

M Ī H A R O

B O O K 4

NGĀ
HAERENGA

Journeys

N I V A G R A M

NGĀ HAERENGA

Journeys

By Niva Gram

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The Stranger in the Sky

Chapter 1: Eleven

I turned eleven standing beside a crater.

This was not Mum's idea of a birthday activity.

The object that had fallen from the sky the night before lay half-buried in broken fern and black soil. Smoke curled from one side. Strange angular marks covered its dark hull.

Grog had ordered everyone away until morning. Hemi had ignored him for six minutes before Moemoeā physically dragged him back.

Now a proper rescue team surrounded the wreck.

Reweti studied the cracked outer shell. Piripi watched the water channels in case anything leaked. I stood where Grog told me to stand and tried not to be annoyed about it.

“Eleven,” Hemi said beside me. “Practically ancient.”

He was twelve now and had become even more confident in opinions nobody had requested.

Moemoeā handed me a wrapped parcel. “Happy birthday. Open it later.”

“Is it food?” Hemi asked.

“Not for you.”

That meant yes.

A metallic knock came from inside the wreck.

Everyone stopped.

Another knock.

Three fast. Two slow.

Grog raised one hand.

“Nobody touches the hull.”

Hemi whispered, “That usually means somebody is about to touch the hull.”

He was right.

Reweti pressed a tool into a split seam. Piripi redirected cool water across the hot metal. The outer panel groaned and opened.

A boy fell out.

He hit the ground, rolled and came up holding a short metal bar like a weapon.

He looked about twelve.

Pale from exhaustion. Dark blond hair. A cut across one cheek. Heavy clothes that made no sense in our warm forest.

He shouted something none of us understood.

Grog kept both hands visible.

The boy shouted again.

Then he looked at me.

Not because I was special.

Because Kiki had flown out from behind my shoulder and landed on my head.

His expression changed from fear to complete confusion.

“Bug?” he said in English.

I laughed.

“Cicada.”

His eyes widened at the sound of my voice.

“You speak English?” Grog asked.

The boy nodded once.

Then he pointed back at the sky.

“Help,” he said. “Please.”

That one word changed the whole morning.

After the rescue team carried Erik away, I stayed beside the wreck with Reweti. Up close, the craft looked less like a mysterious weapon and more like something repaired too many times. Different metals covered old cracks. One panel had been tied into place with woven cord before somebody later bolted over it. Erik had not arrived in a perfect piece of foreign technology. He had arrived in the best thing his people still had that could fly.

That detail made his single word—help—feel heavier.

The wreck was not an attack.

It was a message.

And the person carrying it had nearly died trying to reach us.

Chapter 2: The Boy in the Wreck

His name was Erik.

Not Eirik. He corrected Hemi three times.

Hemi said the extra vowel made it look more interesting.

Erik said he did not care.

I liked him immediately for that.

He spent his first two days in the healing rooms. The crash had bruised his ribs and burned one hand, but nothing was broken.

The harder problem was trust.

Nobody knew how he had found Te Waka Tōhorā.

Erik said he came from a sanctuary called Vardheim, far to the north through routes none of us used.

Grog had heard the name.

Reweti had too.

That made everyone more worried, not less.

“The old sanctuary network closed most direct routes generations ago,” Grog explained.

“Why?” I asked.

“Different reasons. Safety. Conflict. Distance. Some communities chose privacy.”

Hemi leaned against the wall.

“More hiding.”

Grog ignored him.

Erik sat upright despite the healer telling him not to.

“Vardheim is failing.”

His English was good but careful, as if he translated each sentence inside his head before speaking.

“What does failing mean?” Moemoeā asked.

“Cold system. Light system. Food rooms. Paths. Everything.”

He drew a shape on the table with one finger.

A branching pattern.

“Our sanctuary was built inside a mountain-fjord system. Stone, water, ice, timber. The old routes carry power between them.”

I thought of our Deep Current.

“Same kind of problem?”

“Maybe.”

He looked at the hei tiki at my chest and then away quickly.

“We heard of a place that repaired living paths. Whale place.”

Hemi smiled. “Whale place is good.”

Erik did not smile.

“People are cold. We do not have enough heat to last winter.”

That ended the jokes.

Grog asked how many people.

Erik gave a number large enough to make my stomach drop.

He had not crossed worlds for adventure.

He had crossed because his home was running out of time.

When the healers finally made him lie down, I stayed by the doorway.

He noticed.

“You do not trust me?” he asked.

I thought about Dave.

Hemi.

Prophecies.

Strangers.

“I don't know you.”

Erik nodded.

“Better answer.”

I smiled.

The healers also found a small carved token strapped beneath Erik's shirt. He refused to let anyone take it until Grog promised it would stay in sight. Later Erik explained it carried his family mark and a route symbol for home. He had brought almost nothing else.

I recognised the way he held it. I touched Ru's hei tiki without thinking. Two different objects, two different cultures, both carrying the same human fear: if everything else disappears, let me keep one thing that tells me where I come from.

“But I believe you're scared.”

He looked away.

“That is enough for today.”

Chapter 3: Runes Are Letters

Three days later Erik caught Hemi copying the symbols from his craft.

“Stop.”

Hemi looked up from his notebook.

“Why?”

“Because you are drawing them wrong.”

“Then teach me.”

Erik stared at him.

Hemi stared back.

Moemoeā whispered, “This could take hours.”

It did.

Erik explained that the marks on his craft were runes.

“Letters first,” he said. “People on Earth make them into all kinds of mysterious things. Mostly they were writing.”

Hemi looked disappointed.

“So no magic alphabet?”

“No.”

Erik paused.

“But Vardheim uses rune forms in our path systems because our builders used what they knew. The symbol is not magic by itself.”

That made sense to me.

Our woven maps were not magical because a pattern automatically contained power. They held knowledge. People used them inside living systems.

Erik drew three runes correctly and wrote ordinary sounds beside them.

Piripi practised carefully.

Moemoeā copied only after asking.

Hemi filled half a page.

I asked Erik whether he minded us learning.

He seemed surprised by the question.

“No. I mind people pretending to know.”

Fair.

In return I showed him some NZSL.

He learned THANK YOU first.

Then HELP.

Then HEMI IS ANNOYING after Moemoeā insisted.

Hemi demanded equal teaching rights.

By lunch, Erik could sign enough to insult him.

The tension around him eased.

Not completely.

Some adults still watched him as though an entire foreign sanctuary might be hiding inside his pockets.

That afternoon I found him staring at Te Rākau Kura.

“Your tree is alive,” he said.

“Very.”

“Our old central hall has a tree too. Not like this. Its roots grow through stone.”

He looked homesick.

“What's it called?”

He told me a name I could not pronounce.

I tried.

He winced.

I tried again.

Worse.

Erik showed us how easy it was to turn unfamiliar writing into fantasy. He pointed to one mark Hemi had copied

and asked what we thought it meant. Hemi guessed fire. Piripi guessed protection. Moemoeā guessed journey. Erik said it was simply part of a name.

“People like mystery more than accuracy,” he said.

That sounded familiar. Te ao Māori had been turned into decoration by people who wanted the look without the relationships underneath it. I wrote the lesson down: learn before borrowing; ask before using; do not turn somebody else's culture into a prop for your own adventure.

He laughed for the first time.

It was a small sound.

But something about it made him seem less like the boy from the wreck and more like just Erik.

Chapter 4: The Council Says No

Te Waka Tōhorā had a council.

I had successfully avoided most council meetings for three years.

This one found me anyway.

Erik stood in the centre of the room while adults discussed his sanctuary as if he were not there.

Some wanted to send supplies through a temporary path.

Some wanted no route opened at all.

One elder said, “We do not know what followed him.”

Another said, “We do know what happens when desperate people open old connections without planning.”

Hemi muttered, “People get helped?”

Moemoeā elbowed him.

Grog asked Erik whether Vardheim could guarantee a controlled receiving gate.

Erik's jaw tightened.

“If we could guarantee our gates, I would not be here.”

Silence.

That was the problem.

Helping Vardheim meant entering an unstable sanctuary through a damaged route.

Not helping meant leaving people to face a failing winter system.

The council decided no.

Not forever.

For now.

They would gather more information.

Erik stood completely still.

I recognised the look.

It was the look I had worn when adults said not now after Koro died.

A phrase that sounded reasonable until you were the person waiting.

Outside, Erik walked fast enough that I had to run after him.

“They're trying to keep people safe,” I said.

He stopped.

“Which people?”

The question landed hard.

He pointed toward the council chamber.

“Your people are safe while they collect information.
Mine are cold while you decide.”

I did not have a good answer.

Hemi arrived behind us.

“Exactly.”

I turned.

“Don't.”

“Why? He's right.”

“Being right about the problem doesn't mean every
solution is right.”

Hemi's eyes flashed.

“Your favourite sentence.”

Erik looked between us.

“You fight a lot.”

Moemoeā caught up.

“This is normal.”

Piripi nodded.

“Very normal.”

Erik rubbed his face.

“I did not cross the Between to wait.”

I understood.

That night the council decision stayed with me because nobody in the room had been obviously cruel. The people saying no had real reasons. They remembered exposed sanctuaries, broken routes and the way one bad connection had let Aurora's early systems reach us. Erik's need was also real.

