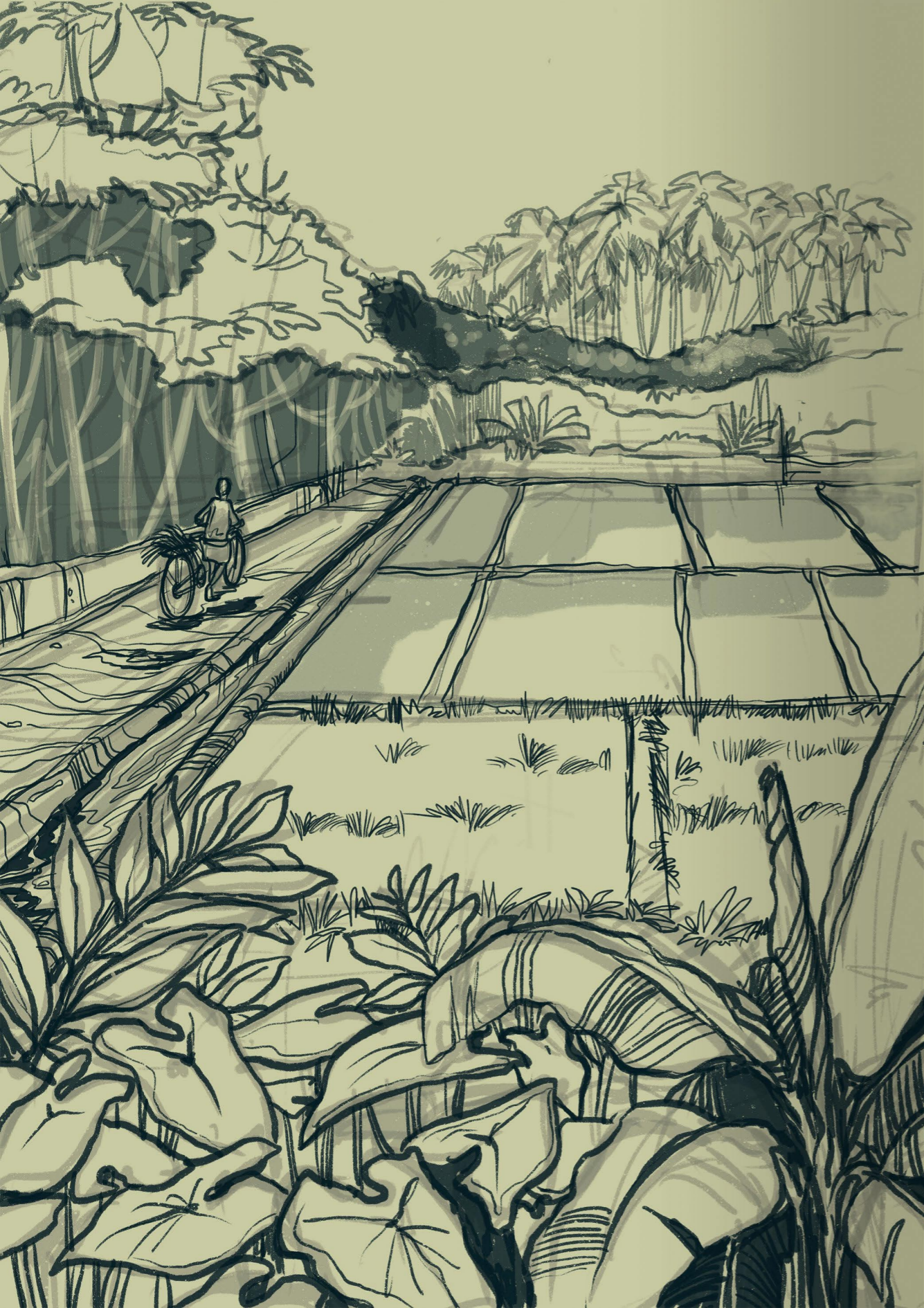


Memoirs of a Sacred Goove

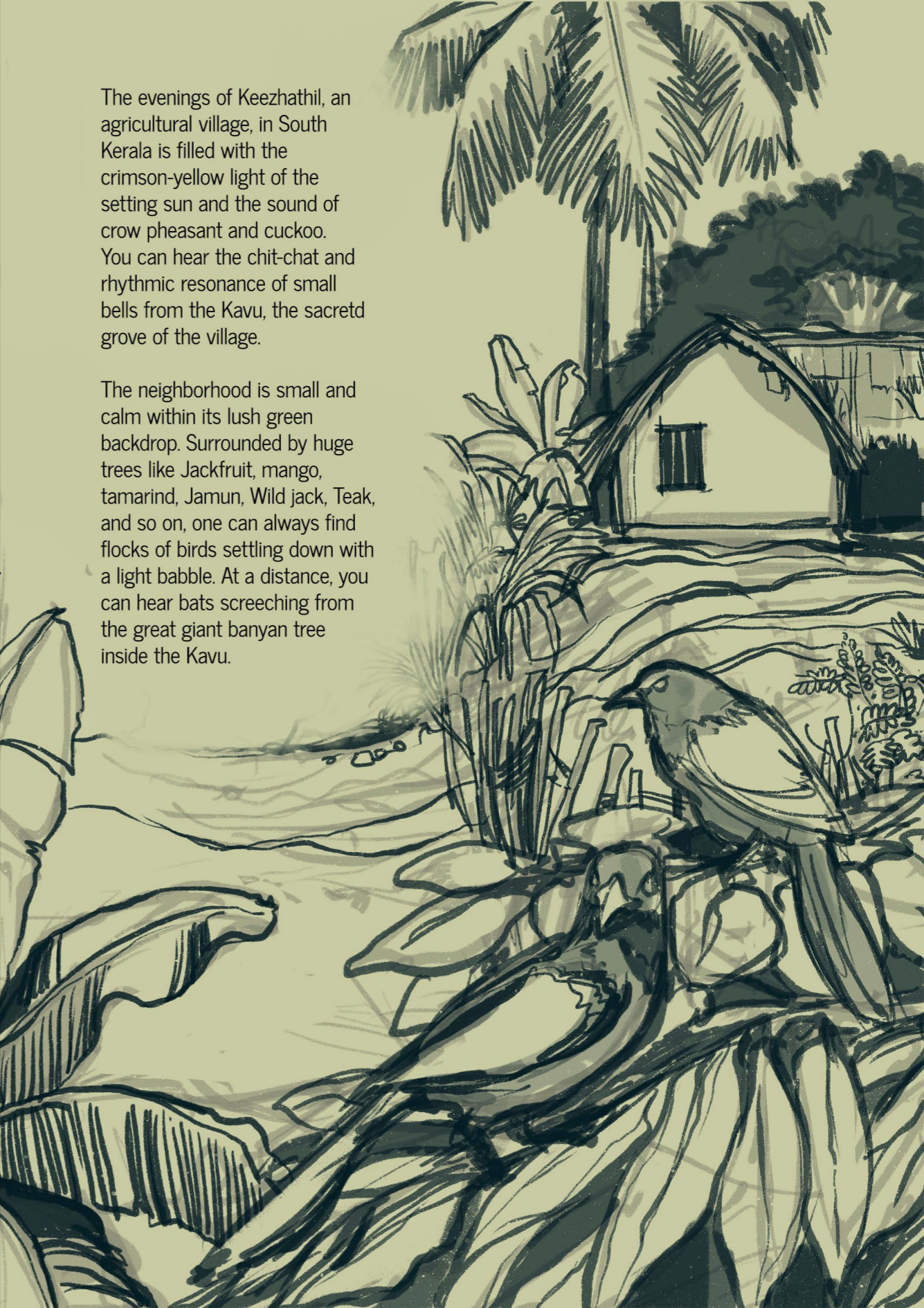


Abhijath Ajay

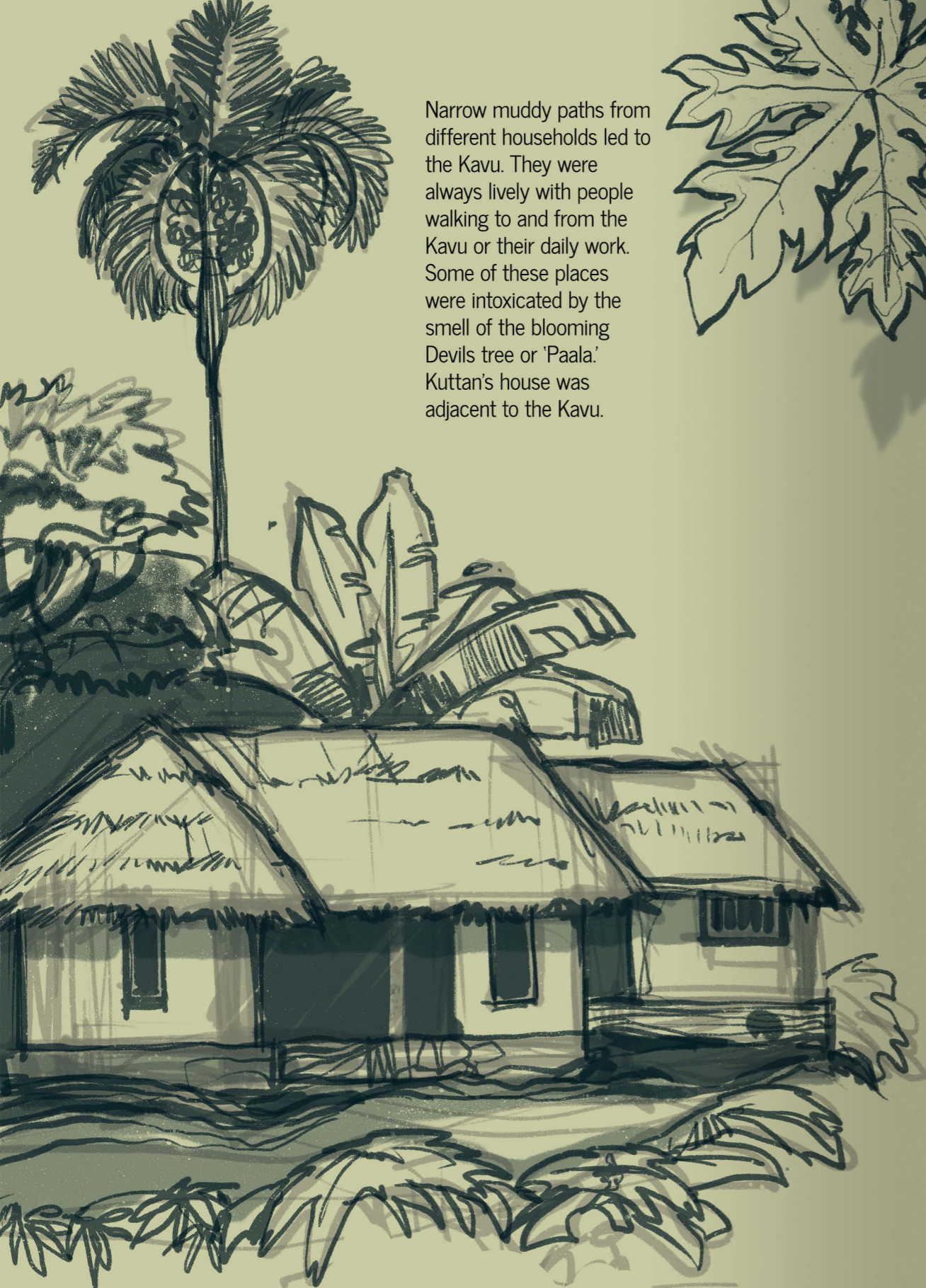


The evenings of Keezhathil, an agricultural village, in South Kerala is filled with the crimson-yellow light of the setting sun and the sound of crow pheasant and cuckoo. You can hear the chit-chat and rhythmic resonance of small bells from the Kavu, the sacred grove of the village.

The neighborhood is small and calm within its lush green backdrop. Surrounded by huge trees like Jackfruit, mango, tamarind, Jamun, Wild jack, Teak, and so on, one can always find flocks of birds settling down with a light babble. At a distance, you can hear bats screeching from the great giant banyan tree inside the Kavu.



