

A black and white line drawing of a jungle scene. In the foreground, three elephants are depicted. The elephant on the right is facing right, with its trunk curled upwards. The middle elephant is facing forward, and the one on the left is facing left. They are standing on a path or clearing. In the background, there is a large, craggy rock formation on the right side. To the left of the elephants, there is a dense area of green foliage and trees. The overall style is that of a children's book illustration.

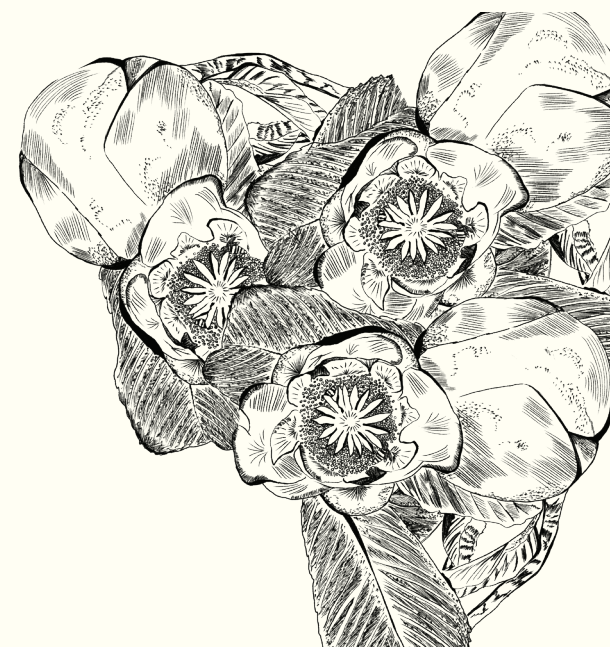
Who can Terrify an Elephant?