I was learning that moral problems were hardest when nobody had invented the stakes. Safety and urgency could both be true. A good answer had to carry more than one truth without pretending one of them disappeared.

But I also remembered how one old relay had let Dave into the Deep Current.

Opening a path because the need was urgent could still put another home at risk.

Balance was becoming less like a philosophy and more like a problem that made everyone angry.

Chapter 5: Hemi Says Open It

Hemi found an old Vardheim route before the adults did.

Of course he did.

He spent two nights in the archive with Piripi, who claimed he was only there to make sure Hemi did not break anything.

Moemoeā said that was exactly what an accomplice would say.

The route appeared in a damaged woven record beneath another sanctuary name.

Most of it had been deliberately closed.

One thread remained.

“Enough to reopen,” Hemi said.

“Enough to investigate,” I corrected.

He looked at me.

“People are freezing.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

That annoyed me.

“Yes, Hemi. Caring about risk does not mean I don't care about Erik's people.”

Hemi pushed the map toward me.

“Then open it.”

“I can't just open someone else's sanctuary.”

“You can.”

That was true.

World-Shaping had become strong enough that I could probably help wake an old route.

“That's not the same as having the right.”

Hemi laughed once.

“Who gave the council the right to keep it shut?”

We stared at each other.

Moemoeā stepped between us before the argument became something worse.

“Erik should be here.”

That stopped us.

She was right.

We had turned his home into our debate.

Erik arrived ten minutes later.

He studied the old map.

His fingers shook.

“This was one of ours.”

“Can your people receive it?” I asked.

He swallowed.

“Maybe.”

Hemi said, “Maybe is enough.”

Erik snapped, “Not for you to decide.”

Hemi recoiled.

Erik pointed at the map.

“My people will be standing at the other side if this goes wrong. Not yours.”

Hemi's anger drained.

That was the first time I saw his belief meet the person it was supposed to help.

He looked away.

“Fine.”

Erik took a breath.

“I want the route investigated. I want help. I do not want someone opening my home like a door because they think freedom sounds good.”

I looked at Hemi.

Later Hemi admitted Erik's response had shaken him. “I thought I was arguing for him,” he said. “Then he looked at me like I was another person deciding his life.”

I did not tell him that was exactly what had happened. He already knew.

For the rest of the evening he helped Erik translate the old route notes instead of demanding the gate be opened. That did not solve Hemi's larger belief, but it proved he could still change his behaviour when a real person complicated the idea in his head.

He nodded.

Not happily.

But he nodded.

Chapter 6: Moemoeā's Promise

Hemi disappeared after the archive argument.

Moemoeā found him near the fire gardens.

I did not follow immediately.

Some conversations belonged to the people inside them.

Later Moemoeā told me enough.

Hemi had not been angry at Erik.

He had been angry at himself.

“I sounded like them,” he said.

“Like who?”

“Everyone who decided what was best for me without asking.”

That scared him more than being wrong about a map.

Moemoeā sat beside him until the fire channels dimmed.

“You're not them because you made one bad choice,” she said.

“What if I keep making it?”

“Then I'll tell you.”

Hemi laughed weakly.

“You already do.”

“Exactly.”

He looked at her.

“And if I don't listen?”

Moemoeā was quiet for a long time.

Then she said, “I'll still care about you. That doesn't mean I'll help you do something wrong.”

That was the promise.

Not I'll never leave.

Not I'll always agree.

I love you so much I will become whatever you need.

Something stronger.

I will care, and I will still tell the truth.

A few days later I found them holding hands under the Outsiders Club root.

Hemi dropped hers immediately.

Moemoeā grabbed it again.

“Coward,” she told him.

His ears turned red.

Piripi walked into a branch because he was trying not to stare.

Erik looked confused.

I explained quietly.

“They're becoming a thing.”

“A thing?”

“Very technical term.”

Erik nodded seriously.

“We have this in Vardheim too.”

I laughed.

Hemi threw a cushion at us.

The next day Moemoeā told me she had meant every word. “People think staying means never leaving somebody's side,” she said. “Sometimes staying means refusing to disappear just because the conversation got ugly.”

I thought of Mum and Dad. Their marriage had ended, but neither had stopped being our parent. Staying had taken a different shape.

Moemoeā's version of love was starting to sound like that: connection without surrender. I hoped Hemi understood what a gift that was.

For an afternoon, nobody talked about failing sanctuaries or Dave.

We were eleven and twelve.

That mattered too.

Chapter 7: The Map Between Sanctuaries

The investigation team found something bigger than a route to Vardheim.

They found a network.

Old sanctuary maps had been stored separately for generations, partly for safety. When we overlaid them, fragments connected.

Te Waka Tōhorā.

Vardheim.

The Earth Sanctuary.

Other names I had never seen.

Some routes were active.

Some deliberately sealed.

Some ended in blank space.

Grog warned us not to romanticise it.

“This was never one magical world with one government.”

Good.

I did not want that.

Different communities had built different ways to survive.

Some worked together.

Some disagreed.

Some disappeared.

A few old records described meetings where sanctuary representatives argued for days over whether routes should stay open.

Hemi read those with intense interest.

“So people have always wanted this.”

“Some people,” Whaea Anahera corrected.

“And some wanted everything shut.”

“Yes.”

Hemi smiled as if history had proven him right.

I read the rest.

One sanctuary had been exposed through an open route and abandoned.

Another had become isolated so long that a preventable illness spread before help arrived.

History did not prove one side right.

It proved choices had costs.

Erik found Vardheim's mark in the network.

Beside it was an old instruction.

REOPEN ONLY WITH BOTH GATES HELD.

“Both gates,” I said.

Erik nodded.

“Your side and ours.”

That changed the council's decision.

If Vardheim could hold its gate long enough, we could open a controlled crossing instead of forcing a path from Te Waka Tōhorā.

A message had to reach them first.

Erik's crashed craft could not fly.

Rere could not navigate an unknown route alone.

Then Piripi noticed a tiny side channel in the old map.

Not large enough for people.

Large enough for sound.

Or maybe a cicada.

Kiki landed on the map.

Everyone looked at her.

I shook my head.

We spent an entire lesson comparing route records from different communities. Their maps did not line up neatly because they had not been designed as one system. One marked water first, another stars, another stone pressure, another human travel. Overlaying them required translation rather than simply matching symbols.

That became a metaphor nobody needed to explain. Multicultural did not mean flattening different knowledge into one universal magical map. Cooperation required keeping differences visible long enough to understand how they connected.

“Absolutely not.”

Kiki clicked.

She had already volunteered.

Chapter 8: A Route Nobody Uses

Sending Kiki through an abandoned sanctuary route was a terrible idea.

We did it carefully.

That did not make it less terrible.

The side channel was too small for a person and too unstable for a normal message shell.

Kiki's Mīharo had always moved strangely through paths. She was partly cicada, partly something Aroha had awakened by accident, and completely convinced rules were optional.

Mere built a tiny recording bead for her to carry.

Erik spoke into it in his own language first, then English.

“I am alive. I reached Te Waka Tōhorā. We found the old two-gate route. If you receive this, hold Vardheim's gate at first light in three days.”

His voice shook only once.

I attached the bead gently beneath Kiki's wings.

“You come back.”

Click.

“That is not a promise.”

Click-click.

Hemi said, “Pretty sure that means promise.”

“You do not speak cicada.”

“Neither do you.”

Unfortunately, he had a point.

The route opened like a thin line of blue light.

Kiki flew through.

It closed.

I hated the next six hours.

Every minute felt wrong.

Erik paced.

Moemoeā made him eat.

Hemi pretended not to worry and failed.

At sunset the line flickered.

Kiki shot out and hit me in the forehead.

I had never been happier to be attacked by an insect.

The recording bead held a reply.

An older woman's voice spoke Erik's language.

He sat down hard.

“My aunt.”

He listened again.

Then translated.

Vardheim still stood.

Barely.

Their inner heating system had lost another section.

They could hold the old gate.

Three days.

First light.

At the end, his aunt said something longer.

Erik covered his face.

I waited.

Finally he said, “She said my mother thought I was dead.”

I sat beside him.

While Kiki was gone, Erik told me what his aunt sounded like when she was angry. He described his mother's soup, a bridge that iced over every winter and the room he shared with a cousin when he was younger. None of it

was important to the rescue plan.

That was why it mattered.

Vardheim stopped being a failing sanctuary on a map. It became the place where Erik knew which floorboard squeaked and which neighbour gave children too much food. Saving a place meant saving ordinary life, not just systems.

No prophecy.

No world-saving speech.

Just one kid who had finally sent word home.

Chapter 9: The First Crossing

At first light, both gates answered.

Vardheim's side appeared as a pale blue line in the balancing chamber.

Our side glowed gold-green.

For the first time in generations, the two systems recognised each other.

Aroha's job was not to rip the route open.

My job was to help the lines meet without letting either side overwhelm the other.

Reweti handled structural flow.

Whaea Rina adjusted the woven guides.

Piripi watched water pressure.

Hemi held heat steady.

Moemoeā read changes in the path.

