

Rātā me te Rākau

Rātā and the Tree

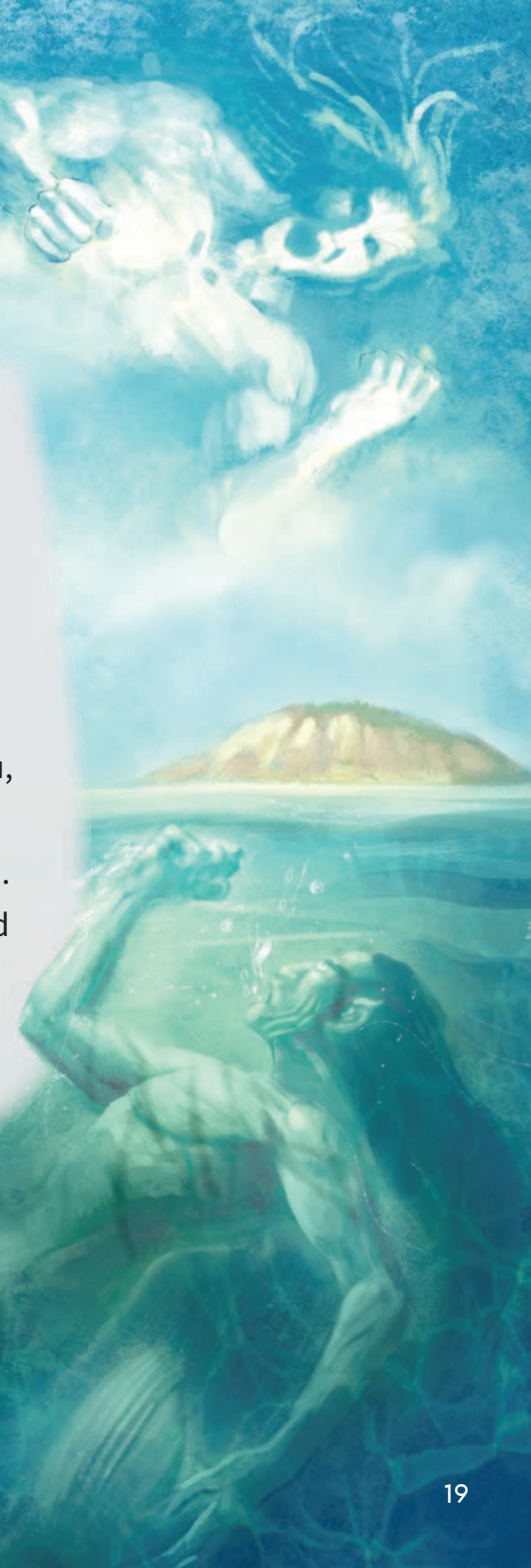
A tale from long ago, retold by André Ngāpō



Rātā was very tired. He had been searching the forest for many days to find the right tree to make a waka. Some trees were not tall enough. Other trees were not straight enough.

“There must be a rākau tall enough and straight enough for me to use to carve a giant waka,” he said. “The waka must be big enough to carry my people away from this island.”

Rātā knew that Tāwhirimātea, the god of the wind, and his brother Tangaroa, the god of the sea, were about to do battle. Soon Tāwhirimātea would send his powerful winds racing across the sea, and Tangaroa would send his massive waves in return. Rātā knew the battle would destroy all the villages on his island, and he wanted to do what he could to save his people.



Rātā searched, growing more and more weary. Then, at last, he saw it – the perfect tree!

Rātā got straight to work. “Everyone in the village will be so happy,” he said to himself. “Finally we will be able to leave and be safe.”

