



EXPLORER SCHOOL

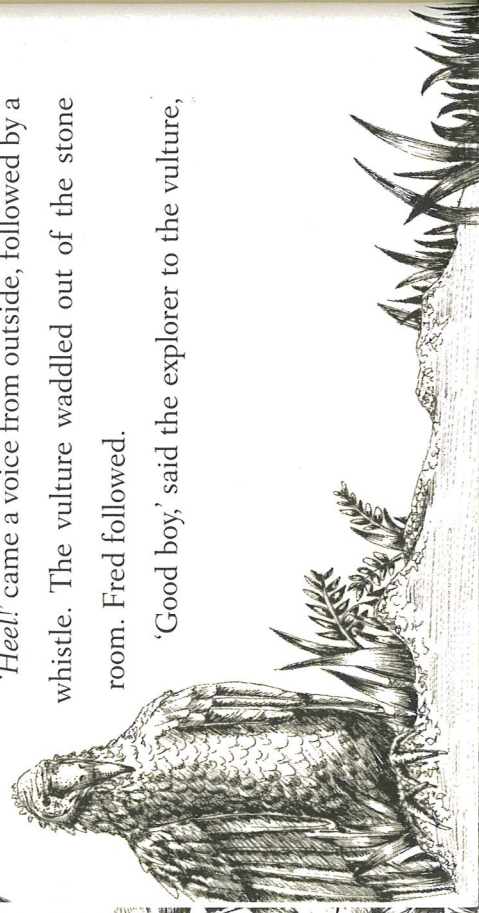
The next day was Thursday, a full twelve days since the crash. Fred was woken from a nightmare about a burning aeroplane by the vulture pecking at the back of his head. He sat up.

'Hey!' he said.

The vulture looked at him, an irate glare of disdain for the slack of a world that had failed it.

'Heel!' came a voice from outside, followed by a whistle. The vulture waddled out of the stone room. Fred followed.

'Good boy,' said the explorer to the vulture,



tussling its naked red head as if it were a dog. The fire outside the stone room had already been lit.

'Wake the others,' said the explorer.

'It's only just sunrise,' said Fred dubiously. 'Max sometimes threatens to pee on you if you wake him up early.'

'Wake him anyway. If he chooses to weaponise his urine, so be it. I've been watching you all, and there are some basic techniques for survival that you don't yet know. I'll be working late today, so you need to listen now.' He glanced down at Fred's palm and saw the mark. He said nothing, but it was possible, Fred thought, that the left side of his face smiled half an inch.

'Come, hurry! Explorer school is in session.'

The others emerged, rubbing their eyes. The explorer handed out pieces of meat from a gourd cut into a serving bowl.

'To get home, you need to know both the river and the land. Tell me what you know.'

It was hard to say what the meat was – a bird, Fred thought, though it might have been fish. He ate as slowly as he could, chewing each piece until it turned to pulp in his mouth.

'We already know the river quite well,' said Con proudly. 'We came on a raft.'

'Describe it.'

'Fred made it,' said Con. She grinned at him. Her cheek was covered in mosquito bites, but her smile was broad. 'He was fanatical about it.'

'What did you use?' the explorer asked Fred.

Fred described it as best he could. He tried not to sound too proud of it.

'It sounds a good design,' said the explorer, and Fred felt his face burn hot with pleasure. 'I came along the Negre, by raft from Manaus, on one of my

first expeditions. I used a similar model. Not as good as a dugout canoe, but quicker to make.'

'What was the expedition looking for?' asked Fred.

'Various things. Some of the men were looking for a city, others for plants for a new medicine. I was just hungry to see the world. We were naive, and clumsy. Two men died. But I loved it.'

The explorer began sketching a map in the dust. 'You come this way, around the edge of the rapids by Dead Man's Point, and north. Water leaping up into your face, the raft trying to ride the waves the way you would a horse, and me trying to make sure that the bamboo rod I used to steer didn't jerk and impale me through the ribs. Some of the happiest days of my life.'

He handed out more meat. Max widened his eyes in appeal, and was given double. Con opened her mouth to object, and then closed it again.

'You'll have to do part of the same journey I made, before you reach the city. It will be choppy. Foam,

and rocks – you can get thrown up several feet in the air, so you'll have to tie the little one on. If anyone falls overboard, they can't grab on to the raft in those waters without capsizing it.'

'Really?' said Lila. 'But couldn't you –'

'No,' he said sternly. 'The only honourable thing to do is drown.'

'Oh,' said Lila.

'Oh,' said Fred.

'Fine,' said Con. 'What else?'

'And then there are certain preparations you must make. Have you got a pen?'

They didn't, of course, but Lila took a flint and began to scratch into a piece of grey stone.

'In the forest, fifty miles down from here,' said the explorer, adding to the dust map, 'you'll come across a kind of bee; it's absolutely minuscule, and rather beautiful. It's drawn to sweat, and to moisture, and it's happiest when nesting on the centre of the pupil of your eye. The people there call them eye lickers. Write that down.'

