

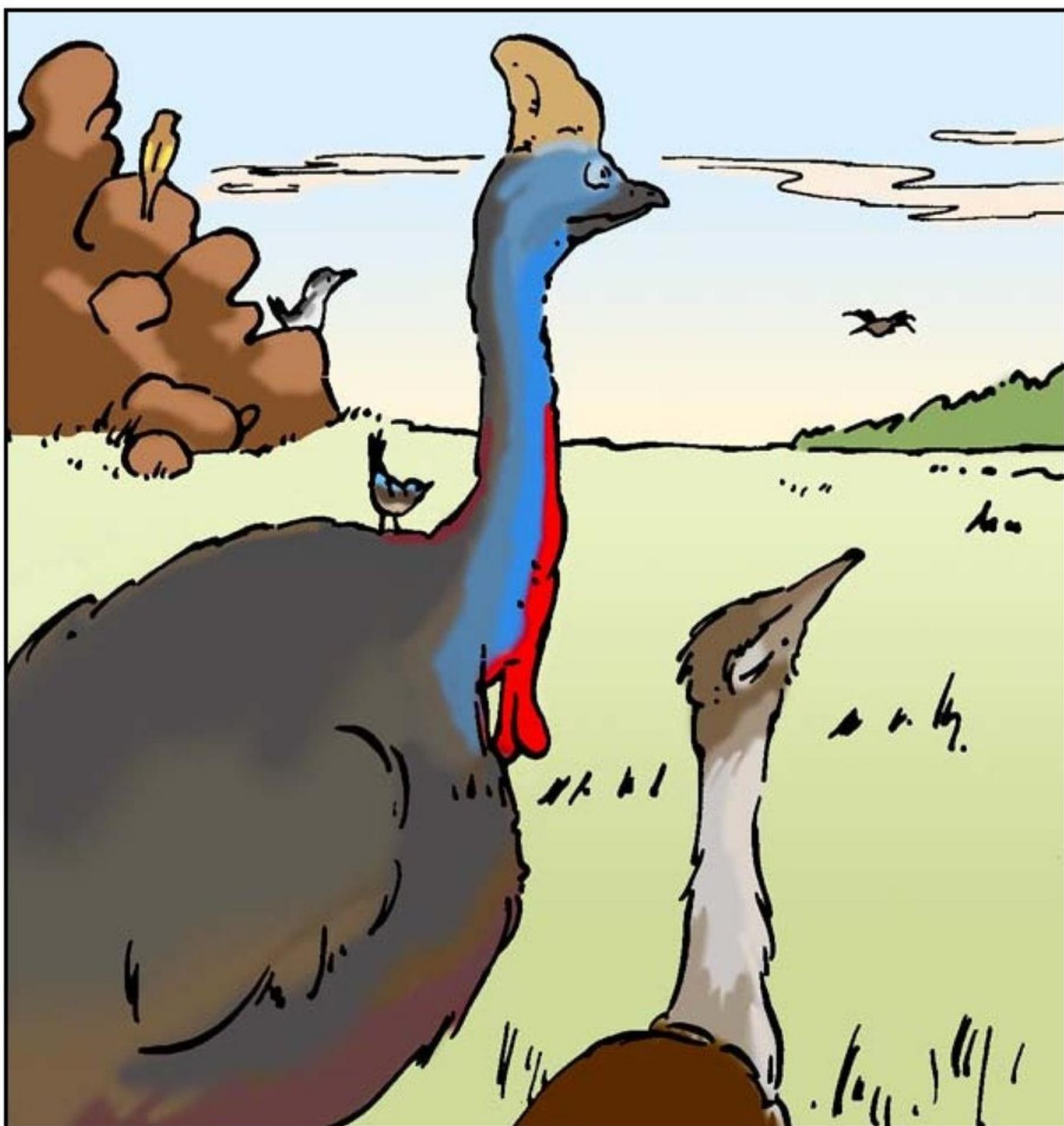
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# How the Robin Stole Fire