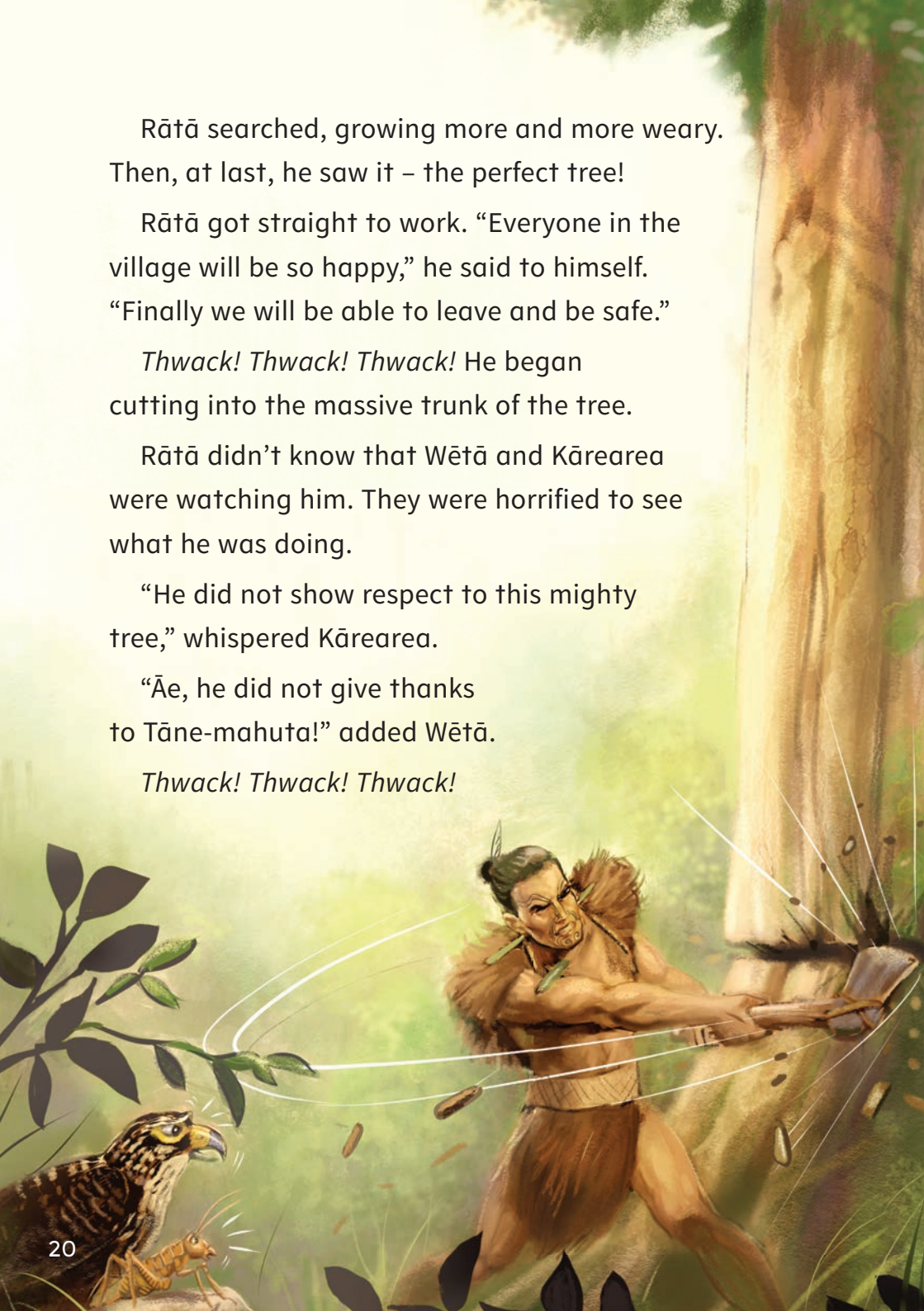
Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! He began cutting into the massive trunk of the tree.

Rātā didn’t know that Wētā and Kārearea were watching him. They were horrified to see what he was doing.

“He did not show respect to this mighty tree,” whispered Kārearea.

“Āe, he did not give thanks to Tāne-mahuta!” added Wētā.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!



The sound of Rātā striking the tree was heard by every creature in the forest.

“What’s that?” cried the forest creatures, moving closer. “What is he doing?”

Rātā couldn’t hear the creatures over the noise of his chopping. The tree fell at last with a thunderous crash. “Ah,” said Rātā. “Now I can rest. Tomorrow, I will start carving the waka.”



