The Rainbow Bird and The Fire

(Wongaibon Nation – New South Wales)

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A long time ago, in the Dreaming, the people had no fire. They ate their food raw, shivered when the winds blew cold, and sat in darkness at night. Only one man, the Fire Keeper, possessed the flame.

He guarded it jealously in his camp. A single burning stick glowed in the centre, and he never let it out of his sight. If anyone begged for fire, he shook his head and said, “No. This is mine. You may not have it.”

The people grew weary and thin. “If only we had fire,” they whispered. “We could cook our food, warm our children, and light our nights.”

The Rainbow Bird’s concern

Among the people was a small, bright bird. In those days she did not wear the brilliant colours we know now. Her feathers were plain, but her heart was kind. She listened to the cries of the children and saw the hunger of the people.

“This is not right,” she thought. “One man should not keep the fire for himself. It is meant to be shared. I must do something.”

So the little bird flew towards the camp of the Fire Keeper.



The Fire Keeper refuses

She perched on a branch nearby and called down politely. “Fire Keeper, will you not share your flame? The people are hungry and cold.”

But the man frowned. “No,” he said firmly. “This is mine. I alone will keep it. Go away, little bird.”

She fluttered closer. “Just one spark,” she pleaded. “Enough to light a small fire for the children.”

Still he refused, covering the glowing stick with his hands. “Not one spark. It belongs to me.”

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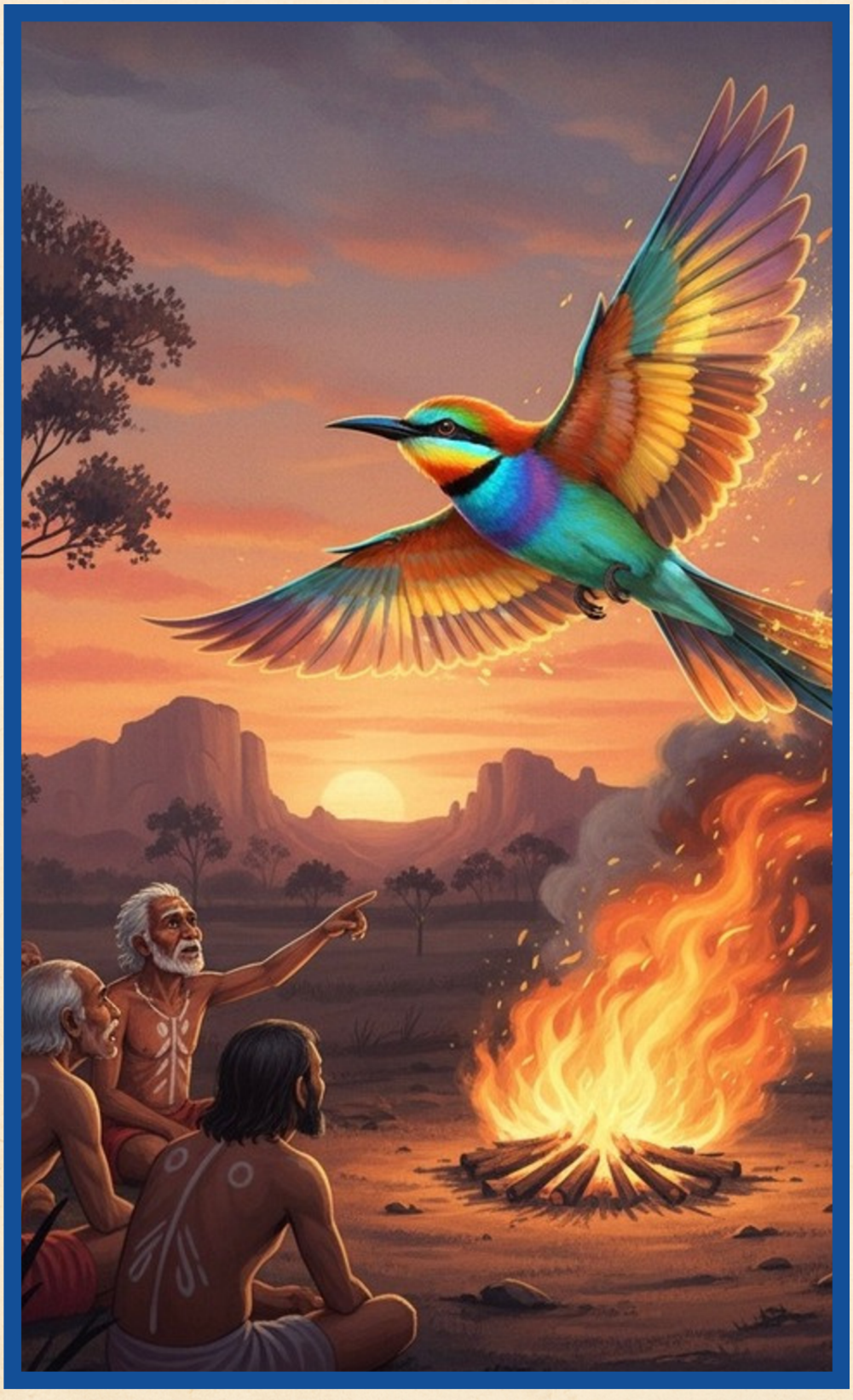
The daring theft

The bird's eyes flashed. "Then I will take it," she whispered.

When the Fire Keeper turned his head, the bird darted down. She seized the burning stick in her beak and flapped her wings furiously. Sparks flew as she rose into the air.

"Thief!" cried the Fire Keeper. "Bring it back!" He threw stones and waved his arms, but the bird was too quick. She soared high above the trees, carrying the flame.

As she flew, the sparks rained down, setting branches and logs alight. Soon the people gathered the burning sticks and made fires of their own. They laughed with joy, warming their hands and cooking food at last.



The daring theft

But the burning stick grew hot in the bird's beak. Ash and sparks scorched her feathers. She dropped the stick at last, and it landed on the ground, still burning brightly. The people rushed to guard it and keep it alive.

The bird fluttered down, her feathers singed. She looked at her tail, once plain, now streaked with brilliant colours — red, orange, and yellow from the flames, with flashes of green and blue where the fire's heat had caught her.

The people gasped. "See how the fire has marked her! She shall be known as the Rainbow Bird."