



## Chapter Eighteen

Nua ran all through the night. Powerflower hovered somewhere in the ether close by. He ran as a ghost, his feet soundless, his movements quick, agile, undetected by the creatures of the Truth Stream. He skirted the waterfall and found the track the children had used. Every so often he stopped and listened, cocking his ear to the evening breeze. He felt Powerflower's petals overhead. He found himself whispering to the night air.

'Powerflower, do you feel it too? This creature of evil, the son of the eye?'

'Yes Nua, but where I'm not sure. It hasn't passed this way as yet.' Nua pushed hard down the mountainside, his heart heavy with fear, but his courage intact. He stopped to rest on the rock ledge where he had left his cloak for Bella to wear, the place he had given her medicine and food before moving on down the slope towards the river at the edge of the Truth Stream. An owl hooted in the night. He called back. It cruised past him, landing on a branch a short distance in front, its eyes wide and burning bright.

Nua was above the clearing where Smelt lay at rest, babbling to himself about the filthy rotting Half-lights. A chill spread through his body. He could smell the foul creature, smell its malevolence. Hear it muttering.

'So, it is true. The evil one has a son of the light that can travel the Truth Stream. These are bad times,' he thought.

Powerflower materialised, the size of a butterfly, next to his ear, and said to Nua, 'It has picked up the children's scent. It is on their trail. We must try to stop it. Fool it somehow. Set a false trail. Lead it on a merry chase. Come, let's return to the cave where you healed Bella and disturb the ground. Let's hurry. There is no time to waste.'

Smelt was fiddling with what was left of Bella's shoe, stuffing it in his nose, biting at the leather, nibbling away at its threads. With a sudden jerk of his queer head, he dropped the piece he was playing with. He jumped to his feet and let out a howl; a howl that carried to Nua and Powerflower.

'It's coming,' Nua said. 'It knows of our presence. We must forget the cave. It will be on us before we make it. We will return to my village to warn our warriors. It is too much for me alone to tangle with.'

'I think you're right,' came the reply on the wind from Powerflower. 'Quickly, run for your life.'

Smelt had reached their lookout. He crawled around in the dark earth scratching at its surface. He laughed his hideous laugh and howled again into the night.

Soon he found the place where the new scent divided itself from his real quarry. It was frustrating for the vile creature, for in his heart he wanted to track down Nua, and peel the skin from his body. 'Oh Master,' he called. 'Yes, I understand,' he replied to himself, a lunatic, mad, deranged, bent on blood and mayhem. It was with some disappointment that he bounded off in the direction of the cave, in the wake of Bella and Race's footsteps.

It wasn't long before he found the cave. He rummaged around, kicking at the dirt. He could keenly smell where they had sheltered from the storm. Smelt moved like a weasel, slinking about the cave and up onto its ledge. It was here that he went berserk, crashing into the trees that surrounded the area.

'Arrgh,' he growled in pain. 'It's him. The other.' He could smell where Nua had been. 'Here with the rotting Half-lights.' He could smell the cloak, the eel, Solo and Ubu. He screamed into the night, a blood-curdling howl of pure hatred. 'You too, I will devour. I will strip you piece by piece. You, I will have for myself. A prize for my effort. A reward for Smelt.'

The beast loped to the ridge and followed the path to the waterfall, head down, licking at moss and boulder. He seemed confused, rushing this way and that, deceived by the water that had diluted the scent. He backtracked, but returned again and again to the waterfall. He picked up boulders and sent them flying through the air, smashing against the far side, his strength demonic, awesome. The horrific noise shattered the calm night.

The sun was rising above the waterfall. Smelt squinted his eyes, two



*Bella & Keywee in the Truth Stream*

black buttons set in an evil face. Finally, he decided to climb the falls. That was when he found the scent again. ‘I’ve found them, Master. I’ve got them. I’ll bring you back their eyes.’

He stood at full height at the lip of the falls. The sun, now at its full power, blasted down on his evil head.

Nua was now where Keywee had revealed itself to the children, not far ahead of the foul creature.

‘It’s closing on us. It walks in the light. I fear for us all, Powerflower: my people, our Truth Stream. The evil one’s son has great power. I shall wait here and meet it.’

‘No, no, Nua. Do no such thing. You must make it to your village and gather your warriors to protect Bella and Race. They have gone to the Tundra, near to Mt Cloudcatcher. It is there you must go. It is our only chance. This creature is too much for either of us. Quickly, come. To your village.’

The warrior Nua thought for only one moment, then nodded to Powerflower. ‘Yes, you are right.’ He turned and fled as fast as his strong legs could take him.

Smelt now moved more slowly trying to melt into the bush by the river. The morning chorus abruptly stopped, also frightened by his ranting words of murder. There were no fish to be seen or bees to be heard. All was silent and still, Smelt alone moving like a rodent through the covered bush.

Nua had just outrun the devil. He could now smell the beast himself. Again, Nua’s scent confused Smelt. He howled again, wanting Nua’s bones. He came upon a new smell. One he could not understand. It had joined the Half-lights – right here, where he stood. He pawed at the ground with his talons, moaned, shrieked aloud at the secret of its identity. He could smell the other human, but right here, at this place a separation had occurred. The rotting Half-lights and the traitor Solo had moved off up towards the ridgeline, far above his head, with the source of this alien scent. He went berserk, shredding fern and ponga, beside himself with rage, frustrated at this division of scents.

‘Half-lights,’ he yelled. He knew it was them that his Master wanted. The other could wait till later. He would tear him apart; tear him limb from limb.



## Chapter Nineteen

They parted on the ridgeline high above the valley floor where they had met the Sansvira. Mt Cloudcatcher stood brooding to their left, almost close enough to touch. They had talked through most of the night, making promises to each other. Solo built their courage up, telling them they would soon be reunited, that they would meet again on the valley floor to enjoy the company of the Sansvira, that they'd be together for the birth of Epic of the Superbird. He told them it was up to them, that the Truth Stream's future was in their hands.

Solo watched his charges wind their way up the slope towards the Tundra. They looked too fragile, too small for such a large task. But they alone could do it. The Sansvira had decreed it.

They parted with tears in their eyes. Ubu strove to go with them. Solo called him back. With a sad voice, he bid the children farewell. 'Till we meet again,' he called. 'Travel safe, my children. I love you as my own. The prophecy will be fulfilled.'

Then it was Solo's turn to move across the face of the range, to turn towards the village of the Kuaha, the People of the Doorway. He too had tears in his eyes, though he hid them till the the children were out of sight.

Keywee stood apart, detached, looking at her own vision of the future. She tapped Solo's side to let him know it was time to leave.

It was that night they heard the howl of Smelt. Solo shuddered. Ubu whimpered. It woke them from their dreams. It shook them to their core. What could make such a monstrous sound in the Truth Stream?

\* \* \* \* \*

This was the first time in their short lives that the children had been alone, truly alone. They buoyed each other's spirits with talk of the

Sansvira, Ubu, Solo and Keywee as they laboured up the ridgeline towards the Tundra. The day passed to the sound of skylarks and dragonflies. The sun was warm. They realised they were hungry. It was Race who complained first. Bella pulled from her pocket a small parcel wrapped in a bright green leaf. Unwrapping it, they found a piece of the eel Nua had left them.

