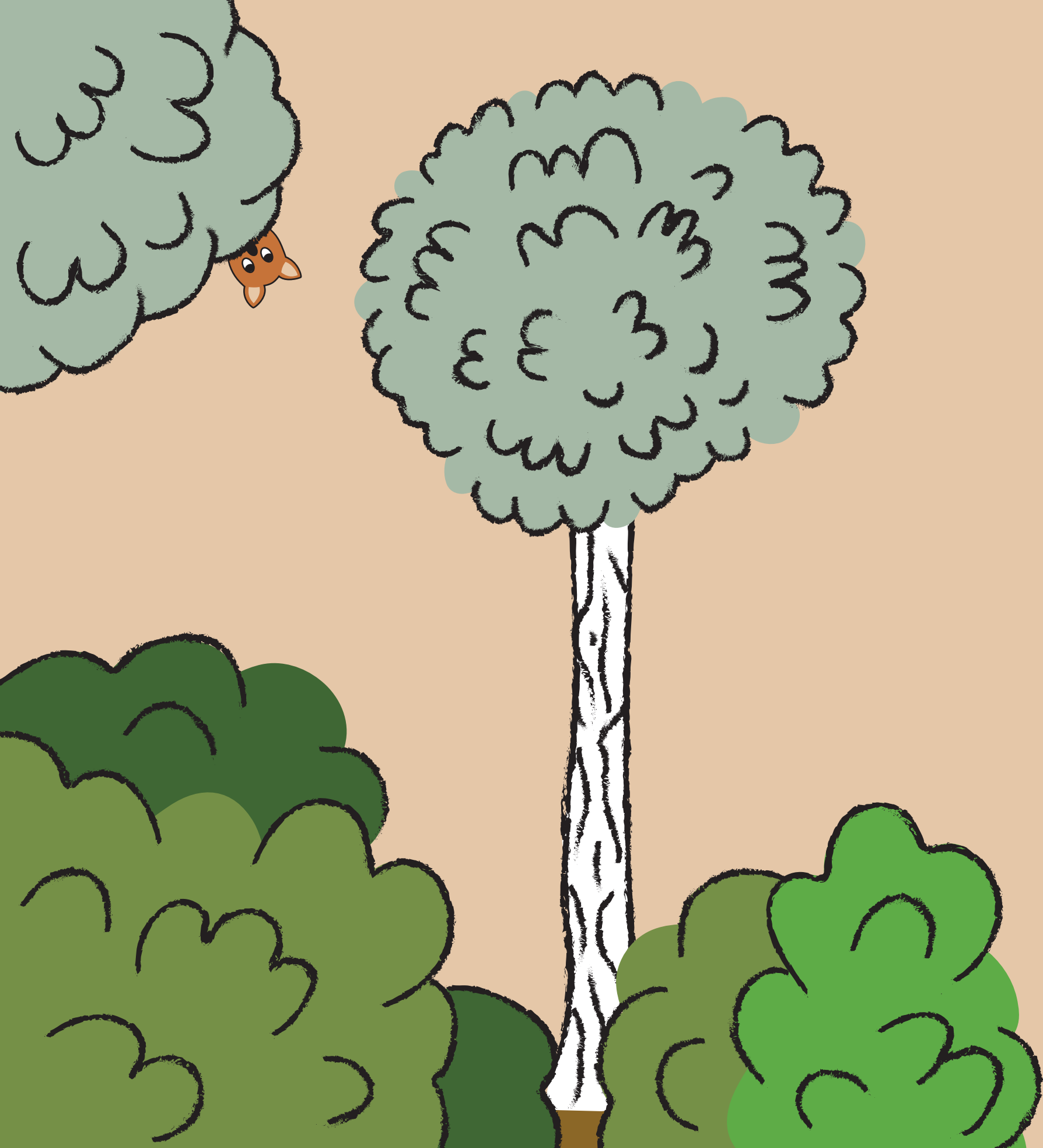




The Squirrel

JOANA PEREIRA



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Playing
with
the
Trouble



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Since I was a little girl, I've wanted to contribute to creating a better world.
But what does a better world truly mean? For whom? And at whose expense?
Who am I to determine on my own the kind of impact the world needs?