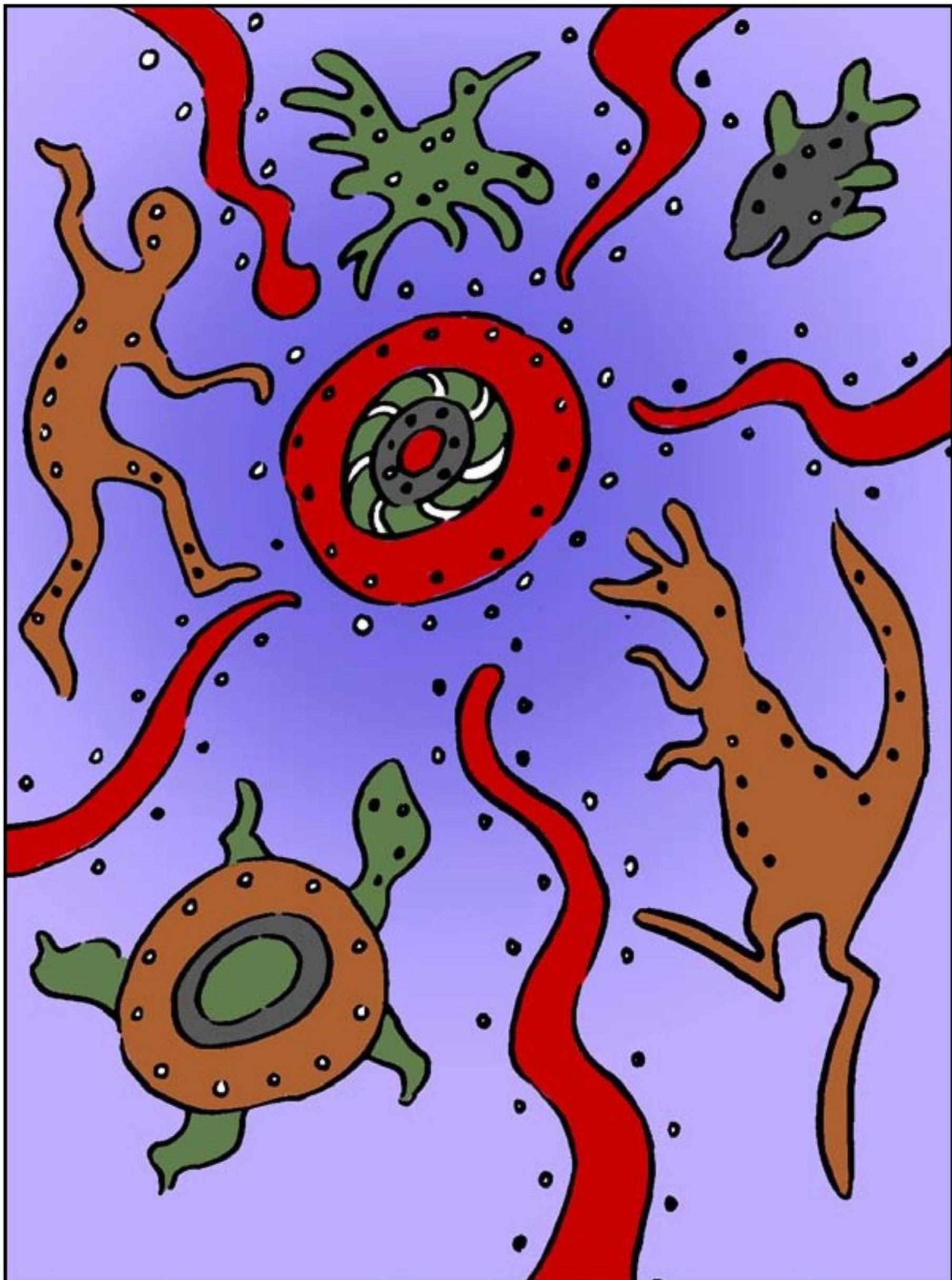


An Australian Aborigine Folktale  
Retold by William Harryman  
Illustrated by Anik McGrory

