

# MUSE

by Paul Mason



**T**hey left the wind chimes softly chinking at the river's edge and found a narrow track, hidden by low ferns. Tre climbed the slope into the bush, Muse close behind. After all that had happened, were they finally close? Tre had to find his parents. He *had* to.

"You sure this is right?" whispered Muse.

"Mum's wind chimes are a sign. This is it."

"Maybe we should carry on upriver? Stay on our own?" Muse said. There was hesitation in her voice.

Tre jerked an arm in warning. Up ahead, a silhouette peered from behind a ponga. He froze, letting out a long breath a few seconds later. It was a carved post, with a wooden head and shoulders – a sentry with a camera. He recognised the shape of the pouwhenua and the hand that had carved it and allowed himself a careful smile. "Come on. This way."



But as they came into a small clearing, a patrol was swiftly on them, dropping down over the ridge. The people wore fatigues and masks. Some clutched staffs; a few held wooden bows, arrows notched, and Tre found himself staring into dark, watchful eyes.

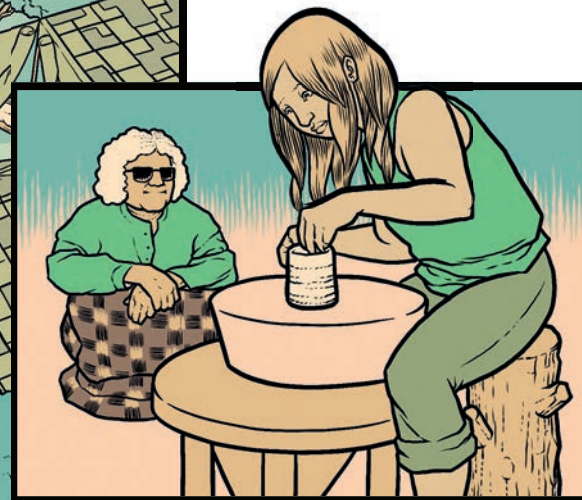
The leader signalled, and the group lowered their weapons. Her eyes were familiar. Slowly, she lowered her mask. "Tre!"

Before he had a chance to think, Tre was in the squeeze of his mother's arms. Then his father's.

"We've hoped for so long. And now you're here," Dad whispered in his ear.







After a short walk, the bush gave way to a camp. Bivouacs and low canvas tents huddled beneath a veil of green netting. Faces young and old emerged from the shadows to study Tre and Muse. One boy, brawny in his T-shirt, scowled and turned his back.

"It's OK, everyone. False alarm," Dad announced to the camp with a wide grin. "This is my son, Tre, and his friend Muse. They escaped!" He turned to them. "Welcome to Camp Radical."

"The Radicals!" said Tre. "I didn't believe you existed." He'd heard the rumours in the city, back in the pen. A few kids in the dorm had liked to talk, but Tre never believed the things they said. He'd needed hard proof that never came.

"We're real all right – no thanks to the Voids. But we're well-hidden from their spies," Mum said. She gestured at the green fabric above their heads.

"Let me show you where to dump your things," said Dad. "Then a tour."

He took them to a long tent, the floor covered in flax mats and rows of bedrolls and sleeping bags. "Women on one side, men on the other. You'll have to squeeze in."

First Dad showed them the pottery tent. A girl was at the wheel, a wet cup rising from beneath her fingers as an elder watched on. Nearby, kids had settled on logs to read. Tre thought all the books had been destroyed. Others were writing, and more children worked in the kitchen tent, chopping vegetables, stirring, tasting.

"Remember what all this looks like?" Mum asked. She ran a hand over his cheek. "Mum's a teacher," Tre explained to Muse. "As long as we're free to create, our voices won't be hushed," his mother said.

"Then we have a chance," said Dad. "Come and see where we carve." He took them to a lean-to on the edge of the camp. Inside, Tre recognised the surly boy from before. He was bent over a tree trunk, a mallet and chisel in his hands.

"I knew that was your pou out in the bush, Dad," said Tre.

Dad nodded towards the boy. "That was one of Phyn's."

The boy looked up from his tapping and gave a slow nod, misgiving still in his eyes. Tre noticed the tools in his hands – they were Dad's. With a pang, he realised he'd not yet earned the right to use them. "Nice one," he murmured as Phyn went back to work.





That evening, they shared dinner around the fire, steaming plates on laps, happy chatter mingling with the smoke. One of the adults had a ukulele and sang about dreams and tricky roads ahead and better days. Beside Tre, Mum joined in. It was good to hear her voice again. Tre leant closer to feel her warmth. He'd missed it so much.