‘Oh Bella, you are so clever. By jingoes, Bella, you are the best.’ They ate their meagre meal and pushed on, reaching the summit as the sun faded from their sight, behind a distant smog, which they knew to be the smog of Lair City. Its last rays were reflected high on Cloudbatcher’s peak.

They had passed through stunted trees with gnarled limbs that had been bent by the wind and snow. The track was blocked by frequent clusters of rock and shale, tight, springy foliage and tussock. They drank from icy pools of water that made their teeth ache. A stiff wind greeted them on the plateau. The air had grown thin and cool. They decided to drop back down the ridge to the first outcrop of rocks that gave shelter from the elements. They gathered as much tussock grass as they could and spread it thickly on the ground and stuffed it inside their jackets and pants. ‘By jingoes, it will be bitterly cold tonight Bella. I’m cold already.’

‘We’ll be okay, Race. We’ll pull as much of this grass over us as we can.’

They squeezed up close amongst the cairn of rocks and dragged the tussock around their feet. They huddled close together, pulling their hands inside their jackets, surprised at the warmth the tussock afforded.

‘How will we find Epic, Bella? What do we have to look for? The Tundra spreads forever. It could take a lifetime to find his egg.’

‘Don’t worry, Race. It will be shown to us. I just know it. Didn’t the Sansvira say so? Tomorrow, we will start early. You can go a long way in a day. It will be a special egg. Not like any we have seen before. I mean, it won’t be like the eggs we had in Mt Paris.’

‘Oh Bella, our parents, I haven’t thought of them for such a long time. They would be happy to know we are here. I hope some day they can know the Truth Stream too.’

‘They are on Level Five, Race, You know it’s better than Lair City. Imagine their heartache to know the truth of it. But I do remember the egg dishes your mother made, Race. So scrummy?’

‘I hope Superbird didn’t hear you say that,’ Race said, laughing. ‘And I hope Solo and Ubu are okay.’

‘They will be fine. Bedded down like us for the night. Keywee will protect them.’

‘I reckon they will be warmer than us, with ferns to cover them. Solo will have Ubu to cuddle up to.’

‘You have me Race, and besides, Ubu will be next to Keywee for sure. Now let’s try and get some sleep. Here, cuddle closer.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Keywee had them moving at first light. The track slowly descended into a valley with foothills covered in trees with bright red flowers. It was easy going, with clear distinctive paths. A myriad of birds called to each other. Huge fat pigeons sat scoffing down berries in massive trees. It was a paradise of flax, fern and ponga. Their path now met a stream. Eels and fish swam in the crystal-clear waters. At any other time, Solo would have felt comfortable. Instead, he constantly looked back over his shoulder, expecting to see a monster chasing him. The early morning howl had embedded itself in his heart. He tried to rationalise, telling himself it was just a dream, so real that it was this that woke him. Still, something didn’t feel right. Ubu hung in close to Keywee, occasionally stopping for his master to catch up, then trotting away to Keywee’s side.

Solo thought about his premonition. The vision of his parents, smiling at him from their cottage in the middle of Lair City. How was it so? He swallowed hard when he thought of returning to that place, to Lair City. To touch them, talk to them and be with them, his own parents, old and grey, that would be worth the risk. He thought of Bella and Race, high up on the Tundra, alone. He knew they would have to spend the night in the open, freezing. He spoke out loud to himself. ‘By jingoes Bella, you are a clever girl,’ and smiled. No, they would be okay. He had been through many hardships with them. He knew their mettle. But he found it difficult not having them by him to talk to, to take care of.

What was it that he would find out about himself with the Kuaha people? The Sansvira were positive that this was his destiny. That it was there that he must go. He looked up the trail at Keywee and Ubu. He wondered, had they too heard the howl, that haunting sound that still rattled away in his head? It was just a dream, he told himself again ...

it wasn't real. But still he kept looking back over his shoulder, waiting for the beast to pounce.

Keywee had moved out of sight around the bend, so he quickened his step. 'Too much daydreaming,' he told himself. 'Come on, keep up.' But he need not have concerned himself with his pace, for as he turned the corner, there they were, Keywee and Ubu at a standstill, waiting.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I'll keep up, it's fine.' Keywee stood in the dappled light and turned towards his progress. Ubu was at her side, tail brushing the track. He caught up, expecting to move on. Yet Keywee was like a statue, peering down at him with a look that said, 'This is as far as I go.'

For the first time, it registered with him just how big she was. She towered over him, a gentle giant of down and feathers. She pointed with her trumpet up the trail indicating the way. She used her trumpeted beak to push him in that direction. At first, just a nudge. Solo stumbled forward a step, turned and looked up into her tranquil eyes. She spun him around and nudged harder, propelling Solo forward. He nearly lost his footing. Then to Ubu's great indignation and surprise, he was given the same treatment. She stamped her foot in that way of hers that said 'you behave'. Then she waded into the stream and swam with an effortless, graceful movement across it to the other side. 'Looks like we are alone, boy, I guess this is the way to the village.' He looked in Keywee's direction, waved, and in the blink of an eye she was gone. Ubu barked twice. Solo got down on his haunches and stroked Ubu's ears, neck and head. 'She's special – magical. You liked her a lot, didn't you, boy?' The dog barked again.

'Well, Ubu, it's just us now. Let's meet the Kuaha.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Smelt followed the scent of Bella. He kept low, slung to the trail like a bloodhound, his head in the dirt. He would slide over the rocky outcrops carefully, hoping to spring on them with the element of surprise. 'They can't be far now, Master. You will have their eyes soon.' The trail was getting hotter, fresher. Smelt's eyes were bulging. He licked at his sharp teeth, believing that they would be just over the next lot of boulders or around the next turn. His taloned claws left scratch marks in his wake, the sinister imprints of a creature new to the Truth Stream. 'Mustn't let them know I'm close,' he said to himself, as he wormed his way up the ridge. At last he arrived at the place of parting,



the place where they had dropped over the side to meet the Sansvira. The same place they had parted company – Solo and Keywee for the Kuaha, Bella and Race for the Tundra.

It took all he could to contain himself. His face red with anger, he wanted to howl. Howl with rage. Which way to go ... should he go forward, follow the trail towards the Tundra, or drop over the side? He could see the valley far below, lit in sunlight. What if he got it wrong? He hissed, moaned, slapped at his head, with a closed claw. ‘Stinking Half-lights, rotting flesh.’

He crawled around in circles, pushing his teeth forward. The double rows, razor sharp, triangular, snapped at themselves, making a sound similar to stones tapped together. Then, in a flurry of madness, he ripped at the earth sending shale, pebbles and moss every which way. He rolled amongst his own havoc, spitting out words of hatred for Bella and Race.

