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TE
MĀRAMATANGA

Clarity

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By Niva Gram

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Part 1

The Split

Chapter 1: Twelve

I turned twelve with everyone I loved in one place.

That should have felt safe.

Instead it made me count exits.

Mum noticed.

“Stop scanning the room.”

“I’m not.”

“You looked at three doors while saying that.”

She was right.

My birthday was held at the Earth Sanctuary so Rose, Krish, Hui, Ahi and Wai could all come without crossing into Te Waka Tōhorā.

Grog brought enough food for thirty people and ate enough for twelve.

Reweti came late because he claimed birthdays started too early.

Erik arrived through the Accord gate carrying a Vardheim cake that looked like a brick and tasted much better.

Hemi and Moemoeā arrived together.

Very together.

Hemi was thirteen now.

Moemoeā leaned into him without thinking. He watched her whenever she spoke. The softness between them was real.

So was everything else.

Open Roads had grown across several sanctuaries.

Project Aurora was months from full activation.

The Accord protected more people than last year and still not enough.

We were eating cake in the middle of an argument about the future of Mīharo.

Ahi, now nine, did not care.

He had discovered Erik could carve small wooden boats.

Wai, five, followed Kiki around calling her Bug Sister.

Dad tried to teach Grog a Hindi card game.

Nan accused both of cheating.

For ten minutes I let myself be twelve.

Then Hemi found me outside.

“Happy birthday.”

“You already said that.”

“This one's serious.”

He handed me a small piece of charred wood.

I recognised it from the Northland forest story.

“From the fire?”

He nodded.

“Grog kept some.”

I stared at him.

“Why give it to me?”

“Because you keep acting like I forgot what can go wrong.”

His voice was quiet.

“I didn't forget.”

I closed my hand around the wood.

Rose had also made a rule for my twelfth year: one day a week with no sanctuary work unless someone was actually dying. She said I was becoming the kind of child

who scheduled rest as if rest were another assignment.

I argued that the crisis did not respect weekends.

Mum replied that neither did burnout.

Reweti backed her, which felt like betrayal. Even Grog agreed.

So I put one empty square into every week. The fact that protecting my future required protecting ordinary time felt embarrassingly obvious once everyone else said it.

“Then don't make me watch it happen again.”

Hemi looked away.

“I can't promise that.”

It was the most honest birthday gift I received.

Chapter 2: The Year of Open Roads

Open Roads stopped being Hemi's group.

It became a movement.

That made everything harder.

Some members wanted exactly what I wanted:
emergency links, shared knowledge, fewer families cut
off from whakapapa and sanctuary support.

Some wanted every closed route reviewed.

Some wanted all routes opened.

A few had started saying ordinary Earth governments had
no right to control anything connected to Mīharo.

Hemi did not agree with the worst voices.

He also did not remove them.

"If I start deciding who gets to speak, I'm doing the same
thing as the council," he argued.

"No," I said. "Choosing not to give somebody your
platform is still a choice."

"And who decides what's too extreme?"

"You do. It's your movement."

He hated that answer.

Responsibility was easier when you could blame a system.

Moemoeā tried another approach.

She organised listening meetings where people had to describe what they wanted changed before proposing solutions.

Those meetings went better.

Hemi loved her for it.

I could see that too.

One night after a meeting, I found them sitting by the harbour.

Hemi's head rested against hers.

Moemoeā looked peaceful.

For one sharp second I wished the whole conflict would disappear so they could simply be two kids who liked each other.

Then a message bell rang.

Aurora had completed another regional test.

Three Accord sanctuaries recorded sudden Mīharo loss.

An Earth-born teenager near one test site had collapsed after a strong ability disappeared mid-use.

Nobody died.

Again.

Hemi stood.

Open Roads had newsletters now. Proper ones. Some articles were thoughtful. One explained how families could document Mīharo experiences without publishing identifying details. Another argued that Accord councils still gave too much power to older gatekeepers. I agreed with parts of both.

Then one anonymous piece called people who preferred closed sanctuaries collaborators with erasure.

Hemi did not write it. He did publish it.

I asked why.

“Because people need to hear anger too.”

“They can hear anger without you giving cruelty your letterhead.”

He hated that phrasing enough to remember it.

The peaceful boy vanished.

“How many warnings does he get?”

I had no answer he would accept.

Honestly, I did not have one I fully accepted either.

Chapter 3: Hemi and Moemoeā

Hemi and Moemoeā became official because Piripi got tired of pretending not to know.

“Are you two together or are we all supposed to keep being stupid?” he asked at lunch.

Moemoeā said, “Together.”

Hemi choked on his drink.

Apparently nobody had told him they were announcing it.

I laughed until my voice cracked.

They were good together.

That was what made what came later hurt.

Moemoeā knew when Hemi was spiralling into anger and could bring him back without making him feel controlled.

Hemi made her feel listened to in a way people sometimes forgot to do because she was easygoing.

He remembered small things.

She challenged big things.

Their love was not fake because it did not save him.

One afternoon Moemoeā asked me to walk with her.

“He's getting worse.”

There it was.

No pretending.

“Open Roads?”

She nodded.

“He hears every delay as proof. Every closed gate. Every Aurora test. Every person who says wait.”

“Have you told him?”

“Yes.”

“Does he listen?”

“Sometimes.”

Sometimes was not enough.

Moemoeā stared at the river below.

“I keep thinking if I understand him enough, I'll know what to say.”

I stopped walking.

“You are not a cure.”

She flinched.

“I know.”

“Do you?”

She looked at me.

I softened my voice.

“You can love him. You can help him. You cannot become responsible for the choice he makes after you tell him the truth.”

Moemoeā nodded slowly.

“That's horrible.”

“Yes.”

We kept walking.

Behind us, Hemi was teaching a younger child how to warm their hands without burning anything.

Moemoeā's relationship with Hemi also had ordinary bits nobody saw from outside. He remembered how she took tea. She stole the blankets. He hated when she borrowed his pencils because she chewed the ends. She loved listening to him talk about the Dutch couple even when the story was one she had heard before.

That ordinariness mattered. Later, people would reduce them to the boy who went too far and the girl who stopped him.

They had been more than the ending. Love deserves the truth about its good parts too.

Kind.

Patient.

Dangerous ideas did not erase every good thing in a person.

Good things did not make dangerous ideas safe.

Chapter 4: Erik Stays

Erik was supposed to return to Vardheim permanently after one year.

He didn't.

Not because Vardheim was still failing.

It was stable now.

Not because his family wanted him gone.

His mother sent messages every week explaining the opposite.

Erik stayed because the Accord needed people who understood more than one sanctuary system.

And because, he said, Te Waka Tōhorā had become part of his life.

“That sounds suspiciously emotional,” I told him.

“Do not tell anyone.”

He spent part of each term at Vardheim and part with us.

No one demanded he become less Vardheim to belong here.

That mattered to both of us.

One evening we worked late in the archive comparing Aurora signals against sanctuary maps.

Erik rubbed his eyes.

“You know, normal twelve-year-olds probably do not spend evenings mapping magical extraction networks.”

“Normal thirteen-year-olds?”

“Definitely not.”

“Maybe we're extremely boring.”

“You have a glowing cicada.”

Kiki clicked.

“Fair.”

We laughed.

Then stopped at the same time.

Something had changed between us over the last year.

Not suddenly.

Not lightning.

More like noticing a path had formed because you had walked it many times.

Erik looked at me for half a second too long.

I looked away first.

My face felt hot.

This was ridiculous.

I had helped stabilize a world-sized whale.

I had confronted Dave.

I could not look at a boy.

Erik cleared his throat.

“Aurora map.”

Erik and I had started swapping parts of our worlds on purpose. I learned more about Vardheim's ordinary school life, not only its runes and gates. He learned that kapa haka was not one generic performance and stopped asking questions the second he realised a topic needed someone more knowledgeable than me.

“I thought being your friend meant you knew everything Māori,” he admitted once.

“Absolutely not.”

That conversation made me trust him more. Respect was not pretending difference did not exist. Sometimes it was knowing when not to make one person explain an entire culture.

“Yes. Important.”

We both stared at the map like it had personally rescued us.

No romance happened that night.

But for the first time, I knew it might.

Chapter 5: Voices Go Missing

The first missing voice belonged to a girl named Mereana.

Not our healer Mere.

A twelve-year-old living near one of Rangi Energy's newest test regions.

She had a small Mīharo ability connected to birdsong.

Nothing dramatic.

Birds calmed when she sang.

During an Aurora test, she opened her mouth and no sound came out.

My body remembered before my mind did.

Cold throat.

Silent scream.

Doctors finding nothing.

Adults saying stress.

I had to leave the room.

Erik followed but did not speak.

Good.

After a few minutes, I said, "He's doing it again."

"Not exactly the same."

I glared at him.

"I mean the mechanism may be different. The harm is real."

I knew.

I appreciated him being precise even when I hated precision.

More reports arrived.

A man who could sense underground water lost the ability for hours.

A child who made plants bloom suddenly could not keep a seedling alive.

An elder in another sanctuary lost access to a memory path.

Most recovered after the tests ended.

Some did not fully.

Aurora was teaching itself what to take.

My original mesh had taught Dave that voice could be a doorway.

