

A vibrant illustration of a young boy with dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt with a pink floral design, climbing a large tree. He is smiling and has his arms outstretched. The tree has thick brown branches and dense green foliage. In the background, a large, bright white shape, possibly a waterfall or a cave entrance, is visible against a soft, hazy sky. The foreground is filled with various green plants, including ferns and broad-leafed species, creating a sense of a lush, hidden forest.

# Ozhudurukka Paradu Mekka

The Hidden  
Forest Creatures

This booklet is published by : Keystone Foundation  
41,111D, Groves Hill Road, Kotagiri 643217,  
The Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, India.  
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Supported by : This publication is made possible with support from  
The Wild Incubator Program (2023-24)  
by Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS), India

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Citation : Keystone Foundation (2024)  
*Ozhudurukka Paradu Mekka*. The Hidden Forest Creatures.

The title is in the Urali language, an indigenous community who reside in  
the Sathyamangalam hills where this story is based.



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First Printing : May 2024

Design at : Text & Graphics, Ooty, Ph: 9443856791

Printed at : Shri Balaji Printers, Coimbatore, Ph: 0422-4369310



# Ozhudurukka Paradu Mekka

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Forest Creatures



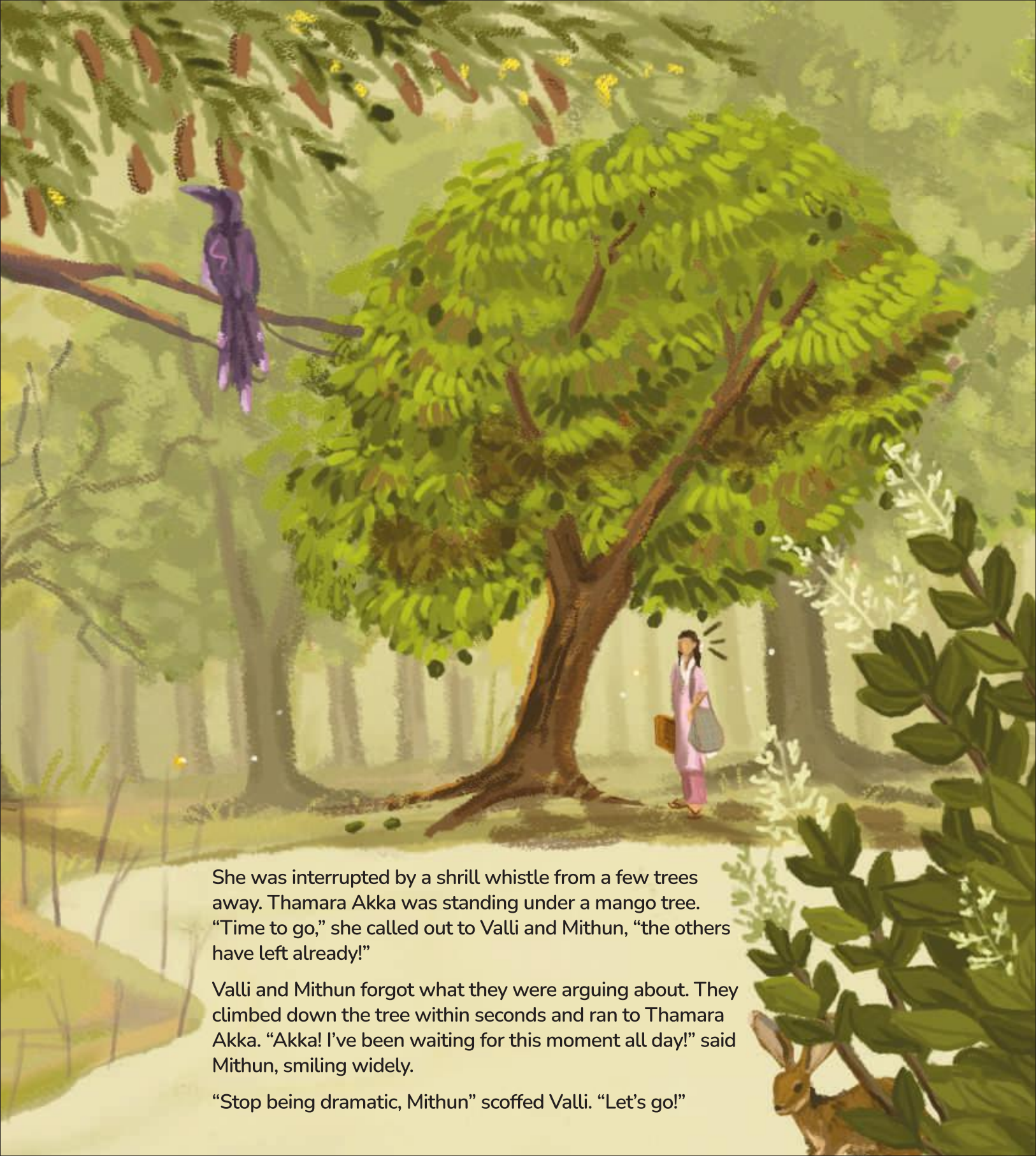


Valli was sitting on a thick branch of the tamarind tree, holding a thinner branch with both her hands.

“Let go, Mithun, I said let go!” she cried in frustration as her brother pulled on her leg from below.

“It’s almost time to go,” Mithun cried back, “come down!”


Valli pulled her leg away and stood confidently on the thick branch. “Why are you so impatient? Akka said she would call us when-”



She was interrupted by a shrill whistle from a few trees away. Thamara Akka was standing under a mango tree. "Time to go," she called out to Valli and Mithun, "the others have left already!"

Valli and Mithun forgot what they were arguing about. They climbed down the tree within seconds and ran to Thamara Akka. "Akka! I've been waiting for this moment all day!" said Mithun, smiling widely.

"Stop being dramatic, Mithun" scoffed Valli. "Let's go!"

