

BEHIND THE VINES

The explorer passed Max to Lila, one hand under the boy's head. 'Stay here with him. We'll be quick.'

'No!' said Lila. 'Whatever it is you're planning, I need to know.' She rearranged Max in her arms, clumsy with love, cradling him to her. 'Come on!'

The explorer opened his mouth as if to argue, then met Lila's eyes and shut it again. He turned to the wall of green foliage.

'It goes further back than you think,' he said. 'Come, push away the vines, quick.'

Fred shoved aside a great armful of the lianas,

some browned with age, some thick as his wrist.

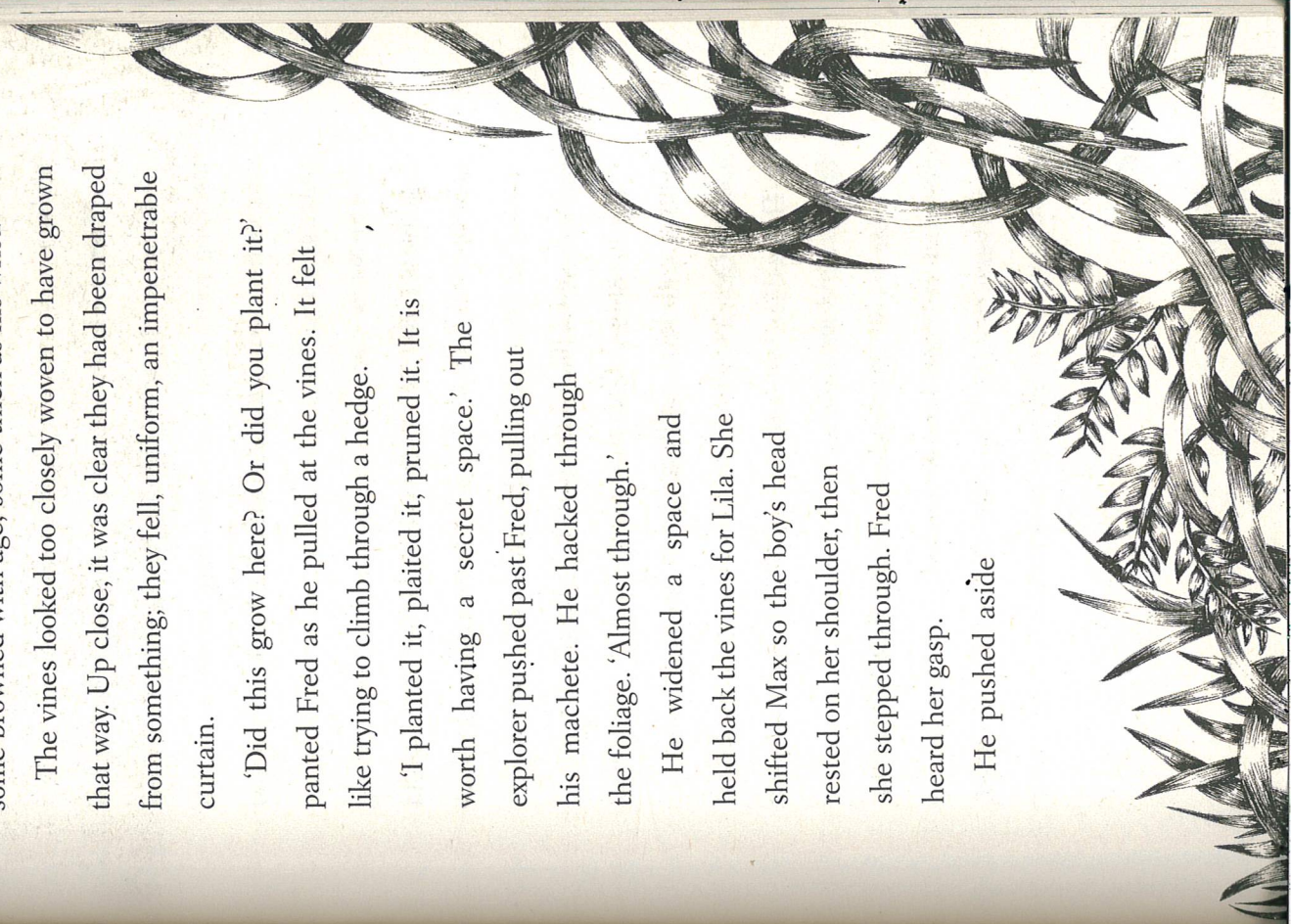
The vines looked too closely woven to have grown that way. Up close, it was clear they had been draped from something; they fell, uniform, an impenetrable curtain.