Erik stood at the centre with the old Vardheim marks in front of him.

“Now,” he said.

I placed one hand on the platform.

Gold lines rose.

On the other side, cold blue light moved toward us.

They touched.

The chamber shook.

Hemi increased heat.

“Too much,” Moemoeā said.

He lowered it immediately.

The path steadied.

A doorway formed.

Beyond it I saw snow.

Dark stone.

A woman crying.

Erik made a sound I had never heard from him and ran.

Grog grabbed his coat before he crossed.

“Slow.”

Erik looked ready to punch him.

Then the woman on the other side shouted his name.

Erik stopped fighting.

He stepped through carefully.

She pulled him into her arms.

The route held.

Everyone in our chamber exhaled at once.

Grog looked at me.

“Small team only.”

I nodded.

The council had agreed to an assessment mission.

Not rescue everyone.

Not open everything.

Go, understand, help build the safest next step.

Hemi hated how slow that sounded.

He came anyway.

Moemoeā too.

Piripi.

Grog.

Me.

I stepped through the gate.

Cold hit my face so hard I forgot every complaint I had ever made about winter in Aotearoa.

Erik laughed at my expression.

Behind him, Vardheim stretched into a dark frozen valley beneath a sky full of pale light.

Before I crossed, Mum's voice came through the Earth message route. Grog had told her what we were doing. She made me repeat the plan, the return conditions and the name of the adult responsible for me.

“You sound like Grog,” I complained.

“Excellent.”

Then she softened. “Go help. Do not go prove anything.”

That sentence travelled with me into Vardheim. I was not crossing to prove I deserved the title World-Shaper. I was crossing because another community had asked for help and we had finally found a way to answer without taking their choice away.

Beautiful.

And failing.

Book Four had become bigger than Te Waka Tōhorā.

The Broken Sanctuary

Chapter 10: Vardheim

Vardheim was not Te Waka Tōhorā with snow.

That became obvious in the first five minutes.

The sanctuary sat inside and around a deep fjord valley. Dark stone buildings climbed the slopes. Timber bridges crossed narrow gaps. Warm water ran through channels beneath paths to keep ice from taking over.

Runes marked doors, tools, maps and warning signs.

Not random mysterious symbols.

Writing.

Information.

History.

Erik's aunt Solveig met us at the gate. His mother reached him first.

She hugged him so hard his boots left the ground.

Nobody laughed.

Then she turned on Grog.

“You let him fly that wreck?”

Grog pointed at Erik. “I met him after the wreck.”

“Still.”

Grog looked impressed.

I understood immediately where Erik got some of his personality.

We were taken to a long hall warmed by pipes beneath the floor. Half the pipes were cold.

Solveig spread local maps across a table.

She did not ask me to fix anything.

Good.

She asked what Te Waka Tōhorā had experienced.

I explained the Deep Current, Dave's extraction network and the lattice we built.

Then she explained Vardheim.

Their sanctuary moved warmth through stone and water. Hot springs fed part of the system. Mīharo pathways moved the rest. Rune-marked gates recorded pressure, direction and access.

“Our system was designed for deep winter,” Solveig said.

“It should be strongest now.”

“But it's not,” Piripi said.

“No.”

A young engineer named Freja placed three measurements beside the map.

The drop began at the same time Rangi Energy expanded on Earth.

Hemi looked at me.

“Same problem.”

“Partly,” Freja said.

Hemi frowned.

She tapped a second line.

“Our western heat route was damaged years ago. We closed it instead of rebuilding. The remaining system carried the extra load until something outside began pulling.”

Two pressures again.

External extraction.

Internal weakness.

Before we left the hall, Freja made us sign a visitor agreement. Hemi rolled his eyes until he read it. The rules protected local knowledge from being copied out of context, required us to ask before touching active

systems and made clear that Vardheim could end our involvement whenever it chose.

“You have more rules than Te Waka Tōhorā,” he complained.

Freja replied, “You arrived because our systems are failing. That does not mean our boundaries failed too.”

Hemi had no answer. I quietly loved her for it.

Aroha the World-Shaper was not the answer.

Vardheim already had people who understood Vardheim.

What they needed was another set of eyes and enough time.

Chapter 11: Cold Rooms

Numbers became real when we visited the lower homes.

Three families had moved into one hall because their own heating channels failed.

Children slept in layers of blankets.

Food stores were being shifted toward the warmest chambers.

Nobody was freezing to death yet.

Yet mattered.

Erik knew everybody.

He stopped every few metres.

An old man hugged him.

Two little kids punched his arms and accused him of dying without permission.

His mother kept one hand on his shoulder as if she expected the Between to steal him again.

Hemi became very quiet.

At one house, a girl about eight showed us a frozen line running through her bedroom wall.

“It used to glow,” she said.

Hemi touched the stone.

Orange warmth spread through his fingers.

The line flickered.

Grog stopped him.

“Temporary heat only.”

“She's cold.”

“Then warm the room. Do not connect yourself to a failing system you do not understand.”

Hemi's jaw tightened.

But he listened.

He warmed a metal plate instead. The room temperature rose slowly.

The girl's mother thanked him.

Outside, Hemi kicked snow off a step.

“We could send heat from Te Waka Tōhorā.”

Piripi said, “Across a route we only just reopened?”

“For people who need it.”

“And if our system starts draining too?”

Hemi turned on him.

“Then at least we tried.”

I understood the feeling.

When suffering was in front of you, caution could look cruel.

But I had nearly killed myself in Book Three by trying to fix every weak line at once.

“We help them build something that keeps working after we leave,” I said.

Hemi laughed bitterly.

“You sound like Grog.”

“That's becoming a serious problem.”

He smiled despite himself.

Then he looked back through the window at the little girl.

“Just don't make them wait forever.”

One family refused extra help because another household was colder. Solveig accepted the decision but sent a healer to check them anyway. The choice reminded me that communities were not simply helpless victims waiting for us. They were already rationing, repairing, sharing and making hard decisions long before we arrived.

Our presence added options. It did not create courage where none had existed.

I promised I wouldn't.

I did not promise I could save them.

That difference mattered.

Chapter 12: Erik's Mother

Erik's mother was called Ingrid.

She did not approve of his rescue mission.

This was clear because she told him every fifteen minutes.

“You stole a flight craft.”

“Borrowed.”

“You crashed it into another sanctuary.”

“Eventually.”

“You could have died.”

Erik looked at his soup.

“People here could have died too.”

That ended the argument.

Ingrid sat down.

Her anger folded into fear.

“You are twelve.”

“I know.”

I knew that sentence.

Mum had said versions of it to me for years.

Ingrid noticed me listening.

“And you?”

“Eleven.”

She closed her eyes.

“Excellent. Children saving sanctuaries.”

Grog, at the other end of the table, said, “We try to discourage it.”

“Not very well.”

I liked her.

Later Ingrid told us what happened before Erik left.

Vardheim's council had rationed heat and begun planning an evacuation of the coldest quarter.

Erik argued they should contact other sanctuaries.

The council said the old routes were unsafe.

Erik asked how unsafe compared with winter.

Nobody gave him an answer he accepted.

So he found an old craft, followed damaged route markers and left.

Hemi looked delighted.

“See?”

Erik snapped, “It was stupid.”

Hemi blinked.

Erik rubbed his burned hand.

“Necessary can still be stupid.”

That sentence stayed with me.

Sometimes people survived because somebody took a terrible risk.

That did not magically turn the risk into good planning.

Erik had reached us.

He had also nearly died and almost carried an unstable route straight into Te Waka Tōhorā.

Both were true.

Ingrid put her arm around him.

“Next time you save us, ask first.”

Erik smiled.

Ingrid later apologised to me for snapping at Grog. “Fear makes me rude,” she said.

“Fear makes Grog annoying.”

From across the room Grog said, “I can hear you.”

Ingrid smiled for the first time.

Watching them made me think about parents differently. Mum's fear had once felt like a wall around me. Now I could see the love inside it without agreeing with every choice fear produced. Children grow by learning adults are people too. Adults probably hate that.

“No promises.”

She smacked the back of his head gently.

Some family languages were universal.

Chapter 13: The Rune Gate

Vardheim's western gate had not opened in fourteen years.

It was carved into a stone wall above a geothermal channel.

Rows of runes marked its edges.

Freja made one thing clear before we began.

“Do not call this a spell.”

Hemi raised both hands.

“I wasn't going to.”

“You absolutely were.”

She was right.

The runes labelled functions.

Open.

Close.

Heat.

Pressure.

Emergency release.

Names of builders.

Dates.

The Mīharo lived in the relationships between stone, water, people and sanctuary pathways. The writing helped people understand and guide those relationships.

I liked that distinction.

Freja showed us where the gate failed.

One stone section had shifted years ago. Instead of rebuilding it, Vardheim rerouted pressure through the eastern system.

It worked.

Until Dave's extraction made the whole network weaker.

“Can you shape the stone back?” Hemi asked me.

“Probably.”

Freja said, “No.”

We both looked at her.

“That stone has been under stress for fourteen years. If Aroha pushes it back without relieving pressure, it may split the wall.”

Reweti would have loved her.

We spent two days measuring.

