

MĪHARO

BOOK 2

TE WAKA
TŌHORĀ

The Whale Waka

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TE WAKA TŌHORĀ

The Whale Waka

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Part 1

The Sanctuary

Chapter 1: Nine

I turned nine in a hidden valley that did not appear on any map.

This was not how I had imagined my birthday.

There were no cousins racing through our backyard.

No balloons stuck in trees.

No Koro pretending he had not eaten icing with his finger.

There was, however, a cake.

Mum had somehow convinced the sanctuary kitchen to let her use an oven.

Dad found candles.

Ahi found the candles before Dad needed them and melted one into the shape of a worm.

Wai ate icing from the bowl.

Some things survived magical relocation.

Nan sat at the table with a cup of tea and said, “Nine. Far too old.”

I signed, YOU SAID THAT LAST YEAR.

“And I was right then too.”

Everyone laughed.

I could laugh now, a little.

Not properly.

The sound came out rough and breathy, like my throat had forgotten how.

Since the scream that called Grog, tiny sounds had begun escaping sometimes.

A cough.

A hum.

Once, half of Ahi's name.

No real words yet.

The hidden mesh still caught almost everything.

The healer at the sanctuary said that was important.

“It is not a wall,” Mere told me. “It is a net.”

Mere was one of the people who looked after new arrivals.

She had silver hair, bare feet and the annoying habit of answering questions with another question.

I wrote, CAN WE CUT THE NET?

She asked, "What happens if you cut a fishing net wrapped around a living fish?"

I wrote, YOU ARE VERY ANNOYING.

She smiled.

"Yes."

The answer was no.

Not yet.

After cake, Mum gave me a new red notebook because the old one was almost full.

Dad gave me a fountain pen and said I was old enough not to lose it.

I lost the lid within eleven minutes.

Ahi gave me a drawing of Rere with laser eyes.

Rere did not have laser eyes.

Probably.

Nan gave me one of Koro's old handkerchiefs folded around a tiny wood shaving.

"From his carving bench," she said.

I held it carefully.

The hei tiki warmed.

Kiki clicked beside my ear.

Then Grog appeared in the doorway.

He was carrying no present.

“Rude,” Ahi told him.

Grog looked at me.

“I have something better.”

Mum folded her arms.

“No.”

Grog blinked.

“I haven't said what it is.”

“You were about to say Te Waka Tōhorā.”

Grog sighed.

After everyone went to bed, I sat outside the cabin with Mum. The sanctuary valley was darker than our old neighbourhood because there were no streetlights. Tiny green lights drifted between the trees instead. Mum wrapped a blanket around both of us and asked whether nine felt different. I told her it felt like eight with more secrets.

She laughed, then went quiet. "I wish Ru could see you here." I did too. For a moment I imagined Koro complaining about the damp, arguing with Grog about directions and pretending he was not impressed by the glowing trees.

Mum squeezed my hand. "Whatever Grog says about prophecies, you are still allowed to be nine." That became one of my favourite rules.

"I was."

I smiled.

Nine suddenly felt different.

Chapter 2: The Rules of Hidden Places

Before Grog was allowed to take me anywhere, Mum made him explain the Earth Sanctuary properly.

This took three days.

Mum had questions.

Dad had questions.

Nan had questions that sounded like accusations.

I had the most questions, but mine took longer because I had to write or sign them.

The sanctuary had rules.

Do not bring someone in without permission.

Do not use another person's Mīharo without consent.

Do not show the path to anyone outside unless a kaitiaki agrees.

Do not assume somebody owes you their story because their Mīharo is unusual.

That last rule was Mere's favourite.

“People arrive here frightened,” she told me. “Sometimes the safest thing we can offer is not asking them to

explain.”

I liked that.

On Earth, everyone had wanted an explanation for my voice.

Doctors.

Teachers.

Neighbours.

Even people who barely knew me.

At the sanctuary, nobody stared when I signed.

Nobody asked what was wrong with me.

They asked my name.

They asked whether I wanted tea.

One boy asked whether Kiki bit.

Kiki bit him.

That answered his question.

Mere showed me the healing rooms, the gardens and the old meeting hall built into the side of a hill.

People with different kinds of Mīharo lived there.

A woman could make seeds sprout faster when she sang.

A man always knew the safest path home.

A little girl made shadows move in the wrong direction
when she was angry.

“Are they all going to Te Waka Tōhorā?” I wrote.

Mere shook her head.

“No. Some stay. Some return home. Some travel
elsewhere.”

ELSEWHERE?

Mere smiled.

“Te Waka Tōhorā is not the only sanctuary that survived.”

That made my head fill with questions so quickly I gave
up writing them.

Later, Grog took me to the awa.

Rere did not appear.

We sat on a fallen log.

I wrote, WHY ME?

Grog read it.

“Because you called.”

I frowned.

I tried again.

WHY DID THE PROPHECY PICK ME?

Grog looked at the water.

“Prophecies are usually less useful than people think.”

I stared at him.

“The old words say someone from your line will bring balance. They do not say you must obey anyone. They do not say you cannot be frightened. They do not even say we understand what balance means.”

Mere also showed me a small room where people could leave messages for family without opening a full path. Some messages travelled in shells, some in carved tokens, some through people who knew how to carry memories safely. Nothing worked like a normal phone, which Ahi thought was terrible and Nan thought was excellent.

At lunch I watched two newcomers sit at opposite ends of a long table. Nobody pushed them to talk. One stayed silent. The other told a story so loudly everyone nearby heard it anyway. The sanctuary made room for both.

I began to understand that safety was not just locked gates. Sometimes safety was being allowed to decide how much of yourself you handed over.

I wrote, THAT'S A BAD PROPHECY.

Grog grinned.

“Excellent. You may be ready.”

Chapter 3: What Ru Remembered

Nan finally opened the rest of Koro's wooden box.

She had kept one bundle tied shut since we arrived.

“I wasn't ready,” she said.

Inside were letters.

Most were old.

Some were written in te reo I could not read well.

Some were in English.

One had my name on the outside.

AROHA.

Koro's handwriting.

My hands shook.

Nan sat beside me.

“He must have written it before your birthday.”

I opened it.

There were only four lines.

Moko,

If the hei tiki wakes for you, listen before you act.

Our people were not only survivors. We were makers.

Find the tree.

Love, Koro.

I read it three times.

Then I cried.

Not loudly.

I could not.

Nan held me until I stopped.

Afterward we looked through the other papers.

Ru's father had been connected to Te Waka Tōhorā.

So had his mother.

Names went farther back.

One appeared beside sketches of carved whale ribs and living timber.

Reweti.

Nan tapped it.

“Your koro used to say Reweti was one of the finest carvers in our line.”

Another page described a woman whose weaving patterns were used to guide people through changing paths.

Her name was damaged by water.

Only the first letter remained.

“We lost too much,” Nan whispered.

I looked at the pages.

Not lost, I wrote.

FOUND.

Nan smiled through tears.

That afternoon, Dad joined us.

He had been learning more about Mum's side of the family while we were at the sanctuary.

“Your mum travelled halfway around the world before she met me,” he said. “I thought I was marrying one person. Turns out I married an entire secret whale civilisation.”

Mum, walking past, threw a tea towel at him.

Dad laughed.

I liked that he could joke about it.

He understood what it felt like to belong to more than one place.

India lived in our food, stories, music and his phone calls to family.

Aotearoa lived in everything around us.

One letter was from Ru to Hui, written years before I was born. He apologised for not taking her to Te Waka Tōhorā when he had the chance. He wrote that he thought ordinary life would be enough and that maybe leaving the old world behind would make things simpler.

Nan read that line twice. “Ru always wanted simple,” she said. “Then he married me.” I laughed so suddenly a rough sound escaped. Nan laughed too.

The letters did not turn Koro into a perfect wise man. They made him more real. He had been afraid. He had made choices. He had forgotten things. He had also tried, near the end, to leave us a path back.