The Squirrel

Once upon a time, there was a squirrel on a quest to find the special acorn. This acorn, said to hold immense power, could change the world for the better. She searched along with her fellow squirrels. They all had the same brown coat, tufted tails, and big eyes. They scurried across the forest floor in the same way, almost like a mirrored reflection of one another.

But as her journey began, doubts crept in.

"Am I even heading in the right direction?"

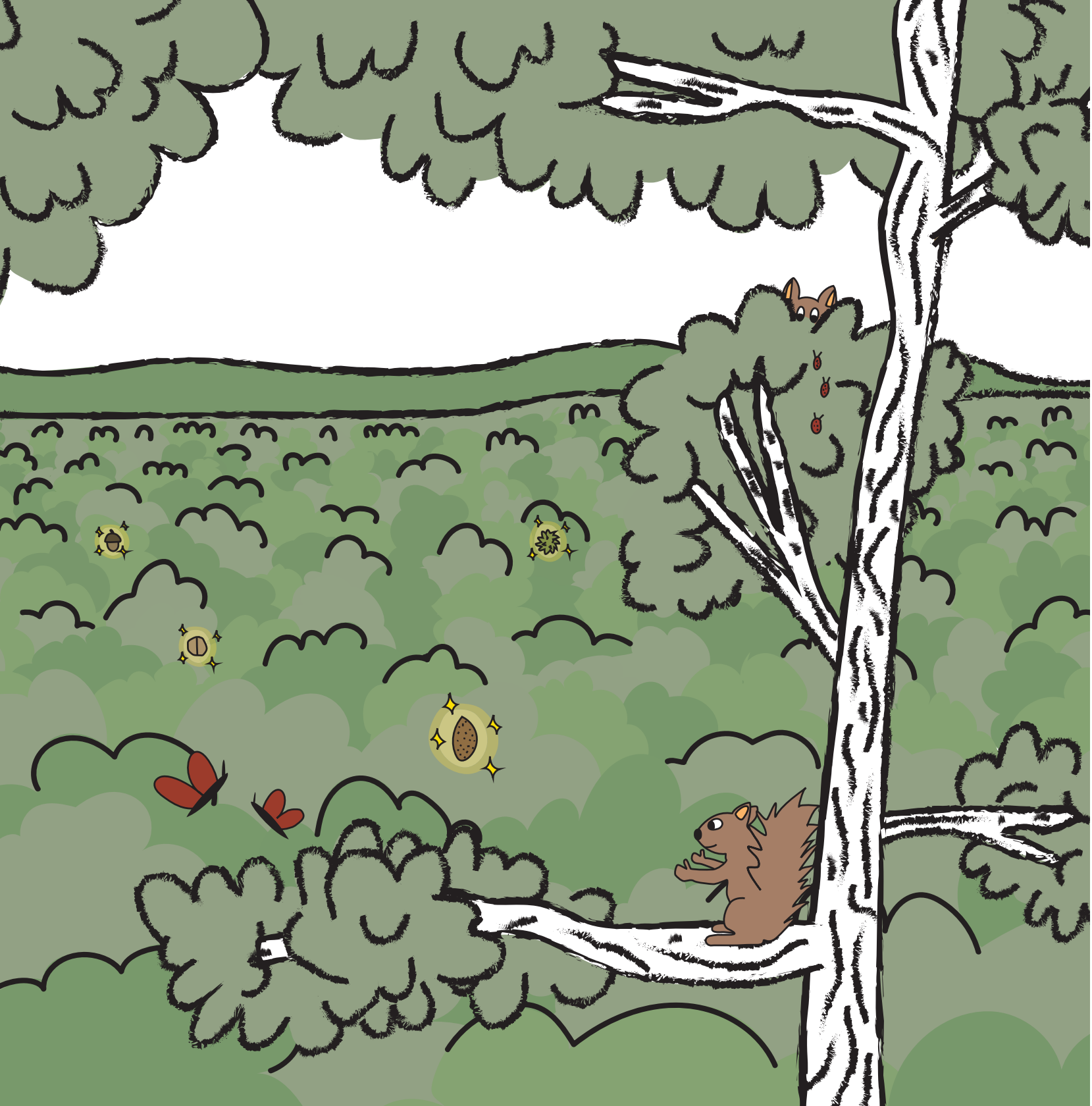
How could she be certain? Just then, a golden eagle swooped low over her head, its wings slicing through the air in the opposite direction of the squirrel. The squirrel paused, tilting its head curiously, its big eyes glinting with a strange sense of wonder. She had never seen such a creature before.

