



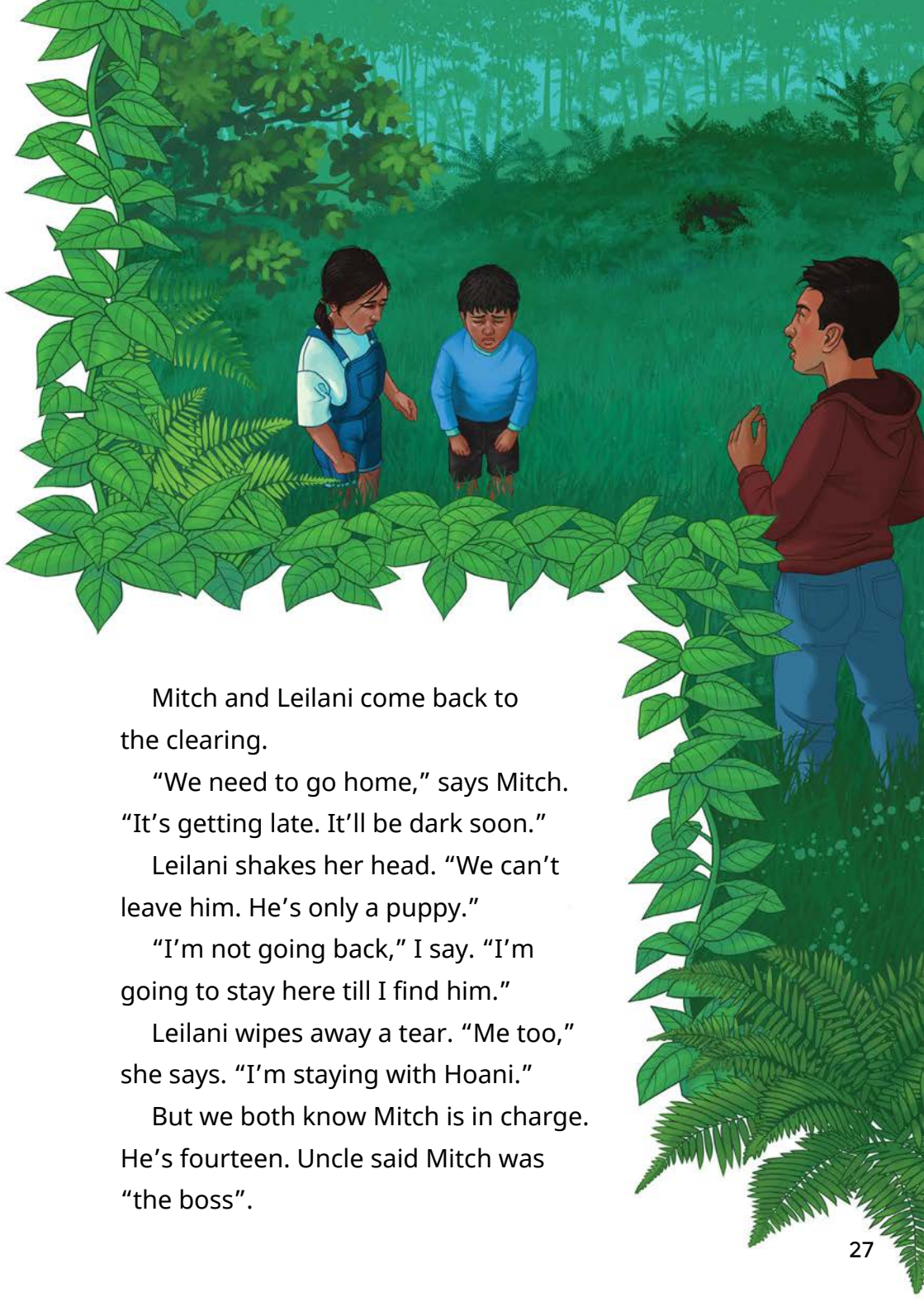
Where's Toki?

by André Ngāpō

"Toki!" I call. "Toki! Where are you, boy?"