Now his network was finding other doors.

Hemi stood in the council chamber listening to every report.

When the meeting ended, he said nothing.

That scared me.

Moemoeā reached for him.

He let her hold his hand.

But his eyes were somewhere else.

Mereana wanted to help the investigation but refused to become a symbol. "I don't want every newspaper calling me the girl who lost her song," she said.

I understood immediately.

We used her measurements without her name. She decided which recordings could be shared. Her experience mattered as evidence, but she still owned her story.

Dave had once treated my voice as a resource. I was not going to repeat that by treating Mereana's pain as public property just because it helped our case.

That night Open Roads announced a new campaign.

RETURN WHAT WAS TAKEN.

I agreed with the words.

I was afraid of what Hemi meant by them.

Chapter 6: Dave's Invitation

Dave invited me to Rangi Energy.

Nobody liked that.

Mum said no before I finished reading the message.

Dad said several things in Hindi that I did not need translated.

Hui wanted to burn the letter.

Grog asked to see the envelope.

Reweti asked what Dave wanted.

That was the useful question.

The letter said he would show me Aurora before activation.

No tricks.

No extraction.

Neutral observers allowed.

He wanted me to understand what he believed he was preventing.

Hemi wanted me to go and destroy the system.

That was immediately removed from the list of sensible options.

Erik said, "He wants something."

"Obviously."

"Maybe your agreement."

"Never."

"Maybe your fear."

That was more likely.

Dave still believed if I truly understood the danger of uncontrolled Mīharo, I would choose his side.

Part of me wanted to refuse simply because he wanted me there.

Another part wanted evidence.

Real evidence.

Aurora was being built on Earth. We could not understand it only through stolen documents and sanctuary readings.

Mum finally agreed to a supervised visit.

Conditions: Rose, Krish, Grog, Mere and an independent engineer came with me. No private rooms. No medical equipment. No contact with my throat.

Dave accepted everything.

That worried me too.

Before we left, Moemoeā found me.

“Hemi thinks this is a trap.”

“Do you?”

“I think Hemi sees traps everywhere now.”

She looked tired.

“Be careful anyway.”

I promised.

Erik walked me to the Earth gate.

“Come back.”

Mum had said the same words years ago.

Before we answered Dave, Dad made us write down what information we wanted from the visit. Aurora architecture. Shutdown controls. Safety assumptions. Who could authorise changes. What happened to converted Mīharo after storage.

“Otherwise he'll control the tour and you'll leave knowing what he wanted you to know,” Krish said.

That was a very Dad kind of wisdom: practical, unmagical and exactly right.

I added one more question at the bottom.

What does Dave think success looks like if the people being protected never agreed they needed saving?

From Erik they felt different.

I looked at him.

“I will.”

I hoped that was a promise I could keep.

Chapter 7: Rangi Energy

Rangi Energy did not look evil.

I hated that.

The main facility was glass, steel and bright offices.

People carried coffee.

Engineers argued over diagrams.

A receptionist gave Wai a sticker because Mum had accidentally brought all of us to the first security checkpoint before Dad took the boys elsewhere.

Normal.

That was the point.

Dave met us in a conference room.

No guards.

No dramatic speech.

He showed us energy output charts.

Aurora had already produced enough power in tests to supply thousands of homes.

He showed us modelling of uncontrolled Mīharo events.

Fires.

Storm surges.

Infrastructure failures.

Some examples were real.

Hemi's Northland fire appeared without his name.

My stomach twisted.

Dave watched my face.

“This is what I am trying to prevent.”

“By taking from everyone.”

“By stabilising dangerous energy.”

“Mereana lost her voice.”

Dave's jaw tightened.

“Temporary side effect.”

I nearly left.

Mum grabbed my hand.

Dave took us to the Aurora control level.

The central system used a mesh architecture I recognised immediately.

Bigger than buildings.

Silver geometry repeated through the entire network.

At the centre stood a command console.

Dave touched his own throat.

A tiny silver line glinted beneath the skin.

I froze.

“You put one in yourself.”

“A control interface. Voice-authenticated.”

He sounded proud.

He had built his own version of the thing he put in me.

“Does it take your voice?”

I also noticed how many good people worked there. One engineer proudly explained a battery system that had nothing to do with Mīharo. A technician had photos of her children taped above a desk. Another worker told Mum the company paid for his training.

That complicated my anger without reducing it.

Destroying Rangi Energy carelessly would hurt people who had never seen the hidden extraction layer. Dave had wrapped harm inside a real workplace with real useful technology.

The final solution would have to separate the system from the people trapped inside it.

“No. I perfected it.”

I stared at the mesh.

Dave believed control made him safe from the harm he imposed on others.

That belief had never looked more fragile.

Chapter 8: What Dave Wants

Dave asked to speak to me in front of everyone.

No secret meeting.

He had learned at least one lesson.

“Aurora activates in six months,” he said.

“We know.”

“The Accord gates will resist it.”

“We know.”

“For a while.”

Grog shifted behind me.

Dave continued.

“Your World-Shaping ability could help me separate harmful Mīharo from harmless forms.”

I almost laughed.

“You want me to help Aurora choose what people get to keep?”

“I want you to help prevent damage.”

“Who decides harmful?”

“We build criteria.”

“Who is we?”

Dave hesitated.

That was enough.

“You,” I said.

“Experts.”

“People who built the machine.”

“People who understand risk.”

I thought of Pania.

Ru.

Hemi.

Mereana.

Every person whose life did not fit Dave's categories.

“No.”

Dave's expression barely changed.

“You haven't seen what unrestricted Mīharo can do.”

“I've seen a wildfire. I've seen failing sanctuaries. I've seen my own power nearly hurt me.”

“Then you understand.”

“I understand danger. I don't agree that danger gives you ownership.”

Dave looked tired.

“Aroha, one day someone with more power than Hemi will not stop.”

The use of Hemi's name shocked me.

“You've been watching him.”

“I watch threats to the network.”

Anger flashed through me.

Dave smiled sadly.

“There. That feeling. Imagine it with enough power to burn a city.”

I stood.

On the drive away, Mum asked whether any part of Dave's offer tempted me.

I wanted to say no immediately.

Instead I told the truth.

“The part where he says we could stop dangerous Mīharo before somebody gets hurt.”

Mum nodded.

“That's the dangerous bit, isn't it?”

She was right. Manipulation works better when it touches a fear you already carry. I had seen what uncontrolled power could do. Refusing Dave did not require pretending that danger was imaginary. It required refusing his claim that only control could answer it.

“Imagine fear with enough money to build Aurora.”

We left.

On the way out I looked back at the silver control mesh.

For the first time, I knew exactly where Dave had tied himself to his own machine.

Chapter 9: Almost

I returned to Te Waka Tōhorā exhausted.

Erik was waiting at the gate.

He did not ask about Aurora first.

He hugged me.

That was new.

I hugged him back.

Also new.

For a few seconds, the entire year disappeared.

Then Hemi arrived and ruined it.

“Are you two—”

Moemoeā covered his mouth.

“Leave.”

Hemi tried to speak through her hand.

She dragged him away.

Erik's face had gone red.

Mine probably matched.

“So,” he said.

“Aurora.”

“Yes. Safe topic.”

We walked to the ridge.

I told him about Dave's control mesh and his offer.

Erik listened.

When I finished, he said, “You did not come back because you promised.”

I looked at him.

“I came back because I wanted to.”

“Good.”

The word was quiet.

We sat with our shoulders touching.

Neither moved away.

“Aroha?”

“Yeah?”

He turned toward me.

I knew what was happening.

My heart did something ridiculous.

Then Kiki landed directly between our faces.

Erik closed his eyes.

I started laughing.

Kiki clicked proudly.

“Your insect hates me,” Erik said.

“She's protective.”

“She has terrible timing.”

Later I told Hui about the almost-kiss. This was a mistake.

Nan became unbearable.

“Erik, is it?” she said, as though she had never heard his name before despite meeting him dozens of times.

I threatened to leave.

She laughed until she cried.

The teasing was annoying and also strangely comforting. My family could make room for a first crush beside Aurora, missing voices and sanctuary politics. The world had not become so serious that every ordinary part of being twelve had to disappear.

We did not kiss.

Not then.

But when Erik took my hand on the walk back, I held on.

For the first time in years, something new in my life was frightening in a good way.

Aurora

Chapter 10: Back to the Old House

Our old house was still there.

That surprised me.

Not because houses usually vanish.

Because in my head it belonged to another life.

Mum had kept it rented while we moved between the Earth Sanctuary and ordinary life. Now, with Aurora testing nearby, Grog wanted us to check a cluster of strange readings in the area.

I stood in the backyard where everything began.

The harakeke was taller.

The lemon tree was bigger.

The place where Kiki first woke looked completely normal.

Kiki landed on the same kind of leaf and clicked.

“Do you remember?” I asked.

She clicked again.

Erik stood beside the fence trying not to look sentimental.

“This is where you made her?”

“Awakened. Accidentally.”

“Still impressive.”

I looked toward the kitchen window.

Pania had been inside cleaning.

Dave had been hiding near the garage.

Koro had been alive.

I was eight.

A low white hum moved through my throat.

Aurora.

Kiki's light dimmed.

The harakeke leaves lost a little colour.

