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Purpose

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By Niva Gram

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Part 1

The Living Lines

Chapter 1: Ten

I turned ten with a voice that worked most of the time.

Most of the time was a huge improvement.

I could talk at breakfast.

I could argue with Ahi.

I could tell Wai to stop touching my things and hear myself sound exactly like Mum.

I could say Koro's name aloud.

That one still hurt.

Singing was harder.

Long sentences were tiring when I was nervous.

And if I pushed too much Mīharo through my throat, the old silver mesh tightened like a fist.

Mere said the mesh had become partly woven into my own healing tissue.

“So we do not rip it out,” she told me.

“We teach your body not to obey it.”

I did not love having technology inside me.

I did love proving Dave had not won.

My tenth birthday happened at Te Waka Tōhorā.

Mum, Dad, Hui, Ahi and Wai crossed over from the Earth Sanctuary for the weekend.

Ahi was furious that his first trip inside Rere had happened without laser eyes.

“Your drawing lied,” I told him.

“Rere could get laser eyes.”

“Please don't give Hemi ideas.”

Too late.

Hemi, now eleven, was already asking Piripi whether a whale could safely focus light through water.

Moemoeā told both of them no.

Nobody had asked her, but this rarely stopped Moemoeā.

Te Rākau Kura gave me a present too.

At least, everyone called it a present.

When I placed my hand on the trunk, gold lines spread beneath the bark again.

They did not stop at the roots this time.

I felt them travel through bridges, waterways, growing platforms and deep structures below the school.

For three seconds I was aware of too much.

A fountain changing pressure three valleys away.

A cracked board near the western harbour.

A tree drinking from a suspended river.

Rere sleeping in warm water.

Then the connection vanished.

I nearly fell over.

Reweti caught my elbow.

“And that's why you don't touch everything just because it lights up for you.”

I pulled my hand back.

“Helpful.”

My voice rasped on the second syllable.

Reweti grinned.

“Ten years old and already sarcastic. Ru would be proud.”

I smiled despite myself.

Across the hall, Hemi was staring at the fading gold lines.

Not frightened.

Later that day, Mum and I walked the lower market together. At eight I had needed her to believe me. At nine I had needed her to let me go. At ten, something had changed again. She still worried, but she no longer treated every unknown thing as a reason to pull me home.

"You look taller," she said.

"I am taller."

"I meant in here." She tapped lightly over my heart.

I rolled my eyes because mothers were legally required to say embarrassing things on birthdays. But I understood. I was not the same child who had whispered a song in the backyard and accidentally awakened a cicada. I still felt like her sometimes. I also knew more about how dangerous being heard could be.

Interested.

"Imagine what you could do with that," he said.

Reweti's smile disappeared.

"Exactly the question she should not answer yet."

Chapter 2: World-Shaper?

By Monday everyone at school knew.

Not because I told them.

Te Rākau Kura was terrible at keeping secrets.

A living tree with hundreds of students was basically one enormous gossip.

World-Shaper.

The name followed me through corridors.

Some students whispered it.

One little kid asked if I could make him taller.

I said no.

He looked disappointed.

Another asked whether I could move mountains.

I said I hoped not.

Hemi thought the attention was funny until somebody called him World-Shaper's Friend.

Then he hated it too.

Moemoeā solved the problem by telling everyone I could shape them into frogs.

This was completely untrue.

It was also extremely effective.

Whaea Anahera called me into a learning room high in the trunk.

Reweti was already there.

So was Grog.

Three adults in one room was never good.

“Am I in trouble?” I asked.

Grog said, “Not yet.”

Reweti said, “Probably soon.”

Whaea Anahera ignored them.

She laid three objects on the table.

A carved piece of wood.

A woven strip of muka.

A bowl of water.

“Which one is shaping?” she asked.

“The carving.”

Reweti raised an eyebrow.

“The weaving?”

Whaea Anahera waited.

I looked at the water.

“All of them?”

“Better.”

She explained that World-Shaper was an old description, not a royal title and not a promise that I could control reality.

Some people could sense how living systems connected.

A rare few could influence those connections strongly enough to change how a place grew, flowed or healed.

“Your line has carried versions of that ability before,” Reweti said.

“Ru?”

He shook his head.

“Ru could hear the lines. He was never trained far enough to shape them.”

That hurt more than I expected.

Koro had known just enough to know what he had forgotten.

“And me?”

Reweti pushed the carved wood toward me.

“You start by learning grain.”

I stared at him.

“That's it?”

Grog showed me the oldest version of the title in an archive panel. The translation was not exact. One phrase meant something like person-who-helps-a-place-become-what-it-needs-to-be. World-Shaper was shorter and much more dramatic.

“So somebody made it sound cooler?” I asked.

“Probably a teenager.”

That helped. Titles stopped feeling sacred when you imagined generations of people arguing about what sounded best.

Whaea Anahera also warned me that different communities had different words for similar abilities. Nobody owned the idea of shaping living systems. Te Waka Tōhorā's language came from its own history and whakapapa.

“You wanted mountain moving?”

“No.”

“Good. Pick up the wood.”

World-Shaper training began with a splinter.

Chapter 3: Follow the Grain

Reweti did not let me use Mīharo for the first week.

This felt unfair.

“If you cannot see what the wood is doing without magic, you have no business pushing magic into it.”

He gave me practice timber and a blunt chisel.

I learned to look at grain.

Where it changed direction.

Where a knot made the wood stronger.

Where forcing the blade would split it.

My first carved line wandered sideways.

My second was too deep.

My third looked like Ahi had made it with his teeth.

Reweti kept every piece.

“Why?”

“Evidence.”

“Of what?”

“Improvement.”

I liked that answer.

During breaks he told me about Ru.

Not secrets.

Small things.

Ru had hated getting up early.

He once fell asleep during a navigation lesson and woke because a bird stole his lunch.

He was better at repairing tools than carving faces.

He sang loudly when he thought nobody could hear him.

“That sounds like Koro,” I said.

“He was always Ru before he was your koro.”

I had never thought about that properly.

Adults had whole lives before children arrived.

Reweti showed me an old beam from the waka's inner frame.

The carver's marks underneath matched the symbol from Koro's box.

“Your line,” he said.

“Reweti's?”

“Mine is connected to it. But the oldest work predates me.”

Good.

One less impossible ancestor standing in front of me.

He traced the pattern.

“Carvers did not simply decorate the waka. They read stress. Weight. Growth. Movement. They shaped living timber so it could move without breaking.”

I touched the beam.

Gold light appeared beneath my fingertip.

Reweti slapped my hand away.

“What did I say?”

“No magic.”

“And?”

“Listen first.”

“Good.”

Reweti made me sharpen tools too. I thought that was punishment until he showed me what a blunt edge did to beautiful timber. It crushed fibres before cutting them, leaving damage you could not always see from the surface.

“Tools change the thing they touch,” he said. “So does power. If you do not care for the tool, you make the material pay for your laziness.”

I wrote that sentence in my notebook because it sounded like it belonged to more than carving.

At the end of the week he finally let me use a tiny amount of Mīharo. I did not push gold light into the wood. I listened for resistance, then made one cut along the grain. It was not impressive. It was the cleanest line I had ever made.

I rubbed my hand.

“You could say it without hitting me.”

“You remembered, didn't you?”

Annoyingly, yes.

Chapter 4: The Weaver's Map

The next part of World-Shaper training had nothing to do with carving.

Whaea Rina taught weaving.

She was small, fast and terrifying.

“Your fingers are lazy,” she told Hemi within thirty seconds.

Hemi had only come to watch.

He left.

I stayed.

Whaea Rina showed me a narrow woven strip patterned with dark and light lines.

“What do you see?”

“A pattern.”

“Useless answer.”

I tried again.

The dark lines crossed, separated and rejoined.

Some repeated.

One changed direction near the edge.

“A path?”

“Better.”

She placed the weaving over a map of Te Waka Tōhorā.

The lines matched old waterways.

My skin prickled.

“This is a map?”

“It can be.”

Weaving had been used to hold knowledge when maps were dangerous to carry.

Routes.

Seasonal changes.

Safe crossings.

Relationships between places.

Whaea Rina showed me another fragment preserved from Aroha's family line.

The name of the weaver was damaged, but the pattern remained.

“One of your tūpuna wahine,” she said. “A master.”

