

TURNING TO HEAD BACK, he could've sworn he heard his name being called. "Hello?" he said. But the tunnel remained silent. He turned the map upside down and directed himself back. The mouse – *or was it a rat?* he suddenly thought, cringing – scurried near his feet as he passed a familiar junction.

"Atama," someone whispered from the direction of THE END.

It's just my imagination. He ignored the hollow whisper and sprinted as fast as he could, avoiding the puddles, navigating his way through the last two junctions.

"This way," the voice whispered again.

KORO'S STAR

Claire Aramakutu

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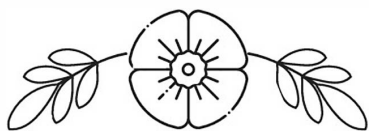
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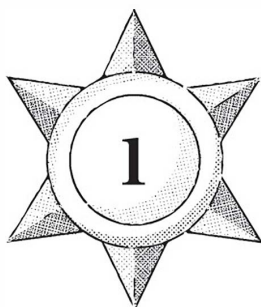
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*For those who serve,
past, present and future,
we thank you.*

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“**HOLD THE LINE,**” Atama whispered to his sister, Maia. “But I’m too *little* to be at the front,” the six-year-old protested.

Atama rested his weapon on his shoulder. “Fine. Retreat to the rear,” he ordered.

Maia shuffled back and rested on a pile of rotting wood. Atama held the front line, listening carefully for footsteps. Their shelter had been hastily constructed after they heard the enemy marching forward. The wind howled, threatening to take down the weak entrance. It didn’t help that the sun was nearly set; the imminent darkness only added to Maia’s terror.

“What was that?” she squeaked.

“Shh,” said Atama, “they’re close.”

Atama squinted, trying to see through a narrow gap in the wall. A big brown eyeball met his and he jumped back, falling onto his bottom.

“A monster!” cried Maia.

Atama scrambled to his feet and steadied himself, weapon raised. The creature scratched at the ground and growled, poking its nose through the gap, sniffing to identify its prey.

“Come and get it!” yelled Atama, pushing the end of his weapon through the opening, hoping to wound it. Its sharp teeth attacked and took hold, ripping the weapon from Atama’s hand and breaking down a section of wall.

Maia screamed as the beast leapt through the gap, its foaming mouth wide open. Without hesitation, Atama jumped on its back and tried to wrestle the weapon from its grip. It thrashed and flipped Atama over on his back against the muddy ground. Before he could recover, the beast stood over him, bubbling saliva dripping onto Atama’s face.

“Yuck!” he cried, pushing away their young German shepherd dog.

Maia laughed as he fell into the few boxes that remained standing at the entrance of the wood shed.

“Good monster, Blaze,” she said, patting the top of his head.

“Some help you were,” said Atama, giggling.

Maia stomped away in her gumboots across the sodden lawn. “You’re my big brother. You’re supposed to save me.”

Atama smiled. He took the role of ‘big brother’ very seriously. Even when it was just in a pretend war with a familiar beast.

Mum stepped down from the back door. “Flatten those boxes will you please, Atama,” she said. “The movers will be here shortly to collect them.”

“Yes, Ma.” He brushed away the mud from his knees.

It had been a week since they’d moved into the army camp. Dad was being deployed overseas soon so he’d arranged for them to be relocated to a new camp, closer to Mum’s family. Atama didn’t mind too much, but he already missed his friends. It had rained all week. “A mover’s curse,” Mum had called it. “Almost as bad as when there was a storm on our wedding day.”

Dad laughed. “Almost.”

The rain kept most of the neighbourhood kids inside and, because it was the school holidays, Atama

was yet to meet anyone his own age. A couple of older cousins had come over to help Mum unpack, but they weren't interested in hanging out with a ten-year-old boy. They giggled as they tried on Mum's old wedding dress, prancing around her room. Maia joined in, stomping on the carpet in Mum's high heels. Atama was glad she was happy.