Erik saw it too.

“It's reaching here.”

We walked the neighbourhood with Mere and Dad's measurement equipment.

Ordinary families lived ordinary lives while an invisible extraction network pulled at something they did not know existed.

A woman watered roses that had stopped flowering properly.

A boy complained birds no longer nested in the tree outside his room.

Nobody connected those things to Rangi Energy.

Maybe not every change was Aurora.

That mattered.

We recorded evidence instead of turning coincidence into certainty.

Dad found an old birthday streamer caught behind a shelf in the garage. Faded green paper, probably from when I turned eight. He held it like evidence from another century.

“We were all so stupid,” he said quietly.

I knew what he meant. Not stupid about magic. About how many things were happening inside our family that nobody knew how to name.

We took the streamer with us. I did not need every object from the past, but this one reminded me that before prophecy, extraction and sanctuaries, there had been

cake, crooked decorations and a family already trying to survive change.

By sunset, one thing was clear.

The closer we moved toward a conversion line, the weaker local Mīharo traces became.

Our old house sat inside the edge of the drain.

The place where my voice had first awakened was slowly being made quieter.

Chapter 11: Grey Aotearoa

Aurora did not turn Aotearoa grey overnight.

That would have been easier to notice.

It happened in patches.

A stream near one test site stopped carrying the faint blue Mīharo glow Piripi could usually sense.

A grove where birds gathered became strangely quiet.

People with small abilities reported feeling tired or disconnected.

Most ordinary people noticed nothing unusual.

Some noticed plenty and blamed weather, pollution, stress or bad luck.

Sometimes they were right.

We had to be careful.

Whaea Anahera reminded us that wanting Dave to be responsible for everything would make our evidence weaker, not stronger.

So we tested.

Distance from Aurora lines.

Dates of activation.

Recovery after shutdown.

Patterns across regions.

The connection held.

Hemi hated the time we spent proving what he already believed.

“People are losing themselves while you make graphs.”

Dad answered him.

“And if we accuse a company publicly without evidence strong enough to survive challenge, Dave wins.”

Hemi looked at Krish.

He respected Dad more than most adults because Dad never pretended Mīharo made ordinary engineering useless.

“How much evidence is enough?”

Dad sighed.

“More than anger. Less than perfection.”

That answer annoyed everybody.

Which meant it was probably honest.

The worst report came from Mereana.

Her voice had returned only partly.

She could speak.

She could not sing.

When birds heard her, nothing happened.

She told me she felt ridiculous mourning something nobody else could see.

I knew exactly what she meant.

“It's real because it mattered to you,” I said.

She cried.

So did I.

The data also forced us to separate environmental harm from symbolic language. Saying the land looked sad might be meaningful in a story; proving Aurora caused a specific ecological change required measurements.

So we worked with local observations rather than pretending Mīharo explained every struggling tree or missing bird.

Te ao Māori taught relationship with whenua, not an excuse to stop doing careful science. If anything, caring about a place made accuracy more important because bad claims could distract from real harm.

Afterward Hemi stood outside the room.

His hands glowed faint orange.

“I'm done waiting,” he said.

I believed him.

Chapter 12: Hemi Opens the World

Open Roads called it the Returning.

They opened seventeen small Earth paths in one night.

Not sanctuary entrances.

Miharo channels.

Places where hidden currents could flow back into landscapes Aurora had drained.

Hemi did not ask the Accord.

He asked local Open Roads groups.

To him, that was consent.

To everyone else, it depended on who counted as local.

At first the results were beautiful.

A dry stream brightened.

Birds returned to a quiet grove.

Mereana sang one note and every sparrow on a fence turned toward her.

People cried.

Hemi stood in the centre of it and looked vindicated.

Then one channel surged.

Vines grew across a road in minutes.

A second opened beneath a farm and frightened livestock.

A boy who had never shown Mīharo before released a shockwave that shattered windows when he panicked.

In Northland, fire ran blue along a wet tree line without burning the wood, then jumped into dry scrub and became ordinary flame.

Hemi raced to help contain it.

So did we.

The fire was stopped.

Nobody died.

Again.

Hemi stood blackened with soot, breathing hard.

I waited for him to say we need to stop.

Instead he said, “We opened too much in the wrong places.”

“Hemi.”

“We can adjust.”

“People didn't agree to this.”

“People never agreed to Aurora either.”

“That does not make this automatically okay.”

His face hardened.

“You saw Mereana.”

“Yes.”

“You saw the stream.”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you defending the world that took it?”

I stared at him.

Some Open Roads teams had actually consulted local people before opening channels. Those sites tended to go better because residents knew drainage, fire risk, animals, access roads and local histories that outsiders did not.

The worst problems happened where the movement treated “Earth” as one empty destination rather than thousands of particular places.

Hemi saw the pattern too.

For a moment I thought it would change his plan.

Instead he said, “Then we need better local teams.”

He kept redesigning the method around the conclusion instead of reconsidering the conclusion itself.

“I'm defending people's right not to be used by your answer either.”

For the first time, Hemi looked at me with something close to contempt.

It disappeared quickly.

I still saw it.

Chapter 13: Too Much at Once

The Returning changed Earth for six days.

Not everywhere.

Enough.

Some changes were wonderful.

Whānau who had hidden small abilities for generations found each other.

Old stories suddenly made sense to people who had thought their grandparents were speaking metaphorically.

A polluted wetland responded to a local kaitiaki group faster than anyone expected.

Children laughed at lights moving through rain.

Some changes were frightening.

Untrained people panicked.

A woman who could feel other people's emotions became overwhelmed in a supermarket and collapsed.

A teenager accidentally froze pipes through an entire building.

Emergency services had no idea what they were dealing with.

Open Roads volunteers tried to help.

Sometimes they did.

Sometimes they made things worse.

Dave went on television.

For the first time, he spoke publicly about anomalous energy events.

He did not say Miharo.

He did say danger.

Unregulated.

Escalating.

Aurora, he claimed, could stabilise it.

Hemi had handed him evidence.

Hemi knew it.

That made him furious.

“He caused the drain.”

“And you caused this surge,” I said.

“I returned what he stole.”

“Not all of that was stolen from those places.”

He stopped.

The channels had pulled from connected sanctuaries too.

Some Mīharo entering Earth came from shared currents, not Dave's stores.

Returning was not as simple as pouring water back into a river.

You had to know whose water it was.

Hemi stared at the map.

“Then we trace it.”

Hospitals became one of the clearest examples. A little Mīharo could be helpful in healing rooms where trained people understood it. A sudden surge around medical equipment was terrifying. One hospital temporarily lost power when an untrained electrical ability interacted with a backup system.

Nobody died, but surgeries were delayed.

Hemi's supporters pointed to patients whose pain eased when Mīharo returned. Both stories were real.

A policy built from only the beautiful stories would lie. A policy built from only the frightening ones would lie too.

Still adjusting.

Still refusing to stop.

Moemoeā stood behind him with tears in her eyes.

He did not see.

Chapter 14: Moemoeā's Line

Moemoeā asked Hemi to pause Open Roads.

Not end it.

Pause.

Map the damage.

Talk to affected communities.

Work with the Accord.

Hemi said no.

They argued in the Outsiders Club space where we had once written silly rules about biscuits and Kiki eating votes.

Nothing about the room had changed.

Everything about us had.

“I need you to hear me,” Moemoeā said.

“I hear you.”

“No. You're waiting for me to stop so you can explain why you're still right.”

Hemi flinched.

“People are getting their Mīharo back.”

“And other people are getting hurt.”

“We fix the parts that hurt.”

“What if the whole method is hurting?”

Hemi stared at her.

“You sound like Aroha.”

Moemoeā's face changed.

“Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Turn everyone who disagrees with you into the same side.”

Silence.

Hemi reached for her.

She stepped back.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.”

“Then trust me.”

Moemoeā began crying.

“Love is not obedience.”

Hemi closed his eyes.

She continued.

“This is my line. If you keep opening routes without people agreeing, I won't help you.”

He looked at her for a long time.

“I can't stop.”

Not won't.

Can't.

That frightened all of us.

Moemoeā took off the bracelet Hemi had given her.

She did not return it.

She held it in her fist.

“Then I can't stand beside you while you do it.”

She walked out.

After she left him, Moemoeā slept in my room at Te Waka Tōhorā for three nights. She did not want advice. Mostly she wanted somebody else there when she woke up.

On the second night she said, “I feel like I'm abandoning the kid he was.”

“You're not responsible for keeping every version of him alive.”

She knew that intellectually. Grief rarely cares what you know intellectually.

She kept Hemi's bracelet in a box beside the bed. Not wearing it. Not throwing it away. That was where she was too.

Hemi stayed.

That was the beginning of the end of them.

Not because the love disappeared.

Because love finally met a boundary Hemi chose not to respect.

Chapter 15: The Kiss

The world did not stop being dangerous because Erik kissed me.

That would have been convenient.

It happened after a long day closing one of Open Roads' unstable channels.

Nothing exploded.

Nobody nearly died.

We were simply tired.

We sat beside an Earth river while Grog and the others checked the final gate.

Erik handed me water.

Our hands touched.

Neither of us moved.

"Kiki around?" he asked.

I looked at my shoulder.

Empty.