Piripi mapped water.

Hemi tested heat.

Erik translated old maintenance notes.

Moemoeā found a warning everyone else had missed because it had been carved behind a later support.

I sensed where the living current still touched the gate.

At last we had a plan.

Freja would release pressure.

Local builders would shift the stone.

I would help the Mīharo path recognise the repaired route.

Not fix Vardheim.

One task.

One system.

Local people leading it.

Freja also made us document every change before we touched the gate. Old measurements, new measurements, expected effects, safe stopping points.

Hemi called it boring until she showed him a record from fourteen years earlier proving exactly why the gate had been abandoned.

Someone had skipped one pressure check because the repair was urgent.

The resulting crack took months to stabilise.

Boring paperwork, apparently, could be the memory of previous mistakes.

When the gate finally opened three centimetres, warm air rushed through.

Everybody cheered as if we had moved a mountain.

Maybe three centimetres was enough.

Chapter 14: The Other Pull

The repaired gate should have strengthened Vardheim.

Instead it revealed another problem.

The moment warm Mīharo began flowing through the western route, something pulled back.

White light.

My throat tightened.

Dave.

I had not felt his network this strongly since leaving Te Waka Tōhorā.

Freja's instruments jumped.

Heat fell.

Hemi swore.

Erik shouted instructions.

We closed the gate before the pull could lock on.

Silence filled the chamber.

Then Hemi said, “He's taking from here too.”

Not intentionally from Vardheim, perhaps.

That was worse in a different way.

Dave had built a network that recognised Mīharo wherever connected Earth pathways came within reach.

He did not need to know each sanctuary existed.

His system treated all of it as energy.

Freja stared at the readings.

“One man's machine reaches a place he has never heard of.”

I thought of all the old sanctuary marks in the network map.

How many were weakening without understanding why?

Grog sent an urgent message back to Te Waka Tōhorā.

Hemi paced.

“This proves it.”

“Proves what?” I asked.

“We can't keep hiding separately. One person on Earth can hurt all of us because nobody talks to anybody.”

He was partly right.

Again.

That was becoming the most dangerous thing about Hemi's ideas.

They started from truths.

Moemoeā watched him carefully.

“Talking is not the same as opening everything.”

“Not yet.”

The words were quiet.

I looked at him.

Hemi looked back.

Something had shifted.

He no longer saw open routes only as help.

We sent the readings to three other sanctuaries. Two reported similar drops. The third did not.

That difference mattered. Dave's network was not affecting every place equally. Local design, distance, Earth connections and old repairs changed vulnerability.

Hemi wanted one explanation because one explanation made one solution easier. The evidence kept refusing to cooperate. I began to appreciate evidence for exactly that reason: it could be inconvenient enough to save you from your favourite idea.

He was beginning to see them as justice.

That was bigger.

And harder to argue with.

Chapter 15: A Network That Asks

The answer came from combining Vardheim's gates with Te Waka Tōhorā's lattice.

Not merging them.

Learning from both.

Freja's system had strong local controls. Every gate had clear permission states.

Our lattice was better at rerouting pressure.

Erik called the idea ugly.

“Good,” I said. “Ugly systems still work.”

We designed a temporary buffer between the sanctuary route and Earth's extraction pull.

The important part was that neither sanctuary could activate it alone.

Two gates.

Two permissions.

Two stop controls.

Hemi hated that.

“What if one side needs help and the other says no?”

Erik answered before I did.

“Then you talk.”

“While people freeze?”

“Better than somebody deciding my home belongs to them because they have a good reason.”

Hemi looked away.

Moemoeā squeezed his hand.

He let her.

Erik and I spent hours testing the buffer on a small channel.

He was good at noticing patterns I missed.

I was better at feeling when the living current changed before the instruments showed it.

We argued constantly.

Not like Hemi and me.

Different.

Erik would say, “Your feeling is not data.”

I would say, “Your data is three seconds late.”

Then we would both be right and annoying.

At midnight, after our fourth failed test, he handed me a mug of something hot.

“What is it?”

“Drink.”

“That is suspicious.”

“You ate a glowing fruit from a moving market stall without asking.”

Fair.

It was hot chocolate.

Much better than Hemi's Dutch version.

I told him that.

He asked why I knew a Dutch version.

I explained Hemi.

Erik shook his head.

“Your life is strange.”

The first successful buffer test lasted only twenty seconds. At second fourteen, Vardheim withdrew permission on purpose. The path closed cleanly. At second seventeen, Te Waka Tōhorā reopened its side, but nothing happened until Vardheim agreed again.

Erik looked pleased.

“That,” he said, “is what trust looks like in engineering.”

I wrote the sentence in my notebook. Trust was not a permanently open door. Sometimes trust was knowing a door would close when you asked and still be there when you chose to open it again.

“You crashed out of another world.”

“Also fair.”

We went back to work.

Chapter 16: Hemi Opens a Door

Hemi opened a small route without permission.

Not to Vardheim.

To Earth.

He said he only wanted to test whether free Mīharo could flow around Dave's extraction.

He chose an abandoned forest path far from people.

He kept the opening tiny.

He told himself all the reasons it was safe.

Then the fire started.

Not a normal fire.

His Mīharo crossed the open path and found dry grass on Earth.

Heat answered heat.

A line of flame raced through the clearing.

Hemi closed the route immediately.

Grog and local kaitiaki contained the fire before it spread.

Nobody was hurt.

That did not make it okay.

I found Hemi sitting outside the gate chamber with ash on his hands.

He looked younger than twelve.

“I thought I could control it.”

I sat beside him.

“I know.”

“I was trying to prove there was another way.”

“I know.”

“Stop saying that.”

“Why?”

“Because it sounds worse.”

He was right.

Understanding his reason did not remove the consequence.

Moemoeā arrived.

Hemi could barely look at her.

She sat on his other side.

“You promised you'd listen.”

“I know.”

"You didn't."

"I know."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I can't make your choices for you."

Hemi whispered, "I know."

This time the words sounded different.

Grog suspended him from gate work.

Hemi did not argue.

The Earth clearing where Hemi's test went wrong belonged to nobody in Open Roads. That became one of the hardest facts for him to face. He had chosen an "empty" place because no houses were nearby, but empty had meant empty of people he knew about. It still held plants, animals, fire risk and connections to others downstream.

A place did not become available for experimentation simply because nobody was standing in front of you to object.

That frightened me more than if he had.

He understood exactly what he had done.

And part of him still believed the idea itself was right.

Chapter 17: Winter Light

The buffer worked on the sixth attempt.

We reopened the western gate.

Dave's network pulled.

The buffer redirected pressure through three local routes, then closed the Earth-facing layer before extraction could lock on.

Warmth moved into Vardheim.

Not from Te Waka Tōhorā.

From Vardheim's own restored system.

That mattered.

We were not powering their sanctuary.

We helped them recover what already belonged there.

The lower halls warmed first.

Ice melted from one blocked channel.

A food room reopened.

The eight-year-old girl whose bedroom line had frozen ran outside without a coat and had to be dragged back by her mother.

Erik stood beside me watching lights return along the valley.

“I thought I would not see this again.”

“You should have trusted adults and waited calmly.”

He looked at me.

I smiled.

He laughed.

“You are terrible.”

“I’ve been told.”

Ingrid found us and pulled both of us into a hug without warning.

Erik complained.

I did not.

Vardheim was not completely fixed.

The network still needed rebuilding.

Dave still existed.

Other sanctuaries might still be weakening.

But winter was no longer an immediate threat.

The council thanked us publicly.

I made Freja stand beside me because I refused to let anybody tell the story as Aroha-the-World-Shaper saved Vardheim.

Freja had designed half the solution.

Local builders had done the dangerous work.

Erik had found us.

We had helped.

That was enough.

Hemi stood at the back beside Moemoeā.

He clapped too.

Vardheim held a meal after the lower halls warmed. It was not a victory feast so much as everyone finally having enough energy to cook together. People brought what they had. Some dishes were familiar to Erik and completely strange to us.

Nobody asked us to perform Te Waka Tōhorā culture for them, and we did not treat Vardheim like a museum. We were guests in a living community.

That ordinary respect felt like a better model for sanctuary connection than any grand speech about unity.

But he did not look happy.

The solution had proven cooperation could work.

To Hemi, it had also proven how much help had been delayed by closed doors.

Chapter 18: The Boy Who Came Back With Us

Erik returned to Te Waka Tōhorā with us.

His mother hated the idea.

His mother also helped pack his bag.

Vardheim wanted a permanent young liaison while the sanctuary network was investigated.

Erik volunteered before anyone else could.

“You like crashing into places?” I asked.

“I am improving.”

His repaired craft stayed behind.

We used the gate.

Much safer.

Before leaving, Solveig gave Te Waka Tōhorā a copy of Vardheim's old route records.

Not ownership.

A shared copy.

Te Waka Tōhorā gave them sections of our pressure-lattice design under the same terms.

Knowledge exchanged because both sides agreed.

Hemi watched the handover.

“Imagine if every sanctuary did this.”

“Maybe they should,” I said.

His eyes lit.

“Exactly.”

I added, “If they choose to.”

His expression changed.