I wanted a name.

A proper one.

Whaea Rina understood.

“We do not fill missing names with guesses just because silence makes us uncomfortable.”

That was hard.

It also felt right.

We had already lost enough truth.

I traced the pattern.

Carving shaped strong lines.

Weaving connected flexible ones.

Both were maps.

Both were structures.

Both changed when tension changed.

That evening I drew the pattern in my notebook beside the gold lines I had seen inside Te Rākau Kura.

They matched.

Not exactly.

Enough.

Kiki crawled across the page and stopped at one crossing.

The hei tiki warmed.

A cold tremor moved through the floor.

Whaea Rina would not let me copy the old pattern immediately. First I had to weave a simple strip until my fingers understood tension. Pull too hard and the whole piece narrowed. Too loose and the structure sagged.

“Balance,” I muttered.

“Do not say that word like you have solved it,” she replied.

I had to laugh.

The lesson also changed how I looked at the mesh inside my throat. Dave had woven technology around a living pathway. He had designed tension in one direction: take, pull, convert. No flexibility. No consent. No way for the system to change with me.

Maybe that was why my healing had damaged his control. I was changing. His design was not.

Very faint.

I looked up.

Nobody else noticed.

Something deep inside Te Waka Tōhorā had shifted.

Chapter 5: The Outsiders Are Older Now

At ten, I felt much older than I had at nine.

This was probably ridiculous.

Hemi, at eleven, agreed with me.

“We're basically adults.”

Moemoeā said, “You got your sleeve stuck in a door this morning.”

“Adults do that.”

Piripi said, “Not usually.”

Our Outsiders Club still met beneath the same root.

Only now we had homework.

More homework.

Apparently magical education believed in suffering too.

Hemi had become excellent at controlled heat when he wanted to be.

The when was important.

He could warm a room evenly now.

He could guide flame along a metal channel without burning the table.

He could also still make a candle explode if someone annoyed him.

Moemoeā was the only person who could tell him to stop without starting an argument.

Usually.

They were closer now.

Not boyfriend-girlfriend close.

Not yet.

But Hemi saved her a seat without thinking.

Moemoeā always knew when he was pretending not to care.

Piripi and I noticed everything.

We said nothing.

Mostly because we valued our lives.

My own voice had strengthened.

I could talk for whole conversations if I stayed calm.

When the mesh tightened, I switched to NZSL or writing.

Nobody at Te Rākau Kura treated that as failure.

That mattered more than I realised.

One afternoon Hemi asked, “Do you think you'll ever get rid of it?”

He meant the mesh.

“I hope so.”

“I'd rip it out.”

“You'd bleed everywhere.”

“Fine. Bad plan.”

He looked across the valley.

“I just hate that he still gets to be inside something that's yours.”

I knew what he meant.

“He won't forever.”

Hemi nodded.

Then the ground gave one slow shudder beneath us.

A flock of birds rose from the valley.

Our friendship had become less about being new and more about knowing one another too well. Piripi could tell when I was pretending my voice did not hurt. Moemoeā knew when Hemi's jokes meant he was angry. Hemi knew I was about to ignore advice whenever I got

very quiet.

That kind of knowing was useful and annoying.

We also started spending time apart. Moemoeā joined advanced path-reading. Piripi trained with water navigators. Hemi spent more hours in heat practice. I worked with Reweti and Whaea Rina.

Growing closer did not mean doing everything together. It meant knowing the others would still be there when you came back.

The giant tree creaked.

Moemoeā looked up.

“That wasn't normal.”

This time everybody noticed.

Chapter 6: The First Fracture

The fracture appeared near the western terraces.

A living walkway had split down the centre.

No one was hurt.

That was luck.

The strange part was not the crack.

Living timber cracked sometimes.

The strange part was the colour.

Grey spread from the break like frost.

Reweti arrived with three builders and told everybody to stay back.

I stayed back for almost two minutes.

Then he sighed.

“Fine. Come here.”

I crouched beside him.

“Touch nothing.”

I nodded.

The fracture felt wrong even without contact.

Cold.

Empty.

Like the mesh.

“Dave?” Hemi asked from behind us.

Reweti looked at Grog.

Grog said, “We don't know.”

Hemi muttered, “Adults say that when they know.”

He was not completely wrong.

Reweti cut a thin sliver from the damaged edge.

Inside, the wood was healthy for a few centimetres.

Then a white line ran through it.

My throat tightened.

The mesh responded.

I stepped back.

Grog saw.

“Same signal?”

“Similar.”

Not identical.

That bothered me more.

If Dave's white thread was reaching the waka again, why did it feel different?

Whaea Rina arrived carrying one of the old woven maps.

She laid it beside the fracture.

The damaged line matched an ancient channel beneath the walkway.

Not a road.

Not water.

A Mīharo pathway.

Reweti frowned.

“This is not surface damage.”

The gold lines beneath the nearby bark flickered.

One went dark.

Then another.

The builders marked a wide safety circle around the crack. Students gathered outside it anyway. Some looked frightened. Others whispered that the World-Shaper would fix it.

I wanted to disappear.

Reweti heard them too. “You are not a repair service,” he said quietly.

“Could have fooled them.”

He tapped the grey edge with a tool. “Good kaitiaki do not make one child responsible for a system built by generations.”

That sentence steadied me more than praise would have.

When a second faint fracture appeared several metres away, the builders stopped treating the first as an isolated fault. The question changed from how do we patch this to what is putting pressure on the whole structure. I liked the second question better, even though the answer was more frightening.

Far away, a bell began ringing from Te Rākau Kura.

Emergency signal.

The fracture was only the first place we could see the problem.

Something deeper was failing.

Chapter 7: Below the Roots

School moved into investigation mode.

This was much more exciting than ordinary lessons.

Also much scarier.

Whaea Anahera split older students into teams.

We were not allowed near dangerous zones.

Hemi complained.

Moemoeā told him dangerous zones were dangerous.

He said the name was dramatic.

She said that was because danger was dramatic.

Our team mapped small failures.

A lamp-path that dimmed every third hour.

A stream that had lost pressure.

A root bridge that healed too slowly.

Individually, none seemed huge.

Together, they made a pattern.

I drew them over Whaea Rina's woven map.

The failures curved toward the centre of the waka.

Not Te Rākau Kura.

Deeper.

Below the roots.

Reweti called it the Deep Current.

“What is it?” I asked.

He hesitated.

“The closest Earth word would be circulation.”

Te Waka Tōhorā moved water, heat, nutrients and Mīharo through connected living systems.

The Deep Current linked them.

If it slowed in one place, another part compensated.

If too many pathways failed, the whole waka would become unstable.

“Can I feel it?”

Reweti looked unhappy.

“Probably.”

“Can I?”

“That is a different question.”

He took me to the oldest root chamber under the school.

I placed both hands on the floor.

At first I felt nothing.

Then the world opened.

Thousands of lines.

Water.

Wood.

Roots.

Roads.

People.

Rere.

Heat.

Miharo.

Connections layered over connections.

Some bright.

Some weak.

Some cut.

I gasped and pulled away.

Blood rushed in my ears.

Reweti caught me.

“Too much?”

I nodded.

“Good.”

I glared at him.

“Knowing something is too much is useful information.”

He helped me stand.

After I pulled away from the Deep Current, Reweti made me describe exactly what I had sensed without interpreting it. Bright line. Weak line. Fast water. Cold space. White flicker. He stopped me every time I said damaged, dangerous or wrong.

“Observation first,” he said. “Meaning second.”

It felt like science class, which was probably the point.

We drew my observations beside actual measurements from engineers and water keepers. Some things matched. Some did not. My Mīharo was useful evidence, not perfect truth.

That was important. Feeling a system deeply did not make me automatically correct about it. I could still misunderstand what I felt.

“World-Shapers get dangerous when they think feeling everything means they understand everything.”

I looked at the floor.

The Deep Current was hurt.

But I still did not know why.

Chapter 8: Do Not Fix It

I wanted to fix the Deep Current.

Obviously.

That was the problem.

Reweti knew it.

Whaea Anahera knew it.

Grog knew it.

Even Hemi knew it, although his solution was “fix it harder.”

The adults banned me from shaping anything below the roots.

I was furious.

“You called me a World-Shaper.”

