



This extract is taken from Stu's forthcoming title

The Last Kiwi

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The Last Kiwi

Stu DUVAL

Chapter One

The rats were slipping through the cutty grass, deathly silent like a ribbon pulled from a corpses hair.

High above, the harvest moon watched them from behind stained, calico clouds, helplessly adrift, unable to raise any alarm.

Up ahead, on the knoll above the bay, the Settlers Hall glowed honey gold through smokey windows. Fiddle music mixed with whiskey and laughter, spilling from the open doors.

The rats stopped, sniffing the air; cigar smoke and cheap perfume; kerosene and mutton fat.

The sound of their cocked muskets no more than a muffled click. A cricket in the tussock? A snapped twig?

The fiddlers fiddled, the dancers danced, the calico moon watched in silent horror.

Then the roar of musket, the shatter of glass, the screams of terror. The sequence repeated until all was silent, save the thump of waves upon the beach. A funeral beat. Crash and rumble, crash and rumble...

The rats moved on, vanishing into the black ti-tree stand atop the hill. Leaving only the sad moon, still adrift in the calico clouds.

The Invasion of Birdlandia had started.



Ma Grissington's Chronicle was published on Friday at exactly 3.15 pm. No sooner and certainly no later. Ma Grissington herself supervised the first print run, rattling off the ancient press that thundered and clanked fit to burst.

It never did.

This was in large part due to the tireless attention of the Chronicle's chief printer Hansard Temuka

a perpetually harried kiwi, wrinkled and stained with the ink of a thousand print runs.

For over seventy years the Chronicle had been rattling off that press, Hansard oiling and adjusting, Ma Grissington ever vigilant (Hansard called it sticky-beaking) ensuring the paper that bore her name was printed on-time, as impeccable and as authourative as she was herself.

"Punctuation and punctuality! That is the beginning and the end of the matter Mr Temuka"

Hansard merely muttered under his beak, wiping a his oily hands on an even oiler rag, "more like snooping and scandal-mongering!"

Every Friday at 3.15. For over seventy years.

And in the stores and on the street corners of Three Cases at precisely 5 pm for the good citizens of that self same town to purchase and read. Five cents a copy. Sixteen pages. Crisp newsprint folded just the once. As regular as the old clock atop the Avian Chapel on Moa St.

Except today.

Today being Monday.

And Ma Grissingtons Chronicle was on the streets of Three Cases at 10am in the morning!

All four pages of it. (still five cents a copy - as Ma Grissington's father always said 'business is most certainly business')

Hansard Temuka was cursing all who would listen and them that would not.

His wife had awoken him from his bed in the early hours of Sunday Morning, with the harvest moon still glowing in the sky.

"Ma Grissington wants ye at the Print Shop right urgent and all."

He'd struggled into his stained overalls, gulped the piping hot coffee thrust in his hand, and staggered out into the dark, cursing his bad luck, and Ma Grissington, and his scalded tongue with equal bile.

She was at her desk when he arrived.

Not a hair out of place, her grey Moa feather skirt and white starched blouse pressed as crisp as folded newsprint.

She was laying out the front page of the Chronicle, gold rimmed spectacles in their customary place at the end of her elegant beak. She barely acknowledged his arrival, nor explained why she had summoned him at such an ungodly hour.

"I will require the press readied Mr Temuka. And with as much speed as you may muster."

He stood in the doorway, uncertain and perplexed.

She finally looked up from her front page, peering at him over the top of her spectacles. It was a look he had seen more times than he cared to remember. A look so astringent it could peel paint, part foreboding, all forbidding!

"I note you are still standing in my doorway Mr Temuka.

I also note the absence of that most singular sound; that of my print press. Would you be so kind as to remove yourself from the former and attend to the latter."

He turned to leave, muttering under his breath, 'never heard of such a thing.. printing on a Sunday morn.. what the hell is the old bird thinking.. has she lost her goddamn marbles?'