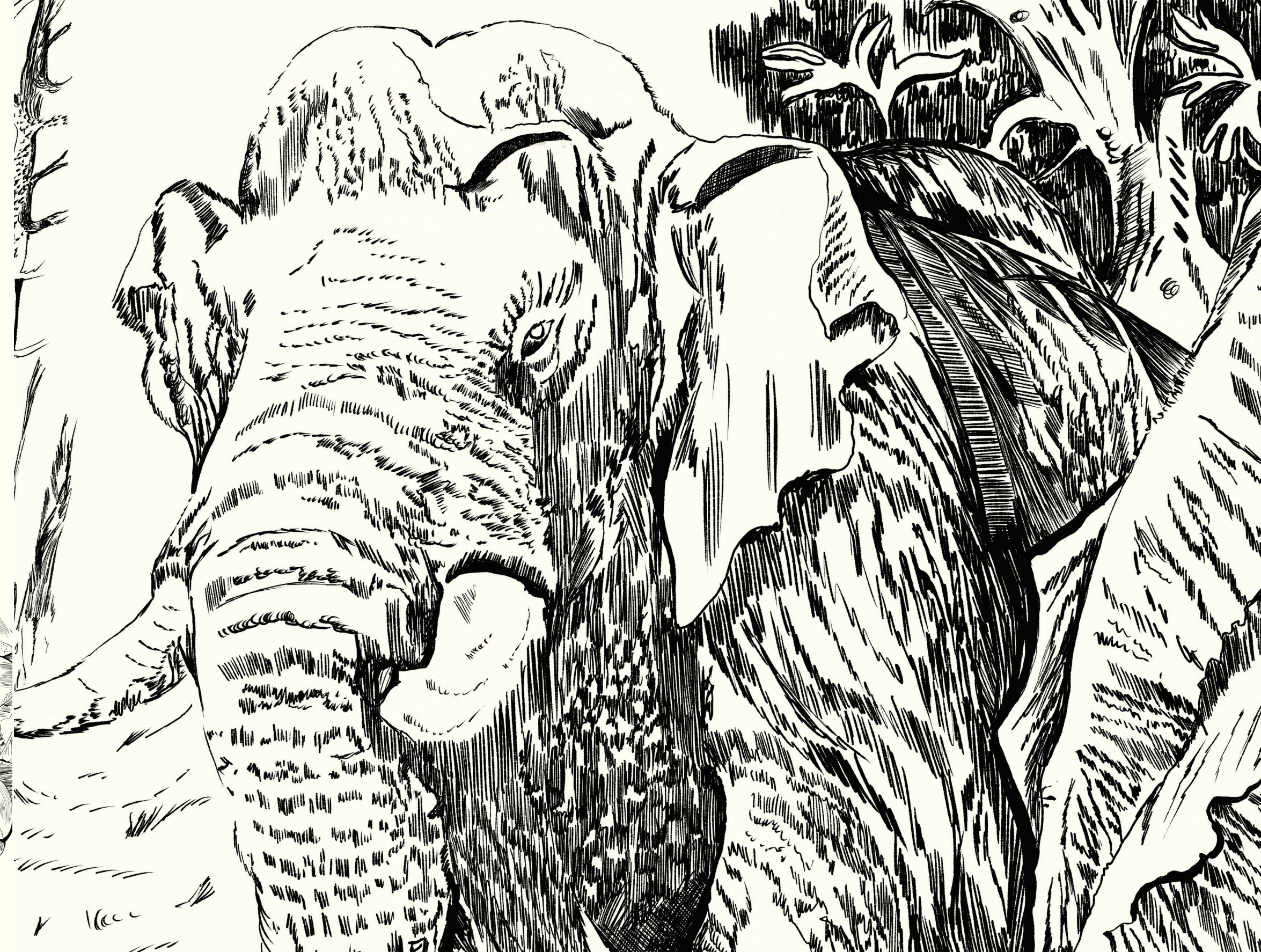
Stories from the Pakke Tiger Reserve



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The illustrations in this book are the original creations of the author. All efforts have been made to accurately interpret the stories of the interviewees.

Collaborators

Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology

Canopy Collective

Who can
Terrify an Elephant?

Stories from the Pakke Tiger Reserve



By Omisha Pashilkar

Tamuk is an 9 year old elephant in the Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh.

Tamuk's name belongs to the Nyishi Language. He was an illegal elephant rescued from Namdapha district.

Joymala is an older female elephant rescued from Namsai, according to the Mahouts she was in love with Raja. She is about 40 years old.

Raja was taken in from the Itanagar Zoo. Raja used to be a guiding light for both Tamuk and Joymala and the three of them were inseparable, but he passed away recently due to a medical ailment.

This story is based briefly on the accounts of Kaka Tallong (Mahout) and Pali Nebam (Jugali) who look after the elephants of Pakke, among other mahouts.

Kaka Tallong : I am from Seijosa, Darlong village. I was 18 to 19 years when I joined Pakke. Its been almost 8 years now that I've been working here. I've worked with 2 elephants here, Tamuk and Khai Singh.



Pali Nebam: I joined Pakke in 2005 August. This is the only place I've worked in. I was 16 or 17 when I started working with elephants. I've always worked with Joymala.





At Dijji Camp, Pakke Kessang,
Tamuk walks in the jungle.
His big ears move to and fro.
The sun is warm, and the wind blows gently.
The mahouts stand in line.
Kaka Tallong, climbs onto Tamuk.
But the rope is loose.
As they wait
Tamuk gets restless.

Just Then—
BZZZZZ!
A tiny bee buzzes behind his ear.
Tamuk shakes his head.
More bees come.
More buzzing follows.
The bee is small, and Tamuk is big.
But Tamuk is *terrified*.
Bees fly into his trunk and mouth.
The sting spreads like wildfire.