Reweti said, “And now you think that means every damaged thing is yours to touch.”

“It's failing.”

“Yes.”

“People could get hurt.”

“Yes.”

“Then why are we waiting?”

Reweti placed two pieces of timber on the table.

One had a crack.

“Repair it.”

I reached for the damaged one.

He stopped me.

“Why is it cracked?”

I looked.

A knot sat near the split.

The grain twisted around it.

“Pressure?”

“From where?”

I did not know.

He turned the wood over.

The underside had been cut too thin.

“If you fill the visible crack without understanding the pressure, what happens?”

“It cracks somewhere else.”

“Exactly.”

He pushed the wood toward me.

“Your job is not to be the fastest person in the room with power.”

I hated how often adults made sense after annoying me.

That night, I sat beneath the school with Hemi, Moemoeā and Piripi.

The floor pulsed faintly.

Hemi said, “I'd still fix it.”

Moemoeā leaned against him.

“And that's why you're not the World-Shaper.”

“Rude.”

I smiled.

That evening I sent Mum a message about being banned from fixing the waka. Her reply came back almost immediately.

GOOD, she had written in enormous letters.

Then underneath: I love you. Please continue not saving civilisation without adult supervision.

Dad added: Your mother has discovered sarcasm. We are all suffering.

I laughed hard enough that my voice rasped.

The message reminded me that there was a life outside the crisis. Ahi had a school project. Wai had learned to climb somewhere he should not. Dad had burned dinner. Nan was complaining about sanctuary tea.

Te Waka Tōhorā mattered enormously. It was not the only thing I belonged to. Maybe that was another protection against trying to carry the whole world.

Then a gold line under the floor went dark.

Somewhere far below, something answered with a white flash.

The problem was getting worse.

And for the first time in my life, the hardest thing I could do was nothing.

The Hidden Current

Chapter 9: A Map Made of Problems

The investigation took over our classroom wall.

Piripi pinned up maps.

Moemoeā added notes.

Hemi drew flames next to anything he thought should be burned.

Whaea Anahera made him erase most of them.

I layered Whaea Rina's weaving maps over the newest failures.

The pattern was clearer now.

Three water channels had slowed.

Two root bridges were healing badly.

A food garden on the north side had lost warmth overnight.

The western harbour had one section where lanterns dimmed whenever a crossing opened.

All the problems pointed toward an old Mīharo junction beneath the central valley.

“So we go there,” Hemi said.

“Eventually,” Whaea Anahera replied.

Hemi groaned.

I understood him.

We were ten and eleven, not babies.

But the deeper systems of Te Waka Tōhorā were not a school playground.

The adults sent experienced kaitiaki first.

They returned with something strange.

A metal fragment.

Not from the waka.

Earth-made.

Silver.

Mere crossed from the Earth Sanctuary to examine it.

She placed it beside a sample of Dave's mesh.

The metal reacted.

A white pulse jumped between them.

My throat tightened.

“Same technology?” I asked.

Mere frowned.

“Related.”

“Dave.”

“Likely.”

Hemi slammed his palm on the table.

“There. Done. We know.”

Mere shook her head.

“No. We know one fragment came from technology related to Dave's. We do not know how it reached a sealed internal junction.”

That mattered.

A crossing could carry a signal.

We colour-coded the wall: blue for water, green for living timber, gold for Mīharo flow and white for anything linked to Dave's technology. The colours looked neat. The problem did not.

One failure belonged in three categories at once. A weak root changed water pressure, which changed the amount

of Mīharo moving through a bridge, which made a nearby relay compensate. Every tidy label connected to another.

“Systems are rude,” Piripi said.

Whaea Anahera overheard. “Systems are honest. Humans are the ones who like pretending one cause creates one effect.”

By the end of the lesson, our beautiful wall looked like Kiki had flown through wet paint. It was also finally useful.

A person could carry a signal.

But metal did not walk itself into the Deep Current.

Someone or something had brought it there.

For the first time, I wondered whether Dave was only part of the problem.

Chapter 10: The Old Builders' Chamber

Reweti took us to a chamber most students never saw.

It sat below the oldest part of Te Rākau Kura, behind a wall that looked solid until he pressed three carved marks in the right order.

The wall folded inward.

Hemi whispered, “I need one of those at home.”

Moemoeā whispered back, “You would forget the code.”

Inside, the chamber held tools.

Old ones.

Carving implements.

Weaving frames.

Stone weights.

Bundles of fibre.

Metal parts from later repairs.

Nothing looked like one person had designed the place.

That was the point.

Te Waka Tōhorā had been built and rebuilt by generations.

“Sanctuaries survive because people adapt,” Reweti said.

He showed us an inner frame covered in two systems of marks.

Carved grooves tracked structural strain.

Woven bands tracked flexible routes around those strains.

Hard structure and flexible response.

I thought about the two lines of my own whakapapa.

Carver.

Weaver.

Reweti pointed to an old sign cut beneath the frame.

The same family mark from Koro's box.

“Your people worked here.”

I ran my fingers close to it without touching.

For once, I did not need the gold light.

Knowing was enough.

Whaea Rina unfolded a fragile weaving pattern.

One route on it no longer existed on modern maps.

It led from the central junction to a place marked only with a spiral.

“What's there?” Piripi asked.

Reweti and Whaea Rina exchanged a look.

“A balancing chamber,” she said.

“Used when the waka was first learning how to carry this much Mīharo.”

Hemi smiled.

“So there is literally a room for fixing the balance.”

One tool in the chamber did not belong to any tradition I recognised. It had an Earth-made steel head fitted to a much older carved handle. Reweti said somebody had repaired it decades ago rather than throwing it away.

“People sometimes imagine tradition means nothing changes,” he said. “Living traditions change because people keep using them.”

That helped me understand the chamber. The old builders had not preserved Te Waka Tōhorā by freezing it. They had protected its purpose while adapting its materials.

Dave's technology was not dangerous simply because it was modern. It was dangerous because of what it did and because people did not consent to the cost. That

difference mattered.

Reweti looked at him.

“There is a room for helping the waka fix its own balance.”

Hemi sighed.

“You all really hate shortcuts.”

Chapter 11: What Dave Is Taking

Mum's next message came with newspaper clippings.

Rangi Energy had grown.

Dave's clean-conversion project was being tested in three regions.

The articles praised him.

Cleaner power.

Less waste.

New technology.

Jobs.

Nobody mentioned Mīharo.

Of course they did not.

At first I wanted to tear the pages up.

Then Whaea Anahera made us read them properly.

“If you only read what makes you angry, you learn nothing.”

I hated that lesson too.

Dave's machines were producing real electricity.

People liked that.

Hospitals, homes and schools needed power.

The problem was where the extra energy came from.

Mere brought measurements from Earth Sanctuary.

Tiny drops in ambient Mīharo had appeared near each Rangi Energy test site.

Not enough for ordinary people to notice.

Enough for sanctuaries to feel.

The Deep Current carried connections between worlds.

Dave was pulling from Earth.

Te Waka Tōhorā was compensating.

“Like taking water from one end of a river,” Piripi said.

“Yes,” Mere replied. “If you take a cup, nothing obvious happens. If you keep taking cups, the lower river changes.”

Hemi's face hardened.

“Then shut his machines down.”

Grog said, “How?”

“Break them.”

“And when ordinary communities lose power?”

Hemi stopped.

“Dave built the trap inside something useful,” Grog said.
“That makes stopping him harder.”

I thought about balance.

Dave believed Mīharo was dangerous and ordinary
energy was safe.

He had found a way to turn one into the other.

If I destroyed everything he built, people who knew
nothing about Mīharo could suffer.

If I did nothing, Te Waka Tōhorā would keep weakening.

We calculated the extraction in class. One station taking
a tiny amount looked almost harmless. Twelve stations
running all day did not. Over weeks, the numbers became
large enough to explain the weakening Deep Current.

Maths made the problem less mysterious and more
frightening.

Dave did not need one dramatic machine stealing all the
Mīharo at once. He had built a system where each
individual loss was easy to dismiss.

I thought about things people ignored because each one
seemed too small: one lost word, one story not taught,
one stream polluted a little more. The total mattered even
when no single moment looked like a disaster.

There was no clean answer.

That was new.

At eight, problems had looked like good people and bad people.