Now there was Te Waka Tōhorā too.

Maybe the prophecy's two worlds were not just Earth and Mīharo.

Maybe people could carry many worlds at once.

Chapter 4: The Mesh

Mere showed me the mesh on my ninth birthday week.

Not with a mirror.

With Mīharo.

She filled a bowl with clear water and placed it between us.

“Think of speaking,” she said.

I thought of Mum's name.

The water stayed still.

“Now try.”

I pushed air through my throat.

A faint rasp came out.

The water flashed white.

Thin silver lines appeared across the surface.

A net.

My stomach tightened.

Mere touched one line without touching the water.

It pulled toward the edge of the bowl.

Away from me.

“There,” she said.

I wrote, DAVE.

“Likely.”

LIKELY?

“We know the mesh is technological. We know it is harvesting energy. We do not yet know where every thread goes.”

Grog stood behind me with his arms folded.

“He may be able to follow it.”

Mum, who had insisted on being present, said a very bad word.

Mere pretended not to hear.

Dad did not pretend.

“Can he follow her to Te Waka Tōhorā?”

“If the line remains open during a crossing, perhaps.”

That changed everything.

Mum said the trip was off.

I disagreed.

She said I was nine.

I wrote I KNOW.

She said Dave had already hurt me once.

I wrote I KNOW.

She said she would not hand him a road to everyone else.

That stopped me.

She was right.

Grog did not argue.

Instead he said, "Then she learns to close the road."

Mum looked at him.

"How?"

"That is why we have a sanctuary."

For the next week, Mere taught me how to feel the mesh before it pulled.

It felt cold.

Not on my skin.

Inside.

Like a draft through a closed window.

When I pushed my Miharo directly against it, the mesh pulled harder.

When I stopped fighting and listened, I could feel where the thread went.

White.

Thin.

Far away.

Dave.

The idea made me furious.

The mesh immediately tightened.

Mere raised an eyebrow.

Mere made me practise with ordinary emotions first. Embarrassment barely moved the mesh. Fear tightened it. Anger made the silver pattern pull hardest. Joy was strange: it made the net loosen in some places and catch in others.

“Your body is not a machine,” she reminded me. “Dave built technology as though every feeling could be measured the same way. It cannot.”

That was comforting. Dave had made a system to control something living. Living things were messy. Maybe messiness was on my side.

“Anger is information. It is not always instruction.”

I hated when she said wise things.

Mostly because they were useful.

Chapter 5: Mum Says No

Mum said no for twelve days.

I counted.

Day one: no.

Day two: absolutely not.

Day three: Grog, stop asking.

Day four: Krish, do not take his side.

Dad said, "I don't have a side."

Mum said, "Your face has a side."

Day five was mostly silent.

On day six, I left Mum a letter.

I did not write about prophecy.

I did not write about saving anyone.

I wrote about Koro.

I wrote about my voice.

I wrote that Dave had chosen what happened to me without asking.

I wrote that I did not want safety to become another way adults chose everything for me.

Mum read it alone.

That night she came to my bed.

"I hate that you're right about that," she said.

I smiled.

"Don't look pleased."

I looked more pleased.

Mum sighed.

"If you go, Grog stays with you."

I nodded.

"You come back when you are told."

I nodded.

"If anything feels wrong, you leave."

I nodded.

"And you do not become responsible for saving an entire magical civilisation before you have finished primary school."

I wrote, DEAL.

Mum laughed.

Then she cried.

I hated that part.

Dad came in and sat beside her.

Nan joined us without being invited.

Ahi appeared because he had heard crying and assumed there might be food.

Wai followed Ahi.

Soon everyone was on my bed.

It nearly collapsed.

“I want to come,” Ahi said.

Mum said no.

“Why does Aroha get magic school?”

I signed BECAUSE I'M OLDER.

“By four years.”

I signed EXACTLY.

Dad put his arm around both of us.

“This is not a holiday.”

Ahi looked at Kiki.

“It looks like a holiday.”

Kiki clicked.

Traitor.

Before Mum left, she touched my cheek.

Dad spoke to me separately. He said he was scared too, but his fear was different from Mum's. "I left once when things got hard," he said. "I do not want my fear to become another reason you lose something." He looked ashamed saying it.

I wrote, YOU CAME BACK. Dad nodded. "I am trying to stay back."

That did not erase the year he had been gone. It did make the present feel more honest. People could fail and still choose differently next time.

"Come back to me."

I put my hand over hers.

That was the real rule.

Chapter 6: Rere

Rere came at dawn.

The awa was silver under the mist.

Grog stood knee-deep in the water wearing the same gumboots he wore everywhere.

I had started to suspect the gumboots were part of him.

My family waited on the bank.

Mum held my backpack even though I was meant to carry it.

Dad checked the straps twice.

Nan tucked food into a side pocket.

Ahi gave me one of his dinosaurs for protection.

It was missing a leg.

Wai gave me a wet cracker.

I accepted both.

The water bulged.

Rere rose beneath it.

She was beautiful.

Her translucent skin held moving blue light.

Tiny patterns shimmered under her fins.

Her eye was dark and bright at the same time.

She floated above the awa until her belly no longer touched the water.

Grog put one hand against her side.

“Kia ora, kōtiro.”

Rere answered with a soft call.

The sound moved through my ribs.

The mesh inside my throat turned cold.

Mere, standing nearby, noticed.

“There.”

I closed my eyes.

White thread.

I could feel it stretching behind me.

Grog said, “Do not pull.”

I breathed.

Listened.

The line thinned.

Kiki landed on the hei tiki.

Green warmth spread through the cold.

The white thread faded.

Not gone.

Quiet.

“Good,” Mere said.

Rere opened her mouth.

The glowing pod waited inside.

Mum's fingers tightened around my backpack.

Then she let go.

“Go before I change my mind.”

I hugged her.

Then Dad.

Nan.

Ahi.

Wai, who wiped cracker on my shoulder.

I climbed into Rere.

Grog followed.

The inside shaped itself around us like two soft seats.

There were no controls.

No windows.

Then the walls turned clear.

My family stood on the riverbank.

Mum lifted one hand.

I lifted mine.

Rere sank into the awa.

Before I climbed inside, Nan pressed her forehead to mine. "Your koro would have tried to hide how proud he was," she whispered. "Then he would have told everybody by lunchtime."

Ahi shoved the one-legged dinosaur deeper into my bag. "If anything attacks you, throw him." I signed THAT IS YOUR PLAN? He nodded seriously.

For the first time, leaving did not feel like being taken. Dave had taken my voice. Adults had once moved Hemi, though I did not know him yet. This time I was stepping forward because I had chosen to.

The water closed above us.

For one second I panicked.

Then stars appeared where the riverbed should have been.

Chapter 7: Between

The awa disappeared.

There is no better way to explain it.

One moment Rere moved underwater.

The next, water became darkness filled with stars.

Not outer space.

I think.

Grog called it the Between.

“Terrible name,” I signed.

“I didn't name it.”

Rere swam through nothing.

Blue light flowed along her body.

Far away, shapes moved like enormous shadows.

I could not tell whether they were whales, clouds or whole islands.

The hei tiki hummed against my chest.

I felt the mesh turn cold.

White thread appeared in my mind.

Stronger this time.

It snapped tight behind us.

Dave had found the crossing.

I grabbed Grog's arm.

He saw my face.

"The line?"

I nodded.

"Do not fight it."

I wanted to fight it.

I wanted to rip it out.

I wanted Dave to feel every month of silence he had given me.

The thread brightened.

Rere shuddered.

The stars around us bent.

Grog said sharply, "Aroha. Listen to her."

Rere called.

Fear.

Not words.

I felt it anyway.

The thread was not only pulling me.

It was pulling through her.

I put both hands against Rere's inner wall.

Warm blue light met my palms.

I stopped thinking about Dave.

I thought about Rere.