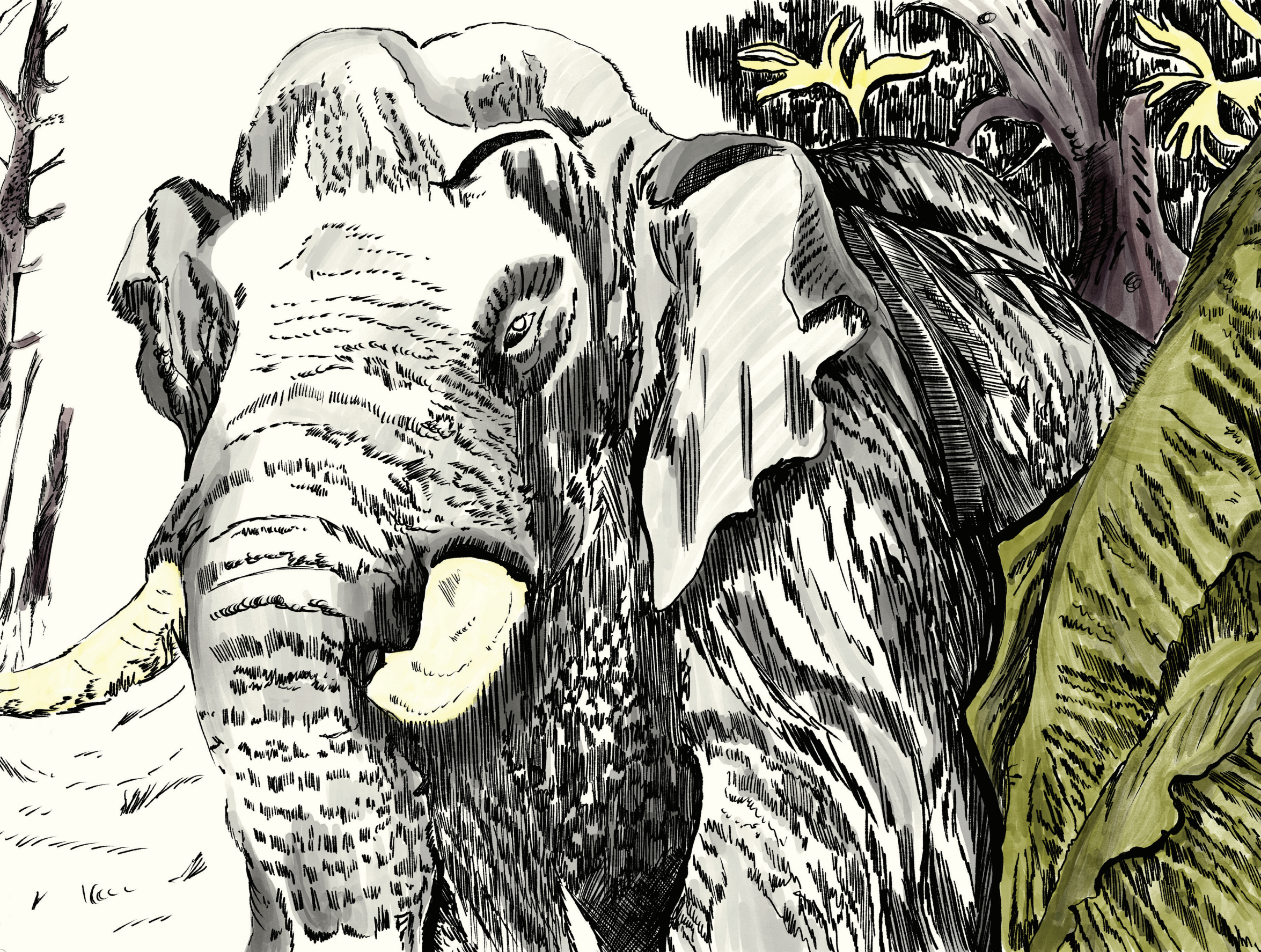
Tamuk panics.
His feet crash down.
His ears flap wildly.
THUMP.
Kaka falls off onto the grass.
It is a near miss.
The mahouts laugh.
Kaka does not.

Tamuk is hurt and angry.
Tamuk crashes through the forest.
He is young and full of mischief.

Joymala watches him.
Then she swats him, annoyed.
She is older. She knows better.
Joymala was a begging elephant.
Rescued from Namsai,
She was a ghost in chains.
But she does not remember.
That past life is lost to her.









