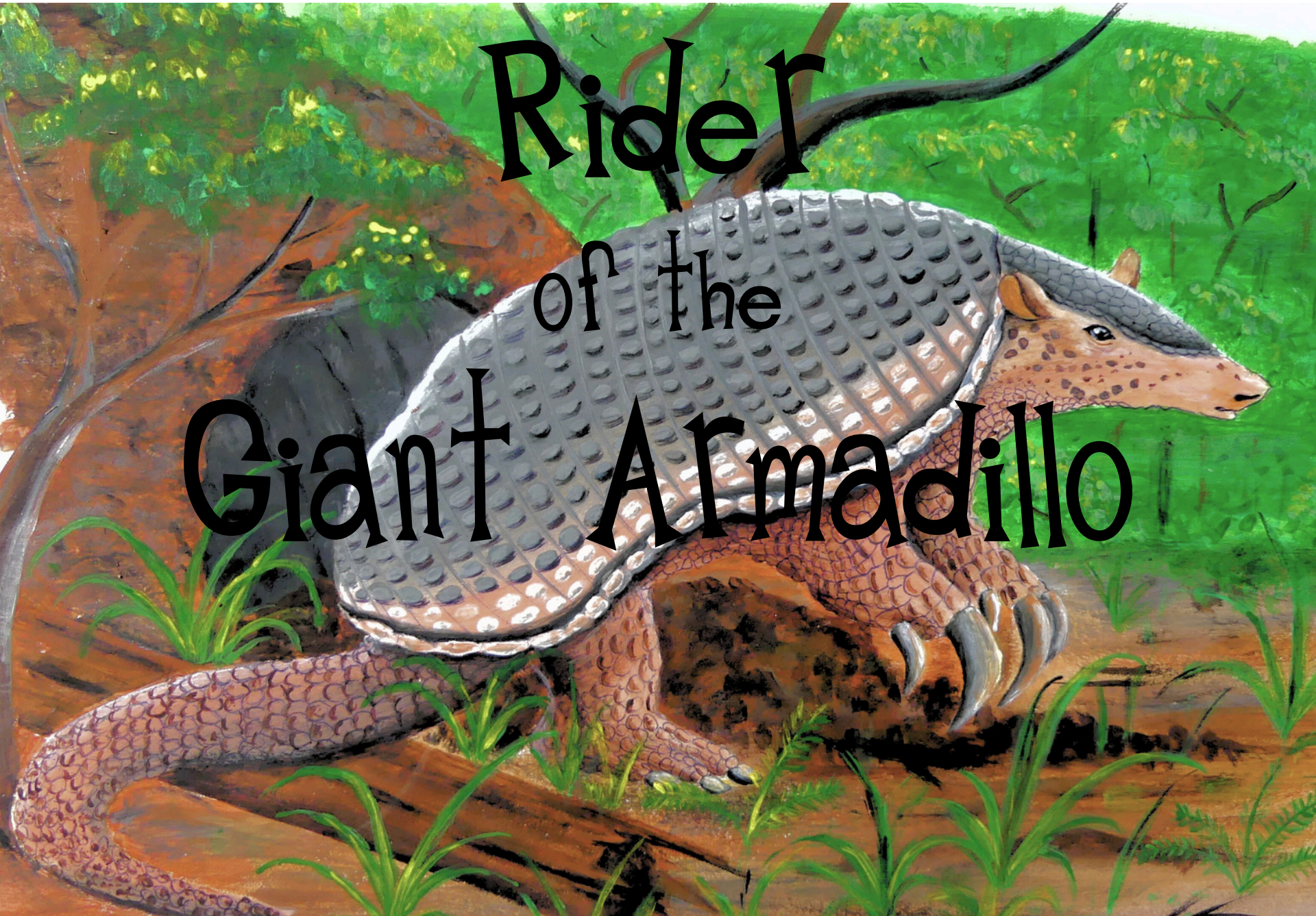
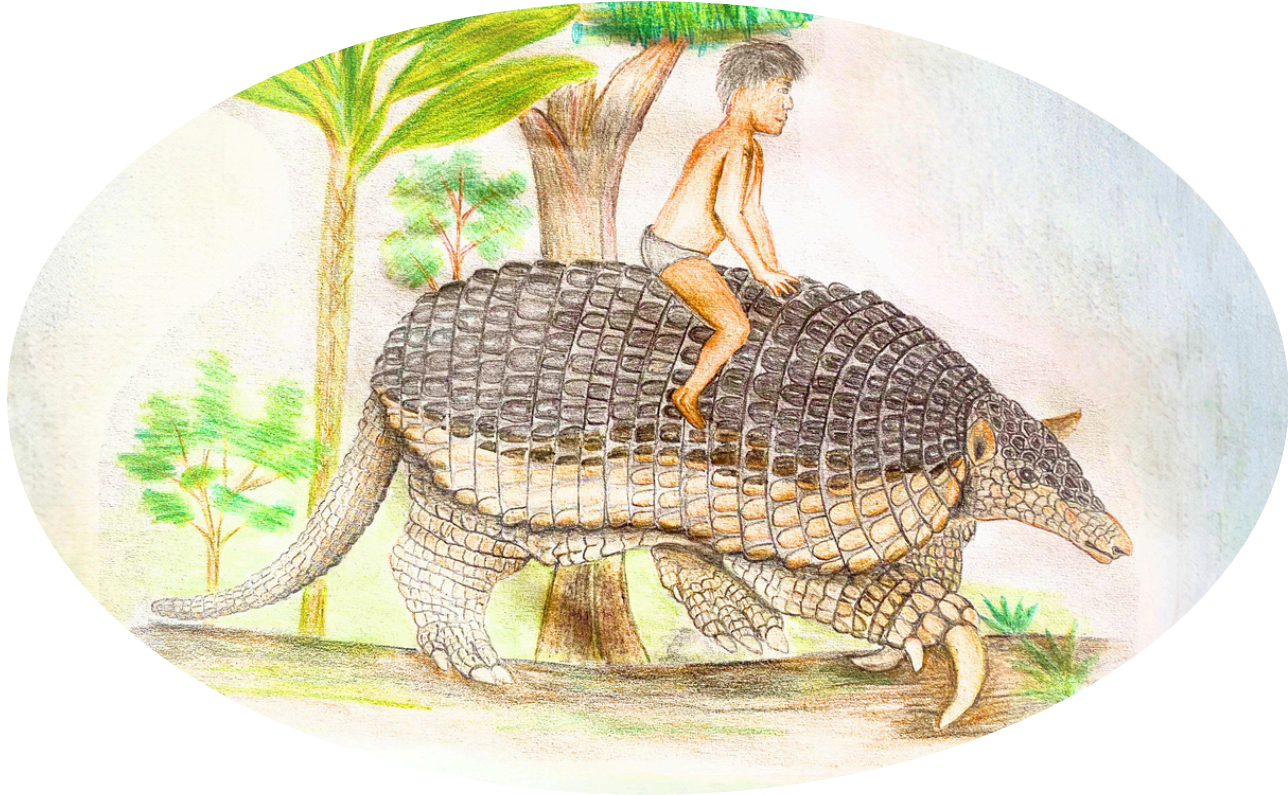




SOUTH RUPUNUNI  
CONSERVATION SOCIETY

# Rider of the Giant Armadillo





This book is dedicated to the memory of Toshao Daniel Aguilar of Maruranau Village

In admiration of your leadership and courage in advancing community-led biodiversity conservation.