Narrow muddy paths from different households led to the Kavu. They were always lively with people walking to and from the Kavu or their daily work. Some of these places were intoxicated by the smell of the blooming Devils tree or 'Paala.' Kuttan's house was adjacent to the Kavu.



Like the other houses, his mother would be sweeping the front yard before lighting the evening lamp. And his grandmother sits on the entrance verandah drying her hair with her 'Thorthu' –a thin white cloth while watching Kuttan play.

The house was no different from the others in the village, a mud and thatch-roofed structure with an earthy fragrance from the lime plastered walls and polished cow dung floors.

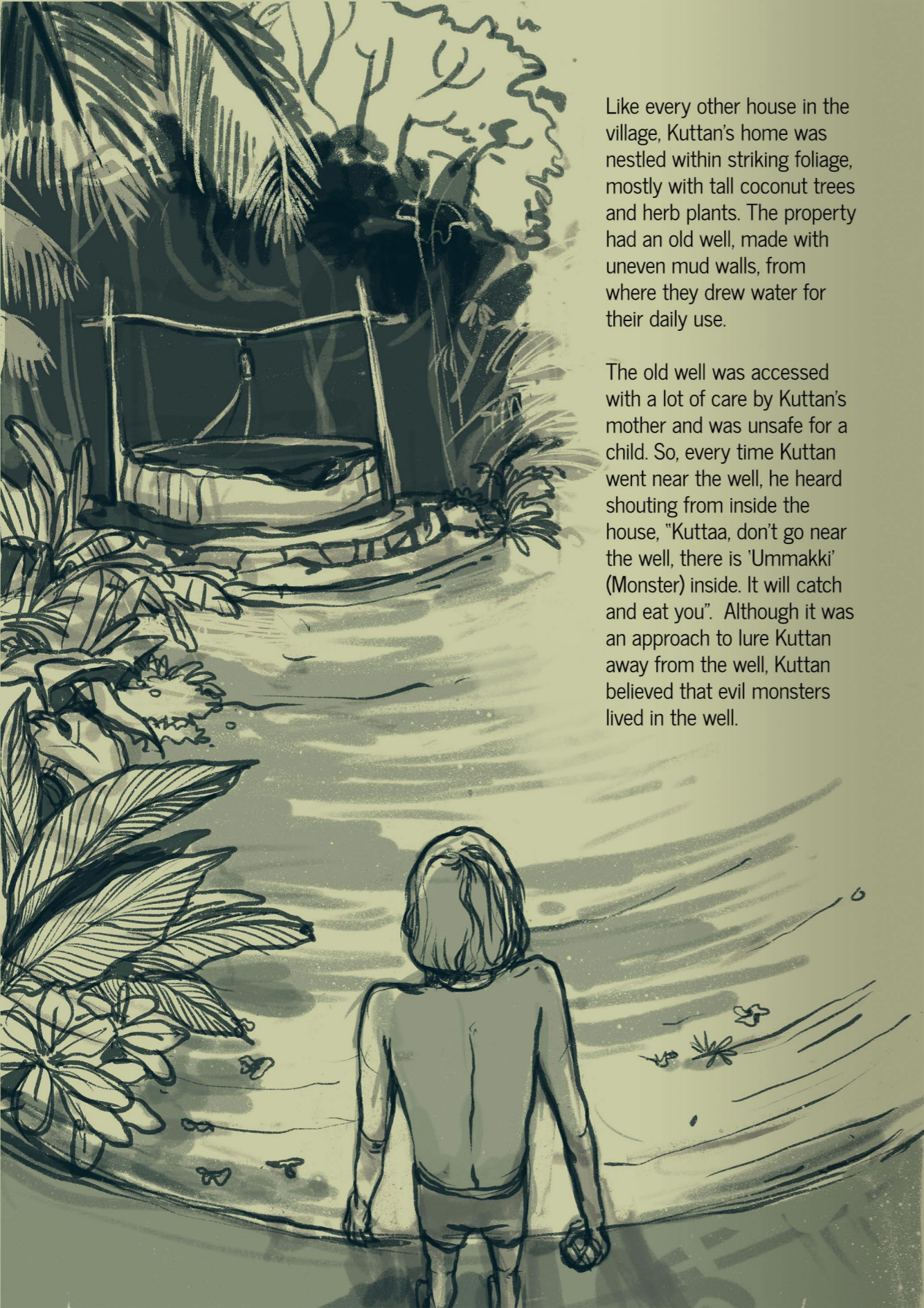




Kuttan, a ten-year-old kid, grew up listening to the folk stories of the village narrated by his mother and grandmother. Most of his evenings passed, listening to the stories about the lifestyles of people, agriculture, birds, trees, and the demons and gods of the Keezhathil village.