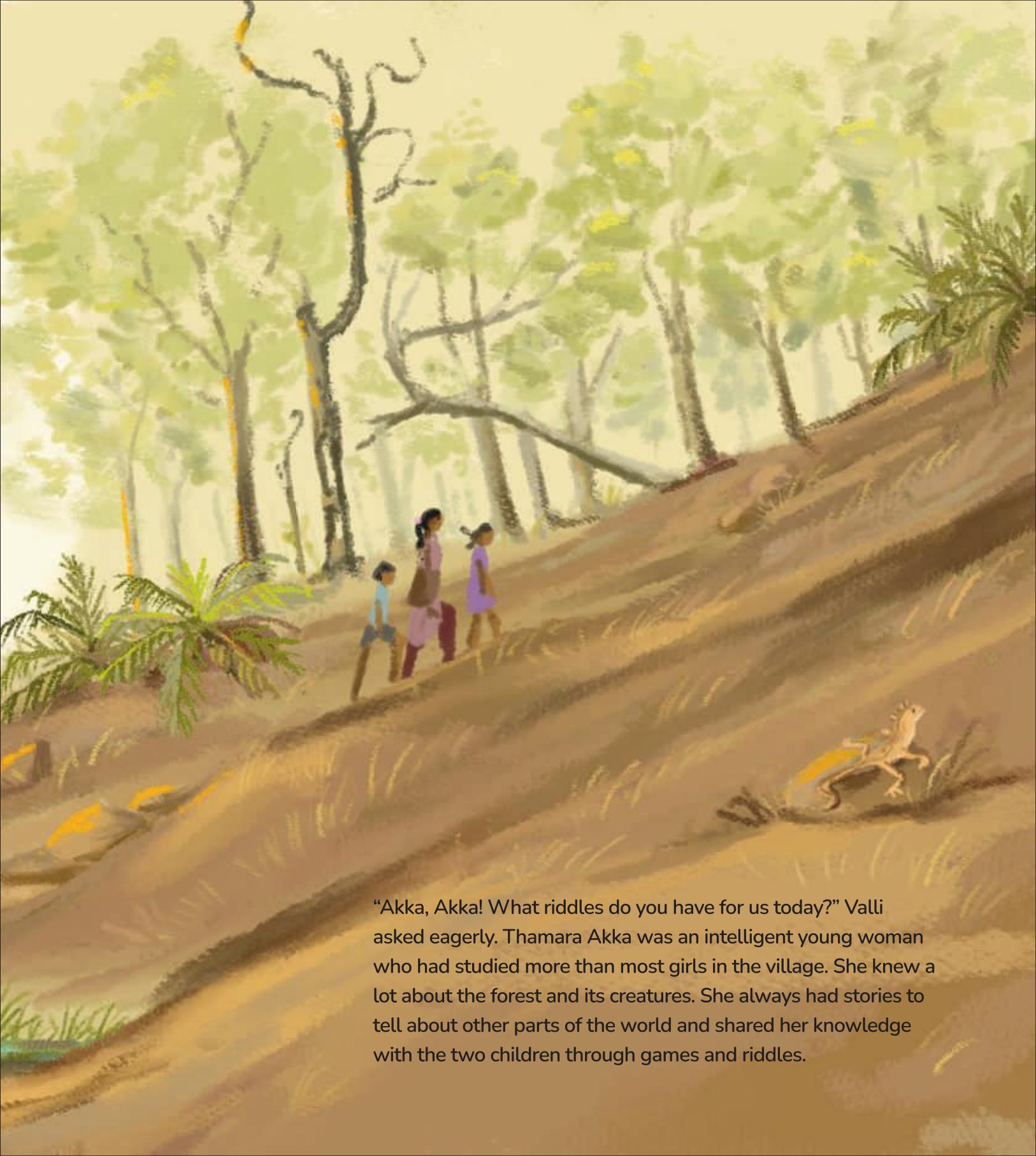


The three of them began walking together towards the forest. They walked through millet fields and said hello to their neighbours. Mithun also said hello to each buffalo they walked past, and the long-tailed shrikes that were perched on electric wires.



They walked by small ponds that were starting to fill up, and Valli counted fourteen spot-billed ducks wading in the still waters. Up ahead, a hill was coming into clear view, covered with trees and shrubs but bare and rocky at the top. Mithun tried to chase the tiny lizards he spotted as they began walking uphill.





“Akka, Akka! What riddles do you have for us today?” Valli asked eagerly. Thamara Akka was an intelligent young woman who had studied more than most girls in the village. She knew a lot about the forest and its creatures. She always had stories to tell about other parts of the world and shared her knowledge with the two children through games and riddles.

“Hmm... Let’s see,” Thamara Akka said, “You have learnt about some beautiful creatures we see around us often, haven’t you? Like the racquet-tailed drongo, the master mimic-”

“And the smart but shy mongoose,” Mithun chirped in.

“And don’t forget the spiders that play hide and seek on the trees!” said Valli.

Thamara Akka smiled, “Today’s riddles are about two wonderful creatures that hide most of the time. We don’t see them very often, but they’re always around – as we come to know through the signs they leave behind.”

“The first creature,” Akka continued, “You’ll be lucky if you see it in the forest. It has scales on its body-”

“It’s a snake! Snake!” Mithun replied in excitement.



“But it doesn’t lay eggs!” Akka laughed, and Mithun scratched his head in confusion. “It feasts on ants and termites and is often nicknamed the ‘anteater’. It lives in holes – or burrows – under rocks and mud.”

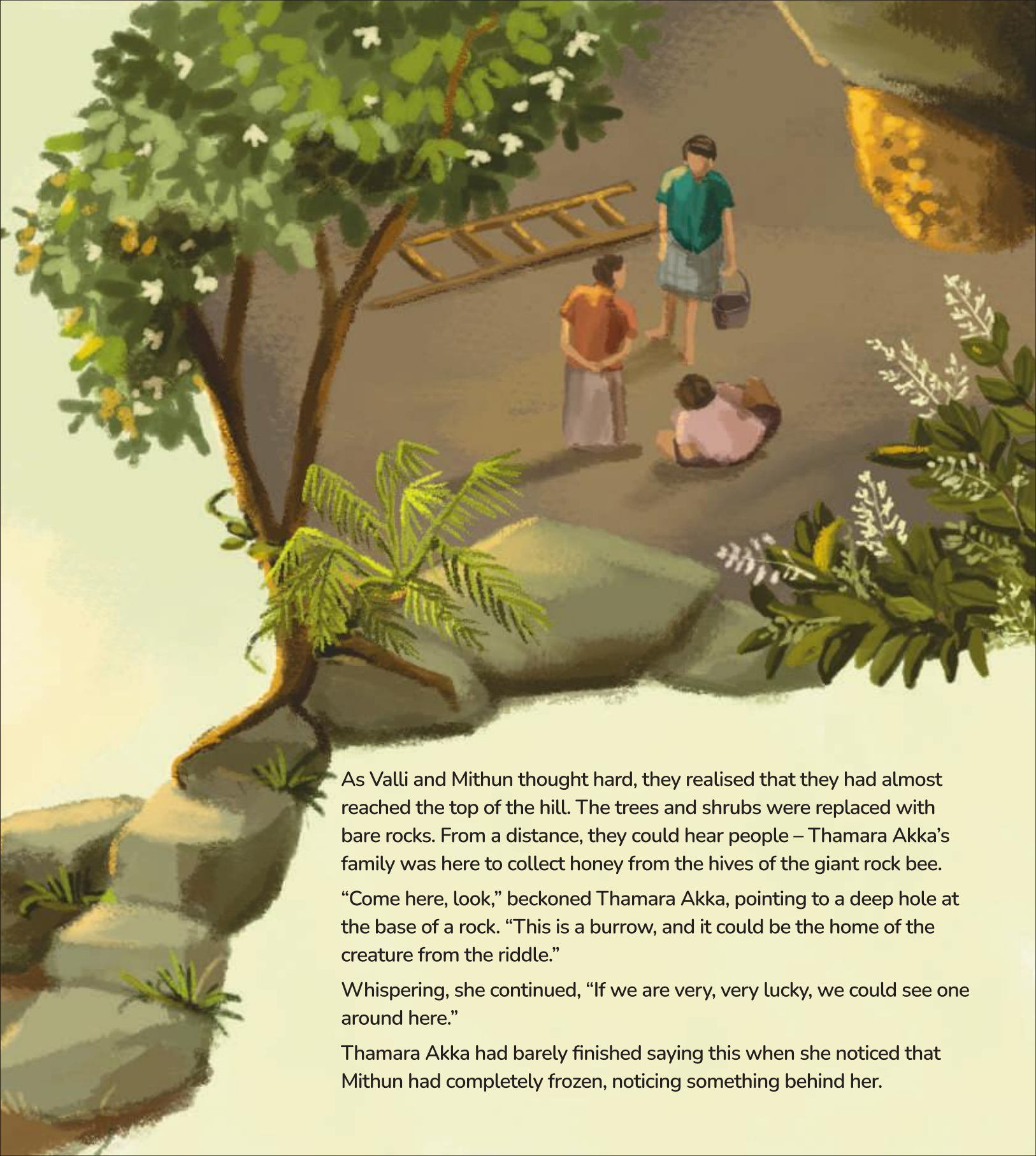
Valli was thinking hard, “Hmm... Scales... ants... Oh! I think I got it!” She imagined a scaly creature in her mind, brownish in colour and much bigger than a cat. “I forgot its name,” Valli continued, “but I know that it rolls into a ball when it feels scared! I also remember that Appa once showed me a ring made from its scales.”