# Credit

This book is part of a series of books produced by the South Rupununi Conservation Society (SRCS) that is intended to educate people about the wildlife of the Rupununi in Guyana.

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The source material for this story comes from interviews in the villages of Shea, Maruranau and Awarewaunau, Deep South Rupununi. These interviews were conducted with kind permission from the village residents, Tosaos and Council members, and the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC).

Thank you to the people of Shea, Maruranau and Awarewaunau for your support and continued dedication to the research and conservation of the giant armadillo and other species in your lands.

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# Foreword

Guyana is home to one of the most extraordinary natural landscapes in the world — vast forests, savannahs, rivers, and wetlands that shelter an incredible diversity of wildlife. Among the most fascinating of these species is the Giant Armadillo — a rare and mysterious animal that plays an important role in maintaining healthy ecosystems. Yet, like many of our unique species, the giant armadillo depends on our understanding, respect, and care for its survival.

‘Rider of the Giant Armadillo’ is more than a children’s story. It is a celebration of Guyana’s natural heritage, the knowledge of Indigenous communities, and the importance of protecting the biodiversity that sustains us all.

The Government of Guyana, through the Low Carbon Development Strategy 2030, recognizes that protecting biodiversity is central to building a sustainable future. Our forests, wildlife, and ecosystems support livelihoods, strengthen climate resilience, and preserve cultural traditions.

I extend sincere appreciation to the residents, Toshias, and Village Councils of Shea, Maruranau, and Awarewaunau, for their generosity, partnership, and continued commitment to research and conservation.

I hope this book inspires children to explore, learn, and appreciate the remarkable wildlife of Guyana, and to become future stewards of our environment. Every story we tell about nature plants a seed — a seed of curiosity, responsibility, and hope.

May ‘Rider of the Giant Armadillo’, spark imagination, nurture respect for wildlife, and encourage a lifelong commitment to protecting the beautiful country we call home.

P Bholnath

Pradeepa Bholanath  
Senior Director, Climate Change  
Low Carbon Development Strategy 2030  
Government of Guyana



# Introduction

This book is a small part of a big story...

Over the last few years, the South Rupununi Conservation Society (SRCS) has worked with eight Rupununi villages to help them create more than 350 000 Hectares of Community Conserved Areas in their Titled Lands. In Shea, Maruranau and Awarewaunau, in Deep South Rupununi, this work has been inspired by the amazing giant armadillo.

In the pages that follow, you will learn about the great size and strangeness of the giant armadillo. You will understand its value as the creator of safe habitats for many forest creatures. But you will also come to recognise its immense vulnerability: slow to reproduce and requiring vast areas of undisturbed habitat, this creature is highly susceptible to local extinction from hunting, roadkill, habitat loss, and the wildlife trade.

Inspired by the wish to care for the hard working and vulnerable giant armadillo, and at the same time sustain their hard working and vulnerable ecosystems, Shea, Maruranau and Awarewaunau engaged in a 2-year research and conservation project with the SRCS. As a result, the communities arrived at a shared solution: their lands would be managed to support long-term coexistence between people and nature. The villages updated their Village Sustainability Plans and maps, signed an historic inter-community agreement that specifies collaborative conservation actions, and initiated the research, education and monitoring required to realise this vision. Finally, the villages pledged funds from their Low Carbon Development Strategy Income to finance these actions.

The story that follows is well known in the South Rupununi. It celebrates a connection between people and giant armadillos that we hope will continue and strengthen in the years to come. And we hope the actions of these communities will inspire many others to work towards long-term sustainability of their lands.

*Erin Earl*

Technical Advisor  
Giant Anteater and Giant Armadillo Research and Conservation  
South Rupununi Conservation Society



# South Rupununi Conservation Society

We are farmers, hunters, school children, business people, tour operators, teachers, tour guides and more. We are the women, men and children who call Guyana's Rupununi our home.

Over the years, we have seen a decline in the number of animals and plants of the Rupununi Region as well as continued degradation of the natural environment. Through education, research and conservation we are dedicated to sustaining and protecting the wildlife of our home.

Our focus currently includes:

- Red Siskin Conservation;
- Giant Anteater and Giant Armadillo Research and Conservation;
- Yellow-Spotted River Turtle Monitoring and Research;
- Environmental Education;
- Traditional Knowledge Preservation;
- Fire research and management;
- Conservation of the Hoary-throated Spinetail and the Rio Branco Antbird.

To find out more, contact us via email at [srcs.rupupununi@gmail.com](mailto:srcs.rupupununi@gmail.com), view our website [www.srcs-gy.com](http://www.srcs-gy.com), or find us on Facebook and Instagram.

# Amazing Giant Armadillo

Giant Armadillos truly are giant: they can weigh more than 30 kg and measure up to 150 cm in length, with a massive third claw reaching up to 14 cm. But their size and strength conceal significant vulnerabilities: a Giant Armadillo takes 7-9 years to reach sexual maturity, and, if all goes well, females produce only one pup every three years. Each Giant Armadillo requires approximately 25 sq km of undisturbed habitat to survive.



Each Giant Armadillo has unique markings. We identified and named 25 individuals. Here are Griffith (male, left), Antoine (male, centre) and Piraichab (female, right) from Shea. The other named armadillos from Shea are Chimpirinha, Leo, Gabriel, Mizii, Bakorara, Kazorin and Shelly.

