

THE MOA

BY LUCY BUCHANAN
*Matamata Intermediate,
Winner of the
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Ahorangi's family had been arguing again.

She had heard shouting on the way to the lake but had chosen to ignore it. Instead, she quickened her pace towards the safe, sandy shore and sat there now, thinking. Dipping her hands into the cool water, Ahorangi picked out the prettiest stones she could find, savouring the feel of the smoothest ones before dropping them in her kete. It was therapeutic. The gentle waves could almost wash away her nerves and worries. But not quite. There was still a nagging voice that echoed in her head; unsettling words rolled around like a serpent ready to strike.

Ahorangi's grandfather was dying.

Her father, Ihaika, was determined to be the new chief and had the entire iwi trapped beneath his pressing palm. He thirsted for power and planned to attack a neighbouring iwi they had been happily aligned with for many years. Ahorangi knew that should they attempt to defeat the iwi, they themselves would be defeated. But Ihaika refused to believe they weren't invincible, his ignorance overtaking common sense.

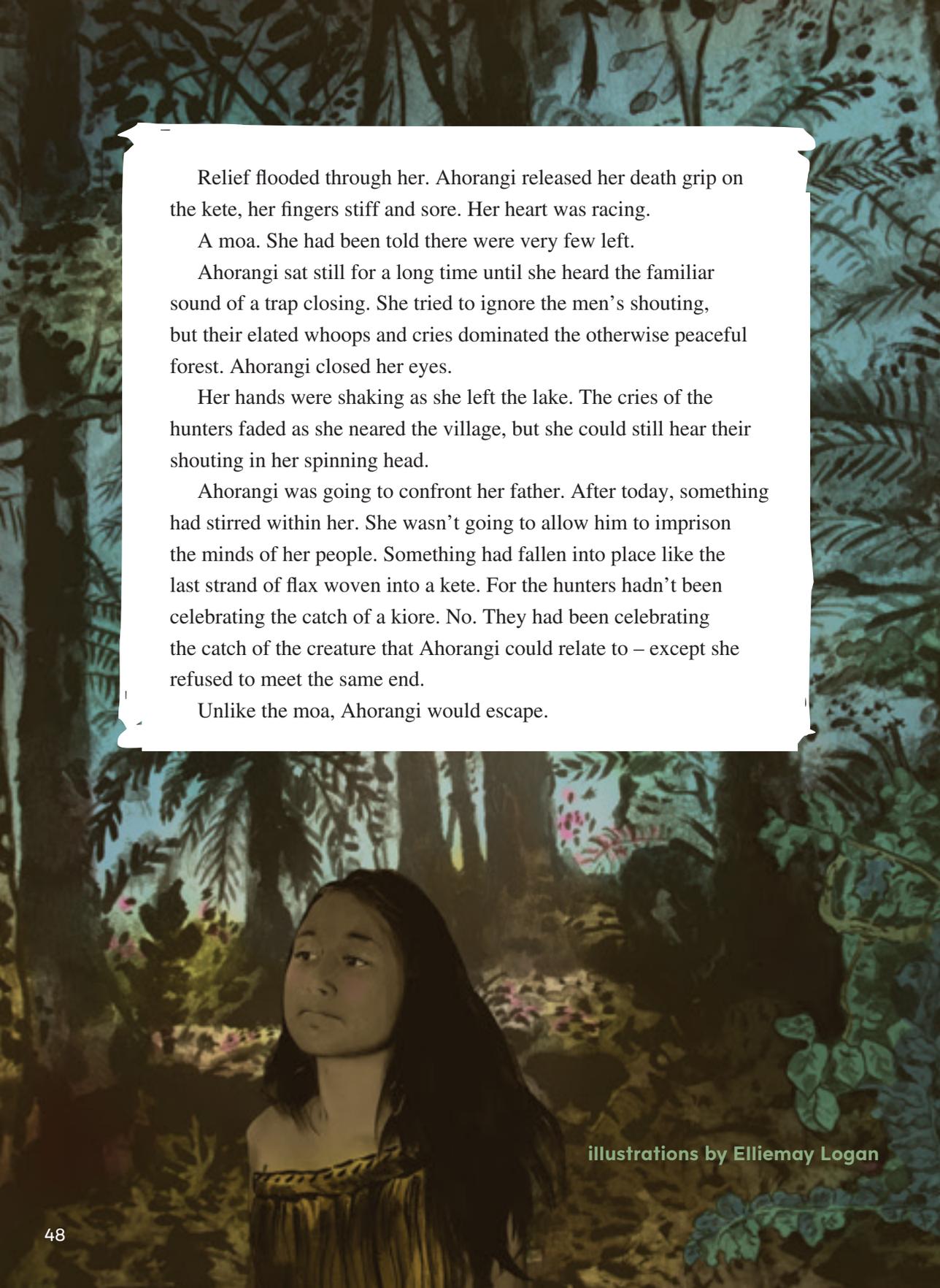
The crunch of twigs sounded in the forest, snapping Ahorangi out of her reverie. Her head whipped around, hair slapping her face from the sudden movement.

At first, she thought the towering creature was a figment of her imagination, but Ahorangi knew it was real when it locked black eyes with her brown ones. She dropped the stone she was holding in favour of the heavier kete. Instinct told her to throw the basket, but her mind told her to wait.

The brown-feathered bird stared down, studying her like prey. She wanted to run, to escape the terrifying gaze. The bird stepped back on its large clawed feet, keeping its small eyes on her. Ahorangi felt trapped beneath the glare, as if the bird were suffocating her, as if its claws were already scratching at her throat. Her grip on the kete tightened, her knuckles turning a pale white.

Then the bird ran.





Relief flooded through her. Ahorangi released her death grip on the kete, her fingers stiff and sore. Her heart was racing.

A moa. She had been told there were very few left.

Ahorangi sat still for a long time until she heard the familiar sound of a trap closing. She tried to ignore the men's shouting, but their elated whoops and cries dominated the otherwise peaceful forest. Ahorangi closed her eyes.

Her hands were shaking as she left the lake. The cries of the hunters faded as she neared the village, but she could still hear their shouting in her spinning head.

Ahorangi was going to confront her father. After today, something had stirred within her. She wasn't going to allow him to imprison the minds of her people. Something had fallen into place like the last strand of flax woven into a kete. For the hunters hadn't been celebrating the catch of a kiore. No. They had been celebrating the catch of the creature that Ahorangi could relate to – except she refused to meet the same end.

Unlike the moa, Ahorangi would escape.

illustrations by Elliemay Logan

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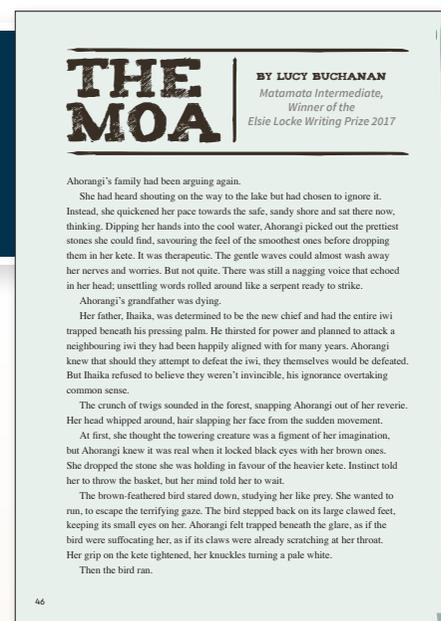
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