There it was again.

The line between us.

Back at Te Waka Tōhorā, Erik was given a room near the guest quarter.

Moemoeā immediately declared the Outsiders Club international.

Piripi objected that we still had only two actual outsiders.

Hemi said percentages were irrelevant.

Kiki ate the new membership list.

Some traditions deserved preserving.

That night, Erik and I sat on the ridge above the harbour.

He showed me a small carved token from Vardheim.

One rune marked his family name.

Another marked the route home.

“Not magic?” I asked.

“Not by itself.”

He handed it to me.

“It means I know where I belong.”

I gave it back.

“Keep it, then.”

He closed his fingers around it.

Far below, Hemi and Moemoeā walked between market lights holding hands.

Everything looked peaceful.

It was not.

Erik's decision to become a liaison also meant accepting responsibility to both places. He could not simply tell Te Waka Tōhorā whatever Vardheim wanted, or return home and represent us as if he spoke for everyone.

“So you're basically guaranteed to annoy somebody,” I said.

“Probably everyone.”

“Perfect qualification.”

He smiled.

Belonging to more than one place did not make him divided. It gave him more relationships to care for. I understood that deeply.

Dave's network was still growing.

More sanctuary marks were appearing on our maps.

And somewhere inside Hemi, a door had opened that none of us knew how to close.

The Storm Truth

Chapter 19: The Box Under Hui's Bed

Nan waited until I was eleven to tell me she had another box.

I was offended on principle.

“You had this the whole time?”

Hui folded her arms.

“You were eight.”

“Then nine.”

“Still a child.”

“I'm eleven.”

“Still a child.”

Adults had an extremely flexible definition of age.

We were back at the Earth Sanctuary for a short visit. Mum had wanted all three kids home for a week, and Grog had agreed as long as I did not wander anywhere

near Rangi Energy.

The box came from under Hui's bed.

Small. Metal. Pania's name scratched underneath.

"Her grandmother gave it to Ru years ago," Hui said.

"After Pania died, Ru was gone too. I couldn't open it."

"Why now?"

Nan looked at me.

"Because you keep asking the same question."

What really happened?

The calf story had never fitted.

Dave's half-truths had only made it worse.

Inside the box were papers, a cassette tape and one small notebook.

Pania's handwriting covered the first page.

MĪHARO IS NOT ONE THING.

Underneath she had listed examples.

Heat.

Growth.

Memory.

Voice.

Weather.

Connection.

My stomach tightened at voice.

Hui sat beside me.

“You do not have to read it all today.”

That was the kind of thing adults said when they knew you absolutely would.

I turned the page.

Pania had been researching her grandmother's stories.

Not as a scientist exactly.

Not as a priest or expert either.

As someone trying to recover something her family had partly lost.

I recognised that immediately.

Koro had done the same.

So had I.

Near the back, one entry was dated the day before my eighth birthday.

I read it twice.

RU SAYS THE OLD PATHS ARE WAKING.

Then one line underneath.

DAVE THINKS THIS IS DANGEROUS.

I looked at Nan.

Hui also made one rule before we opened anything else: if a page named someone who was still alive, we would think before sharing it. “Family truth is not automatically public property,” she said.

That annoyed the investigator part of me and comforted the granddaughter part.

We were trying to recover truth, not turn every private mistake into entertainment. The difference would matter later when Hemi wanted to release everything about Dave at once.

“He knew before the storm.”

Hui nodded.

The truth had just moved closer.

Chapter 20: Pania's Notebook

Pania's notebook made her real in a way memory had not.

I remembered her laugh.

Her warm hands.

The way she had looked at Kiki in the kitchen.

But the notebook showed her thinking.

She wrote about her grandmother teaching fragments of old knowledge quietly.

She wrote about feeling embarrassed when she was younger because other people called those stories superstition.

Then she wrote about wanting them back.

Not because everything old was automatically true.

Because losing the chance to understand was different from choosing not to believe.

Erik read some pages with me after we returned to Te Waka Tōhorā.

He understood the problem from Vardheim.

“We have old records people ignored because new systems worked better,” he said. “Then the old systems fail and everyone discovers the notes were useful.”

“That's not exactly colonisation.”

“No.”

He nodded.

“Different history. Similar problem of people deciding something old is worthless before understanding it.”

I appreciated the distinction.

Pania's final entries described unusual weather around our area.

Not weather she controlled.

Patterns of Mīharo moving through storms.

She believed certain conditions made hidden pathways easier to feel.

The night of my birthday, the conditions were strong.

Then I awakened Kiki.

I stopped reading.

A cold thought entered my head.

“Did I cause it?”

Erik answered immediately.

“No.”

“You don't know.”

“You were eight and sang a song in your backyard.”

“The storm got worse after.”

“Weather was already there.”

I knew that.

Emotion did not care.

Hemi, who had been listening from the doorway, stepped in.

“Even if your Miharo changed something, Pania made her own choices. Dave made his. Ru made his.”

I looked at him.

For once his certainty helped.

The final page ended halfway through a sentence.

IF THE STORM OPENS THE PATH TONIGHT, I WANT
TO SEE WHETHER—

Pania's notes were full of uncertainty. She wrote maybe, I think and need to test far more often than she wrote definitely. That made me trust her more, not less.

She was not presenting herself as a keeper of perfect lost knowledge. She was rebuilding carefully from family

memory, observation and what little had survived.

I wished Dave had learned from that. Uncertainty had made Pania curious. It made Dave want control.

Nothing after that.

No answer.

Only the cassette tape.

Chapter 21: Dave Was There

The cassette was not a recording of the storm.

It was worse.

Pania had recorded a conversation with Dave two weeks earlier.

Not secretly.

At the beginning she said, "I'm recording this because you keep changing your argument."

Dave laughed.

He sounded younger.

Warmer.

Like an uncle I barely remembered.

They argued about Mīharo.

Pania believed hidden knowledge should be studied carefully and brought back into family life.

Dave believed anything powerful enough to injure people needed control before celebration.

"Electricity kills too," Pania said.

“Which is why we regulate it.”

“You cannot regulate whakapapa.”

“I’m not trying to.”

“Not yet.”

The tape clicked off.

I sat in silence.

Dave’s later beliefs had not appeared from nowhere after Pania died.

He had already been uncomfortable.

The storm turned discomfort into certainty.

Hui listened with us.

When it ended, she said, “Dave told Rose he followed Pania that night.”

“Followed her where?”

“To Ru.”

That was new.

Nan closed her eyes.

“I knew Ru left the house after we got home. He said Pania needed him. I thought she had rung.”

“Dave took her there.”

“I think so.”

My anger rose.

“And nobody told us?”

Hui snapped, “We were grieving too, Aroha.”

I stopped.

Nan almost never raised her voice.

Her eyes filled.

“I lost my husband. Rose lost her father. Dave lost Pania. Nobody had the whole story, and the one person who did stopped speaking about it.”

Dave.

I looked at the tape.

For years I had thought of truth as something adults withheld from children.

Now I saw another possibility.

Sometimes adults had only pieces too.

That did not make the silence harmless.

It made it messier.

Rose later admitted she had suspected parts of the calf story for years. She had never had enough evidence to replace it with something better, and grief made asking

Dave feel almost cruel.

“I thought leaving it alone was kindness,” she said.

Sometimes silence protects people for a while.

Sometimes it protects a lie. Often it does both at once.

That was another thing the world refused to make simple for me.

“I want to ask him,” I said.

Mum, standing in the doorway, answered.

“Then you don't ask him alone.”

Chapter 22: The Meeting

Dave agreed to meet because Rose asked.

Not because I did.

That annoyed me until I saw him.

He looked older than I remembered.

Rangi Energy had made him famous enough that his face appeared in newspapers. In person he looked tired.

The meeting happened in a neutral building near the edge of the Earth Sanctuary path.

Mum sat beside me.

Dad sat on my other side.

Hui came.

Grog stood near the door.

Dave noticed him.

“So Ru's stories were true.”

Grog said nothing.

Dave looked at me.

“You're speaking.”

“Yes.”

Something moved across his face.

Relief?

Regret?

I hated that I could not tell.

I put Pania's notebook on the table.

Dave went white.

"Where did you get that?"

"Nan."

Hui said, "Answer her."

Dave sat.

For a long time nobody spoke.

Then I asked the question I had carried since I was eight.

"What happened that night?"

Dave looked at Mum.

Then Hui.

Then me.

"Pania left your party because she felt something in the storm."

My chest tightened.

“What?”

“Mīharo. She said the storm had opened a path.”

He laughed without humour.

“I thought she was excited by nonsense.”

He followed her because the weather was dangerous.

She went to an open field where the air felt charged.

Not to save a calf.

Not at first.

Pania tried to reach the Mīharo moving through the storm.

Lightning struck close.

The surge threw her to the ground.

Dave found her barely conscious.

“Why didn't you call an ambulance?” Dad asked.

Dave's face twisted.

Before Dave arrived, Grog asked what I needed from the meeting. Revenge was one possible answer. An apology was another. A confession. Information.

I chose information.

“Why?” Mum asked.

“Because he can refuse an apology. He can fake regret.
But what happened already happened.”