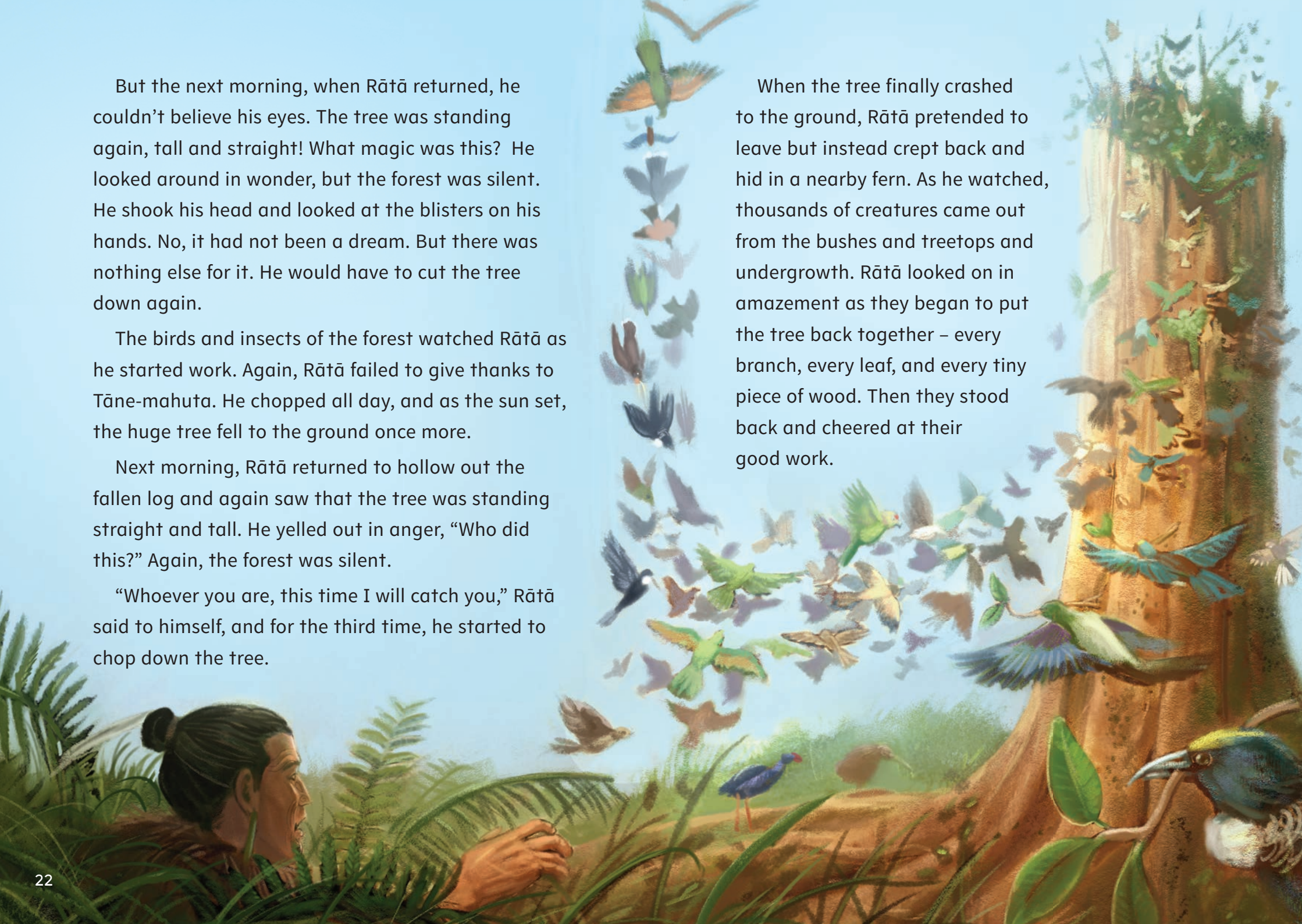
But the next morning, when Rātā returned, he couldn't believe his eyes. The tree was standing again, tall and straight! What magic was this? He looked around in wonder, but the forest was silent. He shook his head and looked at the blisters on his hands. No, it had not been a dream. But there was nothing else for it. He would have to cut the tree down again.

The birds and insects of the forest watched Rātā as he started work. Again, Rātā failed to give thanks to Tāne-mahuta. He chopped all day, and as the sun set, the huge tree fell to the ground once more.

Next morning, Rātā returned to hollow out the fallen log and again saw that the tree was standing straight and tall. He yelled out in anger, "Who did this?" Again, the forest was silent.

"Whoever you are, this time I will catch you," Rātā said to himself, and for the third time, he started to chop down the tree.

When the tree finally crashed to the ground, Rātā pretended to leave but instead crept back and hid in a nearby fern. As he watched, thousands of creatures came out from the bushes and treetops and undergrowth. Rātā looked on in amazement as they began to put the tree back together – every branch, every leaf, and every tiny piece of wood. Then they stood back and cheered at their good work.



Rātā jumped out from the fern. He was furious. “Why do you cheer and make fun of me?” he screamed. “You have ruined all my hard work!”

“Make fun of *you*?” said Wētā. “We wonder why you make fun of our guardian, Tāne-mahuta, by not showing respect to him and this rākau?”

Rātā was shocked. He looked up at the beautiful tree. He felt very embarrassed. He had been so desperate to save his people that he had forgotten to show respect. He had forgotten to explain why he needed this tree.

“Please forgive me,” he said. “I was desperate. I needed to make a waka to take my people away from the angry storms of Tāwhirimātea and the wild waves of Tangaroa.” His eyes filled with tears, and he turned and went back to his village.

Next morning, Rātā was woken by shouting. He looked up to see a very strange sight. A giant waka was sailing through the air towards his village! It was being carried on the backs and wings of thousands of insects and birds.