# *How the Robin Stole Fire*

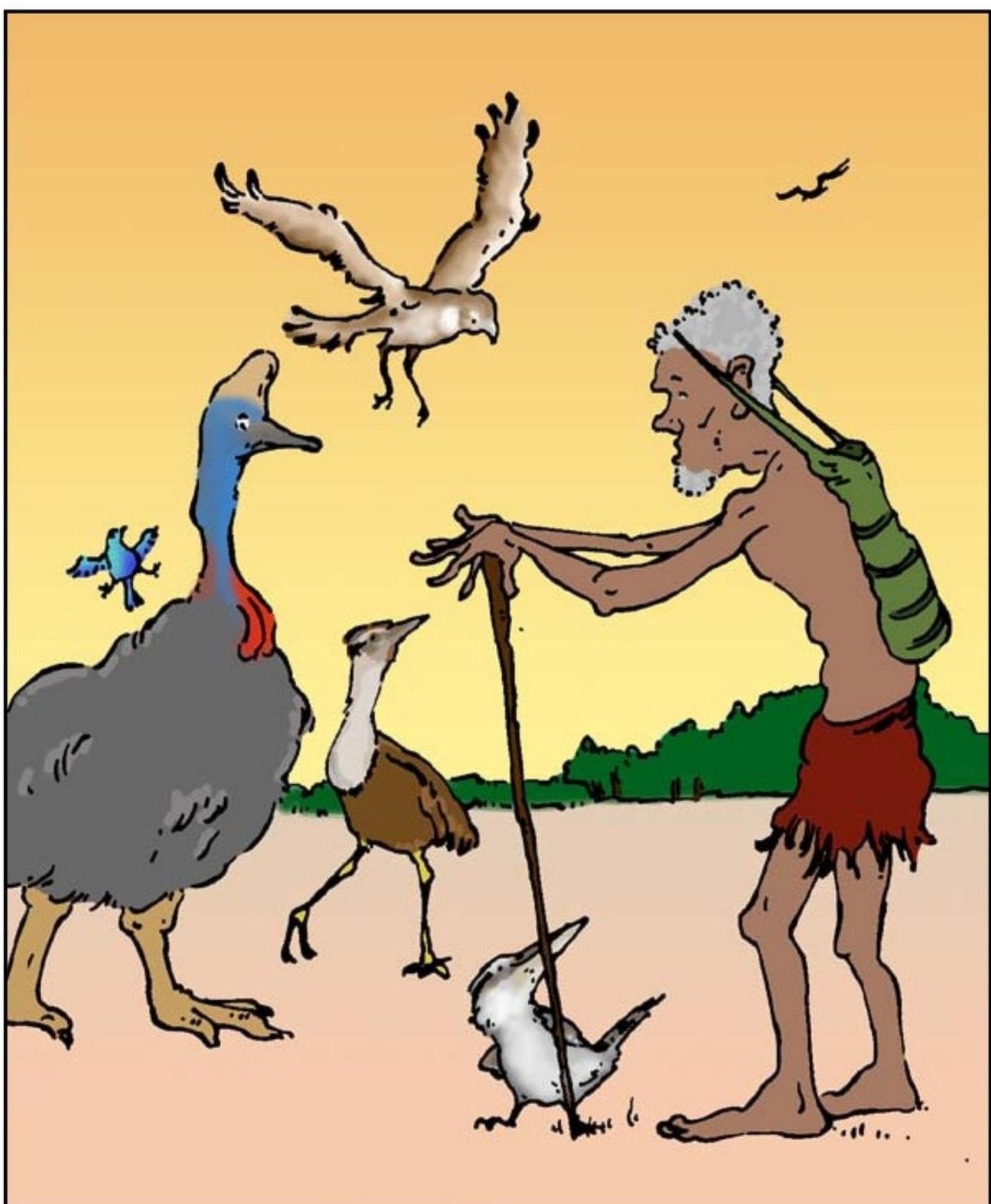


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Ages ago, in the dreamtime, the ancient time when the world was created, the first people lived on Earth as birds and other animals. They created the culture and traditions of today. This is a story from that time.

One day, near sunset, a group of hunter birds were returning to their village when they met a very old man. The old man was carrying a spear and an empty day pack, called a dilly bag. When the old man approached the hunter birds, he stuck his spear into the ground as a sign of peace.





The old man began to speak to the birds.  
“I have come a great distance, my brothers,  
and many moons have passed. I have traveled  
to the place where the water speaks with  
the voice of thunder. I have passed beyond  
the mist-hidden mountains to the great red  
plains. And I have traveled to the land that  
lies beyond the dawn. I have had many  
adventures. I would like to rest with you  
for a while. In return for your kindness,  
I will tell you the secret of the fire of the sun.”



The leader among the birds decided to take the old man back to their village and give him some food. A wonderful meal was quickly prepared. When everyone had finished eating, the tribe gathered around the old man and waited for him to speak.

No one knew about fire during this time. When living things enjoyed the warmth of the sun, they often wondered how to take fire from the sky to provide warmth when the snows came. They didn't know how to use fire to cook food or harden spears, but they knew fire would keep them warm.