It took some time for him to calm down. He decided on a direction. At last, it seemed set in his mind. He moved towards the Tundra, following the scent upwards. It was no good. The other trail pulled at his mind. His steps became hesitant. Half-hearted, he couldn’t hold it in any longer. He drew himself to his full height and howled into the sky. He bounded his way back down to the dividing place, the place he had just destroyed, and jumped over the edge to descend to the valley floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The trail widened into a clearing. There were vegetable gardens and orchards. It didn’t take much imagination to realise this was a man-made clearing. Solo could now see humans, bending down amongst the produce, too intent in their work to notice the strangers. Their brown skin glistened from their labour. Solo walked towards the nearest person to him. He was just about on her when she jumped, fleeing with a scream across the rows of sweet potato to join the others, who were now also aware of the intruders. They all took to their heels and raced over a hillock, out of sight.

Solo held his hands out in a pleading gesture. ‘Hello, I’m Solo,’ he called. ‘The Sansvira said I should come. Keywee led us here.’ This he said to an empty field.

He heard them before they reached him. Heard the sound of feet, many of them heading towards the field he and Ubu were in. Head

feathers appeared over the rim of the hill, then tattooed faces, and before they knew it, they were surrounded by Kuaha warriors.

They held hand clubs, spears and long staffs with jagged edges. They circled Solo and Ubu in a fearless prance. The warriors waved their clubs, and poked out their tongues at them. Ubu snarled, growled, turning on the spot next to Solo's feet. 'I'm Solo,' he said. 'I've been sent by the Sansvira.'

Suddenly the circle parted to allow through a giant of a man. His splendid body rippled with muscle, his elaborate headdress sat within plaited black hair. He too carried a club, which protruded from under a magnificent cloak of feathers. The warriors all looked to this man-god. Solo reached out to offer his hand in friendship. One warrior stepped forward, slapped it away with the back of his club. This hurt Solo. Ubu sprang at this man, who kicked the dog hard back into Solo's feet. Ubu yelped in pain. Solo felt his body shaking. He found it near impossible to meet their eyes. The leader walked closely around them. He looked Solo up and down. The warriors moved their circle tighter.

'I'm Solo, I've been sent by the Sansvira,' he urged. At the name of the Sansvira, the leader stopped on the spot and glared at the trembling alien. He opened his arms wider. His men stepped back.

'The Sansvira told me to come to the Kuaha,' he said again in a thin, nervous voice. This is my friend Ubu.' He gestured to his dog. 'Keywee brought us here.' At the mention of Keywee's name, the chief cocked his head. He dropped his club inside his cloak. 'We have come to save Epic of the Superbird.'

At the mention of Epic's name, the whole tribe let out a cry. 'Epic!' they called. The leader took a step backwards, turned to his warriors and raised his arms above his head. They abandoned the circle and formed a loose group, all challenge gone from their bristling bodies.

'Solo,' the headman said. 'Solo, I am Chief Otahi of the Kuaha. You are welcome in our land.' And he embraced Solo and his sceptical dog, pushing his nose against Solo's.

Solo was ushered ahead, next to Chief Otahi. They called out Epic's name as they marched back towards their village. Word spread like wildfire of Solo's arrival. Villagers of all ages, women and children, and the old, lined the path and called out Epic's name. The pair was led to the centre of the village, where a huge carved meetinghouse dominated their homes. A crowd now gathered to see for themselves these aliens from beyond the Truth Stream. They pointed at Solo and

at his dog, talking amongst themselves, delighted at the distraction that broke the routine of their day.

They chanted Superbird's name. 'Epic, Epic,' they called. Then a hush spread across the gathering. One by one they ceased their talk, until silence reigned.

Solo was looking at them, Otahi at his side. He wasn't aware that behind him stood the Ancient, the Wise – the Kuaha's spiritual leader. He turned to follow the direction of the crowd's attention. Solo was spellbound by the lines that covered the old man's face. He wore a simple cape; his aged hand held a staff.

Chief Otahi stepped forward and whispered to the Ancient One, words that only they shared. The Ancient One's head nodded, while his eyes never left Solo.

He moved towards Solo and he too, like the others, pressed his nose against Solo's. The crowd erupted into chants of joy.

'You will come into our house,' Otahi said. 'The Ancient One wishes to have words.'

The old man led the way. Otahi put his arm around Solo's, to show him the way. Ubu trotted beside him. Otahi stopped. 'You can't bring this animal in here,' he said. 'This place is for men and men alone. He can stay on the porch and wait for you.' Solo led his dog away from the doorway and asked him to sit. 'You must wait here for me' he said. 'It will be fine. I shan't be long.'

Little did he know the time he would spend with the Ancient. He was made to remove his battered boots. 'Now, come, the Ancient waits.' Otahi led Solo inside the meetinghouse. Its walls were lined with images of the Sansvira, carved into the wood. A massive centre pole held the roof in place. This too, adorned with images of the Sansvira. The floor, made of flax, felt good on his feet, the patterned walls, also woven from the flax plant, were pleasing to the eye.

The Ancient sat down on the floor, off to the side, at the back of the meetinghouse. A beam of light streamed in from overhead.

'You sit here, Solo,' Otahi said. He had Solo sit opposite the Ancient. Otahi sat at the Ancient's side.

Solo was about to speak, but his words were shut down by Otahi. 'You will speak soon. First the Ancient One will read you. This is not the time for you to talk.'

They sat in silence. The Ancient One peered closely into Solo's eyes. Solo felt as if his soul was being stripped bare. His eye flinched,

blinked. He tried to look away, to survey his surroundings. 'No!' Otahi commanded. 'Look at the Ancient One. He sees Solo's soul. His spirit. He says you will have the mark of a Lair on your calf. Have you?' Solo rolled the leg of his trousers up to reveal the scar that Kart's fingers had made. The Ancient One lent over and whispered in Otahi's ear. 'He says you are Kuaha. He says from long ago. He says your family's blood once lived here in the Truth Stream. He says your soul is good. He says you too are a medicine man. You have great strength. You know the ways of plants. He says to tell him your story now. Why you are here.'

Solo talked and Otahi translated to the Ancient. The Old One's head nodded often. He smiled through sparkling eyes. Solo often heard Epic's name, Sansvira and Keywee in the translation. When Nua's name was spoken, the Ancient One's eyes were at their brightest. Bella, Race, Ubu, Lair City, all were relayed as he spoke of them.

"He says your coming is prophesied. That he knew you would come. He says you will go to Lair City again. He says you will go with Epic to save the Truth Stream. Together. Your way with medicine has the Evil One looking for you. He sends you visions of your past and lies of your blood people. He says you will understand these things in time. He says you need protection. It is necessary you walk with Neke.'

The Ancient clicked his tongue, making the strangest sound inside his mouth. He started tapping the floor with his finger tips. There was a pattern, a rhythm, a musical quality that spread throughout the meetinghouse. Solo heard rustling in the rafters overhead. The Ancient continued his song. His eyes locked to Solo's. Solo wanted to find the source of the rustling that made a counterpoint to the Ancient's incantations. He turned his head towards the rafters. The sound moved within the thatched grass ceiling, towards the centre pole to his right.

