

CHEYENNE THOMAS

Seeker

Tāwhirimātea appeared to me in the backseat of a bus that shuddered and groaned as it passed through Matatā and headed north of Whakatāne. He moved between the aisle of patched chairs with no sound. His hair cascading down his shoulders in thick waves, unruly and twisting like turbulent winds. His skin was golden-brown and weathered from some unspeakable storm, but his eyes appeared like clouds. Shades of grey and white. No one else paid him any mind, but the air around me felt suddenly choked. Pressurized and barely contained. When he spoke his voice was soft as an autumn breeze, whispered and chilly.

“Don’t get lost,” he said, and his breath appeared in wisps of pale white fog. I watched him as he slid into the chair beside me. Clad in a black leather jacket, a plain white shirt, jeans, and steel-capped boots. He smelt like the air before a thunderstorm, charged with anticipation and the scent of rain. On the back of his leather jacket is a patch of white embroidered wings that shone like moonlight on a black sky.

“You’re not going to stop me?” I asked. When he turned to face me, my breath caught in my throat. Nothing about him changed but I felt as if I had stuck my hand out and touched a streak of lightning. *Danger*, my brain seemed to scream at me, *look away!* But even as I thought the thought, Tāwhirimātea smiled and I was reminded of the feeling of a gentle wind caressing through my hair, of a cooling breeze in the summers sweltering heat and the relief that came with it. Reminded of all the times I had spoken into the wind and received an answer

as it swept through the leaves of trees or whistled against a windowpane.

“No.” A fear I had felt build within the centre of my chest faded and the warnings my brain had tried to shout at me quietened in the face of Tāwhirimātea’s calm. The god of weather, thunder, and lightning, of wind and clouds and storms. Why would he stop me, when he was the god of journeys, of the leaving and the returning? Who else would know what it meant to go wherever it was that the wind took you? I looked away. Looking at him hurt, so I stared down at the sports bag sitting idle on the floor between my feet. Clothes, a toothbrush and toothpaste, deodorant, and a small box containing all the loose bills I had saved over my short life. I could fit my entire life into a single bag and that life contained nothing of sentiment. No photographs, no mementos, no letters or signs that I was a person at all. I gulped, emotion lodging itself like a rock inside of my throat.

Tāwhirimātea placed a hand on my shoulder and it was heavy and solid and cold. I looked at him and he was nothing but formless smoke and a pair of cloudy grey eyes with that same small smile that reminded me of a cool summer breeze.

“No going back now.”

Hine-nui-te-pō reached for the half-consumed bottle of Smirnoff Ice held loosely between my fingers, and I let her take it while staring over the railing of the balcony too high above the ground. Every time I tried to look at her directly, she shimmered and faded like a mirage in the summer heat as if, like the bottle of Smirnoff Ice, she was being half-consumed, and half spat back out. I resigned myself to only being able to see her out of the corner of my eye. Her hair was damp and lifeless, her skin pale and sickly and I could not make out her face. I always imagined the goddess of death to smell like decaying flesh, like dead wood and grass and other lifeless things turned to rot, but she didn’t. She didn’t smell like anything. No scent carried by the wind, no hint

of some underworld gardens or ocean seas; she simply smelt of nothing. Hine-nui-te-pō was an absence of scent and somehow, it was more disturbing than I could have imagined. I wondered, briefly and hollowly, if that was what the afterlife was. An absence of scents and sounds and touch. An absence of life and light.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" I didn't know if she spoke, but her words entered my head as if they were my own. A red blinking reminder of something waiting for me if I could just turn away from the edge. I was so high above the ground that the cars that lined the streets below looked like ants. Lines upon lines of them standing still in the dark. I watched Hine-nui-te-pō take a sip from the bottle in her hand without really seeing her at all, and held my hand out when she offered it back to me.

Empty.

"I don't know where it is," I said to the bottle. My life had aged and dragged, and I had lived and loved and lost, yet I could still feel something missing. The hollow pit in my gut that had driven me from Whakatāne, past Matatā, and towards Auckland. The feeling of some hidden thing that I still could not see, could not touch, and could not feel. I peeked further over the balcony rail, and a stiff and cold hand curled around my shoulder. When I looked back at Hine-nui-te-pō her mouth was open, but no sound was coming out.

"Don't," she said, her voice was inside of my head and it sounded like my own.

She pulled me away from the balcony and I stumbled at the fierceness of it. Hitting the floor of the apartment room. I looked up at her, the most solid she had been all night and she stared at me with a thousand dead eyes, with her mouth open in a soundless cry that tore inside of my head.

