

SAN'S QUEST

Carmen Saptouw

Illustrated by Cameron Shefer-Boswell

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San was a bushman drawing who lived on a rock in a cave deep in the Karoo.
He was the only bushman in the cave. Engraved with him were his spear and boomerang.
During the day he remained on the rock as humans would visit the cave at times.
Only at night he would climb from his rock and wander around the cave.
He would walk from wall to wall just to make sure he didn't miss a fellow drawing even though he knew there was none other.
He never left his cave – he was too scared of what laid beyond it and he feared the unknown.
He had taken a peek before, but it was dark and the only thing he could see was the little lights that covered the dark heavens. From inside he would sit and watched them for hours.
He couldn't help but wonder how it must be to gaze upon the lights from outside his cave.

One day a group of humans entered his home. They were looking for drawings.
“Oh look, here is one,” he heard as one pointed directly at him. The group gathered in front of him.
“But there is only one drawing,” said the group. San could hear their disappointment.
“There are other caves in the area filled with drawings. We will go there next,” said one of the humans as he led the group out of the cave.
More drawings like me, can it be? San thought. He emerged from the rock as he wanted to ask them about the so-called other drawings like him, but he knew he couldn't reveal himself to his visitors.
He decided to climb back into his rock.

That evening, as night was coming to an end, he sat in his cave wondering about what the human said.
He unexpectedly heard a buzzing sound. It was a fly and right behind the fly was a four-legged creature who was sticking out his tongue. San realized that it was trying to catch the fly.
San took his spear from the rock and charged towards the green monster.
He threw his spear, but missed the monster by an inch.
“What do you think you're doing?” shouted the green monster.
“I am preventing you from doing any harm to that poor creature,” he said as he sprinted towards his spear.
“He is not a poor creature. That is my breakfast, now put your stick down and let me be!”

“No, I will not!” San said bravely. Suddenly the buzzing noise sped passed them.
“Now look what you have done,” said the four-legged creature as he watched his breakfast escape from the cave. He turned around and followed the fly. Without thinking, San followed.
“Leave him alone!” he shouted at the green monster.



After some time of running after the four-legged monster, he realized that it was no longer dark. He looked up and noticed that different shades of blue, purple and pink were filling the sky. Fear struck him as he realized he had left his cave. This is not good; I have to go back, he thought. But as he turned around, the sky turned dark. He saw a dark shadow on the ground and when he looked up, a black winged creature with a red beak came into sight. It was heading for the green monster.

“Watch out, green monster!” he shouted, but it was in vain, as the four-legged one was too absorbed in finding his lost breakfast. San didn’t like the monster much, but he couldn’t watch him be eaten as breakfast either. He jumped on to the closest rock, climbed it to the highest point and threw his boomerang. The green monster noticed the dark shadow covering his body; he turned around panic struck him as he saw the bird. It descended towards him at a rapid speed. I won’t be able to escape he thought as he closed his eyes and waited for the worst. But then the bird shouted in pain and flapped his wings to lift itself higher again.

“Hide!” shouted San as his weapon returned to him. The four-legged creature did as commanded. The bird was circling trying to find the one that had hit him, but to no avail. “Coward, where are you? No one throws a weapon at me and gets away with it!” he shrieked. His eyes searched for the green monster, but he couldn’t find it. “And you better ensure that I never see you again, because if I do, it will be your end,” he threatened and flew off.

Are you okay?” San asked as he approached the four-legged creature. “Yes thanks to you, you saved my life, but I don’t understand why you did it,” said the creature. “Neither do I, but I couldn’t watch you become someone’s breakfast, even though you wanted to eat an innocent fly earlier. Now that I think about it, you probably deserved it,” said San. “Now, now, let us not dwell on the past. I am Cham,” said the four-legged creature as he reached out his paw to San. “I am San. Wait, weren’t you green before?” asked San. “Let me explain. Cham is short for chameleon. I can change colour to suit my surroundings. Now tell me what I can do in return for you?” he asked. “Day time has come and I have to return to my cave, but I was wondering if it’s true that there are others like me in caves close by?” he asked. “Yes there are,” answered Cham. “I have an idea; let me take you there to return the favour.”

“No I can’t leave,” said San.

“Why? What is holding you here? Family? Friends?” asked Cham.

“No,” said San.

“So you would rather roam alone in a dark cave day in and day out than embrace the opportunity to be amongst fellow bushmen?” asked Cham.

