

# DO YOU REMEMBER THE STORIES OF THE TANIWHA?

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In the quiet of the kauri trees, where the only sounds were the whispers of the wind and the murmurs of the stream, a young Māori boy named Tawhiti lived with his māmā, Hinewai. Their whare was small, secluded nestled beneath the canopy of ancient trees. To the outside world, it was a place lost to time, but to Tawhiti and his mother, it was a sanctuary from the ever-present shadows of fear.

Tawhiti was ten with dark eyes full of wisdom. He often felt the weight of the world resting on his shoulders; a burden that only a child hiding from the world could understand. Hinewai was his pounamu, his taonga, her strength, a beacon of light in their life of solitude. Together, they lived in the forest, their existence interwoven with the whispers of their tipuna and the grounding of their land.

Their lives had changed when the voices of the world outside had become too loud, too demanding. The taniwha had swam the seas of Te Ika-a-Māui and was now kissing the rock beds of Te Wai Pounamu. Hinewai spoke of them in hushed tones, their presence a constant, unnerving reality. Tawhiti craved knowledge, he wondered what a world outside of his own was like. Full of questions he often ignored his mama's warnings "Ka tahae te taniwha i ngā tamariki, kia tupato tawhiti!". Aue. His curiosity gets the better of him.



Every night, Tawhiti would lie in bed listening to the distant sounds of te manu, imagining the taniwha prowling the periphery of their sanctuary. His imagination painted vivid, terrifying images of their snake-like body, eyes like geckos, tongues like anteaters. He sees them slithering beyond the street lights in wakas of kokowai and kikorangi. He knew that his mother's fear was pausable, but it was his own fear that fueled the restless nights and long days.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon and the stars began their nightly visit, Hinewai gathered Tawhiti close "Tawhiti," she whispered, her voice trembling slightly, "remember the stories of the taniwha?"

"Aē, Mum," Tawhiti replied, his voice a mere breath.

"They are always watching," she continued, "waiting for the moment we are careless. We must stay together. They know we are here."

Tawhiti nodded, understanding the gravity of their situation. Each rustle of the leaves, each crack of a twig, was a reminder of their fears. They lived by the strictest codes of silence and stealth, their lives a delicate dance with danger. Their silence was a siren to the unknown.

In their isolation, Tawhiti and his mother found solace in their relationship to the land. Papatuanuku, their earth mother, held them, whakapapa, a testament to their family tree. Tawhiti remembers his sister being born, Makere. Back when they didn't have to hide and stayed at the pā.



Everyday they would run along the paddocks and shock themselves on electric fences for fun. All the kahis would run a muck, bathing in the waterhole to wash away the adventures of the day. Until Makere was born. She was the first to go. The taniwhas took his cousins one by one, made mamas barren, so whanau hid. He often wonders where the taniwha take them. Cousin 'Mary' came back when she was older, she cut her long hair and spoke the taniwhas tongue.

One day, as Tawhiti was playing near the stream, he saw something unusual—a figure emerging from the shadows of the forest. Tawhiti's heart raced, his breath catching in his throat. He had heard stories of taniwha appearing in the form of people, but never had he seen one himself. The figure moved with an unnerving grace, and Tawhiti quickly darted behind a tree, peeking out cautiously,

The figure was dressed in a dark blue uniform, with a badge gleaming with the kiss of the sun. Tawhiti's blood ran cold. He recognized the emblem from a book Hinewai had shown him—these were the symbols of the taniwha in their human disguise. He ran back to their home, breathless and terrified.

"Mum! Mum!" Tawhiti cried, "The taniwha—they're here! I saw one!"

Hinewai's face turned ashen, but her voice remained steady. "We must go deeper into the forest. Quickly, Tawhiti."



They gathered their few possessions and fled further into the depths of the forest, moving with the practised silence of those who have long lived in hiding. They travelled for hours, until they reached a hidden cave—a place only Hinewai knew of, a sanctuary within a sanctuary.

As they settled into the darkness of the cave, Hinewai began to speak softly, trying to calm Tawhiti's frayed nerves. "We are safe here for now. The taniwha cannot find us here."

Tawhiti clung to his mother, his young mind wrestling with the fear of what lay outside. "Mum, why are they always after us?"

Hinewai sighed, her eyes reflecting the dim light of the cave. "The world outside does not understand us. They believe they are helping us, but their help is like a taniwha's grasp—sometimes it hurts more than it helps. We must protect ourselves until we can be truly safe."