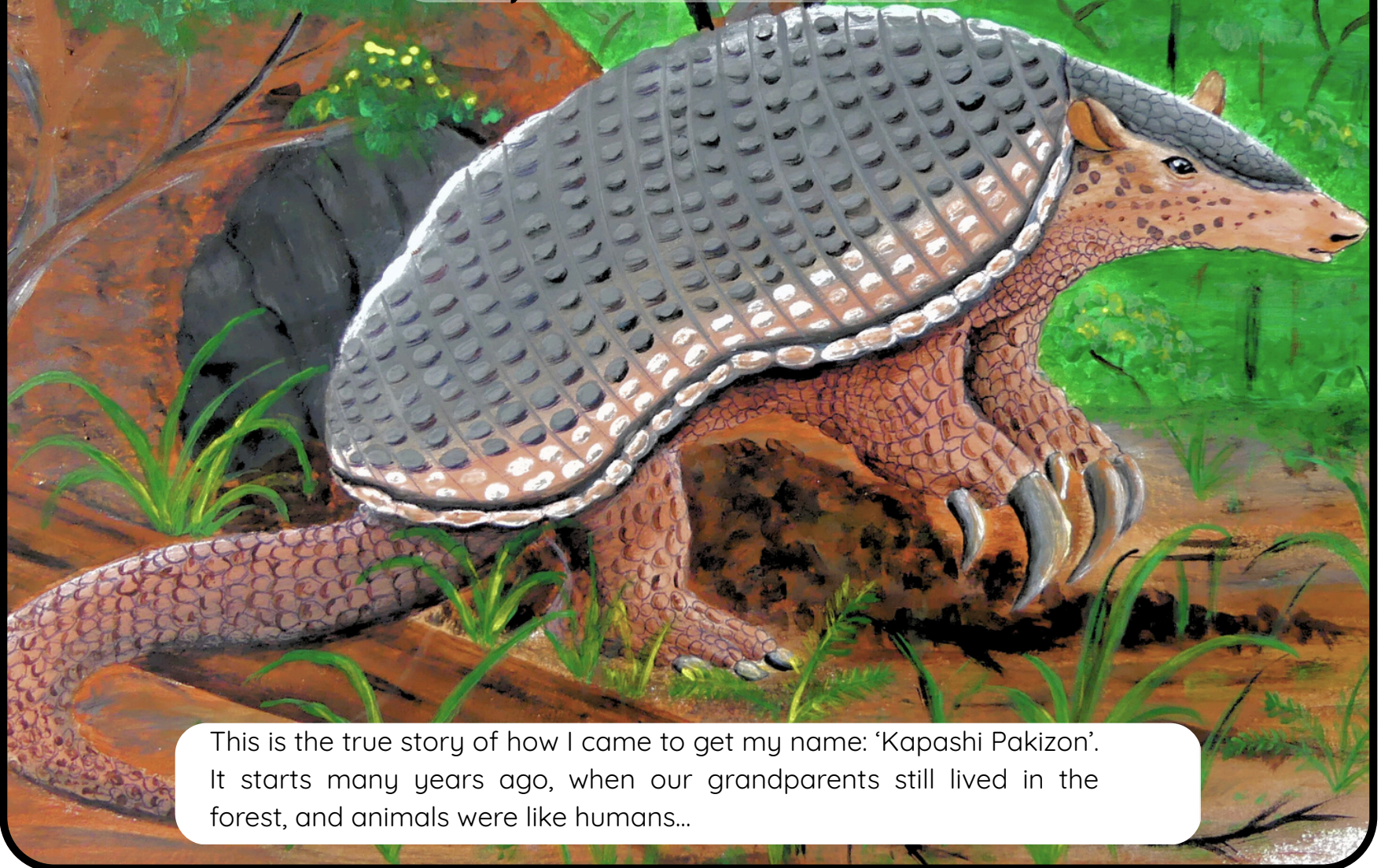
In Awarewauanu, one male (Sowan) and four females ( Mishaaba, Ziinba, Eunice, Tina) were identified. Ziinba is shown on the left. Maruranau's nine armadillos were named Roowi, Chiichakoo, Gabriel, Sir Roy, Lucy (shown right), Anglenia, Danny, Foyde and Alma.

Unknown: Podonko

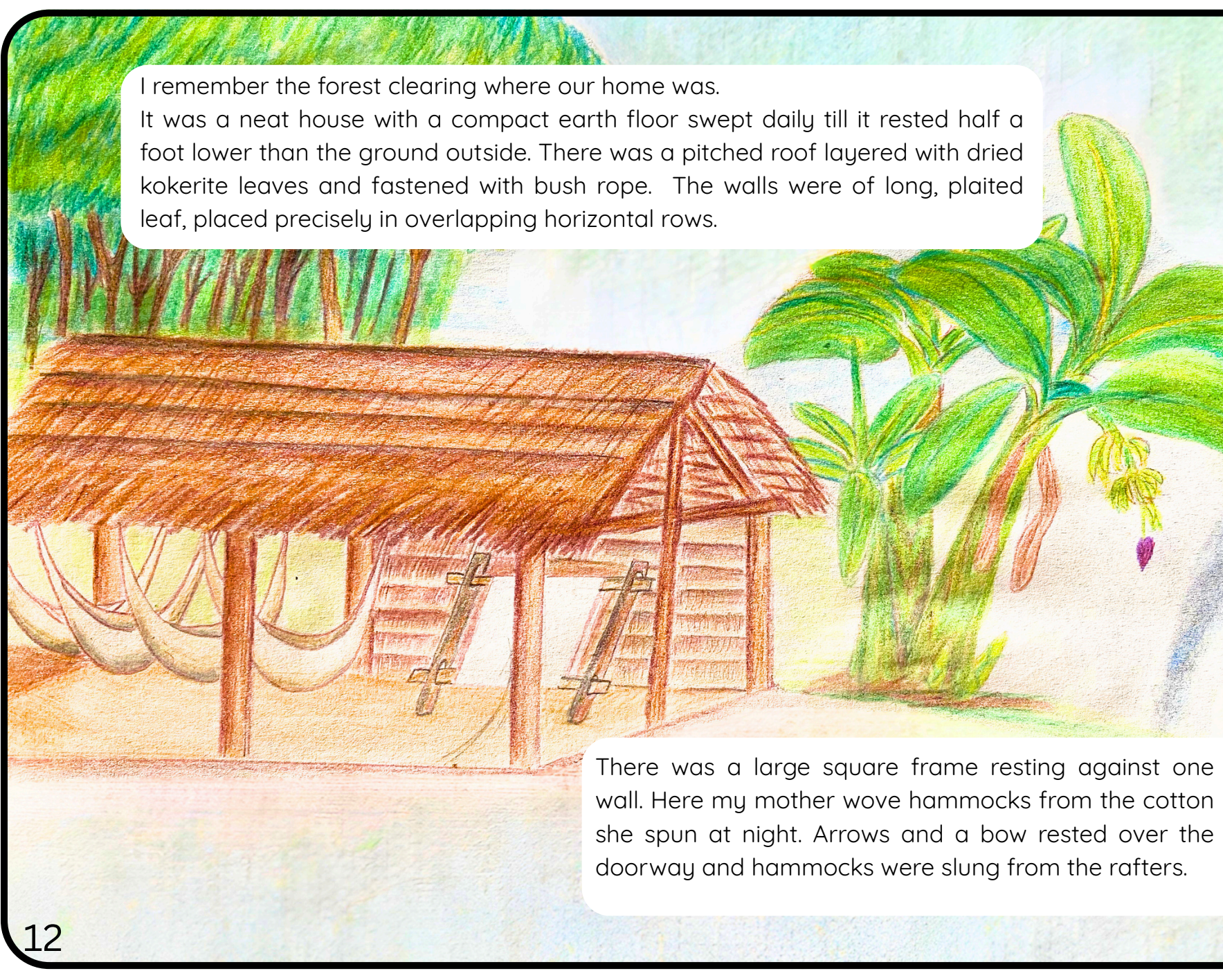


Like humans, Giant Armadillos alter their habitat to make themselves more comfortable. Their deep burrows provide a cool and safe place to sleep during the day. But unlike most human activity, Giant Armadillo engineering benefits the local ecosystem. When a Giant Armadillo vacates a burrow, many species of mammals, birds, and reptiles move in - they may rest for a few hours to escape the heat, wait for prey at the entrance, or spend weeks there as they give birth and rear their young. Our camera traps recorded 24 other mammal species interacting with their burrows or its surroundings.