Its head appeared first, pushing through the thatching; a bright red tongue flicked in and out of its mouth in time to the Old One's clickings, tappings. It studied its environment. Its head swayed from side to side, revealing more of its body. It hooked itself to the centre pole, coiling itself like a ribbon around the circumference. It slid down the carved pole. Its head found the floor and moved towards the ever-increasing tempo that the Old One drummed out. It was a miracle of colour, chameleon like in ability, adapting to whatever surface it passed across.

Where half of its body still held the pole, it was as brown as the turned earth in the Kuaha gardens, and its head was as blond as the dried flax floor it travelled upon. It moved towards the Ancient and found his fingers. Solo's gaze followed its every movement. The Old One's fingers ceased their beat. The creature lifted its head. Its tongue licked at the air, half of its body suspended to stare into Solo's eyes. Solo looked to Otahi for reassurance. But the chief's eyes were closed as if asleep. Then the creature coiled itself around the Ancient One's body, bringing its head over his shoulder. He raised his arm and reached out for Solo. Their hands connected, creating a bridge on which the creature could move. Slowly, it laced the two arms together to the clicking tongue of the Old One's tune. This was now a half tempo softer; more a hum. The creature's body, covered in armoured scales, glinted golden in the overhead light. It found its way behind Solo's neck and rested its head on his shoulder to look back at the Ancient One. It withdrew its tail from both their arms and wrapped the rest of its body at Solo's side. The Old One dropped his hand; the bridge that it had formed was no more. The clicking stopped. Otahi opened his eyes and smiled at Solo.

'It is done then,' he said. The Old One again spoke to Otahi at some length. Then he struggled to his feet. Otahi gestured to Solo to stay seated. The Ancient lent down and kissed the creature on the forehead, then kissed Solo also, then walked away on unsteady legs.

'The Old One needs to rest now,' Otahi said. 'It took much from him to call Neke, all his knowledge and strength. I know you have many questions. I will answer them for you.'

Neke moved and curled around Solo's arm. She too, rested.

'The Ancient told me to tell you these things. Neke is wise in medicine. She is the spirit of healing. She knows poisons, cures and potions. She can sense danger and will travel with you as a friend and advisor, a talisman. She has accepted you. You are Kuaha. Together, your power will double. Your knowledge of plants, herbs and solutions will increase. You will need this knowledge in the land of the Lairs to fight the Evil One, Zekai Manci. She has also the power to protect. Though I can't explain how, she will reveal it to you ...'

Otahi stopped abruptly mid-way through this sentence. He jumped to his feet. A commotion of shouts had drawn his attention, shouts that penetrated the meeting house walls.

'What is happening?' Solo asked.

‘It’s Nua. He has returned. There is fear in my people’s voices. I must go to them.’

Otahi ran for the doorway. Solo ran also, in quick pursuit. Neke wound her way into Solo’s pocket as he gained speed. He found an excited crowd of warriors surrounding Nua. Ubu, who had been guarding Solo’s boots, nuzzled at Solo’s pocket. ‘It’s Neke,’ Solo said. ‘You will meet her. For now, leave her be.’ Solo replaced his boots. He felt the anxiety within the agitated group.

‘What is it Nua?’ Otahi asked of his brother.

Nua had been running for two days. His feet bled. He tried to talk through his heaving lungs. ‘Bring water for Nua,’ Otahi shouted. ‘Here, my brother. Be seated. Tell us what you have seen.’ Nua accepted the water. He gulped it down as Otahi found Nua a resting place on the steps of the meetinghouse.

‘It’s the Evil Eye. He has sent a monster. A creature so powerful that I alone could not overcome its hate. It is tracking the Half-light humans. I have seen these children. It is them. It is Bella and Race. The ones, the very ones, who will free Epic of the Superbird, as our prophesies have foretold. This evil creature can walk in the light. It has no fear and it is going to the Tundra in pursuit of the children. There is no time to waste, or all will be lost. It is as the Sansvira have said.’

It was then that Nua saw Solo. ‘He knows,’ Nua shouted, pointing his club. ‘He has been with them. He is the one that brought them to the Truth Stream. I have watched them, looked over them as they travelled. Why is he here and not with them?’ Nua wailed.

‘Do not worry, Nua,’ Otahi said. ‘Be calm. He is one of us. He is Kuaha. The Ancient One has brought forth Neke. Neke has chosen this man.’

Solo placed his hand in his pocket and Neke curled her way around his arm, lifting her head to the stunned warriors. They bowed to the serpent. Nua too, head bowed, silenced by its appearance.

‘Then we must go. Go now to save the Half-light children. Prepare yourselves for battle, my Warriors. We fight for the Truth Stream. The land of our very blood.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Smelt reached the valley floor, his anger uncontrollable. He circled the area, confused by the absence of smell. The ground had gone cold, as if they had disappeared off the face of the Truth Stream. His

howl echoed around the clearing, bouncing off the rock face, back at himself. He uprooted trees and pelted them at the unyielding rock face, the trees smashing to pieces at its base.

It started with a low pitch that immersed itself inside the frequency of Smelt's howl, then climbed through the octaves to a single note beyond the reach of human hearing: a piercing whistle that made Smelt clutch at his ears, sending him down on all fours in pain. He screamed in agony, rolling away from the rock face, visibly shaking in a contorted ball. He whimpered like a dog and bit at his rubbery lips; his eyes slits, crunched inside his ugly skull. He moaned, retreating, scraping, clawing at the valley floor, defeated by a power he could not identify. The sound rang inside his head, his brutal violence quashed. He called for his Master's help, to no avail.

Smelt inched his way to the path from which he had descended, pulling himself by his front claws, dragging his body behind. He lay prostrate for some time, fighting for his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bella and Race had spent an uncomfortable night on the side of the Tundra. Their bodies felt frozen, locked stiff, but they had survived. It was a mission to uncurl themselves, each movement causing pain to shoot through a limb, neck or finger. Their bones creaked like that of a wooden ship on a wild sea. They did it in sections, disconnecting their heads from each other's shoulders, then their arms, until they finally unravelled from each other. They propped themselves against the boulders of their dwelling, on legs that wouldn't support them. 'I can't feel my body, Bella. I'm completely numb.' Race's words trickled from lips held tight.

'We have to get circulation back into our bodies, Race. Try to move your feet. Here, give me your hands.' Bella, for some reason, had fared the best. She rubbed Race's fingers in her own. "We must make it back up to the Tundra, where the sun will warm us. Race, Can you crawl?"

'I'll try to,' he nodded.

With the help of Bella, Race travelled the short distance to the Tundra. It felt to him that his body would shatter into tiny pieces of ice.

It was his lips that thawed first in the blessed sun. The relief for Bella was palpable.

'I'm such a wimp,' he said through clenched teeth.

'Don't say such things, Race. You are a hero. My hero. Without you,

I would be dead. Frozen to the boulders. It's because of you that I can move more freely. Don't you remember? It was you who turned his back on the cold. It was you who wrapped me up. It was your poor body that sheltered mine. I love you, Race.' She removed the tussock from his clothing, casting it aside. And she threw herself on to Race, desperately working at releasing his frozen body in the sun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Smelt wormed his way upwards. His hearing slowly returned. He crawled claw over claw, shaking out the rattle in his head. At last, his sense of smell returned, and the scent of Bella and Race also, to his nostrils.