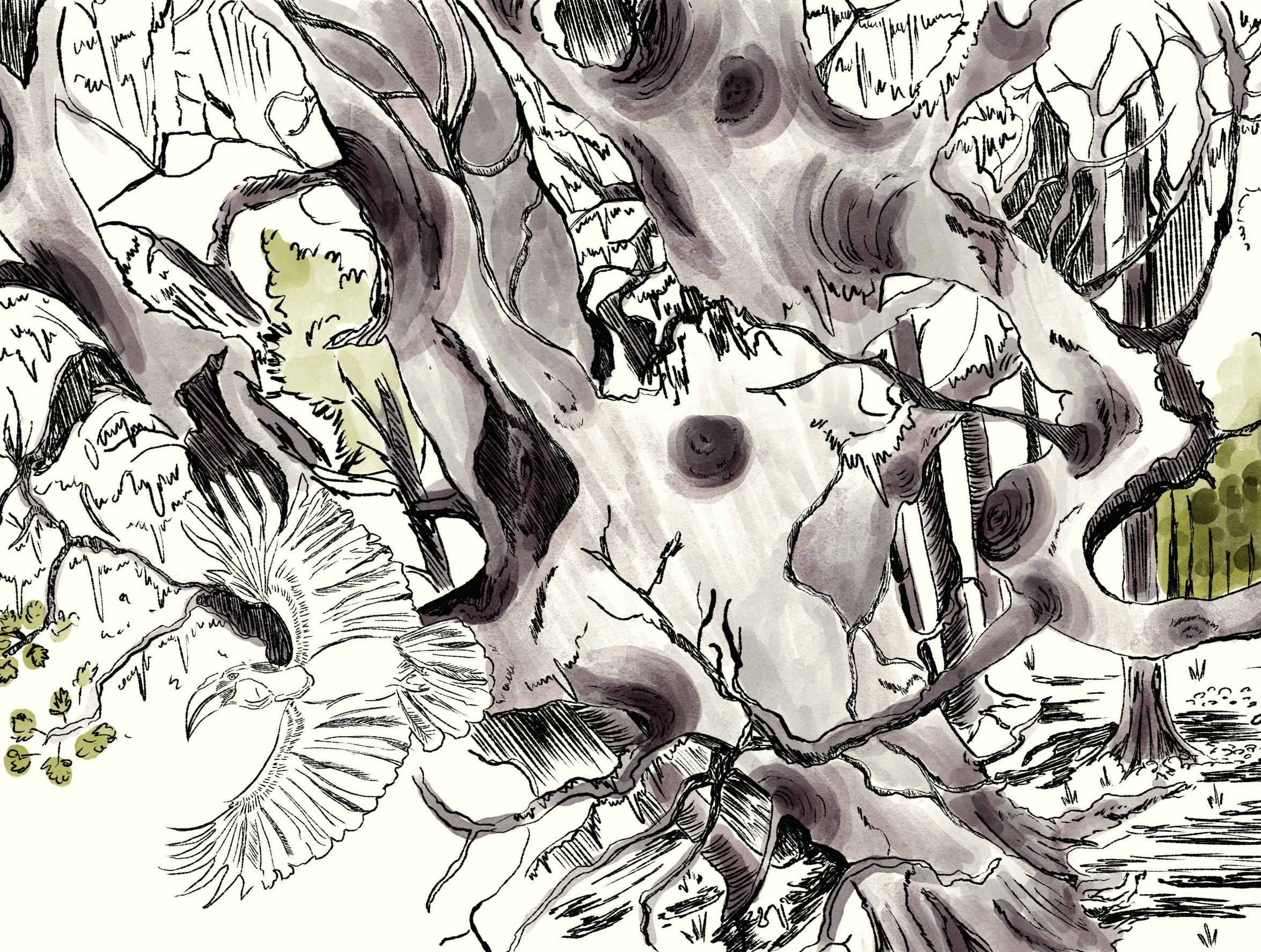
Joymala is a *fighter*.
Once, when Raja had fallen.
Joymala refused food.
She refused rest.
That night,
She walked through the dark,
Past trees and rivers.

