

Baskets of Fire

by Whiti Hereaka



A cold southerly wind is blowing. It's the kind of wind that has snow on its breath. It's the kind of wind that makes you wish you were cosy and warm at home. And it's the kind of wind that makes me think of a story from many, many years ago – the story of Ngātoro-i-rangi and the baskets of fire.

Ngātoro-i-rangi was a brave explorer. He was also a powerful tohunga. A tohunga is an expert, and Ngātoro-i-rangi was an expert in many things. He knew about the stars and the sea. He also knew about magic. He lived a very long time ago, when the first people came and made Aotearoa their home.

Ngātoro-i-rangi came from Hawaiki on the great waka *Te Arawa*. He used his knowledge of the stars, the sea, and the birds to guide the waka on that long journey.

When he arrived in Aotearoa, he set off to explore the new land. He travelled inland from the coast with his slave Ngāuruhoe. Ngātoro-i-rangi found a place with a huge lake and many mountains. Today, we call that place Taupō.

Near the lake, he saw a magnificent mountain. Its beauty was reflected in the calm waters of the great lake below.

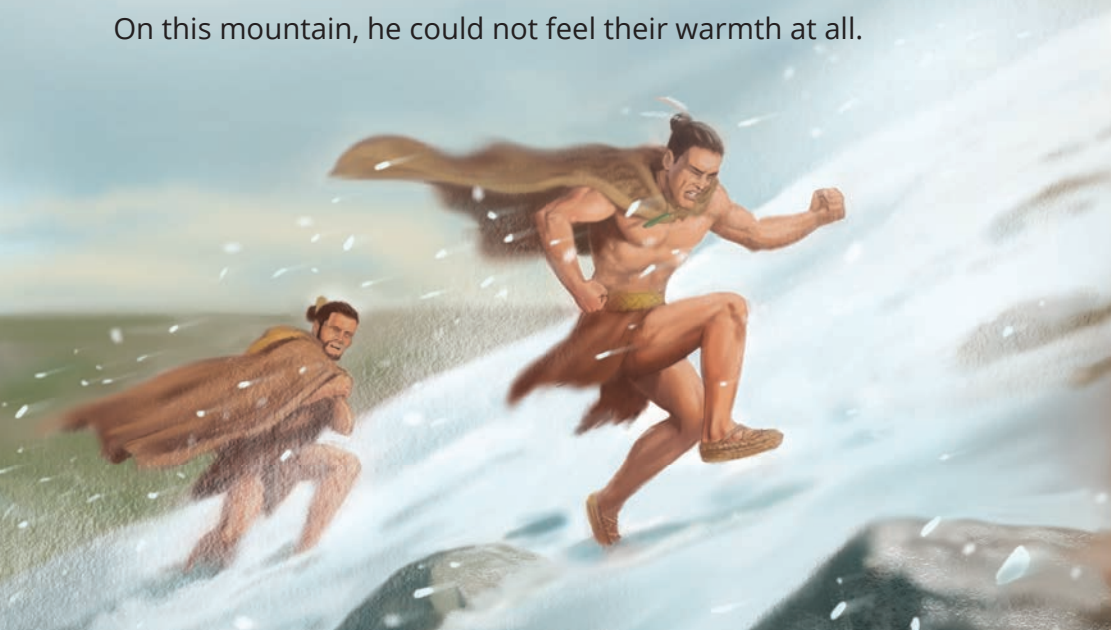
Ngātoro-i-rangi wanted to claim the mountain for his people. The land here was good, and the mana of the mountain would protect them. However, there were two other explorers in the area. Their names were Tia and Hape-ki-tūārangi. Ngātoro-i-rangi knew he had to climb the mountain and claim it before they did.



When he lived in Hawaiki, Ngātoro-i-rangi was able to ask the atua (gods) for help. They would listen to him. (Of course, being atua, they didn't always do exactly what he asked them to do.) He hadn't called on the atua in this new land yet, but he knew he needed their help now.