"Probably planning something."

"Good."

Then he kissed me.

Quick.

Soft.

Terrifying.

He pulled back immediately.

“Was that okay?”

I nodded too fast.

“Yes.”

He smiled.

I started laughing.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That is obviously something.”

“I just expected it to feel more magical.”

Erik looked offended.

“I travelled between worlds.”

“Still just a kiss.”

“Rude.”

I kissed him again.

That one felt better.

When Kiki returned, she landed between us anyway.

Some things remained consistent.

We did not make promises about forever.

We were twelve and thirteen.

We liked each other.

Maybe loved each other.

The word felt huge.

I did not need to rush it.

That was something Hemi had taught me accidentally.

Strong feeling did not create a right to force the future.

Erik took my hand.

We walked back to the others.

We agreed not to turn one kiss into a dramatic declaration about our future. Erik still had Vardheim. I still had Earth, Te Waka Tōhorā and a family who would probably interrogate him if they found out.

“Are we telling Hemi?” he asked.

“Absolutely not.”

“Moemoeā?”

“She already knows.”

Erik looked alarmed.

“How?”

“Moemoeā knows everything.”

That was nearly true. Her gift had made her sensitive to shifts between people long before the rest of us admitted them.

Moemoeā saw our faces and managed a smile even though her own heart was breaking.

I hugged her.

Good things and terrible things kept happening at the same time.

Growing up, apparently, was learning how to hold both.

Chapter 16: Dave Accelerates

Dave used the Returning exactly as we feared.

Rangi Energy released footage of uncontrolled Mīharo incidents.

Not the beautiful ones.

Not the restored stream.

Not Mereana singing.

Fire.

Broken glass.

Frozen pipes.

Panicked crowds.

The footage was real.

The selection was a choice.

Public pressure changed overnight.

People wanted safety from something they had only just learned might exist.

Aurora's full activation moved forward by two months.

Three weeks away.

Hemi blamed himself for exactly seven minutes.

Then he blamed Dave.

Both were partly right.

Open Roads split.

Some members wanted to stop all mass openings.

Others wanted a larger release before Aurora could activate.

Hemi chose the second group.

Moemoeā did not return.

He looked exhausted.

Older than thirteen.

Grog offered him a way back into Accord planning if he paused operations.

Hemi refused.

“Your planning is why Dave got this far.”

Grog did not argue.

He looked sad.

That seemed to make Hemi angrier.

At the next council meeting, I laid out the problem.

If Aurora activated at full strength while Open Roads simultaneously released large Mīharo flows, the systems would collide.

Extraction against release.

Pull against surge.

The result could tear sanctuary paths apart.

“How bad?” Erik asked.

Mere answered.

“We do not know.”

Public debate became ugly quickly. Some people dismissed every strange event as nonsense. Others treated anyone unusual as a threat. A few saw business opportunity. Fear and curiosity spread faster than accurate information.

The Accord chose not to reveal sanctuary locations, but it did begin preparing plain-language explanations for affected families.

Hemi called that too little too late.

Maybe it was late. It was still better than letting Dave become the only public voice explaining what Mīharo meant.

Nobody liked that.

I did know one thing.

Dave and Hemi were now building opposite machines
around the same world.

If they both switched them on, everybody else would live
inside the result.

Chapter 17: The Wild Week

Hemi called it the Wild Week.

I hated the name.

Open Roads opened controlled channels in places where Aurora extraction was strongest.

Some worked.

That was the dangerous part.

A grey park turned green overnight.

A river recovered a lost shimmer.

Several people reported abilities returning.

Every success made Hemi more certain.

Then a channel near a town overloaded.

Rain fell upward for four minutes.

Cars stalled.

Power lines arced.

Nobody understood whether to run from the water or the electricity.

We spent twelve hours helping emergency crews without explaining the whole truth.

Hemi arrived to close the channel.

He worked beside us.

He saved people.

Then I confronted him.

“Stop opening them.”

“This one was miscalculated.”

“Stop.”

“Aurora activates in two weeks.”

“Stop.”

His eyes blazed orange.

“And then what? We trust your gates?”

“We build the return properly.”

“There is no time.”

“Then we make time by stopping both systems.”

“Dave won't stop.”

“That doesn't mean you copy him.”

Hemi stepped closer.

“I am not Dave.”

“Then prove it by listening when people say no.”

He went still.

For one second I thought I had reached him.

Then he said, “You always had a family to go home to.”

The words hit like a slap.

“Hemi—”

“You don't know what it means to have the thing that gave you belonging threatened.”

I thought of Koro.

My voice.

My whakapapa.

The hei tiki.

One Open Roads team shut itself down after the rain incident. Their leader publicly said the movement had stopped listening to its own safety warnings.

Hemi called the statement panic.

Moemoeā called it accountability.

I read it three times because leaving a movement you helped build takes a different kind of courage than joining one. People often stay inside failing plans because

admitting the plan failed feels like admitting they are bad people.

Those volunteers showed another option: change your mind while there is still time.

He was wrong.

But pain had made his world small enough that only his version counted.

He closed the channel.

Then he walked away from me.

Chapter 18: Three Weeks Until Aurora

The final plan began with one sentence.

Do not fight extraction with release.

If Aurora pulled and Open Roads pushed, the world became the rope in a tug-of-war.

We needed a third action.

Return.

Not release Mīharo everywhere.

Not let Dave collect it.

Trace what Aurora had taken and send each current back toward its source.

Mereana's voice to Mereana.

A wetland's Mīharo to that wetland.

Vardheim's heat-current to Vardheim.

Te Waka Tōhorā's Deep Current to Te Waka Tōhorā.

No giant reservoir.

No owner.

A woven return map.

The idea came from Whaea Rina's old patterns and the sanctuary lattice.

Erik added Vardheim's permission gates.

Dad helped us understand Aurora's Earth infrastructure.

Reweti mapped living pathways.

Piripi traced water.

Moemoeā could sense people-linked currents better than any of us.

Grog coordinated the Accord.

Even Open Roads members who had left Hemi offered data from their channels.

The plan was enormous.

It might fail.

But it did not require Dave or Hemi to win.

We called it the Return Weave.

Hemi heard about it within a day.

He sent me one message.

TOO SLOW.

I replied.

STILL YOUR CHOICE TO HELP.

He did not answer.

Aurora activation moved closer.

So did something else.

Open Roads maps showed Hemi gathering routes around one of the oldest sanctuary junctions.

A source gate.

If he opened it during Aurora, he could release more Mīharo than all seventeen Returning channels combined.

Moemoeā looked at the map.

The Return Weave also included a refusal layer. If we could not trace a stolen current with enough confidence, we would not send it anywhere until we knew more.

Hemi hated that when he heard.

“So some people stay without what was taken?”

“Temporarily.”

“Easy to say when your voice came back.”

That hurt.

It was still the right safeguard. Returning something to the wrong person or place because we wanted a complete success story would create a new theft wearing the clothes of repair.

Her face went white.

“I know where he's going.”

Three weeks until Aurora.

Less time until Hemi.

The Choice

Chapter 19: The Source Gate

The Source Gate was not a giant container of magic.

Hemi seemed disappointed when we explained that.

It was older and stranger.

Deep inside the sanctuary network, several ancient routes crossed near a place where Earth and hidden worlds touched more closely than usual.

Te Waka Tōhorā records called it a source because people could hear many currents there.

Vardheim records called it a crossing-heart.

Other sanctuaries used other names.

Nobody owned it.

That was important.

Hemi wanted to use it to push Mīharo back toward Earth during Aurora's activation.

His theory was simple.

If Dave's network pulled, a larger outward flow would overwhelm it.

“Like flooding a pump,” Dad said.

Hemi smiled.

“Exactly.”

Dad did not smile.

“Pumps break. So do pipes.”

The sanctuary routes were the pipes.

People were connected to them.

Land was connected to them.

If Hemi flooded the network, nobody knew where pressure would go.

He knew that.

He had decided the risk was worth it.

I found him at the Source Gate with six Open Roads members.

No weapons.

No villains in dark cloaks.

Just people who were terrified Aurora would erase part of them.

Hemi looked exhausted.

"I knew you'd come."

"Then you know what I'm going to say."

"Your weave is too slow."

"Your plan could tear routes apart."

"Aurora will tear them apart anyway."

"We don't know that."

"Exactly."

He used uncertainty as permission.

I used it as a reason to be careful.

Same unknown.

Different choice.

Hemi touched the old stone beside the gate.

"This was here before Dave. Before councils. Before all these locks."

"And before you."

His eyes hardened.

"I'm trying to give it back."

The Source Gate chamber held records from several eras, and none described it as a reservoir. One old Te Waka Tōhorā note warned against “mistaking crossing for possession.” Another Vardheim note described people who tried to draw too much through the junction and damaged routes for years.

History had already seen versions of Hemi's idea.

That did not mean history made the decision for us. It did mean we would be arrogant to act as if we were the first people clever enough to discover a powerful shortcut.

“To who?”

He opened his mouth.

No answer came quickly enough.

That was the question everything depended on.

Chapter 20: Hemi's Plan

Hemi finally showed me the full plan because Moemoeā asked him to.

He still answered her.

That mattered.

Open Roads had mapped hundreds of small channels.