About Mum letting go of my backpack.

About Koro saying listen before you act.

About the sanctuary rule.

Connection is not ownership.

The white line loosened.

Kiki flew around my head, green wings flashing.

I breathed slowly.

The thread became thinner.

Then a voice came through it.

Dave.

Faint.

“Aroha?”

My whole body froze.

“I know you can hear me.”

Grog could not hear him.

Rere could.

She flinched.

Dave said, “Come home.”

Home.

As if he had not taken it from me.

I opened my mouth.

Nothing came.

But I did not need sound.

I pushed one thought down the line.

NO.

The hei tiki flashed.

The thread snapped dark.

Rere surged forward.

A gold light opened ahead of us.

Grog grinned.

The Between changed colour as Rere moved. Blue stars became green. Green became gold. Once I saw what looked like a whole forest hanging upside down far away, then it folded into darkness before I could point.

Grog told me crossings remembered travellers. “Every path is easier the second time and more dangerous if the wrong person learns it.” That was why Dave's thread mattered so much.

I realised then that closing the line was not only protecting me. It was protecting everyone whose home waited at the other end.

“There.”

The darkness split.

Beyond it waited an ocean in the sky.

The Whale Road

Chapter 8: A World on a Whale

The first thing I saw was water falling upward.

At least I thought it was upward.

Rere burst through a sheet of gold light and suddenly there was sky everywhere.

Below us was ocean.

Above us was also ocean.

Between them floated Te Waka Tōhorā.

It was enormous.

Not big like a ship.

Big like land.

The dark shape of a whale stretched farther than I could see. Forest covered its back. Mountains rose from it. Rivers shone blue between valleys. Waterfalls spilled from cliffs and vanished into mist before reaching the sea below.

Tiny lights marked towns.

Bridges curved between ridges.

Sails moved where there should not have been wind.

I forgot to breathe.

Grog laughed.

“Everybody does that the first time.”

I signed, THAT IS A WHALE.

“Good spotting.”

I hit his arm.

Rere called happily.

We flew closer.

Details appeared.

Gardens.

Whare.

Tall towers made of living wood.

People walking along paths that curved with the land.

A huge tree rose near the centre, its canopy higher than some clouds.

My chest tightened.

I pulled Koro's old photograph from my bag.

Same tree.

Te Rākau Kura.

The hei tiki warmed so quickly it almost hurt.

Kiki launched from my shoulder and flew against Rere's clear wall as if she wanted to get outside.

“Soon,” Grog told her.

Rere descended toward a harbour carved into the side of the whale-world.

Boats floated in water that curved along the shore without spilling into the sky.

Nothing obeyed the rules I knew.

I loved it immediately.

Then the mesh in my throat gave one cold twitch.

I froze.

Grog noticed.

“White line?”

I waited.

Nothing else.

I shook my head.

“Good.”

He did not sound convinced.

Rere touched the harbour water.

Her mouth opened.

Warm air rushed in.

For the first time, I smelled Te Waka Tōhorā.

Salt.

Rere circled once before landing, which gave me time to notice that the whale-world was not shaped like a neat island. Valleys dipped into the curve of her back. Forest climbed over ridges that moved almost too slowly to see. Farther along, a line of houses tilted gently as Te Waka Tōhorā breathed.

I pressed both hands against Rere's clear wall. Somewhere below those forests my koro had walked as a boy. His parents had known these paths. People from my whānau had helped shape parts of this impossible place, and yet I knew less about it than Moemoeā probably knew about vending machines.

That thought made the wonder feel heavier. I was not arriving as a tourist. I was arriving late.

Woodsmoke.

Wet earth.

Flowers.

Home, somehow, even though I had never been there.

Chapter 9: The Harbour That Breathes

The harbour moved.

Not the water.

The harbour itself.

Wooden platforms rose and lowered with each wave like they were breathing.

Rere floated beside one.

Grog stepped out first.

I followed.

The ground felt solid.

I still tested it twice.

People passed us carrying baskets, tools, fish, books and things I could not name.

Some wore clothes like people on Earth.

Some wore woven cloaks.

Some wore bright fabrics from places I did not recognise.

Nobody looked exactly like a fantasy person.

They looked like people.

That made the impossible place feel more real.

A woman selling fruit called to Grog by name.

A boy about my age ran past carrying a bundle of glowing reeds.

An old man stopped, looked at my hei tiki and quietly touched his chest.

I looked at Grog.

WHY?

“Your taonga is recognised here.”

I did not like strangers recognising something I barely understood.

Grog must have seen that on my face.

“You do not owe anyone a conversation.”

Good.

We walked through the harbour.

Everywhere I looked, something moved in a way it should not.

A row of lanterns turned toward people as they passed.

A bridge grew three extra steps because a woman was carrying too much.

Small fish swam through a ribbon of water suspended
above the street.

Kiki chased them and hit the water with her face.

She fell onto my shoulder looking offended.

I laughed.

A rough sound came out.

Several people turned.

I went still.

Grog stepped between me and them.

“Keep walking.”

They did.

No questions.

No staring.

I relaxed.

At the end of the harbour, a carved archway rose from
two living roots.

Words glowed along it.

Nau mai.

Welcome.

The hei tiki pulsed once.

I felt the whale beneath my feet.

Near the docks, I noticed carved signs beside newer painted ones. Some names were in te reo Māori. Others came from languages I did not know. Grog explained that visitors and refugees had passed through Te Waka Tōhorā for generations, but the place itself held Māori whakapapa at its centre.

“People can be welcomed without pretending everybody is the same,” he said. “A sanctuary that erases difference has missed the point.”

I thought of Dad, who cooked Indian food in a New Zealand kitchen and never seemed confused about being both from somewhere and part of somewhere else. Maybe belonging did not require becoming identical.

Not movement exactly.

A heartbeat.

Te Waka Tōhorā was alive.

And somehow it knew I had arrived.

Chapter 10: The Road With Legs

Grog said we were taking the road.

I assumed he meant walking.

I was wrong.

A long wooden platform waited beside the harbour.

It had six legs.

Actual legs.

“No,” I signed.

Grog climbed aboard.

“Yes.”

The platform stood up.

I stepped back.

Grog laughed.

“You climbed inside a whale.”

I pointed at the road-creature.

THAT IS DIFFERENT.

“How?”

I could not answer because it was not.

I climbed on.

The walking platform carried us uphill.

It moved smoothly, except when Kiki flew too close to its face.

I did not know it had a face until then.

The platform snorted.

Kiki clicked back.

Grog told both of them to behave.

We passed terraces of gardens and homes built around giant roots.

Children ran beside us.

Some shouted at Grog.

One yelled, "Is that her?"

I hated being that her.

I pulled my hood up.

Grog said nothing.

Then a girl jumped onto the moving platform without asking.

She landed beside me.

Dark hair.

Quick eyes.

Bare feet.

“Kia ora,” she said. “I’m Moemoeā.”

I stared at her.

She stared back.

“You don’t talk?”

I shook my head.

“Okay.”

That was it.

No pity.

No why.

She pointed at Kiki.

“Does she bite?”

I nodded.

Moemoeā grinned.

“Good.”

A boy climbed aboard from the other side.

He had a basket of something that smelled amazing.

“You stole my kūmara,” Moemoeā told him.

“You abandoned them.”

“For two minutes.”

The boy handed me one.

“Piripi.”

I accepted the food.

I signed AROHA.

Moemoeā understood.

Piripi did not.

“Teach me,” he said.

Moemoeā asked where I was from on Earth. When I told her Aotearoa, she laughed. “Obviously.” I explained that Dad was Indian too, and that Mum had met him while travelling there years before.

Piripi wanted to know whether India had walking roads. I said no. Moemoeā asked whether India had magical elephants. I said probably not. Hemi, whom I had not met yet, would later tell me this conversation proved Te Waka Tōhorā children knew less about Earth than they pretended.

