the steel blade, easily giving way to the deep cuts that he made. Closing one eye as the cigarette smoke threatened to sting, he quietly chipped away lost in a kind of reverie as other soldiers trudged to-and-fro paying him no notice.

He absentmindedly flicked the last of his cigarette into the dirt and picked at a piece of tobacco stuck to the bottom of his lip before stepping back to admire his work: KIA ORA. 'Maybe the next Māori, might feel a bit more welcome,' he thought to himself.

Determined to add a final flourish, Hōri returned to the pillar and beneath his newly carved words of welcome and began cutting into the wood once again. This time, however, the task was made more difficult as he carefully coaxed the bayonet to curve across the grain of the timber. Time and again he steered the steel to form a series of interconnected swirls. In between each carved curve, he used the point of the blade to dig out rows of triangular notches. These were the marks and shapes that he'd known since birth. The traditional patterns that adorned Makō, the house of his ancestors on his marae back in Wairewa.

Although the whare tūpuna was modest in its design, when he was a boy, he used to stare at the carvings for what seemed liked hours trying to discern their deeper meaning. When he touched them, he felt he could almost sense the wairua of the carver. He imagined each design connected the past with the present, the spiritual realm with the mortal, and the natural world with her people.

It was Uncle Paki who had patiently explained to him the basic meanings of each carving. His father, he was told, had died before he was born. And, for as long as he could remember, his mother could utter no words. So, Uncle Paki took him under his wing.

‘This is Tangatahara,’ he had explained, pointing to a large stern-faced carving with protruding tongue. ‘He was a great warrior chief.’

Young Hōri was enthralled, hanging off his every word.

‘And this,’ he continued, ‘is the taniwha who lives up the Ōkana.’

‘Will he eat me?’

‘Only if you piss him off,’ Uncle Paki laughed.

Hōri laughed nervously. ‘What about this one?’ he asked pointing to an ornate pattern of linked swirls, inset with curling rows of teeth-like triangles.

‘Ah. Pou Tuna,’ Uncle Paki declared. ‘This represents the large female eel. Here, eel is an abundant food source. But once Pou Tuna arrives in the Ōkana, it is time for us to stop harvesting.’

As Hōri looked at the carvings, he could see the Pou Tuna pattern replicated many times.

‘What are ya doin’, Hōri?’ barked a voice behind him.

Hōri stopped his carving and turned around. Corporal Fisher. A mean bastard that always managed to make Hōri sound like hoary.

‘Not defacing His Majesty’s property are ya, *Hoary*?’

‘Just making the place a bit more welcoming.

‘Is that so?’ he replied. ‘Well, *key-a oar-rah* to you too, *Hoary*.’

‘Kia ora, Corporal Fisher.’

‘The rest of the Third are meeting up in Nelson. The sergeant wants us all there by 17.00. Don’t be late.’

‘Nelson?’

‘Yes, Nelson.’

Hōri stared blankly at him.

‘Jesus, you really are a TAPS soldier aren’t yah?’

‘Taps?’

‘Thick As Pig Shit.’

Corporal Fisher slowed his speech down and spoke as if he were addressing a child. 'From Christchurch, you head north, turn left at Blenheim until you get to Nelson. Got it?'

'Got it,' Hōri replied, eyes downcast.

Fisher turned and headed into the tunnel entrance.

Hōri stood for a moment before realising he was gripping his bayonet and clenching his teeth. He could do nothing. Say nothing. As usual. Powerless.

He thrust his bayonet into the pillar before leaning his back against it and sliding down until he was sitting on the dirt floor. He reached for his top pocket and pulled out the pack of Wills' Three Castles. Gently, he tapped the bottom of the packet until a single cigarette protruded from the torn opening. Taking the cigarette between his lips, he then patted his trouser pockets to reach for his match tin. He flicked open the hinged lid, took a single waxed match and struck it against the rock wall face. Cupping his hand around the flame, he lit the cigarette before flicking the extinguished match towards his feet.

'Uncle Paki, Uncle Paki!' he shouted excitedly, splashing water from his swinging bucket as he ran onto the marae.

Uncle Paki was sitting in front of the whare tūpuna with Aunty Hene, enjoying the afternoon sun and having a cup of tea.

'I got one, I got one!' Hōri yelled.

'Careful, boy,' Uncle Paki laughed, 'you won't have it for long if you keep throwing that bucket around.'

'Look,' he said placing the bucket at his uncle's feet, splashing even more water. 'Tuna.'

Aunty Hene cackled with delight. 'You catch it all by yourself, young fella?'

'Yip,' Hōri replied, pulling his shoulders back with pride.

'Well, let's take a look then,' Uncle Paki said.

The three of them stood staring down at the bucket. Inside, barely covered in water, was a fat eel writhing and coiled around itself, covered in oozing slime.

'You plan on keeping him as a pet?' Aunty Hene asked, still staring down.

'Um, no,' Hōri answered, 'can't we eat him?'

His Aunty and Uncle chuckled in unison. 'Not like that you can't,' said Uncle Paki.

'You could always try, I suppose,' Aunty Hene chimed.

‘Best we dispatch him first, eh?’ Uncle Paki said taking the knife he had tucked in his boot.

Uncle Paki reached in the bucket and with one hand, swiftly sticking his thumb and forefinger into the gills of the eel and lifting it from the bucket. The eel curled and twisted around his arm. In a flash, he sliced the knife between the gills, narrowly missing his fingers. Blood spurted from the eel. Paki tucked the knife back into his boot and then snapped the eel’s head back with his free hand.

Hōri stood motionless as he watched blood and spinal fluid squirt from the dying creature.

‘Catching is only half the job,’ said Uncle Paki as the eel slowly uncurled. ‘You’ve got to bleed them first then wash off the hūare, the slime, before gutting and hanging them on the whata.

‘Yuck,’ Hōri said screwing up his face.

‘Maybe one night I’ll take you along to Te Mata Hapuku where we dig trenches in the shingle under the full moon. There we wait for the tuna to wriggle up in their hundreds.’

‘You did good, boy,’ Aunty Hene smiled. Come to the wharekai and I’ll make you a tea and a bread.

The thought of the hot, sweet tea with thick bread and dripping made Hōri’s stomach rumble. Leaving his uncle to finish the gruesome task with the eel, he trotted along happily beside his aunty chatting about his exploits up the river.

The late afternoon sun shone on Hōri’s back, and he made his last mark on the pillar. Finally, he was finished. His hands blistered and sweat trickling down his face. Pou Tuna. There can be no mistaking. Any Māori would recognise the uniqueness of the design. Typically, Māori, yes. Specifically, Kāi Tahu, absolutely. He smiled. ‘Welcome, Hōri,’ he said quietly to himself as he entered the tunnel, ‘Welcome to the Pākeha King’s war.’