



# Walking in the Wild

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Level 4



The sun is just waking up in Mizoram, its rays nudging the Dampa Tiger Reserve to life.

Bamboo stems huddle together, towering over the narrow mud paths. The River Seling flows by, gurgling.

Swathing canopies rise, as if to meet the sky. Morning dew drips to the forest floor, making a gentle pitter-patter in the quiet of dawn.



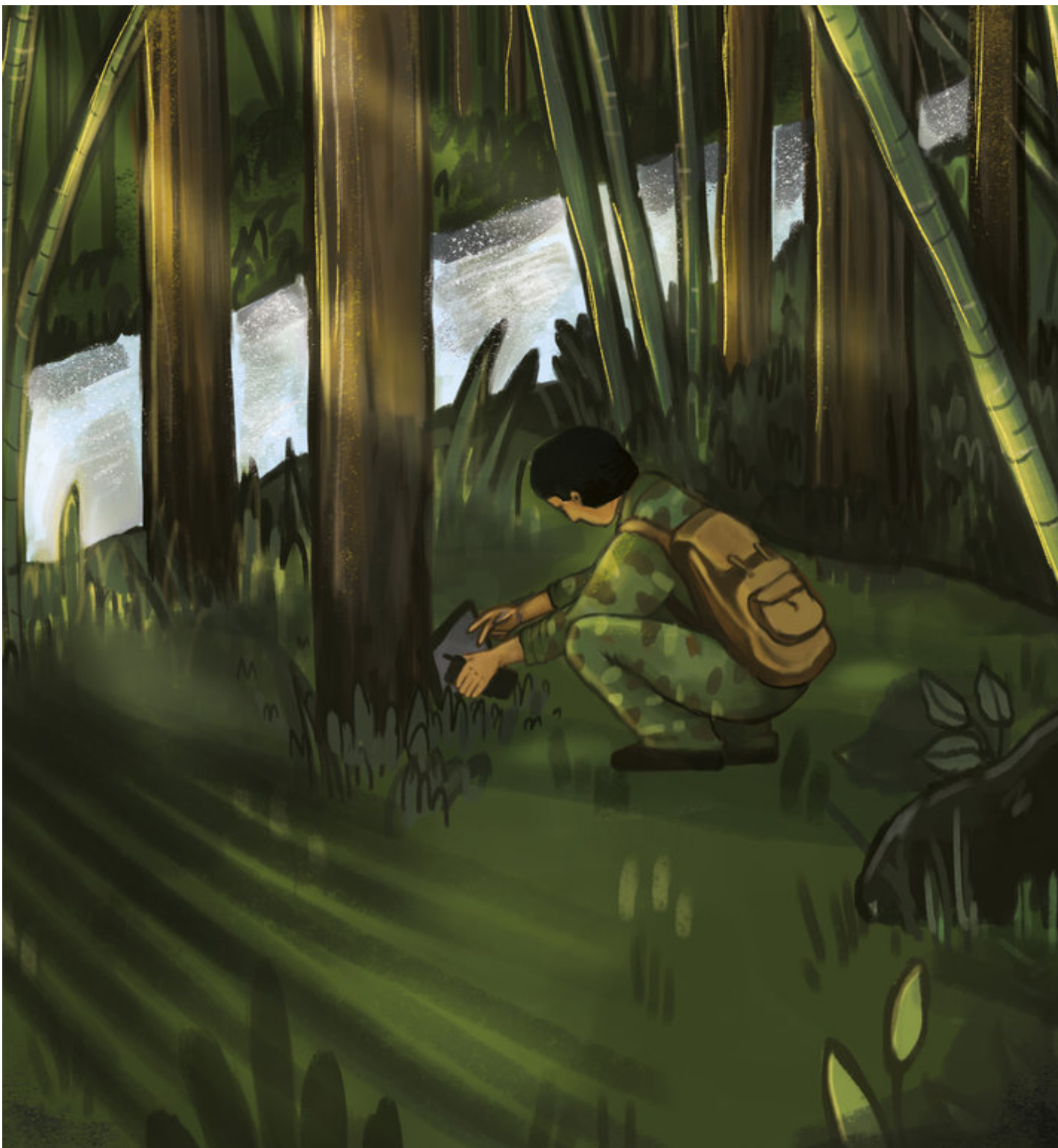
No, not quiet. Still, maybe.  
Peaceful, definitely.  
But not quiet.  
Forests are not quiet places.



