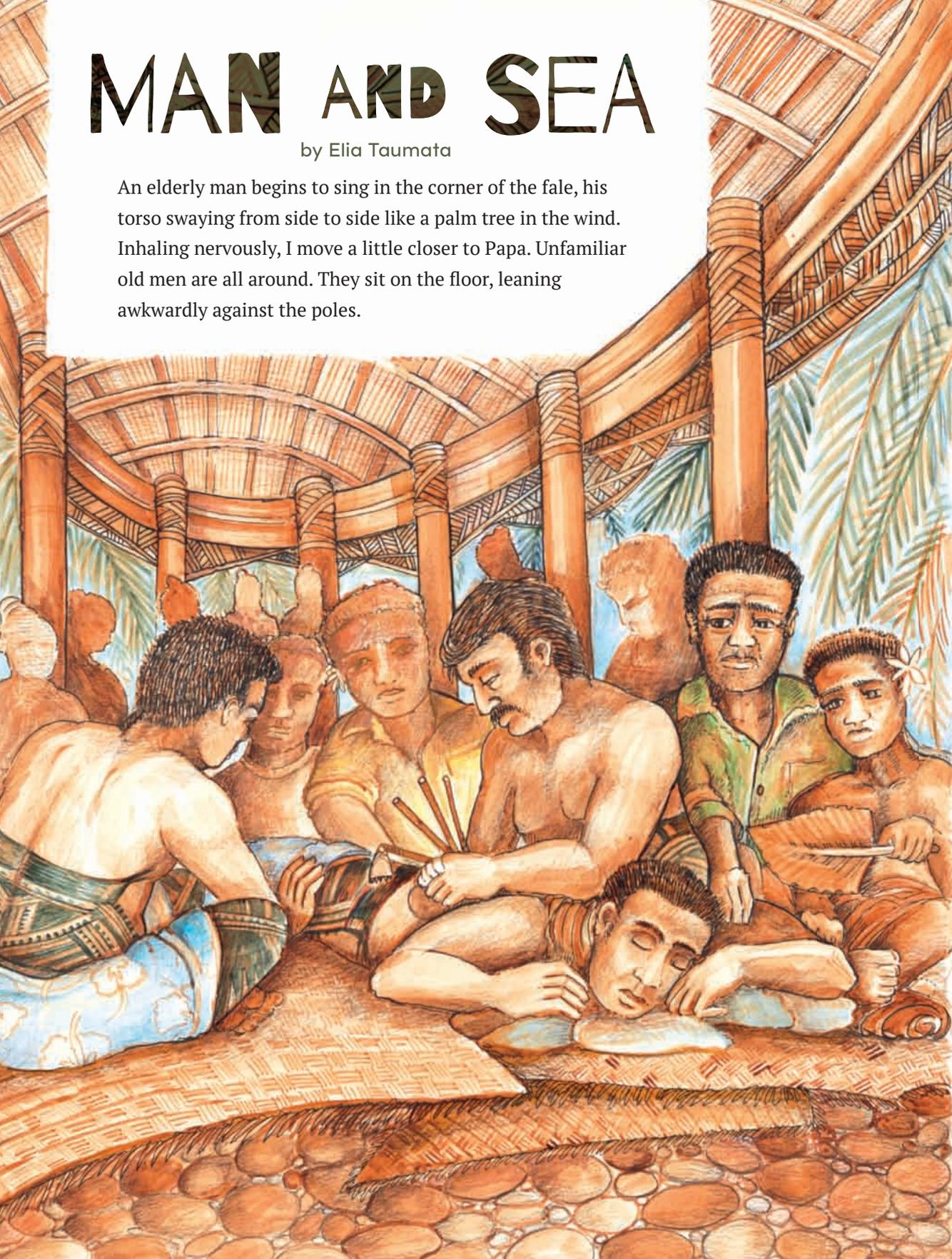


MAN AND SEA

by Elia Taumata

An elderly man begins to sing in the corner of the fale, his torso swaying from side to side like a palm tree in the wind. Inhaling nervously, I move a little closer to Papa. Unfamiliar old men are all around. They sit on the floor, leaning awkwardly against the poles.



My brother Ioane steps into the middle of the room, and a group of men greet him. Ioane gives his hand to one of them, another man I've never seen before. He is the tufuga tā tatau, the master tattooist. He ushers Ioane onto an old fala, and my brother lies on his front. He doesn't look our way.