For the first time since leaving the Earth Sanctuary, I stopped thinking about Dave for nearly ten whole

minutes. It felt strange to discover that a new world could be frightening and fun at the same time.

I showed him my name again.

By the time the walking road reached the market, I had taught both of them HELLO, THANK YOU and STOP.

Moemoeā taught me the quickest route to the sweet stall.

It felt like a fair trade.

Chapter 11: The Market of Impossible Things

The market was bigger than our whole Earth Sanctuary.

Stalls curved along three levels of a valley.

Smoke rose from cooking fires.

Music came from somewhere above us.

Water flowed through channels that changed direction when people stepped near them.

Moemoeā moved through the crowd like she owned it.

Piripi followed more slowly.

Grog disappeared to speak with another kaitiaki after making them promise not to lose me.

Moemoeā said, “We won't.”

Piripi said, “You definitely will.”

We nearly did.

There were too many things to see.

A woman sold woven bags that became larger inside when you put food in them.

A man carved tiny birds from wood, then whispered to them and let them fly around his stall.

A family from somewhere beyond Te Waka Tōhorā sold glass beads that held moving pictures of ocean storms.

“Where are they from?” I signed.

Moemoeā looked at Piripi.

He understood enough now to answer.

“Another sanctuary.”

I stopped.

Another one.

Mere had said there were others.

Seeing people from one made the idea real.

Moemoeā shrugged.

“People come and go.”

“Not everyone likes it,” Piripi added.

Moemoeā rolled her eyes.

“Old people.”

An old woman beside us said, “I heard that.”

Moemoeā almost walked into a post.

I laughed.

The rough sound came again.

This time I did not stop it.

Kiki clicked happily.

We bought warm bread and sat near a fountain.

The fountain water rose into the air, formed a spiral and fell back without splashing.

Moemoeā pointed toward the giant tree in the distance.

“That's where you'll go.”

TE RĀKAU KURA?

Her eyebrows lifted.

“You know it?”

I showed her Koro's photograph.

She studied it.

“That's old.”

Piripi leaned closer.

“Really old.”

Moemoeā pointed at a man in the photo.

“Who is that?”

I wrote KORO.

One stall sold tiny packets of seeds labelled with two names: the plant's ordinary name and the place its people had carried it from. Grog later told me the market had rules about what could be traded. Taonga were not just objects to buy because they looked interesting. Some things belonged to particular people, stories or responsibilities.

That made sense to me. Koro's hei tiki would have looked like jewellery to someone who did not know it. To me it held his hands, his birthday gift, his warning to listen and every question I had not asked in time.

I tucked it beneath my shirt when a stranger stared too long. Moemoeā noticed and shifted closer without saying anything.

She looked at me differently.

Not because I was the prophecy girl.

Because I belonged to a story she already knew.

“Then you really did come back,” she said.

Chapter 12: The Boy Who Didn't Belong

I met Hemi because he was fighting with a door.

The door was winning.

It stood at the side entrance of a guest house and refused to open.

Hemi shoved it.

The door shoved back.

“Stupid magic house,” he muttered.

I stopped.

He was older than me by about a year.

Brown skin.

Messy black hair.

A bruise on one elbow.

A bag dumped at his feet.

He looked furious at everything.

Kiki flew to the top of his bag.

Hemi stared at her.

“Is that yours?”

I nodded.

“Of course it is.”

The door creaked.

I touched it.

It opened.

Hemi stared.

I shrugged.

He picked up his bag.

“Show-off.”

I should have walked away.

Instead I smiled.

He almost smiled back.

Grog appeared behind him.

“Good. You've met.”

Hemi's face closed.

“I don't need a babysitter.”

“Neither does Aroha.”

I signed TRUE.

Hemi frowned.

“What's that?”

Grog explained I used NZSL.

Hemi looked at me.

“Can you hear?”

I nodded.

“Cool.”

Again, no pity.

No why.

Grog told me Hemi had arrived from Te Tai Tokerau only a few weeks before.

He had not grown up on Te Waka Tōhorā either.

That changed things.

Everybody else seemed to know where paths led, what food to order and why the road had legs.

Hemi did not.

“You got lost too?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Good.”

We walked to the market with Moemoeā and Piripi.

Moemoeā asked Hemi three questions before we reached the first bridge.

He answered none.

She kept asking.

By the fifth bridge, he told her his name.

By the sixth, he told her he hated sweet kūmara.

Moemoeā looked horrified.

“We cannot be friends.”

Hemi said, “Great.”

Hemi had arrived with almost nothing. One bag, two shirts, a pair of shoes with mud still stuck in the soles and a jacket that was too warm for the harbour. He guarded the bag as if somebody might decide it was not really his.

I recognised that feeling in a different way. Since losing my voice, adults had handled my notebooks, my medical files and even my silence as if they belonged to the problem instead of to me. I did not know Hemi's story yet, but I knew what it looked like when a kid expected things to be taken.

So when Moemoeā reached for his bag to help carry it, I shook my head. She stopped immediately. Hemi noticed. He did not thank me, but some of the tightness left his shoulders.

She grinned.

He smiled before he could stop himself.

I saw it.

So did Moemoeā.

Chapter 13: The Tree School

Te Rākau Kura was not built beside the giant tree.

It was the giant tree.

Roots thicker than houses spread across the valley.

Doors opened in the trunk.

Bridges connected branches hundreds of metres above us.

Classrooms grew inside hollow spaces lined with living wood.

Leaves the size of umbrellas shifted to let sunlight through.

I stood at the base and looked up until my neck hurt.

Hemi stood beside me.

“Nope,” he said.

Moemoeā laughed.

“Scared of heights?”

“Scared of schools trying to kill me.”

A root lifted behind him.

Hemi jumped.

Piripi laughed so hard he dropped his books.

Inside, the school felt warm.

Not warm like heating.

Warm like the tree knew people were there.

We passed rooms for reo, carving, weaving, science, history, navigation and things that did not have Earth names.

One class was learning how to keep a floating stream stable during a storm.

Another was building tiny shelters from living vines.

Children of different ages moved between levels.

Nobody wore a uniform.

I approved.

A kaiako named Whaea Anahera met us near the central trunk.

She looked at my hei tiki.

Then at me.

“Aroha.”

I hated being recognised again.

She noticed.

“Sorry. Your name arrived before you did.”

I wrote, THAT KEEPS HAPPENING.

“It will stop being interesting soon.”

That was the best thing an adult had said all week.

She gave me a small wooden tablet for writing and translating signs for classmates who did not know NZSL.

Hemi asked if he got one too.

“Can you not speak?”

“I can speak heaps.”

“Then no.”

Moemoeā laughed.

Whaea Anahera placed her palm against the trunk.

Gold lines lit under the bark.

“Te Rākau Kura remembers every learner who comes through.”

I touched the wood.

The gold light rushed toward my fingers.

The whole tree shivered.

Whaea Anahera showed me where Year 5 learners usually started. Some classes mixed ages because Mīharo did not appear on a school timetable. A seven-year-old who could calm frightened animals might learn beside a twelve-year-old who was only just discovering the same ability.

Ordinary subjects still mattered. Reading, writing, maths, science and history sat beside carving, weaving, navigation and Mīharo practice. “Magic does not excuse you from fractions,” Whaea Anahera said when Hemi complained later.

I liked that Te Rākau Kura did not treat the old knowledge as decoration around a normal school. It was part of how the whole place worked.

Everyone went silent.

Hemi whispered, “Show-off.”

This time I did not smile.

Somewhere deep below us, something had recognised me.

Chapter 14: The White Thread Returns

The white thread found me during lunch.

One second I was eating bread with Moemoeā, Piripi and Hemi.

The next, cold cut through my throat.

I dropped the food.

Kiki screamed.

Not clicked.

Screamed.

The sound made every cicada in the tree answer.

Hemi jumped to his feet.

“What is it?”

I grabbed my neck.