# Kapashi Pakizon



This is the true story of how I came to get my name: 'Kapashi Pakizon'. It starts many years ago, when our grandparents still lived in the forest, and animals were like humans...



I remember the forest clearing where our home was. It was a neat house with a compact earth floor swept daily till it rested half a foot lower than the ground outside. There was a pitched roof layered with dried kokerite leaves and fastened with bush rope. The walls were of long, plaited leaf, placed precisely in overlapping horizontal rows.

There was a large square frame resting against one wall. Here my mother wove hammocks from the cotton she spun at night. Arrows and a bow rested over the doorway and hammocks were slung from the rafters.

The cassava kitchen stood on its own, a little downwind from the house we slept in.

There, the cassava would be scraped, washed and grated on sharp stone graters and squeezed with the mukru matapee until the poison was gone. Then it could be safely prepared for farine, cassava bread, kari, casareep and tapioca.





That morning, my parents left before dawn to work in the farm. I was too old to be carried in my mother's sling and too young to be helpful, so I was left in the care of my brothers. But they were content to play by themselves and ignored me in the house.

So I made up my mind to follow the path to the farm on my own.



# Spirits of the Forest

In those days, the forest was still filled with animals and the spirits of animals, and I knew to be afraid.

Jaguars, ocelots, giant anteaters and huge black caiman, harpy eagles and packs of wild hogs: any one of them could kill a child in a moment.



My dreams were filled with animals of great strength or cunning, who could speak and reason, steal a child or capture a soul.





But for a small boy, the forest floor was endlessly enticing.

I picked up a shining rock and noticed a yellow leaf shimmer in the undergrowth; a few steps more to a feather gleaming in a low shaft of sunshine, and suddenly I was following a carefully maintained road of leaf cutter ants marching in regulated disorder to their nest.

When I looked about, I was not on the path anymore.



I was lost. Panic filled my throat and wild stories of jaguars and jumbies filled my head. I sat down on a fallen log to cry.

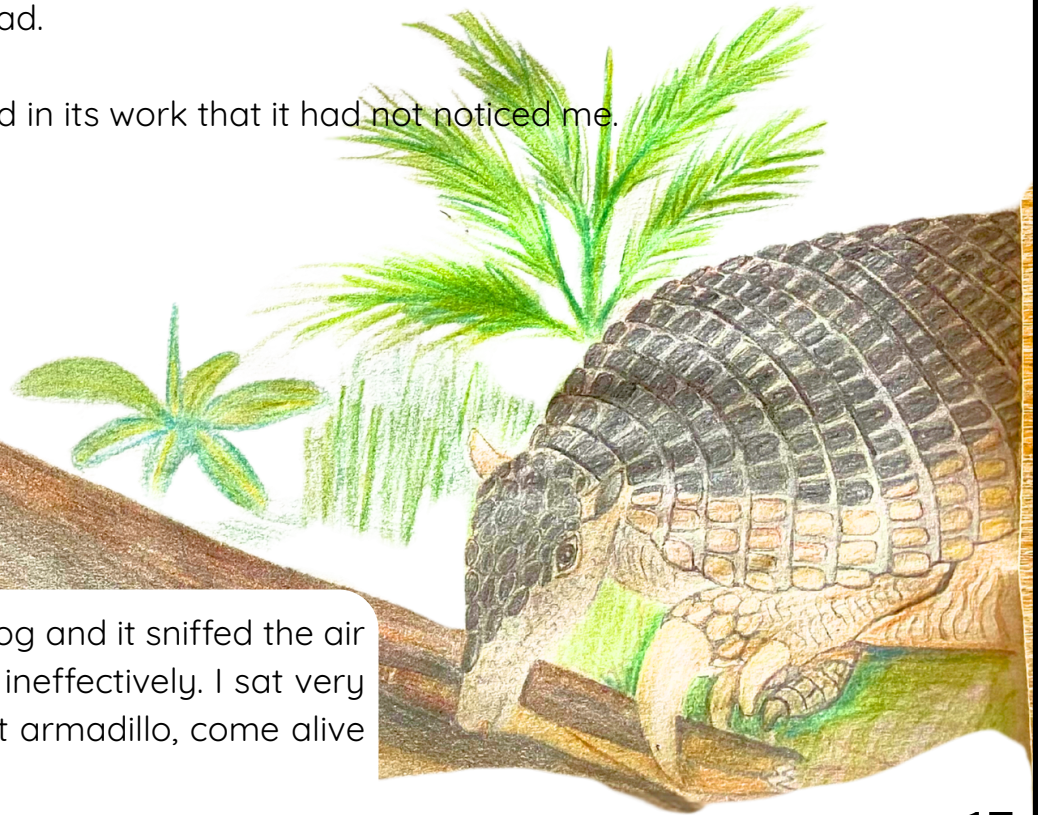


After a while the log began to shake under me. Startled and a little curious, I looked around to find out what was happening.

Beside me, an enormous creature was pulling the decayed wood apart. Its body was covered in a thick, shiny carapace. The great beast stood on its strong back legs, balancing with the help of a thick, scaly tail.

Its massive forearms reached into the log, breaking it apart with curved claws bigger than my head.

It was so engrossed in its work that it had not noticed me.