At ten, I was starting to understand that sometimes the dangerous thing was a useful thing built on the wrong cost.

Chapter 12: Hemi Wants a Door Open

Hemi stopped talking about breaking Dave's machines.

For almost a week.

Then he found another idea.

“What if we open more Mīharo into Earth?”

We were sitting under the Outsiders Club root.

Moemoeā looked up.

“What?”

“Dave takes some. Fine. Put more back.”

Piripi said, “From where?”

Hemi pointed around us.

“Here.”

I stared at him.

“You want to open the sanctuary?”

“Not all of it. Just pathways.”

“To anyone?”

“Why not?”

Moemoeā answered before I could.

“Because hiding is part of how this place survived.”

Hemi's face changed.

“Exactly.”

The word came out sharp.

“Hiding. Always hiding. Hide the reo. Hide the magic. Hide the people. Hide the places. That worked really well, didn't it?”

Moemoeā went quiet.

I knew where the anger came from.

Hemi's life had been adults moving him around and deciding where he belonged.

Te Waka Tōhorā was the first place that said stay.

To him, hiding Mīharo felt too close to being told to make himself smaller.

“I don't want it gone,” I said.

My voice was steady now.

“But opening everything is still choosing for everyone.”

“Who chose when it was hidden?”

That question landed hard.

Piripi looked at me.

Moemoeā looked at Hemi.

Nobody had a quick answer.

Hemi stood.

“You keep saying balance like it automatically means the middle is right.”

He walked away.

After Hemi left, I found the old woven map and looked at every route that had once connected Te Waka Tōhorā to Earth. Some had closed because they were unsafe. Some had closed because communities asked for privacy. Some had simply faded when nobody used them.

There was no single story called hiding.

That complicated Hemi's argument, but it did not erase it. Some paths had absolutely been closed because people were afraid of exploitation. Fear had protected them and isolated them at the same time.

I began writing questions instead of answers. Who gets to choose when a path opens? Who carries the risk? Can a sanctuary stay safe without becoming a cage?

Those questions would not leave me alone.

I hated that he had a point.

Balance did not mean half of Dave and half of Hemi.

It had to mean something more difficult.

Something we had not figured out yet.

Chapter 13: The Flooded Market

The market flooded on a cloudless day.

One of the suspended waterways dropped six metres in less than a minute.

Water hit the upper stalls like a broken dam.

People shouted.

Tables overturned.

Fish swam through a spice shop.

A basket of bread floated past me.

Kaitiaki training stopped being practice.

Grog yelled assignments.

Piripi knew the drainage paths.

Moemoeā got younger children uphill.

Hemi heated soaked supports so they would not buckle.

I followed the water.

The channel had not broken.

It had been pushed.

Pressure from somewhere below had forced too much water into one route.

The Deep Current again.

I placed my palm against the living wall.

Gold lines appeared.

For a moment I saw the whole local system.

One blocked route.

Two overloaded ones.

A third path that had been unused for years.

I could open it.

I knew that instantly.

Then Reweti's voice appeared in my head.

Do not fix the visible crack before you understand the pressure.

I searched deeper.

The unused route led toward the old balancing chamber.

If I opened it fully, the flood would leave the market.

It might also hit a residential valley.

“Aroha!” Grog shouted.

People were running out of time.

I needed a smaller change.

Not open.

Redirect.

I traced the woven pattern Whaea Rina had taught me.

Flexible route around pressure.

I pressed two fingers into the gold line.

The living wall shifted.

A narrow new channel opened beneath the market.

Water rushed into it.

Not all at once.

Enough.

The flood stopped rising.

I fell to my knees.

Hemi reached me first.

“You did it.”

“Temporary,” I said.

Reweti arrived and looked at the new channel.

While I worked, I could hear ordinary market sounds underneath the emergency: somebody crying over ruined produce, a shopkeeper counting damaged jars, children

being checked by adults, an old woman arguing that her stall could reopen before the floor was dry.

A crisis was never only the big dramatic moment. It became dozens of smaller problems afterward.

When the water finally dropped, I helped move soaked boxes. Hemi carried twice as much as anyone and refused to rest. Moemoeā quietly handed him food until he ate it without noticing.

That was our friendship at its best. Nobody saved the market alone, and nobody had to.

He did not praise me.

He checked where it went.

Then he nodded once.

That felt better.

Chapter 14: My First Shape

Everyone called the market channel my first shape.

I did not like that.

It sounded like I had made something from nothing.

I had not.

The route was already possible.

I had changed how the living wall grew for a few metres.

The waka did the rest.

Reweti agreed with me.

“Good. Keep being suspicious of impressive names.”

The temporary channel had consequences.

A garden downstream became too wet.

Three root-lamps dimmed.

A path needed to be closed for repairs.

Nobody was hurt.

The market survived.

But my choice still changed other things.

Whaea Rina made me map every effect.

“World-Shaping creates responsibility after the exciting part.”

Hemi sat beside me while I worked.

“You saved hundreds of stalls.”

“And flooded a garden.”

“A garden.”

“Someone grows food there.”

He leaned back.

“You are impossible to impress.”

“I am impressed.”

“You don't look it.”

I smiled.

“I'm also thinking.”

Hemi groaned.

Moemoeā arrived and stole his pencil.

“Thinking is good for you.”

“Everyone says that.”

“Because you need it.”

He tried to grab the pencil.

She held it behind her back.

They ended up chasing each other around the root.

Piripi looked at me.

“They're getting worse.”

“Much.”

We went back to the map.

Whaea Rina made me revisit the new channel after three days. Living systems had already adjusted around it.

Moss grew along one edge. Water insects had moved in.

A gardener had redirected one bed because the soil stayed wetter now.

My choice had become part of other people's choices.

“That is what shape means,” she said. “Not a mark you make once. A change other living things continue responding to.”

I stopped imagining World-Shaping as drawing gold lines exactly where I wanted them. It was closer to joining a conversation already happening and accepting that the conversation continued after I left.

My first shape had worked.

But now I understood something important.

Power was not measured only by whether you could change a thing.

It was measured by how many other things changed with it.

Chapter 15: The Chamber of Balance

We reached the balancing chamber through a tunnel that narrowed until Grog had to turn sideways.

Hemi laughed at him.

Grog threatened to leave him there.

The chamber itself was enormous.

A circular room beneath the central valley.

Carved ribs curved overhead.

Woven bands crossed between them.

Water moved through channels in the floor.

Gold light pulsed in time with Te Waka Tōhorā's heartbeat.

At the centre stood a low platform shaped like a spiral.

The metal fragment from Dave's system lay near one edge.

But it was not alone.

Old repair pieces had collected there over generations.

Earth metals.

Stone.

Wood.

Glass.

Different technologies had been added whenever people solved a problem.

Reweti crouched beside the silver fragment.

“It came through a repair path.”

Not sabotage.

Not someone sneaking into the Deep Current.

Years ago, a piece of Earth equipment had been used to strengthen a failing crossing relay.

Dave's newer signal recognised the material.

It had found a compatible route into the waka.

A flaw nobody had predicted.

Hemi looked disappointed.

“So nobody betrayed us.”

Grog said, “Try sounding less disappointed.”

I touched the spiral platform.

The Deep Current opened in my mind.

This time I did not see only damage.

I felt how the waka compensated.

Water moved around blocked channels.

Roots thickened where others weakened.

Communities adapted.

The whole system was already trying to balance itself.

Dave's extraction was one pressure.

Old repairs were another.

Closed routes were another.

The spiral platform at the centre had thousands of tiny wear marks from hands, tools and feet. I had imagined ancient World-Shapers standing there alone making enormous decisions. The marks suggested something else: teams, repeated maintenance, ordinary work.

Reweti confirmed it. "Nobody sensible built this place around one powerful person."

I looked at him.

"Nobody sensible," he repeated.

The old chamber had places for water keepers, carvers, weavers, navigators and healers to work at the same time. Balance had always been collaborative. The lonely chosen-one version was probably another story people had made simpler over time.

Growth over generations was another.

There was no single switch to fix.

That was the truth.

Te Waka Tōhorā was alive enough to have history inside its problems.

Chapter 16: Balance Is Not the Middle

At the end of term, Whaea Anahera asked me what balance meant.

I almost said the middle.

Then I thought of Hemi.

He would hate that answer.

So would I now.