I wanted the shape of the truth badly enough to survive
not getting the emotional ending I imagined.

“I did. Roads were blocked. Power lines were down. I
thought Ru could help before they arrived.”

He drove her to Koro.

The story had reached the part I feared.

Chapter 23: Ru's Last Attempt

Dave did not say Ru cast a spell.

That mattered.

He said Koro tried to remember.

Pania was unconscious on the floor of Ru and Hui's back room.

Her breathing was shallow.

Dave was shouting.

Ru told him to stop.

Then Koro began with karakia he had learned when he was young.

Not magic words.

Words carrying intention, relationship and knowledge.

He tried to find the Mīharo path Pania had opened in the storm.

Dave said the room changed.

Lights flickered.

The hei tiki around Ru's neck grew hot.

Ru reached for something he had once known how to hold.

But he had spent decades away from Te Waka Tōhorā.

Much of his reo had gone quiet.

Much of his training had faded.

He kept pushing anyway.

Hui covered her mouth.

I knew what came next.

I had almost done the same thing in the balancing chamber.

Keep helping until nothing is left.

Dave's voice broke.

“I told him to stop.”

For the first time in my life, I believed him.

Ru did not stop.

The effort overwhelmed him.

His heart failed.

Not because karakia killed him.

Not because Māori knowledge was dangerous.

Because an older man under enormous stress tried to channel more than his body could carry while desperately attempting to save someone.

Pania died before the ambulance reached them.

Ru died moments later.

Dave sat between them.

Alone.

Mum was crying.

Hui was crying.

I was too.

Dave stared at the table.

“I watched magic take both of them.”

I wiped my face.

“No.”

He looked up.

“You watched two people die while using Mīharo.”

“What's the difference?”

“Everything.”

My voice shook.

“Cars kill people. Storms kill people. Electricity kills people. You don't get to turn one terrible night into proof that everyone else's Mīharo should be taken.”

Dave's face hardened.

The warmth disappeared.

“You weren't there.”

“Neither were the people you've been stealing from.”

After the meeting Hui told me something I had not known. Ru had been warned about his heart before the storm. Nothing dramatic, but enough that overexertion was already a risk.

That detail mattered because it stopped the story becoming Mīharo killed Koro.

His death sat at the intersection of age, stress, lost training, a medical vulnerability and one desperate choice. Real tragedies often have more than one cause. Dave had built a whole ideology by pretending there was only one.

Silence.

That was the moment I understood him best.

And forgave him least.

Chapter 24: What Grief Built

Dave explained Rangi Energy because he wanted us to understand he was not a monster.

That was probably true.

It did not make the explanation comforting.

After Pania and Ru died, he became obsessed with the energy he had seen.

He measured traces at the storm site.

He studied old electrical anomalies.

He used his knowledge of power systems to build detectors.

Eventually he realised Mīharo could be converted.

His first experiments used tiny amounts.

Then he found people with strong expressions.

Then he remembered me.

Mum stood so fast her chair hit the wall.

“You experimented on an eight-year-old.”

Dave flinched.

"I thought if I disconnected her early—"

"You entered my house at night."

"Rose—"

"You took my daughter's voice."

Dave looked at me.

"I did not know it would manifest that way."

"You knew I couldn't speak afterward."

"Yes."

"And you kept the system running."

He had no answer that mattered.

Project after project followed.

Each time he told himself the energy produced meant something good had come from dangerous power.

Hospitals powered.

Homes heated.

Jobs created.

Evidence, in his mind, that control worked.

"And now?" I asked.

Dave's eyes sharpened.

“Now I can make it permanent.”

Grog moved slightly.

“What does that mean?”

Dave realised he had said too much.

He stood.

“It means you should keep your sanctuaries away from my network.”

“Your network is already reaching them,” I said.

That stopped him.

For the first time, Dave looked genuinely shocked.

He had not known about Vardheim.

Dave's explanation also showed how moral language can hide inside technical language. He called extraction stabilisation. He called taking conversion. He called side effects temporary variance.

None of those phrases were technically meaningless. They were also easier to say than a child lost her voice because I experimented on her.

I began paying attention to language whenever powerful people described harm. Sometimes the choice of noun was doing half the work.

His machine was bigger than his knowledge too.

I almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

Chapter 25: Hemi's Answer

Hemi reacted exactly as I feared.

“He admitted it?”

We were back on Te Waka Tōhorā.

Moemoeā sat beside him.

Erik stood near the window.

I told them everything.

Pania.

Ru.

The mesh.

Dave's belief.

His plan to make extraction permanent.

Hemi's hands began glowing before I finished.

“Then why are we still talking?”

“Because we need to know what permanent means.”

“It means he wants us gone.”

“Our Mīharo gone.”

“Same thing.”

That sentence frightened me.

For Hemi, Mīharo had become inseparable from self.

I understood why.

It had given him belonging.

But if losing Mīharo meant losing personhood, what did that make people without it?

Moemoeā asked quietly, “What do you want to do?”

Hemi stood.

“Open the paths. All of them we can.”

Erik said, “No.”

Hemi turned.

“Your sanctuary nearly froze because nobody could reach you.”

“And you nearly started a bushfire because you opened a path without consent.”

Hemi's jaw tightened.

“One mistake.”

“A warning.”

I stepped between them.

“Dave wants one answer for everyone: remove Mīharo. You are starting to want one answer for everyone too: release it.”

Hemi laughed bitterly.

“So your balance answer is what? Ask nicely while he drains us?”

I did not have the full answer.

That was the problem.

Hemi did.

At least he thought he did.

Simple answers feel powerful when complicated ones are still being built.

He looked at me.

“You know what happened to Ru because knowledge was hidden. You know what happened to me because people disconnected from their own people. How much more evidence do you need?”

Enough to know hiding had costs.

Moemoeā challenged Hemi after I left. “If you use Aroha's pain as proof for a plan she does not agree with, you're doing something to her story too.”

That stopped him.

Hemi apologised to me the next morning. Properly. No but.

The apology mattered. So did the fact that his larger conclusion did not change. People can recognise one harmful behaviour while holding onto the belief that keeps producing versions of it.

Not enough to prove every door should be forced open.

We were looking at the same history.

We were learning different lessons.

Chapter 26: Aroha's Answer

I stopped trying to answer Hemi with the word balance.

He hated the word now.

Honestly, sometimes I did too.

Instead I wrote down principles.

Not rules for everyone.

Questions every big decision should survive.

Who chooses?

Who carries the risk?

Who benefits?

Who loses?

Can people leave?

Can they say no?

What happens if the plan fails?

Erik added one.

Does the person making the decision understand the place affected?

Piripi added another.

Who repairs the damage afterward?

Moemoeā read the list twice.

“Hemi will say this is slow.”

“It is slow.”

“Dave is not.”

“I know.”

That was our problem.

Careful systems take time.

Harm can move quickly.

We took the principles to the council.

Not as prophecy.

Not as Aroha's Rules.

As the beginning of a sanctuary agreement for shared routes.

Vardheim joined by message.

Earth Sanctuary joined.

Two smaller sanctuaries responded through old channels.

Nobody agreed on everything.

Good.

Agreement too quickly usually meant somebody was not speaking.

Hemi attended one meeting.

He listened for twenty minutes.

Then he asked, "What happens when a sanctuary refuses to help someone?"

No one had a perfect answer.

He looked at me.

"Exactly."

But he stayed for the rest of the meeting.

That mattered too.

Afterward Moemoeā took his hand.

"You didn't walk out."

"I considered it."

"Growth."

He smiled.

For a moment I thought maybe we could build something before he broke something.

The principles became more useful when people attacked them. One sanctuary asked what consent meant when a child was in immediate danger. Another asked who represented a community when leaders and residents disagreed. Vardheim asked what happened when one side withdrew consent after travellers had already crossed.

We did not solve every question.

We wrote emergency exceptions, review processes and safe-return rules. The list became less elegant and more realistic. I trusted it more because of the mess.

Then Grog arrived with a Rangi Energy document.

One phrase was circled.

PROJECT AURORA.

Chapter 27: The Truth Is Not a Weapon

We had enough truth to destroy Dave's public reputation.

Maybe.

Pania's notebook.

His admission.

Evidence of hidden extraction.

Hemi wanted everything released.

“People should know what he did.”

Mum agreed that people deserved truth.

She disagreed about throwing Mīharo into public view without a plan.

“If we expose Dave by exposing every hidden person and sanctuary, we punish the people he harmed too.”

Hemi hated that.

I understood it.

Truth could be used like a weapon.

Sometimes necessary.

Still capable of hitting the wrong person.

We chose a slower path.

Collect evidence.

Protect identities.

Understand Project Aurora.

Build sanctuary cooperation before Dave could exploit isolation.

Hemi called it cowardly.

Moemoeā told him that was unfair.

They argued for the first time in a way that did not end with either of them laughing.

Later I found Hemi alone at the harbour.

“Do you think I'm wrong about everything now?” he asked.

“No.”

“Which part am I right about?”

I sat beside him.

“People should not be forced to hide because somebody else is afraid of them. Sanctuaries should help each other. Lost knowledge should come back. Dave should be stopped.”