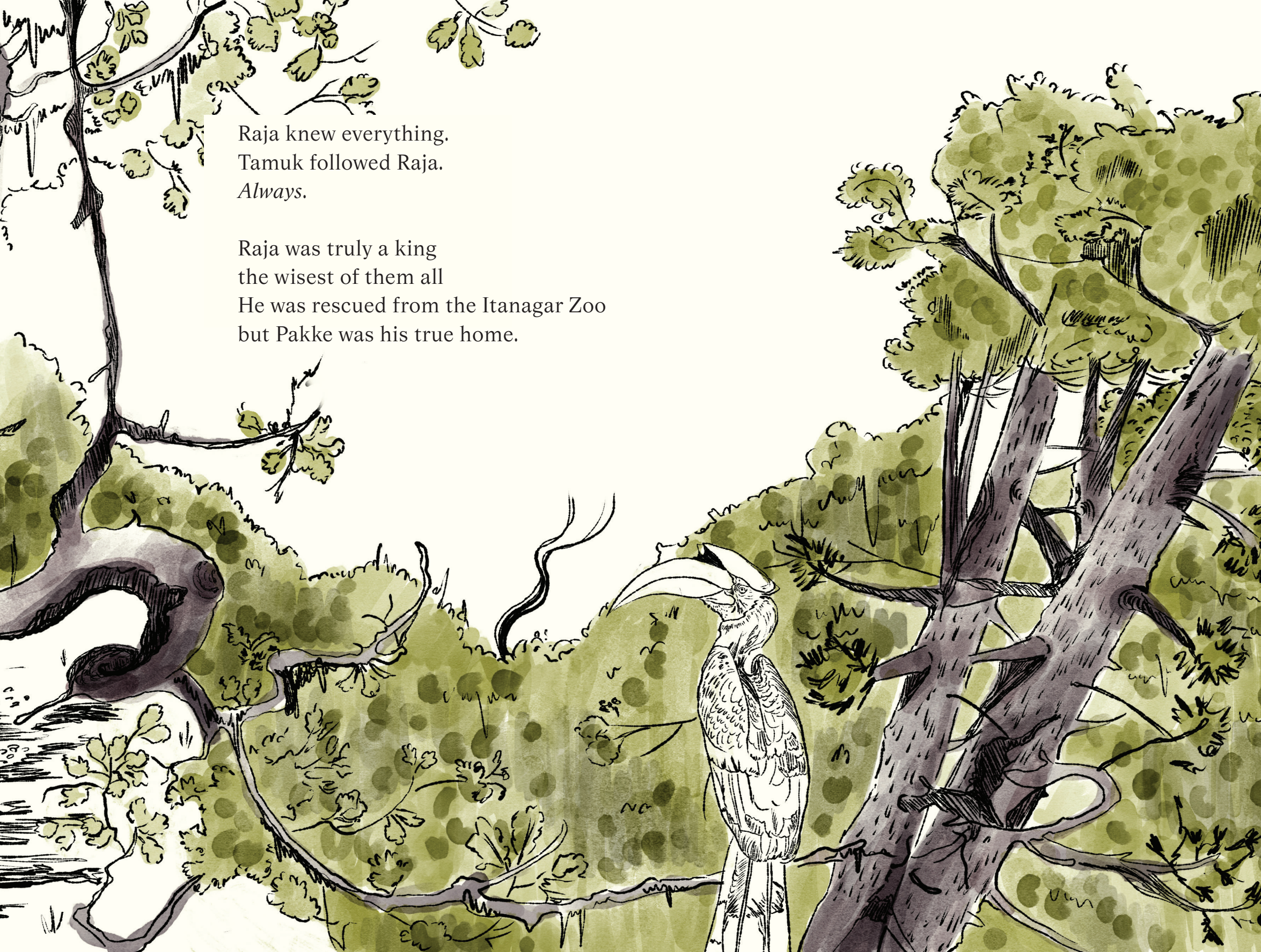
They found her at dawn.
She was standing over Raja.
His breath came heavy.
Joymala circled him.
Draping her trunk over his back,
She helped pull Raja up.

Joymala did not leave his side.
When Raja was too weak to move,
Joymala heard him.
She tore the forest apart to find him.

*Raja must have got attacked by the wild elephants. Joymala just stood there defending him and might have fought off the wild elephants before we arrived. We thought we lost Raja that day but Joymala saved his life.