“Balance is when everything gets what it needs without one thing taking so much that the others cannot live.”

Whaea Anahera nodded.

“Better.”

“Not always equal.”

“Correct.”

“Not always calm.”

“Correct.”

“And not always fair-looking from the outside.”

“Also correct.”

I thought about Dave's machines.

Useful electricity built from stolen Mīharo.

I thought about Hemi wanting to open every path
because hidden things had been hurt by hiding.

Both ideas began with something real.

Neither understood the whole system.

Maybe that was the danger.

People took one true pain and built an entire answer
around it.

After class, Hemi waited outside.

“You told her balance isn't the middle.”

“Yep.”

He looked pleased.

“So you agree with me.”

“Not that much.”

He laughed.

Moemoeā joined us.

Hemi immediately stopped pretending he had not been
waiting for her too.

Below the path, gold lines flowed steadily through the
repaired market channel.

The Deep Current was still weak.

But we understood it better.

That mattered.

Then Kiki landed on my shoulder and gave a warning click.

The mesh in my throat went cold.

I tested my new definition against ordinary things. Ahi and Wai did not need the same bedtime. A seedling and a giant tree did not need the same amount of water. Mum and Dad did not need to live in the same house to both be my parents.

Equal was not always balanced. Different did not automatically mean unfair.

That made the word harder, not easier. There would be no magic formula where I measured both sides and stood exactly halfway between them.

When the cold pulse from Dave's network arrived, I realised the next part of my learning would not be about finding a perfect middle. It would be about deciding what could coexist and what had to be stopped.

Not a thread.

A pulse.

Strong enough to make the chamber lights flicker.

Dave's network on Earth had just grown again.

The Lower Waka

Chapter 17: The Pulse From Earth

The new pulse was not a message.

It was a measurement.

That made it worse.

Mere brought readings from the Earth Sanctuary the next morning.

Rangi Energy had activated a larger array.

Three test sites had become seven.

Seven had become twelve.

Each site took only a tiny amount of Mīharo.

Together, the pull was no longer tiny.

The Deep Current dropped across half the waka.

Waterways slowed.

Two weather gardens lost their usual warmth.

A herd of glowing insects abandoned the southern terraces.

Nothing collapsed.

Not yet.

Grog spread maps across the table.

“Dave has built a system that looks ordinary from the outside.”

Mere nodded.

“Most workers probably have no idea what the conversion layer actually does.”

That mattered to me.

Hemi did not care.

“They still work for him.”

Moemoeā said, “People can be part of something without knowing what the secret part is.”

Hemi crossed his arms.

“Convenient.”

I understood why he was angry.

I also knew Dad had once worked for people whose decisions he disagreed with because rent still needed paying.

Ordinary life was full of people inside systems they did not control.

Dave understood that too.

He had hidden his extraction inside usefulness.

I touched the map.

“Can we block the pull here?”

Reweti said, “Maybe. But if we block one route, pressure moves.”

“Then we need more than a block.”

Whaea Rina looked at me.

“What do we need?”

I thought about weaving.

Flexible paths.

Carving.

Mere showed us a graph of the new pull. I understood enough maths now to see why everyone looked worried. The line had not jumped once. It had climbed steadily, week after week, as Dave added more sites.

A slow problem could be harder to notice than an explosion.

“If this were one huge theft, people would panic,” Piripi said.

“Exactly,” Mere replied. “Small losses can hide inside normal life.”

I thought about how Dave worked. He liked systems, numbers and things that behaved predictably. He had built danger that looked boring. That made it harder to fight with anything as simple as courage.

Strong structures.

“A system that can move around the pressure.”

Reweti nodded slowly.

“Now you are thinking like a shaper.”

Chapter 18: Under the Whale

The Lower Waka was older than the school, older than the harbour and probably older than several rules Grog insisted were ancient.

We reached it through a lift grown inside a hollow root.

The root descended for so long Piripi asked whether we had left the whale completely.

“Not yet,” Grog said.

“Yet?”

Grog ignored him.

The lower chambers curved with the body of Te Waka Tōhorā.

Some walls were living timber.

Others looked almost like bone.

Gold Mīharo lines ran through both.

The air hummed.

I could feel the huge whale beneath everything.

Not as an animal carrying buildings on its back.

As a living world whose body and sanctuary had grown together for generations.

That changed how I thought about shaping.

You could not treat Te Waka Tōhorā like a machine.

You also could not pretend it was only a whale.

It was both and more.

We passed old maintenance marks from different periods.

Carved symbols.

Woven tags.

Earth numbers painted in faded black.

A metal plate stamped with a date from decades before I was born.

Sanctuary did not mean frozen in the past.

People had always borrowed, adapted and repaired.

The damaged relay sat behind a curved wall near the Deep Current.

White light pulsed through it.

The silver Earth metal had become part of the system years ago.

Now Dave's signal used it like a doorway.

I stepped closer.

My mesh tightened.

Grog stopped me.

“Not today.”

“I can feel it.”

“That is why not today.”

Hemi muttered, “Adults and waiting.”

The lower chambers changed my understanding of Te Waka Tōhorā again. Above, people talked about the waka as home, ancestor, sanctuary and world. Down here, I could see the labour required to keep any of those words true.

Pipes had been replaced. Timber had been patched. Water routes had been redirected. Notes from different generations sat beside one another.

Nothing survived because it was magical enough to avoid maintenance.

That felt important. Culture, family, sanctuaries, even friendships did not stay alive because somebody declared them precious. People kept returning to them, repairing them and changing what needed changing.

Moemoeā elbowed him.

I was starting to understand the waiting.

Not liking it.

Understanding it.

Chapter 19: What Was Taken

Our history lesson that week was harder than any Mīharo lesson.

Whaea Anahera did not make colonisation into a fairy tale.

She did not say one day everything was perfect and then bad people arrived.

She showed us laws, school rules, land loss, punishment for language, families separated from knowledge and the slow pressure that made people hide things to survive.

She also showed us resistance.

People keeping reo alive at home.

Whānau protecting stories.

Communities rebuilding what others tried to weaken.

Te Waka Tōhorā was part of that fictional history.

Not the whole answer.

A sanctuary.

A place where some knowledge and Mīharo could continue when Earth became dangerous for them.

Hemi sat completely still.

At the end he asked, "Why did anyone ever close the paths again?"

Whaea Anahera answered carefully.

"Because hidden places can protect people."

"Hidden from who?"

"From people who would exploit them."

"So the people who hurt us still decide we have to hide?"

Nobody answered quickly.

Hemi stood.

"That's not protection. That's winning quietly."

He left the room.

Moemoeā followed.

I stayed.

Whaea Anahera looked tired.

"He is not wrong to be angry."

"But?"

"Anger can identify injustice. It cannot design every solution."

I thought about Dave.

His fear identified a danger too.

Pania had died using Mīharo.

Whaea Anahera also made us compare different colonial histories instead of flattening them into one story. Māori experiences in Aotearoa were not identical to what happened to other Indigenous peoples elsewhere. The pressures could rhyme without being the same.

That mattered because Te Waka Tōhorā met travellers from many places. Welcoming them did not mean stealing their stories or using one culture as a shortcut for another.

Hemi listened more closely during that part, even though he was still angry. His anger was rooted here: Te Tai Tokerau, care, disconnection, lost whakapapa, adults making choices over him. It did not need an imported history to make it powerful.

Ru had died trying to save her.

Dave had taken one true horror and built his whole answer around removing magic.

Hemi was taking one true history and beginning to build his answer around releasing it.

I did not know how to tell him that without sounding like I was defending the world that hurt him.

Chapter 20: Moemoeā Stays

Hemi disappeared for most of the afternoon.

Not truly disappeared.

He went to the fire gardens on the east ridge where students practised heat Mīharo safely.

Moemoeā found him there.

I found both of them later.

They were sitting on a warm stone wall.

Hemi had red eyes.

Moemoeā pretended not to notice me.

I almost left.

Then Hemi said, “Stay.”

So I did.

For a while none of us talked.

The fire gardens glowed below.

Controlled flame moved through channels between dark stones.

“When I was in care,” Hemi said finally, “everyone kept saying the move was for my own good.”

Moemoeā looked at him.

“I know.”

“No, you don't.”

She did not get angry.

“You're right. I don't.”

Hemi blinked.

Moemoeā continued.