Mithun was still clueless. What could this creature be?



Would you like to take a guess? Give it a try – draw this creature,  
whatever you think it may be!





As Valli and Mithun thought hard, they realised that they had almost reached the top of the hill. The trees and shrubs were replaced with bare rocks. From a distance, they could hear people – Thamara Akka’s family was here to collect honey from the hives of the giant rock bee.

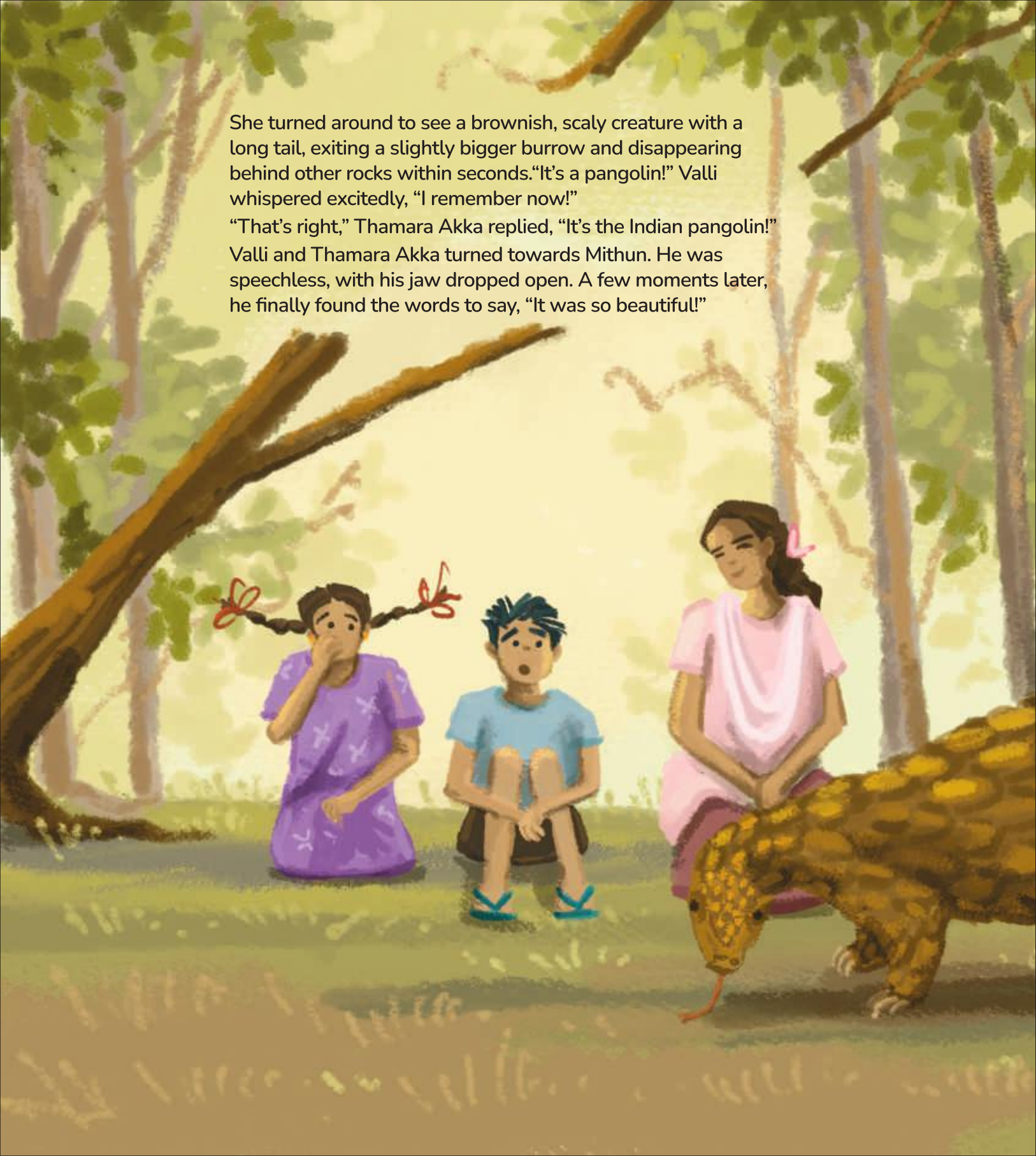
“Come here, look,” beckoned Thamara Akka, pointing to a deep hole at the base of a rock. “This is a burrow, and it could be the home of the creature from the riddle.”

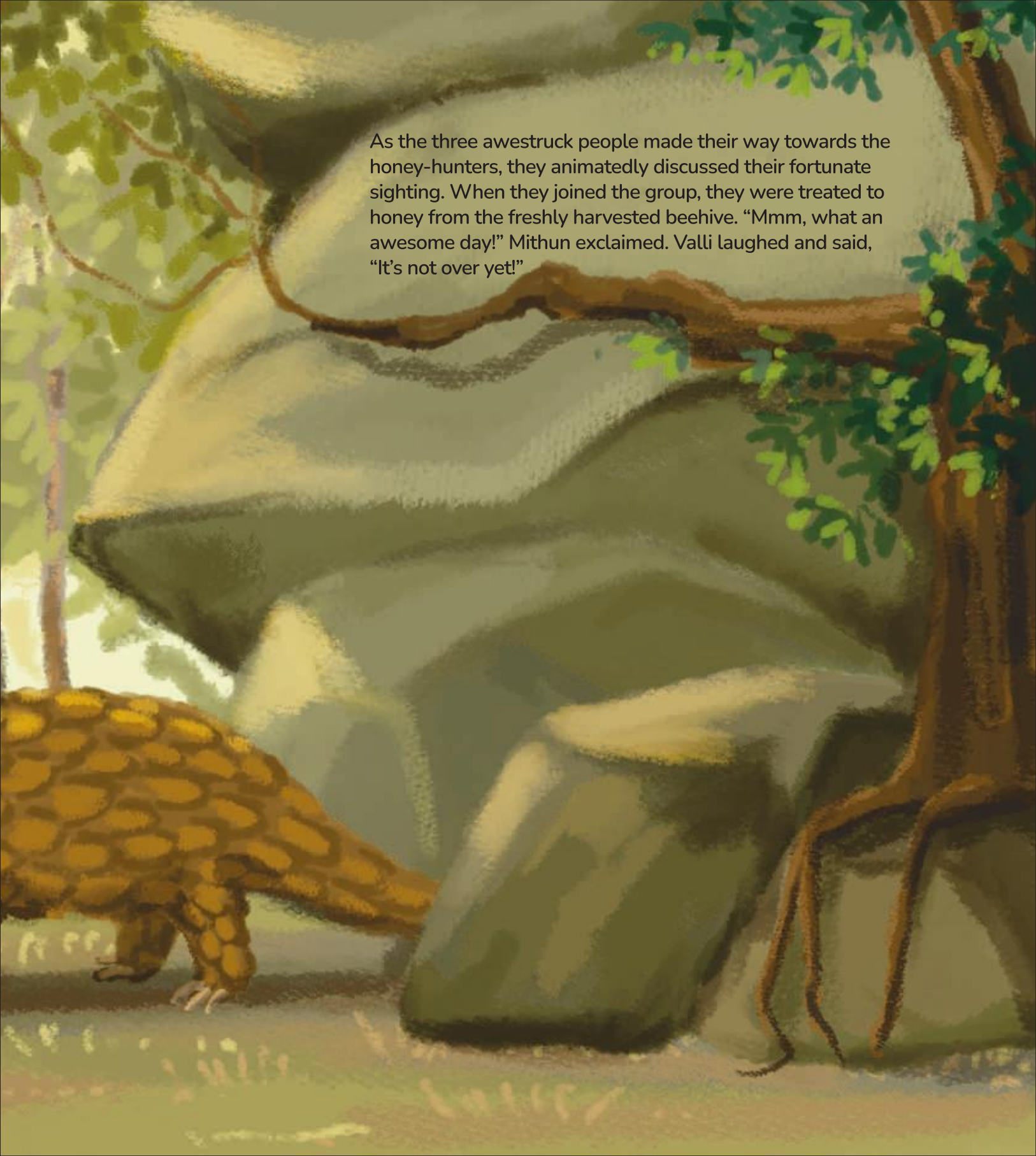
Whispering, she continued, “If we are very, very lucky, we could see one around here.”