She called after him, her voice echoing off the timber walls of her paneled office and following him down the brick corridor to the print room.

"I have all my marbles firmly intact Mr Temuka. None are lost.

But we stand to lose much more than marbles this very day.

The Rats have landed an army at Widows Bay and are at this very moment headed for Three Cases. We are at war Mr Temuka...*war!*"

The Rev Beauford Gore hastened up the gravel path to the Avian Chapel of St Albie The Steadfast.

The old clock in the steeple chimed the half hour.

Just the way it had done faithfully for one hundred and thirty three years.

He slipped his silver fob watch from his waistcoat pocket and checked the time: 10.31am. His watch was a minute fast and he was a minute late. He quickened his pace, his long thin legs propelling him up the path.

The Town Council would already be in the nave, waiting, full of trepidation, and, no doubtful of whisky as well..

He pushed open the heavy kauri doors to the sanctuary and hustled along the ambulatory, past the apse and the stone statue of St Albie, arms reaching out like wings, imploring him to pause for a moment in personal reflection and prayer. He had time for niether.

A haze of blue cigar smoke hung like a shroud at the head of the nave, and below it a murmur of voices, intermingled with gasps and shouts.

There were eleven Kiwi gathered on the worn rimu pews. Ten consisted

of the Three Cases Town Council; five men and five women. Of these four were farmers: two storekeepers; a distiller: the town undertaker; a surgeon: and Ma Grissington.

The eleventh person was a tall kiwi in a faded blue uniform, generous moustache the colour of cinnamon and salt. He bore the gold thread shoulder epaulettes of an officer, although to those with a military bent it would have been immediately noted that the crossed feather and sword motif denoted not merely an officer but rather a General.

Furthermore, not merely a General, but, with the addition of an encircling totara leaf brocade around the crossed feather and sword, a General in Command of Forces. He was standing slightly apart from the others, one boot resting on a pew, smoking a cigar all the while lost in deep thought.

Rev Beauford Gore addressed him, wiping the sweat from around his damp clerical collar with a cotton handkerchief.

"General Whatipu please forgive my tardiness .. but it has been a most harrowing morning,"

"For some the morning started while Sunday was still sleeping." said Ma Grissington.

The Reverend nodded, bobbing his head deferentially.

"Yes, yes, the Chronicle's Special Edition was a clarion call to whole town. Splendid reportage, as usual."

The Undertaker leapt to his feet, which considering his extreme girth was a minor miracle in itself.

"With all due respect I say *damn* 'splendid reportage!' What about the Rat Army that's headed this way! We're not going to stop them with splendid bloody reportage!"

The Surgeon pounded the pews, his face like a red a slab of raw mutton.

"Mr Duggins has hit the nail on the proverbial head! What are we going to do to stop the vermin from sacking Three Cases!"

There was shouted agreement, beaks clattering, and much pounding of

pews.

The Reverend caught more than a whiff of whisky on their breath and concluded, correctly, that the distiller had uncorked a bottle or two of his finest single malt to calm nerves.

However, some, the Surgeon and Mr Duggins, in particular, had sampled more than was necessary to calm their nerves and had only succeeded in inflaming their worryment.

Ma Grissinton stood to her elegant feet and raised a gloved hand

“Stop this brouhaha and bickering and let us hear from General Whatipu. He is, after all, the only one amongst us who has experience in these matters.”

The chapel fell silent, save for a muffled belch from Mr Duggin.

All eyes were on the General.

His eyes were on the stained glass window of St Albie high above the sanctuary. The refracted light sparkled and glowed in the mid-morning sunshine, casting a halo of light in the cigar smoke above his head.

He took one last pull on his cigar and then stubbed in out on the edge of the baptismal font, much to the Rev Beaufort Gore’s consternation.

"What inscription is carved under the name-sake of this very Chapel" he asked out loud, to no one in particular.

The Reverend answered for them all.

"STABILIS SEMPER"

The General turned from the stained glass window and eyed them all, individually, with an unflinching gaze.