"That's odd," she thought, "Why do we all look the same? Are we the only ones seeking this acorn?"

She began to wonder if this was the right place to find what she was looking for.

"I'm certain there's more to the world beyond this sameness... More to explore, more to discover."







She strays off from the path all the other squirrels were taking, and a more colorful environment appears. This new place was alive with diversity, teeming with different species of animals and an abundance of flora. It felt vibrant, inclusive, and right — as if she had found the perfect setting for her journey.

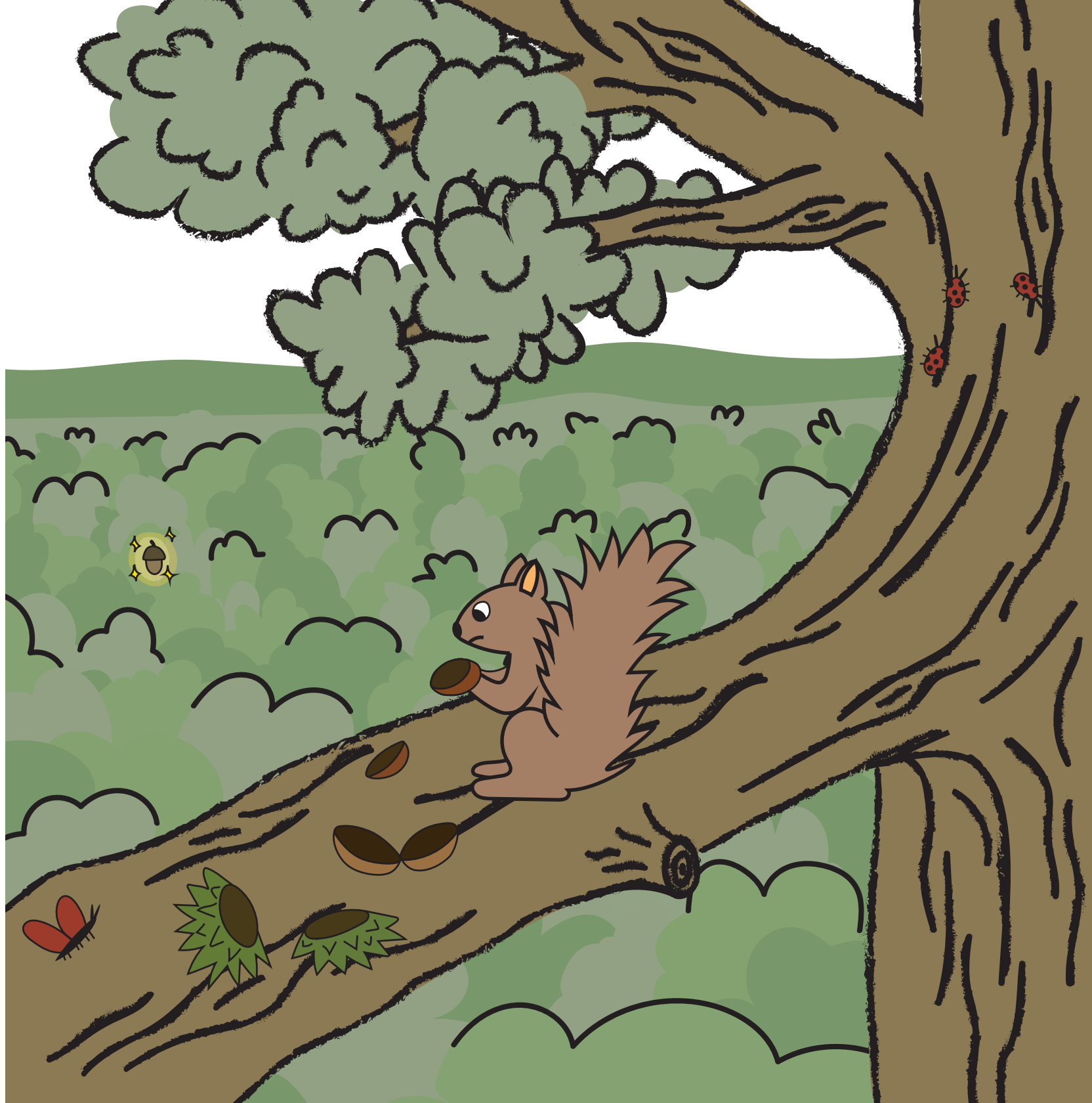
"Yes! I can feel it... I must be getting closer and closer to the special acorn!"