“No it’s not that, it’s just that I have never left my cave until this morning,” San admitted.

“Why? What was keeping you there?” asked Cham curiously.

“To be honest, fear,” San confessed.

“Fear of what?” asked Cham.

“Fear of the unknown. I don’t know what lies behind those rocks and that scares me,” said San.

“You are scared? I don’t believe it. You the warrior with a spear in hand, the one who just saved my life without thinking twice,” said Cham not convinced.

“Well it’s the truth and I have to get back. It was nice to meet you Cham,” he said as he turned around and walked back to his cave.

“San, wait!” Cham shouted. But he kept on walking.

“Fear is not something that should stop you from going forward. If you do return to your cave now you will never experience the adventure ahead.

Don’t give in to it San, because this adventure can change your life forever.” Cham stared at him, but he continued to walk.

When he realized that San was not turning around, he sighed, shook his head in disbelief and walked in the other direction.

San reached his cave and looked into the darkness. He looked outside once more.

It’s so bright and cheerful out here, he thought, and then he started to run.

“Cham wait! Wait for me!” he shouted. “You are right, I have nothing to lose. I can’t live my life in a dark cave all by myself. What kind of life is that when there is so much more out there?” San said as he reached Cham.

“That’s the spirit,” said Cham. “Right then, now that that is settled we must get some breakfast first before we start our journey,” he continued as he watched a tiny winged creature fly pass.

“Wait a second,” said San, “after all that happened this morning, you decided to continue eating other living creatures? Are you willing to make the same mistake twice Cham?” asked San.

“Hmm,” said Cham deep in thought. “You are probably right. From now on I vow to be a vegetarian.”

“I like that,” said San.

“Come on, I think there are berry trees just around that bend up ahead. Let the exploring begin,” he said smiling.

They walked for quite some time before they reached the berry plants, but San didn’t mind he was getting comfortable with the outside world. Cham acted as a guide: naming trees, plants and animals as they passed. Everything that came into sight was new to him and he couldn’t stop smiling.

While Cham stuffed his face with berries, San climbed the closest rock – it provided a lookout and he could see the land stretch out before him.

“Some do not see the beauty of the Karoo,” said Cham as he wiped his mouth.

“I am fascinated by it; but why is it called the Karoo?” he asked.

“The Khoi Khoi was a human tribe that previous lived here and the word Karoo came from them. It literally means desert or dry,” said Cham.

“So we live in a semi desert?” asked San.

“Yes and it can become quite unpleasant at times. We experience extreme heat in summer and frosts in winter. This is the place for survivors,” said Cham proudly.

“Maybe I should go back to my cave then,” said San.

“Now just a minute, I haven’t finished yet. All that find themselves here are meant to be here.

We were made for the Karoo. Do you see that fynbos there?” he asked, pointing to some bushes in the distance.

“Yes,” said San looking at the unusual mixture of shrubs.

“It would not thrive as well anywhere else in the world, because it needs this climate to survive.

But enough with the talking, we better get moving as we still have a stretch of road to cover,” Cham said.

Well there is no point in turning back now, thought San and followed Cham in silence.

“Look,” said San.

“What?” replied Cham, disinterested.

“It’s a rolling ball,” he answered.

Cham stopped and turned around to have a look.

“Oh please, that’s nothing,” he replied, “it’s only a dung beetle.”

“And what is that?” asked San intrigued.

“Well it is an insect that rolls his dung around and makes a home of it – really nothing to look at.”

“I think that is very interesting and I would like to ask him some questions,” said San and started to walk in the beetle’s direction.

“San, I know everything seems interesting to you right now, but we do not have the time to stop every few minutes,” said Cham panicked.

“What happened to exploring?” asked San.

“Let just say there are certain things that do not need to be explored,” said Cham.

“What do you mean?” asked San.

“There are certain things better left in the past, just trust me, okay?” said Cham. He walked in the other direction before San could question him any further.

Sometime later they reached a cross road. To the left the road looked the same as the current path they were on. However, to the right the road turned into a very dry piece of land.

San stood looking at both sides.

“I say let’s go left,” he said looking at Cham, smiling.

“Unfortunately not my friend, our destiny lies to the right,” he answered.

“I don’t think we will be able to,” said San at closer inspection, “it seems that the road is broken.”