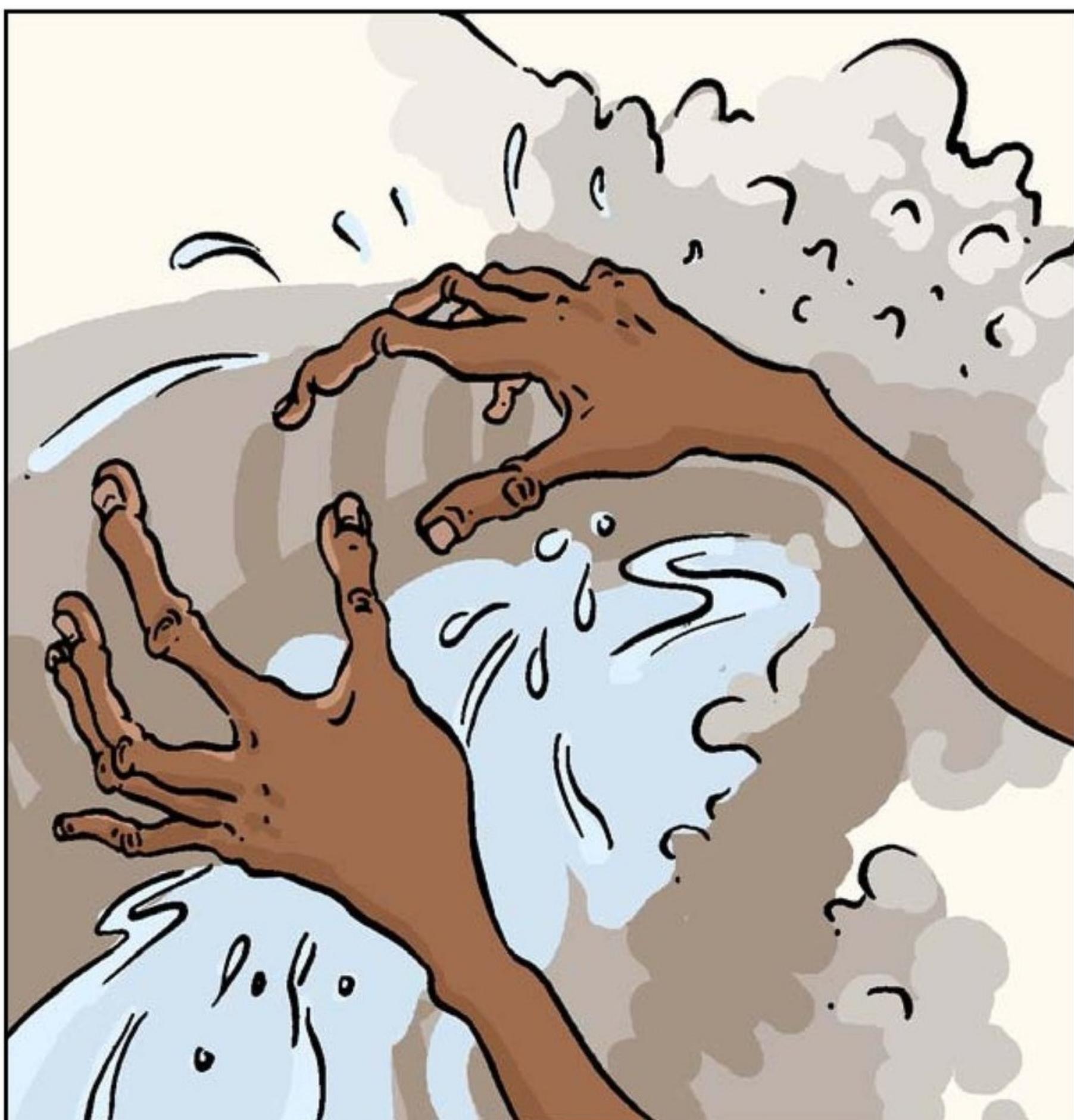


The old man began, “Now I am old, and my people are scattered like dead leaves in the wind. But I have journeyed to the land behind the mountains that hide the sun. There was no water, and the creeks were filled with animals who had died from thirst. I nearly died, as well.

“I hurried, without rest, afraid that I might not survive. One day, when my tongue was swollen with thirst, and my legs were weak, I saw a brilliant pool of water in the distance.”

The old man continued, “I ran, stumbled, and crawled until I reached the water. When I lowered my face to drink, it was only sand—pure white sand shimmering in the sun.