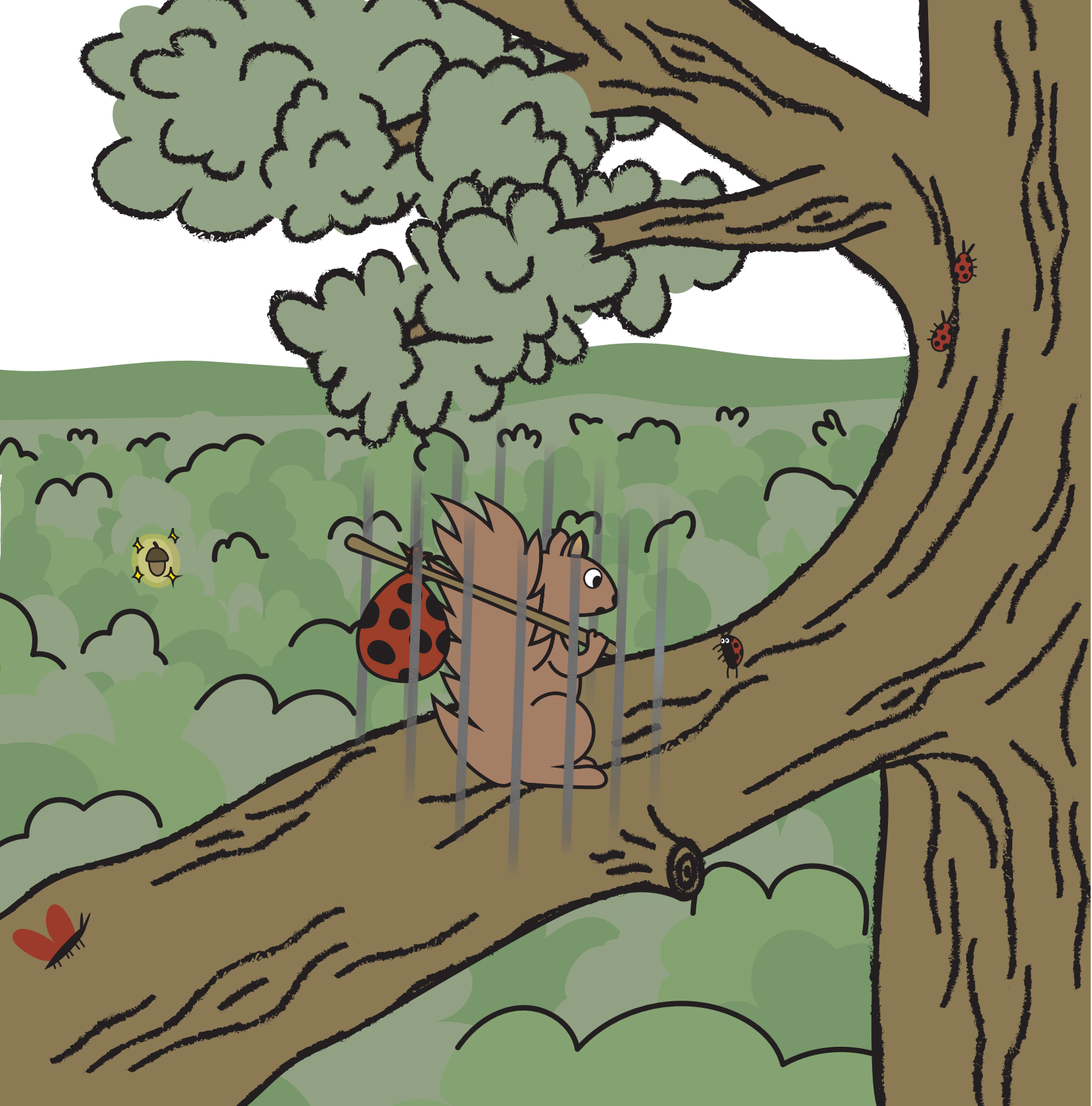
"Whoa... the food here looks incredible. And there are so many options to choose from..."

