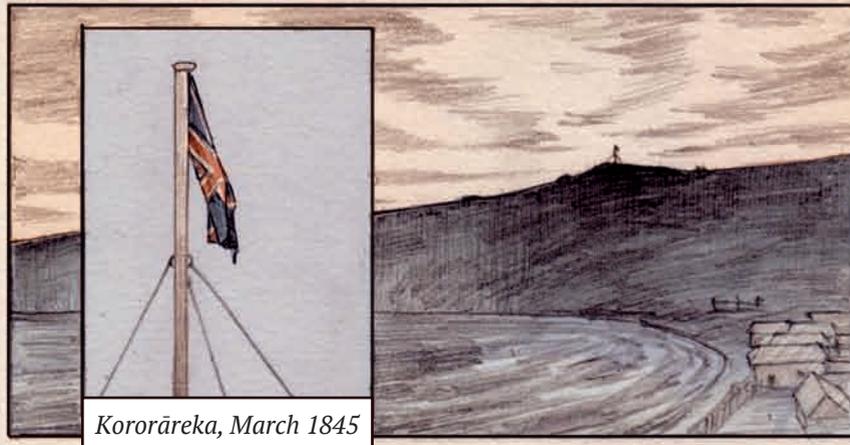
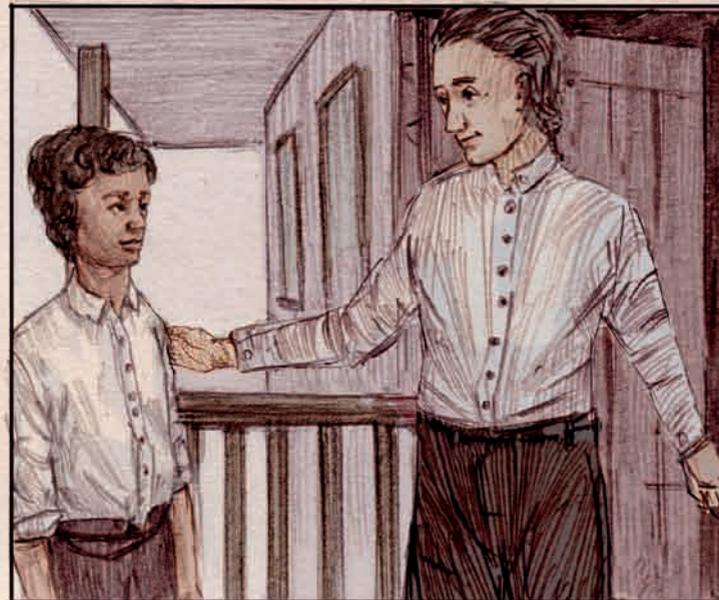


Fallen Leaves

by Paul Mason



Kororāreka, March 1845



If the tiny settlement seemed troubled, inside the thick walls of the printery, all was quiet industry and peace. The air was cool, the rich smell of ink, paper, and leather instantly comforting. Haora waved to the two men working quietly: the one named Frère Emery hunched over the tiny metal letters in their frames; the other, Frère Luc, rolled ink across a finished plate. They looked up to smile but carried on with their tasks.

“Did they know there would be a battle,” Haora wondered, “that Heke Pōkai and his warriors were coming?”

Frère Jean seemed unaware of the troubled look on the boy’s face. He led his young apprentice across the room and sat him at the binding table. “These books need their covers. You remember how I showed you last week?”

“How to add the leather? Āe.”

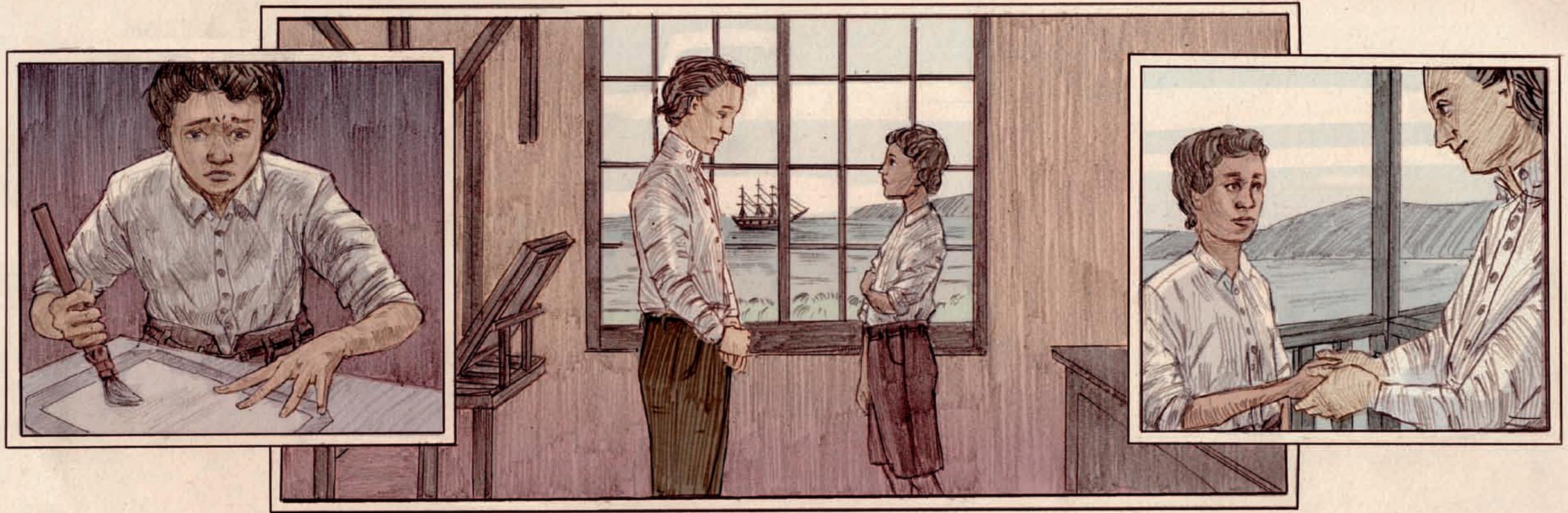
“Good. We will work together.”