'Eye lickers,' said Lila, scratching hard. There was no fear in her face, only concentration. Baca climbed on top of her head and sat there, an inquisitive hat. 'The best thing to do is wear a bit of net over your eyes.'

'Could we make netting?' asked Fred.

'That's a good question. It's one of the very few things that is almost impossible to make.'

'Could I –' Fred closed his eyes and tried to picture what the net would need to look like – 'punch holes in a bit of snakeskin?'

'Well, you could.' The explorer looked at Fred, nodding slowly. 'That's not a bad idea, in fact. But finding snakeskin is difficult in these parts; the vultures eat them. I have one mosquito net. It's the most valuable thing I own, I think.'

They waited.

'I suppose I can cut off four pieces, and you can tie them round the back of your heads with vines.'

'Thank you,' said Fred and Lila together.

'That's kind,' said Con solemnly.

The explorer waved it away, frowning, unexpectedly awkward in the face of gratitude. 'And then, the vampire bats.' He added further lines to the map, and some spikes to show hills. 'You need to find a way to deal with them.'

Con looked up. 'Please, please tell me that's a joke.'

'Not at all! They come in swarms – not around here, but on the other side of the mountain. You must have heard of them?'

'No!' said Con.

Fred hadn't either. 'But Lila will have,' he said.

'I've never seen one,' said Lila. 'But their front teeth are sharper than razors, and their tongues give off a chemical that stops your blood from clotting.'

'Quite,' said the explorer. 'It's all very impressive, from an evolutionary point of view, but very frustrating from a personal one.'

'Frustrating?' said Con. 'Bats that eat you are frustrating?'

'They don't eat you, dear child. They drink you.'

I assure you there's a difference. When you strike round the mountain, you need to be wary of maggots.'

'Maggots,' said Con. The skin on her face was lurid white.

'Yes. It's unpleasant to think of yourself as the kind of person maggots choose to associate with, but there you are. There was a disconcerting moment, many years ago, when a maggot worked its way out of my skin; it poked its head up out of my body like a meerkat rising from a hole. It was extremely surprising. I'll teach you how to extract them with a thorn and some fire. Remind me.'

Lila wrote 'Maggots' on the list, and added a question mark.

The explorer looked at them appraisingly. 'You should go soon. You're nearly ready.'

Fred stared at him. Somehow the news did not fill him with the relief it should have.

'You should go before the rains. You can fish now. Fred knows how to set a trap. With that and the

tarantulas and some berries, you should survive. The maggots get worse during the rains, and the going is much slower when the ground is boggy. And there's yellow fever, of course.'

'Oh, of course!' said Con. She sounded a little hysterical. 'Maggots aren't enough, without a fever turning you yellow. It sounds like a proper holiday.'

The explorer ignored her. 'And when you get back to the city, when they ask you how you found your way, you must lie.'

'We'll say whatever you want,' said Con.

'And no matter how many people ask, you don't mention my name. Do you understand?'

'We don't know your name,' Con pointed out.

'What is it, so we know what not to say?'

The man gave a rumble, half anger, half amusement, deep in his throat. He rose, and hefted the vulture into his arms. 'I'll be working today. If you try to come behind the vine wall again, I'll feed your little toes to -'

'- to the vulture, yes. We know,' said Con.

'What was the meat?' asked Fred, as the explorer turned to go. 'It was good.'

'What? Oh, caiman,' he said. 'The one in the lake.'

That night, Max came and tugged at Fred's foot.

'Fred!' he hissed. His whisper was extremely damp.

'Fred! I have bad news. I have bad feelings.'

'What?' Fred jerked awake, searching for Max's face in the dark.

'I have a bad feeling,' said Max. 'A lot of bad feelings.'

'Shh, Max. What are you scared of?'

Max's voice was whiny, but there was real fear in it.

'There's something coming.'

'There's nothing coming,' said Fred. 'You're probably dreaming about the caiman.'

He listened. The forest was never still - it rustled and insects called and monkeys bellowed all night long - but it didn't sound any louder or quieter than usual.

'What kind of thing?'

'An animal. It's watching us. Or a monster. I know it.'

'There's no monsters, Max.'

'They're watching! I heard them!'

'The animals are just living their own lives, Max. I promise. They're not interested in us.'

'I can hear them breathing!'

'You don't need to worry. The only thing you need to do is go to sleep.'

It was dark under the vine roof, but Fred could see that Max's eyes were wide and unconvinced, and his hair was wet with sweat. 'Can I come and sleep next to you?'

Fred hesitated. Max was not a quiet sleeper. He thrashed a lot, and bit things, and farted in his sleep.

'Please?'

'All right. But please try not to bite me, OK?'

'Yes,' said Max. He took a firm hold of Fred's wrist, put it in his mouth, and went to sleep.

It was just as Fred was falling asleep that he saw the movement in the trees. He rose to his knees and crossed, keeping low, to the doorway of the stone

house. He looked out over the square. Moonlight filtered through the holes in the canopy.

Something *was* watching them. But it wasn't an animal: nor was it a monster.

It was the explorer. He was sitting in a low branch, leaning easily against the trunk, knife in hand, keeping guard.