White light crawled under my skin.

The school trunk flashed.

Gold lines turned pale.

Whaea Anahera ran toward us.

“Move away from the tree!”

I tried.

The mesh pulled.

A white line shot from my chest into the living wood.

The tree groaned.

Children shouted.

Roots twisted across the floor.

Hemi reached for the line.

Grog, arriving from the lower level, yelled, “Don't touch it!”

Hemi stopped.

I could hear Dave faintly through the connection.

“Aroha.”

Not angry.

Almost gentle.

“I know where you are now.”

Fear hit me.

The line brightened.

Mere's words came back.

Anger is information. It is not always instruction.

Koro's words came too.

Listen before you act.

I put both hands on the trunk.

The tree's heartbeat thundered through me.

Fear.

Mine.

The tree's.

Kiki's.

Then another feeling.

Not fear.

Trust.

The tree was not fighting me.

It was waiting.

I stopped pulling against the mesh.

I followed the white thread inward.

Found the place where it caught my voice.

Then I turned toward Dave.

For months I had wanted to scream at him.

This time I did not.

I pushed one clear sound through the opening.

“No.”

It hurt.

It was rough.

It was mine.

Dave went silent.

The gold lines in Te Rākau Kura flared.

The white thread snapped.

I fell backward.

Hemi caught me.

Moemoeā grabbed my hand.

Piripi yelled for a healer.

Everyone was staring.

I touched my throat.

Hemi's eyes were huge.

“You talked.”

I tried again.

After the healers checked me, Whaea Anahera closed the classroom for the day. She did not call the incident a failure. She called it evidence. Dave had learned more about the path, and we had learned that the tree could help me resist him.

Hemi hated that description. "He attacked you."

"Yes," I said, my voice only a rasp again. "And now we know something we didn't know yesterday."

Moemoeā looked between us. "Both can be true."

That became another lesson I kept. Something could be frightening and useful evidence at the same time. A person could be hurt and still learn. None of that made the hurt acceptable.

Nothing.

I smiled anyway.

One word was enough.

For now.

Te Rākau Kura

Chapter 15: The Word I Said

For three days after I said no, everybody asked me to say it again.

Mum, when Grog sent a message home.

Mere, when she crossed over to examine me.

Whaea Anahera.

Piripi.

Hemi.

Moemoeā asked once.

Then she told everyone else to stop.

I loved her for that.

The word did not come again.

I could make more sounds now.

A rough hum.

A breathy laugh.

Once the beginning of Mum.

The mesh still caught most of my voice, but the net had changed.

One strand was broken.

Mere showed me in a bowl of water.

The silver pattern had a gap.

"You made that?" I wrote.

"You did."

I stared at the gap.

For months Dave's machine had felt bigger than me.

Now it had one broken thread.

Hemi leaned over my shoulder.

"So break the rest."

Mere said, "Eventually."

"Why eventually?"

"Because tearing a net out of a throat is not the same as undoing a knot."

Hemi rolled his eyes.

"Adults love waiting."

I signed TRUE.

Mere looked at both of us.

“Children love surviving long enough to become adults.”

Hemi stopped smiling.

Later, he apologised.

Not to Mere.

To me.

“I keep thinking if something's wrong, you smash it.”

I wrote, SOMETIMES.

He shrugged.

“That's how I got here.”

I waited.

He did not explain.

I did not ask.

Mum heard about the word through a message shell before I could tell her myself. Her reply arrived less than an hour later. It was mostly crying.

“I'm proud of you,” she said. Then, very quickly, “Not because you spoke. I was already proud of you. I'm proud because you chose when to use it.”

That mattered. For months adults had treated getting my voice back as the finish line. Mum finally understood that speaking was not the same as being whole. I had already built a life with signs, writing, facial expressions and people who bothered to learn them.

Sanctuary rule.

People get to keep their story until they are ready.

Hemi looked relieved.

That was the moment we became proper friends.

Chapter 16: Outsiders Club

Moemoeā named us the Outsiders Club.

Piripi objected because he had been born on Te Waka Tōhorā.

“Then you're an honorary outsider,” she said.

“That makes no sense.”

“Correct.”

The club met during lunch beneath a root shaped like a bench.

Members: me, Hemi, Moemoeā, Piripi and Kiki.

Kiki was not allowed to vote because she ate part of the membership list.

Hemi had been on the waka longer than I had, but only by a few weeks.

He still got lost.

I still got lost.

Moemoeā pretended she never got lost.

Piripi knew this was a lie.

Our lessons were stranger than anything at my Earth school.

In one class we learned how to read the colour of water to tell whether a current was healthy.

In another we listened to old stories recorded in carved panels.

We had maths too.

Miharo did not remove multiplication.

This felt unfair.

The best class was called Kaitiakitanga.

Whaea Anahera put a seed in each of our hands.

“Make it grow.”

Hemi's sprouted first.

Too first.

A stem shot up, wrapped around his wrist and nearly slapped Piripi in the face.

Moemoeā laughed until she cried.

My seed did nothing.

I stared at it.

Kiki landed on my knuckle.

Whaea Anahera crouched beside me.

“What are you asking it to do?”

I wrote, GROW.

“What does it need?”

I frowned.

Water.

Soil.

Light.

Time.

I signed those.

Whaea Anahera nodded.

“Kaitiaki is not the person who orders the seed to grow.
Kaitiaki is the person who helps create the conditions
where it can.”

Hemi looked at his runaway plant.

“Mine grew.”

“Did it grow well?”

His plant strangled the edge of the table.

“Depends who you ask.”

We made actual club rules after Piripi complained that Moemoeā could not just declare things official. Rule one: nobody had to explain where they came from. Rule two: food had to be shared unless it was the last piece. Rule three: no using Mīharo on another member without asking. Rule four: Kiki was not allowed to decide votes by eating the paper.

Hemi added rule five: if one of us got sent away, the others had to find them. He said it like a joke.

Nobody laughed. Moemoeā wrote it down.

My seed finally cracked.

One tiny green shoot appeared.

I smiled.

Slow was not the same as weak.

Chapter 17: Hemi's Fire

Hemi told us about the fire because Moemoeā found the scar on his arm.

We were sitting on a high branch after class.

The valley stretched below us.

Moemoeā pointed at the pale mark near his elbow.

“What happened?”

Hemi went still.

Moemoeā immediately said, “You don't have to tell me.”

That surprised him.

He looked away.

Then he started talking.

He did not remember his birth parents.

He remembered houses.

Lots of houses.

Different bedrooms.

Different rules.

Different adults saying this is just for now.

Sometimes he stayed months.

Sometimes weeks.

Once only four days.

He stopped unpacking properly.

“Why bother?” he said. “They move you anyway.”

Then he was placed with an older Dutch couple in Northland.

Their accents were strong.

They ate strange licorice.

They gave him his own room.

Not a spare room he was borrowing.

His room.

They kept his drawings on the fridge.

They bought the cereal he liked without him asking.

They told his social worker they wanted him to stay.

Hemi stopped talking for a moment.

Moemoeā's hand moved closer to his but did not touch.

“Then they came to move me again,” he said.

The couple argued.

Hemi heard every word.

They wanted him.

The system had another plan.

Hemi ran.

He hid in the bush.

Night came.

He made a tiny fire for warmth.

Then he thought about every house he had left.

Every bag he had packed.

Every person who said it was not their decision.

The fire answered his anger.

It spread faster than fire should.

Across wet leaves.

Up green branches.

Through air.

“I thought I'd killed the whole forest,” Hemi said.

He had not.

Grog arrived before the fire could reach nearby homes.

Other kaitiaki helped contain it.

Grog found Hemi sitting in ash, crying and trying to stamp out flames with his shoes.

“He didn't call me dangerous,” Hemi said.

His voice went quiet.

“He said I didn't know how to carry it yet.”

Moemoeā finally took his hand.

Hemi let her.

I understood him better after that.