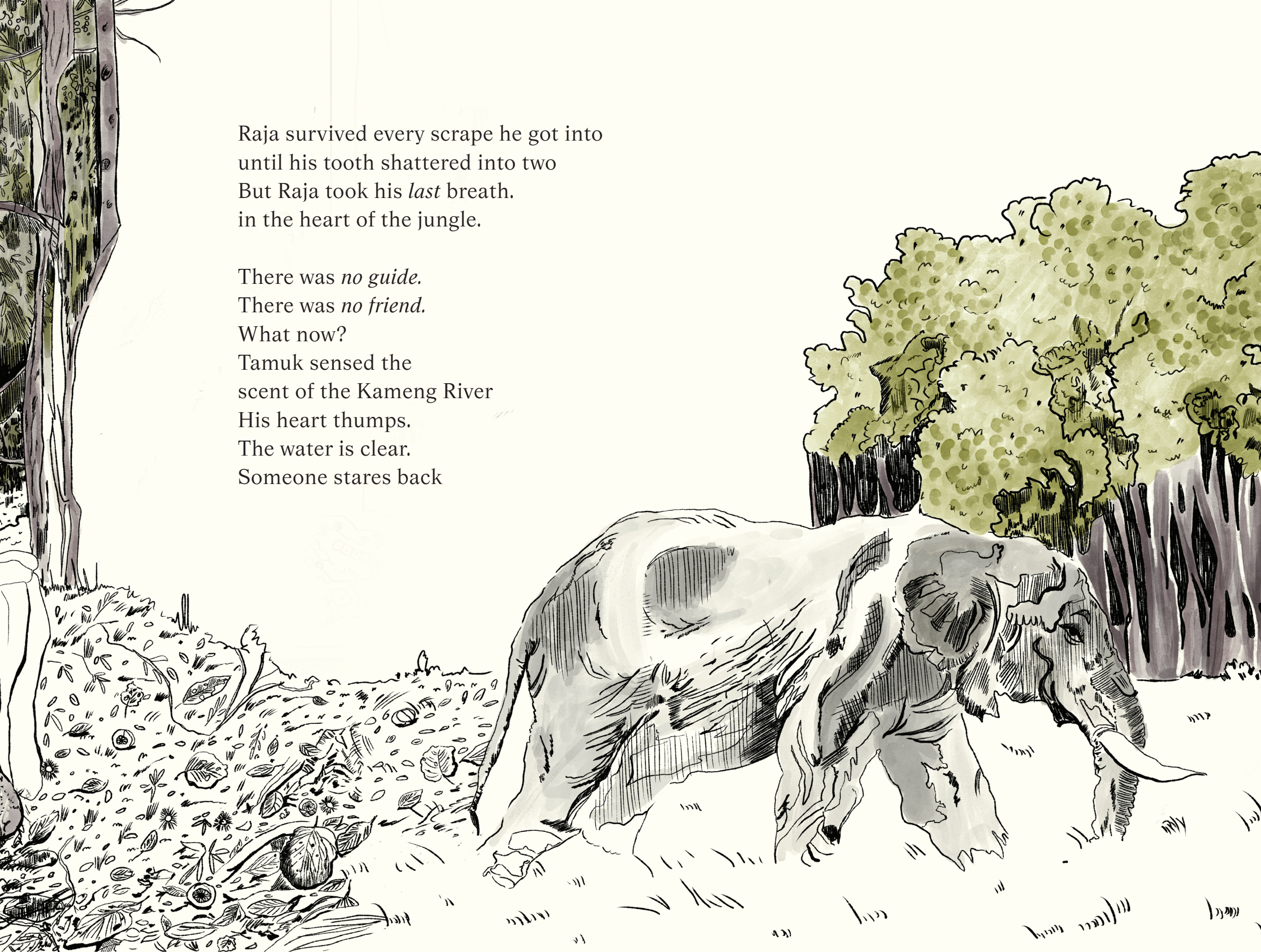
Raja knew everything.
Tamuk followed Raja.
Always.

Raja was truly a king
the wisest of them all
He was rescued from the Itanagar Zoo
but Pakke was his true home.



Raja survived every scrape he got into
until his tooth shattered into two
But Raja took his *last* breath.
in the heart of the jungle.

There was *no guide*.
There was *no friend*.
What now?
Tamuk sensed the
scent of the Kameng River
His heart thumps.
The water is clear.
Someone stares back





At camp, Kaka panicked.
The river was too strong for Tamuk!
Kaka and Pali ran behind him
into the dense and thorny jungle.
For miles they followed his chote paav
It's impression engraved into the soil

Pali Nebam sighed.
"The khatan was there. Now it's gone."
Kaka groaned.
"He must have opened it"
Pali frowned.