I'm really worried. This is all my fault. I let Toki go, and he sprinted off into the bush.

Usually, he never goes far, and when we call, he barks to let us know where he is. This time, he's been missing for nearly an hour. I can hear Mitch and Leilani, my cousins, calling him, too ...



Mitch and Leilani come back to the clearing.

"We need to go home," says Mitch. "It's getting late. It'll be dark soon."

Leilani shakes her head. "We can't leave him. He's only a puppy."

"I'm not going back," I say. "I'm going to stay here till I find him."

Leilani wipes away a tear. "Me too," she says. "I'm staying with Hoani."

But we both know Mitch is in charge. He's fourteen. Uncle said Mitch was "the boss".

“Toki might have gone back to the marae anyway,” Mitch says. He’s about to say something else when we hear a long howl.

“Oooooooooohhhhhhh!”

“Toki!” We look at each other, confused.

“That came from down there,” says Leilani, looking at the ground. “But ...”

“It sounded like it came from over there as well.” Mitch finishes her sentence.

Then we hear Toki bark. He barks again, but it’s a bit muffled. His barks seem to rise out of the ground, yet they’re coming from straight ahead too, from a thicket of bush. We move towards it. “Look,” says Leilani, pointing. “It’s a cave!”



We can make out the cave entrance, covered by ferns.

“We can’t leave him down there,” says Leilani, running towards it.

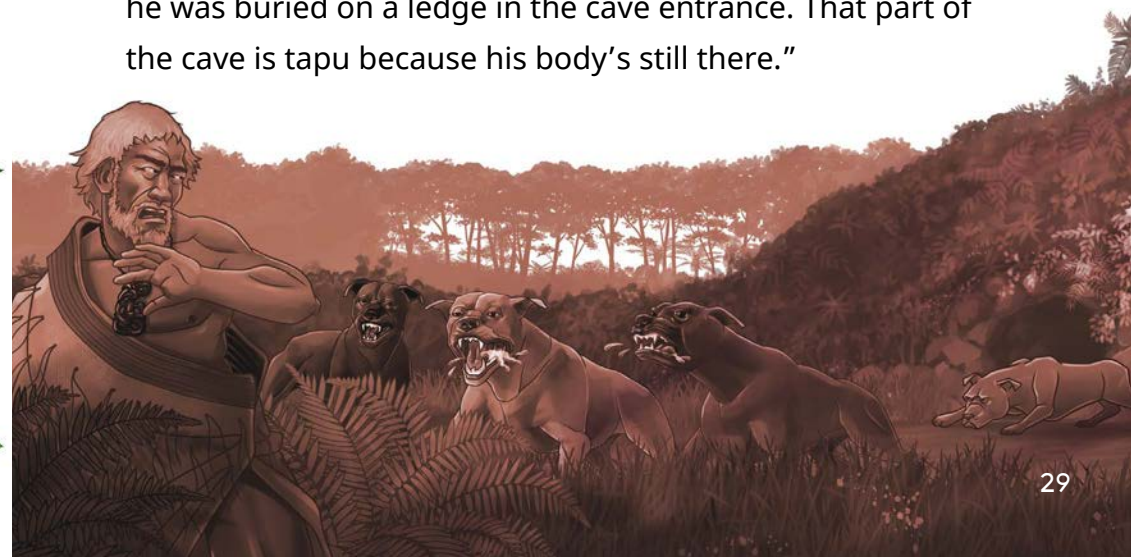
“Stop!” Mitch and I both shout at the same time.

“It might be dangerous,” says Mitch.

“And it might be a tapu cave like Ruakuri,” I add.

“Ruakuri?” says Leilani. “Where’s that?”

“Near Waitomo. Koro told me that long ago, a chief found a cave there, guarded by wild dogs. The dogs were protecting their pups inside the cave, and they attacked the chief. So he went and got some warriors, and they returned and cleared out the dogs. After that, the people used the cave as a sacred burial place. When the chief passed away many years later, he was buried on a ledge in the cave entrance. That part of the cave is tapu because his body’s still there.”