'Stinking rotten Half-lights. My pain is nothing to what I shall heap on you. You will pay for my hurt. I will drink your blood and eat your hearts.' He made his way to the dividing place driven more by hate than strength, though this too was returning as his hatred spurred him on. 'I have them now, Master. They are trapped. Their eyes you will have. The rest is mine, mine, mine. Smelt's.'

\* \* \* \* \*

They left in a hurry, brandishing weapons of many kinds. Otahi and Nua led. Solo amongst the group of perhaps eighteen or twenty warriors. Ubu was at Solo's side; Neke safely travelling in his pocket. Straight above the village they climbed. They made a fearsome collection of tattooed faces. The path was steep and direct to the far end of the plateau, to the Tundra that Bella and Race now walked, looking for the egg of Epic of the Superbirds. The Sansvira's son.

\* \* \* \* \*

'This is like looking for a needle in a haystack, Bella. Where do we start? What do we look for? We might have passed it by already.'

'There will be a sign, Race. Keep your eyes sharp for anything out of place, anything unusual.'

'It all looks the same to me. Boulders, rocks, tussock and puddles of ice.'

'We'll find him, Race, just believe me.'

'But what is it that we're looking for? It could be anywhere. We'll die if we have to stay another night.'

'Well, let's just stop and think about it. Where would we put an egg?'



‘By jingoes, Bella, that’s it!’

‘What’s it?’

‘Where would we put an egg? Remember where my mother kept her eggs? She kept them cool inside a box. A box she made from stones. It was one of her most precious items. We weren’t ever allowed near it. Do you remember?’

‘Yes, yes, Race. I do. So we should be looking for something similar.’

They searched around every cluster of rocks they came upon, zig-zagging their way across the Tundra, lifting rocks, peering inside niches. They had reached the highest point on the Tundra, at a place where they could see its length in both directions. A tarn sat, perfect, still a short distance away, at the bottom of the gentle slope that stretched in front of them. It reflected the cloudless sky they walked beneath.

Many rock formations dotted its shores. Tussock and a miraculously stunted tree stood defying the harsh elements of wind and ice. ‘He is down there,’ Bella whispered. ‘I just know it. Near that tree. I feel it in my heart.’ They were surprised just how far the tree and tarn were. They looked so close from their position at the top of the plateau. But at last they reached the small body of water. As they walked around its outer edge, Cloudcatcher dominated, its snow-covered body mirrored back at them. Then the tree slid into the picture, captured in the circular pool of water. The children stood hand in hand, mesmerised by its beauty.

‘Pull the feather out, Bella, let it loose.’

‘Of course, Race. Now who’s the clever one?’ Bella released the feather of Epic. Straightaway, it hovered in mid-air, held by invisible strings. It floated off, across the tarn, it too now also reflected in the mirrored surface. The children followed the fantastic feather around the edge of the pool. It was so striking, against the pure white snow of the mountain. It headed for the very tree which Bella knew held the egg. The feather circumnavigated the tree, rotating wildly. Round and round it sped, until it was a blur of colour, flashing a trail of itself into itself. Finally, it drifted in the lopsided way of leaves, when autumn claims them. It flopped side to side until it came to rest on a small cairn of rocks at the base of the tree.

To the children’s total amazement, the feather disintegrated in a puff of blue smoke, and vanished into the cold mountain air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Smelt had made his way to the Tundra. He followed their zigzag path, constantly muttering to himself. 'I have them. They're mine.' Nose to the tussock and shale, he slunk along, close to the ground. Their scent was fresh and pungent. The hairs on his face and body bristled with excitement. At last, his quarry was nearby. He made his way to the rise of the plateau on his belly and pushed his square head through a clump of tussock and over its rim to see them for the first time. Two stinking Half-lights and their rotting flesh, which he soon would have, were holding hands next to the tarn. 'Oh Master, I have found them.'

\* \* \* \* \*

'Epic lives here, can you feel his presence?'

'Yes, I can.'

They found themselves next to the tree, its roots exposed, wrapped around a collection of rocks. These roots then burrowed into the hard ground. It was as if the rocks had pushed the tree skyward and it had fought back, refusing to leave the earth. It was covered in small, tight leaves. Its bark, like steel, glowed with a bluish tinge. It stood about twice their size.

'He's in there,' Bella said, pointing to the base of the tree where it sat exposed, balancing on its citadel of rocks.

'Can you help me, Race?'

'Yes, but we should be careful how we remove the rocks.' They leaned down together, removing the smaller stones that had wedged into a cluster amongst the roots and larger rocks. They worked methodically, in silence.

'This one is loose, see?' Race pushed at the largest of the rocks that they knew to be the doorway. It wobbled on its edge. 'If we clear some of this dirt from its front we will be able to pull it free.' They scraped away at the base of the rock with pieces of shale excavating under its bottom edge. It dropped into the hole they had made and fell flat on its face.

'By jingoes, oh look at it. It's the egg of Epic. We have found him.' Then, to their total joy, miniature flowers of blue materialised with a popping sound all over the tree, sending the sweetest perfume into the air. They embraced each other, dancing and shouting Epic's name.

\* \* \* \* \*

Smelt had sneaked up behind them, on the far side of the tarn, his eyes bulging, his mouth salivating. He licked at his teeth. He rose to his full height. His howl shattered the perfect day.

He came at them directly across the tarn, water splashing high around his body, screaming ‘Stinking Half-lights. You’re mine!’

The children spun around. The terror in their eyes spurred the ugly creature on. He leaped at them in one evil movement, his claws at the ready to rip them apart, slashing at the air.

Race pushed Bella hard against her shoulder, sending her spiralling out of the way of Smelt’s raking claws. Race tried to duck to the side as Smelt’s full fury came whipping past his head, catching his forearm. He cried out in pain, rolling away, clutching at his wound. Blood seeped through his fingers.

‘Run, Bella, run,’ he screamed as Smelt bounced against the hard dirt, springing back on to his hind legs. He glared at Race who was scrambling on his knees. Smelt’s attention turned to Bella. His head twisted sharply on his shoulders in Bella’s direction. She stood frozen to the spot, calling out to Race. Smelt laughed and tipped his head back and howled again at the sky. He dropped back down on all fours. His mind was made up. It was Bella that would be the easiest to devour first. He prowled towards her, his teeth protruding menacingly, tapping at themselves, his mind intently focused on Bella. His head was inches away from her. ‘Stinking rotten flesh,’ he hissed, as he pulled himself over her, towering, ready to rip her apart.

Race picked up the largest rock he could find and hurled it at the beast, screaming at the same time. ‘Leave her alone.’ The rock crashed into the side of Smelt’s head, just above his ear, with a sickening thud. The monster’s legs buckled as he flung his arms up to explore the gaping hole in the side of his head. He crashed, stumbling against Bella’s side, sending her flying into tussock and shale. Race ran to his dearest friend in the world and pulled her to her feet. ‘Come on,’ he yelled. ‘Come on.’ They sprinted as fast as they could. Race’s arm stung as blood dripped freely, splattering the rocks that they jumped. Their hearts pounded in their chests. They turned, panic-stricken, to see Smelt regain his footing.