Thamara Akka had barely finished saying this when she noticed that Mithun had completely frozen, noticing something behind her.

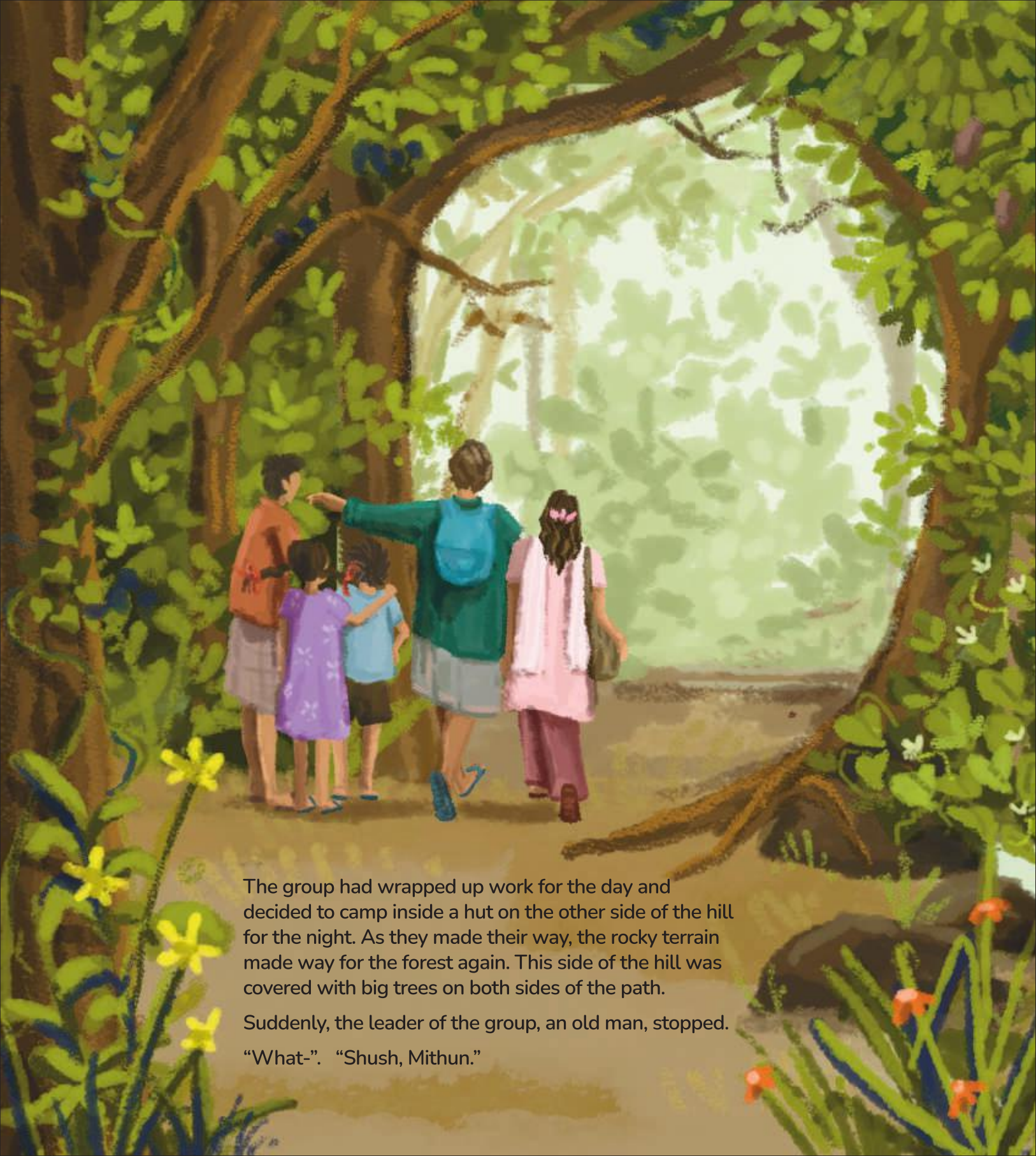
She turned around to see a brownish, scaly creature with a long tail, exiting a slightly bigger burrow and disappearing behind other rocks within seconds. "It's a pangolin!" Valli whispered excitedly, "I remember now!"

"That's right," Thamara Akka replied, "It's the Indian pangolin!" Valli and Thamara Akka turned towards Mithun. He was speechless, with his jaw dropped open. A few moments later, he finally found the words to say, "It was so beautiful!"



A painting of a large sloth hanging from a tree branch in a forest. The sloth is brown and has a long, thick body. In the foreground, a tortoise with a brown and yellow patterned shell is walking. The background shows green foliage and a large tree trunk on the right. The overall style is soft and painterly.

As the three awestruck people made their way towards the honey-hunters, they animatedly discussed their fortunate sighting. When they joined the group, they were treated to honey from the freshly harvested beehive. “Mmm, what an awesome day!” Mithun exclaimed. Valli laughed and said, “It’s not over yet!”



The group had wrapped up work for the day and decided to camp inside a hut on the other side of the hill for the night. As they made their way, the rocky terrain made way for the forest again. This side of the hill was covered with big trees on both sides of the path.

Suddenly, the leader of the group, an old man, stopped. “What-”. “Shush, Mithun.”



Everyone was still and silent. They heard a loud crack from a few metres ahead. Then, silence. A few moments later, they heard heavy footsteps and loud rustling of leaves. A large, dark creature emerged from the forest. Mithun tightly grabbed his elder sister's hand. It was an elephant!

The elephant slowly crossed the path, huffing and swaying its trunk. Valli felt seen – she was sure that the elephant knew that they were there, and was acknowledging their presence. It disappeared into the forest on the other side of the path, but the group leader did not budge. A few seconds later another elephant emerged from the woods. Valli was delighted to notice something very special. Smiling, she whispered to Mithun in his ear, “Look between the elephant's legs.” Mithun looked intently and realised there were more than four legs there. There was an elephant calf on the other side of the bigger elephant, not visible to the group.