Leilani looks frozen in fear. "So, there might be people buried here?"

"Probably not," says Mitch. "The entrance is too small."

Toki whines and whimpers. "He sounds really scared," says Leilani. "We should go in."

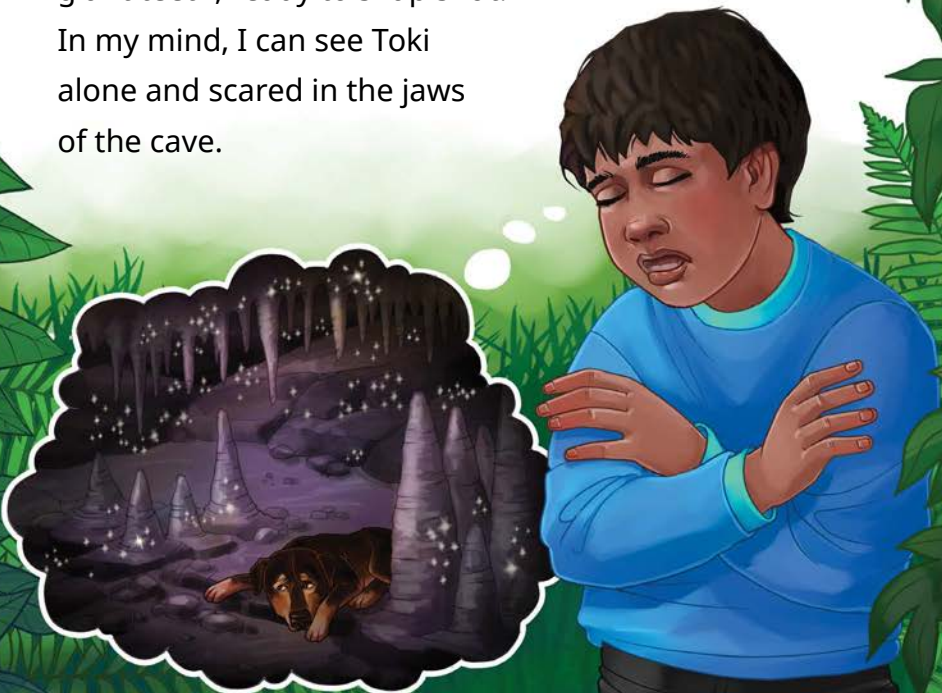
"We better say a karakia first," I tell them. "Dad taught me one about respect. It lets Tāne-mahuta and the creatures of the forest know we don't mean any harm. And it will help to bring good luck to our mahi."

"Say it now," says Leilani.

"No," says Mitch. "We need to get help."

But I begin the karakia anyway. As I say each word, I try to imagine Toki in the cave. On the walls, tiny glow-worms sparkle like beautiful stars. But the rock is cold and wet, and there are stalactites and stalagmites looking like giant teeth, ready to snap shut.

In my mind, I can see Toki alone and scared in the jaws of the cave.