At Aurora activation, they would open them in sequence.

The Source Gate would provide the main pressure.

Mīharo would move toward Earth faster than Aurora could take it.

If the extraction system overloaded, Dave's network would fail.

On paper, parts of it made sense.

That frightened me more than a ridiculous plan would have.

“What stops the flow after Aurora breaks?” Erik asked.

Hemi pointed to local Open Roads teams.

“They close their channels.”

“And the Source Gate?”

“I close it.”

Moemoeā looked at him.

“If you can.”

Hemi's face tightened.

She continued.

“I'm not insulting you. I'm asking.”

He looked down at the maps.

“I can.”

He needed to believe that.

The entire plan depended on Hemi being able to control more Mīharo than he had ever held.

That was exactly the kind of plan we had spent years learning not to build.

One powerful person.

One critical point.

No safe failure.

I said it.

Hemi stared at me.

“Your Return Weave depends on you.”

"No. It depends on dozens of people and closes if I fall out."

"Because you built it that way."

"Yes."

"You don't trust yourself?"

"Not enough to make everyone else depend on me being perfect."

The room went quiet.

Hemi laughed sadly.

"That's the difference between us."

I thought he meant courage.

I realised he meant trust.

We tested a scale model of Hemi's idea using harmless training currents. The overload worked exactly once. It broke the mock extractor and also cracked two of the four route channels feeding it.

Hemi pointed out that the extractor had failed.

I pointed at the broken channels.

"Replaceable," he said.

"People are not."

The model could not settle the argument because Hemi and I were measuring success differently. He measured whether Dave's system died. I measured what survived around it.

Hemi trusted himself more than systems because systems had failed him his whole childhood.

I trusted shared systems more because I had learned what happened when one person decided they knew best.

Neither belief came from nowhere.

Only one of our plans gave other people a way to stop us.

Chapter 21: Moemoeā Goes to Him

Moemoeā went to the Source Gate alone.

Not secretly.

She told us exactly where she was going.

“If I bring a group, he'll hear an intervention before I open my mouth.”

I wanted to argue.

Then I remembered all the times people had turned Hemi into a problem before letting him be a person.

So we waited nearby.

Moemoeā found him sitting beside the closed gate.

The bracelet he had given her was wrapped around her wrist again.

Not because everything was fixed.

Because she still loved him.

“Come home,” she said.

Hemi smiled weakly.

“Which one?”

The question was cruel without meaning to be.

Moemoeā sat beside him.

“Te Waka Tōhorā.”

“They suspended me.”

“From gates. Not from being loved.”

Hemi looked away.

“You left.”

Moemoeā breathed in slowly.

“I stopped helping the plan. I did not stop loving you.”

“Feels the same.”

There it was.

The wound beneath everything.

For Hemi, boundaries still felt like abandonment.

Moemoeā knew it.

She did not surrender hers.

“I can stay beside you while you are angry,” she said. “I can stay while you disagree with me. I cannot stand beside you while you choose for thousands of people.”

Hemi's eyes filled.

“What if I'm right?”

“Then being right still doesn't make them yours.”

He cried then.

So did she.

I learned about that part later.

What mattered was the ending.

Moemoeā held out her hand.

“Come back with me.”

Hemi stared at it.

For a long time, I thought he would take it.

He did not.

“I can't.”

Moemoeā stood.

When Moemoeā returned, she did not describe Hemi as lost. She hated that word.

“He's right there,” she said. “He's making choices I hate. That's different from disappearing.”

That was important. Calling somebody lost can make other people feel noble for giving up on them or entitled to drag them back. Hemi remained responsible for his decisions precisely because he was still a person inside them.

Moemoeā could grieve who he was becoming without pretending he had stopped existing.

“No.”

Her voice shook.

“You won't.”

She walked back to us alone.

Chapter 22: No More Middle

A reporter from an Accord sanctuary asked whether I was still trying to find the middle between Dave and Hemi.

I nearly shouted.

Instead I answered carefully.

“Balance is not the middle.”

People kept misunderstanding that word.

If one person steals and another person wants to return what was stolen by flooding everyone's houses, the balanced answer is not half a theft and half a flood.

You stop the theft.

You return what belongs to people.

You do not create a second harm just to make the first harm symmetrical.

Dave was actively taking Miharo without consent.

That had to stop.

Hemi was actively preparing to release Miharo through people and places without their consent.

That had to stop too.

The fact that Dave had done more harm did not give Hemi a free pass to create his own.

The fact that Hemi had real reasons did not make Dave's fear reasonable policy.

Balance meant relationship.

Whenua and people.

Whakapapa and choice.

Protection and freedom.

Not equal amounts.

Enough for each relationship to remain alive.

Reweti listened to my answer afterward.

"You finally stopped using the word like a scale."

"Only took four books."

He laughed.

Then he became serious.

"World-Shaping will ask one more thing from you."

I groaned.

"Of course it will."

"You will have to choose what you refuse to shape."

I frowned.

My answer circulated through the Accord and was immediately shortened into “Aroha chooses balance,” which proved people could turn anything back into a slogan.

I asked the communications team to publish the longer version too.

Not because I thought everyone would read it. Because complicated positions deserve at least one place where they are allowed to remain complicated.

Hemi had slogans. Dave had corporate language. I wanted our side to resist pretending clarity required removing every uncomfortable detail.

He pointed toward the Return Weave.

“You can probably force parts of this world into order now. That does not mean you should.”

The final lesson was not how much I could change.

It was where I would stop.

Chapter 23: The Thing Dave Forgot

Aurora had one enormous flaw.

Dave thought Mīharo was energy.

He was not completely wrong.

That was why his machines worked.

But Mīharo was not only energy.

It carried relationship.

Mereana's voice was linked to birds, place and memory.

Hemi's fire was linked to emotion, body and belonging.

Te Waka Tōhorā's currents were part of living systems.

Vardheim's warmth belonged to stone, water and generations of local design.

Aurora measured power and ignored connection.

That created a trail.

Every stolen current still leaned toward where it belonged.

Weakly.

Sometimes almost invisibly.

But the connection remained.

That was why my voice had never truly disappeared.

Dave had diverted it.

He had not changed whose it was.

The Return Weave could follow those relationships.

Not perfectly.

Enough.

“Like whakapapa,” Hui said when I explained it.

We were sitting at the Earth Sanctuary kitchen table.

“You can lose contact. You can forget names. That does not mean the relationship never existed.”

I looked at her.

“That's it.”

Nan smiled.

“Obviously.”

Of course she said obviously after we had spent months building equations.

Dad laughed.

We redesigned the weave around source relationships rather than energy strength.

That meant Aurora's largest stores would not simply dump into the nearest open channel.

Tracing relationship also meant accepting that some currents belonged to groups rather than single individuals. A community water pathway could not be “returned” to one person. A sanctuary current needed local people to decide how it re-entered their system.

The Return Weave therefore stopped at certain gates and asked.

That slowed everything.

Good.

If our repair became faster by removing the people who had to live with it, we would be rebuilding Dave's logic with prettier language.

Each current would search for its own strongest living connection.

Return, not release.

Dave had forgotten that taking something did not make it his.

Hemi was forgetting the same thing from the opposite direction.

Chapter 24: I Love You

Erik said I love you while we were arguing about emergency gates.

Very romantic.

I had proposed closing Vardheim's physical crossing during Aurora activation.

He thought we needed one evacuation route open.

We had spent twenty minutes disagreeing.

Then he said, "I love you, but that plan is terrible."

Silence.

Erik froze.

I froze.

Kiki clicked once.

"Did you just—"

"No."

"You did."

"I was speaking generally."

"Generally about loving me?"

His entire face turned red.

I started laughing.

“This is terrible,” he muttered.

“Extremely.”

Then I stopped laughing.

Because I loved him too.

Not forever promises.

Not adult love.

Not I will become whatever you need.

I loved the way he questioned me.

The way he belonged to Vardheim and Te Waka Tōhorā
without giving either one up.

The way he asked before kissing me.

The way he could sit beside fear without turning it into a
command.

“I love you too,” I said.

Erik looked stunned.

“But your evacuation route is still wrong.”

He stared.

Then laughed so hard he had to sit down.

We eventually built two emergency routes with separate controls.

Compromise based on evidence.

Not romance.

After the accidental declaration, Erik wrote to Ingrid before I could. Apparently his mother had a rule that he was required to report major injuries, sanctuary disasters and first relationships.

“Those are not the same category,” I said.

“Tell her.”

Ingrid's reply arrived within an hour: ABOUT TIME.

I wanted to disappear into the Between.

Erik was delighted.

Love did not make the crisis smaller, but it gave us something the crisis was not allowed to define.

That distinction was important.

Loving Erik did not make him right.

Loving Hemi had not made Hemi right either.

Maybe love worked best when it did not demand that.

Chapter 25: The Gate Opens Early

Hemi opened the Source Gate early.

Not fully.

A test.

That was what he called it.

The pulse reached every sanctuary connected to the old network.

Te Waka Tōhorā's Deep Current surged.

Vardheim's heat channels spiked.

On Earth, people with Mīharo reported sudden bursts of power.

Aurora detected the pulse immediately.

The network answered.

Pull.

Push.

For twelve seconds the two systems fought.