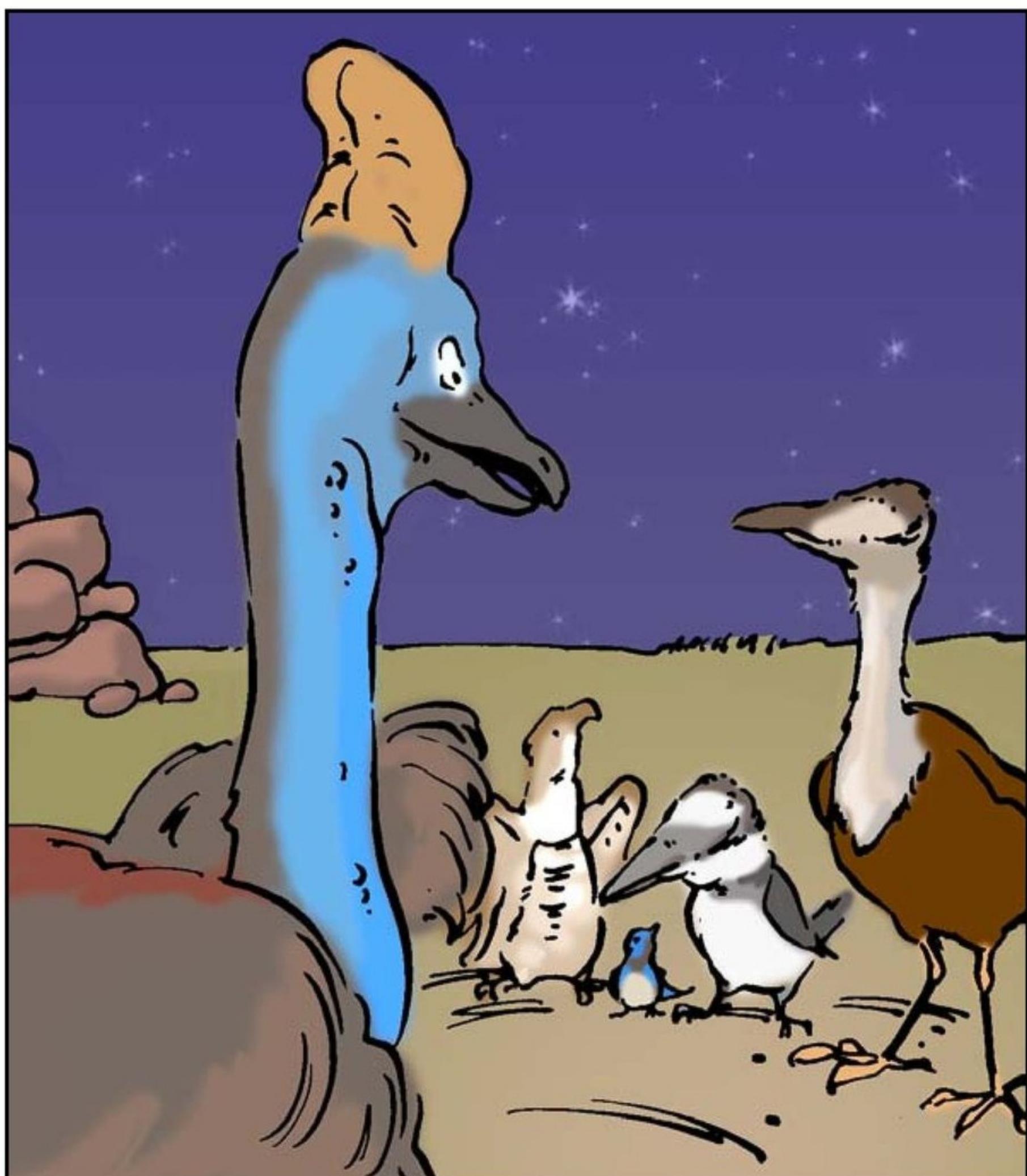
“In my frustration and frenzy, I began to dig and dig, until my hands were sore. Beneath the sand, the dirt grew hard, like clay. But I found water, and the small trickle saved my life.”





The old man finished his story: "Having rested for a day, I felt refreshed. After many days, I found a land where large trees grew. One morning, before the sun had risen, I saw its fire shining through the trees. I was curious, so I walked nearer. It was then I saw Mar, the Cockatoo, take the fire from under his wing and hold it in his hands. I accidentally stepped on a dry stick, and he heard me. As I ran away, he threw a spear, but he missed me. From there I traveled back to the hunting ground of my people, but they were gone. I followed their tracks until I found you. And now, here I sit, offering you the gift of fire, if one of you is brave enough to steal it from Mar."

The members of the bird tribe were very excited at the prospect of having fire for the long, cold winters. They all spoke at the same time, trying to convey their feelings and ideas for stealing the fire from Mar, but they did not listen to each other. Finally, one of the elders silenced everyone and said that he had devised a plan.