“It is not broken, only cracked. Be careful it goes all the way down,” Cham warned.

“Yes I see and it’s quite deep,” said San.

“A fall I would rather not experience,” said Cham.

“What causes it?” asked San.

“At times it can get so dry in the Karoo that the ground literally cracks,” answered Cham.

“We have to find a way to cross it,” said San. He looked around.

“What are you looking for?” asked Cham.

“A rock,” said San.

“There are plenty of rocks around us, but why would you be looking for a rock?” asked Cham confused.

“It’s a specific one, never mind,” said San as he remembered the dung beetle.

“I know what you are thinking, but he won’t help us,” said Cham.

“How do you know?” asked San.

“Just trust me okay, we must find another way,” pleaded Cham.

“I am sorry Cham, but he is the only way across. Come on,” he said as he started to run back.



San reached the dung beetle and he introduced himself. He looked behind him to introduce Cham, but realized he wasn't there.

"So, I was wondering if you would assist us to cross the cracked path?" he concluded after explaining their situation.

"Yes I will help you, but not that coward of a lizard," said the Beetle.

"You mean, Cham?" asked San.

"That's right," the Beetle responded.

"But why not?" he asked.

"You see we used to be friends," said the Beetle.

"What happened?" asked San.

"I had urgent business to attend to and I asked Cham to look after my roll, just for a few hours.

I was in such a hurry and I did not have the time to roll my home along with me.

He agreed and promised to take good care of it, but when I returned, my home was destroyed and my keeper and so-called friend was missing. I had to build it from scratch and that is not an easy task," the Beetle said.

Now San understood why Cham was avoiding the beetle.

"Thank you for offering to help me, but Cham is my friend and my guide, I can't leave him behind.

You see he has done no harm to me, he has only provided help and support in my time of need.

Goodbye," he said.

Cham who was hiding behind a nearby bush couldn't believe what he heard. San would do that for me, he thought. He then stepped forward and revealed himself.

"Hello Dunbee," he said nervously.

"I have nothing to say to you, Cham," Dunbee responded.

"Then let me start by saying I am truly sorry for what happened," Cham continued.

"And what exactly happened?" Dunbee asked.

"I fell asleep while guarding your home and when I woke, your roll was no more. I didn't know what to do and fled the scene. I acted like a coward," he said bowing his head in shame.

"I regret what I did that day to you and our friendship," Cham finished.

Dunbee looked at Cham for some time.

"I see you are sincere. I will accept your apology old friend now help me push the roll to the crack," said Dunbee.

“Look how quickly that went,” said Dunbee when they reached their destination.

“Teamwork does pay off,” said Cham.

“Okay one more push should do it,” said Dunbee.

They pushed the roll and it landed in the crack.

“Now my roll will serve as a bridge for you to cross,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Cham.

“But how will you get it out of the crack?” asked San.

“Don’t worry, I think I will set up my home here for the time being,” said Dunbee.

“Thank you once again, Dunbee,” said San as he climbed the roll.

“Anytime and good luck with finding your fellow bushmen,” he said waving.

“Goodbye my friend,” said Cham and shook his hand.

Cham started to climb the roll, but then he stopped and turned to his friend.

“Dunbee, why don’t you rather join us on our journey?” he asked.

“That is a brilliant idea!” he heard San shout from the other side of the roll.

“Think about it, you can’t move your roll because it is stuck, which means you are stuck,” said Cham.

“Well, you do have a point there. I think I will join you,” he said and followed Cham over the roll.

Once on the other side they continued on the dry path. They walked passed an opening to a cave.

San glanced at it and smiled as he realized he didn’t miss his cave.

“Come on San, we are almost at the Whirl,” said Dunbee.

“What is that?” asked San.

“Come and see,” shouted Cham from up ahead.

“Wow! I have never seen anything like this before,” he said staring at the airborne stones and sand that moved in a continuous circle.

“That is a whirl wind,” said Cham pointing at the column of air moving rapidly round and round in a funnel shape.

“I assume we must go around it,” said San.

“There is no going around it, we have to go through it,” said Dunbee.

“What do mean through it?” asked San.

“We have to jump into the whirl wind. Then after three circular movements we have to jump out and hope we end up on the other side,” answered Cham.



“What?” said San in disbelief.

“Yes, unfortunately there is no other way,” said Dunbee.

“Come on, let us give it a try,” said Cham.