‘What is it?’ Bella pleaded.

‘I think we have to separate. It’s our only chance.’

‘No! No! Don’t leave me. I don’t want to die alone.’ They just stopped in their tracks and looked into each other’s eyes. Then they

understood there was no escape, and turned. Bella shivered, her legs went to jelly. 'I love you Race.' Her words were fragile, hardly audible. 'I love you too Bella,' Race whispered back.

Smelt was all fury, beside himself with hatred. An oily substance streamed down the side of his head. He came at them his grin hideous, foul. He was only a stride or two away when the first blow struck. Nua's club came down in a brutal blow across Smelt's back. He spun in mid-air, whipping his claws at his attacker, only to have them flayed aside by Otahi's staff. A horrific noise poured from Smelt's evil mouth, the warriors' grunts could be heard labouring into the perfect day.

Solo shepherded the children to the side of the battle, concern on his face for Race's bleeding arm.

Ubu was next into the fray, fastening onto Smelt's nearest leg. Smelt's rage exploded in a fury of wild, powerful kicks, sending Nua into Otahi. He lunged at the Kuaha chief, his claws slicing open the brave warrior's thigh. Ubu's jaws separated a piece of flesh from the howling Smelt, who retreated on all fours. But the next warrior to meet him died without a word, his neck snapping like matchwood. He collapsed at the feet of the snarling Smelt. . Another brave warrior disembowelled, stood stunned, holding his insides. A fountain of blood poured from another's mutilated face. The ground turned red.

Nua, at the side of his chief, watched with tears in his eyes as his friends were chopped down by the demented Smelt. 'I'm alright, Nua. Help our people,' Otahi said. 'Go.'

Nua joined the battle. His club worked, finding its mark time and time again. Smelt, doubled over a Kuaha warrior on his back, spun on the spot and reached over with one of his claws to remove his tormentor's head clean from his body. This was too much for the Kuaha, who backed away from the screaming creature. They circled him. Smelt lunged, his teeth chomping, foaming at the mouth. At his feet there were six dead or dying. He walked on them, booted a head away. It rolled past Nua, with eyes wide open. Shock spread across Nua's face. It was his sister's husband. Smelt flung himself at the circle, easily breaking the ring, ripping an ear from one of the Kuaha. He walked backwards, facing the remaining foe, snarling, howling, spitting blood. Nua advanced, club held high. He charged at the evil creature, the others followed, raining blows to all parts of his frame. Smelt fell to the ground, kicking and biting, clawing, gnawing at every limb that came his way, flinging bodies from himself.

With one final show of strength, he gained his feet, hitting out in all directions, causing untold damage to the flesh of his nearest victim. Nua sprung from down low, like a cat, into mid-air and smashed Smelt another blow in the side of his head. It hit the same spot as Race had done. A pitiful sound escaped the monster's lungs, a howl like no other, as his head flew from side to side. He kicked out at Nua, sending him crashing back into his battered men.

Smelt turned and ran. His pace bewildering to the tribe. He ran, a broken creation of his Master.

The Kuaha stood and watched, their weapons at their sides. Around them lay many wounded or dead. They bowed their heads in disbelief.

'We must know it's left the Truth Stream,' Nua said. 'Chase it. Harry it all the way. Will you do this?' he asked, looking to several men who had fared the best. 'Don't let up. It's wounded and in retreat. Throw rocks and trees, but don't get any closer. It hasn't the stomach left to fight.'

This they did, constantly pelting Smelt with whatever they could find. Whenever it stopped to rest its broken body, they were there to inflict more pain. They watched it crawl across the bridge to the other side, defeated but very much alive.

The men suffered in silence. Tears for their fallen comrades spilled freely from their eyes. They tended the wounded as best they could. The dead they buried under mounds of stone. Otahi would recover, though scarred for life. Others less lucky bore hideous injuries; one warrior had lost an ear.

Race's gash had ceased its bleeding. Solo helped where he could with what was at hand, binding wounds with bandages made from his own shirt, which he tore into strips. Those who could, helped. Those that were wounded returned to the village. One was sent ahead to bring cloaks and medicine to meet them on the Tundra. They went, leaving Otahi and Nua who had insisted they go. The five of them waved the men away. 'Farewell brothers. Tell the tribe how well we fought. Sing songs to our dead, who will remain here for all time. This day will be remembered as a victory for the Truth Stream, and of free men. Soon the birth of Epic will be known to all concerned. For it is foretold. It will be so.'



## Chapter Twenty

Bella led them back to the tarn above the battle scene. The air was still fragrant with blossom. There, the egg of Epic lay inside its nest of stone, exposed to the Truth Stream for the first time. Otahi and Nua stood transfixed. Ubu limped a little as he walked up to Solo's side. Neke wound her way down his leg to coil herself in a branch of the tree. Race looked at Solo, too overcome to even ask questions of the serpent's appearance. He watched it make its way to the tree then slide up into the branches. 'That's Neke,' Solo said. 'She has her place with us. I will tell you more some time.' Race just nodded, as if it was quite natural Solo should have such a friend.

'You have found Epic. It's just as the Sansvira have said. So now we must bring it to them. Are you ready to do such a thing?' Solo asked of the children.

Bella leaned down, reached in for the egg. It was the size of a football. She rolled it towards herself very gently until she could pick it up in both hands. She cradled it in her arms. Race replaced the front stone. It was as if they had never been there.

Solo put his hand out for Neke and she wrapped herself around his arm. They all gathered around to look at the egg of Epic that Bella held tenderly against her body.

'The sun is going,' Otahi said. 'We must move.'

Nua agreed. 'We can't stay here.'

They made their way back across the Tundra. It didn't seem that far. At times they all got to hold the precious cargo, passing it to each other around obstacles of rocks that blocked their way. But mostly Bella carried it.

At last they reached the end of the plateau where the track dropped down the ridge towards the Sansvira's home. For Otahi and Nua, this

place was new. These were paths they had never trodden. They saw the last rays of light hit the valley floor.

‘That’s where we have to go to,’ Solo said, noticing their interest in the secluded hideaway. ‘This is where the Sansvira dwell and wait for Epic’s egg.’

‘All too soon it will be too dark to travel,’ Nua remarked. ‘We should find a place to camp. This night will be cold. We are ill- prepared. Besides, it’s too dangerous to try and venture down those tracks with Epic in our care.’

‘We can show you where we spent the night,’ Race said. ‘It’s not far from here.’ He led them to where they had stayed only the night before. The tussock lined the ground, still intact, greeting them like an old friend. Otahi let out a sigh of relief; as he sat down to rest his leg. Nua made his chief comfortable up against the rock. Blood was oozing through his bandages into his grass skirt. It was the same for Race, though his wound was less. They huddled together in the dark night. They put Bella at the back of the grotto. She held Epic close to herself. She gently rubbed the egg and to their amazement, the more she rubbed it, the more luminous it became. ‘Epic lives,’ Nua said. ‘Its life force breathes. This was once a legend, but now it is more.’