Ngātoro-i-rangi asked them to send a storm so that no one else would try to climb the mountain before him. Straight away, Tāwhirimātea sent cold winds, sleet, and snow. Ngātoro-i-rangi had never felt such a terrible storm. His cloak was useless. The cold seemed to stab right through his body and go deep into his bones. Ngāuruhoe begged him to turn back, but Ngātoro-i-rangi kept climbing. He was a brave and proud man.

In Hawaiki, Ngātoro-i-rangi was known to the ahi tipua – the children of Rūaumoko. They were the fire demons who lived under the earth. He stamped his feet on the icy ground, hoping to bring them to the surface. Perhaps their warmth would save him and Ngāuruhoe. But in this new land, he could not feel them. On this mountain, he could not feel their warmth at all.



Ngātoro-i-rangi knew he was freezing to death. He hoped he had enough power to send a message to his sisters back home in Hawaiki. He spoke his words even though his teeth were chattering with the cold. He spoke his words even though he only had the strength to whisper. He spoke his words even though they seemed to be ripped from his mouth and scattered by the wind.

Back in Hawaiki, his sisters suddenly felt a cold breeze. Then they felt the sting of ice on their faces. They drew their cloaks closer around themselves. Even though it was warm in Hawaiki, they could see their breath hang frozen in the air.

Then they heard the voice of Ngātoro-i-rangi whispering: "Oh, my sisters! Send me fire!" They filled kete with embers from deep within the earth – ahi tipua. Then they called on the demi-gods Te Pupū and Te Hoata to carry the kete to Aotearoa. Te Pupū and Te Hoata raced beneath the ocean. As they ran, the hot embers burnt a tunnel through the rock.



The kete were heavy. Sometimes Te Pupū and Te Hoata had to stop and rest. They were in such a rush, they didn't notice that each time they stopped, they left some of the embers behind. They stopped at Whakaari, Moutohorā, Rotorua, Rotoiti, Tarawera, Ōrākei Kōrako, Wairākei, and Tokaanu. When finally they reached Tongariro and found Ngātoro-i-rangi, there was only one kete left. There weren't enough embers to warm both Ngātoro-i-rangi and Ngāuruhoe. Ngātoro-i-rangi was very angry at Te Pupū and Te Hoata for being so careless. He stamped his foot. It made a large hole or crater in the side of the mountain. He tipped the last embers into the crater. The heat from the mountain was enough to save him, but it was too late for Ngāuruhoe.

Now Ngātoro-i-rangi could feel ahi tipua beneath him. From the top of the mountain, he could see the path Te Pupū and Te Hoata had followed on their journey – the journey that brought volcanic fire to Aotearoa.



The mountains still tell the story of Ngātoro-i-rangi in their names: Tongariro (which means “strong, southerly wind”) and Ngāuruhoe (the slave of Ngātoro-i-rangi). The place where he received the last kete is called Ketetahi. The descendants of Ngātoro-i-rangi still live under the protection of the mountain he climbed so long ago.

So whenever a cold southerly blows, and your teeth chatter, remember the story of Ngātoro-i-rangi and his baskets of fire.



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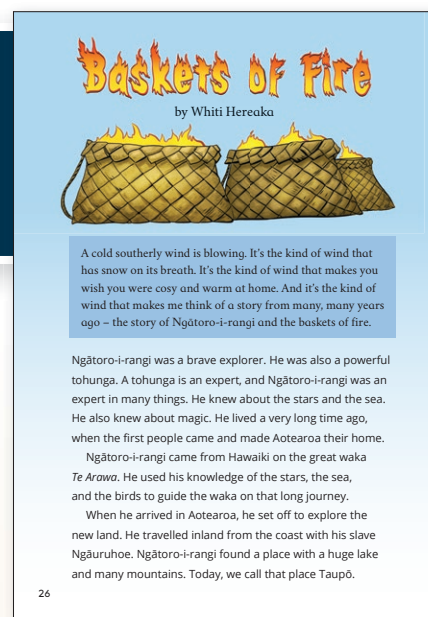
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