“You go ahead, I think I will observe at first,” said San.

“Okay Dunbee, after the third turn we must aim our bodies toward that red rock,” said Cham.

San shook his head in doubt. Then they jumped.

Immediately they were sucked into the whirl, around and around they went.

“One!” San heard Cham scream. “Two and three!”

San saw them lifted and then pushed out of the whirl wind.

With a thud they hit the ground right at San’s feet. “Oh no!” said Cham disappointed.

“What?” asked Dunbee disorientated.

“It didn’t work,” said Cham.

After regaining his balance, Dunbee noticed that they were back at the exact same side before they had entered the Whirl.

“The whirl wind is too strong; we need something that will help to pull us out of it,” said Dunbee.

“Any recommendations San?” asked Cham.

“Give me a second,” he said as he paced up and down and then he said, “I got it!”

“On our way here I saw a cave opening,” said San.

“Yes, I saw you looking at it longingly. Oh no, don’t tell me you are giving up and found yourself a new home,” said Cham.

“Not at all. You see, with this spear I can create what we need,” said San.

“I don’t understand,” said Dunbee.

“All I need is to draw what we need on the rock in the cave. It will then materialize and we can use it to get to the other side of the whirl,” he finished.

“I see,” said Cham, “that is why you were looking for a rock at the crack.”

“Yes,” said San. And the three of them walked back.

“So tell me why you didn’t ever draw yourself a friend before when you lived alone?” asked Cham.

“It doesn’t work like that,” said San,

“I don’t choose what to draw. The spear somehow knows what I need at the time.”

“We are here,” he said as he peeked into the opening of the cave.

“It sure looks dark in there,” said Cham.

“Come on, you had no problem entering my cave,” said San.

“Yes, but if I am honest, I was distracted remember,” said Cham.

Without a word Dunbee came from behind and walked passed them into the cave.

“It’s not as dark as I thought,” he said and walked deeper into the cave.

San followed and felt the rock wall with his hands.

“This is perfect, it’s the exact same rock that I had in my cave,” San said.

He took out his spear and drew a line.

“Not really an artist I see,” teased Cham.

“Please don’t do me any harm!” they heard Dunbee. San and Cham froze at his distressed voice.

“Dunbee, where are you?” asked San.

Cham pulled San closer. He pointed his index finger into the darkness.

San turned around and saw two green eyes gleaming back at them. They heard a hiss.

The snake-like sound filled the cave and the green eyes started to move toward them.

The reptile’s face became visible in the dim light.

“You must be looking for this,” it said and swung its tail forward.

It was a girdled lizard. The creature’s entire body was cloaked in armoured scales and wrapped up in its tail was Dunbee.

“Please help me,” he cried.

“Will you keep quiet! I had enough of your begging,” she said irritated.

She knocked her tail down and with a thump Dunbee fell silent.

“What do we have here?” the reptile said as she moved her attention to Cham.

“A chameleon I see, nice and juicy,” she hissed as she revealed her forked tongue.

She pounced forward and tried to grab Cham with one of her claws, but he pushed his body back just in time. San jumped onto the closest rock and threw the reptile with his boomerang.

It bounced off her with a thud.

“Please, that little toy of yours will do nothing to me,” she said.

San launched himself into the air toward the lizard and landed with the tip of his spear between its scales.

She screamed out in pain as it penetrated her tail.

Instantly Dunbee was released from her clutches and fell to the ground. The reptile now filled with anger turned to find the one that caused her pain, but before she could react she felt a blinding sting between her eyes. The rock fell to the ground. The reptile was furious when she saw the culprit that threw the rock. "You will pay for this," she said, directly looking at Cham. "I'll meet you at the whirl wind!" Cham shouted and started to run. The reptile followed him out of the cave.

"Dunbee, are you okay?" asked San concerned. "Yes I am fine thank you, but we must go after them," he said. "Yes, we will shortly," said San and he turned his attention back to his sketch. Once finished he put his hand on the rock and lifted out a chain. He tied it to his spear. "Let's go," he said. Once outside they ran to the whirl wind.

On arrival they saw both Cham and the reptile in the Whirl. "I hope Cham has a plan," San said as he watched them being spun around. Suddenly Cham was thrown out of the whirl wind. "Come on!" he shouted and he grabbed San. "Wait for me!" shouted Dunbee and he grabbed onto San's waist. They jumped back into the Whirl as the reptile was thrown out of it.

