

LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

A TALE FROM THE LAGOON

by MARA WOLFORD

Joson and Kea loaded their spearguns into the back of the box-like Karimun and we headed down the hill to the beach, as we often did after school. It may seem odd to allow 12-year-olds to handle potentially lethal weapons, but the parents in our neighbourhood had agreed that the boys were competent to dive in the calm waters of the three-kilometre lagoon of Nusa Dua. They were not allowed to go beyond the reef us parents surfed a kilometre out to sea, but they did sometimes when it was calm. Boys will be boys.

They unloaded the wooden guns that were longer than they were tall from the boot. “You know the rules; stay inside the lagoon. And come in as soon as the sun sets behind the hill,” I said as I waxed my board. They skedaddled down the sand towards the jetty.

THAT’S WHEN THE OCTOPUS CAME ALONG AND GRABBED MY HEAD AND FACE. IT TRIED TO DRAG ME AWAY TO ITS HOLE

I set off across the lagoon for a quick surf.

The sun set behind the hill and I began the paddle in. A few of the guys were on the beach for sunset. We had a cheeky beer in the glowing calm of dusk and they headed home. Waiting alone in the failing light, there was no sign of the boys.

Goddamnit. The last time they did this, they had ventured outside of the lagoon and one of them had lost a very expensive fin coming in over the reef. They had searched for it in vain

for two hours after dark, leaving me in a panic on the beach.

Just as fear began to wrack me, I heard two excited voices, then saw the two gangly figures running up the beach in the dark carrying their spearguns. Kea held his other arm straight over his head, carrying an unidentified object so long it dragged in the sand behind him.

“Mum, mum, you’re not gonna believe this! The octopus tried to kill Kea, it tried to drown Kea!” Joson blurted out.

“Slow down. *Whaaat?*”

“Kea and I were near the end of the jetty, waiting on the bottom for schools of needlefish to cruise by, but you know how hard they are to nail because they’re so skinny.”

“Yeah, and that’s when the octopus came

along the bottom and grabbed my head and face,” Kea said, taking up the story. “It tried to drag me away to its hole. *Gawd*, I was scared. So Joson killed it.”

“Yeah, mum. I couldn’t think what to do, but then I did: I smashed its head in with the butt of my gun. Over and over and over. I thought I might hit Kea because the thing was wrapped around his head and arms. *Shit*, it shot ink out everywhere and we couldn’t see anything, but it wouldn’t let Kea up. So I just kept bashing it.”

“Geezus. How long did all of this take? How long were you two under?” I asked.

“Like, forever, or something,” they replied in unison.

“Mum, can we take the octopus home and you cook it for us?” Joson asked. “I love octopus, especially a killer octopus that I bashed to death.”

“Yeah, sure looks like you two won the battle,” I said as I poked the poor creature’s nearly unidentifiable head. “Let me find a garbage bag to put it in. You guys go rinse off. I’ll cook it tomorrow, but let’s head up the street to get dinner to celebrate your victory over the octopus offensive.”

The two scurried off to the showers, chatting and laughing. I wandered around looking for a plastic bag. You never have to look too hard to find one in Bali.

We loaded all the gear into the car and I placed the bag with the two metre-long octopus in the boot.

“You guys remember to put the octopus in the garage fridge tonight, right? When you unload your gear.”

“Sure, mum.”

I had a late start the next day. I’d work from noon till long after dark. I opened the boot of the car that had already sat for five hours under the sizzling equatorial sun to load my tools and nearly passed out from the wafting odour. Turned out I wouldn’t have to cook that octopus after all. The car reeked for months to come, a daily reminder of a battle won.