Their excitement built as the light from Epic’s egg grew. They gathered around Bella, each in turn touching the egg. Neke climbed from Solo’s pocket, full of inquisitiveness, gliding across the ground on to Bella’s lap. She turned her head to stare at Bella and made a cooing sound. Then she wrapped herself around the egg for a moment before moving off to find Solo’s arm. As she travelled across the short distance to Solo, Ubu pushed his head between Solo’s legs. ‘Neke, this is Ubu, my trusted friend.’ Ubu gave the smallest of yaps before Neke mounted Solo’s reaching hand.

It was Race who first noticed the change in the light. A soft glow emanated from the ridgeline, off to the side of their campsite, faint but steady. He moved towards it and peered down onto the valley floor. ‘You had better come and see this,’ he called to the group still clustered around Bella and the egg.

‘What is it Race?’ Solo enquired.

‘You should just come and look for yourselves,’ he said. ‘It’s the Sansvira.’

The two Kuaha warriors were the first to arrive at the mention of the Sansvira. Otahi sprung to his feet, oblivious to his wound. Solo

helped Bella, who held Epic close, to gain her feet. They stood in a tight group, heads bowed towards what Race had seen.

A golden light spread from the rock wall across the valley floor like a lantern held to show the way. A pitch-black void separated the two sources of light. Epic's egg intensified its radiance; delicate as it was, it revealed the path in a limited way.

'Is that the Sansvira's home?' Nua asked? 'I can't see them.'

'They live in the rock face,' Race explained. 'They're calling to Epic. Look how his egg shines.'

'Tomorrow we will be able to answer their call, but for now it's impossible. Too treacherous, too steep, too far away. If Bella was to slip or fall, Epic's life could be short. It's not worth the risk, don't you agree, Solo?' Nua asked. 'And besides, Otahi's leg would hinder our descent.'

The Otahi chief straightened himself on his bad leg. 'Who is it that speaks for the Chief of the Kuaha?' his words cut the night air like a knife.

'Brother, my only care is your well-being,' Nua said, slightly defensive. The Kuaha warrior lowered his head towards his chief, who responded by touching Nua's crown.

'Forgive me Nua. I know your love is true and strong. What does Solo think?' Otahi asked.

'I feel Nua speaks with our safety in mind. The way is difficult, yet the Sansvira call. Have faith Nua. Let the children decide for us.'

All eyes turned to Bella and Race. Solo's, Neke's, Ubu's, Nua's, Otahi's. Race was first to speak. 'By jingoes, Bella's the clever one. She will know what we should do.'

'It will be hard by day or night to descend to the valley floor. Yet the Sansvira are calling us. I think they want us to come; and look at the light Epic gives to show our feet where to stand. My heart tells me we should attempt to make our way now. But first, I have an idea.'

Race smiled 'See, I told you she is a clever one.'

'Let's go back to our camp,' she said.

They moved off towards the cluster of rocks that had been their shelter and placed Epic amongst the tussock bedding they had made the night before. The troupe followed her, sharing a quizzical look.

She asked them to make a circle around Epic. 'Let's hold hands,' she said. She was particular who stood where, dividing the two Kuaha warriors between herself and Race. She called Ubu inside the circle;



his happy look said it all. Neke cooed towards the dog from Solo's arm. 'I want us to call for Powerflower, together as one, to help light the way.' The two warriors looked at each other, amazed.

'You can't call Powerflower. We have tried many times in our meetinghouse, for his spirit, his presence, to no avail. He has a mind of his own. He comes and goes as the wind that none can control,' Otahi said.

'Please believe me, he will come. Let's try.' Bella's lone voice was the first to speak his name. 'Powerflower,' she whispered. Solo and Race now, too, spoke his name. Shyly the two Warriors added to the call. At first the syncopation was out, sounding more like a squabble; an incoherent duelling of voices trying to make a point. Yet somehow it became one and grew in stature. They chanted his name. 'Powerflower, Powerflower, Powerflower.' In unison they called. The chant skipped into the air, danced in front of them; one solid name. They squeezed each other's hands, unaware of doing so. Their voices became stronger by the second, vibrating in their chests and warming their insides, stripping away their fear of failure. A belief started to stir. A current passed between them, electric. It consumed their beings. Their lungs filled with hope.

Who knows what the Kuaha expected, but they couldn't hide the amazement in their eyes as the creature of truth from the Truth Stream materialised out of thin air, as small as a butterfly, above the egg of Epic. It fluttered into view; then it sped from face to face, even to Neke and Ubu – the joy of their continued calling of his name. Then Powerflower expanded to full size, filling the circle with transparent petals that brushed their cheeks. And he said, 'I am here.'

The light around them immediately intensified, lighting up their environment so they could clearly see each other's rapture at what they had achieved in calling Powerflower to their side.

'You have the egg of Epic,' Powerflower intoned. 'The Sansvira have called their son home. I can feel them calling in the valley below. This night will be remembered, for so it is prophesied. Is this not so?' He was suspended in front of Otahi, directing his energy forward to the proud Kuaha Chief, whose eyes were filled with tears of joy.

'Ahh, Otahi. This is a special time. Your people will be free of Zekai Manci's cruel attachment to the Truth Stream. But not in your time. The birth of Superbird will change the Truth Stream. That is all I really know. Kind King, weep no more. Yes, it is really me. I am here to help

your people. I could not come before. It is Bella and Race who have the power to call on me. Be pleased it is so. It is your belief in them that has made it possible. You have lost many fine men. They have died for good reason, as you will witness.'

Nua put his arms around his brother. 'It is truly him, my brother. You do not dream. Come. We must go.'

Bella and Race felt uncomfortable for the chief. He had spent his life trying to call Powerflower to his aid. That he came to them did not diminish him or place them higher in their own minds. He would always be the Chief of the Truth Stream, and they told him so. 'You are good children,' he said to them. 'Your respect is taken to my heart. My men look upon you from above, glad of spirit.'

They moved down the ridge to the place where they had separated from Solo the first time. Powerflower lit the way. The going would be steep and narrow to the valley floor. Bella held tight to Epic. She inched her way, held by Nua at the front, Otahi from behind. She had no hands of her own to use, as they clung to Epic's egg. At times Nua had her step on his back, a human bridge when the drop was most extreme. Solo guided her to safe ground. They edged their way forward through the night towards the glowing valley.

At several points, Bella had to pass Epic to one or other of them, but soon as she could she retrieved Epic from their safe hold. The expression on Otahi's face when he first held Epic was one of transcendent wonder. 'Here you are,' he said to her 'the son of Sansvira must be carried by you.

'By jingoes,' she said to herself, 'I have a great idea.' It was then she knew it was Otahi's place to leave the egg at the rock wall's base.

'Thank you,' she said to him as he passed it back to her. They had less than a third of the descent to make when they heard the call of Keywee shattering the silence of night. He trumpeted his call time and time again. Soon they were astonished to hear birds and bees, dragonflies, and huge pigeons flying close overhead, rabbits running, fox and deer. The very Truth Stream was alive, all creatures great and small were descending onto the valley floor. Moths, butterfly, bats on the wing: some circled them, flew on by, after stopping briefly to see the son of the Sansvira in Bella's arms. The egg pulsed, vibrated against her, alive.