The tattooist takes up his position alongside the solo. Papa grips my arm as he proudly watches the ceremony begin. The tattooist selects a wooden tool. At the end of it are what look like tiny white arrows. I know what they are. Shark teeth. Papa has told me. And I know what the solo's task is. Papa told me this also. He will wipe away my brother's blood.

I have three brothers, but Ioane is the oldest. When Dad passed away, it was Ioane who had to drop out of high school and get a job, even though he was only sixteen. He's been at the meatworks for two years now. Mum has two jobs, so we get by. A few months ago, Papa came to New Zealand to talk with Ioane. He made us all stay back in the lounge after evening prayers on his first night. He had something important to say.

"Ioane, you have made me very proud," Papa said, his eyes glassy with tears, "and I know the alofa you have shown for your 'āiga, your family, would have made your father proud, too."

Mum was all choked up and couldn't say anything. None of us could, so Papa went on. "As you know, your father was also forced to become a man at a young age. Many years ago, I offered him the same proposal that I am here to offer you, Ioane."

My brother guessed what this proposal would be. He looked at Mum and gave her a shy smile. Even though she was crying, Mum smiled back.

Ioane makes a small noise as the tapping begins. I close my eyes, afraid to watch his pain. Outside, a dog barks. Some kids are teasing it, and a woman yells at them to stop. Just beyond the fale lies the beach, and I can hear a group of boys playing in the water. Papa pulls me closer and straightens his back as Ioane groans again. I know I must stay with my brother. The tufuga tā tatau is hunched over him, his body blocking our view. We can hear Ioane but not see him.

Tap, tap, tap. Ioane's legs jump, and the solo gently pushes them back down. He leaves his hands there as the noises from my brother continue.

Papa clears his throat. "Ioane, listen," he says. And then he begins a story that I recognise straight away. It's the same one our dad used to tell.



Our land was once ravaged by many evils. One of those evils was Uliuli, an octopus that lived in the channel between the islands of ‘Upolu and Savai’i. Anyone who tried to cross this channel would be devoured by the enormous black creature.

The people were terrified of Uliuli and would go to great lengths to avoid it. Sometimes this involved many hours of unnecessary paddling. One day, a matai decided it was time to take action. His village overlooked the channel, and he was tired of gazing over a stretch of water that his people were too afraid to cross. So the matai took his eldest son, Tataua, down to the beach. A tropical storm raged, and the tide was high. The sea crashed angrily against the rocks, spitting spray across their legs. The matai stood, staring out over the channel. After a moment, his eyes closed and he breathed deeply, almost as if he were inhaling the spray. Then he spoke.

“For too long, Uliuli has brought misfortune to my people. And now the wild pigs have moved inland. They too are scared of the sea. Hunting has become more difficult – and neither can we fish. What are we to eat? We cannot survive on breadfruit alone.” The matai turned to his son. “I am much too old to banish this evil. My limbs are weak, and my sight is failing. Tataua, my son, you must carry my name into the sea and bring life back to the people.”

The boy looked at his father in disbelief. “But I am too young! There are older, stronger men in the village who would accept the challenge. Why me?”

“Because you are my son.” The matai handed Tataua a wooden blade, the edges carved to resemble shark’s teeth. “Take this. It is time to become a man. Our people need you.”

Tataua had no argument against the power of his father’s words. He took the blade and swam out into the channel, only stopping when he reached the middle. On his left, Tataua could see the island of ‘Upolu; on his right, Savai’i. The boy scanned the water all round, watching for movement. Then he started to sing a song that the fishermen sang, almost as if he were teasing the octopus.

A watery shadow slowly became larger, causing the ocean to bubble and fizz. Before he knew what was happening, Tataua was launched in the air. His body twisted, and he plummeted back into the water. Tataua swam to the surface, struggling to pull out his blade. Uliuli was there, waiting, but before Tataua could do anything, he was seized by a monstrous tentacle.

Using all his strength, Tataua swung his wooden blade. The creature hurled the boy into the air once more with a screech of pain mightier than the storm. As Tataua came back down, he readied his blade one last time, driving it into the head of the octopus. Black blood spilled over brown skin, and it was finished.

The story ends with Tataua arriving back in his village covered in the blood of Uliuli. When they washed Tataua's body, the black blood remained in his battle scars. Papa explained that these marks of Tataua are the marks of our people.