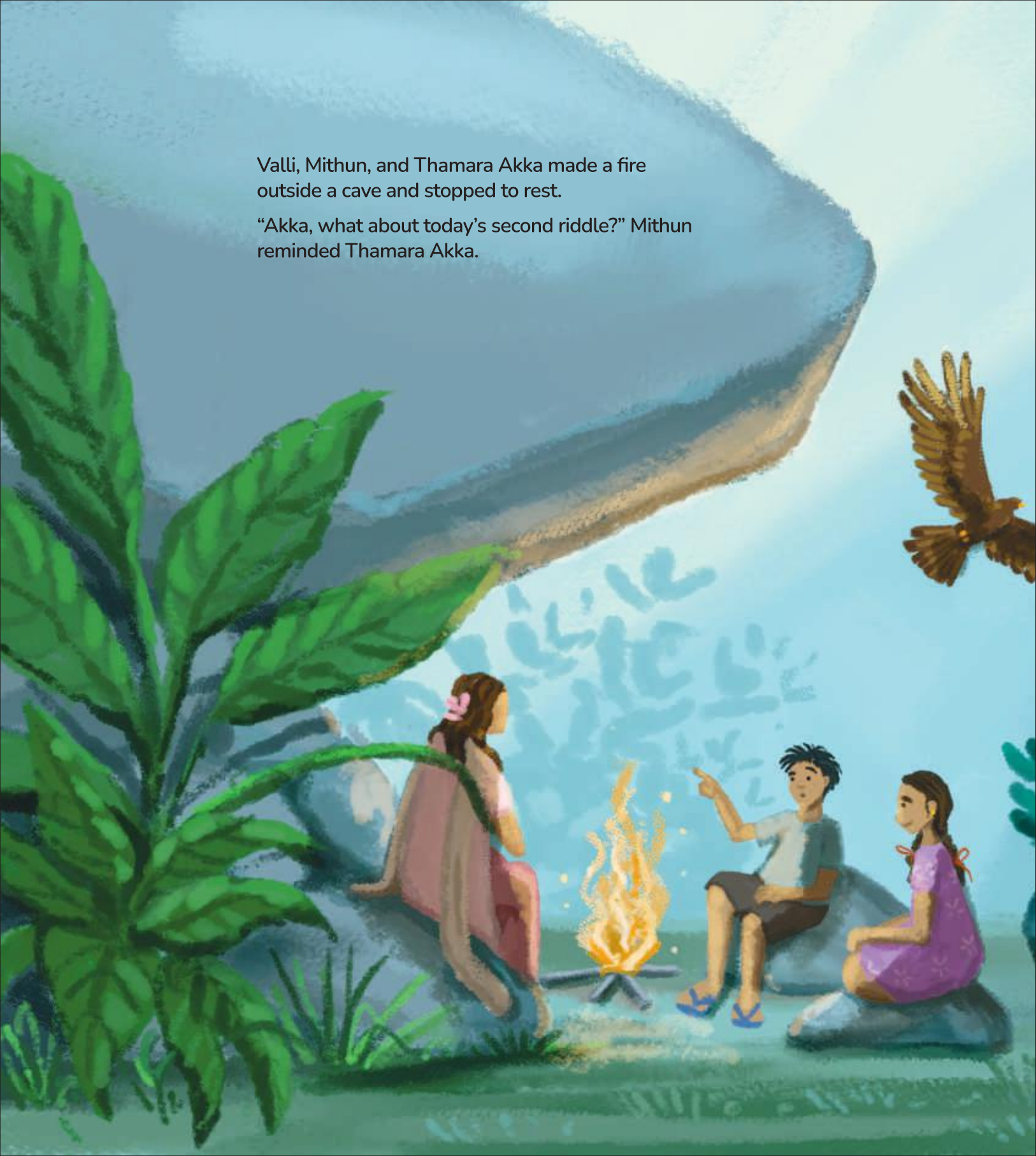
The second adult and calf also disappeared into the trees. The group waited for a few minutes until their footsteps faded away, then continued their journey. Thamara Akka looked down to check if Valli and Mithun were okay. Pleased to see their wide smiles, she said, “They won't bother us unless we bother them!”





Valli, Mithun, and Thamara Akka made a fire outside a cave and stopped to rest.

“Akka, what about today’s second riddle?” Mithun reminded Thamara Akka.



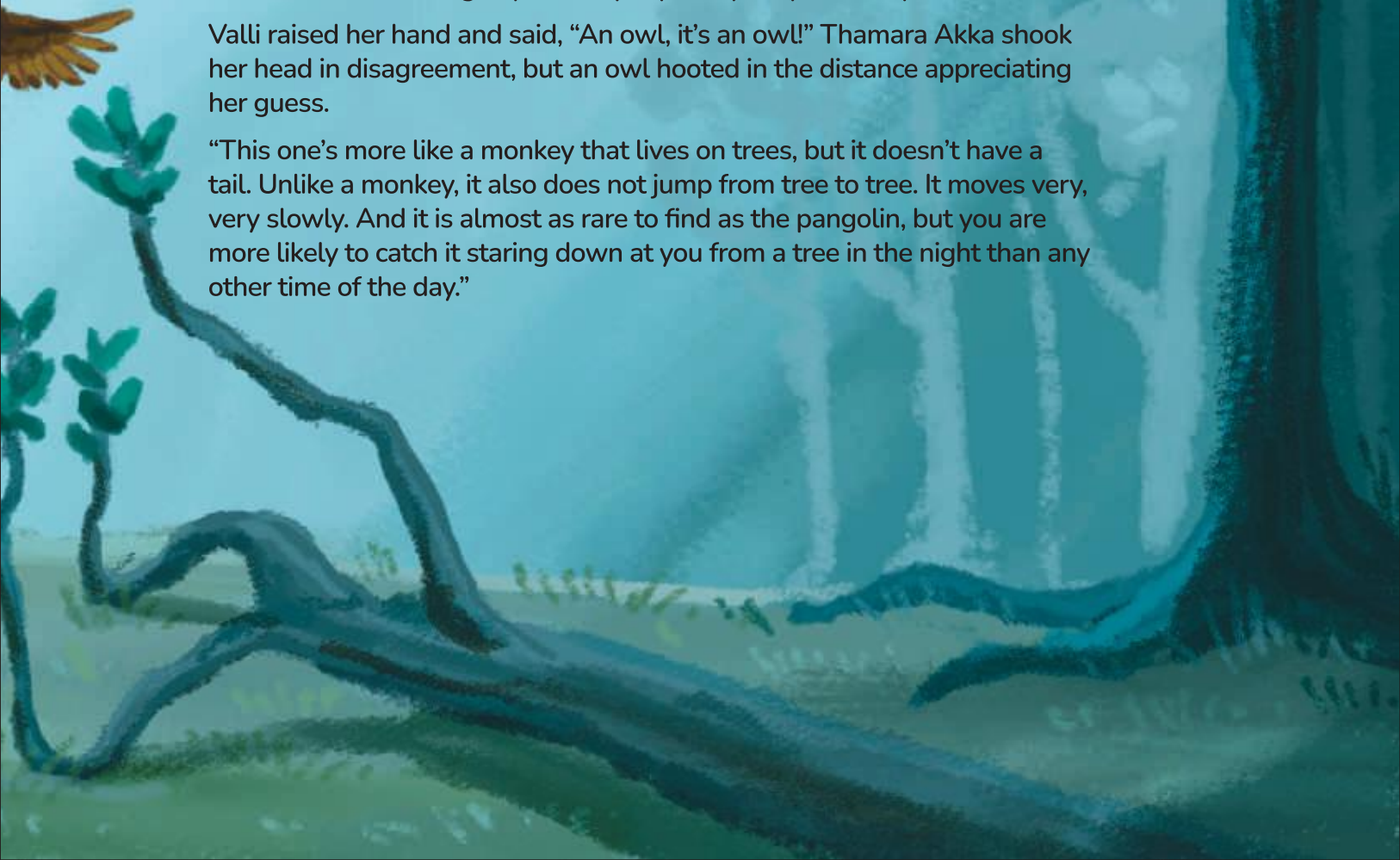


“Ah, yes, of course!” Thamara Akka replied,  
“Now is the right time for this one!”

“This creature has large eyes, and people say they are teary all the time!”

Valli raised her hand and said, “An owl, it’s an owl!” Thamara Akka shook her head in disagreement, but an owl hooted in the distance appreciating her guess.