The Between tore open in three places.

One Accord message route vanished completely.

Rere was thrown against a harbour wall.

Kiki dropped unconscious.

I felt my voice split into static.

Then Hemi closed the Source Gate.

Everything stopped.

Twelve seconds.

Enough.

We reached him before Open Roads could leave.

Moemoeā saw Kiki in my hands.

Her face changed.

Hemi looked sick.

“I didn't know Aurora would answer that fast.”

“We told you.”

“You guessed.”

Erik stepped forward.

“And you guessed harder.”

Hemi's hands ignited.

Grog moved between them.

“Enough.”

Hemi put the fire out.

Good.

Then he looked at me.

“The test proves Aurora can be overloaded.”

I could not believe him.

“It nearly tore the network.”

“For twelve seconds.”

“Exactly.”

“Then we make the release cleaner.”

Moemoeā whispered, “Hemi, stop.”

He looked at her.

For one heartbeat, the old Hemi returned.

Then he shook his head.

“I can't let Dave win.”

There it was.

The test also injured Hemi. He hid it at first. A white burn-like line appeared along one forearm where Aurora's pull had crossed his fire current.

Mere treated it and warned that another direct collision could damage his Mīharo pathway permanently.

Hemi heard the warning.

He chose to continue anyway.

That detail would matter later because nobody could honestly say he had never been told the danger. Being informed did not guarantee a safe choice. It did make responsibility clearer.

Not save people.

Not return Mīharo.

Win.

The cause had become a war.

Chapter 26: Forty-Eight Hours

Aurora activation moved forward again.

Forty-eight hours.

Dave claimed the instability caused by Open Roads proved delay was dangerous.

Hemi claimed the acceleration proved the Return Weave would never be ready.

Both used the other as evidence.

We stopped arguing and prepared.

The Accord assigned roles.

Grog coordinated sanctuary gates.

Reweti and Whaea Rina managed the living lattice.

Dad and Freja tracked Aurora infrastructure.

Mere monitored people-linked currents.

Piripi controlled water pathways.

Erik held the Vardheim side and our emergency routes.

Moemoeā joined the Return Weave team.

Her ability to sense emotional and personal connections had become essential.

I anchored the shaping layer.

Not alone.

Never alone.

Rose and Hui stayed at Earth Sanctuary with Ahi and Wai.

Mum hated that.

She wanted to be beside me.

I wanted her safe.

We argued.

Then I remembered everything I believed about choice.

“What do you want?” I asked.

Mum looked surprised.

“To help where I'm useful.”

She joined communications between Earth families and the Accord.

Of course she did.

Krish kissed my forehead.

Hui touched the hei tiki.

“Ru gave you a taonga, not a job description,” she said.

“Come home after.”

I promised to try.

Across the network, Hemi prepared the Source Gate.

Moemoeā stared at his signal.

“He's going to do it.”

We recorded personal stop conditions too. If my body temperature dropped sharply, Reweti would remove me from the shaping layer even if I objected. If Erik lost contact with Vardheim, his local team would take over. If Moemoeā became overwhelmed by too many person-linked currents, Mere would cut her feed.

Everyone had a replacement.

Even me.

I insisted on that.

A world-saving plan that collapses because one twelve-year-old faints is not a responsible plan, no matter how impressive the twelve-year-old feels.

“Yes.”

She closed her eyes.

When she opened them, something had changed.

“Then I know what I have to do.”

Chapter 27: The World-Shaper's Choice

The night before Aurora, I stood inside the balancing chamber alone for exactly five minutes.

Not to save the world.

To decide what I would do when the plans failed.

Because plans fail.

Dave would adapt.

Hemi would push harder.

Routes would break.

Somebody would ask me to use more power than the design allowed.

What would I refuse?

I placed my hand on the spiral platform.

Gold lines opened.

Te Waka Tōhorā breathed around me.

I felt Earth faintly through old connections.

Whenua.

Water.

People.

Voices.

Vardheim's cold stone.

Rere in the harbour.

Kiki recovering on my shoulder.

Mīharo did not feel like a substance.

It felt like relationships carrying energy through them.

Dave's choice was to own the energy.

Hemi's choice was to free the energy without asking the relationships.

My choice would be to return what could be traced and leave what was not mine to direct.

Even if that meant some Mīharo stayed lost for now.

Even if it meant the ending was imperfect.

I would not force a person open.

I would not drain a person closed.

I would not save the world by treating it like an object.

Reweti entered quietly.

“Decided?”

“Yes.”

“Scared?”

“Very.”

“Good.”

I looked at him.

“You always say that.”

“Fear reminds powerful people they can be wrong.”

He touched the platform beside my hand.

The gold lines steadied.

Tomorrow Dave would activate Aurora.

Hemi would open the Source Gate.

Before leaving the chamber, I touched Ru's hei tiki and thought about what he had done on the night Pania died. He had tried to carry more than he could because there was nobody beside him who knew enough to share the load.

I did not judge him for that.

I also refused to copy it.

My whakapapa did not demand that I repeat my ancestors. It gave me relationships, lessons and unfinished knowledge. Honouring Ru could mean making a different choice because I knew how his ended.

Moemoeā would face the boy she loved.

And I would have to make the World-Shaper's choice.

Not between Dave and Hemi.

Between ownership and relationship.

Giving It Back

Chapter 28: Aurora

Aurora activated at 6:00 in the morning.

For half a second, nothing happened.

Then the world pulled.

Every Miharo pathway I could feel tightened toward Earth.

The Deep Current screamed through the soles of my feet.

Vardheim's blue gate flared.

Rere thrashed in the harbour.

Kiki's wings went dark.

Across the Return Weave, voices shouted readings.

“North route dropping.”

“Vardheim holding.”

“Earth Sanctuary stable.”

“Two unsigned sanctuaries showing heavy loss.”

Dave's network had become enormous.

It reached farther than any test.

White extraction lines appeared across the sanctuary map like cracks in glass.

Then Hemi opened the Source Gate.

Gold-orange Mīharo surged the other way.

Pull met push.

The Between tore open.

Three Accord gates failed at once.

One river on Te Waka Tōhorā lifted from its channel and hung in the air.

On Earth, reports came in of storms forming from clear skies.

Aurora's output doubled.

Hemi had hoped to overload it.

Dave's system adapted.

It drank the surge.

“He's feeding Aurora!” Dad shouted through communications.

That was the nightmare.

The more Hemi released, the more energy Dave had to convert.

Hemi could not see the full network from the Source Gate.

We could.

“Tell him to stop,” I said.

Moemoeā was already running.

The Return Weave shook beneath my hands.

Reweti shouted, “Aroha, stay here.”

Every part of me wanted to follow her.

The first public signs on Earth were confusing. Lights flickered in several cities. Animals behaved strangely near conversion corridors. Some people with no known Mīharo felt nothing at all. Others became dizzy or heard sounds nobody around them could hear.

That unevenness made emergency messaging difficult.

Mum's team kept repeating the same instruction: do not assume every unusual event is supernatural, but do not dismiss people reporting something they cannot explain.

Careful language was slower than panic. We used it anyway.

I stayed.

The pressure also tested the friendships holding our plan together. Erik's Vardheim team lost one instrument and

had to work from older measurements. Piripi's water readings contradicted the first lattice model. For several minutes nobody knew whether a rising gold line meant the Return Weave was working or a sanctuary route was failing.

We said what we knew, what we guessed and what we did not know. That discipline felt almost painfully slow while the world shook. It was still safer than pretending certainty because everyone was frightened.

That was my job.

World-Shaping was not doing every important thing yourself.

Sometimes it was trusting the person who had to do the thing you could not.

Chapter 29: Hemi

Hemi stood inside the Source Gate surrounded by fire that did not burn him.

Miharo poured through his body faster than he had ever carried it.

He looked magnificent.

He looked terrified.

Moemoeā stopped at the edge of the circle.

“Hemi.”

He turned.

For one second his face softened.

“You shouldn't be here.”

“Close it.”

“Aurora's taking everything.”

“You're feeding it.”

“No.”

“We can see the readings.”

Hemi's expression changed.

The possibility entered.

Then he rejected it.

“Dave wants us to stop.”

“This isn't about what Dave wants.”

“It always is.”

There was the trap.

Hemi could no longer imagine an action outside the war.

If Dave benefited from stopping, stopping had to be wrong.

Moemoeā stepped closer.

“Look at me.”

He did.

“I love you.”

His eyes filled.

“I know.”

“Then hear this. People are getting hurt. You are making it worse. Close the gate.”

Hemi's fire flickered.

The Source Gate groaned.

For one heartbeat, the flow slowed.

Then a white Aurora line struck through the open path.

Hemi screamed.

He pushed back instinctively.

The gate widened.

Moemoeā shouted his name.

“I can't close it now!”

There it was.

The plan had reached the point every safe design was meant to prevent.

The person in control could no longer stop the system.

Hemi looked at his own hands.

Fire and white extraction twisted together around them.

“Help me.”

Moemoeā moved.

Then Hemi saw the gate behind her beginning to collapse.

Fear turned back into determination.

Later we learned that several Open Roads members had begged Hemi to stop before Moemoeā arrived. He heard them as fear. One adult member left the chamber rather than help widen the gate.