They were being spun around like leaves. "One," Cham screamed, "two and three!" San threw the spear; it lodged itself in the red rock. "Hold on tight," he shouted. They were being sucked out of the whirl wind, their bodies were pulled toward the red rock. They lost grip of one another. Cham and Dunbee landed on top of the red rock. They lay there for a second, both out of breath. "Where is San?" Dunbee asked. He was not on the rock. They looked down and saw the reptile being thrown out of the Whirl once more. She shook her head, clearly dizzy and started to make an unbalanced walk back to her cave. They looked at each other and started to laugh. "What is so funny?" asked San. They looked down once more and saw a brown spot nestled on the rock.

“There you are,” said Dunbee.

“Are you alright?” asked Cham.

“Yes I am fine,” he said as he emerged from the rock and climbed to the top.

“That was close,” he said as he loosened the chain from his spear.

“Look! We did it, we made it to the valley,” said Cham as he looked down the other side of the rock.

“No, look at you,” said Dunbee.

Cham was completely red. “Ha ha ha,” they laughed.

“I know red is not my colour,” he said as his normal shade returned.

“But seriously guys, look!” Cham said excited.

The valley stretched out beneath them. It was filled with trees that appeared to grow upside down.

It had green succulent leaves sprouting from the root, like branches; some had yellow flowers on top and others red. The trees created a clear path beneath them that lead to numerous caves.

“We made it,” said San relieved.

“Yes we...” Cham said.

San saw Cham’s eyes were rising. He looked up and saw the bird with the red beak.

“Cham!” he shouted and grabbed onto his feet. Dunbee was left standing on the rock.

Helplessly he looked on as his friends were taken.

“Now I have you,” said the bird. “I have been looking all over for the one that got away.

I told you to make sure that I don’t find you. And what do you do? Display yourself on a rock,” he said, answering his own question. “I assume the one hanging from you is your partner in crime. Well here is a message to both of you: no one hits me and gets away with it, your fates are sealed.”

“San, you have to save yourself! Let go of my feet. You have come this far; your fellow bushmen are so close, let go and don’t look back,” Cham pleaded.

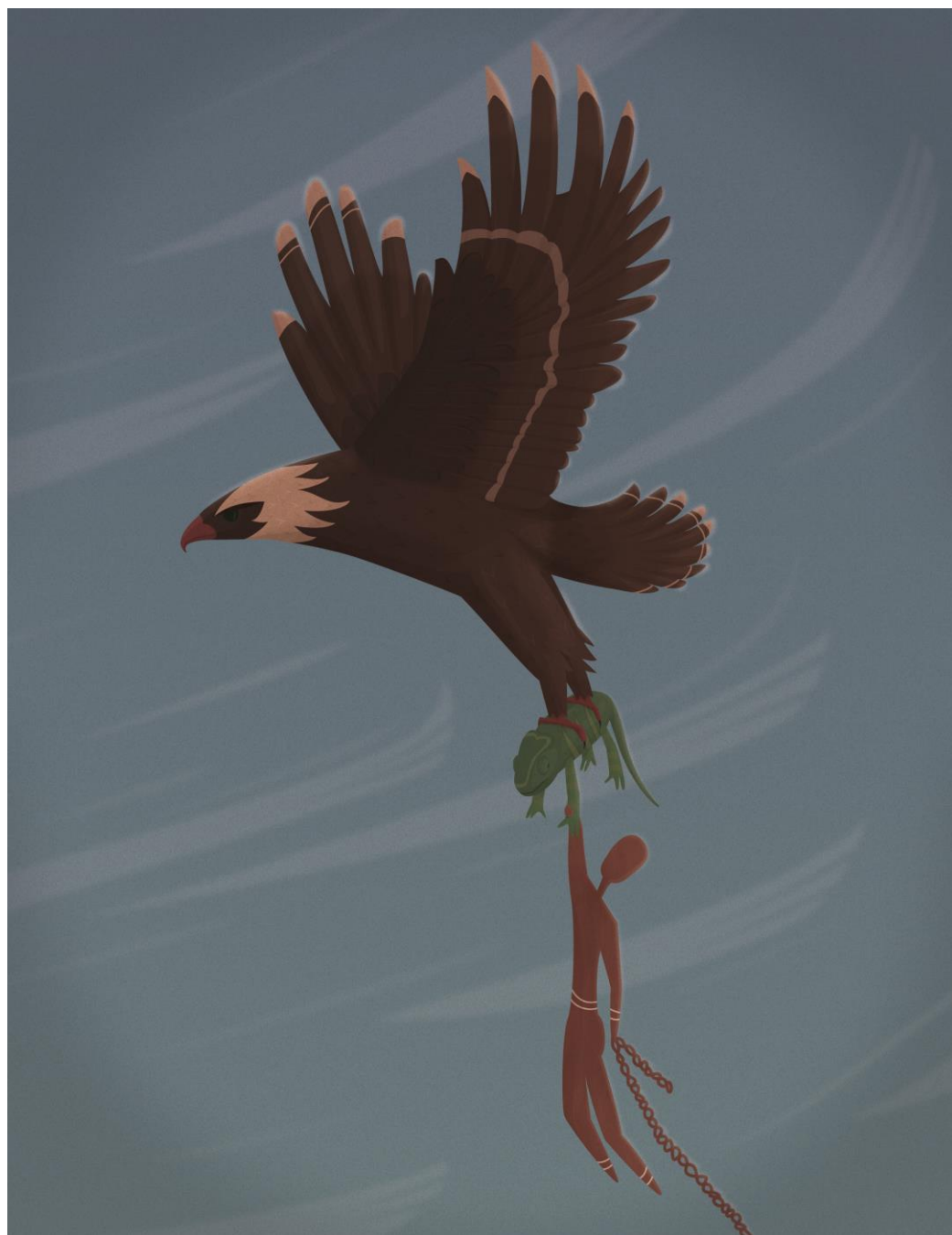
“I can’t do that Cham, I was the one that hit him with my boomerang,” said San.