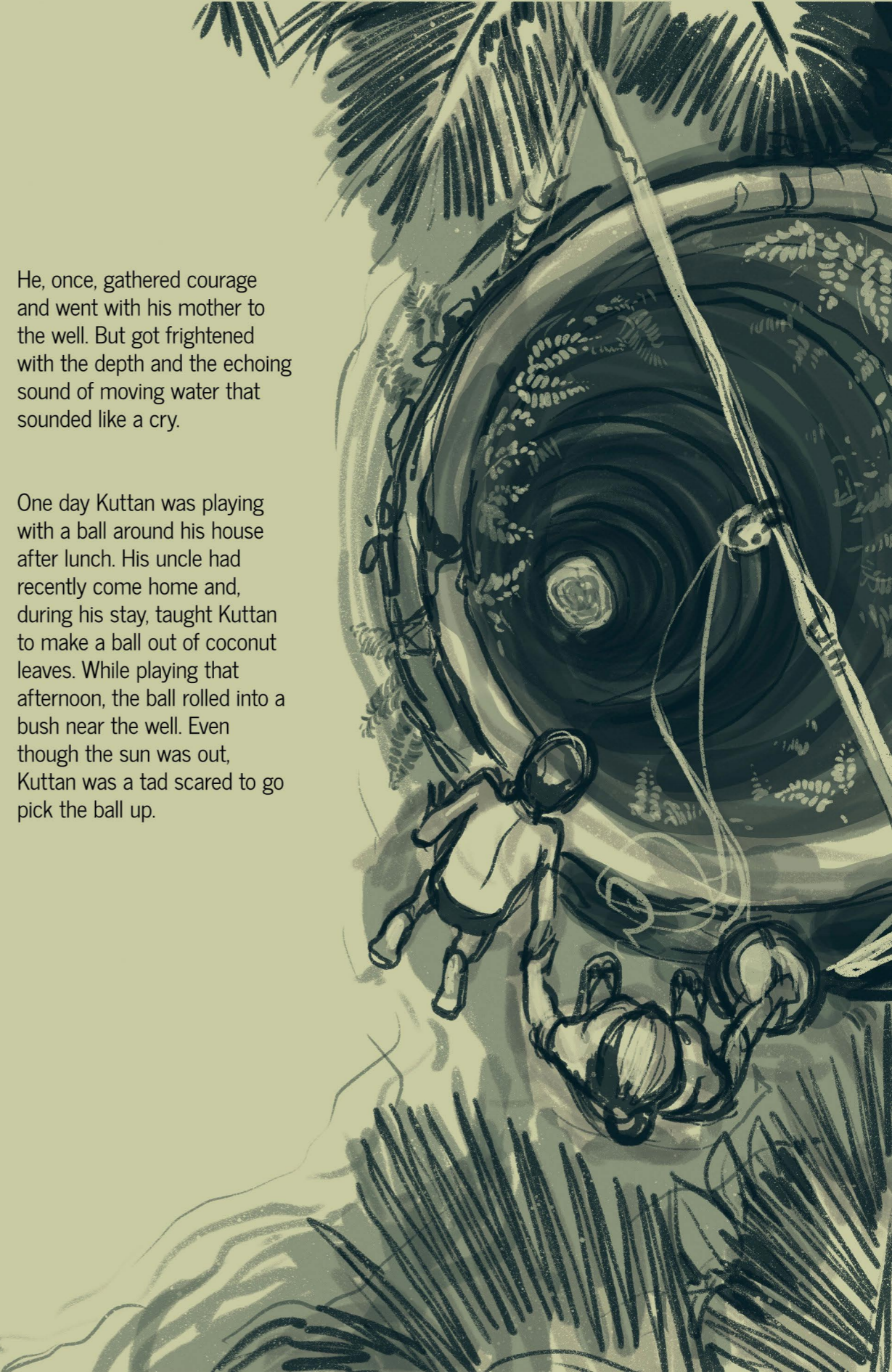
Most of the stories revolved around the Kavu and its gods. Listening to the mysterious tales of Yakshi, Maadan, Marutha, and different deities, Kuttan became fearful of the Kavu and its surroundings. He would always be found clinging to his mother's saree while visiting the Kavu. The sacred grove came out to be a scary place for Kuttan.





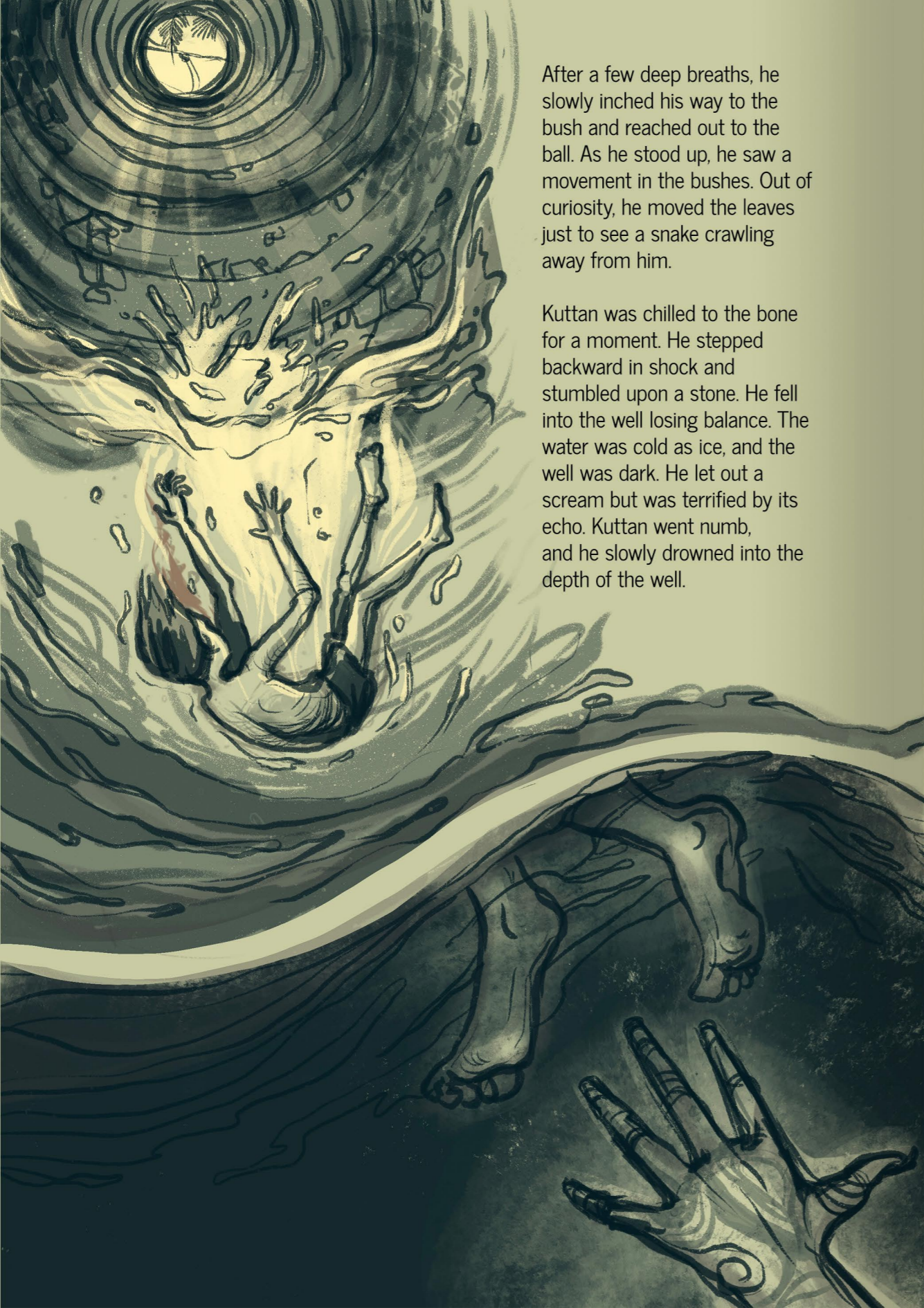
Like every other house in the village, Kuttan's home was nestled within striking foliage, mostly with tall coconut trees and herb plants. The property had an old well, made with uneven mud walls, from where they drew water for their daily use.