His eyes finally rested on Ma Grissington.

"Translation if you please madam."

She blushed ever so slightly at his candid stare.

"Why sir, it is Latin for STEADFAST ALWAYS."

He said nothing immediately, but, with a flourish that startled them all, drew his battle sword from its gilded sheath and held it back over his shoulder, the tip pointing at St Albie’s stained glass image, his eyes

however still firmly fixed on them all. Then his voice, which up till then had been soft and conversational, now boomed like a barrage of cannon.

"You ask what shall be done about the advancing Rat Army?

You fear these invaders who have dared assail our shores? Fear not! Let St

Albie's words be *your* words! *Steadfast Always!*

Steadfast in the face of the foe! Now rally the good people of the town and break out the muskets, for we shall halt the vermin invader in their tracks and deliver them such a blow that they will evermore fear the name Three Cases!"

And so saying he sheathed his sword, strode down the aisle, through the kauri doors and out into the morning sun.

The Town Council stared after him, stunned.

Mr Duggin belched.

General Whatipu strode purposefully on down the hill from the chapel and along Moa Street into the town.

His resolute stride and erect military bearing declared to all the world that here was a man who was not cowered by fear.

Here was General Isaiah Whatipu, born and raised in this very town, back to put the blade and bullet to the Rat invaders!

He passed the shops and dwellings of his youth.

Mr Duggins Funeral Parlor stacked high with coffins; The Chronicle offices with old Hansard sweeping the print shop floor;

Dr Spleengrindle's Surgery & Veterinarian Clinic;

The General Store, still awash with the smell of candy and kerosine. On and on, down the hill past the blast of white-hot heat from Joeseph Dannevirke's blacksmith furnace and Iris Knickle's Haberdashery, where he had stolen his first kiss.

He wheeled hard right at the corner of Moa and Musket Lane

and found himself outside a handsome hostelry sagging under the appellation of 'The Grande & Glorious Oceanic Imperial Hotel & Stables', better known to all and sundry simply as

'Abe's Place' on account of its affable proprietor Abraham Revelation.

The General bounded up the elaborate stairs, pushed open the frosted glass door with a commanding thrust and entered the hotel saloon. It was furnished with fabulously deep leather chairs and soothingly dark swamp kauri paneling. The whole interior was redolent with the smell of cigar smoke and tussock malt ale.

Abe himself was behind the bar pouring two thick crystal shot glasses with the house single-malt; Feathered Friend. He stood over six feet tall, large for a kiwi, his hospitable face wreathed with an impressive growth of whiskers reaching down to his belt buckle.

Apart from him the saloon was empty as chapel on Tuesday.

"Thought you might need a dram or two after meeting with our fine Town Councilors."

The General's shoulders suddenly sagged as if the whole wide world was pressing down upon him. Gone was the jaunty stride and resolute disposition.

He sank into a deep leather chair, and stared wide-eyed into thin air as if he was seeing some horrible vision.

Abe set the whisky glass on the chair arm.

"Is it as bad as it seems then Isaiah?"

The General blinked and looked up, startled, as if awoken from a deep reverie.

He could play the role of Inspirational General before the Town Council and stride down the hill of Three Cases like a Conquering Hero, but, here, in the womb-like surrounds of Abe's saloon, he could, at last, let the mask slip.

Abe and he had been childhood friends. Together they had chased Moa and girls; skinned their knees and their hearts.

And when childhood dreams became young men's schemes Isaiah had left to join the army and Abe to distill the finest whisky in Birdlandia, and although their paths ran separate, their friendship endured, two strands of flax wound tight around the memory of a life long gone.

Here, alone with Abraham Revelation, Isaiah could speak his mind.

"I fear the situation is as bad as it can get my old friend, and no rousing speeches can change that fact."

"When will the Rats attack Three Cases?"

Isaiah sipped his whisky and looked back over his shoulder, out the window. The hills above Three Cases were caped in golden tussock, and high above them, on the undulating ridge-line, swaths of dark ti-tree marched.

