

ACROSS THE SEA

by Hone Rata

Ihaka buried his face in his korowai. It was cold, and they had hours to go. Kāmaka said they wouldn't arrive until sundown, and the sun was still at least two hands above the horizon. His sister leant into the tiller, turning their tiny waka across the wind as she looked to the waves. Ihaka liked watching her sail. She'd been on the water before he could tie his first knot.

"Where's the wind strongest?" she asked.

He looked across the waves to where the gusts whipped the crests into white foam. After some thought, he pointed to the east. Kāmaka nodded. The question had been a simple one; Ihaka knew she'd asked it to teach a lesson. They may have travelled far from home, but he could figure out what he needed to know. He had the skills now.

Ihaka turned to study the foaming wake. All the comforts of home, of whānau, lay far beyond that glistening trail. As he watched, an orca leapt from the water. The mighty creature soared gracefully before disappearing in a huge splash. The sight reminded him of the kahawai his koro once caught. They had jumped, too. It used to be that a person could catch countless fish in the river, but there were none now. They had all been taken.



Only a handful of islands in their rohe had survived the rising sea. This was Ihaka's first journey to them. He'd worked for this moment his whole life: learning to navigate and to sail, to speak the dialects of the people who lived in these waters. He could still see his nanny on the shore, watching as they set off. She was proud of her granddaughter, a fearless sailor and kaiwhakaterere. Ihaka hoped she would feel the same about him one day.

"Ki raro rā!" Kāmaka shouted.

Ihaka ducked as the waka turned and the boom swung above his head. The boat listed sharply as it came about, and he held tight to the side. Once they'd settled, Kāmaka pointed ahead. He could just make out the chain of islands that was their destination, the largest of them resting like a green jewel in all that blue. He pictured cooking fires, piles of food. Maybe the tangata whenua would serve them pipi. Kōura, even. They'd been sailing for three days on light rations, and his stomach grumbled as he imagined biting into sweet white flesh.

"Take the tiller, e hoa," Kāmaka said, nodding to the biggest island. Ihaka moved clumsily, suddenly uncertain, as they changed seats. "Aue, e te tungāne," his sister added gently, an encouraging smile on her face. Ihaka let his training take over. He'd done this dozens of times, he told himself. It made no difference that he was sailing to a new place, to trade with people he'd never met.

The wind dropped as the sun went down, and Ihaka admired the golden light. Slanting rays cut through the surface, and far below, beneath all the water, he caught a glimpse of rooftops. Kāmaka had said they might.

“Look!” he cried. “The old city!”

His sister nodded but kept her gaze fixed ahead. She didn’t want to see. It made her too sad, but Ihaka was curious. He’d been told stories about life before Earth had warmed. His marae was large, but the drowned city had been home to tens of thousands. So many people living together in one place! Ihaka watched the submerged buildings pass until there were no more roofs, and the ruins were far behind.

“Ready?” Kāmaka asked. The beach was up ahead. They crested a wave, the waka hanging for a moment – almost weightless – before plunging down. Ihaka held his breath and leant back. The waka shuddered as it took the full weight of its cargo, but he wasn’t worried. He knew their boat was strong. It had been built by his tīpuna and had carried generations across the sea. It was one of the few waka that remained. Ever since the sea rose, wood had been in short supply, especially on the mainland. Nanny said if people in the before-time had known what lay ahead, they might not have been so quick to fell the forests. They might have been more careful with what they had.

Kāmaka reached for her pūtātara and blew a long, loud note. A karanga rose up,

calling them in. Kāmaka responded in kind, her voice strong. Ihaka reefed the sails, and the waka slowed almost instantly. Expertly, he guided them onto a wave and rode it in, carefully landing the craft on the pebbly shore. Kāmaka smiled at his perfect landing, and Ihaka felt his cheeks heat with pride.

They climbed out of the waka and waited. A man called out; others joined in. Many feet pounded. Ihaka stood in awe as their voices grew louder. The silence that followed the haka lay unbroken for a long moment as they stood, humbled by the display. “We must reply,” Kāmaka said. “Do your best. Remember, our tīpuna stand with us.”

They’d been taught the traders’ haka, which renewed their iwi’s promise to treat all others equally. It was a good promise – Ihaka was proud to be the one making it – yet as he stepped forward, he felt small in front of the crowd. He paused for a moment, steadying his thoughts, then lifted his foot and stomped down.

Over his shoulder, he saw Kāmaka mirror every action, and together they fell into the well-practised moves. His voice grew loud and clear as his confidence grew. When they sang the last verse of the waiata, the islanders joined in. Their voices lifted their spirits and bound them as one.

It was dark by the time people crossed the stony beach to greet them. Ihaka and Kāmaka responded with hongis and smiles, then they unloaded the goods from the waka. The dried meat and pounamu were

eagerly taken; in return, Ihaka and Kāmaka took metal salvaged by the island’s divers and timber from the local trees.