He looked at me.

“Then why do you fight me?”

“Because you keep deciding that being right about the reason makes you right about the method.”

He stared at the water.

I wanted him to understand.

He wanted me to agree.

Neither happened.

Across the harbour, Erik was helping Piripi repair a route marker.

Moemoeā stood farther away, watching Hemi with worry she tried to hide.

Kiki clicked softly on my shoulder.

Project Aurora waited in Grog's folder.

Dave had an answer.

We made protected copies of Pania's notebook and the Rangi evidence instead of publishing raw material. Rose kept family pages private. Engineers received technical evidence. Accord leaders received sanctuary impact data. Investigators could later receive more.

Hemi called that controlled truth.

Maybe it was.

But privacy and secrecy were not identical. I was learning to ask whether information was being protected for the vulnerable or protected from accountability. The answer changed what I thought should happen next.

Hemi had an answer.

I had questions and a set of principles.

For the first time, I wondered whether that would be enough.

The Balance

Chapter 28: Project Aurora

Project Aurora was not one machine.

That was the first problem.

It was a network plan.

Rangi Energy documents showed conversion sites connected across regions, each designed to identify, draw and stabilise unusual energy signatures.

Mīharo signatures.

My original mesh had become the model.

Dave called the next stage universal conversion.

The phrase made my skin crawl.

Mere translated the technical language.

“If it works the way he intends, Aurora will not wait for a strong Mīharo event. It will search continuously.”

“For people?” Moemoeā asked.

“For energy.”

That answer was worse.

People would become readings.

Places would become sources.

Sanctuaries would become reserves Dave did not even know existed.

Erik read a page twice.

“He thinks this will prevent future magical accidents.”

“And produce enormous amounts of electricity,” Piripi added.

Both were true.

Dave's plan was not nonsense.

That made it more dangerous.

Hospitals could run on Aurora.

Homes could be heated.

Businesses would invest.

Politicians might praise it without knowing what the hidden layer took.

Hemi threw the papers onto the table.

“Then we tell everyone.”

Grog said, "Tell them what?"

"Everything."

"Including every sanctuary location?"

Hemi's answer came slower.

"Not locations."

"Including the existence of people with Mīharo?"

Hemi hesitated again.

Aroha looked at him.

He hated secrecy.

He also knew exposure could put children like us in danger.

There was no easy version.

I looked at the Aurora diagram.

Dave had built a system that removed consent without looking violent.

No soldiers.

No cages.

Dad noticed something else in the documents: Aurora's public power system could operate without the hidden extraction layer. Not at the same output, but it could work.

That mattered because it meant stopping Aurora did not require rejecting every piece of technology Dave had built. We could separate useful engineering from theft.

Hemi disliked that idea at first. He wanted Dave's whole project destroyed. I understood the feeling. Repair is less emotionally satisfying than smashing. It is also sometimes the more responsible choice.

No public declaration.

Just infrastructure quietly deciding what belonged to whom.

That was what we had to stop.

Chapter 29: Open Roads

Hemi stopped arguing only with us.

He started talking to other people.

Students.

Young kaitiaki.

Adults whose families had lived hidden for generations.

People from smaller sanctuaries frustrated by closed routes.

They called themselves Open Roads.

Hemi claimed he did not choose the name.

Nobody believed him.

Their first meetings were reasonable.

Open more communication channels.

Share emergency routes.

Teach lost knowledge openly inside communities.

Stop treating Earth-born people with Mīharo like problems to be hidden.

I agreed with most of it.

That made everyone confused.

“So join us,” Hemi said.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because your meetings keep ending with somebody saying all closed gates are oppression.”

Hemi crossed his arms.

“A lot of them are.”

“Some communities chose privacy.”

“People choose things under fear.”

“That does not make their choice yours.”

We went in circles.

Moemoeā attended the meetings too.

Not because she agreed with everything.

Because she loved Hemi now.

They did not announce it.

They did not need to.

He waited for her after class.

She wore one of his spare bracelets.

He listened when she spoke in a way he rarely listened to anyone else.

I was happy for them.

I was also afraid of what love might ask from her later.

One evening she found me outside Te Rākau Kura.

“You think I'm choosing him over you.”

“No.”

“You thought it.”

I sighed.

“I think you're trying to keep him close enough to reach.”

She looked toward the Open Roads meeting hall.

“Is that bad?”

“No.”

I meant it.

Then I added, “As long as you remember you don't have to follow him somewhere dangerous just to prove you care.”

I attended one meeting without announcing myself as an opponent. People told stories before policy. A woman described spending thirty years thinking the strange things she sensed were signs she was unwell. A young man said his grandmother died before he believed her stories about Mīharo.

Those stories mattered.

Open Roads was not dangerous because everyone in it was reckless. It was powerful because it gave language to real isolation. If we wanted a better alternative, we had to answer that pain instead of only criticising Hemi's methods.

Moemoeā nodded.

Her face told me she already knew.

Her heart had not caught up yet.

Chapter 30: The Accord

The sanctuary agreement finally got a name.

The Accord.

Hemi hated it.

“Sounds like adults invented it.”

Adults had.

Mostly.

Representatives from Te Waka Tōhorā, Vardheim, Earth Sanctuary and three smaller sanctuaries joined through message routes.

Not every sanctuary wanted in.

That was allowed.

The Accord created three things.

Emergency contact routes.

Two-sided permission for physical crossings.

Shared warnings about threats like Aurora.

Nothing automatically opened.

Nothing permanently closed.

The point was choice.

Hemi called it a prettier lock.

Erik called it the reason Vardheim could ask for help next time without sending a twelve-year-old through the Between in stolen equipment.

They argued for twenty minutes.

I watched the adults.

Some agreed with Hemi more than they admitted.

Closed systems had failed people.

Some agreed with Erik.

Open systems had exposed people.

The Accord did not solve history.

It created a way to make the next decision with more people in the room.

That was less dramatic than prophecy.

I liked it.

The council asked me to demonstrate how a balance gate could work.

I refused to call it that.

They called it that anyway.

The gate combined Te Waka Tōhorā's flexible lattice with Vardheim's two-sided permissions.

If one side withdrew consent, the gate closed safely instead of ripping the path.

If pressure rose, routes redirected instead of forcing through.

Hemi watched the demonstration.

“Beautiful cage.”

I wanted to yell at him.

Instead I asked, “What would make it not a cage?”

He looked surprised.

Then he answered seriously.

“A way for people inside to challenge whoever controls the lock.”

That was a good point.

We added an appeal process.

Hemi blinked.

“You used my idea.”

“Yes.”

The Accord also created youth seats after Moemoeā pointed out that adults were making rules about children whose Mīharo often appeared before adulthood. I ended up with one seat and immediately regretted helping

create it because meetings were extremely long.

Still, being in the room changed things. Adults sometimes spoke about young people as risks. We could answer as people.

Representation did not guarantee agreement. It did make it harder to pretend those affected were only abstract problems.

“While disagreeing with me.”

“Terrifying, isn't it?”

For one minute, we were us again.

Chapter 31: Aurora Test One

Aurora's first large test lasted forty-three seconds.

Te Waka Tōhorā felt every one.

The sky dimmed.

Not night.

Colour.

Green leaves greyed at the edges.

Kiki fell from the air.

Rere screamed from the harbour.

My voice disappeared halfway through a sentence.

Then the pull hit.

White lines tore through the Deep Current.

Every old Earth-linked material lit at once.

Vardheim's emergency channel flashed blue-white.

The Accord gates slammed shut automatically.

That saved us.

Mostly.

Hemi dropped to his knees, both hands glowing violently.

Moemoeā grabbed him.

“Don't push back!”

He snarled, “He's taking it.”

“I know.”

“Then let me—”

“No.”

Her voice cut through him.

He stopped.

For forty-three seconds, Dave's system pulled.

Then it ended.

Colour returned slowly.

Kiki crawled weakly onto my wrist.

My voice came back as a whisper.

Reports arrived over the next hour.

Vardheim lost heat briefly but recovered.

Two smaller sanctuaries suffered path failures.

On Earth, Rangi Energy announced a successful clean-energy milestone.

No mention of grey leaves.

No mention of children losing Mīharo for seconds.

No mention of a whale screaming in another world.

Hemi stood in the council chamber shaking with rage.

“Your gates protected the sanctuaries that signed.”

He pointed at the map.

“What about everyone else?”

After the test, healers measured my voice pathway. No new permanent damage. That should have comforted me.

It did not.

I remembered being eight and having adults tell me tests were normal because nothing visible was wrong. Invisible harm is still harm.

So when Rangi Energy called the test successful because its equipment remained intact, I understood exactly whose definition of success they were using.

Nobody answered.

Open Roads gained dozens of members that night.

Aurora had just made Hemi's strongest argument for him.

Chapter 32: Two Extremes

People started asking which side I was on.

Dave or Hemi.

Control or freedom.

Aurora or Open Roads.

I hated the question.

“Neither,” I said.

Some people heard cowardice.

Some heard balance.

I meant something more specific.

Dave believed danger justified taking everyone's Mīharo without consent.

Hemi increasingly believed historical harm justified opening everyone's paths without consent.