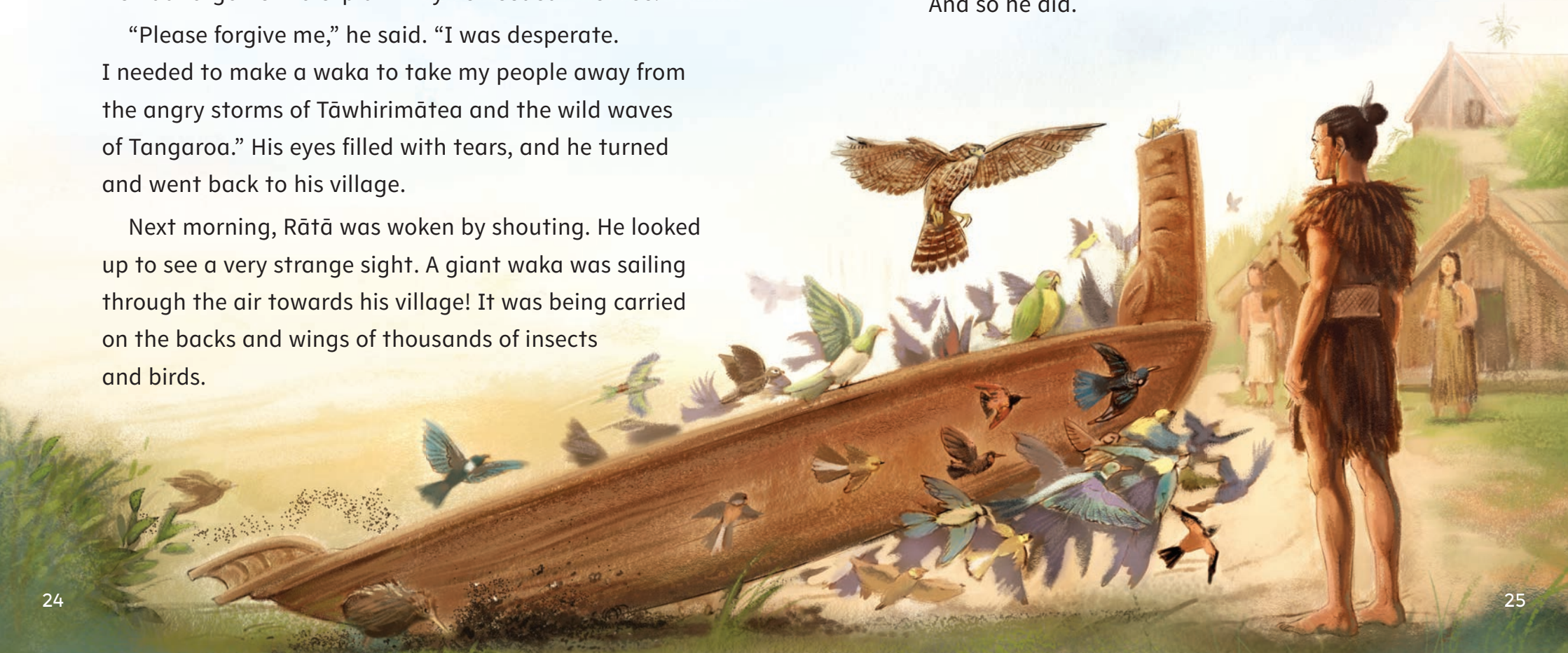
“Rātā,” said Wētā. “Your heart was in the right place, even if your mind wasn’t. Please take this waka as a gift to your people.”

Rātā felt as if his heart would explode with joy.

“All we ask,” said Kārearea, “is that you show respect and give thanks to Tāne-mahuta for the gifts of the forest and that you teach others to do the same.”

“I will,” promised Rātā. “I will.”

And so he did.



Rātā me te Rākau (Rātā and the Tree)

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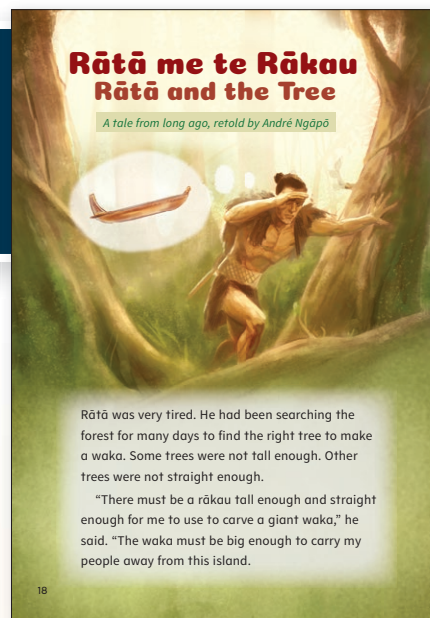
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