“Yes, but you did it to save my life, now let go,” he said.

He started to move his feet to loosen San’s grip. It worked. San felt himself slipping.

“No, Cham stop, don’t do it!” he begged as he lost his grip.

He grabbed the chain and threw it back at Cham – it wrapped around his leg.



“San, what are you doing? Let go!” shouted Cham.

“No! I will not leave you behind!” he shouted. He took his spear and threw it at the bird.

The bird shrieked in pain as the spear hit its head. Immediately his claws opened, and Cham and San found themselves falling.

They fell through the sky at a great speed. The ground was like a magnet pulling them down.

The bird came into sight again. He descended after them; he turned around, his red claws visible, once more he grabbed at Cham, but missed. He tried again and missed once more.

The bird suddenly shouted out in irritation.

It seemed that something was hitting the bird, but by now San didn’t have the energy to turn around.

He knew that he and Cham were about to meet their end. He looked over at Cham and could see his eyes were closed, waiting for the inevitable.

But then, to their surprise, they landed softly.

They realized that something was beneath them. San saw that it was a type of net.

“Cham, are you okay?” he looked at Cham, but his friend did not speak.

He stood with his jaw wide open and pointed. Eventually he said, “Look San, they look just like you.”

San then turned around and was amazed to see that he was surrounded by fellow bushmen like himself; they were all holding onto the net that caught him and Cham.

Some were tall, others short, some were skinny, others plump. There were red ones and brown.

“There are so many,” said San looking at the drawings.

“Are you two okay?” they heard between mumblings of the crowd.

“Luckily we have watchers on the cliff. They saw what happened and could alert us in time.

Wait, this must be a bit overwhelming. Everyone, please let us give them a moment to recuperate,” said the bushman.

“Please continue with your business, it is almost time to start the night fires,” instructed another bushman.

One by one the crowd slowly moved away from the net while still staring at Cham and San.

“I would like to welcome you to the Dry Valley,” the bushman said as he turned his attention to the pair in the net. “I am Dagwa, the Chief and you are?”

“I am San and this is my friend Cham, but before we continue, there is another in our company,” said San.

“Yes, the Beetle. I have sent men to fetch him.

So tell me how you came to find yourself on the red rock?” he asked.

They told the chief about their journey.

“So you see, by facing my fear I had this great adventure that brought me here,” San concluded.

“I can’t think that it was easy taking that first step from your cave San, but you did it and by facing your fear you embraced the opportunity to change your life,” the Chief patted San on the shoulder.

“And wouldn’t the Dry Valley want a courageous young man like San to join their family?” asked Cham.

“Indeed it would. You are more than welcome to join our family and that includes you too, Cham.