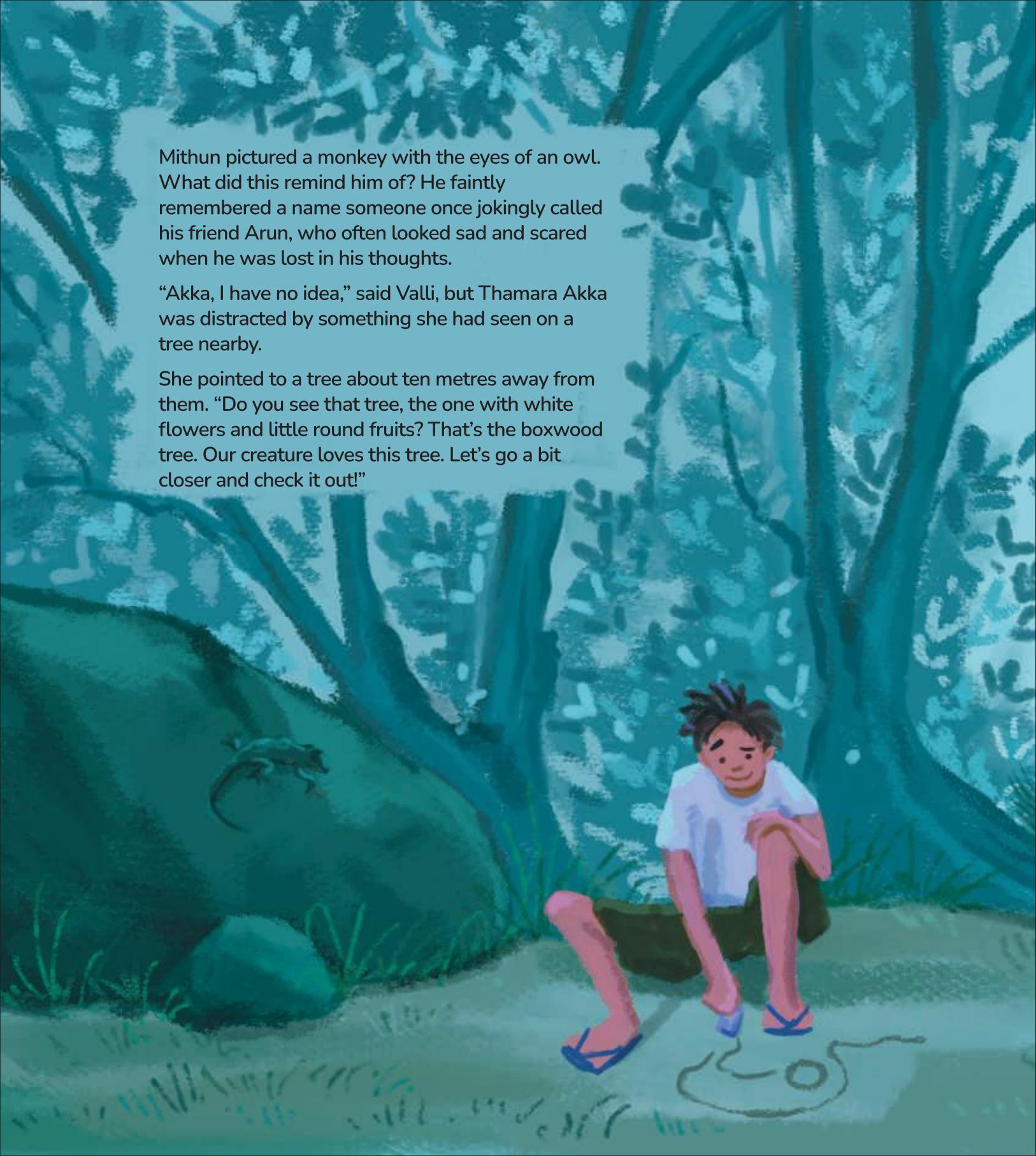
“This one’s more like a monkey that lives on trees, but it doesn’t have a tail. Unlike a monkey, it also does not jump from tree to tree. It moves very, very slowly. And it is almost as rare to find as the pangolin, but you are more likely to catch it staring down at you from a tree in the night than any other time of the day.”

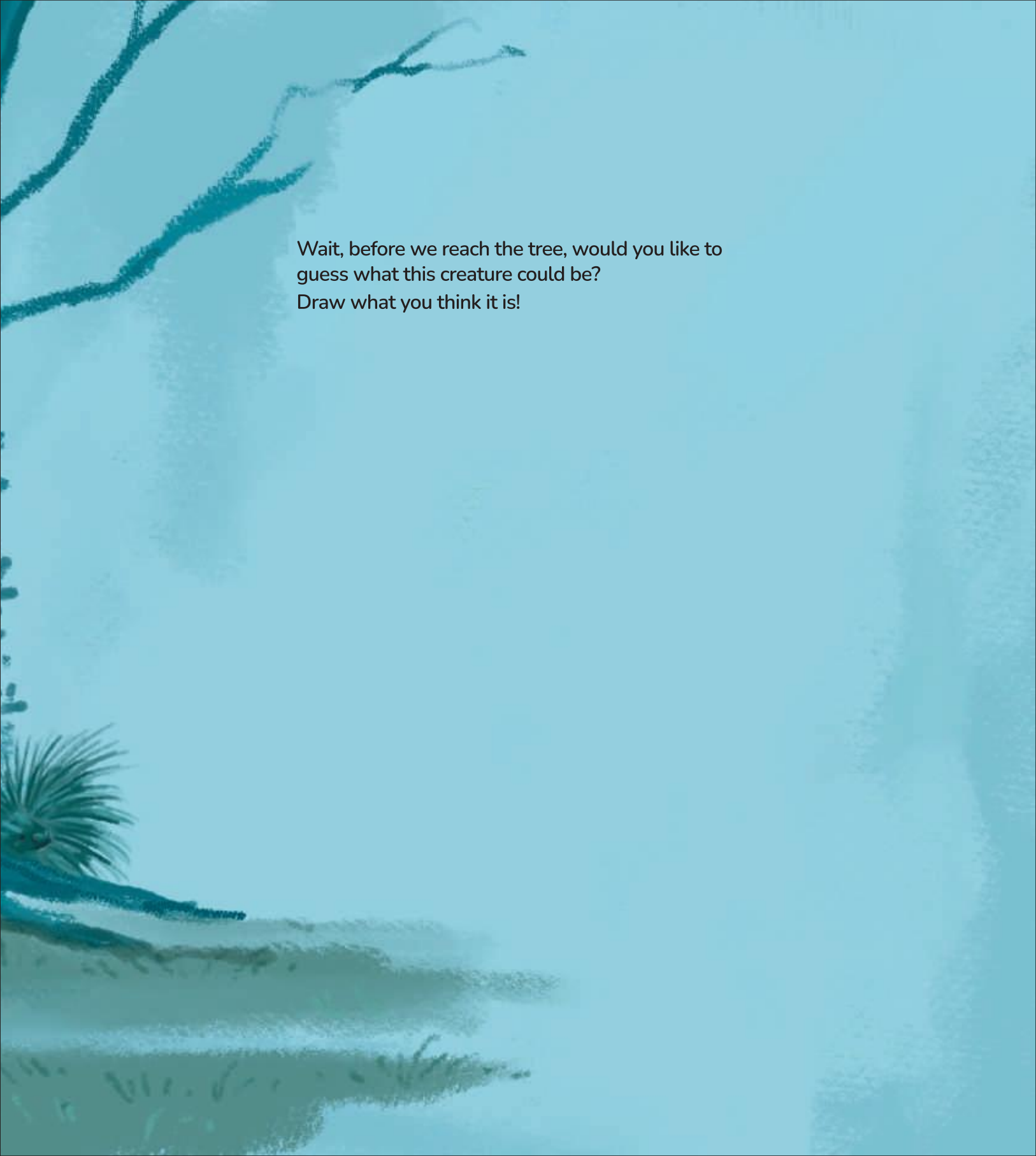


Mithun pictured a monkey with the eyes of an owl. What did this remind him of? He faintly remembered a name someone once jokingly called his friend Arun, who often looked sad and scared when he was lost in his thoughts.