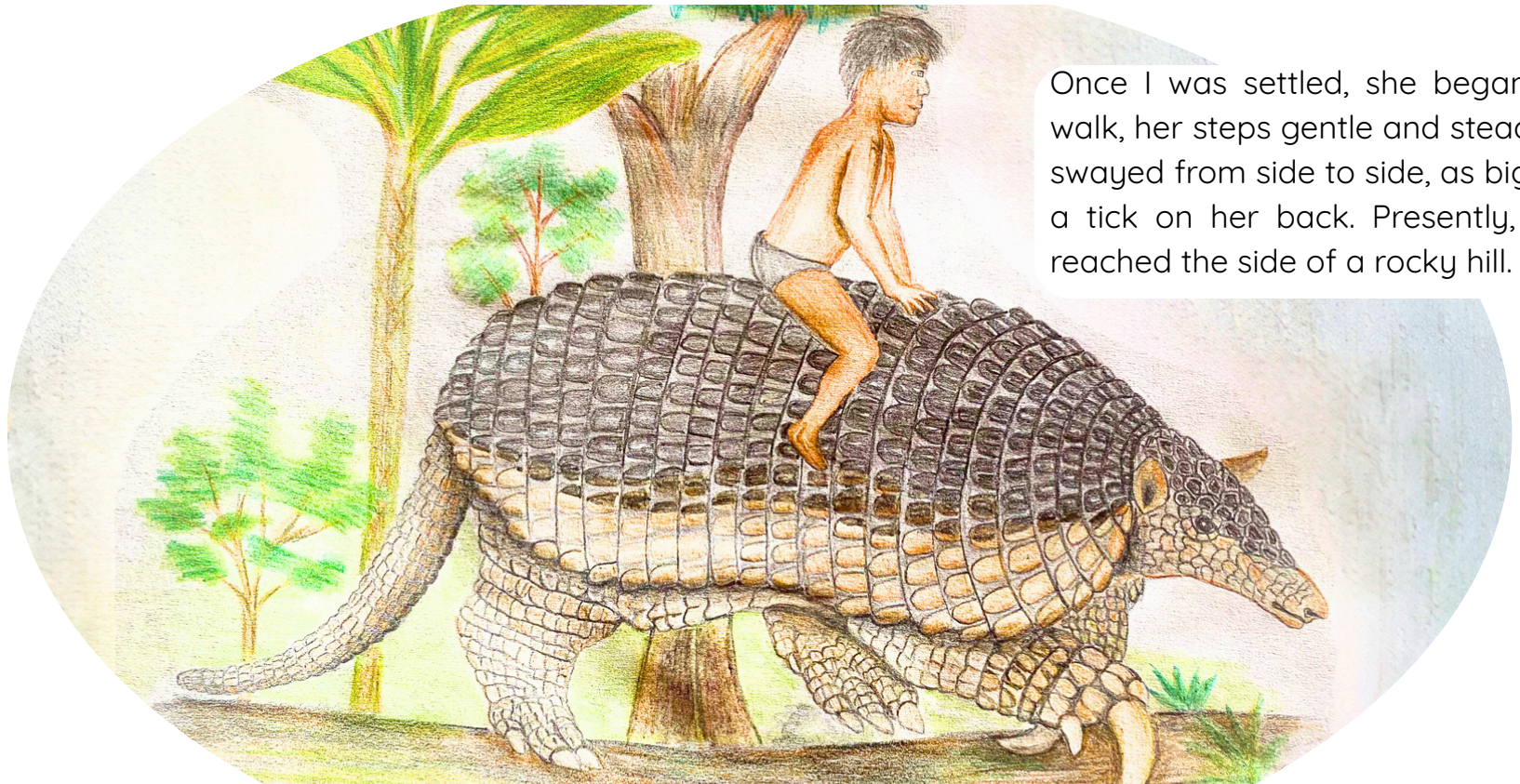


But at that moment its head emerged from the log and it sniffed the air with a curious nose. Its small black eyes blinked ineffectively. I sat very still now, for I realised this was a maroro, a giant armadillo, come alive from my father's stories.

The maroro stopped her work and settled onto all four of her heavy limbs. She did not seem alarmed at all, and her confidence calmed me at once. Her great bulk comforted me, and I slowly reached out to touch her. Her carapace was smooth and hairless, flexible and slightly warm.

I was enchanted, for I was no longer alone in the forest.

I rested my cheek against her side. When she didn't stir, I carefully climbed up onto her wide back.

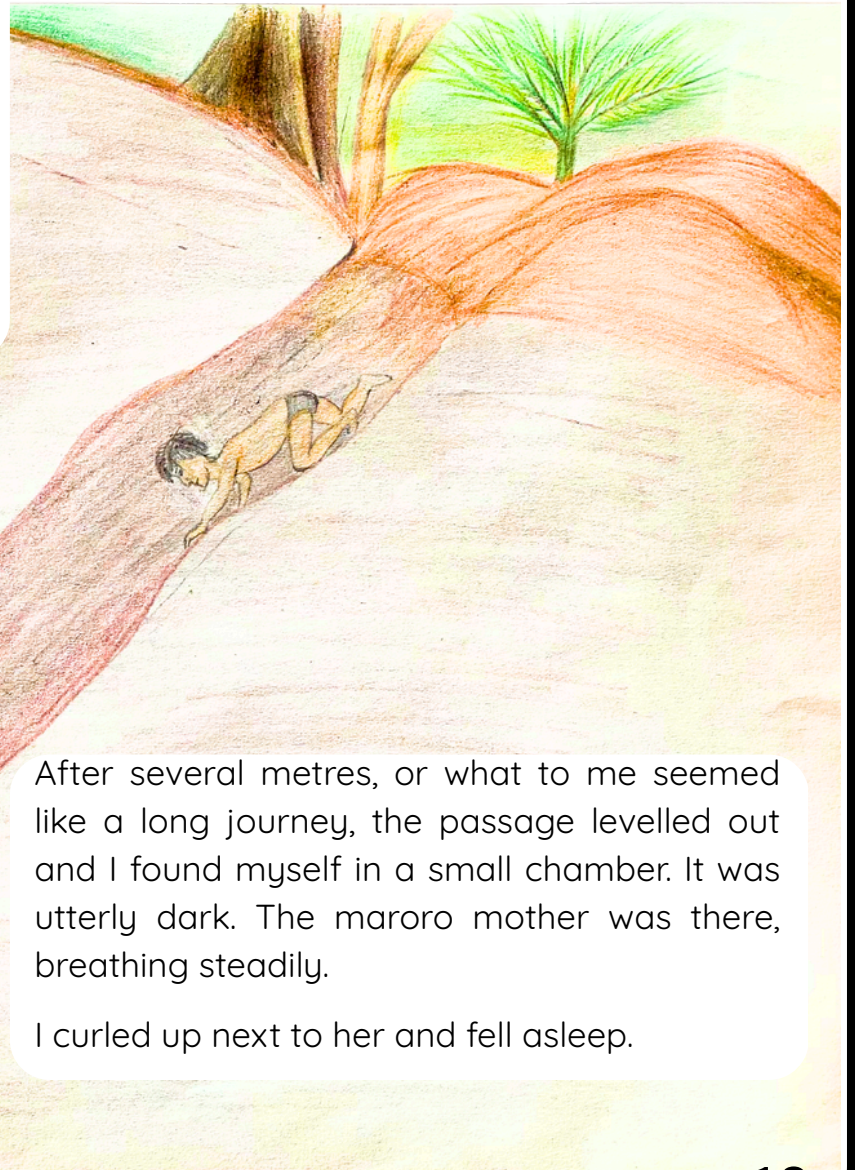


Once I was settled, she began to walk, her steps gentle and steady. I swayed from side to side, as big as a tick on her back. Presently, we reached the side of a rocky hill.

