

Hukarere and Hine Tai

by Apirana Taylor

Hukarere listened to the waves breaking on the seashore nearby.

“Nan?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Nan Waikawa.

“Are taniwha real?”

“Yes.”

“Nan?”

“Yes.”

“Are they lots of colours?”

“They can be.”

“Nan?”

“Yes.”

“Do taniwha have wings?”

“Some do.”

“Nan?”

“Yes.”

“Have they got scales?”

“Sometimes.”

“Nan?”

“Yes.”

“Can taniwha talk?”

“Hukarere! You ask too many questions. Eat your breakfast and pipe down!”



Hukarere gulped as she looked at Nan, who glared at her.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why are you frowning?”

“Because I want you to eat your breakfast and get to school!”

Nan erupted.

“Nan can be scary when she frowns,” Hukarere thought.

She dug her spoon into her cereal and popped it into her mouth.

She chewed and looked thoughtful as she swallowed.

“My teacher, Mr Taikaha, said that if we want to learn, ask questions.” She looked at Nan, who was still frowning. Then Nan’s glare disappeared and was replaced by a gentle smile.

“Very well,” Nan replied. “Ask questions.

But just one at a time, please.”

“Nan? Are taniwha really real?”

“Yes.”

“But are they really, really real?”

“It’s time for you to go to school!”

Nan said.

Hukarere grabbed her backpack and scooted out the door. “Wait till I tell Wiremu, Nancy, and Tania that taniwha are real,” she thought.



After school, Hukarere sat at the table eating a sandwich.

“Nan,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe in taniwha.”

“Why?”

“We talked about them at school today. My friends said they aren’t real. And Mr Taikaha said he wasn’t sure.”

“Well, let me tell you –”

“Nan!” Hukarere interrupted. She leapt to her feet and pointed at Nan. “Taniwha aren’t real. Have you ever seen one?”

“Yes,” Nan replied.

“Have they got gigantic sharp teeth?” Hukarere asked.

“Sharper than razor blades,” Nan said.

“Are they as big as mountains?”

“They can be bigger than mountains.”

“Have they got claws?”

“Long as spears,” Nan laughed.

“Do they fight and eat people?”

“They kill a thousand warriors a day. Then they eat them and use their leg bones for toothpicks.”

“I don’t believe you. Taniwha sound scary.”

“Taniwha are powerful and can be dangerous,” Nan continued, “but some are kind and caring. I call these taniwha kaitiaki. They guide us and care for us. Many Māori whānau have them. They can appear in many forms.”

“Have you seen a kind taniwha?” Hukarere asked.

“A kaitiaki.”

“Yes. Her name is Hine Tai. She is our kaitiaki,” Nan replied.

“What does she look like?”

“You ask too many questions, girl.”

The next day was Saturday. Nan sat in her chair gazing out the window at the sea. She looked thoughtful. “Hukarere,” she called.

“Yes, Nan.”

“It’s a beautiful day. Good to warm my bones. Let’s walk down to the rocks. I know a pool where Hine Tai lives.”

When they reached the pool, Nan stood back a little and said to Hukarere, “Haere koe kia kite mehemea a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe. Go and see if Hine Tai is combing her hair.”

Hukarere felt a bit scared. “What if Hine Tai isn’t a kind taniwha, a good kaitiaki? What if she eats me?” She peeked over the rocks and gazed into the pool to see if Hine Tai was combing her hair. She saw sunlight dancing on the water.

When Hukarere looked back, Nan asked, “I kite koe i a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe? Did you see Hine Tai combing her hair?”

“Kāo,” Hukarere replied.



The next day, Nan called, “Hukarere! Haere koe kia kite mehemea a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe. Go and see if Hine Tai is combing her hair. The sea is calm. I’ll keep an eye on you from the porch.”

Hukarere walked down to the pool. She didn’t feel as scared as yesterday. She peered into the deep water and saw silvery blue fish darting about beneath the surface.

When Hukarere came back, Nan asked, “I kite koe i a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe? Did you see Hine Tai combing her hair?”

“Kāo.”

On the third day, Nan repeated, “Haere koe kia kite mehemea a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe.”

Hukarere ran to the pool. She crouched down and peered in.

Sunlit water and shadows danced over the rocks. Silver and blue fish darted about hither and thither. Sea shells glittered. Bull kelp swirled in the current.

“Can I see someone down there?” Hukarere wondered. She looked and looked. Suddenly she jumped up and ran back to the house.

“I kite koe i a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe?” Nan asked.

“Āe. Āe, e kui. I kite au i a Hine Tai kai te koma i ōna makawe,” Hukarere said. “Yes. Yes, Nan. I did see Hine Tai combing her hair.”

“Good,” Nan replied. “That’s a sign Hine Tai has risen from the deep to bring us lots of fish and mussels to eat. The sea is her home. If we keep the ocean clean and look after her whare, she will care for us and bring us riches from the sea.” Nan gazed through the window.

“Tell me, what did Hine Tai look like?” she asked.

“She was very beautiful,” Hukarere replied.

illustrations by Andrew Burdan

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