At least, with the rain, he had a lot of time to sort out his room. Mum and Dad had limited him to two boxes when they packed to move, so he kept mostly toys and a few books. In their old house, he'd had his own room and decorated it just how he liked it, but now he had to share a room with Maia and her baby dolls, not to mention her pink flowery bedspread. So *ugly*. He used her skipping rope to mark a boundary along the carpet, splitting the room into two sections. His and hers. On his side, he had a single bed with a navy-blue bedspread, a bedside table, a chest of drawers and a shelf to stack his books on. Maia had the wardrobe on her side so Atama had to stuff his belongings under his bed, including his collection of toy soldiers he had stored in one of Mum's old wooden tea boxes.

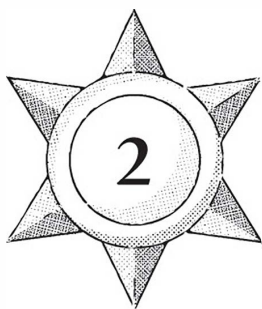
"Stay away from my side," warned Atama as Maia watched him fluff up his pillow.

She stood on one foot, balancing on her side of the skipping rope. "What if I accidentally fall over to your side?"

"Then I'll 'accidentally' give you a dead arm," said Atama.

Maia fell back to her side. "No, you wouldn't," she said before running out of the room.

In a few days, Dad would be gone. Atama knew he had to make some friends, and fast. Otherwise, this was going to be the most boring summer ever!



DAD WAS GOING somewhere called 'Vietnam' – a country where a war was dividing its people and Kiwi soldiers were being sent to help. He said it would be very hot and he was glad he didn't have to lug around a heavy pack and hold a rifle in that heat. He was "just a soldier with a radio," as Dad put it. Atama didn't understand what that meant, but Dad said it was the safest job and Atama had nothing to worry about.

"You'll be the man of the house," said Dad. "I want you to look after Mum and Maia."

"I will," said Atama. He watched as Dad methodically placed item after item into his pack, ticking them off a long, handwritten list.

"When will you be home?" asked Atama.

"I don't know, son."

Tears welled in Atama's eyes. He turned his face away and wiped them with the cuff of his sleeve. He was about to be the man of the house, so didn't want Dad to see him cry.

His father reached up to the top shelf in the closet and brought down an old shoebox. He placed it on the floor and knelt next to Atama. "These were your koro's things from when he went to war," he said, lifting the lid off the box. Atama picked up a piece of thick khaki fabric that was folded to look like the bottom of a sail boat. It had two buttons at the front, barely held on by thin green thread.

"Koro's army cap," said Dad. "Be gentle with it."

Atama carefully placed it on his head. Dad pulled it over so it covered only the right side of his head and then down slightly so when Atama looked up, he could just see the edge of the bottom button above his right eye.

"Perfect," said Dad.

"It's itchy," squirmed Atama.

Dad plucked it from his head and lifted it to his nose. "Musty too," he said, before holding it to his chest. "My dad was wearing this the last time I saw him."

“Where did he go?” asked Atama.

“Your koro was a very brave soldier,” said Dad. “He was a member of the 28th Māori Battalion who fought in the Battle of Crete, among other places.”

Atama was curious about war. “Where’s Crete? And what did Koro do there?”

“Crete is the biggest of the Greek Islands in Europe,” explained Dad. “During the war, it was his battalion’s job to hold the ground and not let the enemy take it. But sadly, Koro died, alongside many of his men, when enemy soldiers rained from the sky, parachuting down on them.”

“That’s not fair,” said Atama.

Dad sighed. “War is never fair, son.”

Dad pulled out a shallow wooden case from the shoebox. The wood was stained dark and had brass decorations moulded around each of the four top corners. Dad flicked up the brass latch at the front to reveal five ribboned medals lying on a bed of velvet navy blue.

“Wow!” said Atama. “Those are neat!”

“They are, aren’t they?” agreed Dad. “These medals were awarded to your koro after he passed.”