When Hemi finished, he looked embarrassed, as though telling us the truth had made him smaller. It did the opposite. The angry boy who fought doors suddenly made sense beside the child who had learned not to unpack.

I wanted to tell him he belonged here. The words felt too big, especially from someone who had arrived after him. Instead I signed STAY for him, then pointed at our root bench.

Moemoeā understood. “Yeah,” she said. “You can stay.” Hemi looked away, but he did not let go of her hand.

Te Waka Tōhorā was not only a magical place to Hemi.

It was the first place that had not sent him away.

That mattered.

Maybe more than any of us understood yet.

Chapter 18: Lessons in Listening

Hemi was very good at making things happen.

He was terrible at waiting.

In Mīharo practice, this caused problems.

When Whaea Anahera asked us to guide a stream around three stones, Hemi pushed the whole stream sideways.

Water soaked everyone.

When she asked us to warm a cold room, Hemi made one wall smoke.

When she asked us to help a climbing vine find a frame, the vine reached the ceiling.

“Efficient,” Hemi said.

“Destructive,” Whaea Anahera replied.

Moemoeā hid a smile.

My Mīharo worked differently.

I could feel connections.

The stream's pull around stone.

The warm place inside a cold room.

The way a vine searched for light.

I could not force much.

At first I thought that meant I was bad at magic.

Whaea Anahera disagreed.

“You are not doing tricks.”

I wrote, HEMI IS.

“Hemi is learning too.”

Hemi heard that.

“I'm good at tricks.”

“Yes.”

He looked pleased.

“That was not praise,” Moemoeā told him.

The hardest lesson involved the mesh.

Mere had left a small silver strand in a sealed glass tube.

A piece from a damaged relay at Rangi Energy, Grog said.

We practised sensing it without touching.

The silver strand felt hungry.

That was the only word for it.

Hemi hated it.

“Why not burn the whole company down?”

Everyone stared.

He lifted both hands.

“Not actually.”

Moemoeā said, “Your face said actually.”

Hemi looked away.

I understood the anger.

Dave had stolen from me.

But I also remembered Rere shuddering when I fought too hard.

I wrote, IF I BURN HIS THING, HE CAN SAY MĪHARO IS DANGEROUS.

Hemi read it.

“So?”

SO I DON'T WANT TO PROVE HIM RIGHT.

Whaea Anahera made us repeat the stream task a week later. This time Hemi waited before touching the water. He watched where it already wanted to move, warmed one cold patch of stone and let the current choose the easier route.

It took twice as long as his first attempt and soaked nobody.

He looked disappointed by how ordinary success felt. Then Moemoeā bumped his shoulder. “See? You can do boring.”

Hemi smiled. “Don't tell anyone.”

Hemi frowned.

He did not agree.

Not really.

But he thought about it.

Chapter 19: The Sick Root

The first real emergency happened beneath the school.

A root stopped glowing.

That sounds small.

It was not.

Te Rākau Kura used its roots to move water, warmth and Mīharo through the valley.

When one went dark, classrooms above it cooled.

A suspended stream lost height.

Three bridges folded themselves up and refused to unfold.

School was cancelled.

Nobody celebrated.

Whaea Anahera took our group below the trunk.

The lower roots formed tunnels wide enough to walk through.

Gold light pulsed beneath the bark.

Except one root.

Grey.

Cold.

Kiki would not land on it.

Piripi found a white mark near the base.

“Dave?” Hemi said immediately.

Whaea Anahera did not answer.

I touched the bark.

The mesh in my throat twitched.

Not Dave exactly.

A leftover trace.

Like a footprint.

I signed WHITE THREAD.

Hemi's hands warmed orange.

“Let me burn it out.”

“No,” I rasped.

The word was barely there.

Hemi looked at me.

I was surprised too.

Whaea Anahera smiled but stayed focused.

“Why no?”

I wrote, ROOT IS ALIVE.

Burning out the white mark might burn the root too.

Moemoeā knelt beside me.

“What does it need?”

Seed lesson.

Water.

Warmth.

Connection.

Piripi traced where the root joined two healthier ones.

We worked together.

Moemoeā redirected water.

Piripi stabilised the bark.

Hemi added warmth carefully.

Very carefully.

I placed both palms on the grey root and listened.

The white trace had taught it to close itself.

It was protecting itself so hard that nothing could enter.

I knew that feeling.

I did not force it open.

I stayed.

Slowly, a thin gold line returned.

Then another.

The root warmed.

Above us, the school gave one enormous creak.

A bridge unfolded.

Hemi grinned.

After the root recovered, we had to return the next morning and check it again. I expected the gold glow to mean finished. Reweti told me healing needed follow-up.

One section was still weak, so Piripi adjusted the water and Hemi lowered the heat. The second repair was smaller than the first and probably more important because nobody was watching.

I began to understand why kaitiakitanga was not a heroic moment. It was coming back after the exciting part to make sure the thing you cared for was actually okay.

“We fixed it.”

Whaea Anahera shook her head.

“It healed. You helped.”

I liked that better.

Chapter 20: A Message From Earth

The message from Mum arrived inside a shell.

Of course it did.

Te Waka Tōhorā had many ways of communicating with the Earth Sanctuary.

Apparently ordinary envelopes were boring.

I held the shell to my ear.

Mum's voice played.

“Aroha, we're okay. Ahi has lost the same shoe again. Wai bit Grog's spare hat. Your dad says hello. Nan says you're too skinny even though she cannot currently see you.”

I laughed.

Then Mum's voice changed.

“Dave came looking for us.”

My stomach tightened.

“He knows the house is empty. He asked neighbours where we went. Rangi Energy has announced another project. They are calling it clean conversion.”

The shell paused.

“Grog says we're safe. I believe him. Mostly. You focus on learning. We love you.”

The message ended.

I listened again.

Hemi sat beside me.

“He won't stop.”

I shook my head.

“Then we stop him.”

I wrote, HOW?

Hemi's eyes hardened.

“Take away what he uses.”

THE MACHINES?

“All of it.”

I looked at him.

There was more in his answer than Dave.

Hemi saw people without Mīharo as the world that had moved him from home to home.

Dave saw Mīharo as the thing that killed Pania.

Both of them were starting to make one thing stand for everything that hurt them.

I did not have those words yet.

I just knew I did not like the feeling.

Moemoeā arrived with Piripi and dropped beside us.

“Why do you both look miserable?”

Hemi told her.

She listened.

Then she said, “We can hate what Dave is doing without hating everyone who isn't like us.”

Hemi looked at her.

“Easy for you to say.”

Moemoeā's face changed.

“Maybe. But I still get to say it.”

Hemi stood and walked away.

Moemoeā watched him go.

She looked hurt.

I touched her shoulder.

She sighed.

Mum's message also said Dad had started keeping a folder of every public Rangi Energy announcement. Nan called it evidence. Dad called it being organised. Ahi

called it boring and used the back of one page to draw Rere with rockets.

The family was not waiting helplessly for me to solve Dave. They were watching, recording and protecting each other on Earth while I learned here.

That took some pressure off my chest. I was part of the answer. I was not the whole answer.

“He's not bad.”

I nodded.

I knew.

That did not mean he was always right.

Chapter 21: The Choice to Protect

At the end of term, Whaea Anahera asked what we thought kaitiaki meant.

Piripi said guardian.

Moemoeā said caretaker.

Hemi said protector.

I wrote, SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T OWN THE THING THEY PROTECT.

Whaea Anahera read it aloud.

The class went quiet.

“Where did you learn that?” she asked.

I thought about Rere.

The seed.

The sick root.

My voice.

I wrote, EVERYWHERE.

After class, Grog waited beneath the tree.

“Walk with me.”

We followed a path to a high ridge overlooking the whale-world.

From there I could see villages, forest and rivers stretching along Te Waka Tōhorā's back.

"The prophecy people keep whispering about you," Grog said, "has become unhelpful."

