

Spirit of the Bird

by Ben Brown

It is the hunting season in the new land. For Pai and her people, the long days of summer mean work. It is time to find moa. But Pai would rather not hunt. She has other things on her mind, things like painting.

“She’s our dreamer, that one,” her father often says.

“This place needs its dreamers,” is her grandmother’s answer.

Pai has dreamt all her ten years in the new land. She is always gazing up at the night sky. Grandmother has taught Pai the names of the heavens. Pai can’t believe there are only twelve of them. She is sure there must be more. But her grandmother knows these things – and Pai knows not to question her.

The heavens contain the stars that guide her people, the stars that mark the seasons throughout the year. And there are still so many of them left to name ...

Each year, the trail to the hunting ground grows longer. The great birds are becoming harder to find. Now, each moa is a prize: a treasure of meat and bone and soft, warm feathers. The people have hunted the bird ever since they arrived in the new land, but there are not so many moa any more.

It is only the people who have grown in number.

The hunting trail takes them deeper into the valley, where the mountains begin to rise and the river starts its journey, where there is still hope that the great birds will be found.

Pai and her whānau make camp in a cave at the foot of one of these mountains.

Grandmother remembers when huge flocks of the birds were driven with fire. She remembers when clutches of their eggs were plentiful. The people in Grandmother’s day had named the birds moa, after the chickens of their homeland. But these birds were no chickens. Some of their eggs were bigger than chickens, and some of their hatchlings grew to be bigger than people. So many fishhooks and spear points and needles and combs in one leg bone.

Pai wears a comb made from moa bone.

Her father wields a spear pointed in bone.

Grandmother wears a cloak of warm reddish-brown feathers.



Pai has been given the job of looking for the eggs. They are enormous yet surprisingly fragile, and Pai has gentle hands. The work saddens her, whether she finds any eggs or not. Pai knows the hunt sustains her whānau. She knows the moa is a gift. She also knows that each egg gathered is a great bird that will never be.

When Pai is sad, she turns to her dreaming. This evening, by the firelight, she will begin a picture on the cave wall. What will be in the picture?

That remains to be dreamt.



*Tuatahi, moemoeā te āhua.
Whakapūhake me te whitinga.
Tapahi te ao me te pō.
Takoto rā ngā mea katoa.*

*First, dream the image.
Fill it with light.
Cut it with darkness.
Therein lies everything.*

Pai has searched for much of the morning without success. Old nests, broken shells, lost feathers ... but no eggs. The hunters have taken only one bird so far. One bird will not feed all her people. So Pai continues searching into the afternoon. The shadows lengthen, and the light changes tone as evening rises beyond the mountains.

Then, in the changing light, she sees a sign of moa – bark shredded from a particular tree at a particular height. An adult moa has been working on its nest. Pai will recognise this spot in the morning. It is a beautiful tree. In the meantime, she must return to camp before night falls. Now she knows what she will paint on the cave wall.



Pai paints a tree inhabited by the spirit of a bird. She marvels that such a tree lives in the company of moa. In the past, forests were burnt during the hunt. Now it is not so. And now, in her painting, the spirit of the moa is allowed to grow ...

Pai sets off early the next morning. She retraces her steps from the day before, feeling as fresh and new as the rising mist. She finds the tree with the mark of the moa. Moving outwards, she looks for other signs: certain branches nibbled and cut; scrapings in the undergrowth; and, best of all, the bird's droppings. Somewhere an adult moa is foraging, perhaps with a young one in the nest.

There! What's that?

A movement, the brush of ferns across a large, feathered body. The curious probe of a keen head pushing through foliage. Pai can see a lone moa stepping cautiously through the forest. The bird is as tall as Pai – probably even taller – and it seems at this moment to be especially alert.

Three or four steps ... pause ... look this way and that ... move on ... careful and quiet.

Pai feels the excitement of a hunter, the thrill of seeing and not being seen. She does not feel sad as she silently tracks the great creature through the forest. She has decided that today, she is not here to hunt or to gather eggs. She is here to dream. *Rare gifts of great birds, a tree with a bird's spirit, unnamed stars.*

And still the moa makes its way. Stepping. Pausing. Looking. Listening.

At the top of a rise, there is a wall of rock where the forest ends and yet another mountain begins. The moa has made its home beneath this mountain. Nestled in a cleft, it has built a bed of twigs and barks and grasses. In this bed nest, another great bird has begun its journey. The chick is hungry. Pai cannot help herself. She must get closer. She moves, and the great bird turns its head.

"I see you!" it says.

"Feed me!" clatters the chick.

"I will make a picture of you," says Pai. "That is all."