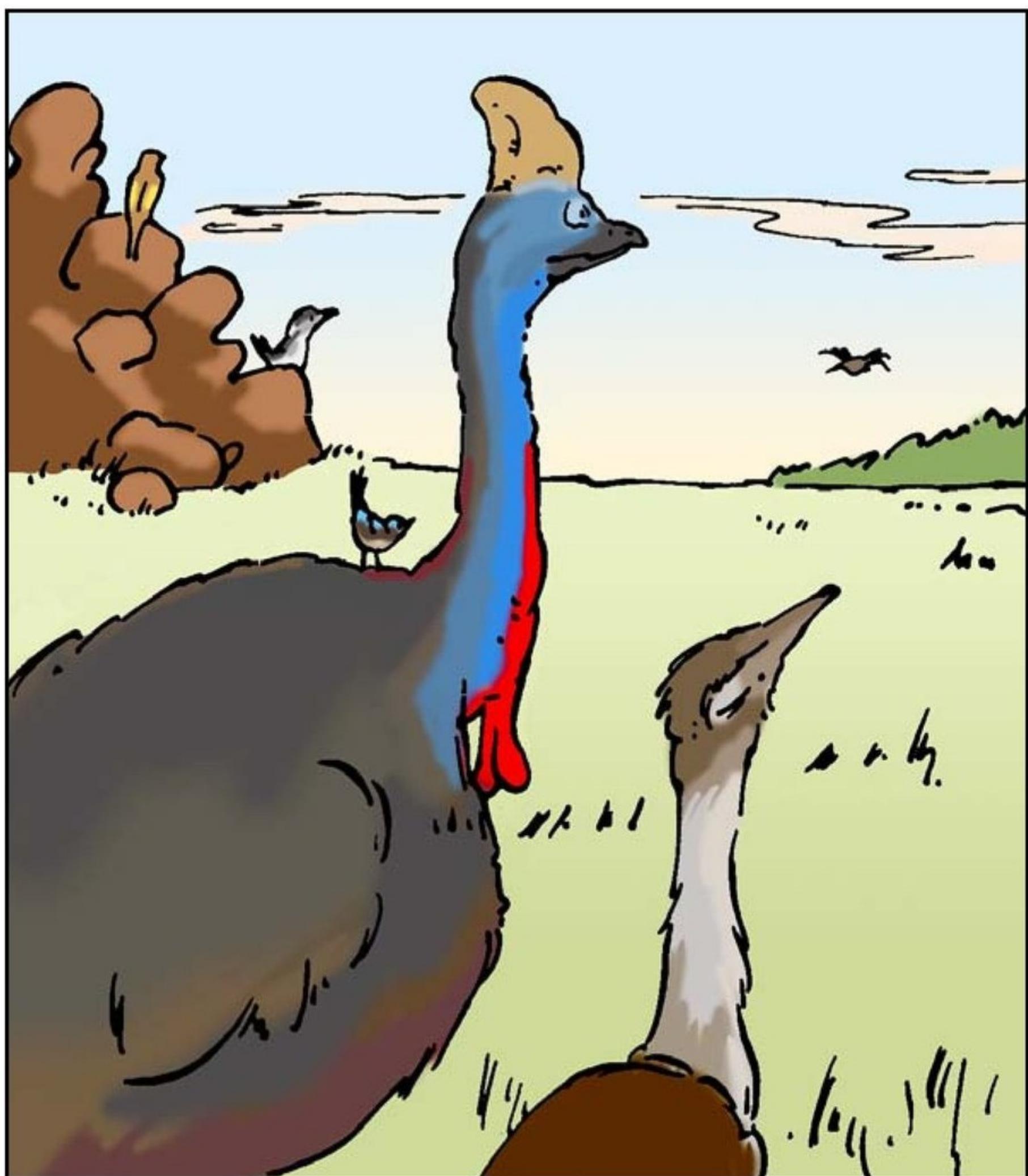
They decided they would hold a party called a corroboree and invite Mar, the Cockatoo, to the celebration. While he was there, someone would try to steal fire from him. At the celebration, there was singing and dancing, and lots of food and drink. There were even mock fights and tests of strength. The birds offered Mar a piece of kangaroo flesh, one of the choicest pieces, but he refused it. Then they offered Mar the kangaroo hide, which he accepted before leaving the party.





The feast quickly lost its fun when Mar left and the tribe was not able to steal the fire from under his wing. They even began to doubt the old man's story. They were not sure the fire was under Mar's wing. One of the smallest birds, a Wren named Prite, decided to follow the Cockatoo back to his camp. He traveled many days, always staying out of sight. By the time Mar had reached his camp, Prite was very weary. But when he saw Mar take the fire from beneath his wing, he flew back to the tribe to tell them what he had seen.

Everyone was very proud of Prite for his ingenuity and bravery. It appeared that Prite had proved the old man's story was true. The elders held a meeting to discuss this news. It was decided that Tatkanna, the Robin, would make the journey to Mar's camp to steal the fire. Early the next morning, Tatkanna set out on his long journey.





Tatkanna traveled for many days. The sun was very hot during this time, and Tatkanna became thirsty and tired. But he continued and arrived at Mar's camp one day just as the sun was setting. Tatkanna was glad he would be able to sleep for the night before having to steal the fire. He unrolled his kangaroo rug and quickly fell asleep.



Just before the sun came up, Tatkanna awoke and began to watch Mar. While he was watching, Mar took the fire from beneath his wing to light a stick on fire, which he used to burn the hair from the kangaroo hide he had been given. When Tatkanna saw Mar with the stick on fire, he charged into the camp and grabbed the stick before Mar knew what was happening.

Tatkanna was so eager to steal the fire that he got the stick too close to his breast and singed all the feathers. From that day forward he was known as Robin Redbreast. Tatkanna was very frightened at having been burned. As he flew with the stick, he accidentally set fire to the dry grass. Soon, all the grass and bushes were burning, and the fire spread quickly.