I raised an eyebrow.

"People hear chosen one and forget you are a child."

Good.

He understood.

"So I am asking something smaller."

He held out a simple cord woven in dark green and gold.

No medal.

No magic crown.

Just cord.

"Would you like to train as a kaitiaki?"

I stared at it.

"Not because of prophecy," Grog added. "Because you keep choosing to protect relationships instead of winning fights."

I thought about Mum.

Koro.

Kiki.

Rere.

Hemi.

Moemoeā.

Even Dave.

I did not want Dave hurt.

I wanted him stopped.

There was a difference.

I took the cord.

The hei tiki warmed.

Kiki clicked.

That evening I showed Mum the woven cord through a message mirror. She cried again, which had become her response to almost everything magical.

“Kaitiaki,” she said. “Your koro would love that.”

Nan leaned into view behind her. “Ru would tell everybody he trained her himself.”

I laughed, and this time the sound lasted long enough that all three of us heard it clearly.

The cord did not make me important. The choices before it did. I wanted to remember that.

I managed one tiny, rough word.

“Yes.”

Grog smiled.

This time nobody asked me to say it again.

Kaitiaki

Chapter 22: Kaitiaki Training

Kaitiaki training was less exciting than Ahi would have imagined.

There were no swords.

No secret uniforms.

No giant monster on the first day.

There were lists.

So many lists.

Emergency routes.

Water pathways.

Names of people to call when a bridge decided to grow sideways.

Rules about who could open Earth crossings.

Rules about when not to.

“This is paperwork,” Hemi said.

He had joined a beginner group too.

“Paperwork saves lives,” Grog replied.

“That sounds fake.”

Grog handed him another form.

Moemoeā volunteered to help us practise patrol routes.

Piripi came because he refused to miss anything interesting.

Our first task was simple: escort three young children from Te Rākau Kura to the lower market during a path shift.

The path changed halfway.

A bridge folded up.

One child cried.

Another tried to climb the railing.

Hemi wanted to force the bridge open.

I stopped him.

We found another route.

It took longer.

Nobody fell.

Grog said that counted as success.

Hemi said it counted as boring.

Moemoeā told him boring was excellent when you were responsible for six-year-olds.

He looked at her.

“You sound like Grog.”

She looked horrified.

The next week we learned how to close a path without trapping anyone inside it.

That lesson mattered more to me.

The mesh in my throat still connected faintly to Earth.

Dave's white thread had not returned since the school incident, but I could sometimes feel it searching.

Like a finger testing a locked window.

I wanted to know how to keep the window closed.

Grog watched me practise.

“Protection is not the same as fear,” he said.

One training session involved nothing magical at all. Grog gave us a list of families in the lower valley and told us to check who needed help after heavy rain. We carried food, moved wet blankets and fixed a gate.

Hemi kept asking when the Mīharo part started.

“This is the Mīharo part,” Grog said.

Hemi stared at a broken gate. “This is wood.”

“Kaitiakitanga existed before you learned to make your hands glow.”

I liked that. Protecting people did not become more valuable just because it looked magical.

I wrote, SOMETIMES IT FEELS THE SAME.

“Yes.”

No wise answer.

Just yes.

I appreciated that.

Chapter 23: Reweti's Workshop

Reweti's workshop smelled like fresh timber and rain.

He was an old carver with strong hands, sharp eyes and a habit of staring at people until they told the truth.

Grog took me there after training.

“This is Aroha,” he said.

Reweti snorted.

“I know who she is.”

I sighed.

Reweti smiled.

“And you are tired of everyone knowing.”

I nodded.

“Good. Means you're sensible.”

I liked him.

He showed me a long carved beam that had been removed from one of the oldest structures on Te Waka Tōhorā.

Tiny marks ran along the underside.

One matched the symbol on Koro's wooden box.

I touched it.

The hei tiki warmed.

“Ru used to do that,” Reweti said.

I looked at him sharply.

“He came here as a boy. Later as a young man. He had a good eye.”

My throat tightened.

I wrote, WHY DID HE LEAVE?

Reweti put down his chisel.

“Earth was home too.”

THAT'S ALL?

“No. But the rest is Ru's story, and some of it belongs to Hui.”

I accepted that even though I hated it.

Reweti showed me an older carving pattern.

“This mark belongs to your carver line. Long before Ru. One of your tūpuna helped shape parts of the waka's living frame.”

Beside it was a woven pattern preserved under clear resin.

“And this came from a weaving line connected to the same work.”

I stared.

Carving and weaving.

Hard structure and flexible pattern.

Two ways of making.

Two ways of holding things together.

Reweti tapped the beam.

“People keep calling you chosen.”

Reweti let me hold one of Ru's old practice pieces. A line curved badly through the wood and ended in a gouge.

“Koro did this?” I asked.

“At about your age.”

I laughed. It was comforting to know Ru had once been bad at something.

Reweti told me not to confuse whakapapa with perfection. Ancestors were people, not trophies. They made mistakes, learned, forgot, argued, left and sometimes returned.

That made my connection to Te Waka Tōhorā feel more honest. I did not have to become impressive enough to deserve my family. I already belonged to them.

I rolled my eyes.

He laughed.

“Exactly. Better to know what your people actually did than to live inside somebody else's prophecy.”

He handed me a blunt practice chisel.

“Start with the wood.”

Chapter 24: Moemoeā

Notices

Moemoeā liked Hemi.

Everyone knew except Hemi.

Possibly including Kiki.

Moemoeā started appearing wherever Hemi was.

Kaitiaki training.

Lunch.

Carving practice even though she hated wood dust.

Once she claimed she needed to cross three valleys because she had forgotten a pencil.

Piripi whispered, “There are pencils here.”

She kicked him.

Hemi seemed to think this was normal.

He was good at noticing danger and terrible at noticing people cared about him.

One afternoon we sat near the market watching a rain curtain move across the far side of the whale.

Hemi told us the Dutch couple from Northland used to make hot chocolate when storms came.

It was the first time he had mentioned them without sounding angry.

Moemoeā asked what kind.

“Too much milk. Not enough chocolate.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“It was.”

He smiled.

Moemoeā smiled too.

I looked at Piripi.

Piripi looked at me.

Kiki clicked.

Hemi frowned.

“What?”

All three of us shook our heads.

Later, Hemi and I walked back to the guest house.

“Do you ever think about going back?” I asked with my tablet.

He read it.

“To Earth?”

I nodded.

He was quiet.

“Sometimes. Not to the system. Maybe to them.”

THE COUPLE?

“Yeah.”

He kicked a stone.

“But what if they moved on?”

I wrote, WHAT IF THEY DIDN'T?

Hemi looked away.

Moemoeā started teaching Hemi little pieces of life on the waka that nobody had bothered to explain when he arrived. Which market stall overcharged tourists. Which root bridge creaked but was safe. Which auntie would feed you even if you said you were not hungry.

Hemi pretended he did not need the help. He remembered every detail.

In return he taught her how to make hot chocolate the way the Dutch couple had made it. Too much milk, not enough chocolate. Moemoeā declared it terrible and drank two cups.

“That's worse.”

I understood.

Hope could hurt.

Te Waka Tōhorā had given Hemi belonging.

But it had not erased the part of him still waiting to be
chosen back on Earth.

Chapter 25: Rere Is Missing

Rere missed the morning crossing.

At first nobody panicked.

Whales did not keep timetables.

By midday, Grog was worried.

By evening, every kaitiaki near the harbour was searching.

Rere was still young.

She knew the Earth route better than any other crossing, but she had never disappeared for a whole day.

I felt something cold under my jaw.

The mesh.

I grabbed Grog.

WHITE THREAD.

His face changed.

“Where?”

I closed my eyes.

The thread did not pull toward Earth.

It ran sideways.

Through Te Waka Tōhorā.

Toward the lower water paths.

Hemi overheard.

“Dave got her?”

“We don't know,” Grog said.