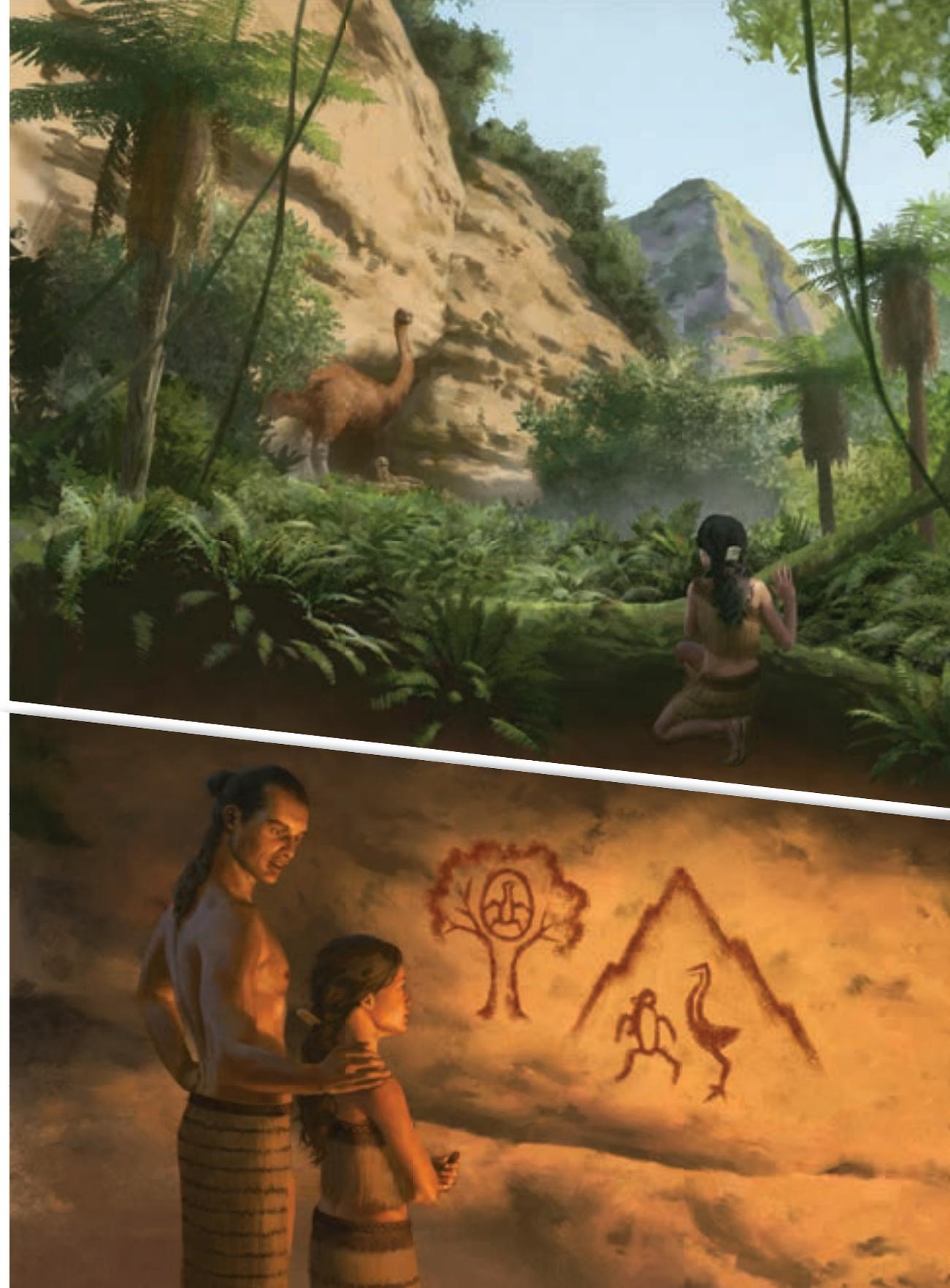
She turns and walks away.

Beside the mark of the tree with the bird spirit, Pai paints the image of a great bird beneath a mountain – and a human without a bird spear. Tomorrow she will add stars.

"Is that what you saw today, Pai?" asks her father.

"No," Pai replies. "It was only a dream."

illustrations by Tom Simpson



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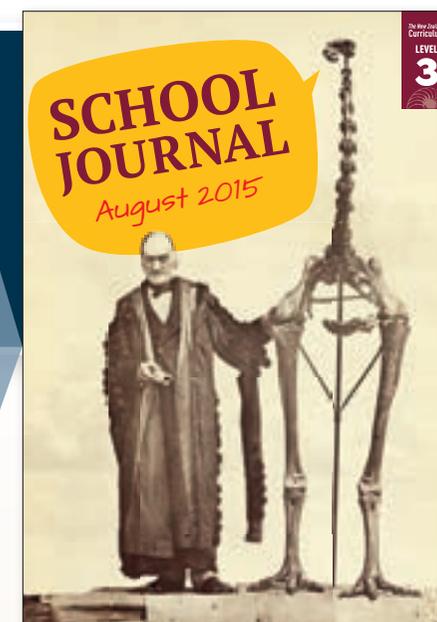
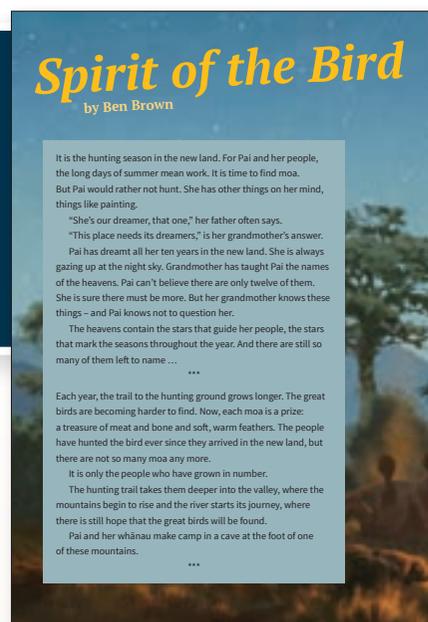
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