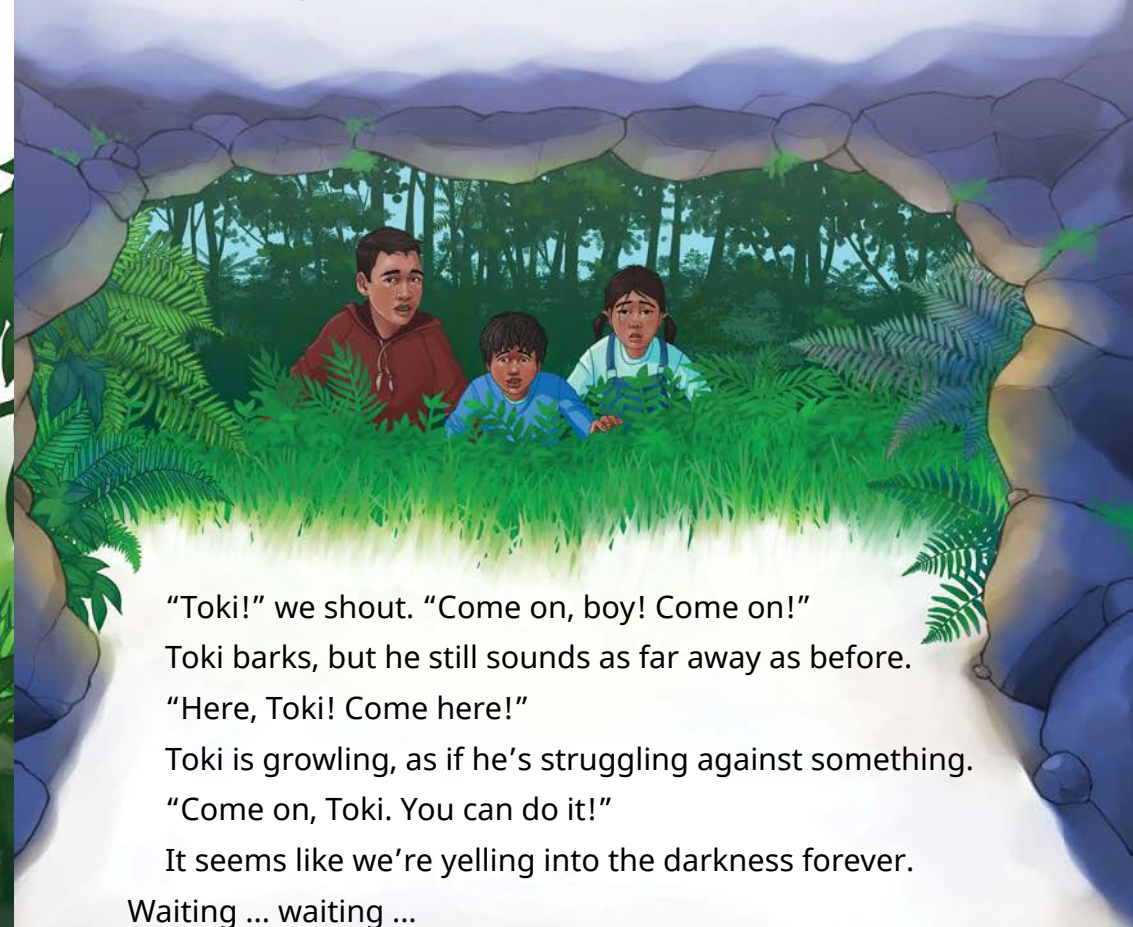
I open my eyes and look up at the darkening sky. It's like Leilani is reading my mind when she says, "Actually, you know, Mitch is right – I reckon it's too dangerous to go in."

Mitch and I nod. It's true – it's not safe.

I imagine Tāne-mahuta looking on. Didn't he hear my karakia? Can't he help Toki escape from the cave?

"Let's try calling again," says Mitch. "It might give him the energy to escape if he's hurt or stuck."

Cautiously, we move closer to the cave entrance.



"Toki!" we shout. "Come on, boy! Come on!"

Toki barks, but he still sounds as far away as before.

"Here, Toki! Come here!"

Toki is growling, as if he's struggling against something.

"Come on, Toki. You can do it!"

It seems like we're yelling into the darkness forever.

Waiting ... waiting ...

Then we hear Toki barking, but this time, it sounds like he's moving towards us, through the trees. We turn around, just as his face explodes through a fern bush. He's all over us with his paws and soft, warm coat. He's yelping with excitement.

"Toki!"

"Where did you come from?" Leilani asks. We follow his path through the ferns and there, underneath a small rocky overhang, is another hole.

"He found another way out," says Mitch.

"Clever boy, Toki!" says Leilani. Toki licks her face and whimpers with joy.

"You mean lucky boy," says Mitch. "How did he know the cave has two entrances?"

I just smile and pat Toki's head. "Thank you, Tāne-mahuta," I whisper quietly.



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