“I know what you told me. I know I care. That's not the same as knowing what it felt like.”

The anger in Hemi's shoulders eased.

She reached for his hand.

This time he took hers first.

I looked away because some moments did not need an audience.

Hemi said, “I just don't want anyone to have to hide again.”

I understood that.

I wanted it too.

“Then help us build something better,” I said.

He looked at me.

“Not just something bigger.”

He laughed without humour.

After Hemi apologised to her, Moemoeā did not make everything instantly fine. She told him the comment had hurt. Hemi had to sit with that instead of explaining why he was angry.

“I know you had a reason,” she said. “A reason isn't the same as permission.”

He nodded.

I remembered the sentence because it applied to Dave too. Grief explained him. It did not excuse what he had done to me. Hemi's pain deserved care. It did not make every choice he made harmless.

Loving somebody, I was beginning to learn, could include saying no to them.

“You always have to say the annoying part.”

“World-Shaper privilege.”

That got a real laugh.

For that night, it was enough.

Chapter 21: The Rangi Array

Mere returned from Earth with photographs of the Rangi Array.

Twelve silver towers linked to conversion stations.

To an ordinary engineer, they looked like part of a new power network.

To me, the mesh pattern was obvious.

The same geometry Dave had used inside my throat.

Repeated.

Scaled up.

A net across the land.

My stomach twisted.

Mere pointed to one station.

“When this activates, the pull on you increases.”

“He's using me as a reference.”

She nodded.

The original mesh had taught Dave's system what my Mīharo felt like.

My voice had become a calibration point.

The thought made me feel sick.

Hemi looked ready to set something on fire.

Grog said his name before he could speak.

"I didn't say anything."

"Your hands did."

Orange light faded from Hemi's fingers.

Mere continued.

"If the array gets a clean lock during a strong expression of Aroha's Mīharo, it may open a more stable extraction route."

"Into the waka?" Piripi asked.

"Potentially."

The room went silent.

I wanted to apologise.

Again.

For the mesh.

For being the reference.

For being the doorway.

Then I remembered Grog's words from Rere's rescue.

It came through me was not the same as I caused it.

Dave chose this.

I did not.

Dad had added notes to the photographs. He had marked roads, substations and public information about the sites. His engineering knowledge was ordinary compared with Mīharo, but ordinary knowledge was exactly what we needed.

“Your father says half this equipment can be understood without magic at all,” Mere told me.

That pleased me. Dave had spent years convincing himself Mīharo and normal technology were opposite worlds. Our response worked because we used both.

Krish could read the infrastructure. Reweti could read living timber. Whaea Rina could read woven pathways. I could feel the Mīharo connections. No single way of knowing was enough.

“Then we make sure he cannot lock on,” I said.

Reweti nodded.

“How?”

That was the real question.

Chapter 22: The Pull

The Rangi Array found me during carving practice.

One second I was cutting a shallow line.

The next, my whole throat turned cold.

The chisel fell from my hand.

White light flashed under my skin.

Reweti shouted my name.

I could not answer.

The mesh tightened harder than it had in years.

My voice vanished.

Then the pull moved deeper.

Not just voice.

The gold lines in the workshop lit at once.

Dave's system had learned to use me as a bridge to everything I touched.

Reweti pulled my hands away from the timber.

Too late.

White threads shot into the floor.

Across the school.

Toward the Deep Current.

Alarms rang.

I fell to my knees.

Inside the connection, Dave's voice appeared.

“There you are.”

I hated him for sounding relieved.

“I can help you end this.”

The pull strengthened.

I could feel the array on Earth.

Machines humming.

Energy collecting.

Mīharo leaving.

Then another hand closed around mine.

Moemoeā.

Another.

Piripi.

Hemi grabbed my shoulder.

Heat spread through the cold.

Kiki landed on my chest.

Reweti pressed his palm to the floor and redirected the school lines away from me.

I was not alone inside the system anymore.

Dave had built everything around one connection.

Us.

We gave him five.

The signal became unstable.

“Aroha,” Dave said sharply.

I could not speak.

Hemi did.

“She's not yours.”

The white lines flickered.

Moemoeā said, “Neither is this place.”

Piripi said, “Close it.”

Together, we forced the path down.

Not destroyed.

Contained.

When the pull finally stopped, Hemi was still holding my shoulder.

Afterward, my friends stayed in the healing room long after the adults said I should sleep. Hemi sat on the floor with his back against the wall. Moemoeā leaned beside him. Piripi pretended to read.

Nobody told me I had been brave.

I was glad.

Brave sounded too clean for what had happened. I had been terrified, furious and dependent on everybody around me. We had survived because the signal was forced to deal with relationships instead of one isolated target.

Dave understood extraction. He still did not understand connection.

“You okay?”

I signed, NO.

Then, after a moment, I added:

BUT HERE.

Chapter 23: The Lower Relay

We could not wait for the array to try again.

The old Earth-metal relay in the Lower Waka had to be isolated.

This time the adults did not leave us behind.

Not because we were suddenly grown.

Because the relay had linked itself to my Mīharo and our school network.

I was part of the evidence.

Hemi understood heat control better than most apprentices.

Piripi knew the water routes.

Moemoeā could read the old path markings faster than Grog.

Our skills mattered.

That felt different from prophecy.

We descended with Reweti, Grog, Mere and Whaea Rina.

The relay pulsed white when I entered.

I stayed outside its main circle.

Piripi diverted cooling water.

Hemi warmed old fastenings so they could be moved without cracking.

Moemoeā followed Whaea Rina's map to find a secondary route.

Reweti cut a new support groove.

My job was to sense when pressure moved.

For two hours, nothing dramatic happened.

That was good.

Then one bracket snapped.

The relay twisted.

White energy jumped toward the Deep Current.

Hemi reached out instinctively.

“No!” I yelled.

My voice came out clear.

He stopped centimetres from the arc.

The energy struck the floor instead.

A gold line went dark.

I felt pressure surge toward the water system.

“Left route!” I shouted.

Moemoeā changed the woven gate.

Piripi opened the water bypass.

Reweti locked the new support.

Hemi held his heat steady.

The relay settled.

Nobody cheered until Grog said, “Stable.”

Then Hemi sat on the floor.

“I almost touched that.”

“Yep.”

“You yelled.”

The mission changed the way the adults treated us. Not into adults ourselves. Grog was very clear about that. But our knowledge had become specific enough to matter.

Before we went below, everyone had to agree on stop conditions. If Hemi's heat passed a set level, he stopped. If my mesh tightened beyond a certain point, I left the relay circle. If water pressure jumped, Piripi called it immediately.

Nobody was allowed to “push through” simply because the mission was important.

That rule saved Hemi when the bracket snapped. It probably saved me too. A plan that includes how to stop is stronger than one built only around finishing.

“Yep.”

He grinned.

“Good voice.”

I threw a glove at him.

Chapter 24: Too Much

The relay was isolated.

The Deep Current did not recover.

That was the bad news.

The damage had been happening too long.

Removing one doorway stopped the worst pull but did not restore weak pathways.

I thought I could help.

I thought I finally understood enough.

That was my mistake.

I entered the balancing chamber with Reweti and placed both hands on the spiral platform.

Gold lines opened everywhere.

I felt the Deep Current.

I found weak routes.

I tried to strengthen them all.

At first it worked.

Water pressure rose.

Roots brightened.

The western terraces warmed.
Reweti said, “Aroha, enough.”
I kept going.
There were so many broken places.
I could feel all of them.
If I stopped, some would stay broken.
“Aroha.”
My nose started bleeding.
I barely noticed.
The mesh tightened.
The world became gold and white.
Then Hemi tackled me off the platform.
We hit the floor.
I tried to push him away.
Moemoeā grabbed my hands.
Piripi shouted at me.
Reweti closed the chamber lines.
Everything disappeared.
I lay on the floor shaking.

Hemi looked furious.

“What were you doing?”

“Fixing it.”

“You were killing yourself.”

The words hit hard because of Ru.

Koro had tried to save Pania with knowledge he could not fully remember.

He had given everything.

And died.

I had almost repeated the shape of his mistake.

Not the same situation.

The same belief.

If I could help, I had to keep helping until there was nothing left of me.