After the story, we are silent. Papa and I sit quietly, just watching, for a long time.

"We will stop now," the tattooist finally says. "It is time for a break."

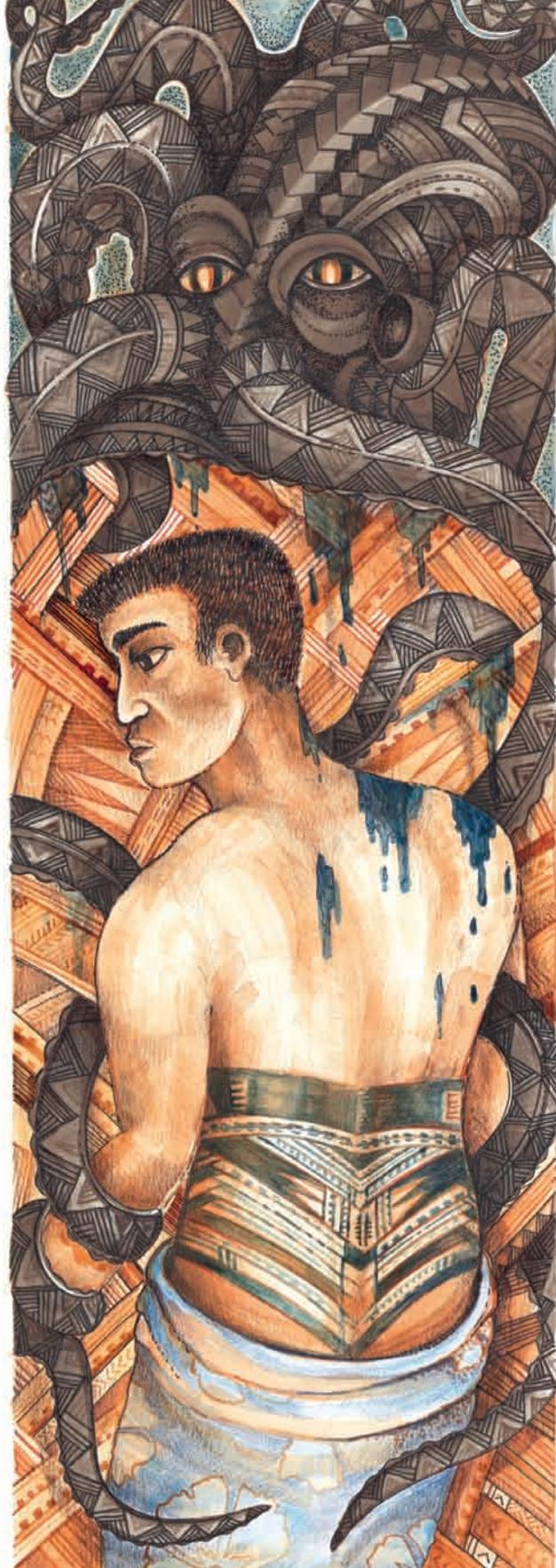
I help Papa to stand, and the solo helps my brother. They walk to a mirror propped against one of the poles, and we follow. We study the pattern begun on Ioane's thigh. He traces his fingers over the symmetrical lines, the fresh ink.

"A few more years, and this will be you, little brother," Ioane says, looking at me.

"Maybe," says Papa. "We will see."

Ioane rests his hand on my shoulder for a moment, just like Dad sometimes did. Then Papa and I watch as Ioane walks down to the sea.

illustrations by Michel Tuffery



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by Elia Taumata

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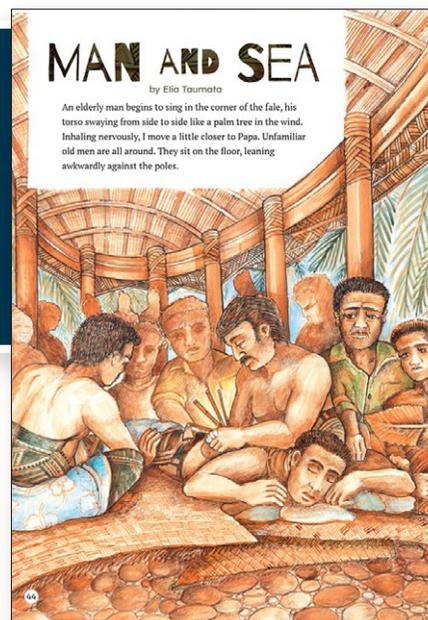
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