The old well was accessed with a lot of care by Kuttan's mother and was unsafe for a child. So, every time Kuttan went near the well, he heard shouting from inside the house, "Kuttaa, don't go near the well, there is 'Ummakki' (Monster) inside. It will catch and eat you". Although it was an approach to lure Kuttan away from the well, Kuttan believed that evil monsters lived in the well.



He, once, gathered courage and went with his mother to the well. But got frightened with the depth and the echoing sound of moving water that sounded like a cry.

One day Kuttan was playing with a ball around his house after lunch. His uncle had recently come home and, during his stay, taught Kuttan to make a ball out of coconut leaves. While playing that afternoon, the ball rolled into a bush near the well. Even though the sun was out, Kuttan was a tad scared to go pick the ball up.

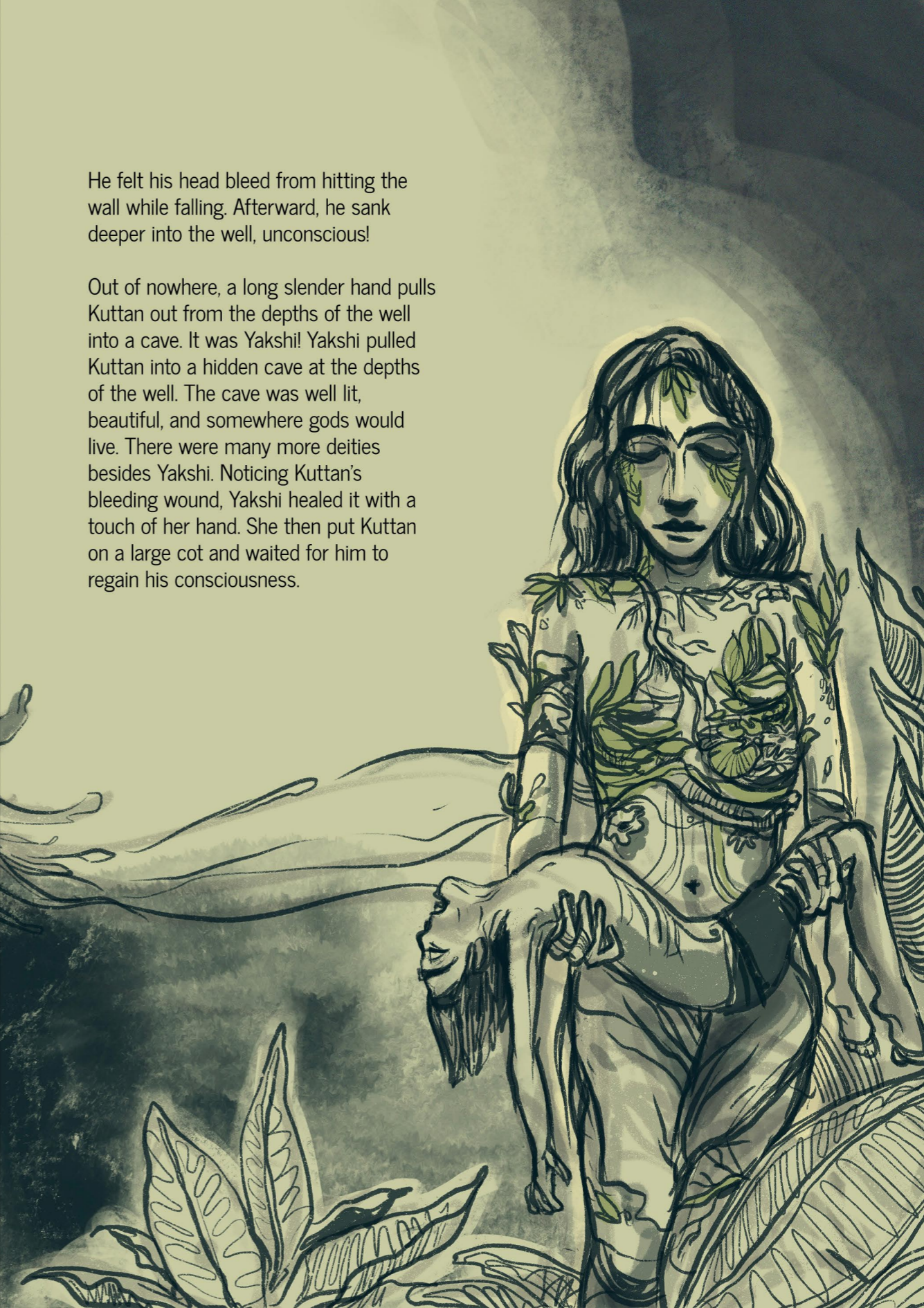


After a few deep breaths, he slowly inched his way to the bush and reached out to the ball. As he stood up, he saw a movement in the bushes. Out of curiosity, he moved the leaves just to see a snake crawling away from him.

Kuttan was chilled to the bone for a moment. He stepped backward in shock and stumbled upon a stone. He fell into the well losing balance. The water was cold as ice, and the well was dark. He let out a scream but was terrified by its echo. Kuttan went numb, and he slowly drowned into the depth of the well.

He felt his head bleed from hitting the wall while falling. Afterward, he sank deeper into the well, unconscious!

Out of nowhere, a long slender hand pulls Kuttan out from the depths of the well into a cave. It was Yakshi! Yakshi pulled Kuttan into a hidden cave at the depths of the well. The cave was well lit, beautiful, and somewhere gods would live. There were many more deities besides Yakshi. Noticing Kuttan's bleeding wound, Yakshi healed it with a touch of her hand. She then put Kuttan on a large cot and waited for him to regain his consciousness.





After a while, Kuttan opened his eyes and jumped in fright of what he saw. He saw these divine figures with glowing eyes and strange appearances. Naively, Kuttan asked them if they were 'Ummakki' and were going to eat him for coming into the well.

The deities laughed and told him that they are the spirits of the Kavu neighboring to his house. They told him how Kuttan's kind ancestors brought them to reside in the Kavu to protect the people of the village and flourish the agricultural land. Yakshi then introduces Kuttan to all the other deities. Madan, Marutha, Brahmarakshas, Chaathan, and Gandharvan; every "Ummaki," as Kuttan had known them, from his grandmother's stories, were standing before his eyes. With curiosity and innocence, Kuttan asks them, "Aren't you the same monsters from my grandmother's stories? I've heard stories about you killing people in the past. Aren't you the same monsters?"



Yakshi smiles gently and says, "Don't worry, Kuttan, those are just stories and Myths. We are the spirit of all elements in this village –from a stone to the large Banyan tree. We would never harm anybody in this village. We reside here to protect this land, vegetation, water, and the people of Keezhathil. We saw you falling to the depths of your house well and pulled you in to save you from bleeding to death." Kuttan remembers the wound and touches his forehead. It was healed, and the bleeding had stopped.

Yakshi held Kuttan's hand and says, "Come on, let's take a walk, Kuttan. Let me show you the real and beautiful nature of the Kavu, which scared you through the stories and myths. Kuttan, by now, had relaxed but was still in shock of the place he was walking by. He was confused, walking through this beautiful abode. He questions about the site to Yakshi.