"What if he followed wild elephants?"
Kaka shook his head.
"Tamuk is trouble."
But Tamuk *must* come back.
The mahout needs his pay.
Sometimes there is no pay
for four months, sometimes for six.
At home, there are five children.

*Khatan is the chain attached to the elephants leg that helps the mahouts identify where the elephant has wandered off.









The debt *grows*.
There is no choice.
Even when the mahout is hungry,
even when he is tired
He still works, no room for mistakes.

Tamuk remembers an old companion
Yamuk was little, like Tamuk.
Tamuk was four. Yamuk was five.
They came from Tenga Pani to Tippi.
They shared the same truck and camp.
Inside the truck, the metal shook.
Yamuk was angry. Tamuk was small.
He could not fight.

Then came the flood.
It was a bad flood.
The water took *Yamuk*.

*Tamuk is actually an illegal elephant we had gone to jail because of that.
WTwo elephants were got from Assam Yamuk and Tamuk. The river took
Yamuk during the floods and he died and Tamuk is in Tippi.





The mahouts searched.
The mahouts cried.
They found Yamuk at Nameri.
But it was too late.



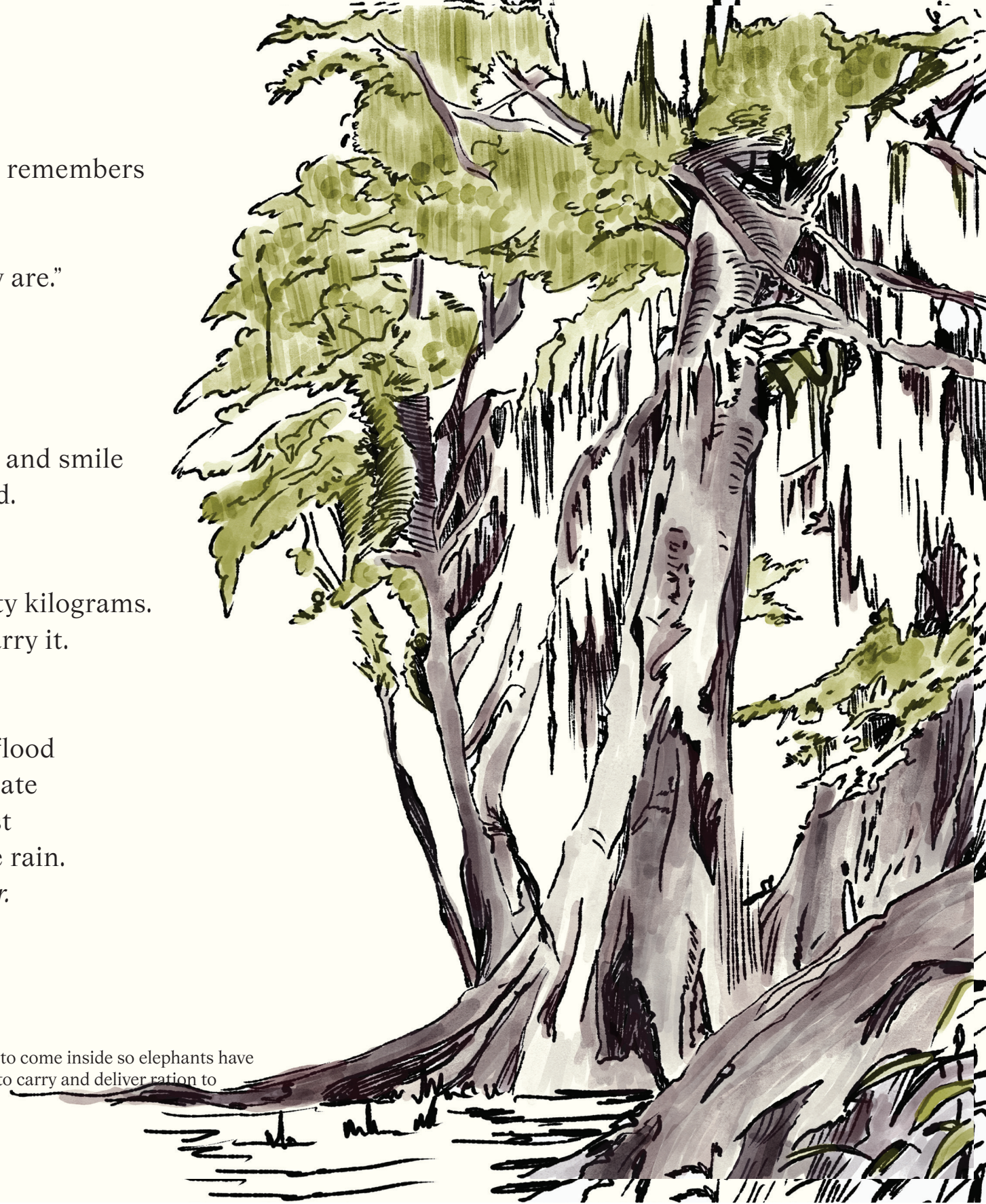


Through the pain, Tamuk remembers
What Raja once said
*"That's you, Tamuk.
Elephants know who they are."*
He steps into the river.
SPLASH.

Tamuk felt safe.
The mahouts find Tamuk and smile
"Troublemaker," Kaka said.
Tamuk lifted his trunk.
They returned to camp.
The ration was heavy. Fifty kilograms.
Tamuk did not want to carry it.
But he feared the *thwack!*

When it rains, the roads flood
Only elephants can navigate
through the sinking forest
the mahouts shiver in the rain.
Sometimes *winter is easier.*
For everyone