But before you decide, I would like to show you around,” said the Chief.

“Firstly, let me take care of Cham – he must be famished.”

“Indeed!” emphasized Cham.

“Chammy,” he called the chameleon closer.

“Yes Chief,” she answered.

“Please see that Cham gets some refreshments,” said the Chief.

“It will be my pleasure, Chief,” she said.

“Hello Cham, it is nice to meet you. I don’t know when last I saw another chameleon,” she said.

“Please follow me,” she smiled. Cham blushed. He struggled to respond, but managed a nod.

“I didn’t know that you could change colour all by yourself,” said San giggling.

Cham nudged him and left with Chammy.

“San please follow me,” said the Chief.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“To the caves of course,” he said and smiled.

They walked amongst the villagers, there were animal drawings too, San noticed as a buck galloped passed them. The Chief took out his spear and drew a log on a rock. He took it out of the rock and lit it by one of the fires.

“Come on, let me show you inside,” he said. They entered one of the caves; the walls were filled with drawings like him. Some climbed out of the cave walls and greeted him. He thought back to his cave and how he used to search the walls for just one more drawing. He realized his search was finally over.

“Yes,” said San out loud.

“Excuse me?” said the Chief.

“Yes, I would like to live here,” he said.

Then it is settled,” replied the Chief. “Please be free to wander around and welcome to the family, San.”

Outside dusk was upon the valley. He found Cham sitting on a nearby rock.

“Where is Dunbee?” San asked.

“Over there,” answered Cham and pointed.

San saw that Dunbee had started a new roll. He waved at San and smiled.

The night fires were started and, with it, smoke and the sound of drums filled the air.

The valley came alive as night settled around them.

The joyful noise of laughter and singing were ringing in their ears.

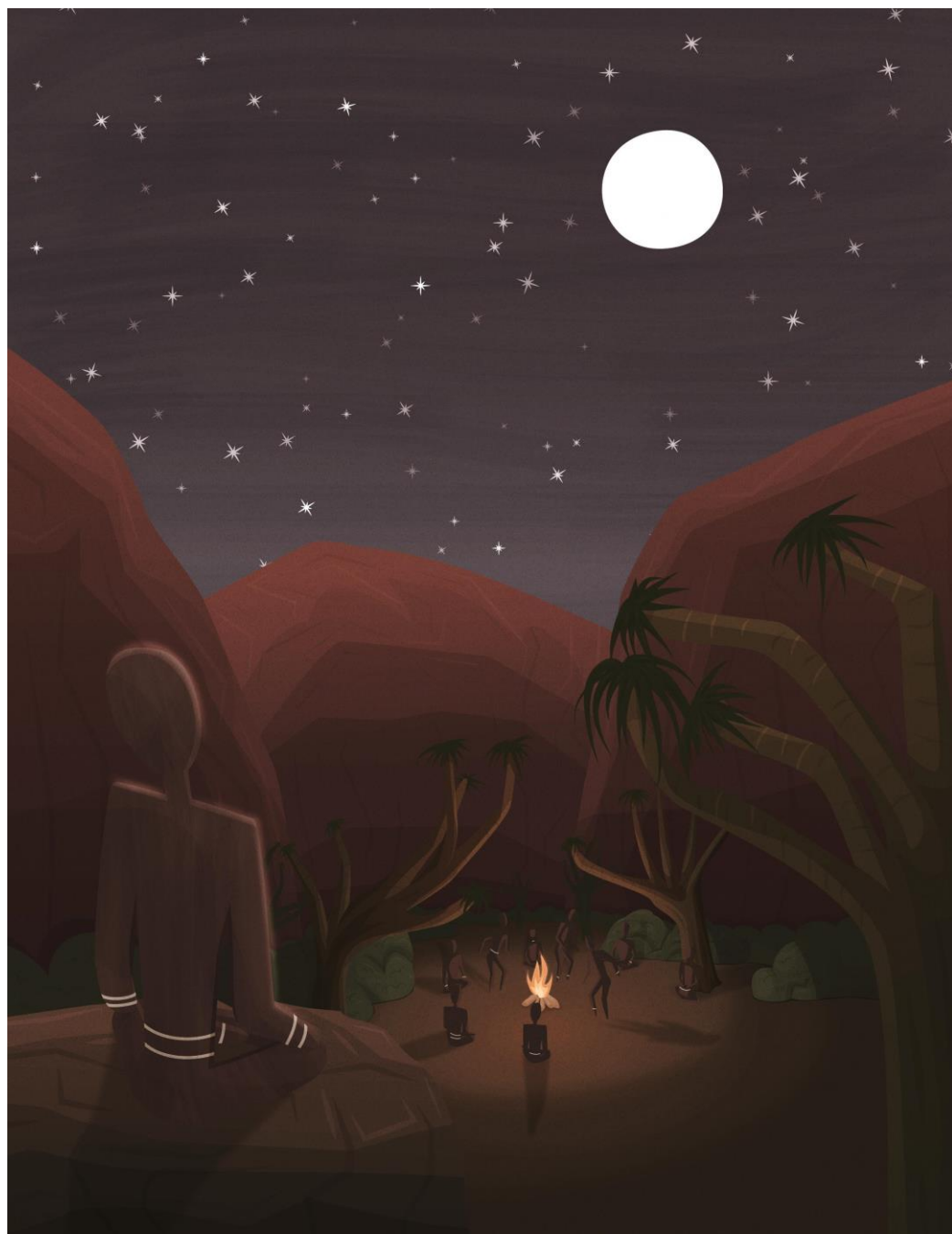
“I think we are home,” said Cham.

