

# PIKOPIKO

QUINN CASSIDY

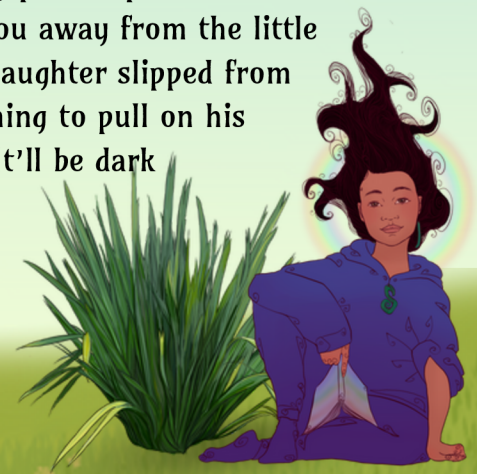
Rawiri bucked under the wriggling weight of his younger cousins, their small limbs tangled around him like vines. A bony elbow dug into his ribs, and a sticky set of fingers tugged at the collar of his t-shirt. He shouted out, regretting it the moment the sound left his lips. His throat caught on the noise, voice cracking. Instantly, the kids burst into giggles, their squeaky voices mimicking the broken note, never quite able to recreate the splintered pitch. He tried to laugh it off, but he knew the burn of heat rushing to his face was obvious. He was too old for grass-stained knees and sticky fingers, but too young to be anywhere else.

“You kids stop being hōhā,” rang out the authoritative voice of his Koro. “Who’s going to help me get this bloody fire started?” Most of the group detached from Rawiri, dispersing in every direction. Their feet stamped across the dry grass, their shadows disrupting the warm red light of the setting sky. His youngest cousin remained, their little body draped over his shoulder, tan arms wrapped around his neck. Rawiri ducked his head back, looking at the child, who peered back at him with the sun glittering in their eyes.

Their stare always made Rawiri flinch. They looked at him as if they saw something he had never agreed to show. He shifted awkwardly, brushing a blade of grass from the kid’s hair instead of meeting their gaze. “Go on then,” he said, voice soft. “Back to the others.” The kid tumbled down Rawiri’s body, landing with a muted thud.

They paused for a moment, turning back to grin up at Rawiri as if he’d just handed over some kind of treasure. Then they took off, bare feet pounding toward the others until they vanished into the blur of movement surrounding the unlit fire.

Rawiri gave his Koro a sheepish, half-hearted smile, already angling his body back toward his tent. The fabric flapped faintly in the breeze, as if beckoning him with promises of soft safety behind its thin walls. “Grab us some pikopiko, eh?” his Koro said casually. The command in his voice was rarely used when he wasn’t wrangling the cousins. Rawiri hesitated. Behind his teeth, a dozen excuses flickered to life. He looked back, ready to offer at least one of them, but his Koro had already turned away, preoccupied with stoking the coals of the fire pit that had yet to be lit. “It’ll get you away from the little ones for a bit,” he added, glancing back with a wink. A snort of laughter slipped from Rawiri before he could stop it. “Okay, fine,” he mumbled, crouching to pull on his boots before turning toward the tree line. “Don’t take too long. It’ll be dark soon,” his Koro called after him.



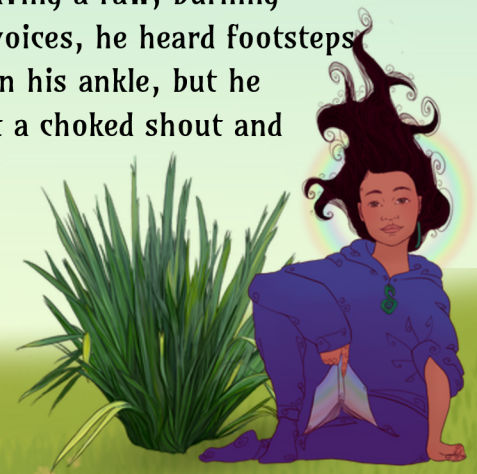
Rawiri made his way down the dirt path, carefully winding his steps between the roots and branches that disrupted the trail. His fingers brushed along the leaves of a fern, a pikopiko in the center just beginning to unfurl. The touch was familiar, stirring up a gold-drenched memory, faded and cracked at the edges with age. Two pairs of small hands. Dirt on scratched knuckles. Graceless, childlike fingers delicately pushing the fern leaves aside.