The maroro started to dig in the soft loam with her enormous claws, shovelling dank soil and tossing it out behind her. She paused for a moment and seemed to wait for me to slide down from her back, so I did.

She went back to work and excavated a tunnel as wide as her body and much wider than mine. Rapidly she descended into the hole, kicking soil out onto a large soft pile behind the entrance. When all became quiet again, I followed her inside, head first.

The tunnel dropped steeply at first. The walls were rough and roots caught my clothes as I slid and crawled into the damp darkness.



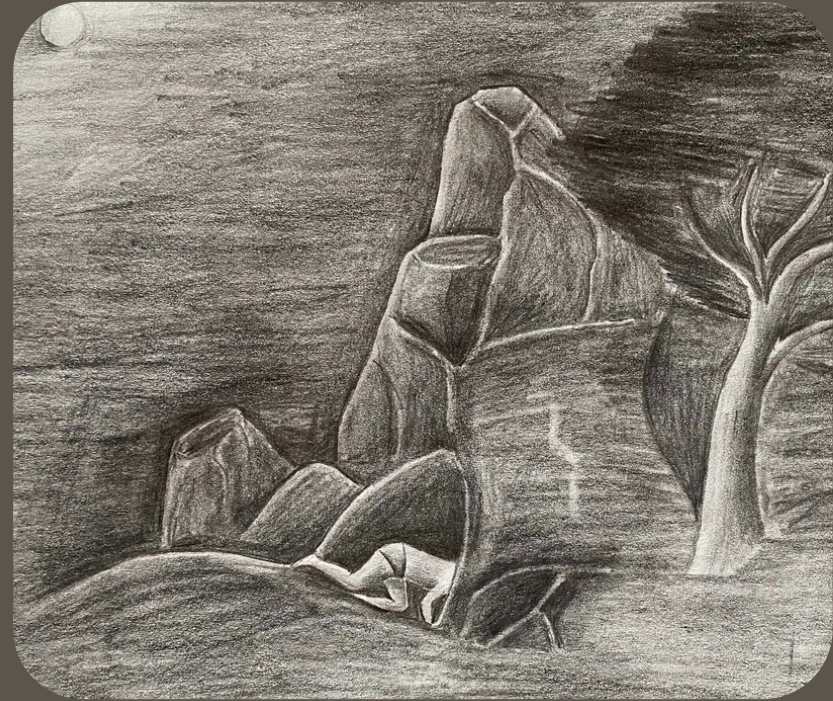
After several metres, or what to me seemed like a long journey, the passage levelled out and I found myself in a small chamber. It was utterly dark. The maroro mother was there, breathing steadily.

I curled up next to her and fell asleep.

# Life as Maroro

That was the start of a strange time for me. During the days we would sleep together in her burrow, and at night she would take me foraging in the forest.

There was a slow pattern to my maroro-mother's movements: we would spend two or three days in one burrow, going out in the night and returning before sunrise; then every few nights some sense or feeling would call her away to another place.



On those nights we would wander far from the burrow and not return.

She would make a new burrow or clean out an old one she had used before. We would stay a few days and then move on.

In that way we were nomads, but we often returned to places we had been: a rich termite nest, a preferred burrow or a favourite place to bathe.

I came to see our home with different eyes.

The dank, claustrophobic tunnel became a perfect underground palace with many rooms. The earth was cool and soothing and the smell of food was always in the air.



My old understandings were forgotten and my life in the house with my parents and brothers became vague. All day, I dreamed of earth and crawling things. At night, I began to see and smell my way in the dark.

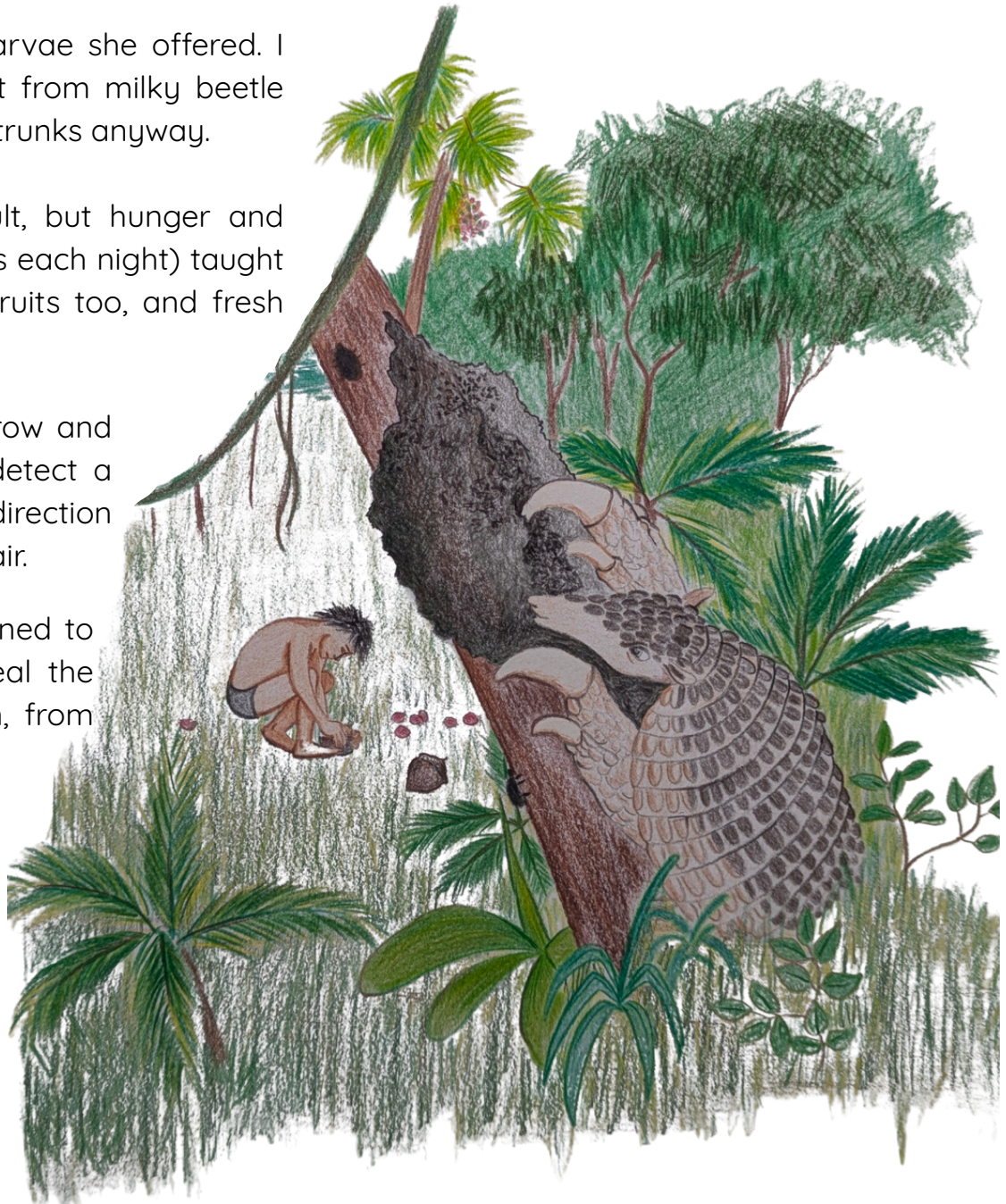
It wasn't strange for me to eat the larvae she offered. I was accustomed to sucking the meat from milky beetle larvae harvested from seeds and tree trunks anyway.