Haora hurried along the shore, his toes digging into the soft sand, passing Kororāreka as quickly as he could. The town was little more than a stockade, a clutch of settlers’ houses, and a small white church – all caught between dark hills on either side. On the crest of the steepest was a pole with the British flag. It hung limp and lifeless, framed by a cloudy and troubled sky. The air was heavy with omens. Kororāreka would fall. Haora could sense it.

He reached the stuccoed walls of the mission, climbed the staircase that led to the printery, and knocked loudly on the heavy door.

“I am glad to see you, Haora,” said Frère Jean, opening the door wide. “Come, there is plenty of work for us to do.”



For the moment, Haora fought down his worry. Slowly he began to lose himself in the quiet rhythm of the work – trimming the soft hide, spreading the glue, turning over the edges, gently pushing them down.

“And your mother and father?” asked Frère Jean after a time.

“Kei te pai,” said Haora.

From the other side of the room came the creak of the wooden screw as paper was pressed onto ink. Page after page, leaf after leaf ... the words appearing as if by magic. The two men barely shared a word as they worked, their worn-out shoes scuffing over the floorboards. The brothers weren’t ones for talking. Not like the men in the town who gabbled too much and drank too much and worse besides. How many would fall in the fighting? Dark clouds were drifting in, and Haora needed to speak of it.

“Heke is coming – others too,” he said suddenly.

Frère Jean looked up. “You know there will be fighting?”

Haora nodded. “Yes. Soon. I heard they won’t hurt this place, but you should still go.”

“Thank you, my boy. But we already know. You’re not to worry.”

“And in the meantime, we work,” Frère Jean added. “Our metal letters will not be taken for musket balls.” He released some finished books from the clamp – held in place to keep their shape – and handed them to the boy.

Haora ran his fingers over the soft brown calfskin, over the writing in gold that ran down the spine. He loved the feel of these books, their weight in his hand. What a thing it was to put words onto paper for others to read. The brothers gave everything for these scripts, for the ideas written on the pages. Carefully, Haora placed a dried bay leaf in the middle of each book. The smell saved the paper from insects.

“They are wonderful, yes?” Frère Jean asked, watching.

“Waiwaiā,” agreed Haora, although his mother didn’t understand what all the fuss was about.

They worked until the sun began to set, then Haora got up to leave. He knew he was welcome to stay, but any offering on the brothers’ dinner table was as threadbare as their clothing. They couldn’t feed another mouth.

“Goodbye, Frère Jean,” Haora said.

“Go in peace,” said the man, taking the boy’s hand.



The crack of muskets came a week later, just after dawn. Haora ran through the bush, unease squeezing his chest, his legs unsteady. Would Frère Jean and the others be spared? He crouched down to watch the battle from behind some harakeke, as if the spiky foliage were enough to protect him. He could hear the thud of cannon in the town below, the terrible cries. He watched with dread as men from both sides fell to the ground, their bodies crumpled and motionless.

Gunfire shook Kororāreka all day. The flagpole lay on the ground like a felled tree. That afternoon, a blast came from inside the stockade. The earth rumbled, and a cloud of furious smoke burst into the sky. The British scrambled towards the beach and rowed boats out to their warship in the bay. The big guns started soon after; one after the other, roaring from the side of the ugly brown ship. They were louder than any thunder, worse than any fire. Then the battle was over, and Kororāreka burnt into the night.

Haora made his way along the beach in the morning light. The sting of smoke still hung in the air. Most of the settlement lay in ruins, but at the far end of the bay, the printery was untouched. Its thick white walls stood strong. The door was locked. No sound came from inside. Had Frère Jean and the others escaped? Haora searched the gardens and orchard, then checked the tannery round the back. He even peered into the deep pits. There was no sign of the brothers.

He turned and left, starting back through the town's charred remains. Something on the path made him stop. It was a book, half buried and badly burnt. Was it one he had helped to make? Haora picked it up and looked at the scorched cover. Inside, the book had fared no better, although the dried leaf in the middle had survived. "It only protects against insects," Haora thought. "Not gunfire."

He wiped off the dirt as best he could, and holding the book tight, walked back to his village. He had been right. There had been omens. And now it had begun.



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