That mattered because Hemi was not swept along by a crowd. By the final moment, the crowd was beginning to pull back and he was the one holding the plan together.

Leadership had turned into isolation while he still called it commitment.

“No. Keep it open.”

Moemoeā could also see that Hemi was in physical pain. The white burn on his arm had reopened, and the Source Gate was pushing heat back through him faster than his body could release it. If he held the connection long enough, he might lose his Mīharo anyway—or something worse.

She told him.

He said, “Then at least it will mean something.”

That sentence broke her heart. Hemi had begun treating his own destruction as acceptable evidence of commitment. A cause that requires you to stop valuing your own life can feel heroic from inside it. From outside, Moemoeā saw a boy she loved disappearing beneath the idea that suffering proved he was right.

He had asked for help and taken it back in the same breath.

Moemoeā understood.

There would not be another clean chance.

Chapter 30: Moemoeā's Choice

Moemoeā had prepared for this possibility without telling Hemi.

She hated herself for that.

After the twelve-second Source Gate test, Mere and Grog had taught her an emergency severance pattern.

Not a punishment.

A last-resort way to disconnect one person from a shared Mīharo current if their link became the point through which catastrophic harm was travelling.

It had never been designed for someone you loved.

It could be permanent.

Hemi saw the pattern forming in her hands.

His face changed.

“Don't.”

Moemoeā was crying.

“Close it.”

“I can't.”

“Then let go.”

“If I let go, Dave wins.”

The Source Gate split another metre.

Across the network, a sanctuary route vanished.

Moemoeā whispered, “This isn't about winning.”

Hemi reached for her.

Fire wrapped around his arm.

Not attacking.

Begging.

“Please.”

She almost stopped.

Then she remembered the promise she had made years earlier.

If you make me choose between you and people getting hurt, I will choose the people.

Moemoeā placed both hands against his chest.

The severance pattern closed.

Hemi screamed.

Not from burning.

From absence.

The fire vanished.

Every orange line around him went dark.

The Source Gate snapped shut halfway.

Aurora's white current lost its strongest incoming surge.

Hemi collapsed into Moemoeā's arms.

She held him.

"I'm sorry."

He grabbed at the air with shaking hands.

Nothing answered.

"What did you do?"

Moemoeā could barely speak.

"I stopped the connection."

Hemi tried again.

No heat.

No flame.

No Mīharo.

His face broke.

Moemoeā broke with him.

She had stopped the danger.

The severance did not erase Hemi's memories of Mīharo. That made the loss sharper. He could remember exactly how warmth once gathered in his palms and feel nothing when he reached for it.

Moemoeā did not tell him to be grateful she saved lives. She did not ask him to forgive her.

She accepted that doing the necessary thing did not entitle her to feel good about the consequence.

Some choices can be right and still leave grief behind.

She had also taken from him the thing he believed made him belong.

When the severance closed, Moemoeā felt the connection vanish too. Her own gift had always let her sense Hemi more clearly than most people. The familiar warmth of his Mīharo simply stopped.

For one panicked second she thought she had killed him.

Then he breathed.

Ordinary breath. Ordinary heartbeat. Hemi without fire.

She pressed her forehead against his and kept saying his name until he looked at her. The first thing she protected after taking away his power was the truth that he was still a person.

There was no cheering.

No victory.

Only two thirteen-year-olds on the floor of an ancient gate, holding each other while one of them realised his magic was gone.

Chapter 31: The Last Open Path

Hemi was out of the Source Gate.

Aurora was still running.

Without his surge feeding it, the extraction network settled into its original pattern.

That was our chance.

“Return Weave ready,” Erik called.

Vardheim answered blue.

Earth Sanctuary answered green.

Te Waka Tōhorā's lattice opened gold.

Smaller Accord sanctuaries joined one by one.

Not every path.

Enough.

The stolen Mīharo stored inside Aurora appeared across our map.

Thousands of threads.

Some bright.

Some nearly invisible.

Mereana's voice.

Vardheim's lost heat.

Wetland currents.

Te Waka Tōhorā's weakened lines.

People we did not know.

Places we might never see.

The weave began tracing relationship instead of strength.

“Do not pull,” Reweti reminded me.

I almost laughed.

Five books and he still had to say it.

I placed my hands on the balancing platform.

The world opened.

White extraction lines.

Gold return routes.

Blue permissions.

Living connections beneath all of them.

I did not grab the stolen Mīharo.

I made paths home visible.

Other people did the same.

Erik held Vardheim.

Piripi held water.

Whaea Rina held pattern.

Reweti held structure.

Mere held people-linked currents.

Dad tracked the physical network.

Mum coordinated Earth messages.

Hui sat with Mereana and other affected families.

Moemoeā stayed beside Hemi.

Nobody had an unimportant job.

The first stolen thread turned.

Then another.

Aurora noticed.

Dave's voice came through the central control line.

“Stop.”

I kept the weave open.

“Aroha, you will destabilise the entire grid.”

Dad shouted through communications.

“He's bluffing. Physical grid is isolated.”

Good.

The unsigned sanctuaries were the hardest. We could detect stolen currents connected to them but had no permission to push a return through closed gates. We sent signals instead.

Some answered immediately.

Some did not.

One explicitly refused until it understood the system better.

We respected the refusal even while Aurora kept pulling.

That was the principle under maximum pressure: consent only means something if you still respect it when saying yes would be more convenient for your plan.

Dave tried another command.

The return process exposed another difficult truth: some stolen Mīharo had changed while stored. Currents had mixed inside Aurora. We could trace most of them, but not perfectly. We marked uncertain threads and held them rather than inventing certainty.

Nobody liked leaving repair unfinished.

Reweti reminded us that unfinished and failed were not the same thing.

Future healers, engineers and communities could keep working. The need for an ending did not give us permission to make irreversible guesses just so the story could feel complete.

The white lines tightened.

His voice mesh lit.

The final fight had moved to him.

Chapter 32: Aroha and Dave

Dave appeared through the Aurora control link like a reflection in broken glass.

Not physically in our chamber.

Close enough.

His control mesh made his voice part of the network.

That was why I could hear him.

“You do not understand what you're releasing.”

“I'm not releasing it.”

“Same thing.”

“No.”

I showed him the map.

Threads returning along specific connections.

“Mereana's voice goes to Mereana. Vardheim's current goes to Vardheim. Te Waka Tōhorā's goes home.”

Dave stared.

For the first time, he understood the difference.

“And the dangerous ones?”

“Belong to people who need support learning how to carry them.”

“Like Hemi?”

Pain flashed through me.

“Hemi was stopped.”

“After nearly tearing the network apart.”

“Yes.”

“You proved my point.”

“No. Hemi proved powerful people need boundaries.”

I looked directly at him.

“So did you.”

Dave's face hardened.

Aurora pulled harder.

“Pania is dead because nobody controlled this.”

There it was.

The oldest wound.

“Pania is dead because a storm, a dangerous choice and a terrible emergency happened at once. Ru is dead because he pushed himself past what he could carry trying to save her.”

“Magic killed them.”

“Grief built Aurora.”

Dave flinched.

I continued.

“I understand why you're afraid.”

His eyes filled.

“Then stop.”

“No.”

Understanding was not surrender.

Forgiveness was not required.

Dave also tried one final argument that nearly worked on me. He showed projections of future Mīharo accidents if Aurora stopped completely.

Some were plausible.

There would be future fires. Future children frightened by abilities they did not understand. Future adults using power badly.

Stopping Dave did not solve risk.

That was never the promise.

Our answer had to be training, support, local safeguards and accountability—not pretending danger disappeared

because we rejected forced extraction. Freedom without preparation had failed under Hemi. Control without consent had failed under Dave.

Love was not obedience.

For a moment Dave looked at me not as a threat or a child, but as his niece. I saw the man who had once stood awkwardly at my birthday barbecue beside Pania. The version of him who might have lived a different life if grief had not hardened into certainty.

That person was not an excuse either.

We are made by what happens to us and by what we repeatedly choose afterward. Dave had years of chances to stop. He had built machines instead.

Feeling sadness for the life he could have had did not require giving him the life he was taking from everyone else.

All the lessons had become the same lesson.

I opened the Return Weave wider.

Stolen Mīharo began leaving Aurora.

Chapter 33: Giving It Back

Aurora fought the Return Weave because that was what Dave built it to do.

Hold.

Convert.

Own.

Every current that turned homeward made the system search for another anchor.

Dave's command mesh was the strongest one left.

The same basic design he had put in my throat when I was eight.

His version was newer.

Safer, he had said.

Perfected.

The silver line at his neck began to glow.

Dave touched it.

For the first time, fear entered his voice.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing to you.”

That was true.

I was returning stolen currents.

Aurora was choosing its own controller as the final route to hold them.

Dave shouted an override.

The mesh tightened.

His voice cracked.

He could shut Aurora down manually.

Dad saw it on the control diagram.

“Dave! Kill the central hold!”

If he did, the stored currents would release into the Return Weave.

Aurora would be over.

Dave stared at the command.

He could save his voice.

He could not save the project too.

He chose the project.

“Override,” he tried again.

Only half the word came out.

The control mesh flashed white.

I wanted to stop.

For one terrible second I was eight again, waking with silence in my throat.