But soon, she realized something unsettling: the food she was eagerly consuming was empty. The environment, once seeming full of life and variety, now appeared hollow and repetitive.

"Ahh... they're all empty. How did I not see this coming?"

Despite realizing the lack of nourishment, she noticed that other animals continued to collect the empty shells. Following suit, she decided to take some along, filling her pockets as she continued her journey.





Just when she wanted to set off again, the squirrel encountered a cheerful and curious animal companion.

"Hello there! How far are you on your journey?" asked her new animal friend.

"Honestly, I'm not sure... I thought I'd be much closer by now, but it still feels so far away," the squirrel replied.

"Hmm, don't you think this cage you're carrying might be slowing you down?"

The squirrel looked around. "A cage? What cage? I only just noticed that I've been lugging around these empty nuts... which have definitely been weighing me down. But a cage? I don't see any cage. Is it stuck to my tail or something?"

"I can see it. Look closely..."

In that moment, she finally recognized the invisible cage that had been trapping her, holding her back all along.

"Wow... How did I not notice this before?!" she exclaimed.

"I need to be vigilant. There could be more invisible cages like this on my path ahead."

As soon as she acknowledged the cage, the cage started to disappear day after day slowly, until it vanished. And with its disappearance, something shifted deep within her — and in the world around her too.

She felt lighter, as if a burden had been lifted. The forest was brighter, the animals livelier, and the trees soared higher, striving to touch the sky. For the first time, she felt truly ready to continue her journey toward the special acorn.







But then, an unsettling feeling crept in. This time, it wasn't about the environment around her, but something stirring within.

"I'm feeling so many emotions at once... It's overwhelming. And these feelings are pulling me in opposite directions.

Excited, my pink part urges me to press on, convinced this is the way forward. But my red part hesitates, whispering that perhaps this isn't the right path. Scared, my yellow part wants to go back to where I came from. I feel torn between them.

I need to stay rational, calm, and objective if I'm going to figure out how to reach the acorn. After all, no one would take me seriously—or want to join me—if I decide based on my emotions."

A new companion appeared suddenly, interrupting her swirling thoughts. There was something familiar about this creature, a similarity she couldn't quite place.

They said: "But aren't you an emotional being, filled with many different squirrels inside you? Wouldn't it be better to try to understand them and bring them along on your journey? I see so many versions of you trying to help out, yet you don't seem to listen to them..."

The squirrel felt agitated. "I know... but I've always thought this journey wasn't the place for them. I believed I needed to be focused and singular to reach my goal, not fragmented into multiple versions of myself that all want different things."