A voice that wasn't his own promising something called pikopiko. Pale arms resting against his suntanned skin. Green curls tickling his palms. Hands cupped in front of him, running through the forest, the sound of his new friend's steps close behind. The familiar smell of fish cooking over charred logs filled the air. Finally, breaking from the tree line, he had looked back, only to find his friend gone. A ruru's cry cut through the still air. Rawiri blinked, and the warmth of the disjointed memory slipped from his mind as his fingers fell from the fern leaves. The red light of the sun had faded, leaving only the low hush of dusk. "You're out a little early, friend," he said playfully. "But thank you for pulling me out of my daydreams. I should get back." He turned and froze. A mist had crept in, thick and silver. It pooled around his ankles and along the forest floor, veiling the undergrowth in a soft shimmer. The silhouettes of the trees were fading into a haze that felt too still. The lingering warmth of the afternoon vanished, and the sweat that had stuck his shirt to his back now made him shiver. The ruru called out again, swooping soundlessly away before looking back to Rawiri with its glowing, golden eyes. Behind the ruru, the mist was beginning to crawl up the trees, devouring the familiar rich greens of the forest. Stepping toward the bird, the forest began to sing.

Voices rose in layers, beautiful and haunting, their harmonies too ethereal to be human. His skin prickled as more notes joined the symphony, each one pushing him to move faster until he was careening down the path. His steps pounded over the uneven track, breath ragged, heart hammering like a drum keeping rhythm to the song.

The ruru stayed close, sometimes soaring ahead, sometimes pausing on branches to call him forward. He followed its bright eyes like a lifeline, chasing their warmth through the thickening mist. The roots that cut across the path were now hidden, drawn under the fog. He stumbled often, arms flailing for balance.

He was beginning to feel the nearness of camp in his bones when a thick root coiled around his ankle mid-stride. Rawiri fell hard. An involuntary grunt escaped him as he slammed into the packed earth. His cheek scraped the ground, leaving a raw, burning sensation. The singing grew louder, closer. Through the layered voices, he heard footsteps approaching, swift and sure. Rawiri scrambled back. Pain flared in his ankle, but he didn't stop until his spine hit the rough bark of a tree. He let out a choked shout and squeezed his eyes shut.





A hand pressed to his calf, warm and soft. Rawiri's eyes flew open, a startled cry catching in his throat. A boy knelt in front of him. He looked to be around Rawiri's age, with fair skin and hair the fierce red of an open flame. His eyes were an intense, radiant gold, like they held the last summer light in the forest. Rawiri was frozen in place as the boy looked at him like he'd just found something he'd lost a very long time ago. "You're—" Rawiri started, but the next words refused to come. The name dissolved, like a memory caught in the fog of a dream. "Can you stand?" the boy asked, voice low but urgent, glancing left and right as the singing curled closer. Concern carved gentle lines into his brow.

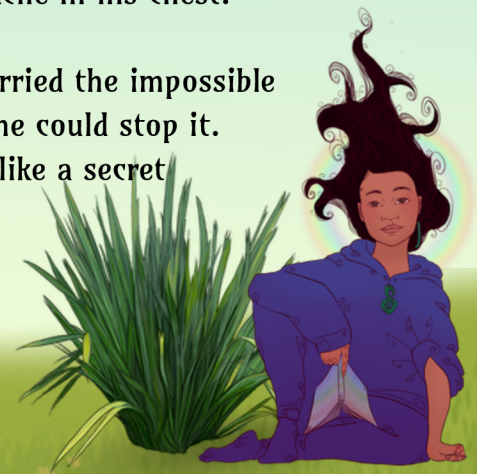
"Maybe," Rawiri breathed, chest rising and falling too fast. He gasped and tried again. "I don't think I can walk on it." The boy rose and slipped an arm around him. His touch was too warm for the chill that had settled over the forest. He pulled Rawiri to his feet, careful and firm. A sharp hiss escaped Rawiri's lips. "Sorry," the boy murmured, voice close to his ear. Rawiri leaned on him instinctively, unsure whether to brace himself upright or collapse entirely. The boy was smaller, but he held him with ease.

"Where are you going?" Rawiri hissed as the boy turned them from the path. "My camp is that way." He paused. Doubt slid cold beneath his skin. "I think." The boy didn't look back. "I know," he replied quietly. "But they're getting closer. We can't outrun them like this." They moved through the trees under the ever-present song. The boy chewed his lip, eyes always moving, scanning the shadows. Suddenly, his step faltered. His gaze locked on something Rawiri couldn't see.

He shifted course, guiding them swiftly. Rawiri squinted, just barely spotting the massive trunk of a fallen tree before they reached it. The boy helped him over, then down onto the damp moss. They came to rest side by side, straining to keep their breathing quiet. The singing drifted further into the trees. Only then did the boy exhale a long, weary sigh. With hush fallen over the forest, Rawiri looked around. The moss beneath them was damp and soft. A curl of green caught his eye, a pikopiko cradled in the fern's care. Without thinking, he reached out, brushing it gently.

Gold-drenched light swam through his mind again. For just a moment, he wasn't here. Hewas much smaller, with grass-burnt knees and pajama sleeves wet with morning dew. Two sets of small, grubby hands pushed fern leaves aside. Laughter chiming between them. Flashes of red hair darting through trees. They'd run barefoot, reckless, and free. The memory slipped again. It always did. Its worn edges left an ache in his chest.