They spent the evening around the fire, laughing and eating. Ihaka was taught the local whakapapa and learnt the ways they were all related. Even this far away, their whānau were woven together. When they lay down to sleep, Ihaka turned to his sister. “Did I do OK today?”

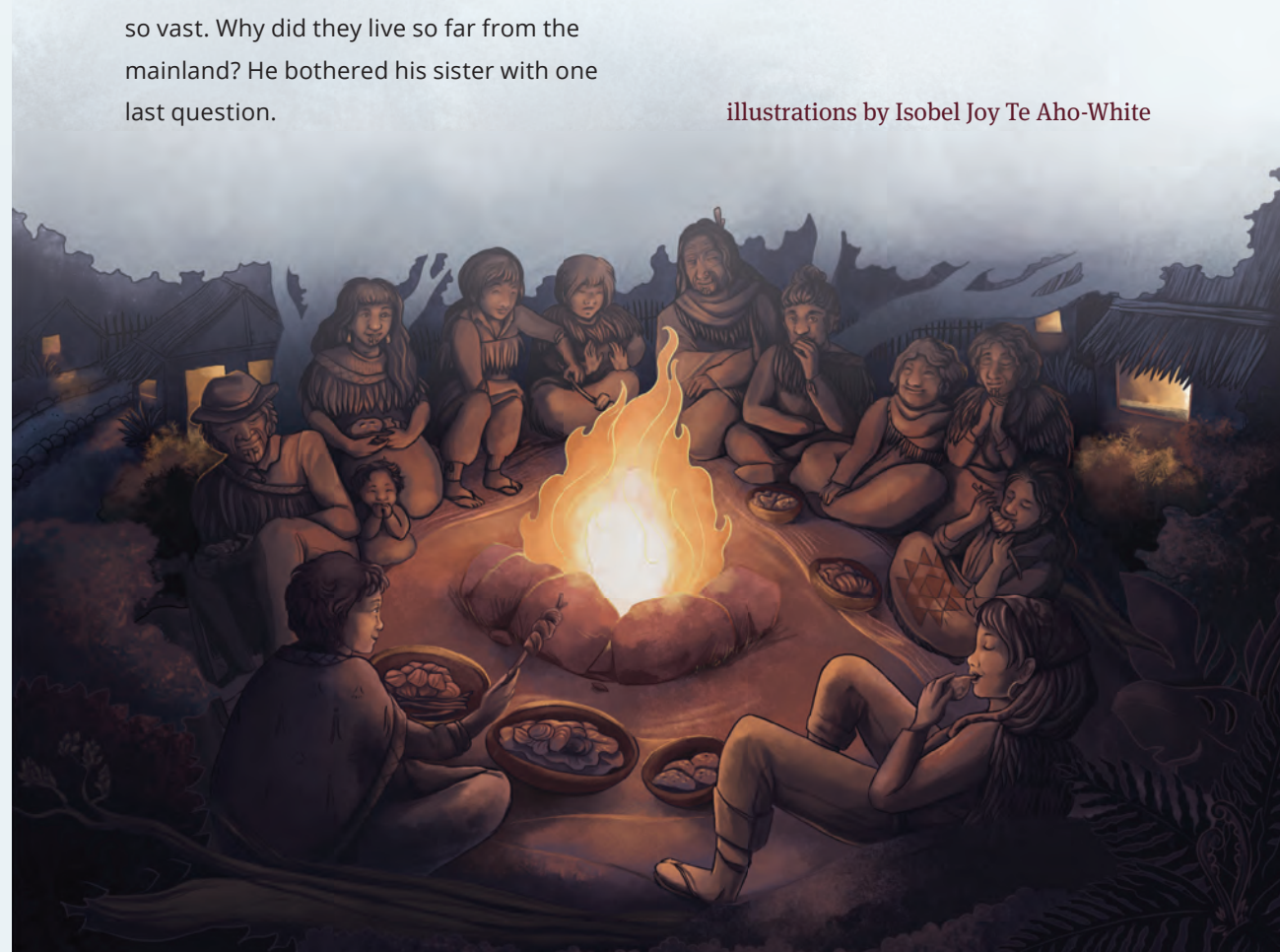
“You’ve done well. Now get some rest. It’s been a big day.”

His sister turned on her side, but Ihaka’s mind was racing. He watched the people who lingered by the fire and thought about their lives. The island was so small, the sea so vast. Why did they live so far from the mainland? He bothered his sister with one last question.

“These islands were once the high places,” she said. “Their tīpuna were here long before the old world drowned. This is their tūrangawaewae. Besides, they like it here. They have freedom.”

They didn’t talk after that. Soon Ihaka could hear the steady rhythm of his sister’s breathing. He was still too excited to sleep. Instead, he pictured his nanny’s smile as she welcomed them home. He wondered how much Kāmaka would let him sail on the way back. And when they might go on their next trip. There were other islands, many people he had yet to meet. Ihaka closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the waves lapping at the shore.

illustrations by Isobel Joy Te Aho-White



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