"Go," she said. *Not yet.* I hear.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to beg. In her gaping mouth, I could hear a thousand voices of a thousand strangers repeating the same words over and over that

grated against the inside of my skull like nails and claws and all manner of sharp things.

Not yet.

Not Yet.

Not yet.

I scrambled across the floor and ran. I ran from the balcony, from the long drop to the rows of ant cars, from Hine-nui-te-pō and her thousands of eyes and her thousands of voices. I ran, and I didn't stop until the voices in my head faded into whispers.

I found Hinepūkohurangi sitting on the edge of the wharf at dawn. Her hair was white, her skin pale and her eyes burned like twin stars. All around her was mist, clouding around her legs, her arms, her face, and spreading like waves across the sea as she watched the sun slowly rise. The air was damp and the chill that trickled down the length of my spine turned my blood to ice. Something in the goddess shifted. A furrow of white brows, a tightness around the edges of her eyes and the corners of her mouth and, I felt as if I was watching a porcelain doll cracking beneath an impossible weight. Her expression was a cry of pain forever frozen upon tired features and when she looked at me, I flinched. From her pain, there was rage and grief so intense I felt sticky with it. Stained somehow by the severity of the wound she held within her heart, and I wanted to scream or cry or take hold of her hands and force her to release the weight of her pain.

"You have to let that shit go," I said, and my voice trembled with the ache of it. I felt sick with the taste of it. As if my lungs might burst from the cold that surrounded her, my bones cracked and threatened to shatter under the pressure, and somewhere far away I could hear a voice cry out her name. She shifted again, and a sudden and crushing longing pierced right through me. I watched her turn her gaze to the distance, watched the way that she saw something that I could not, and the mist around

her trembled and shook, reaching out to some distant figure.

"I don't know how." I expected the world to shatter apart like glass shards smashed against concrete, but it didn't. The waves crashed against the wharf pillars and suddenly the mist was gone, and so was Hinepūkohurangi. Iridescent shades of yellow, violet, red, and blue appeared in the spray of water just as the sunlight peeked over the horizon and the voice of Uenuku was carried in the colours. A howling cry of regret, so deep and so wide that I felt as if I would drown in it. The moment passed. Goddess fleeing and god chasing in an endless loop for all eternity. I sunk to my knees, gasping and shaking. Bathed in sunlight, painted in shades of yellow and orange and pink, I had never felt colder.

I don't know how. The words echoed like a taunt, a phantom whisper against my skin. There, yet not there. I wondered what it was like to hold onto a pain like that, to wail and weep and flee at the very sound of its approach and wondered how something so beautiful could be warped and twisted into something so violent. Sitting there alone with chills rushing up and down my spine, I wondered what it was like to have loved something so deeply that it could hurt that much. To have trusted so blindly that mutual destruction was preferable to forgiveness.

It was Hine-te-iwaiwa that welcomed me back. She sat on the mahau of a marae carved and chiselled in shades of red and brown with hair that flowed down her back and over her shoulders in black waves. In her hands, she held blades of harakeke and weaved them into folded patterns, over-under, under-over, with practiced finesse. She smiled and it was like sunlight on a cold day, it filled me with warmth from the inside out. I could feel that familiar hollow and empty feeling in the pit of my gut threaten to be filled the closer I came to her. She gestured to me without speaking and ushered me up the steps to a place that I hadn't known I was searching for. I found a

spot beside her and watched the way her fingers danced, how she folded and twisted the streams of harakeke into her patterns, and soon enough, she took my hands into her own. Hine-te-iwaiwa guided my fingers to do the same. I copied her, and her smile was kind in the face of my clumsy efforts.

"We tried to find you," she said, her voice like a warm candle in the dark.

"I wasn't ready then," I replied, and I tried not to shrink away from her with guilt that gnawed at my insides of all the meetings with gods and goddesses that visited in moments of despair and regret and weakness. Of all the times that they had reached out to me and I had turned away. She wrapped her knuckles across the back of my hand, and I jumped, blinking owlishly at the squat woman with the long dark hair.

"You are now." It wasn't a question.

A lump of emotion swelled within my throat. That empty feeling, the hollow space I had lived with for as long as I could remember, filled with the voice of Hine-te-iwaiwa as she sang in a language that I did not understand yet. That emptiness filled with the weight of the harakeke in my hands and the support of the marae behind my back. She poured herself and all the things she knew into the chasm I had built my entire life around, filling it to the brim with a smile on her lips and that hollow feeling shifted and transformed, and in a small voice like that of a child, it spoke.

Home, the feeling said, *I am home*.

"Sorry, I'm late."