Yakshi replies, "All the water bodies and trees are interconnected. Underground caves have allowed the spirits to travel from one water body to another in the village." She then says, "Come with us to the pond inside Kavu, you will understand better."

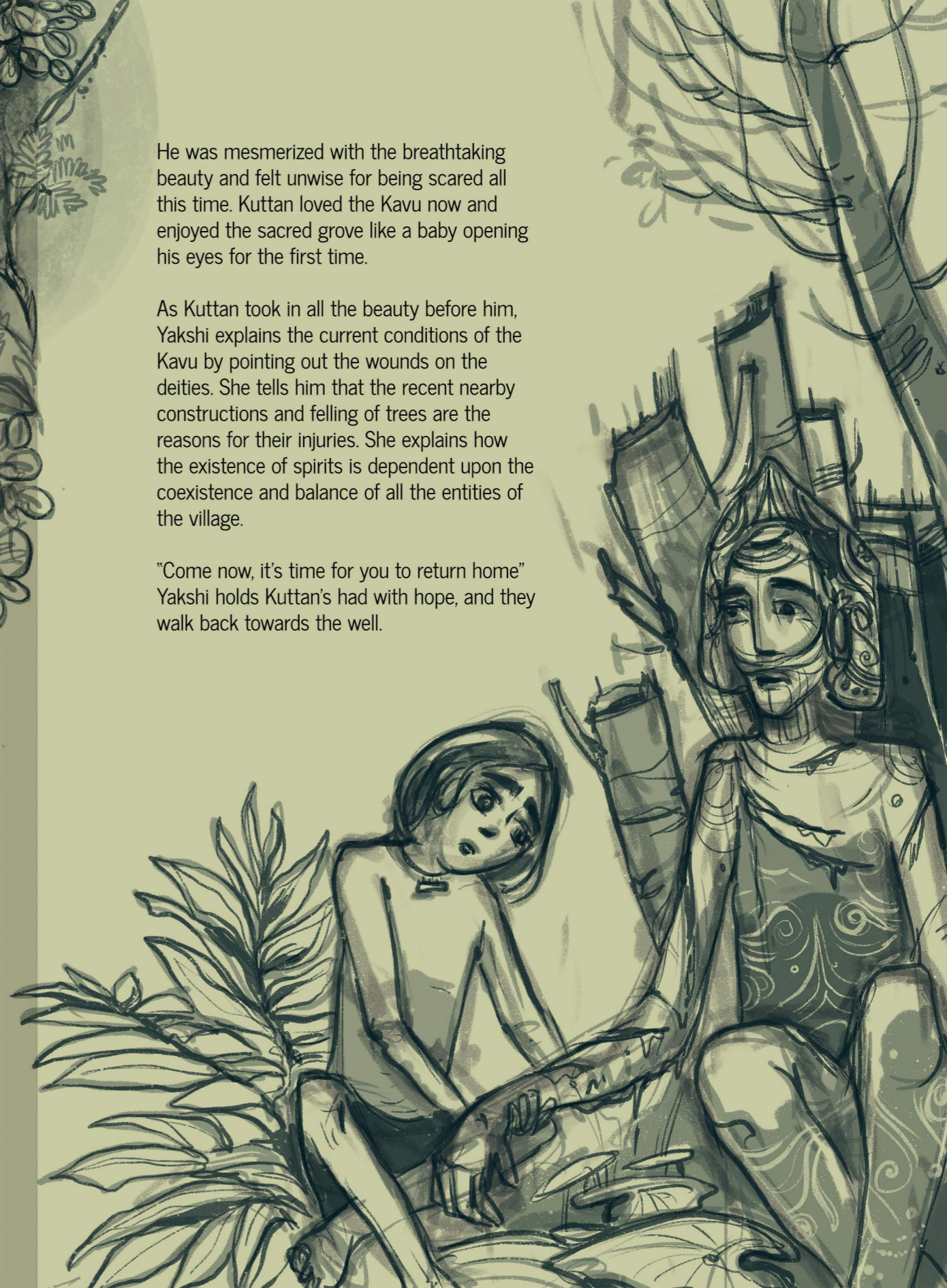
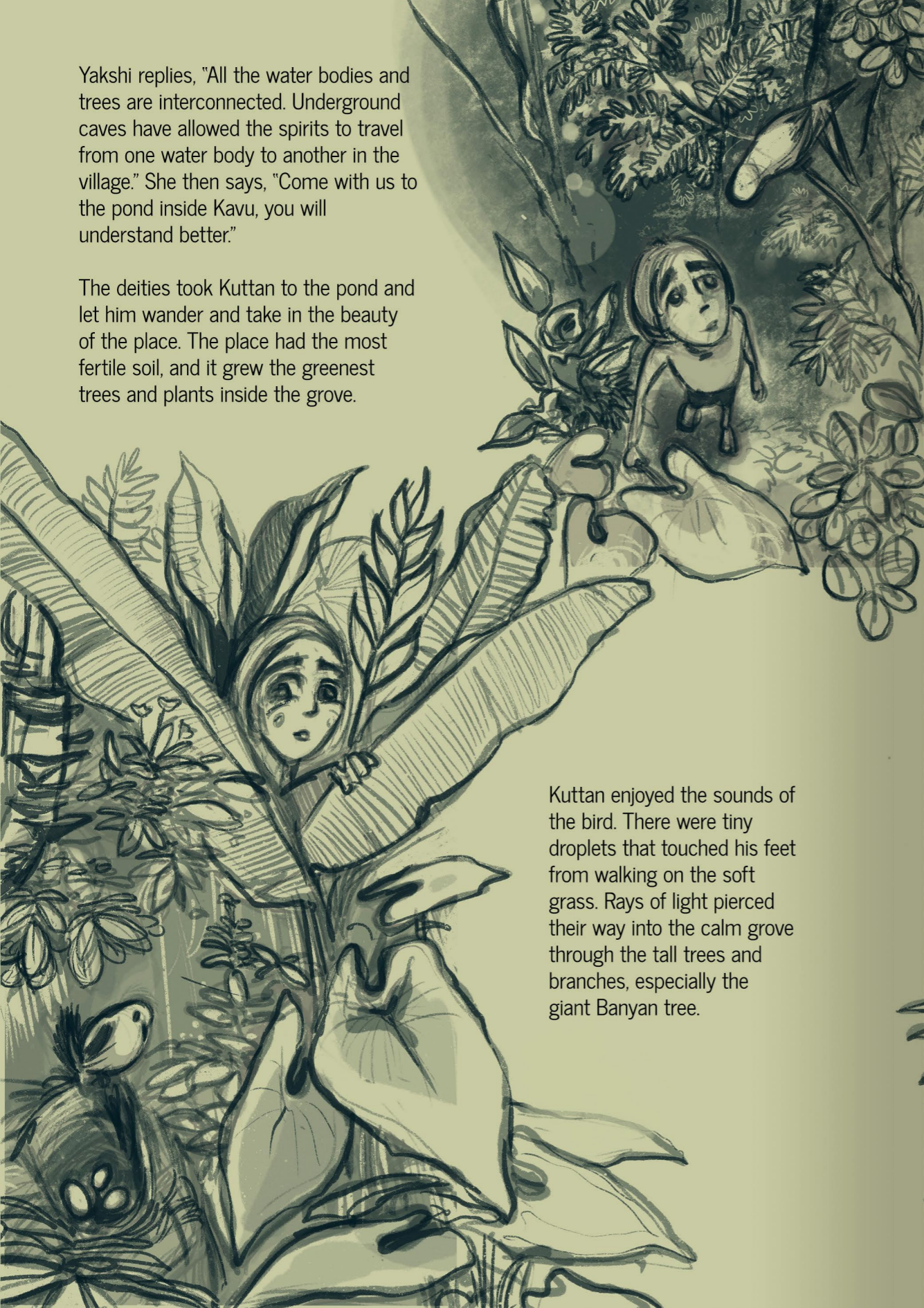
The deities took Kuttan to the pond and let him wander and take in the beauty of the place. The place had the most fertile soil, and it grew the greenest trees and plants inside the grove.