"It's like we're in a cave," Muse said at last. She nodded at the dim solar lights around them like so many glow-worms. "A magical cave."

"You happy?" asked Tre.

Muse looked conflicted for a moment, then nodded. "It's just that when we were trapped in the city, I never thought we'd actually get here. For it to be like this."

"But that's a good thing, right?" said Tre. Muse stood. "I'm wiped," she said, leaving his question unanswered.

Tre realised he was exhausted, too. He wasn't long to bed after Muse, and at first, he was glad to be wedged in, sleeping with the others. But someone nearby snored like a hog. Then he had to pee. He got up and found his boots.

As he staggered through the camp, something moved in the dark. Moonlight caught a face, a backpack on shoulders. "Muse?"

She started and spun around, but after a brief pause hurried on. She was heading towards the track, back to the river.



Tre stumbled after her, wishing he had a torch. "Muse!" he hissed, finally catching up. He grabbed at her backpack and held on. "What are you doing?" He felt her shoulders slump, then she turned to face him. Tears spread down her face.

"Let me go. You're in danger."

"Who?"

"All of you. Your mum and dad. This place."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Tre searched the darkness, suddenly afraid.

Muse wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her jacket. "Let me get away before the Voids come. You'll have a better chance."

"You're not making sense. How are they going to find us?"

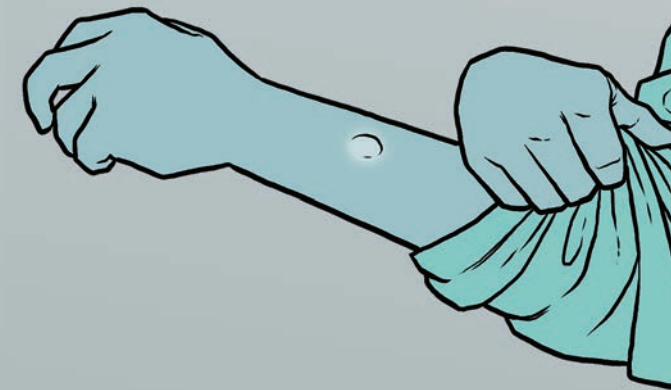
Muse lifted her gaze and held his. Tre felt himself go cold. "I don't believe it," he whispered.

Muse shoved up her sleeve and thrust a bare forearm in his face. Tre saw the faintest of glows, just beneath her skin, and ran a gentle finger over the raised bump of the tracker.

"I had no choice. They have my family." She began to cry harder, but Tre pushed her arm away.

"So, tell me – are the squads on their way?"

"Not if I keep moving. They'll think I'm still searching."



Tre snorted. "So our whole escape was a set-up?"

Muse gave a slow nod. "I was to help you get away from the city. They knew you'd eventually find your parents and the Radicals."

"You used me."

“But then we became friends. And I saw this place. Your parents, the children. How much this means. I need to leave you all behind.”

A voice burst out of the dark. “Enough!”



Tre spun around and felt a sudden, searing blow to his ribs. He dropped to the ground, clutching his side. Another thud, and Muse fell, too. “Traitors,” growled Phyn, twirling his staff and standing over them.

Tre held up a hand, gasping for breath. “Listen –”

“I heard it all,” Phyn snapped. “I followed you the moment I saw you leave the tent.”

“Then you’ll know what Muse has in her arm. We have to get away from here. Now.”

“How about we cut it out?” said Phyn.

Muse shook her head. “It’ll set off an alarm. They’ll home in on us straight away.”

Tre nodded. “We need to get out of here.”

“We?” said Muse.

“We’re in this together.”

“No way. You can explain yourself to the others, to your parents,” said Phyn.

“Just let us go,” Tre pleaded. “We’ll be gone before anyone knows.”

Phyn shook his head, and Tre got to his feet. “Look. If Mum and Dad find out about this, they’ll want to help Muse and me. But their work is here, keeping this place alive. Dad needs someone to follow in his steps.” He let out a long breath. “Turns out it was you instead of me.”

Phyn was silent.

**A**nd then it was the two of them once more, racing for the boat in the darkness. Leaving behind a letter of farewell, clutching at the remains of hope. As long as people thought for themselves, breathed fresh ideas, there was always hope.

Tre remembered a remote track that crossed the ranges at the far end of the lake. There were huts dotted along the way. They would go there and keep moving until they figured out what to do with the tracker in Muse’s arm. The signal had to die out sometime. Nothing lasted forever.

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