Hemi's hands glowed orange.

“We know enough.”

Moemoeā stepped in front of him.

“Don't.”

“Don't what?”

“Turn angry before we even know where she is.”

Hemi looked like he wanted to argue.

Then he saw her face.

The orange light faded.

We followed the cold thread through a service tunnel
under the harbour.

Piripi came because he knew the water routes.

Moemoeā came because nobody could stop her.

Grog said this was not a school mission.

It was real.

That made my stomach hurt.

The tunnel opened onto a hidden pool.

Rere floated in the centre.

Her blue light was dim.

White mesh stretched across the water around her.

Not physical mesh.

Energy shaped like it.

The same pattern inside my throat.

Rere called weakly.

I ran toward the water.

Grog caught my shoulder.

Before we entered the service tunnel, Grog made us stop and say what each of us could do and what we could not.

Piripi knew water routes but was not a healer. Hemi could control heat but not white extraction lines.

Moemoeā was good at keeping frightened beings calm. I could sense the mesh but was vulnerable to it.

“Knowing your limits is part of an emergency plan,” Grog said.

Hemi muttered that limits were depressing.

“Only if you think you were meant to do everything yourself.” Grog looked at me when he said it too.

“Listen first.”

Koro's words.

Always the same.

Listen before you act.

I forced myself to stop.

Chapter 26: The Rescue

Rere was not trapped because Dave had reached Te Waka Tōhorā completely.

He had done something worse in a quieter way.

The thread inside me had left traces every time I crossed or used strong Mīharo.

Those traces had collected in the water path.

Rere had swum through them.

The mesh had wrapped around her.

I felt sick.

MY FAULT, I wrote.

Grog read it.

“No.”

IT CAME THROUGH ME.

“That is not the same thing.”

Hemi said, “Dave did it.”

His anger was aimed in the right direction this time.

We had to free Rere without tightening the net.

Pulling made it contract.

Burning it risked hurting her.

Cutting one line made two others shift.

Piripi mapped the water current.

Moemoeā kept Rere calm, speaking to her softly.

Hemi warmed the coldest parts of the pool so Rere would not go into shock.

Grog worked on the outer strands.

I stepped into the water.

The mesh in my throat connected to the mesh around Rere.

Pain flashed through me.

Kiki landed on my head and refused to leave.

I put my hands on Rere's side.

Her fear flooded into me.

Not words.

Images.

The river on Earth.

The first time she carried us.

Open sky.

The white net closing.

I sent back the only thing I could.

We're here.

Her body relaxed a fraction.

The net loosened.

“Again,” Grog said.

I stayed connected.

Not controlling.

Not ordering.

Present.

Moemoeā matched her breathing to Rere's calls.

Piripi moved water through the gaps.

Hemi held his heat steady.

At one point Rere's fear became so strong that I wanted to promise everything would be fine. I stopped myself. I did not know that.

Instead I pressed my hand to her side and said the roughest words I could manage: “We're... here.”

Moemoeā heard me and repeated it. Piripi did too. Hemi joined last.

Four voices, plus Kiki's furious clicking. Not a promise that nothing bad would happen. A promise that she would

not face it alone.

Slowly, the white threads lifted away.

One remained.

It ran from Rere directly into my throat.

Grog looked at me.

“That one is yours to close.”

Chapter 27: My Voice, My Door

The last thread felt like a wire tied behind my tongue.

On the other end, Dave was there.

Not his body.

His attention.

The line opened and his voice came through.

“Aroha.”

I hated how normal he sounded.

“You don't know what they're turning you into.”

I could not answer.

The mesh caught my voice.

Dave continued.

“Pania believed this was beautiful. Ru believed he could control it. They died.”

The pool around me went cold.

That was the first time Dave had said their deaths and Mīharo in the same breath.

Questions exploded inside me.

But Rere was still trapped.

This was not the time.

Dave said, “Come back. I can remove it all.”

The lie was clever because part of it might have been true.

He could remove Mīharo.

He could probably remove my voice with it.

I thought about Koro.

Mum.

Nan.

Hemi saying smash it.

Whaea Anahera saying create the conditions.

I did not need to beat Dave.

I needed to close my door.

I put one hand over the hei tiki.

I remembered the waiata from my eighth birthday.

My throat hurt.

I tried to sing.

The first sound was broken.

The second was barely a note.

Then one clear syllable escaped.

The hei tiki blazed green-gold.

Kiki's wings flashed.

The thread trembled.

Dave shouted something I could not hear.

I sang another rough note.

Not pretty.

Mine.

The white line broke.

Rere surged upward.

The net dissolved into the pool.

Blue light filled the chamber.

I fell against her side laughing and crying at the same time.

Hemi jumped into the water fully clothed.

Moemoeā followed.

Piripi complained that now everyone was wet.

After the rescue, I asked Mere whether breaking the thread meant the mesh was gone. She shook her head.

“No. But it is learning something Dave did not design it to understand.”

“What?”

“That you are not a closed system.”

I frowned.

She pointed toward my friends outside the healing room.

“He built the mesh around taking from one person. Your strength keeps arriving through relationships he cannot measure properly.”

For once, complicated sounded hopeful.

Grog sat on the edge and laughed.

Rere called so loudly the whole harbour answered.

My voice disappeared again after that.

But the door was no longer locked.

I had opened it myself.

Chapter 28: Kaitiaki

At the end of the year, Te Rākau Kura held a gathering beneath the central trunk.

Not for me.

For everyone finishing their first stage of learning.

I liked that.

No chosen-one ceremony.

No prophecy speech.

Just students, whānau, kaiako and too much food.

Mum, Dad, Nan, Ahi and Wai crossed from the Earth Sanctuary with Grog.

Ahi talked for ten minutes without breathing.

Wai tried to climb a root that moved away from him.

Mum hugged me so tightly I squeaked.

An actual squeak.

She froze.

I laughed.

That sound came too.

Rough but real.

“Don't make me cry,” Mum said.

Too late.

Whaea Anahera gave each learner a small woven cord.

When she reached me, she said, “Kaitiaki is not a title you own. It is a relationship you keep choosing.”

She tied the cord around my wrist.

Hemi received one too.

Moemoeā whispered, “Try not to set yours on fire.”

He whispered back, “No promises.”

She smiled at him in a way he finally noticed.

His ears went red.

I nearly laughed loud enough to lose my voice again.

After the gathering, Reweti found me near the trunk.

He placed my hand against the bark.

“Listen.”

I did.

The tree's heartbeat moved through my palm.

Then something deeper answered.

Gold lines spread beneath the bark.

Not toward me.

From me.

They travelled down the trunk, through roots, across the floor and out toward the valley.

Reweti stopped smiling.

Grog stared.

Whaea Anahera whispered one word.

“World-Shaper.”

I pulled my hand away.

Before my family left, Ahi made me promise that when he was old enough I would show him the road with legs. Wai, now old enough to speak in short bursts, called Kiki “bug sister.” Kiki seemed pleased.

Krish stood beside Rose at the crossing. They were not getting back together. I understood that now. But they had become a team again where we were concerned, and that felt like its own kind of repair.

As Rere carried them toward Earth, I watched until the gold path closed. Then I turned back toward Te Rākau Kura, my friends and the lines beginning to wake beneath the tree.

I had come here looking for my voice. I had found a responsibility too.

The lines remained.

Hemi stood behind me.

“What does that mean?”

Nobody answered.

I looked at the living gold running through Te Rākau
Kura.

MĪHARO · BOOK 2

TE WAKA TŌHORĀ

The Whale Waka

Aroha crosses into a living world carried on an enormous whale, where impossible things are part of everyday life.

A tree school, extraordinary markets and new friendships offer somewhere she might belong. But a dangerous connection to Earth has followed her. As Aroha learns about Mīharo and becoming a kaitiaki, protecting her new home means learning when to listen, whom to trust and how to say no.

Niva Gram

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