The squirrel pauses, taking a deep breath. She decides to continue her journey by carrying and embracing these multiple shades, finding a newfound acceptance of her inner diversity.

After some deep reflection, squirrel decided to embrace the diversity within her. She realized that her emotions, once seen as distractions, could actually be powerful allies. She welcomed each part of herself on the journey, recognizing that every "squirrel" within her might have a role to play.

"Maybe... each part of me has its own unique contribution to make. I might need every one of them as I continue forward."

But then, a deeper hesitant voice surfaced, pulling her thoughts in a new direction.

"What will really happen once I open the acorn? Who is it meant to benefit — just the squirrels, or the entire forest? Have I ever considered what the beings living in the acorn tree think about this quest?"

I've been so fixated on reaching the acorn that I never stopped to ask the other creatures if they know the way, or even if this acorn is something they desire too."

And then it hit her: could the acorn be her biggest cage of all? A symbol of a singular, narrow goal that has kept her from seeing the bigger picture?

Squirrel discovered that the true beauty of her journey was in the connections she made, the wisdom she gained from others, and the shared experiences along the way. She realized that the acorn might not be at the top of a high tree, but rather hidden inside every individual she met.

With a newfound sense of curiosity, she embraced this new kind of journey, open to learning from others and no longer assuming she knew what the acorn looked like or where it was.

"Maybe the real treasure isn't a singular, magical acorn, but the way I've traveled — the interactions, the shared moments, the growth. Perhaps the most important part isn't the destination, but the journey itself."

And with that realization, the squirrel let go of the narrow path she had set for herself, embracing the vibrant, interconnected world around her, ready for whatever the journey would bring next.



Author Biography

I am a dedicated conservationist deeply interested in the (co-)design of collaborative conservation strategies for human-wildlife coexistence (HWC), merging academic insights with practical implementation. I did my PhD at the Center for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Change (CE3C) from University of Lisbon about human-wildlife interactions and livelihood vulnerability in Mozambican protected areas. Now, I am working at BirdLife International in São Tomé and Príncipe helping to implement conservation strategies to protect the rich endemism of the islands.



The Squirrel story was a deep process of reflection that came out from the course "Transformative Research for Sustainability Challenges", co-organized by Wageningen University, Utrecht University, University of Twente, and Stockholm Resilience Centre.

- Joana Pereira

Afterword

As I reflected about my role as researcher, I came to realize that my narrative was overly general, methodical, and filled with hollow concepts. These concepts, so broadly applied, had lost their meaning, yet I found myself relying on these meaningless concepts to give purpose to my research, rather than deeply reflecting on what they truly meant and how I wanted to apply them.

This realization compelled me to confront an uncomfortable truth: I need to define these concepts for myself and use them with clarity and transparency. This means stepping away from autopilot and taking full ownership and accountability for the frameworks and terminology I use to describe my work. It also means challenging the ways I've undermined my own research by focusing solely on the overarching goal of creating impact. Too often, we operate within narrow parameters, unaware of how much we're excluding—and the real danger lies in failing to recognize these limitations.

Taking the time to reflect on and acknowledge the frames through which we conduct our research is more critical than producing any tangible outcome. Moving forward, I want to prioritize the processes through which I structure and conduct my research. These processes, I believe, are the outcomes that truly matter. When the processes themselves are transformative, the resulting outcomes will naturally reflect that transformation.

Emotions are an integral part of the research process as well. They must be acknowledged and openly shared, not concealed behind a veneer of “objectivity” and “neutrality.” Ironically, hiding these emotions undermines the very objectivity and neutrality we aim to achieve. If we truly want to address researcher bias, we must first admit its existence and dismantle the binary thinking that pits objectivity against subjectivity.

Through the story of *The Squirrel*, I’ve attempted to share a part of this new narrative. It’s a story about shifting perspectives, embracing complexity, and committing to a more intentional and reflective research process.