Termites and ants were more difficult, but hunger and practice (we ate for many, many hours each night) taught me quickly. There were good forest fruits too, and fresh water to drink.

At dusk, I would come out of the burrow and sniff for many minutes, straining to detect a dangerous scent, understanding the direction of the wind, feeling the moisture in the air.

When we went back in to sleep, I learned to kick the earth out behind me and seal the entrance of our hole. I felt safer then, from the big cats that prowled at night.

I began to feel at home with my maroro-mother and she cared for me as her own child.



We were almost always alone. We never saw another maroro, though sometimes we used their vacant sleeping holes. Occasionally we would come across other creatures who had taken shelter in my maroro-mother's old burrows.

I learned to recognise the strong smell of the bush hogs, which slept in large groups at the entrance of the hole, rolling in the sand pile and digging up the soft earth.



Sometimes the burrow would have a new family living inside - a pair of sokoru and their two young, or a smaller armadillo and her litter of identical quadruplets.

Once we were greeted by a pack of niinito which rushed out, snarling at us, and then scampered away.

Eventually I forgot my old life, but my old life did not forget me.

# Captured

My parents had returned home late and immediately began to search. But how could they find me? I was sleeping deep in the earth, with only armadillo footprints leading to me.

My family searched for many days, even though they feared a jaguar had taken me. One day, a hunter discovered small human footprints between the fresh prints of a giant armadillo.

My father could hardly believe it, but he went to the Piaiman, who confirmed it – the lost child was alive and living as a maroro.

That night, my family and the villagers formed a search party. All night the men and women walked through the forest, tracking the maroro. They found her prints in the soft mud where we had dug for water, they found her deep claw marks on hollowed out termite nests, and they followed her long, scaled tail tracks across the floor of the forest.

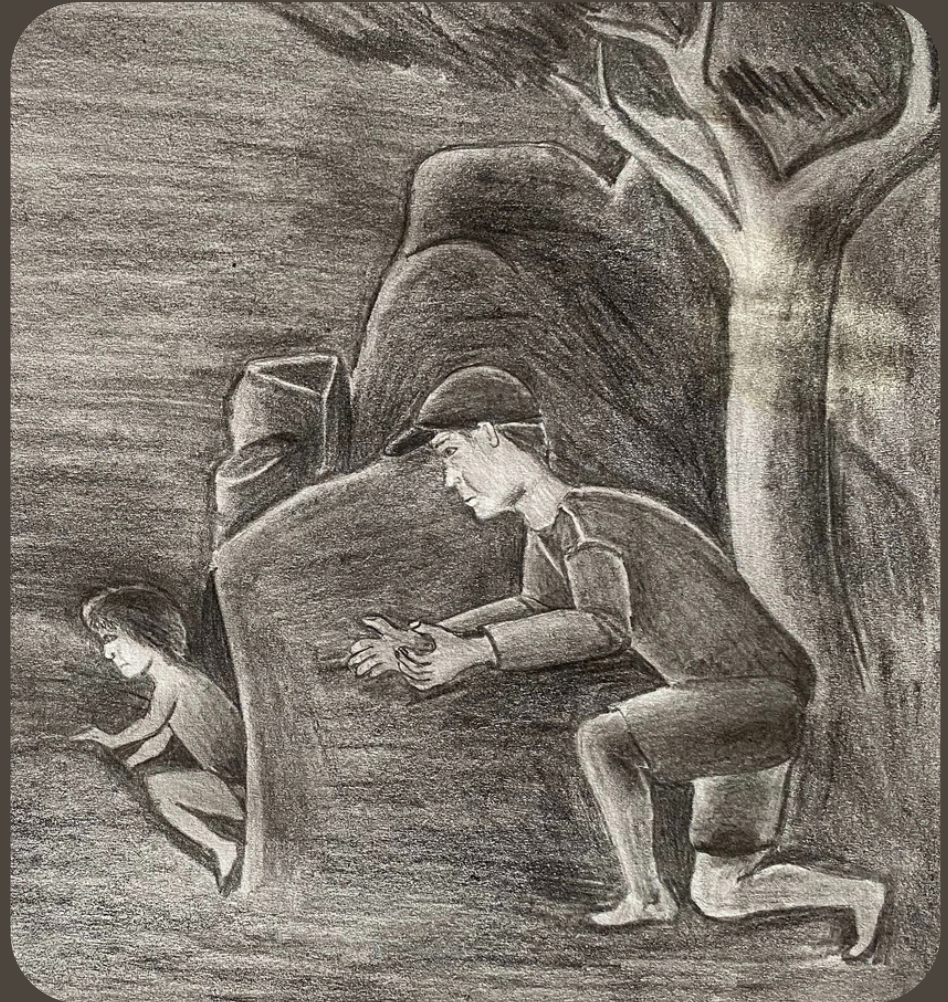


All night, my maroro-mother tramped through the forest, with me on her back. Towards dawn we came to our mountainside burrow. But the search party found us between the boulders. They had been moving stealthily, ensuring that their scent drifted away from us. Upon seeing me, they forgot their caution, shouting and waving in excitement. Startled and afraid, I dashed for my burrow and crawled deep, deep inside.

We stayed inside for two days and two nights, too afraid to leave even to drink water. But finally, when I could not suffer my thirst anymore, I crawled from the hole into the moonlit night. Everything seemed safe and quiet.

My maroro-mother came next. We sniffed the air and cautiously moved out.

All at once there was an explosion of sound and movement – I screamed and bit at arms that grabbed and pulled at me, but I couldn't struggle free.



I was caught and carried by my weeping parents, but all I could do was cry for my maroro-mother: I already had the spirit of the giant armadillo.

They said I was changing into an armadillo, with scales growing at my knees and elbows. The Piaiman worked on me for many weeks with prayers and rituals, until he changed my mind back into that of a human. Finally, I knew my parents and I returned to them. They taught me how to be a boy again: how to think like a boy, how to walk on my two legs, how to eat human food, how to see in the sunshine.



From that time, I had my name Kapashi Pakizon, 'Rider of the Armadillo'. But although I would often dream of her, I never again saw the maroro who had been my mother.