I spent the next two days angry at myself. Not because I had wanted to help, but because part of me had enjoyed being able to feel so much at once. For a few seconds the Deep Current had seemed understandable because it was all inside me.

That feeling had been false.

Reweti said power could create certainty before it created wisdom. “The more you can affect, the more suspicious you should become of the thought that only you can see the answer.”

I wrote that down too.

Ru had died trying to give more than he had. I could honour him without repeating him.

Reweti sat beside me.

“World-Shaper does not mean world-carrier.”

I closed my eyes.

For the first time, I was afraid of my own ability.

The World-Shaper

Chapter 25: After

For a week, I refused to touch anything that glowed.

This was difficult on Te Waka Tōhorā.

Almost everything glowed eventually.

Te Rākau Kura.

Lantern paths.

Water channels.

Kiki.

Hemi's hands when he got annoyed.

I avoided the balancing chamber.

I avoided Reweti's oldest beams.

I even avoided the fountain near the market because it once flashed gold when I sneezed.

Hemi said I was being ridiculous.

Moemoeā told him to stop helping.

He tried again.

“You nearly burned out. That doesn't mean you never use it again.”

I stared at him.

He realised the irony.

“Okay. Coming from me, that sounded bad.”

“Very.”

My voice had become stronger since the Lower Relay mission.

The mesh still tightened under stress, but ordinary speech came easily now.

That should have felt like victory.

Instead I kept remembering the gold lines flooding through me.

How good it had felt for a few seconds.

How certain.

How dangerous.

Reweti did not force me back into training.

He gave me ordinary carving work.

Straight cuts.

Small repairs.

No Mīharo.

One afternoon I asked, "What if I do it again?"

He did not pretend not to understand.

"Then your people stop you again."

"What if they can't?"

"Then we build better ways to make sure they can."

That answer surprised me.

Mum crossed over for one night after hearing what happened. She did not lecture me. That was worse.

She sat on the edge of my bed and looked at the dried blood on the sleeve I had forgotten to change.

"Do you know what scared me most?" she asked.

I expected her to say that I nearly died.

"That you thought helping meant nobody was allowed to stop you."

I looked down.

"Dave does that," she said quietly. "He decides his reason is important enough that everyone else loses the right to say no."

I hated the comparison. I also needed it. Good intentions did not automatically make my choices different from his.

Not trust yourself more.

Not be stronger.

Build systems around the risk.

World-Shaping was becoming less like being special and more like being responsible.

I was starting to prefer that.

Chapter 26: Not a Saviour

The prophecy came up again because somebody painted it on a wall.

Not the whole thing.

Just BALANCE-BRINGER in gold letters near the school entrance.

I hated it.

Moemoeā hated the spelling.

Hemi thought it looked impressive.

Piripi fetched a bucket.

We painted over it.

Reweti helped.

That was how I learned he hated the prophecy too.

“Why didn't you say that earlier?” I asked.

“You were busy discovering you hated it yourself.”

He explained that old words had been repeated so many times nobody knew the original context.

A child from Ru's line.

Two worlds.

Balance.

Saving.

Maybe those words once described a warning.

Maybe a hope.

Maybe something else entirely.

“People like prophecies because they make uncertainty feel organised,” Reweti said.

“Am I a World-Shaper or not?”

“Yes.”

“That's annoyingly clear.”

He laughed.

“Ability is not destiny.”

That sentence stayed with me.

I could shape living systems.

That did not mean I was supposed to solve every problem.

Hemi could shape fire.

That did not mean he was supposed to burn every enemy.

We searched the archives for the prophecy after painting over the wall. The oldest fragment was damaged and the wording people repeated most often came from a copy

made generations later.

One translation said bring balance. Another said hold the crossing. A third could mean stand where worlds meet.

None said save everyone by yourself.

Grog looked extremely pleased by that discovery.

“I have been saying this for years.”

“You also told Mum I was in a prophecy.”

He looked less pleased.

Stories changed when people repeated the parts they liked. The chosen-one version was exciting. The older version sounded more like responsibility at a difficult boundary. I trusted that more.

Moemoeā could read emotional shifts in Mīharo better than almost anyone our age.

That did not mean she was responsible for everybody's feelings.

Piripi could navigate water paths.

That did not mean every river belonged to him.

Maybe the most important thing about power was knowing what it did not give you.

Chapter 27: The Sanctuary Moves

The Earth Sanctuary had to move one of its outer gates.

Dave had not found the valley.

Not exactly.

But Rangi Energy survey teams had begun working too close to one of the hidden approach roads.

Mum's message arrived urgent and short.

We're safe.

Do not come back yet.

Grog is helping us shift.

Love you.

I read it five times.

Hemi stood beside me.

“Still think we should leave Earth alone?”

I looked at him.

He did not mean it cruelly.

That almost made it worse.

“I think Dave needs to be stopped.”

“Same thing.”

“No.”

Hemi's jaw tightened.

“He keeps coming. They keep taking. We keep hiding.”

“Who is they?”

He looked away.

“You know.”

“No. Say it.”

He did not.

Moemoeā had come up behind us.

She looked at Hemi with a kind of sadness.

“Dave is Dave,” she said. “He is not every person without Mīharo.”

Hemi said, “Easy to believe when they didn't spend your whole childhood deciding where you sleep.”

Moemoeā flinched.

Hemi regretted it immediately.

“I didn't mean—”

“You did.”

She walked away.

Hemi closed his eyes.

I wanted to comfort him.

I also wanted him to feel the consequence.

Both were true.

“Go after her,” I said.

The Earth Sanctuary did not pack into trucks and disappear. Moving a gate meant changing who could find the valley, which approach roads connected and where protective Mīharo folded around the forest.

Krish helped with ordinary logistics. Rose organised families. Hui carried records and complained that everyone packed badly. Grog and the Earth kaitiaki shifted the hidden path.

Their message showed me something I kept forgetting: my family had become part of this world too. They were not waiting offstage while I had adventures.

Dave's choices had changed all of us, but so had our response. We were learning how to protect one another without making Aroha-the-World-Shaper the answer to every problem.

He did.

I stayed with Mum's message.

Dave had pushed closer to my family again.

I was done waiting for the Deep Current to fail piece by piece.

We needed a real solution.

Chapter 28: The Lattice

The idea came from Koro's box.

Not directly.

From everything inside it.

Carving marks.

Woven pattern.

A photograph of Te Rākau Kura.

A family line that had once known how to build strong things without making them rigid.

I spread Reweti's structural maps beside Whaea Rina's woven pathways.

Hard supports.

Flexible routes.

The problem with the Deep Current was that too much pressure travelled through too few fixed channels.

Dave's array pulled from Earth.

Old repairs created shortcuts.

Closed pathways forced the current into narrow routes.

What if the waka could reroute automatically?

Not one new channel.

Many small ones.

A lattice.

Reweti stared at my drawing for a long time.

Whaea Rina traced the crossing lines.

“It would have to move.”

“Yes.”

“And change with pressure.”

“Yes.”

Grog asked, “Can the waka grow it?”

I looked at the gold lines in the floor.

“If we give it the pattern.”

Hemi, Moemoeā and Piripi joined us.

Hemi looked over the design.

“Why not just open all the old paths?”

“Because we don't know what every old path connects to.”

“We could find out.”

“While the current is collapsing?”

He frowned.

Moemoeā said, “The lattice gives us time.”

Piripi added, “And if one path fails, water and Mīharo move around it.”

Hemi still wanted something bigger.

I could see it.

But he nodded.

“Fine. We build your net.”

I stared at him.

We built a small model first. Reweti carved flexible channels into living practice wood. Whaea Rina wove removable links across them. Piripi ran water through the system. Hemi added controlled heat to simulate pressure changes.

My first design failed in under a minute.

Water rushed into one side and tore three woven links free.

Nobody died because it was a model. That was the point.

We changed the angles. Added slower gates. Created more than one route around the same pressure point. The fifth model held.

Design was much less magical than people imagined.
Most of it was being wrong safely enough to try again.

He realised what he had said.

“Bad word?”

“Very.”

“Lattice.”

“Better.”

Chapter 29: Too Much Miharo

Building the lattice took everyone.

Carvers prepared living grooves.

Weavers laid flexible guides.

Engineers adjusted water pressure.

Kaitiaki opened and closed routes in sequence.

Students carried tools and messages.

My job was to help the living material recognise the pattern.

