

MĀHINA'S BRIDGE

Keiana Roffey

Haeata couldn't tell what colour the moon was, only that it was too big and too bright. Her eyes hurt. Perhaps they've been open for too long? She didn't really know; she no longer cared. The wind seemed especially strong tonight, murmuring sweet nothings as it stung her cheeks. Haeata looked down at her hand, gazing upon her Nan's ring. She removed the precious stone, holding it up to the moon's halo. *A perfect fit.* Her thumb pad gently rubbed the smooth pounamu, warming at her touch. She let the ring slip from her grip, watching as it disappeared into the darkness below. A few long seconds passed before Haeata heard the promise of stone hitting stone. She sat very still, silent, as she lost herself further in thought. A chill ran across her body as the wind momentarily quietened.

"Phewww! Kōtiro, it's bloody freezing out here!" Though surprised to hear the sudden voice, Haeata remained utterly still. A koro hobbled forward into her view, leaning beside where Haeata had perched on the railing. He wore a long black trench coat and smelled of cigarettes, like her Pāpā always used to. It was almost comforting. A manaia hung from his neck, matching the kowhaiwhai that marked his face. The koro let out a loud sniff, pulled out a grey hanky, and blew his nose obnoxiously loud. "Aroha mai kōtiro, a man my age isn't spry enough to face this kind of hau."

"Then go home."

The koro, though seemingly frail and quivering, bobbed his head from side to side.

"I could go, but then I'm left to wonder."

Haeata, against her will of wills, looked to the koro, intrigued.

"You wonder?"

He sighed deeply.

"Yes, I do."

Oh, okay, Matua Ominous.

"Wonder what exactly?"

The koro rubbed his gloved hands together.

"Who's getting the call?" Puzzled, Haeata stared blankly at him. The koro let out a tired sigh.

"Tomorrow afternoon, when the police find you, they'll call your whānau. Who's answering that call?"

Haeata stayed silent. She hadn't really thought about that yet. *Probably Mum.*

"It's not like she's gonna care anyways."

"Ah, I see." The koro nodded knowingly. "Perhaps you should ask her then."

It's too late. But Haeata was, again, curious.

"What would I even ask?"

“If she cared if you were gone. It’s your māmā we’re talking about, yes? I’m sure that she would.”

His assumptions angered her.

“You don’t know shit!”

The koro chuckled, unfazed, which only pissed Haeata off more.

“I have many lifetimes’ worth of knowledge, kōtiro. I know a whole lot more than you.”

That’s done it.

“What are you even doing here? You a creep?! Or just some lonely bugger that wanders around at night, waiting for some fucked up kid to come along, so that you can drone about your ‘wealth of knowledge’ huh?”

The koro stood silent, stunned. He stiffened, then relaxed, before smiling ever so slightly.

“Heh, I suppose the second one.”

Haeata groaned, throwing her hands up.

“Well, I don’t want to hear it! Leave!”

“So you can kill yourself? That’s what you really want?”

Haeata’s breath hitched.

“Y-yes.”

The koro’s brows furrowed.

“I don’t think that’s true, aye.”

“Oh yeah, why’s that?”

He pointed at her.

“That right there. You just keep... asking.”

“So-” She quickly bit her tongue.

So *what*? The koro smiled again.

“You’re stalling.”

“No, I’m not!”

The koro let out a hearty, knowing chuckle. It echoed through the valley.

“Yeah, right.”

Haeata sulked as his laughter eventually eased off, the sound being replaced as the wind picked up yet again. The moon had now slid behind a maunga in the distance. Haeata returned to thought.

“Why are you out here anyways? Escape the retirement village?”

The koro snorted before gesturing to the valley below the bridge. Far off into the distance, a small gold light glinted from within the bush.

“My whare. On cloudless nights, when te marama hua is out and she is bright, I can see the bridge from my kitchen window. I was making a cuppa when I noticed you dropped something. What was it?”

“Oh.” Haeata contemplated whether or not she wanted to talk about her Nan with this stranger. At all. *Quite literally, now or never, I suppose.* “Nan’s ring. She- she used to wear it on a chain around her neck.” Haeata smiled, recalling every hug where she’d felt the ring resting on her head. “But she’s gone now. I’ve no need for it, so the river can have it.”

The koro nodded slowly.

“It’s pretty empty now, aye?”

Haeata couldn’t see the bottom, but everyone knew the river had been dry for years.

“It is, yeah.”

“Do you know the name of this awa and its arawhiti?”

“Ain’t it Māhina’s bridge? That’s what everyone calls it.”

Koro shook his head.

“It was Waimawera once. Rising water. It earned its ingoa because of how high the river would get. It was said that when Rangi and Papa separated, Papa was left with a shattered heart.”

Haeata pictured the entangled lovers being torn from one another, gaping wounds left from where they were supposed to be held. “Rangi would fill the mighty rips with his tears, so that her manawa could feel him, even from afar.”

Haeata sat silently. *Would anyone grieve for me like that? Would the river stay dry?* “All the mighty awa in this area, that once provided for our tangata, came from the hurt of our atua. It’s said Waimera, in exchange for the water, holds the whispers of our tīpuna.” He smiled down at the empty valley, lost in a memory. “But it wasn’t always like that, aye. When I was a young fella, we’d jump off this bridge into the bluest currents. E hika! If it rained too heavy, the bridge would just about go under.” He shook his head sadly. “But, the current changes, whether we want it to or not.”

Haeata couldn’t imagine the riverbed ever holding that much water. To her, it had only ever been a barren passage.

“What happened to it?”

“One too many dry summers. Waimera was gone.”

“And what, ‘Rising Waters’ was just too ironic? Had to get changed to Māhina? What’s a māhina?”

“Hm.” The koro was silent for a long moment. “Māhina was a kōtiro, your age, who drowned here many years ago. Ever since, it’s been her bridge.” The koro’s eyes grew glassy as he spoke. “You know, kōtiro, the hardest call I ever took was hearing that my daughter had jumped into

the depths of a shallow awa; the awa she'd been raised over, that raised me." *Oh*. Deafening silence hung over the pair for a good minute. Haeata found herself unable to articulate her racing thoughts. The koro's eyes remained locked on the darkness. "Kōtiro, I won't ask you not to do it. Just... just, know it's not yet your time. Don't make your tīpuna fill the river with their tears, aye."

Haeata no longer questioned the koro. Instead, she took a deep breath and slid off the banister, drowsy after the many hours spent so still. Her feet landed on the level, cement footpath - a sense of relief washed over her as she thudded softly. She turned to thank the koro, only to find he was no longer there. *Aye?* Confused, she swivelled to where the light of the koro's house had been. *Nothing but bush?* The night sky had grown misty hues of light purple and orange. The final few stars flickered away as the rising sun slowly breached the horizon. Haeata looked down over the railing, for a final time, able to see the bottom dried-up riverbed. As she gazed down, bewildered, considering how differently the night was supposed to go, a shape caught her eye; right there at her feet, her Nan's ring.