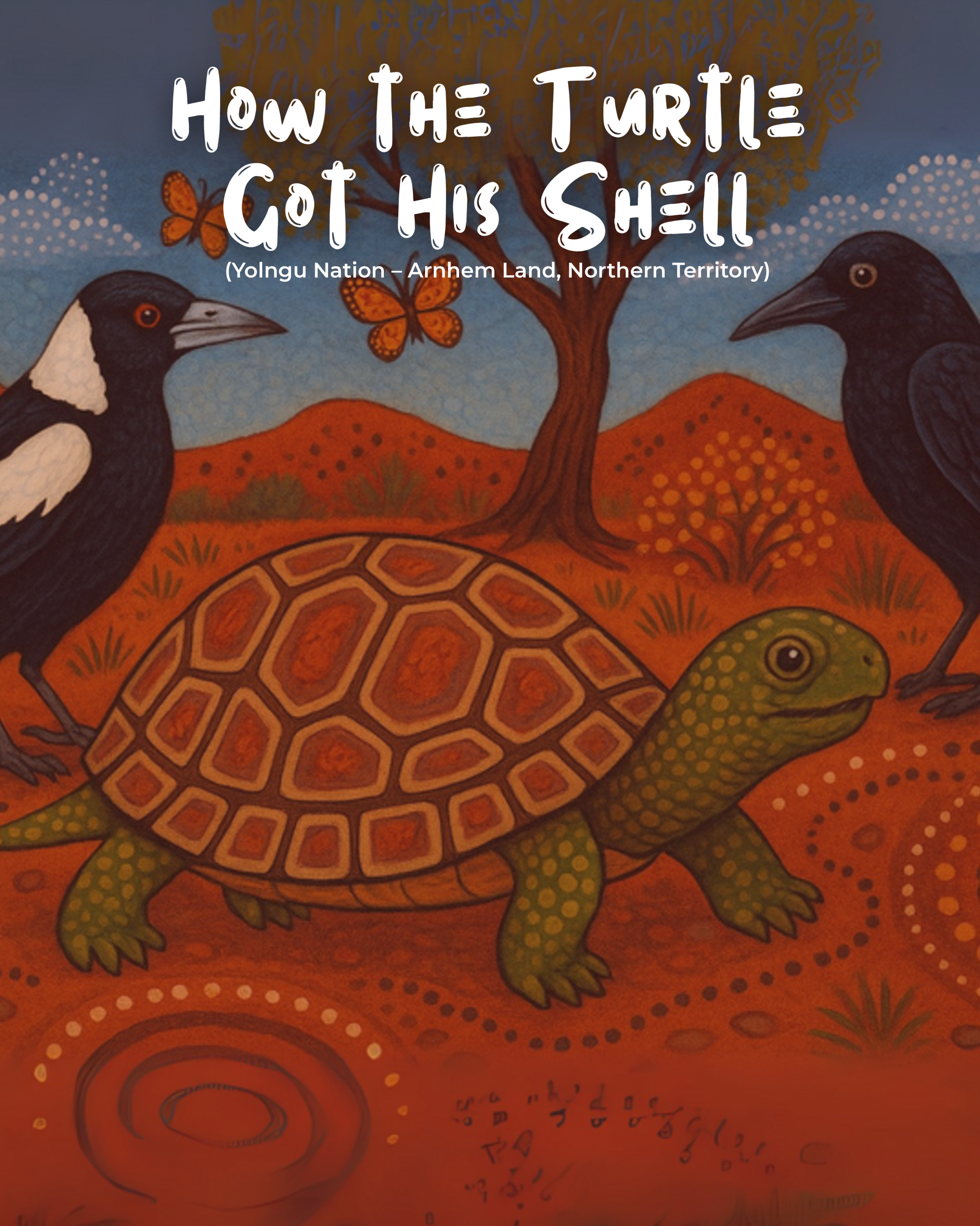
How The Turtle Got His Shell

(Yolngu Nation – Arnhem Land, Northern Territory)



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A long time ago, in the Dreaming, Turtle did not look the way we know him today. He was slow, soft-backed, and small. His skin was tender, and whenever the sun grew hot or the wind blew strong, he had no shelter.

Still, Turtle loved the rivers. He would wade in the cool shallows, catching fish when he could, and resting in the sand when the day grew long.

But Turtle had a greedy streak. One morning, when the birds came down to the water's edge with fish they had caught, Turtle crept closer.

"Those fish look tasty," he said softly. "Perhaps they will not miss just one."

He darted forward and snatched a fish from the pile. Magpie swooped low with a cry. "Thief! That was ours!" Crow flapped his black wings. "Greedy Turtle! Return it!"

But Turtle only scurried to the sand and swallowed his prize.



The birds take revenge

The next day, Turtle crept back. Once again he stole a fish, and once again the birds grew angry.

"We will not let him trick us again," Magpie muttered. So when Turtle tried a third time, the birds swooped down together. Kookaburra dived with his sharp beak, Cockatoo struck with his wings, and Crow pecked at Turtle's back.

"Ouch! Stop! Leave me be!" cried Turtle. He ran for the water, but he was slow, and the birds were swift. They struck again and again until his back was sore and bleeding.

At last he slipped beneath the river's surface and hid in the reeds, trembling.

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The spirits take pity

High above, the ancestral spirits had watched. They saw Turtle's greed, but they also saw his suffering. "This little one has learned his lesson," they said. "But he cannot survive without protection."

So they decided to help.

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When he climbed out of the water, he tapped it with his claws. Tock, tock, tock. It was solid as stone.

Turtle's new gift

The next day, Turtle returned to the riverbank. The birds saw him and swooped again. But when their beaks struck, they met only the shell.

"Ouch!" cried Magpie, pulling back his sore beak. Crow tapped the shell with his own. "It is useless. We cannot hurt him now."

Kookaburra laughed and flew away, and the others followed.

Turtle smiled quietly. "I shall no longer fear you. The spirits have given me my gift."

From then on, Turtle carried his shell wherever he went. When danger came, he tucked his head and legs inside, safe within his own little home.