Not power it.

That distinction mattered.

Hemi's job was heat.

Gentle heat softened certain old joints so they could move without cracking.

He was brilliant at it.

Then one section refused to open.

“More heat,” Hemi said.

Reweti shook his head.

“No.”

“It's stuck.”

“Because pressure is coming from the other side.”

Hemi looked at me.

“We could push through.”

I felt the temptation.

If we opened the stubborn route, the lattice would connect two hours earlier.

The Deep Current was weakening by the minute.

“No,” I said.

Hemi's jaw tightened.

“You always say no when the answer is more power.”

“Because more power isn't an answer by itself.”

“Sometimes it is.”

Orange light ran up his arms.

Moemoeā stepped between us.

“Hemi.”

He looked at her.

The light dimmed.

"I'm trying to help."

"I know."

She touched his wrist.

"Help the plan we all agreed to."

For one second he looked like the boy in the forest again.

Cold.

Angry.

Terrified that somebody else was deciding what happened.

Then he stepped back.

"Fine."

We found another route.

It took longer.

The system stayed intact.

After the argument, I found Hemi alone near the heat channels.

"You think I'm becoming him," he said.

He meant Dave.

"No."

"You looked at me like it."

I sat beside him. "I think you hate being controlled so much that sometimes you treat any limit like control."

He did not answer.

"That's not the same as Dave."

"Yet?"

I wished he had not said it.

"I don't know."

Hemi stared at the flame moving through the channel.

"At least you're honest."

It was not a fight we solved. It was a crack we both noticed.

That night Hemi apologised.

But I remembered how close he had come to forcing the path.

Not because he wanted to hurt anyone.

Because he believed power should not have to wait for permission.

That idea frightened me more than the orange light.

Chapter 30: The Deep Current Breaks

The Deep Current broke before the lattice was finished.

A storm hit the outer layers of Te Waka Tōhorā at the same time Dave's array surged on Earth.

Two pressures.

One weak system.

The balancing chamber lights went white.

Then black.

Water dropped from suspended rivers.

Root bridges locked in place.

The western harbour tilted three degrees.

Three degrees was enough to send boats sliding against their moorings.

Emergency bells rang across the waka.

Grog shouted orders.

Reweti and Whaea Rina ran for the central chamber.

Piripi went to the water gates.

Moemoeā organised students moving toward safe zones.

Hemi looked at me.

“What do you need?”

That question mattered.

Not what can I do.

What do you need.

“Heat teams at the lower joins. No forcing.”

He nodded.

No argument.

I ran to the balancing chamber.

The spiral platform was dark.

For a second I remembered collapsing there.

I wanted to turn around.

Kiki landed on my shoulder.

Rere's call echoed through the lower water system.

Mum's voice lived in my memory.

Come back to me.

I put one hand on the platform.

Not two.

Gold lines appeared.

Weak.

Broken.

I did not try to fill them.

I searched for the lattice.

All the pieces people had built together.

Carved grooves.

Woven routes.

Water gates.

Heat joints.

One unfinished gap.

“Reweti!”

He understood.

“The stubborn route?”

I nodded.

Pressure had shifted.

Now it could open safely.

Hemi's team was already there.

All across the waka, other people were making decisions
at the same time. Market workers secured stalls.

Teachers moved children. Water keepers opened

emergency channels. Healers prepared rooms. Families checked neighbours.

I could feel some of those actions through the gold lines, but I could not direct them. They did not need me to.

That was strangely calming.

The crisis was bigger than me, and the response was bigger than me too.

When the final lattice section connected, I was not the centre of the system. I was one point among hundreds, doing the job only I could do while everyone else did theirs.

I sent the signal.

Gentle heat.

The joint moved.

The final section connected.

The lattice came alive.

Chapter 31: The Song Returns

The lattice worked.

Then it almost failed.

The new routes opened too quickly.

Miharo rushed through them like water into dry ground.

The balancing chamber shook.

Reweti shouted, “Slow it!”

I could not slow the whole system by force.

That was exactly what I had promised not to do.

I listened.

The current had rhythm.

Not music exactly.

Pulse.

Pause.

Pulse.

The same pattern I had heard in Rere's calls.

The same pattern hidden in Koro's waiata.

I began to hum.

The mesh tightened.

I kept going.

One note.

Then another.

My voice cracked.

Kiki's wings flashed.

The hei tiki warmed.

I sang the line I had sung in the backyard on my eighth birthday.

Not loudly.

Not perfectly.

Enough.

The lattice responded to the rhythm.

Gold light slowed.

Routes opened in sequence instead of all at once.

Water steadied.

The harbour level corrected.

Roots brightened.

Across the chamber, Reweti was crying.

I nearly stopped.

“Keep going,” he said.

So I did.

The song was not a spell.

That mattered.

It did not command the waka.

It gave me a rhythm for listening.

The waka did the healing.

We helped.

When the last gold line stabilised, my voice faded to a whisper.

But it did not disappear.

The mesh inside me had split in several more places.

Mere would later say it was no longer controlling the pathway.

The words of the waiata carried memories with them:
Ru's voice at home, Hui joining on the second line, my
own eight-year-old self singing beside harakeke before I
knew Mīharo was real.

For years I had thought getting my voice back would mean returning to who I was before Dave.

It did not.

My voice had changed. I had changed. I signed as naturally as I spoke now. Writing was still part of how I thought. Silence was no longer only something done to me; sometimes I chose it.

Reclaiming my voice did not mean erasing what happened. It meant Dave no longer got to decide what any of those ways of communicating meant.

It was scar tissue now.

Still there.

No longer in charge.

I pressed my forehead to the platform.

For the first time since I was eight, I knew my voice belonged entirely to me.

Chapter 32: The World-Shaper

The repairs took weeks.

The celebration took one night.

Nobody called it Aroha's victory.

I would have refused if they tried.

The lattice belonged to carvers, weavers, engineers, kaitiaki, students, Rere, Te Rākau Kura and the living waka itself.

That was the point.

At the gathering, Reweti handed me the first ugly piece of timber I had carved at the beginning of the year.

The line still wandered sideways.

“Evidence,” he said.

“Of bad carving?”

“Of improvement.”

Whaea Rina gave me a copy of the woven lattice pattern.

Grog gave me nothing.

“You already have too many objects.”

I told him he was cheap.

Hemi laughed.

Moemoeā was standing close enough to him that their shoulders touched.

Neither moved away.

Piripi noticed me noticing.

We both looked elsewhere.

Later, I went alone to the ridge above the harbour.

The gold lines of the repaired system glowed softly through the valley.

World-Shaper.

The title no longer felt like a prophecy.

It felt like a skill I had to keep earning.

I was ten.

I could speak.

I could sing a little.

Dave was still on Earth.

The Rangi Array still existed.

Hemi was still angry about hiding.

Nothing was finished.

But the Deep Current was stable.

Then the sky tore open.

A sharp blue-white line appeared beyond the eastern ridge.

Something fell through it.

Not a whale.

Not a Te Waka Tōhorā craft.

A dark object covered in unfamiliar carved symbols spun through the air trailing smoke.

Emergency bells began ringing again.

The object crashed beyond the forest.

For one second, silence covered the ridge.

Then Hemi's voice came from behind me.

The next morning I visited the repaired market garden from my first shape. New shoots had grown along the wetter edge. The gardener had changed what she planted there instead of trying to force the soil back to exactly how it had been.

“Better now?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Different. Ask me after harvest.”

I loved that answer.

World-Shaping was not making a perfect ending. It was creating enough possibility for living things to continue.

So when the strange rune-marked craft fell through the sky that evening, I did not think prophecy.

I thought: new problem.

Then I saw smoke rising beyond the forest and started running.

“Please tell me that's not another prophecy.”

I stared at the smoke.

“I don't think so.”

Far below, Grog was already running.

We followed.

MĪHARO · BOOK 3

TE PŪTAKE

Purpose

Something is breaking beneath Te Waka Tōhorā, and Aroha's growing abilities could help uncover why.

Living pathways fracture, waterways fail and a threat from Earth reaches deeper into the sanctuary. Through carving, weaving and investigation, Aroha and her friends search for a way to repair the damage. Being called a World-Shaper brings expectations, but Aroha must discover her own purpose and learn that no one can carry a world alone.

Niva Gram

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