"If I were a Rat Commander, I would attack at first light, from the ti-tree cover, then sweep down the hill toward the rear of town. But this would only be a feint. A distraction to the real attack."

He stood now, whisky in hand and stepped over to the window at the front of the saloon. It framed a splendid view, sweeping down Musket Lane, across the shingled rooftops of the shops on Moa St, all the way to the wide swath of the bay beyond, book-ended north and south by rugged cliffs. A pleasant vista, with wooden wharf at centre and brightly coloured fishing boats gently tugging at their mooring ropes like impatient puppies. The sound of the crashing waves upon the shingle bed of sand could be clearly heard.

"That is where the Rats will concentrate their attack. Upon the bay. They will wait till their comrades attack from the rear, from the ti-tree cover, no more than a hundred infantry I suspect, yet screaming like banishes with bayonets to ensure confusion and fear. Then, while the town attempts to repel them, they will spring their trap. The invasion force, anchored even as I speak, off the coast, will swoop in and disgorge a thousand strong army, storming from their landing vessels. Chaos will ensue as the towns defenders, hopelessly outnumbered, turn to face this new threat. They will fail. The Rats will gain the town of Three Cases by the strike of

noon. They will pillage food and munitions and then burn all else. They will take no prisoners. This is their way. This is our fate."

There was silence. Save the sound of distant waves.

Abe refilled their glasses.

"What of the Avian Army? How soon can your troops reach Three Cases?"

Isaiah reached inside his coat pocket and withdrew a folded map. He cleared the bar of glasses and whiskey bottles then unfolded it, smoothing it flat with the palm of his hand.

"The very minute I received news of the Rats massacre at Widows Bay I sent a rider at speed South to Fort Scrimshot, commanding the immediate dispatch of the 17th Heavy Bush Infantry. Another rider was sent east to intercept the 34th Takahe Field Artillery who are somewhere north of Tickle and Feather. These two forces combined number more than one thousand troops and fifty artillery pieces. Yet they are, at best, and even by ceaseless marching, still two and a half days journey from Three Cases. I fear that by the time they arrive the town will be in flames."

Abe ran his eyes over the map.

Three Cases was indeed an isolated township, clinging to the west coast surrounded by great swaths of bush and hill country. The next nearest town of any substance was Major Knobs Mistake and that was three days ride away.

Methusalah, the regional capital, was at least 7 days due east.

"Well, the die is cast my friend." he said "We number at best 352 men and women folk, and not more than 200 muskets between them. Against a Rat Army of over one thousand, armed to their filthy teeth. Rather lopsided odds I should wager."

He then leaned across the bar and uncorked another bottle of 12 year Feathered Friend and raised it in salute with a twinkle in his eye.

"But, all is not lost, for we are led by none other than the dashing General Isaiah Whatipu himself! Hero of the Battle of Nellies Lisp and

Commander of Forces for Northern Birdlandia! Who by the grace of the Almighty, was here in Three Cases visiting his invalided mother when the vermin Rats invaded.

He alone is worth an entire regiment of Rats! When they hear that he is directing the defence of Three Cases, why they shall crap themselves with fear."

He then took a generous swig and thumped the bottle on the bar. Isaiah threw back his head, and, for the first time that day laughed with delight.

"Abraham Revelation! You have missed your true calling in life, for it is you who should be making speeches not I."

Abe stepped forward, placing a firm hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"And it is *you* who should show us how to defeat these Rats not I."

At that very moment the sound of a galloping horse was heard approaching Musket Lane.

The rider was a young soldier in the faded grey uniform of the Mounted Rifles, his boots splattered with mud, his mount foamed with sweat.

By all accounts he had ridden hard and long.

He swung from the saddle and mounted the steps to Abe's two at a time, and pushed through the frosted glass door, standing uncertainly, seeking the General in the dim light of the saloon.

"Over here soldier. What news have you?"