Atama slid his fingers over the medals. The first two were bronze stars, and the other three looked

like round silver coins. Each one was attached to a multi-coloured ribbon. Dad explained what they were all for, but Atama was too distracted looking at the engraved pictures and letters.

“One day these will be yours,” said Dad.

Atama's eyes lit up. “Really?”

Dad closed the case and secured the latch. “One day.” He smiled.

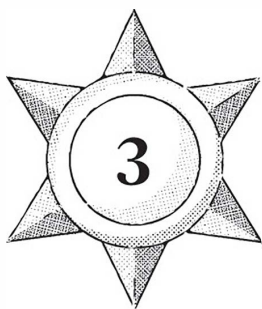
Atama watched as Dad put the lid back onto the shoebox and slid it to the back of the highest shelf.

“How old were you when your dad left?” asked Atama.

Dad continued to pack his bags. “About the same age as you.”

“Might you not come home? Like Koro didn't?” Tears pooled in Atama's eyes again.

Dad put his hands on Atama's shoulders as the tears escaped. “I'll come home, my son.” He slid his thumbs over Atama's cheeks and wiped away his tears. “I promise.”



FROM HIS FRONT DOORSTEP, Atama watched a group of kids playing in the line of pine trees at the end of his cul-de-sac. They lunged at each other with sticks and ducked when pinecones were lobbed over their heads. Atama giggled as the smallest boy pretended a pinecone was a grenade and bellowed an explosion sound before dropping to the ground and crying in pain.

“Looks like they’re having fun,” said Dad as he sat down next to Atama.

“Yeah,” he replied, dropping his head.

“Why don’t you go and introduce yourself?” suggested Dad.

Atama gripped the warm concrete with his toes.

Dad put his hand in Atama's dark, wavy hair and swished it around. "Don't be shy, my boy."

Atama pulled his head to the side, escaping from Dad's hand. He combed his hair back with his fingers. "What if they don't like me?"

"Well, you won't find out sitting here." Dad nudged Atama in the side with his elbow. "Besides, there's no reason for them not to like you."

"Maybe tomorrow," said Atama, feeling a knot tighten in his stomach. Dad was leaving tomorrow and Atama had tried not to think about it. Now he wasn't sure if the nerves he felt building inside were about trying to make new friends or about Dad leaving. Either way, he felt sick and needed to get out of the sun.

"All right," said Dad. He placed his hand on Atama's knee and used it to push himself up. "Come on then. You can help me pack the last of my things."



The smell of roast lamb wafted down the hallway. It was Wednesday and roast meals were usually reserved for Sundays, but Mum said it was a special occasion. Atama thought it was more sad than special – Dad's last night before he left, and no one knew

when he'd be home again. That part bugged Atama.

The last time Dad went away, Mum had made a countdown on the calendar and Dad called on the telephone almost every night. Mum said that was because he was still in New Zealand, but at the time, Atama didn't really understand what that meant. He was only five. This time, Atama knew how far away Dad was going. Over the ocean with other soldiers who were leaving their families too. It did sound like a big adventure, Atama thought. Dad said it would be a shorter trip – only a couple of months – but Atama wished he knew when Dad would be home to tell him all about it. *And what if he doesn't come home...*

"Atama!" Mum called. "Please come and set the table for dinner."

Atama inhaled the sweet smell of honeyed carrots as he entered the kitchen. Mum was pulling the lamb out of the oven and it made his tummy rumble.

"Get those plates over there," said Mum, pointing to the stack on the benchtop. "My mum's special set. Be careful."

"Nana's plates?" asked Atama, picking them up with soft hands.

"Yes," smiled Mum.

Nana had passed away when Atama was only little

and aside from her always smelling like perfumed talcum powder, he couldn't recall much about her. But she was kind, he remembered fondly.

"They are very special to me and it's been a while since we've had them out," said Mum.

Atama placed four of the gilt-patterned plates on the table.

Maia charged in and rattled around in the cutlery drawer, pulling out four forks, which she placed next to each plate. Atama attempted to shift them to the correct side but Maia squealed and whacked his hand away.