Those were not equal harms yet.

Dave had already built a network stealing from people.

Hemi had mostly built arguments and made one serious mistake.

Pretending they were equally dangerous would have been lazy.

But the shape underneath worried me.

Both believed urgency could make other people's choice less important.

Erik understood.

"A bad future does not become harmless because it is not as bad as the current one."

"Exactly."

He looked at me.

"That sounded annoyingly wise."

"I've had bad influences."

"Grog?"

"Reweti."

We were sitting above the harbour again.

Erik had become easy company.

We could argue for an hour and then sit quietly without fixing the argument.

That was rare.

Below us, Hemi addressed an Open Roads gathering.

Moemoeā stood beside the crowd, not beside him.

I noticed.

Erik noticed me noticing.

“You worry about them.”

“Yes.”

“You cannot make Hemi choose differently.”

“I know.”

“You say that like you plan to try anyway.”

I threw a leaf at him.

He laughed.

Far below, people cheered Hemi.

His voice carried up the valley.

I also began refusing people who wanted me to publicly condemn Hemi as if he were already the same as Dave. He was not.

Dave controlled a powerful company and had harmed people for years. Hemi was a thirteen-year-old movement leader making increasingly dangerous choices. Power, scale and history mattered.

I could warn about the direction Hemi was moving without pretending every actor carried equal

responsibility. Balance required accurate weight, not false symmetry.

“No more hiding.”

The words were beautiful.

That was part of the problem.

Chapter 33: The Breach

The breach began as a protest.

Open Roads members gathered at an old Earth gate that the council had kept closed.

They wanted it reviewed under the new Accord.

Fair request.

The review had been delayed twice.

Also true.

Then someone tried to open it.

Hemi said later it was not supposed to happen that day.

I believed him.

He also did not stop it quickly enough.

The gate cracked open.

Miharo rushed toward Earth.

For three seconds, everyone cheered.

Then Aurora noticed.

White light slammed through the opening.

The gate became a funnel.

People screamed.

Hemi pushed fire against the pull.

That made it stronger.

Moemoeā shouted his name.

I reached the chamber with Erik and Grog.

The path was tearing wider.

Dave's network had found a direct sanctuary line.

“Close it!” Grog yelled.

Hemi shouted back, “If we close it now people are still inside the path.”

He was right.

Three protesters had been caught in the crossing layer.

We could not slam the gate shut.

I entered the lattice.

Gold lines tangled with white extraction.

Erik opened the emergency return route.

Moemoeā found the trapped people's signatures.

Piripi stabilised water around the chamber.

Hemi held heat below ignition.

Together we pulled the three people back.

Then I closed the route.

Aurora snapped away.

The chamber floor cracked.

Nobody died.

That felt less comforting every time.

Hemi stared at the damage.

"This is Dave's fault."

"Yes," I said.

He looked at me sharply.

"And ours."

His face closed.

"No."

There it was.

The place he could not follow me.

One of the trapped protesters was an adult who had encouraged the gate opening. Afterward he apologised to the younger members who followed him.

"I said the council was exaggerating the risk because I wanted them to be wrong," he told us.

That honesty helped.

Movements can make leaders feel certain because people around them reward confidence. Admitting uncertainty after harm is difficult. It is also how groups avoid turning one mistake into a doctrine.

Dave caused the extraction.

We caused the opening.

Both truths had to fit in the same room.

Chapter 34: Moemoeā Chooses to Stay

The council suspended Hemi from all gate access.

Open Roads protested.

Hemi did not.

He barely spoke.

Moemoeā stayed with him.

Some people thought that meant she agreed.

They were wrong.

I found them beneath our old root bench.

Hemi sat with his elbows on his knees.

Moemoeā sat opposite him.

Not touching.

“Tell me the truth,” she said.

“I didn't open it.”

“I know.”

“Then what?”

“Would you have stopped them if Aroha hadn't arrived?”

Hemi looked away.

That was the answer.

Moemoeā began crying.

Quietly.

Hemi reached for her.

She moved back.

His hand dropped.

“I love you,” she said.

The words made him look terrified.

It was the first time either of them had said it aloud.

“I love you too.”

Moemoeā wiped her face.

“That does not make me your excuse.”

Hemi's eyes filled.

“I know.”

“And I am not leaving because you're difficult.”

He laughed brokenly.

“Good.”

“But if you make me choose between you and people getting hurt, I will choose the people.”

Hemi stared at her.

Then nodded.

I stepped away before they saw me.

My chest hurt.

After I left them, Piripi asked whether Moemoeā should break up with Hemi. I told him that was Moemoeā's decision.

“But what would you do?”

I did not know.

It was easier to advise boundaries from outside somebody else's love. Moemoeā saw all the versions of Hemi I saw and some I did not. Her responsibility was not to make the choice I found easiest to understand. It was to keep her own line clear.

Not because their love was sad.

Because Moemoeā had already said the words she might one day need to keep.

I hoped she never had to.

Chapter 35: The Balance Gate

Aurora tested again before the breach chamber was repaired.

This time we were ready.

The Accord activated every signed sanctuary gate.

Vardheim held its side.

Earth Sanctuary held theirs.

Te Waka Tōhorā's lattice rerouted pressure.

The Balance Gate—yes, everyone kept calling it that—did something new.

It did not simply close.

It separated connection from extraction.

Messages stayed open.

Emergency signals stayed open.

Physical crossings paused.

Aurora's pull met no direct Mīharo source to lock onto.

Dave's network searched.

Found traces.

Lost them.

Searched again.

For five minutes the sanctuary map flashed white and gold.

Then Aurora shut down.

Cheers erupted.

I did not cheer yet.

I checked Vardheim.

Stable.

Earth Sanctuary.

Stable.

Smaller Accord sanctuaries.

One damaged, recovering.

No trapped travellers.

No grey leaves.

Then I let myself breathe.

Hemi watched from outside the gate circle.

He had no access.

He looked proud of us.

And angry.

Afterward he found me.

"It worked."

"Yes."

"For people inside your agreement."

"Yes."

"And the others?"

"We invite them."

"Invite."

He said the word like it tasted bitter.

"I won't force them."

"Even if refusing puts their children at risk?"

I thought of Erik.

The little girl in the cold room.

Every hard question Hemi kept asking.

"I will keep asking. Keep offering. Keep building ways in."

"But you won't open the door."

"Not theirs."

We published the Balance Gate design to Accord members instead of keeping it as Te Waka Tōhorā technology. Vardheim improved one safety layer within a week. Another sanctuary found a flaw in our emergency closure logic.

Sharing made the design less ours and more reliable.

Dave protected his technology through control. Hemi wanted knowledge opened without many boundaries. The Accord tried something in between but not halfway: share by agreement, credit local knowledge, allow modification, keep stop conditions.

Hemi nodded slowly.

“Then that's where we're different.”

I already knew.

Chapter 36: On the Other Side

Book Four did not end with Hemi becoming evil.

Life was not that tidy.

He still helped younger students with heat practice.

He still made Moemoeā laugh.

He still brought Piripi food when Piripi forgot lunch.

He still called me his friend.

Mostly.

But Open Roads changed.

The meetings moved out of council spaces.

Members began mapping closed paths without permission.

Hemi stopped sharing everything with us.

Moemoeā knew more than she told me.

I did not force her to choose.

Erik stayed at Te Waka Tōhorā and helped build Accord links with Vardheim.

We became closer.

Not romance.

Not yet.

Something steady.

A person who challenged me without trying to own my answer.

Dave responded to the failed Aurora test publicly by announcing the project had exceeded expectations.

Rangi Energy planned a full activation the following year.

Privately, he sent one message through the old mesh frequency.

I heard it while standing in Reweti's workshop.

"You cannot hide forever."

I answered aloud.

"I'm not hiding."

The mesh was too damaged to carry my voice back.

That was fine.

I was not speaking for him.

That evening I found Hemi at an unused gate.

He was not opening it.

Just looking.

"You okay?" I asked.

"No."

Honest.

I stood beside him.

"You?" he asked.

"No."

Also honest.

For a moment we were two kids staring at a locked door.

Then Hemi said, "Next year I'm done asking permission for people to exist."

I looked at him.

"And I'm done letting anyone decide that caring gives them the right to choose for everybody else."

He met my eyes.

Neither of us moved.

We had not become enemies.

Before I left the unused gate, Hemi gave me one last ordinary smile. "Remember when our biggest problem was the walking road?"

"You hated that road."

“Still do.”

We laughed.

That was the cruelest part of the split. Nothing erased the years before it. The friend beside me had once caught me when Dave's white thread pulled through the school. I had once sat beside him while he told us about the fire. History did not disappear just because the future had become dangerous.

That was worse.

We still loved each other.

We had simply stopped standing on the same side of the door.

MĪHARO · BOOK 4

NGĀ HAERENGA

Journeys

A stranger's arrival opens a path to another sanctuary and a much larger world.

Travelling to Vardheim, Aroha discovers unfamiliar ways of living, new connections and communities facing a shared danger. Back home, hidden records reveal painful truths about her whānau. As friendships strain and arguments about freedom and protection deepen, Aroha must help build connections that respect the people on both sides.

Niva Gram

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