Race was the first to the valley's floor. He reached it with a shout. 'Keywee,' he yelled. She tipped her head back, and trumpeted again

into the starlit night. Next was Nua, followed by Bella, then Otahi. Solo's feet touched down, his dog the last to arrive.

They joined the throng of creatures that were continuing to arrive and headed for the glowing wall. Bella looked around and said their names, aloud. 'Race, Solo, Ubu, Neke, Nua, Otahi, Keywee, Powerflower. We are all here, with the creatures from the Truth Stream, as one to witness this birth.'

She passed Epic's egg into the arms of Otahi. 'It is for you to do,' she said. 'You are the chief of the Truth Stream.' He tried to refuse the honour. 'Yes,' she said. 'We will be at your side.'

Five humans, a snake and a dog, a flying flower and the mythical Keywee formed a line on either side of Otahi. With reverent steps, they approached the rock face and laid the egg of Superbird at its base.

The wall shimmered and sparkled. It shone like no other light, as golden as the sun turning night to day, for all that had eyes to see. They arrived as one, the four Sansvira, snapping into place, covering the whole wall. Giants of blue and white, with their dense black tails.

The whole valley broke into barks, calls, singing voices of birds and bees, rabbits clapping their paws. The children erupted into shouts of joy, calling the Sansvira by name. Keywee trumpeted, pouring out notes of happiness. Neke cooed a purring sound, while Powerflower and Ubu danced around and around. Otahi and Nua chanted ancient tribal songs, arm in arm. 'Hail to the Sansvira,' they yelled. 'Hail to you and yours.'

The Sansvira thanked them one by one. They knew each and every name. All the time they were reducing themselves to the one size, that of a human frame. At last, they stood face to face with all around them; the egg of Epic at their feet. 'Epic, our son, lives,' they said. The crowd called: 'Epic, Epic.'

'He is one of the Superbird. You will see his birth on this night.'

'Epic, Epic,' again the crowd roared.

'Our son will walk amongst you good souls of the Truth Stream, for today is the day.'

'Epic, Epic,' they returned.

The egg jumped on the spot, rolling slightly on its side, its colour changing from white to pale blue, then to the colour of a flawless sky. It rocked, and cracks appeared down one side, then in one amazing explosion of shell, Epic pushed the egg aside. He grew, skyrocketed in

size. The crowd's eyes all followed skywards as he shot past the height of the Sansvira's wall.

They chanted, called his name as one. 'Epic, Epic,' they said, until finally they could no longer see all of him. His head had disappeared far out of sight.

'Wow, hah, by jingoes,' Race squealed. Bella danced on the spot, clapping her hands in glee. Solo did a little jig with Neke in his hands. 'It's so amazing. Amazing.'

The Sansvira stood silent, erect, as if waiting for more to come. Then Epic came back. A whistling sound drowned out the gathering cheers. They all fell as silent as the Sansvira. Soon his head could be seen again above the Sansviras' home. He came rocketing down the valley wall, contracting to human size with a final boom that rang through the dell.

'How are the stars, Epic, son of ours, son of the Superbird race?' they asked.

'Still where they should be, my fathers, orbiting the earth and sun. Is this a party for me?' he asked, sweeping his wings into the air.

'Oh, of course it is. All creatures are here to celebrate your birth.'

'Then we shall party, for it is good to be alive.'

'You are needed in the Truth Stream, Epic, to sow the seed of life, to save it from the evil one who has attached himself to our side. It is Bella and Race who have found your nest. It is they that you must thank first. Solo, and his dog Ubu too, must receive your thanks. They have escaped Manci's clutches. They know the Evil One's lair.

'Step forward Half-lights, brothers of the Kuaha. Come and meet our only son, Epic of the Superbird Clan, that you have helped step forth.'

Epic moved forward as they did, and embraced each and every one. 'Neke,' he said as if like greeting an old friend. 'How have you been, Ancient One?' Neke gave her little coo, her eyes glinting bright. 'And you are Ubu,' he said to Solo's dog. 'I like you, I can tell already. We will travel together. That is for sure. I saw it in the stars.'

The two Kuaha Warriors stood next to each other. They were drunk with happiness, waiting their turn to touch the legendary Epic with their own hands.

'Now meet Otahi, and Nua of the Kuaha, who love you. They worship your return and have kept you alive in the hearts of men.'

Epic strode across to them, wings wide, in greeting. He covered them

with a living cloak of feathers and walked them back to the others. The valley overflowed with love and applause.

‘I see Powerflower and Keywee,’ he called. Keywee trumpeted, trotting to the group’s side. Powerflower hovered overhead. He reduced his size. ‘Hello dear friend,’ he said to Epic. ‘It’s been a long, long time.’

The Sansvira spoke: ‘Now, we must talk to our son alone. We will return to our dwelling very soon, so forgive us, allow us this time.’

The group went back down the dell, Race walking backwards, not wanting to miss anything at all.

‘Come, Race,’ Solo said. ‘They need to talk. Do as you’re told.’ He spun the boy around.

‘Epic, these times are troubling. The Evil One has great power. More than you can guess. He will be after you, and Solo as well, to catch you in his net. He has creatures that can walk in the light. Powerful creatures with demonic ways. We urge you not to try and meet him front on, but to find other ways. Trust in Solo. He knows Zekai Mancì’s world. Together, you should work to save the Truth Stream from his evil design. He has courage, and knowledge of medicines with Neke at his side. His dog Ubu is faithful and requires the same respect. If you are in need of our support, we are here for you at any time. Yet you know we cannot move from our valley floor. We have waited for your birth. Now you are here, remember what we have told you. Now we must depart. Go join them and the Kuaha. They will take you back to their village for the night. Enjoy the party they give. You have given them hope by being of the flesh. Fulfil their prophecies. They will fight for you; give their lives, as they already have. Do not let them down. Don’t think this will be easy. The Evil One works at it even now. He will know of your birth. He would have seen the sky. News travels fast.’

The group could see Epic conversing with his clan. ‘What do you think they’re talking about?’ Bella asked.

‘Lair City, Mancì and his evil plans,’ Solo replied. Neke hissed at Mancì’s name.

‘Be safe, Epic,’ the Sansvira said. ‘Walk amongst the humans. Show them the way. It is the Undercity you should deliver back into our land. The land of the Truth Stream.’

‘There is so much I need to know,’ Epic said.

‘Ask Solo. He is your best hope. He knows more than he realises. We must go now, our Son. You know how to find us. We will be here.’

The Sansvira collectively faded. Epic stood for a moment, wanting to call them back but knew they would not come.

He took off into the air on wing, then remembered what the Sansvira had said. ‘Walk with the Humans’ rang in his ears. So he glided back down to earth. He strode out to be with his friends as the first new light of the day tipped its golden finger into the valley floor.

‘Let’s go party,’ Bella said.

‘By jingoes, Bella, you have such good ideas.’



*Superbird & Powerflower*