"Leave it," she demanded.

Atama looked up at Mum and they both rolled their eyes. *Stubborn little rat*. He watched as she continued with a butter knife, then a dessert spoon.

"Spoon goes above," said Atama.

Maia screwed up her nose. "I know," she snorted, placing them down.

Mum giggled from the kitchen.

Atama snuck up behind Maia, wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the floor. "Did you know that you can be a grumpy little toad?" he teased, swinging her around and around. She squirmed under his grip.

“Put me down, you ogre!” she screamed, a little giggle escaping.

Dad came in as Atama gently placed Maia down, holding her steady until the dizziness subsided.

“Always fighting, you two,” said Dad.

Mum snuffed. “I wouldn’t exactly call it fighting.”

“Trouble. The both of you,” he said jokingly.

Mum placed several serving dishes in the centre of the table: a whole plate of lamb, which Dad had carved masterfully, a deep dish filled with crispy roasted potatoes, kumara and pumpkin, a side dish of glistening carrots, and a steaming bowl of minted peas. Atama filled his plate before swirling over a copious amount of dark, rich gravy. He topped it off with a generous drizzle of homemade mint sauce.

Atama laughed as he watched Dad attempt to balance a fifth potato on the pile of food that threatened to tumble off his plate. Mum gave him a disapproving look.

“What?” he asked. “I won’t be getting another meal like this for goodness knows how long.”

The smile dropped from Atama’s face. He’d forgotten for a short moment that this was to be their last meal together. Dad glanced up at Atama and he could see that his mood had dampened.

"Now for the sauce," he said, holding the jug high above his meal, sauce teetering on the spout.

Maia giggled as Dad pretended to spill it. Atama couldn't help but smile. As it began to pour, Maia squealed and then cheered as it splattered all over his tower of potatoes.

"Perfect," said Dad, smiling at Atama.

Mum shook her head. "And you wonder where our kids learned to be mischievous?" She glared at Dad.

He pushed out his bottom lip, and shrugged. "I have no idea," he said.



Atama's belly was still full when Mum tucked him into bed and kissed him on his forehead. "Night-night, darling. Dad'll come and say goodnight soon."

Atama was making hand shadows in the light of his bedside lamp when Dad came in.

"Have you mastered the rabbit yet?" he asked. "Koro taught me that one."

Atama manoeuvred his fingers into position to display a rabbit with pointed ears on the wall opposite.

"Ah, good lad."

Atama lowered his hands and Dad covered them with his. They felt cold and rough. Dad sighed. "I need

you to be strong and brave while I'm away, okay son?"

Atama nodded as Dad gripped tighter onto his hands. "You'll look after your mum and Maia for me?"

"Of course," said Atama.

Dad smiled and kissed him on his forehead. "I'm very proud of you."

Atama wriggled under the covers, feeling a lump rise in his throat. He pulled a hand away, ready to catch a tear that was about to fall free.

"It's okay to be sad. It's okay to cry sometimes, too," said Dad.

Atama nodded and let the tears roll down his cheeks.

"I want you to promise me something ..." said Dad.

Atama's eyes widened. "Yes?"

Dad took Atama's hand back. "I want you to promise me that you'll try and make some friends." Atama sniffled and glared at him. "Promise me that you'll have a fun summer," he said. "I want to think of you having fun and enjoying yourself."

Atama smiled. "Okay, Dad. I'll try."

"Good," said Dad. "Now close those eyes and get some sleep." He brushed the hair away from Atama's forehead and planted another kiss between his eyes. "I love you, my son."

Atama pulled his blanket up under his chin. "I love you too."

After his father went out, Atama stared at the ceiling, thinking about what Dad had said, "... *introduce yourself ... don't be shy.*" The only way he could have a fun summer was if he made some new friends. He loved Maia and didn't mind playing with her sometimes, but a summer of fun wasn't going to happen if his only friend was his six-year-old sister.

Atama fell asleep thinking about what he might say if he saw those kids again. Imagining it was always so much easier than actually doing it.