Crickets chirp.  
Great slaty woodpeckers  
cackle from treetops.  
Hoolock gibbons whoop  
together. The call of the  
great Indian hornbill echoes  
through the forest.

Morning dawns like an  
orchestra in perfect  
harmony, with all the forest  
residents calling, "Good  
morning, I am up!"

In this lively medley, a forest  
guard is hard at work.



Zakhuma Don is checking a camera trap on a tree close to the river.

He is a guard with the anti-poaching team of the Mizoram Forest Department. He patrols the forest every day to make sure that no one or nothing harms the forest. The camera traps help him keep watch even at night, when he is fast asleep at the camp.



Zakhuma scrolls through the camera trap footage from the previous night. A hog badger caught unawares. The large nose of a barking deer.

Zakhuma smiles. It's these little moments that he cherishes. He loves this forest, and everything that lives in it. Looks like it was an uneventful night.



Zakhuma loves photography as a way of understanding animal behaviour. So when he patrols, he takes photos and videos on his personal camera.

Later, he shares these images and stories with the local people of Mizoram and also people who live far, far away. After all, so little is known about the forests of the Northeast of India.



Zakhuma has been able to take photographs of rare animals – the grey peacock pheasant and even the elusive clouded leopard.

He now knows that the clouded leopard is an expert climber and has impressively long canines.





Wait a minute!

What was that?

Zakhuma stares at a video –  
three men slinking away into  
the darkness.

He plays it again.



Zakhuma replaces the camera trap, and starts looking around for clues that the men may have left behind.

He wonders if they belong to the village in the buffer zone, the area bordering the reserve. Mizos, Riangs and Chakmas\* live around Dampa. Sometimes, they enter the reserve for wood, or to fish or hunt animals, even though these activities are not allowed.

\*Mizos, Riangs and Chakmas are tribes native to the Northeast India.

Zakhuma and his team have been worried about another threat to the jungle. People are now planting too many palm trees, since palm oil from the fruits brings in quick money.

Making room for these plantations could deplete the entire forest. The forest department has been spreading awareness about the importance of preserving the forest and its wildlife, and about penalties for wrongdoers.

But Zakhuma knows that change will take time.







Zakhuma moves swiftly along the river. He sees something that makes him stop.

A snare set by poachers.

A barking deer trapped in its clutches.

Zakhuma's heart goes out to the deer. No matter how many times he has come across this situation, it still hurts him to see an animal in pain.



He cautiously approaches the frightened deer. The animal is exhausted from trying to escape but thankfully, still alive. Zakhuma quickly gets to work. He radios his department for help, and in the meantime tries to calm the deer.

Help arrives and the guards cut the snare, being careful not to hurt the animal.



Free at last, the deer bounds away into the forest.  
Everyone is relieved – the deer is going to be all right!  
But there is still work to be done.



The poachers will return to check on the trap. So some of the forest guards hide and lie in wait. As dusk falls and the light starts to dim, the wind carries low, whispered voices to them.

Zakhuma recognises the three men from the camera trap video.

The poachers approach stealthily, with cloth bags, in the hope of carrying their trapped loot back.





But before they can escape, Zakhuma and his team surround them.

The poachers are nabbed and taken back to the camp. It's over quickly! At the camp, they will be questioned by the authorities.

Darkness is falling over Dampa as Zakhuma navigates the steep and hilly terrain, picking his way back through the trees and bamboos.

He stops to listen to the creaks of the bamboos.

It's like they are talking to him.







It's these secrets of nature, these things of startling beauty that inspire Zakhuma to protect the forest every day. It's not easy - there is fighting at the border, poachers that turn violent, and the struggle of the small salary that he earns.



But for him, this is all in a day's work.  
Zakhuma belongs to the forest and the forest to him.



## Meet Zakhuma

Zakhuma works as a forest guard and wildlife photographer with the Mizoram Forest Department in Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram. This is one of India's more remote tiger reserves with very difficult terrain.

Zakhuma is a self-taught photographer. He has created a valuable archive of photographs of Dampa's biodiversity: plants, animals, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mosses and fungi.

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# Walking in the Wild

(English)

Take a walk with Zakhuma, a brave forest guard who lives in Mizoram. As Zakhuma takes us through his forest, we learn about the different animals and what it means to protect the jungle.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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