The hours turned into days, and the days turned into weeks. Each night, Tawhiti would dream of the taniwha, their looming presence a constant reminder of their peril. But with each passing day, he also felt his tipuna with him, his whanau. He wondered if the taniwha he saw could have been the one that took Makere.

One evening, as the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the cave, Tawhiti heard voices—familiar, yet foreign. He peeked outside cautiously and saw several figures approaching the entrance of the cave.





They were dressed in the same dark blue uniforms he had seen before, but this time they did not seem threatening. Instead, their faces were marked with concern and empathy.

Hinewai, too, had heard the voices and held Tawhiti tight. Her eyes cried rivers and Tawhiti knew he couldn't let them take him.

As Tawhiti and his mother stepped out of the cave, the figures introduced themselves not as taniwha, but as representatives of social services. The realisation hit Tawhiti like a wave. These were not mythical creatures, but people who wanted to take him away to be born in another world, a testament of their vision of the future. Their intentions were malicious, not born from a desire to protect them.

One of the representatives, a kind-faced woman, knelt down to Tawhiti's level. Hinewai held tighter "Tawhiti, we've been looking for you because we want to help. We understand that you and your mother have been living in fear. But our goal is to make sure you are safe and cared for. We mean you no harm." Hinewai's grip tightened, she cried harder. "Please... We know what's best for our babies. We have stayed hidden for so long — I just want to go back to my whanau. Please. don't take my baby". Tawhiti looked up at her, his heart heavy with the weight of his fears.

"Mum. - Do we go? - Should we go with the taniwha?". Tawhiti could never leave his mum, not now or ever.



The woman's expression softened. "I understand. Sometimes, people in our role can seem intimidating, especially when there is a lack of trust. But we are here to listen and support you."

Hinewai spat in her face, "Support me! Is one baby not enough! - you plan to take my other? Just as you did with all our babies!". Tawhiti was confused, they just wanted to help why can't mum see that.

Everything happened so fast. They grabbed Tawhiti and he swam through a sea of kikorangi, Hinewai refused to let go. "MĀMĀ! - STOP. LET ME GO", Tawhiti held out to his mum, his voice breaking now "MĀMĀ - PLEASE". Hinewai struggled under the weight of the taniwha, "TAWH - PLEASE" she could barely let out a whisper, her windpipes crushed by the force of the taniwha. Tawhiti's screams grew distant as Hinewai sobbed into the floor.

They both left in police cars, Hinewai to her pā and Tawhiti to a boarding school. Hinewai's whanau tried for years to get their baby's back - the mamae grew and so did they. Tawhiti's heart was conflicted, but he felt a flicker of hope. The taniwha he had feared were not so different from the creatures of his mythology.

Years passed and as soon as he was out of the system his hunger grew for his whanau. His tupuna guided him and he eventually found Makere. A bittersweet meeting of two halves they longed for their māmā. Tawhiti proposed the idea of going to their pā, seeing if their whanau are still there. Makere agreed. On the way they reminisce on their childhood and their upbringings. Talking about how the taniwha's world differentiated from their own.



Tawhiti started laughing “Sis, when you were born everyone was fighting over you – and everytime without fail you would scream the whare down until you were with mum”. Makere laughed “Yeah, I probs knew the taniwha was coming”. An awkward laugh came from both of them. Mamae filled their hearts and they picked up the broken pieces. The world was different now. The forest Tawhiti once hid in was farm land. They had so many questions.

Was mum still alive? - What of their family?

As they approached the pā it got quiet.

Tawhiti broke the silence

“Sis. Are you nervous?”

Makere looked down and shuffled her feet a bit

“Yeah. A bit. I don’t remember anything”

They both got out of the car and hesitated. Knocked on the door of their old whare and waited. They heard whanau laughing inside and heard footsteps sweeping along the carpet.

Tawhiti held his breath.

Makere didn't know what to think.

A frail women opened the door

She looked at them in curiosity

Before she could say anything Tawhitis eyes widened



“Mum?”.

A realisation came over everyone. The whanau were not laughing anymore and were watching from the doorframe. “Tawhiti, Makere - My babies are home”. Everyone cried. Hinewai held them tight. They had found their whanau.

As the evening arrived and the moonlight shined down on them, everyone was catching up. Sharing their lives, the grief, the mamae, picking up the pieces of lost history. At the end of the night it was just Tawhiti and Hinewai.

It was quiet but not forced like before.

Tawhiti looked up into Hinewais eyes, “Mum”

“Yes baby” she replied

“Do you remember the stories of the taniwha?”