*During the rains the cars won't be able to come inside so elephants have to do all the work alone. They also have to carry and deliver ration to all the camps during monsoons.



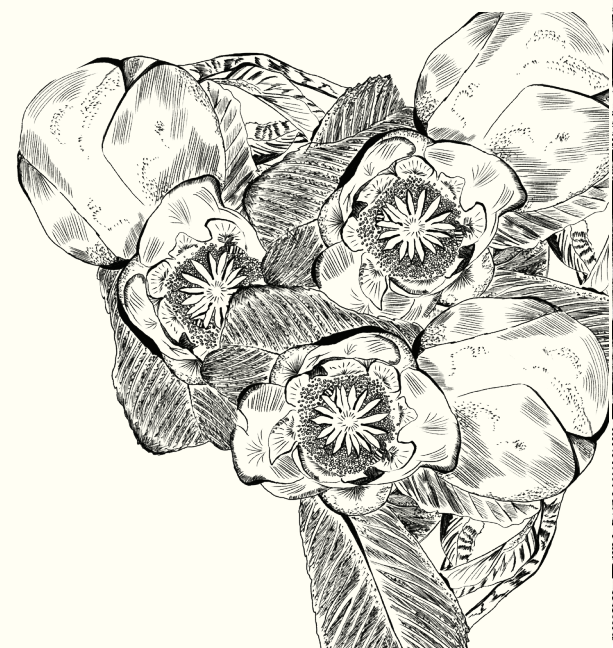


When Tamuk gets older,
Musth will come and he will change.
Everything will feel too loud.
Everything too close.

One wrong move?
and the elephant will charge.
“Tie him tight,” says Gopal.
No food. No water.
Only then will musth pass.
Tamuk is big, bigger than men.
But even a small needle scares him.
The syringe glints in the sun
But the mahouts speak softly.
Their hands are gentle.
The mahouts guide him.

As wizened hands run over his skin
They treat the khatan wounds.
Between punishment and affection
Danger and discipline
Blooms quiet companionship
And tough love.







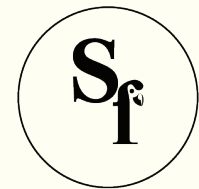
What frightens an elephant? Is it a predator's roar—or the buzz of a bee?

Do they mourn, heal, and forge friendships, just like us?

In the lush forests of Arunachal Pradesh lies Pakke Tiger Reserve, where rescued elephants walk beside their human companions—the mahouts.

These aren't just working ties, but quiet, enduring friendships built on trust, patience, and shared moments. This project blends poetry and illustration to explore the emotional worlds of elephants and the people who care for them. It tells stories of resilience—of showing up, day after day, through hardship. Here, communication happens through unspoken gestures, shaped by companionship rather than command.

Beyond animal care, this is a reflection on coexistence, healing, and quiet resistance in a world of vanishing forests and fading bonds. It is a tribute to the caretakers who, against all odds, stay—offering strength in simply being there.



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