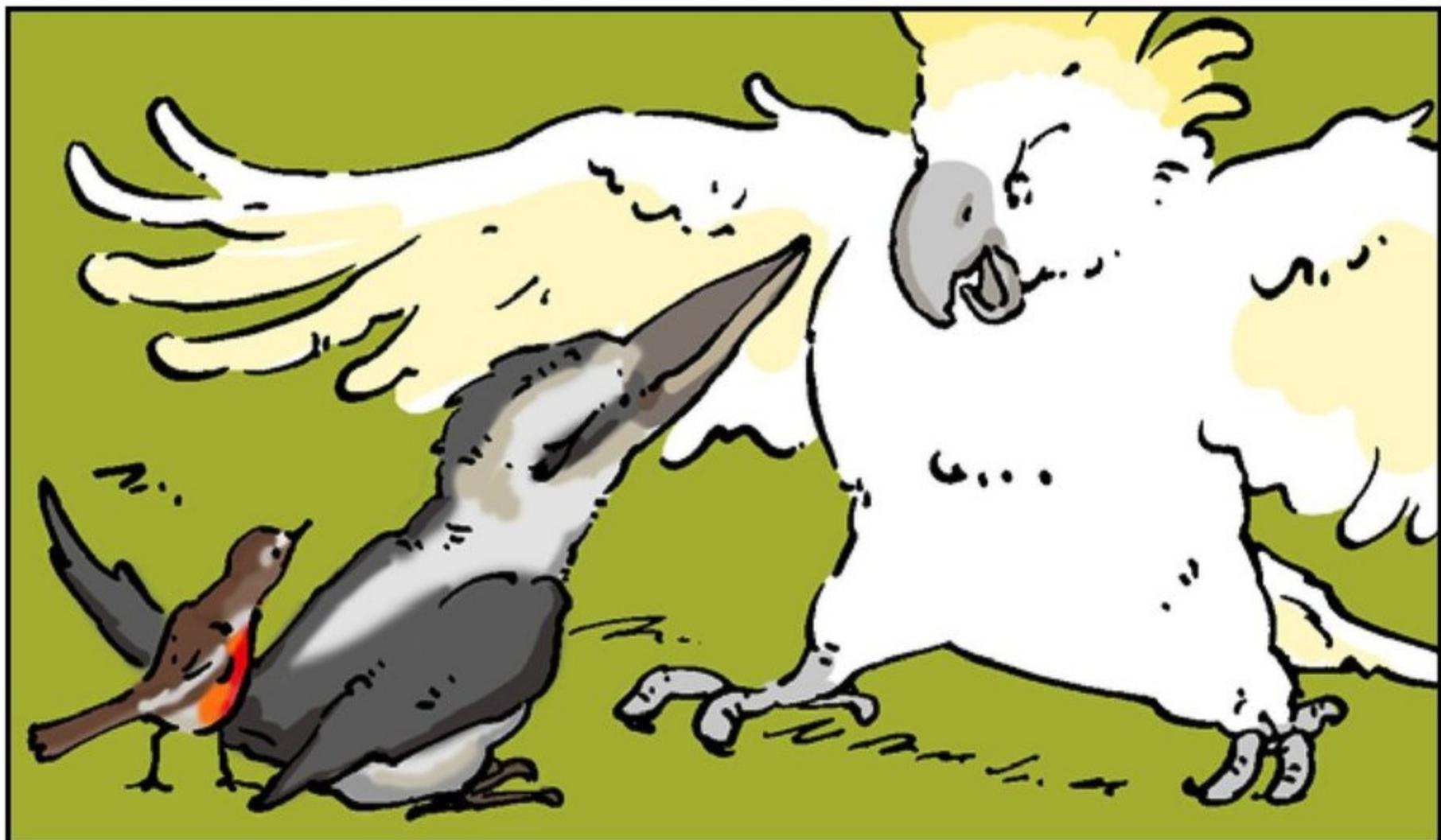


The fire roared like ocean waves as it spread out over the landscape. Birds and other animals raced just ahead of the flames, trying to find any place to be safe. But the fire just kept growing. Tatkanna was well ahead of the flames and didn't realize what he had done. Behind him the bush was reduced to a black carpet of ashes.





When Mar realized what had happened, he began to chase Tatkanna. He quickly realized that fire had been set free and that he would no longer be able to control it. He was very angry about his power being taken away from him. If he was no longer the only one to possess fire, he would be just another common cockatoo, and not someone important. He decided that he would kill Tatkanna when he found him, as punishment for stealing the fire.



When Tatkanna arrived back at his tribal camping grounds, he was very afraid. Mar was right behind him. Tatkanna was only a little guy and would be no match for Mar. He begged his good friend Quartang, the Kookaburra (a larger bird), to defend him. Quartang agreed.

When Mar arrived, Quartang stepped in front of Tatkanna and pushed his small friend away. Mar was visibly angry. “Let me have him,” he said. “He stole my fire and then set the outback aflame in his haste to escape.”

Quartang replied, “The fire is for everyone now. No one should freeze during the cold winters anymore.”

Mar was still enraged: “If you stand in my way, then I will kill you, too.”

Quartang wasn’t very fond of the idea of dying, but he had promised to defend Tatkanna as best he could.

Mar lunged at him and the two fought for several minutes. Mar was much bigger and stronger than Quartang and easily defeated him. Quartang retreated to the trees to save his own life.