Kuttan enjoyed the sounds of the bird. There were tiny droplets that touched his feet from walking on the soft grass. Rays of light pierced their way into the calm grove through the tall trees and branches, especially the giant Banyan tree.

He was mesmerized with the breathtaking beauty and felt unwise for being scared all this time. Kuttan loved the Kavu now and enjoyed the sacred grove like a baby opening his eyes for the first time.

As Kuttan took in all the beauty before him, Yakshi explains the current conditions of the Kavu by pointing out the wounds on the deities. She tells him that the recent nearby constructions and felling of trees are the reasons for their injuries. She explains how the existence of spirits is dependent upon the coexistence and balance of all the entities of the village.

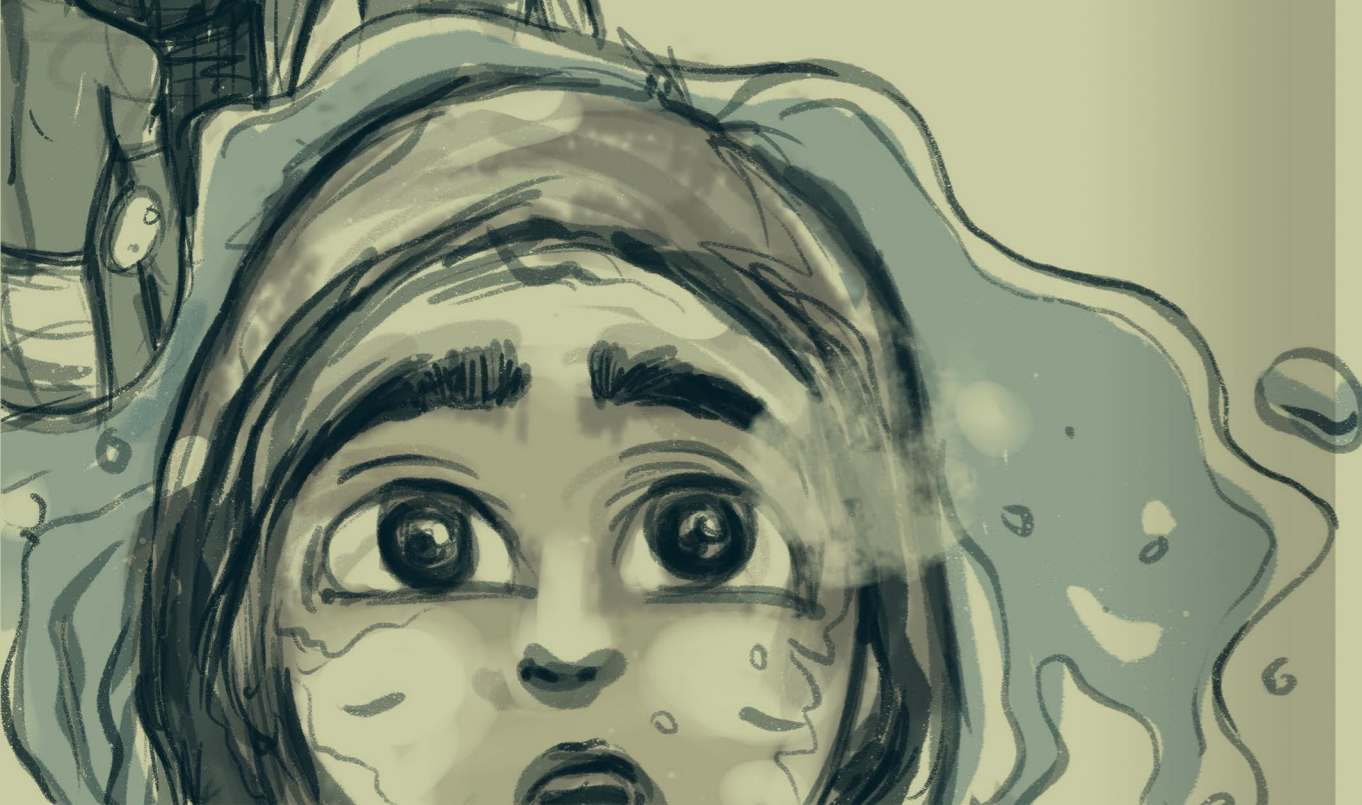
"Come now, it's time for you to return home" Yakshi holds Kuttan's hand with hope, and they walk back towards the well.





In a fraction, Kuttan sees people gathered over him and yelling his name. He notices that he was lying on his mother's lap, breathing heavily and holding her saree on the side on the well. He starts murmuring about Yakshi and the other deities, but no one heeds to his story.

"Don't worry, son, it's all right," said his mother in tears, "we are happy that you are alive. Just relax."



It slowly dawns on Kuttan that he was rescued from the well by the family. Back at home, he explains all the incidents from the well to his mother, but his mother is shocked and does not believe in anything she hears. She assumes that Kuttan must have gotten scared in the well and looks for his amulet but notices that it is missing.

"Don't worry, my son, your amulet must have gone missing in the well of which you are having such thoughts." Kuttan's mother said with confidence. "These nightmares will go away once I get you a new amulet from the astrologer. Kuttan's mother calms him and puts him to sleep. After talking to his mother, Kuttan, too, believed that it was but, just a dream.

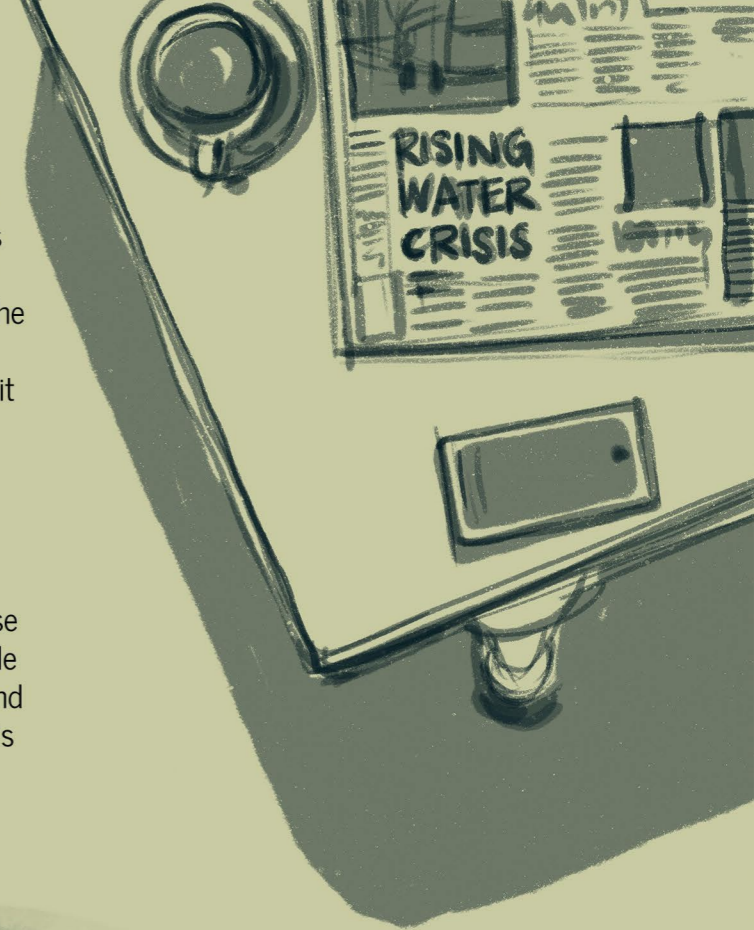


Years passed, and Kuttan and his family moved out of the Keezhathil village to a nearby town. Most of the village properties were acquired by an Industry, and they were asking for Kuttan's family property, too. At the same time, Keezhathil village had started facing a water crisis. Where once it was a land of water bodies, now it has become a dry land due to overexploitation of the water bodies and the groundwater. Day after day, it just got worse, and the people of the village had no reason but to sell their property.