The young soldier, a corporal by his dark blue stripes, saluted and briskly approached the bar, struggling to control his breathing from his strenuous ride.

"General sir, I am Corporal Moses Taranaki, I bring news, of the Rats, moving south, from Widows Bay!"

The General waved a hand.

"Abe give this rider a slug of whisky."

Abe poured and the corporal gratefully gulped it down.

"Now, take your time and relay your news."

The soldier wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Sir, I am with the 66th Mounted Rifles out of Hymnal Vale"

"Col Hebron Hatchets regiment is it not?"

"Indeed sir, and no finer officer there be in the Rifles.

Well, Col Hatchet himself gave me orders to reconnoiter west of our base camp at Hymnal and see if there be any truth to the rumor of a Rat marauding party, supposedly spotted putting ashore off the coast above Widows Bay. He felt it to be nothing more than an old kiwi wives tale sir. We get many such sightings reported, and they all turn out to be phantoms.

Yet he felt, in his gut sir, that this was more than whisky and whispers. So, I was dispatched along with one other rider, a private by name of Obadiah Longshot.

We two headed immediately west for the coast and arrived at about dusk on Sunday gone, at Reverends Nose, to the North of Widows Bay about mile give or take a yard. No sooner had we watered our horses sir, and set about making camp than we heard fiddle music carried on the wind it was."

"That would be the good folk of Widows Bay at the Settlers Hall?"

"Indeed sir. Me and Obadiah listened good hour to that fiddle, mighty fine it was. There was a big fat harvest moon risen early that night as well.

Then of a sudden, there were a volley of musket shot, 'bout a company strong as best we could tell. Then we heard screaming and more volleys of musket fire. I said to Obadiah 'that be the sound of Skullcrusher Long-Barrels, Rat Infantry muskets!

We saddle and ride toward Widows Bay.

By time we'd reached the ridge above the bay we could see nothing but flames and smoke from the Settlers Hall.

The Rats had left."

Here the corporal stumbled, his emotions, raw and laid bare. The General refilled his shot glass, and with a voice of a father bidding his child to sleep, he said,

"Drink this, take your time son, then, when you are able tell us what you witnessed."

The whisky and the General's tone did their work.

"Sir, I will never forget the sight that greeted Obadiah and I.

It was a slaughterhouse. Bodies laying everywhere.

Them that was in the Settlers Hall we could not tally on account of the fire, but many had fled through the back door, and the Rats had cut them down like nine-pins.

Women and young ones and all. We searched among them for the living, but t'weren't any. There were nothing to be done there among the dead, so we pursued the Rats up through the ti-tree, following their tracks, which they had made no effort to conceal, due to the fact that they thought all were dead in Widows Bay."

General Isaiah pointed to the map on the bar.

"Show me here in which direction they were headed."

The corporal studied the map momentarily, getting his bearings, then, traced a finger leading up from Widows Bay, over the ridge-line, then dropping down to a creek in the valley below. "We caught sight of them here sir, fording the Gin Rummy and wheeling south along the old trappers road toward Benjamin Amen's Farm. From a distance we could see more flames and smoke and hear musket fire, we could only imagine what fate had struck that poor farm."

"They would have replenished supplies there no doubt."

"More than likely sir, for they camped not ten mile to the east, place called Bella Titchin's Promise. Obadiah and I could hear their foul laughter and smell

the stench of their cooking pots. They numbered a hundred or so, give or take one or two.

Travelling light they be too sir, no artillery or any heavy pieces, that we could see, save their rifles and munitions.

There be only one direction they could be heading, and that be here sir to Three Cases, of that I'm certain. I sent Obadiah by back road to report all we had seen to Major Hatchet, whilst I rode on here to warn the town.

I never expected to find you sir, General Isaiah Whatipu himself. It is a right honour. Now I beg your permission to take my leave, for my horse needs attending to."

He snapped a crisp salute, wheeled on his muddy boots and left the General and Abe alone with their map and their thoughts.