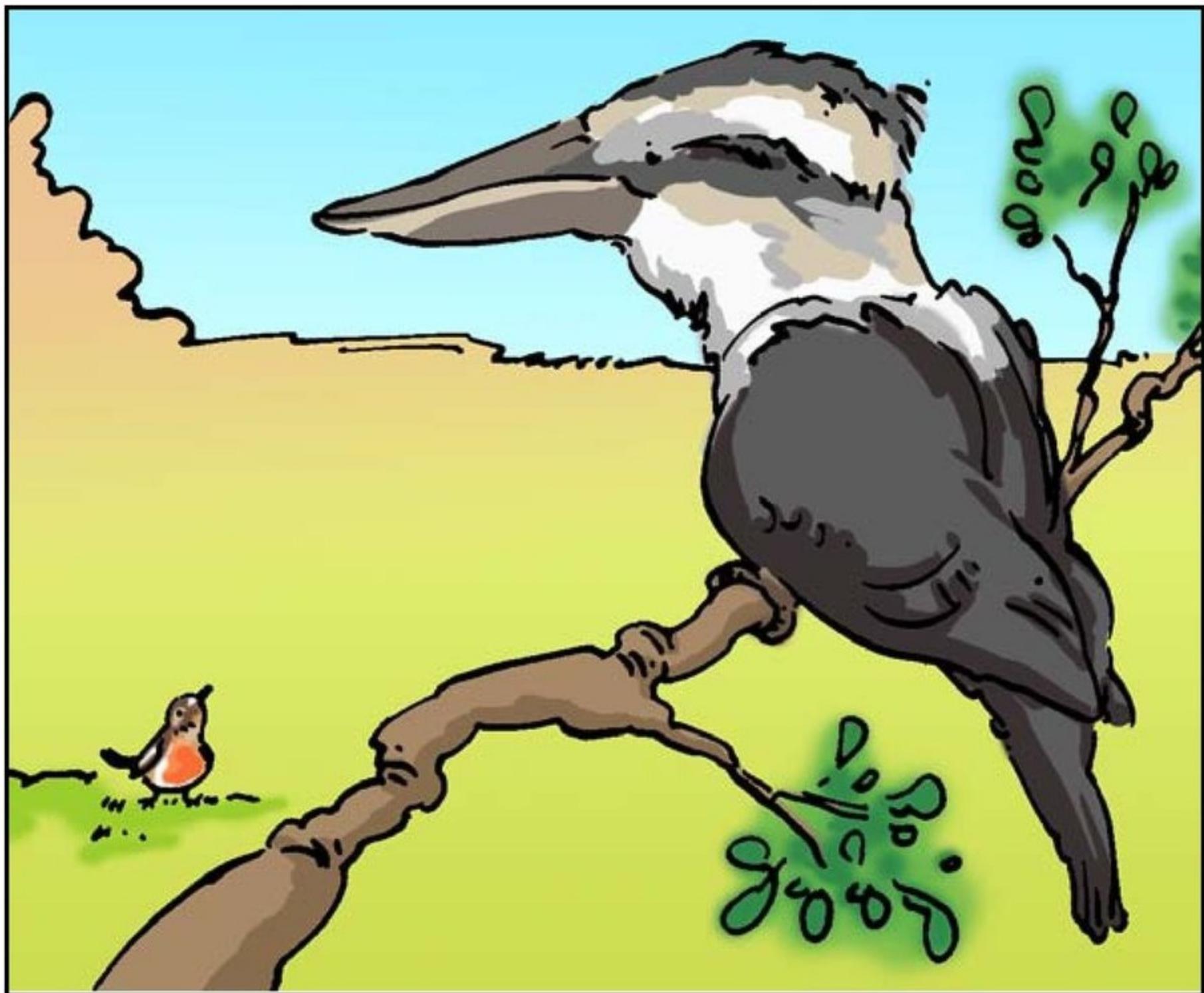


But Mar had had enough fighting. He was very sad and depressed. He glanced at the small pile of wood the tribe had set on fire as he walked away.

Whenever the tribal people see a Cockatoo, they remember how fire was stolen from him.

The tribe was very pleased with the bravery of Tatkanna. They prepared a great feast for the celebration and invited some of the local tribes to the corroboree. With fire, they could dance late into the night and sing until the dawn. They gladly shared their gift of fire with their neighbors.





Tatkanna was the center of attention. But he was shy and missed his friend Quartang, who would not come out of the trees because he felt ashamed of losing the fight. Tatkanna told him it was all right, that he still loved his friend. But Quartang still refused to leave the trees, and he has never left the trees since that day.

Whenever tribal people see a Robin Redbreast, they remember his heroic feat, which is recorded forever in the red burn on his breast.

This story is based on an Australian Aboriginal tale called "How Fire was Stolen from the Red-Crested Cockatoo," collected in 1923. It explains both the origins of useful fire and of the raging brush fires that periodically sweep the grasslands of the Australian outback.

How the Robin Stole Fire  
Level R Leveled Book  
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