'Did this grow here? Or did you plant it?' panted Fred as he pulled at the vines. It felt like trying to climb through a hedge.

'I planted it, plaited it, pruned it. It is worth having a secret space.' The explorer pushed past Fred, pulling out his machete. He hacked through the foliage. 'Almost through.'

He widened a space and held back the vines for Lila. She shifted Max so the boy's head rested on her shoulder, then she stepped through. Fred heard her gasp.

He pushed aside



the final layer of tendrils and creepers. He stopped short.

The vines fell from the roof of a large three-sided stone room. It was built in similar stone to their sleeping room, but with its ceiling almost intact. It was as high as a cathedral, and it smelt of moss and quiet growing things.

The walls were covered in vines, and something had made a nest in the far corner, a ball of grass and feathers.

And in the middle of the bare earth floor, something shone yellow and chrome in the green light.

'An aeroplane,' breathed Fred.

'Precisely.' The explorer strode towards the plane. 'Come. Quickly.'

They edged forward, clumped together, Lila's arms tight around her brother.

'Here she is.' The explorer thumped the side of the plane: it was small, with two seats set one behind the other.

'But you said it burned!' said Fred.

'I did not. *You* assumed that. I said there was a fire, which is not the same thing. I was on a recce when she started to choke. We crash-landed through the canopy, straight on to the stone city. Saved my life. It took five years to repair her.'

Very slowly, Con put out a hand and stroked the wing of the plane.

'I've been keeping the boulevard between the trees clear of grass ever since I came – just in case. It will make a good runway.' He stopped, corrected himself. 'It will make an *adequate* runway. I hope.'

'We're going to fly home!' said Con. Her eyes were shining.

'I am not. I can no longer fly –' he smacked his wounded leg – 'you need both feet to fly a plane. *You* will fly.'

'You want *us* to fly a plane?' asked Fred.

'Well, not all three of you. One of you.'

'No!' said Con. 'Never, not possible, absolutely not! We've already been in one plane crash. Have you any idea what the odds are on surviving two?'

'What else are you planning to do?'

Con looked at Max. She looked at the plane.

'It's much simpler to fly than you think,' said the explorer.

Max gave a moan and struggled in Lila's arms.

'There is enough fuel for one brief lesson, and the journey to the hospital. Which of you will fly? Lila? As Max is your brother, you have first rights to it.'

'I can't!' said Lila. Her eyes were full of tears. 'I would! But I can't breathe when I'm near heights!'

'Con?' said the explorer. 'Fred?'

'Absolutely no way in the world!' said Con. 'I don't want to kill us all!'

The explorer looked at Fred. Fred looked at the plane. His insides were growing hot with the hope of it and cold with fear. His fingertips began to quiver. His ears were ringing.

'I can't,' he said.

'Why not?' asked the explorer. 'The thing that makes driving dangerous is the other drivers. There

will be no other planes.'

'On one lesson?'

'You will have to learn fast.'

'What if I crash?' Fred asked.

'You will have to refrain from doing so,' said the explorer.

'But —'

'You have not, I notice, said you *won't*. You have said only that you *can't*. I say you can.'

'Fred,' said Lila. Her eyes met his. Fred had never seen a person look at once so frightened and so brave.

'All right,' said Fred. 'I'll try.'

'Of course you will,' said the explorer. 'Lila and I will make Max comfortable. I'll return in an hour. I expect you to be waiting here.' The explorer held out his arms to take Max, but Lila clutched him closer to her chest.

'I'm coming with you,' said Con. 'I could be useful. I care for my great-aunt, when she's sick.'

'Don't waste time,' said the explorer to Fred.

'Climb into the front seat and get a feel for the controls. But don't press the black button – that's the starter. I do not recommend you try to fly through stone.'

And they turned, leaving Fred alone in the great stone cathedral with the waiting aeroplane.