“Akka, I have no idea,” said Valli, but Thamara Akka was distracted by something she had seen on a tree nearby.

She pointed to a tree about ten metres away from them. “Do you see that tree, the one with white flowers and little round fruits? That’s the boxwood tree. Our creature loves this tree. Let’s go a bit closer and check it out!”



The background is a light, pale blue color. On the left side, there are faint, dark blue outlines of tree branches extending from the top left towards the center. At the bottom left, there is a faint sketch of a landscape featuring a small, spiky plant and a body of water that reflects the sky and the plant. The overall style is minimalist and artistic.

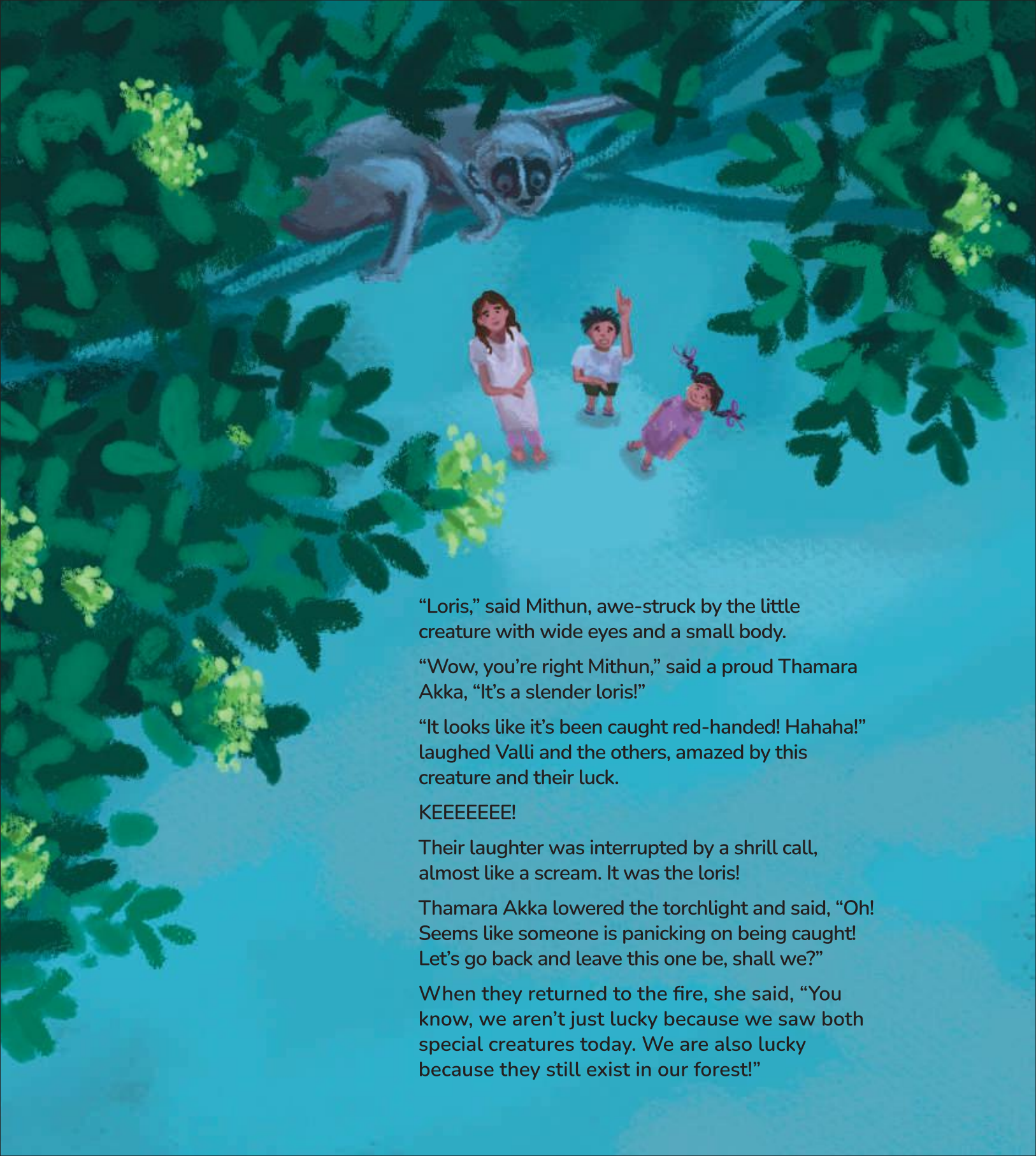
Wait, before we reach the tree, would you like to  
guess what this creature could be?  
Draw what you think it is!

The curious threesome approached the tree quietly. Thamara Akka was holding a torch that she had brought along. She lit the torch and scanned the tree, looking for signs of the special creature.

Mithun thought he noticed something. "Akka, up there!" Mithun pointed to a spot Thamara Akka had missed.

The torchlight moved upwards, and surely enough, a pair of startled-looking eyes stared back at the trio!





“Loris,” said Mithun, awe-struck by the little creature with wide eyes and a small body.

“Wow, you’re right Mithun,” said a proud Thamara Akka, “It’s a slender loris!”

“It looks like it’s been caught red-handed! Hahaha!” laughed Valli and the others, amazed by this creature and their luck.

KEEEEEEEE!

Their laughter was interrupted by a shrill call, almost like a scream. It was the loris!

Thamara Akka lowered the torchlight and said, “Oh! Seems like someone is panicking on being caught! Let’s go back and leave this one be, shall we?”

When they returned to the fire, she said, “You know, we aren’t just lucky because we saw both special creatures today. We are also lucky because they still exist in our forest!”

“What do you mean, Akka?”

“Well, Valli, didn’t you say you saw a ring made with pangolin scales?”

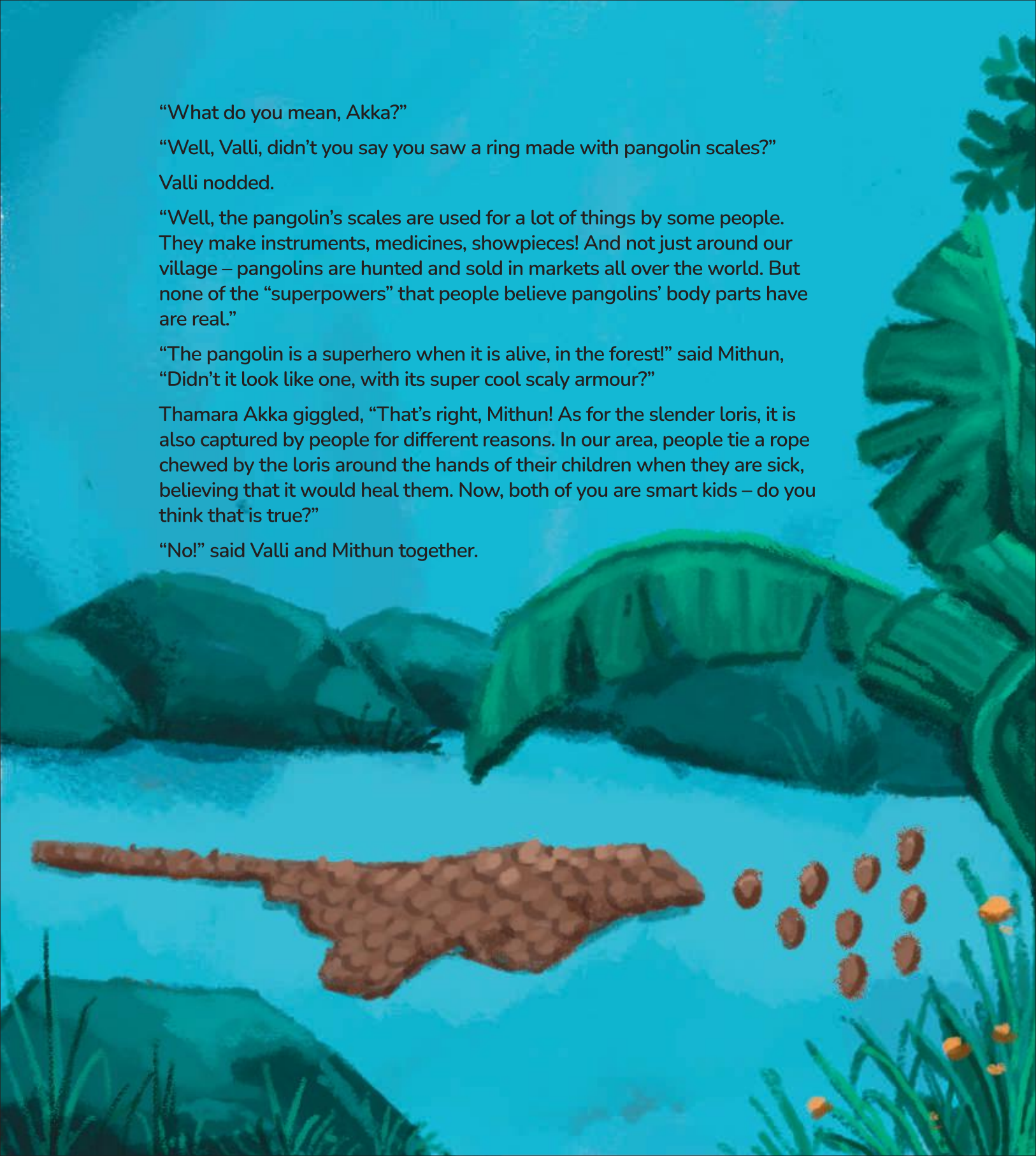
Valli nodded.