He looked at the boy beside him. He was older, taller, but still carried the impossible warmth of a summer afternoon. Rawiri's voice came out before he could stop it. "Pikopiko? Is that you?" he asked hesitantly, the name catching like a secret he'd never thought to tell. A loud, warming laugh burst from the boy, sudden and sharp. It startled them both as it echoed off the trees. They froze, listening. When the forest remained still, the voices nothing more than whispers on the wind, the boy leaned



closer. “Is that really what you’ve been calling me all these years?” he said softly, his breath gently shifting the silver mist. Rawiri’s cheeks burned, but he didn’t turn away. He let the warmth run through him. “You never told me your name,” he murmured. “And I think Pikopiko suits you.” He twisted a finger around an untamed red curl.

In the distance, the voices began to creep closer. High and soft, they beckoned. The boy turned to the sound, warm eyes tightening with concern. “They haven’t forgotten you,” he said. “They still want the small boy who wandered too close to their world all those years ago.”

“Why didn’t they take me then?” Rawiri asked. The boy’s response was hesitant, his eyes dropping to where their thighs pressed alongside each other. “I was meant to bring you back,” he finally said. “But I showed you the pikopiko, and your face lit up so much. You ran to show your Koro, all barefoot and laughter.” He met Rawiri’s eyes, a flicker of something softening the fierce golden hue of his stare. “I’d never seen anyone loved like that.”

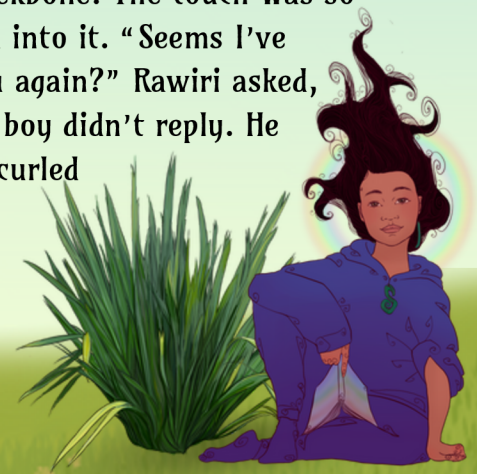
Rawiri’s throat tightened. “And now?” He smiled, soft and sad. “Now you’ve forgotten how to run barefoot through these paths, but you still have people who love you waiting. In a way I never did.” The last words were so quiet, barely a whisper passing between them.

The singing voices grew closer, beautiful and cloying. The boy stood, placing himself between Rawiri and the noise. Tendrils of mist curled around him like tugging hands. He leaned down, helping Rawiri to his feet, steadying him as he wobbled on his bad ankle.

“You have to go,” he said, his voice tender. “The kind of love you have doesn’t grow here.” Rawiri considered the sentence, turning it over in his mind for a long moment. He looked at the boy, trying to commit everything about him to memory this time. His curling red hair, the way the fog snaked through it like smoke from a fire. His skin, pale but warmer than anything Rawiri had ever known. His eyes, golden and soft, and the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“It did for you,” he replied.

“Yeah, well.” His voice was rough now, the words catching in his throat. He reached a familiar hand up, brushing a thumb along Rawiri’s scratched cheekbone. The touch was so light, almost not there, yet it seared through Rawiri as he leaned into it. “Seems I’ve made a habit of breaking the rules of this world.” “Will I see you again?” Rawiri asked, his chest constricting before the inevitable answer was said. The boy didn’t reply. He moved to kneel beside a fern, gentle fingers pulling free a single curled pikopiko. He pressed it into Rawiri’s palm, pushing his fingers closed around it. For the briefest moment, their foreheads touched, black hair against red, their breath mingling in the mist between them. With a sigh, the boy stepped back, taking his





summer-afternoon warmth with him.

The voices had faded fast, the last wilting notes gone by the time Rawiri found the path again, replaced by the distant back-and-forth calls of ruru. The mist loosened, unfurling its suffocating grasp on the trees as it retreated. His steps were slow, but his ankle no longer ached with every movement. Finally, at the edge of the tree line, he breathed in the smell of wood smoke, sharp and grounding. A shape darted out from the edge of the tents, small and fast, bare feet sprinting across the grass.

“Rawiri!” his youngest cousin cried, crashing into him before he could speak. He stumbled back on his bad ankle but caught them with one arm, holding tight. They made their way to the fire, sitting together on the dry grass. His cousin’s wide eyes took him in curiously, their mouth only opening when their gaze drifted to the small green spiral resting in Rawiri’s palm. “What’s that?” they asked, their voice softened with a youthful lisp. Rawiri held it out for them to see. His cousin’s small hands traced the fern curl with careful fingers.

“It’s called pikopiko,” he said quietly, the curling smoke from the fire brushing gently past his cheek. “Someone showed me how to find them when I was little, like you.” He glanced down at the delicate curl, cast in the golden glow of the firelight. “He’s not here anymore, but I can show you where to find them instead.”