I never forgot the strength of the spirit of the armadillo. As a man, I taught my children about the maroro. I taught them that maroro is the grandfather of all the armadillos. Maroro is not a predator or a kanaima who wishes ill for people who respect him. Instead, the maroro is an aid who helps us when we know how to call on him.

I held my sons' hands as we planted cassava with the old maroro claw, chanting a song and blowing into the claw. We called on the spirit of the maroro which makes the cassava grow as big as the armadillo himself.

*Wa paopan an, wa wunu,*

*Wa dapaapan nii, wa kunuuan nii  
maroro ati.*

*Wa pootan ũbazu wadapan  
ũdoranaa kaminkautan wa wunu  
katuun,*

*Na'ap maroro kawan tu'buzukida.  
Kaipa'a iparadanaa:*

*Maroro maroraa, maroro  
maroraapan,*

*Maroro maroran, maroro  
maroraapan*

*Maroro maroraa, maroro  
maroraapan.*



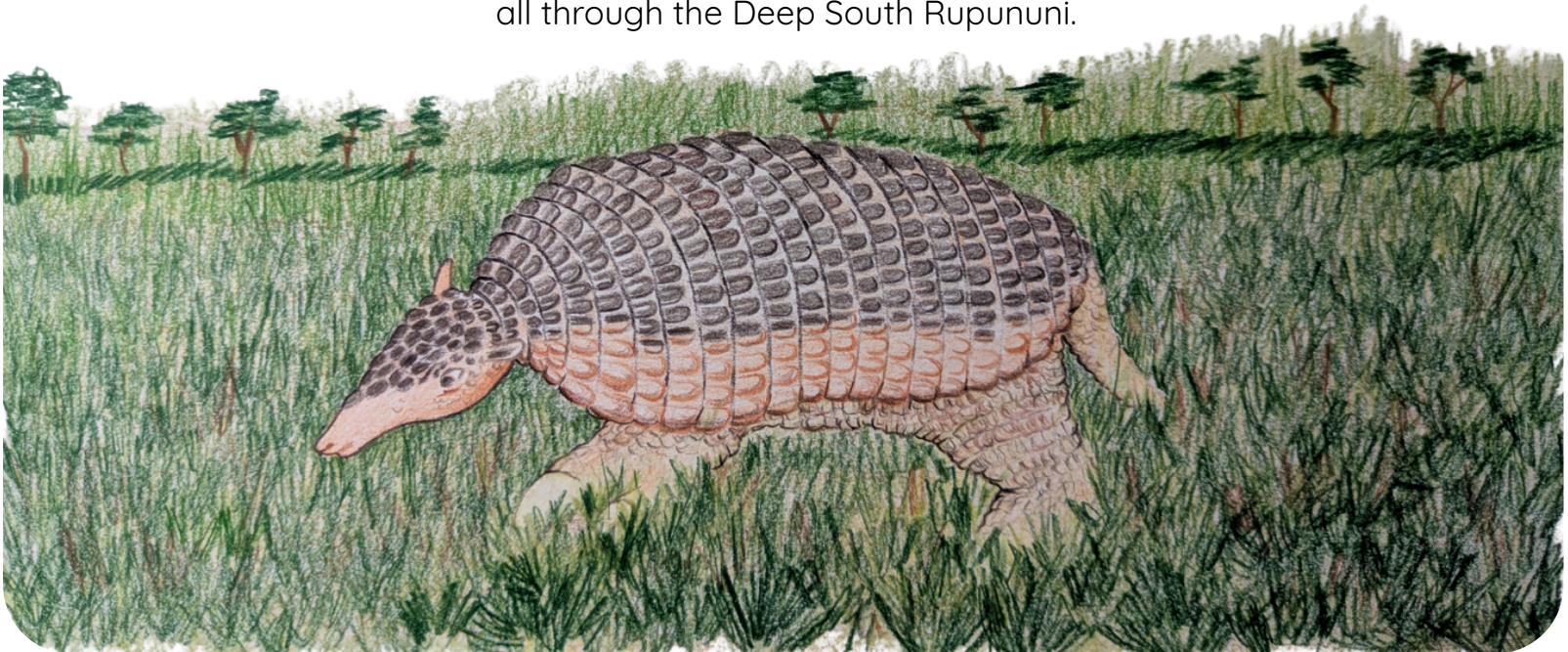
I called my children over at the start of rainy season when I saw the maroro coming into the savannah. We say the savannah is her farm, and she comes out to plant her corn and show us this will be a productive year.

I called on the maroro to help when a child was sick:

*Koraidoona karinan an maroro dorona zamotan an nuzu.*

*Õgaru wuru'u maroro min tominkiiziz. Tarata'azokarawuzu mani imidi ka'azoiti, mazan kamain nao nii õparaubaran kubu kidi, kaziidaru, atamun orodo kamain daun õzarobi'ian õkorin kodichi kizi nii. Õgaru wuru'u dakotina'oraza maroro mintominkizi, wa dauniinao dakotan nii maroro mintominkizzi.*

Most of all, I told my story. It is still known and told today by my children and grandchildren who live all through the Deep South Rupununi.



## Glossary of Wapichan (W) and other words used in this book

**Farine** n: staple food of the Rupununi. This grain-like meal is made at home in a complex process that turns poisonous cassava with a short shelf-life into a safe and long-lasting staple.

**Jumbie** n: a type of spirit or demon in Guyanese folklore and belief.

**Kanaima** n: a term used in Guyana for a person using or manipulating demonic forces.

**Kapashi** (W) n: general word for any one of the four armadillo species in the South Rupununi (say: ka PASH).

**Kapashi pakizon** (W) n: rider of the armadillo (say: ka PASH pak ZRUN).

**Kari / Parakari** n: a fermented alcoholic drink made from cassava root.

**Kokerite** n: Guyanese name for *Attalea maripa*, an important palm tree native to Guyana's forests. Its leaves are used for thatched roofs and walls, its fruit is food for birds and people, and its seeds provide a home for larvae used as fishing bait.

**Maroro** (W) n: (say: ma ROAR). *Priodontes maximus*, the giant armadillo, is by far the largest armadillo species in the world. It can weigh in excess of 30kg, with a nose to tail length of approximately 150cm.

**Matapee** n: a long, woven strainer used to squeeze cyanide-rich juice from the native bitter cassava root which is the staple crop of the Rupununi.

**Mukru** n: native vine used to weave important objects in the home, such as sifters, matapees and baskets.

**Niinito** (W) n: (say: niin it) *Galictis vittate*, the greater grison, is a badger-like animal with webbed feet and claws.

**Piaiman** n: also known as a shaman or medicine man or woman. This person plays a central roll in the spiritual, medicinal and educational life of an Indigenous community.

**Sokoru** (W) n: (say: suk KOR) *Dasyprocta leporine*, the red-rumped agouti, is a common medium-sized rodent feeding on seeds, fruits and nuts of the forest.

**Tapioca** n: granules of starch extracted from cassava, used in sweet and savoury dishes.



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