“Well, the pangolin’s scales are used for a lot of things by some people. They make instruments, medicines, showpieces! And not just around our village – pangolins are hunted and sold in markets all over the world. But none of the “superpowers” that people believe pangolins’ body parts have are real.”

“The pangolin is a superhero when it is alive, in the forest!” said Mithun, “Didn’t it look like one, with its super cool scaly armour?”

Thamara Akka giggled, “That’s right, Mithun! As for the slender loris, it is also captured by people for different reasons. In our area, people tie a rope chewed by the loris around the hands of their children when they are sick, believing that it would heal them. Now, both of you are smart kids – do you think that is true?”

“No!” said Valli and Mithun together.





“Around the world, slender lorises are also captured and sold in pet markets.”

“That’s horrible,” frowned Valli. “The loris looks incredibly cute, but only when it is climbing and feasting freely on trees! In a cage, it would just look so sad.”

“I agree, Valli!” said Thamara Akka. “And with that, let’s call it a day?”

The children agreed. As much as they had enjoyed the eventful day, they were also exhausted.

The two children and Thamara Akka entered the hut and lay down. All three of them fell asleep within minutes.

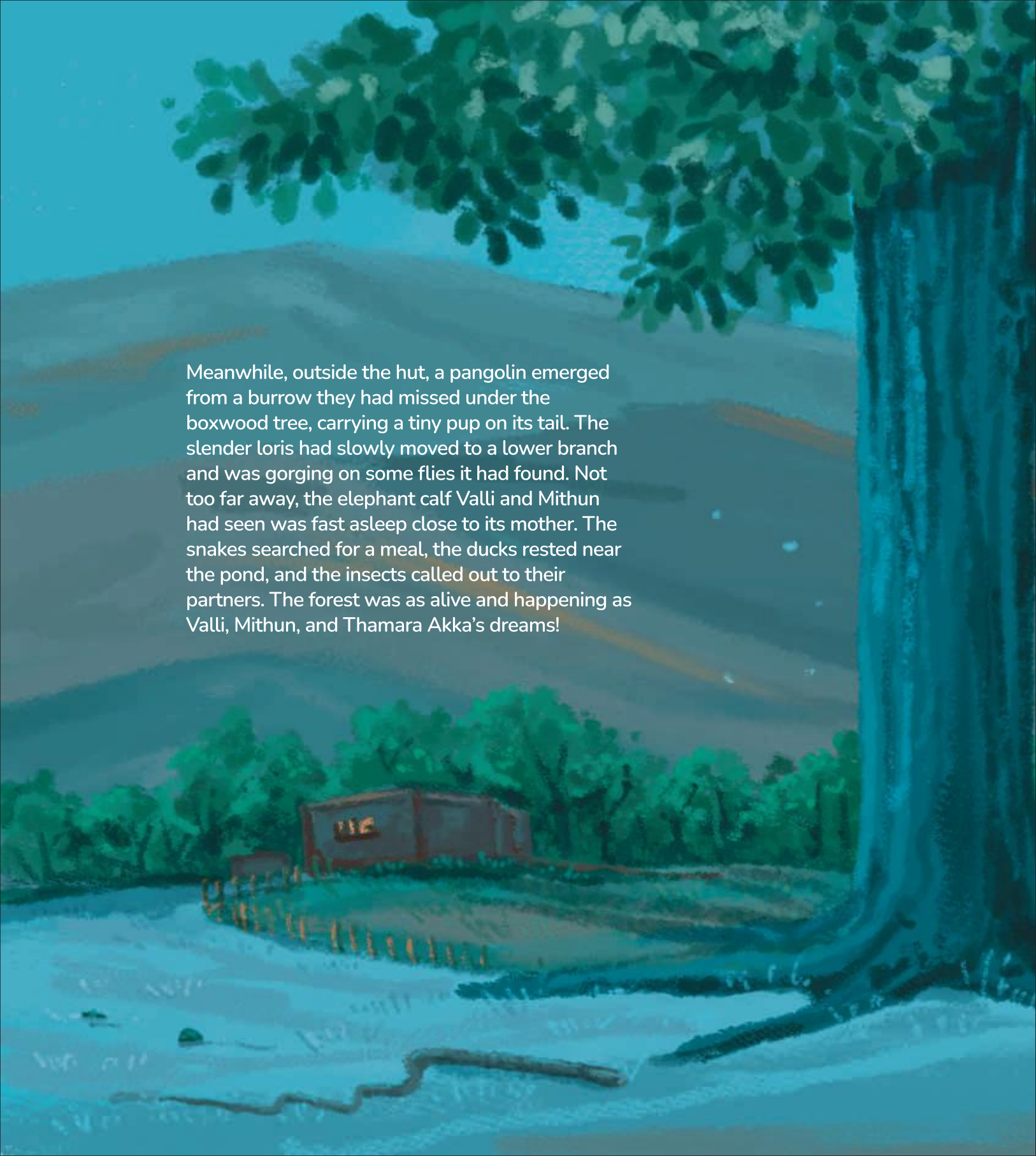
Mithun dreamt that he was a pangolin-inspired superhero with scales on his body and that he could turn into a scaly ball, roll down the hill, and reach home within seconds!

Valli dreamt that she was climbing trees with a slender loris that could speak! With her new friend, she was learning to find joy in slowness as the two shared stories about their own worlds.





And Thamara Akka dreamt of a forest full of pangolins, lorises, elephants, and other amazing creatures.



Meanwhile, outside the hut, a pangolin emerged from a burrow they had missed under the boxwood tree, carrying a tiny pup on its tail. The slender loris had slowly moved to a lower branch and was gorging on some flies it had found. Not too far away, the elephant calf Valli and Mithun had seen was fast asleep close to its mother. The snakes searched for a meal, the ducks rested near the pond, and the insects called out to their partners. The forest was as alive and happening as Valli, Mithun, and Thamara Akka's dreams!



Nature-based Pangolin and Loris art by school students in Sathyamangalam hills







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