A realtor going through all the plots noticed that only old well in Kuttan's property had water left. The realtor met with Kuttan and told him that the buyer is interested in his estate. He told Kuttan about the well and how it is the only well that had water left, but it is about to collapse and be saved by the Industry.

Surprised to hear about the well, Kuttan plans on visiting his old house that was ignored after their move. He went to the village to discuss the land deeds and also to relieve some of his childhood memories before an Industry is built on it.

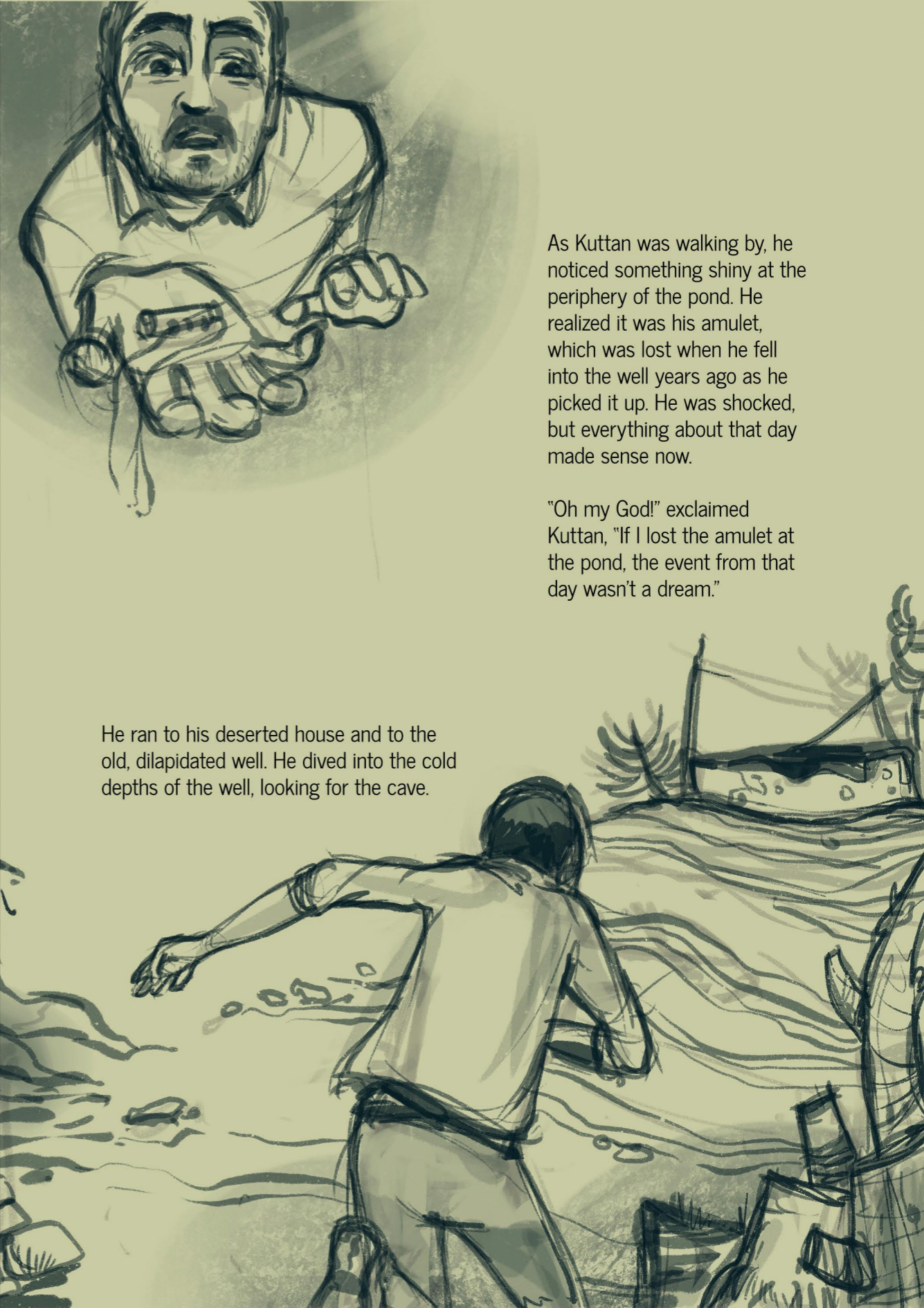


The village people who still lived there were struggling to find a solution to get drinking water. Their primary source for years had been the groundwater through wells, but they were all dry.





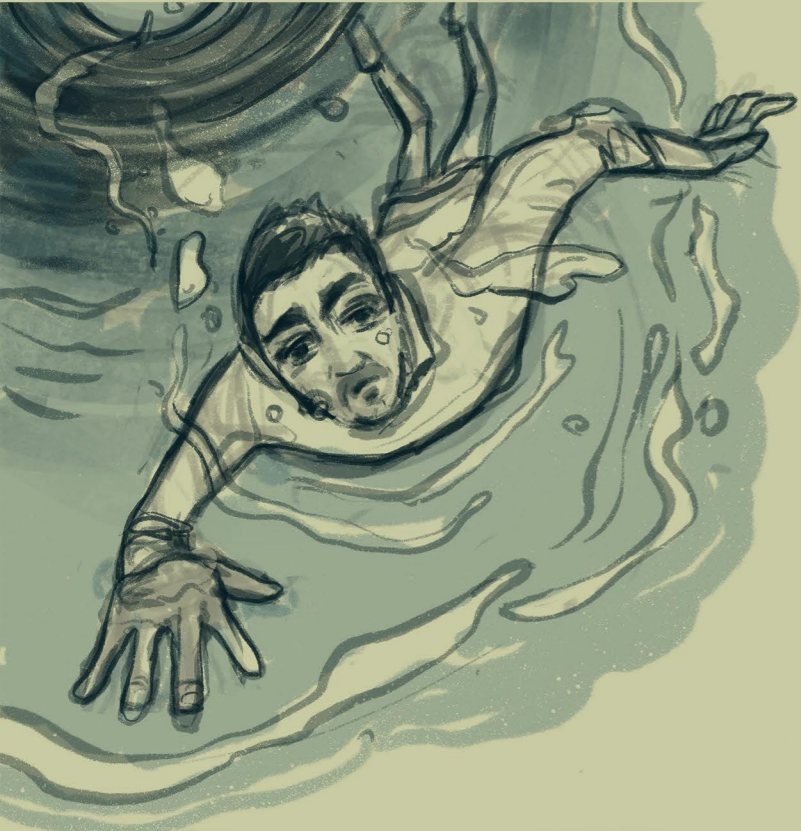
On arriving at the village, Kuttan was shocked to see all the trees cut down. The place that looked like a tropical forest now looked like a desert. Kuttan walked around a dried-up pond that once used to be hidden by a dense set of trees. Kuttan remembered the beauty of the place from his memory.