San nodded in agreement, turning his attention to the sky.

“I am going to join Chammy by the fire,” Cham said as he left the rock, but San didn’t hear him.

He was mesmerized by the little lights that draped the open night sky.

Watching them from outside was so much better than he could ever have imagined.



About Carmen Saptouw

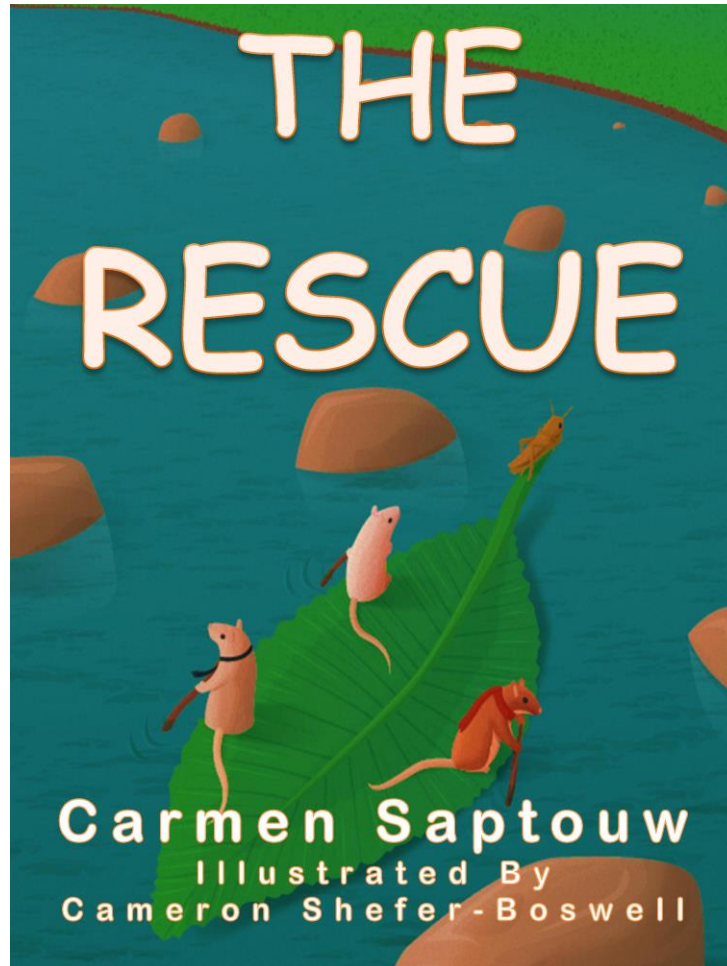
As a young child of only 8 years old, she was inspired to write children's stories.

Following her childhood years, she got so involved with being a teenager that she completely forgot about her passion for writing.

Only in 2011, the year she turned 29, was her passion reawakened from its deep slumber when her dad found the stories she had written as a child. So more than 20 years later she rewrote the stories with the aim to preserve it, but as she typed, the stories evolved and new ideas were sparked.

She aspires to share her stories with children around the world, and for each story to have a sound moral lesson.

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