Then Mereana's thread turned home.

A wetland current followed.

Vardheim's heat.

Rere's stolen light.

Thousands more.

If I stopped to protect Dave from the consequence of his own refusal, Aurora kept what belonged to everyone else.

I kept the Return Weave open.

Dave opened his mouth.

No sound came out.

His eyes widened.

The central hold failed.

Aurora released.

Not explosively.

Thread by thread.

Voice by voice.

River by river.

Colour moved back into the world.

As the stored currents returned, we could see which losses Aurora had hidden inside its output. The system had translated voices, heat, growth, memory-linked Mīharo and living pathways into numbers on an energy screen.

The numbers were real. They were not the whole truth.

When Mereana's thread left the storage layer, a monitor only showed reduced output. Somewhere else, a girl took a breath and sang.

That was the difference between measuring energy and understanding what the energy belonged to.

Dave collapsed beside his silent control console.

As Aurora emptied, some return threads did not create dramatic effects at all. A person simply stopped feeling exhausted. A plant grew normally the following week. A path became easier to hear. A memory that had seemed foggy sharpened.

Repair was often quiet.

The biggest machine in the series was defeated by thousands of small relationships reasserting where they belonged.

That felt right. Dave had spent years believing scale made him powerful. The thing he failed to understand was that connection could be distributed so widely no single control room could truly own it.

Alive.

Voiceless.

Aurora went dark.

Chapter 34: The Silent Man

I saw Dave three days later.

He was in a hospital room on Earth.

Doctors could not find a normal injury that explained his voice loss.

I understood the irony.

I did not enjoy it as much as I once imagined I would.

Dave sat beside the window.

Rose went in first.

Her brother looked at her and cried without sound.

Mum cried too.

Families are inconvenient like that.

People can do terrible things and still be somebody's brother.

When I entered, Dave would not look at me.

I placed a notebook on the table.

Red cover.

Like the one Hui gave me after I lost my voice.

Dave stared at it.

Then at me.

I also left a card with information about NZSL support.

He pushed both away.

That was his choice.

I did not force help on him.

Rangi Energy's hidden extraction records were no longer hidden. Independent engineers had evidence. Families had records. The Accord had measurements.

What happened to the company would be handled by adults, investigators and the ordinary systems of Earth.

I did not need to become judge of everything.

Dave never regained his voice.

He also never returned to the centre of Rangi Energy.

For a while Rose kept trying to include him in family things.

He refused more often than he accepted.

I kept using my own voice when I visited Dave, but I also signed a simple hello. He knew enough NZSL from watching me over the years to understand it.

He looked away.

His refusal was not proof that communication support had failed. It was proof that support cannot force somebody to accept connection.

When I had been silent, my family learned new ways to reach me. Dave's loneliness came from repeatedly rejecting the people who tried to reach him, not from muteness itself. I wanted the story to remember that clearly.

Years later, he would become the lonely older man he had spent his life accidentally building himself into—not because silence made him lonely, but because he kept choosing distance when people offered connection.

Rose visited Dave more than I did. She never excused him. She also refused to pretend he had stopped being her brother.

Some relatives criticised her for that.

Mum said, “Accountability doesn't require me to erase my own whakapapa.”

I understood. Boundaries could be strong without pretending a relationship had never existed. Dave was not invited back into positions of trust. He was not given access to Mīharo systems. Rose still sent birthday cards.

Most years he did not reply.

That difference mattered to me.

Losing a voice did not make a person alone.

I knew that better than anyone.

Chapter 35: After the Storm

Hemi's Mīharo did not come back.

Mere examined him.

So did healers from Te Waka Tōhorā and Vardheim.

The severed pathway had closed.

Maybe permanently.

Nobody promised otherwise.

Hemi listened without speaking.

Then he asked everyone to leave except Moemoeā.

She stayed.

They were not suddenly fine.

He was angry with her.

He loved her.

He hated what she had done.

He knew why she did it.

All of those things lived in the same room.

“Am I still me?” he asked her.

Moemoeā cried.

“Yes.”

Hemi shook his head.

“You don't know that.”

“I do.”

She pointed at his chest.

“You were Hemi before the fire.”

That sentence mattered.

Te Waka Tōhorā had been the first place Hemi belonged because of his Mīharo.

Now he had to learn whether he could belong without it.

Grog contacted the older Dutch couple from Northland.

They had never stopped asking about him.

They were older now.

Still together.

Still had the room that had once been his, although it had become a sewing room.

When Hemi heard that, he laughed and cried at the same time.

He chose to visit.

Not forever.

One visit.

Moemoeā did not go with him.

They needed space that was not punishment or abandonment.

Before Hemi crossed to Earth, he found me.

“You won.”

“No.”

“Dave lost. I lost.”

“This was never supposed to be a game.”

He looked away.

“Easy for the person who kept her magic.”

That hurt because it was true.

I did not argue.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“Me too.”

Hemi's return to Northland was deliberately ordinary. No ceremony. No magical judgment. The Dutch couple met him at a gate with an old coat they had kept because they never knew whether he might come back.

The room that had become a sewing room was changed again. Not restored exactly. A bed went back in beside the sewing table.

Hemi later told Moemoeā that detail mattered more than any speech Grog could have made.

He had spent years believing Mīharo was the reason somebody finally wanted him. Now he had evidence that at least two people had wanted him before they knew anything about it.

We hugged.

Months later Hemi wrote to me from Northland. No apology essay. No political argument.

He wrote that he had helped the Dutch couple split firewood and hated being unable to warm his hands afterward. He wrote that the room smelled different but the window still stuck in the same place. He wrote that he did not know who he was without Mīharo yet.

At the bottom he added: I THINK THAT MEANS I HAVE TO FIND OUT.

I kept the letter. It was the first future Hemi had described in years that was not built around winning a war.

Not fixed.

Not enemies.

Something more honest.

Chapter 36: Home

A few months later, I stood in our old backyard again.

The harakeke moved in a warm wind.

Kiki sat on a leaf.

Mum was inside arguing with Dad about food.

They were still divorced.

They were also still a family.

Ahi chased Wai around the lawn.

Hui sat in a chair giving instructions nobody had asked for.

Grog had eaten three sausages before lunch officially started.

Erik was trying to explain to Krish that Vardheim did not need a curry delivery route through the Accord.

Dad disagreed.

Moemoeā had come too.

Hemi had not.

Not yet.

He was in Northland.

The first visit with his old foster parents had become a second.

Then a third.

Open Roads still existed without him, but it had changed.
So had the Accord.

More sanctuaries joined.

More chose not to.

Emergency routes opened faster.

Consent rules stayed.

Nothing became perfect.

That felt correct.

Rangi Energy's Aurora network was dismantled.

Some of its ordinary clean-energy technology survived
after the extraction layer was removed.

Also correct.

You did not have to destroy everything connected to a
bad system if parts could be repaired and used without
theft.

I wore Ru's hei tiki around my neck.

It no longer felt heavy with unanswered questions.

Heavy with history, yes.

Different.

Erik came outside and stood beside me.

“You disappeared.”

“I’m ten metres from the kitchen.”

“Your mother sent me.”

“Traitor.”

He smiled and took my hand.

I looked at the harakeke.

At Kiki.

At the place where an eight-year-old girl had once sung quietly because her grandparents taught her not to be too loud with her reo.

I began the same waiata again.

“Tōku reo...”

This time I did not whisper.

Hui joined from her chair.

Mum joined from the kitchen.

Ahi got half the words wrong.

Wai invented some.

Dad hummed because he never remembered the lyrics.

Erik listened.

Kiki's wings began to glow.

No storm came.

No one told me to keep it down.

Far beyond the backyard, Te Waka Tōhorā moved through its hidden sky carrying forests, schools, markets, arguments, mistakes and people who kept choosing to repair them.

I was twelve years old.

I was Māori and Indian.

The Accord eventually added one more principle from everything we had survived: no sanctuary, company, council, movement or World-Shaper could claim ownership over another person's Mīharo merely because they could access it.

It sounded obvious by then.

Most important principles do after people have paid enough to learn them.

I did not become ruler of the sanctuary network. I went back to school.

That might have been my favourite part of the ending. Saving something did not mean it had to belong to me afterward.

A daughter, sister, moko, friend, kaitiaki and
World-Shaper.

I did not know what I would become after Year Eight.
World-Shaper was an ability, not a career. Erik did not
know whether he would eventually live mostly in
Vardheim or keep moving between sanctuaries. Moemoeā
did not know whether she and Hemi would ever be
together again. None of us had a prophecy for that.

Good.

The future had finally become ours in the ordinary
way—uncertain, unfinished and open to choices we had
not made yet.

I had lost my voice once.

I knew now that voice was bigger than sound.

And this time, nobody was taking it from me.

MĪHARO · BOOK 5

TE MĀRAMATANGA

Clarity

With voices disappearing and two powerful movements pulling the world apart, Aroha faces her greatest challenge.

Dave's Aurora network promises control. Hemi's Open Roads movement promises freedom. Both carry consequences that others must live with. Together with her whānau, friends and allied sanctuaries, Aroha searches for a way to return what has been taken without creating further harm. The final Mīharo adventure brings questions of voice, belonging and responsibility full circle.

Niva Gram

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