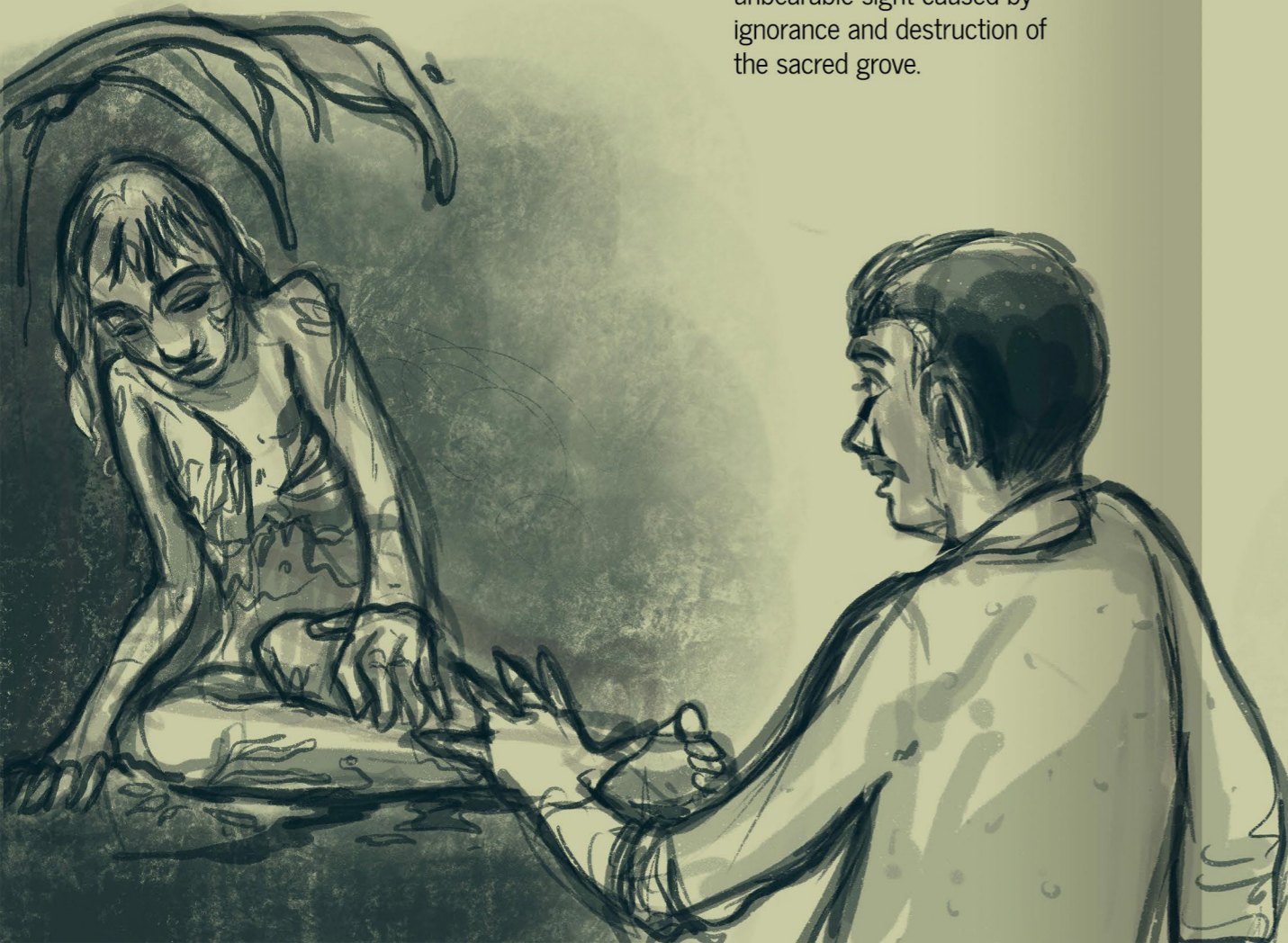
As Kuttan was walking by, he noticed something shiny at the periphery of the pond. He realized it was his amulet, which was lost when he fell into the well years ago as he picked it up. He was shocked, but everything about that day made sense now.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Kuttan, "If I lost the amulet at the pond, the event from that day wasn't a dream."

He ran to his deserted house and to the old, dilapidated well. He dived into the cold depths of the well, looking for the cave.

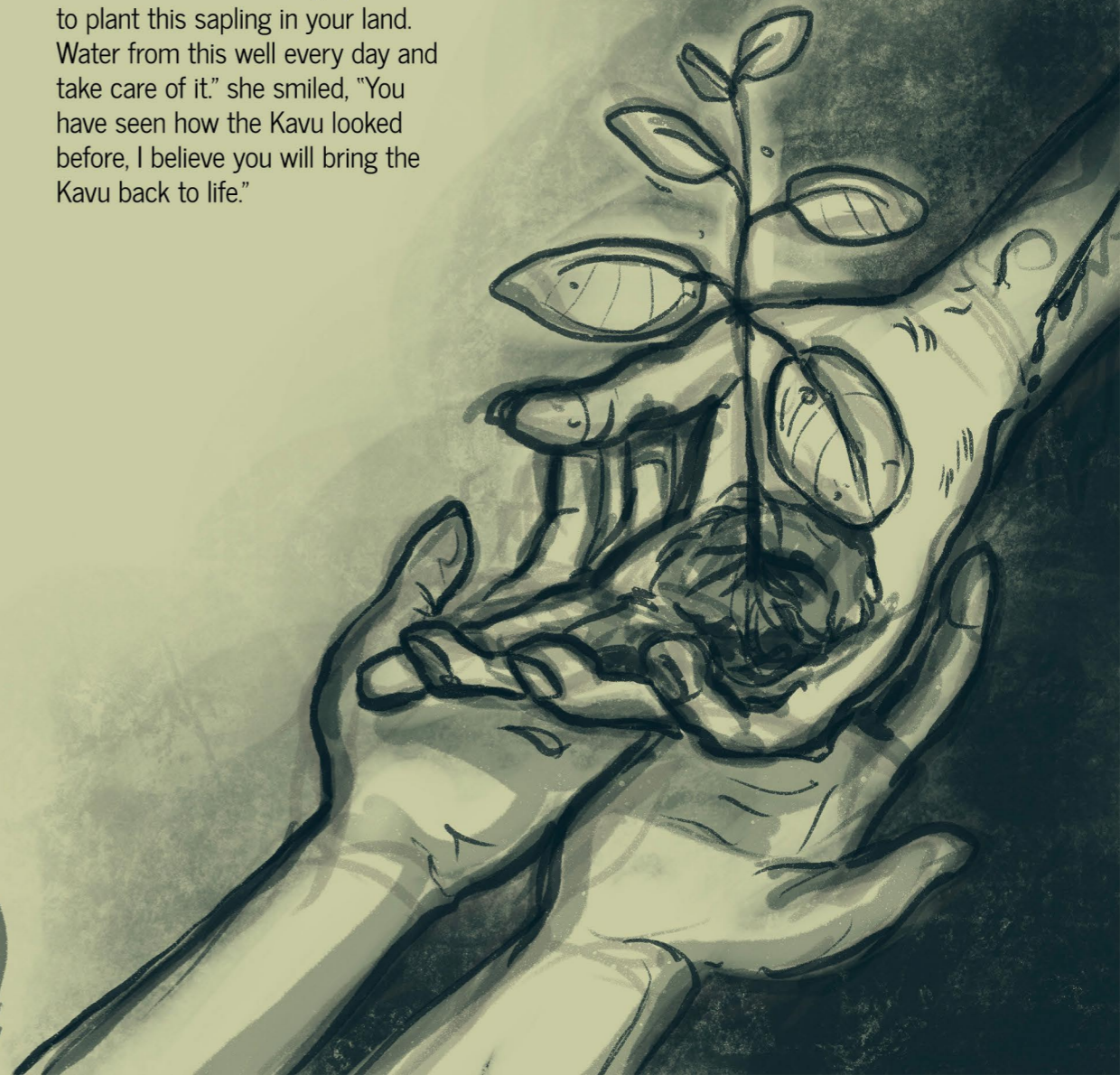


He swam and swam until he saw a dim crack of light. He swam excitedly towards it and entered the cave just to see a gruesome environment. Yakshi was lying in there with bleeding wounds all over her body, she looked aged and weak. All the other deities were dead. Kuttan stood there realizing, the unbearable sight caused by ignorance and destruction of the sacred grove.



Cutting of trees, depleting the groundwater all for unwanted reasons, and without any thought. Kuttan was angry at himself and guilty for not believing and helping the spirits when he had the chance. Kuttan knelt down before Yakshi and asked her what he could do now. Yakshi, without speaking, got up, picked up a sapling, and gave it to Kuttan.

Yakshi told Kuttan softly, "you need to plant this sapling in your land. Water from this well every day and take care of it." she smiled, "You have seen how the Kavu looked before, I believe you will bring the Kavu back to life."



Kuttan swam back up with the sapling. He went and planted the first sapling of his life. He was surprised how such a small and simple act could make such a big difference.

He drew water from the well and watered the plant. That evening he sat near the plant. He could hear the evening call from a single crow pheasant. Was it calling out for this auspicious act, or was it a call for help?

