

MAX

The screaming was not coming from inside Fred's head.

He sat bolt upright and stared around the stone room. Dawn was beginning to break. Con was pushing her hair out of her eyes. Lila was already on her feet.

Max was not lying on the stone floor. Max was missing.

Fred ran out into the stone square, staring around at the grey light, praying that Max would jump out from behind a tree and stick his tongue out at them.

'Max!' shouted Lila. 'Maxie! Where are you?'

'Max?' roared Fred.

The screaming stopped, and the silence battered itself against his skin harder than the noise.

'Not again!' said Con. But there was no lightness in her voice.

Then Fred's stomach turned suddenly cold, full of something writhing and maniacal. 'Is that him?' He pointed at the sloping wall they had tumbled down, to the foot of a tree. There was a bundle lying at its base.

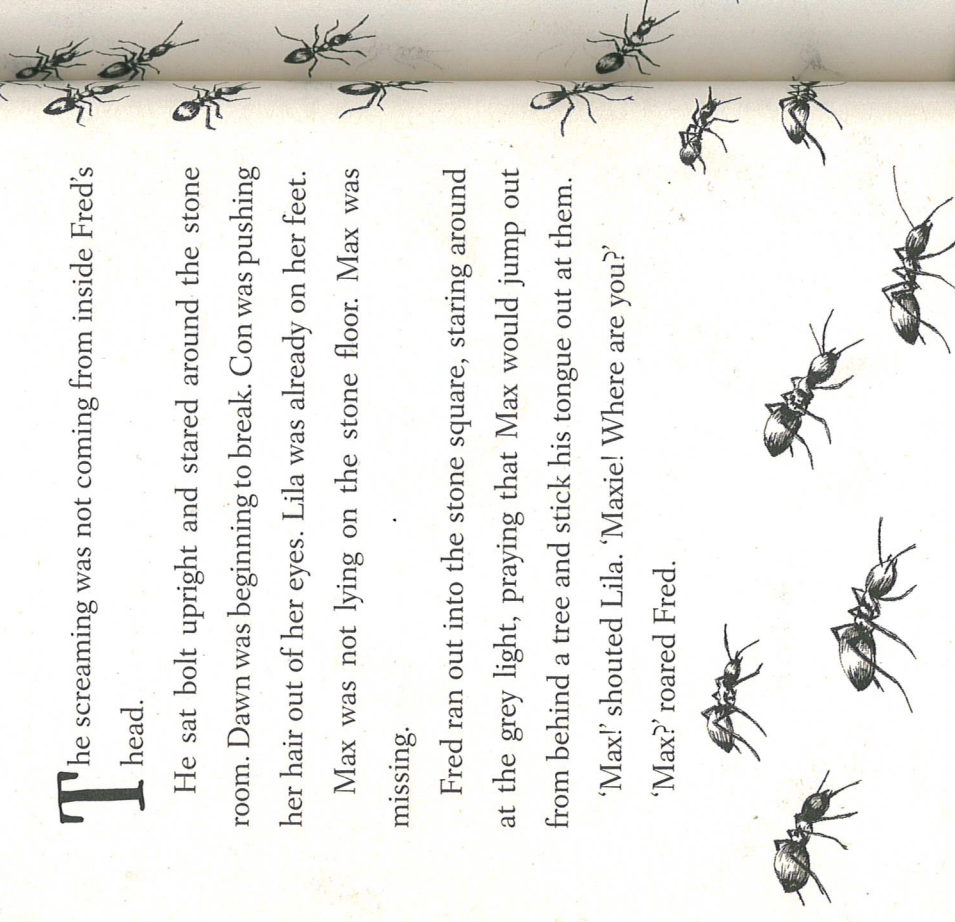
Fred sprinted to the bank, but Lila outpaced him, legs working like fury.

Max lay in a ball. He was shaking, his spine convulsing against his shirt, and his breathing was rough and erratic.

'Max?' said Lila. 'Max, are you hurt? Can you hear me?' Her hair fell over her brother's face. 'Say something!'

Max moaned and shook. His lips formed shapes, but he spoke no words.

'What's wrong with him?' said Con.



'I don't know.' Lila gathered up his arms and legs and little body and stumbled forward. 'I don't know! Come on!' She tripped on a rock and nearly fell on top of him.

Fred held out his arms. 'Shall I carry him?'

'No!' She held Max tighter. 'Where's the explorer?' she said desperately. Her eyes raked the city.

'He'll be working behind the vine curtain,' said Fred.

Lila turned, shouting as she ran. 'Explorer! Hey! You! Where are you?' Baca was tangled in her hair, clutching at her neck with both arms. She didn't seem to realise the sloth was there.

Fred ran after her, followed by Con, who slipped in the rain that glistened on the stones, scrambled up, her knee bleeding, and sprinted faster. Fred reached the vines ahead of Lila and began to push them away, fighting through the dense wall to where he'd seen the explorer disappear. 'Help!' he called. 'Are you here? It's an emergency!' His voice sounded very small and thin.

The vines parted and the explorer stared out. His

face was black with anger. 'What did I say to you about this place?'

'Shut up!' Lila whipped to face him, Max cradled against her chest, her fingers clawing at his skin to hold him as he shook. 'Max is sick! You help my brother or I'll kill you.'

The explorer's anger vanished. 'What happened? Is he dead?'

Lila let out a roar, a noise the like of which Fred had never heard. It had blood in it. Saliva flew from her mouth, and she backed away. 'No! NO! Don't you dare come near him if you're going to say he's dead!'

She stood, the tallest four foot ten Fred had ever seen, the sloth still on her shoulder like a bird on a pirate king. She blazed.

'I apologise. I was startled,' said the explorer. 'He's not dead. Here, give him to me.'

Tears poured down Lila's cheeks as she lowered Max into the explorer's arms.

'Get a branch from the fire. I need more light,' he said.

Fred ran to fetch a torch. Lila stood over them, unblinking.

The explorer laid Max on the floor. He pulled off his shirt and made a pillow, and raised Max's head. He muttered but didn't open his eyes. The shaking jerked his legs, and he had saliva around his mouth.

'Is he going to be all right?' asked Lila.

'I feel like I've eaten a goblin,' said Con. She retched and coughed. 'What can we do?'

'What's happening to him?' asked Fred.

'He's been bitten.'

'By what?'

'Ants.'

'Ants? Oh thank God! I thought it was a snake!' Con let out a bark of laughter and relief. The explorer shook his head.

'A snake would be better. He must have stood on a bullet-ant colony.'

'Bullet ants!' Lila let out a moan. 'Aren't they ...? She couldn't say the word.'

'Deadly? They can be, particularly if there are

allergies involved. He needs to get to a hospital. They can treat it. But only if he gets there soon.'

'How soon?' asked Lila.

'He will shake for another day, and he'll develop a fever. The fever can't be allowed to last more than five days. A week at most. It will cause the brain to swell.'

'So ... so he's just going to die? That's it?' said Lila. 'You're going to let him die? You can't! I'll kill you!' Her face and eyes were wild.

'No. Of course not.' The morning light showed the explorer's face was grey and suddenly ancient. 'I won't let him die. Not another.'

Fred thought of the explorer's face, that night around the fire, as he had talked about love.

'How, then?' urged Lila.

'Let me think,' said the explorer. His tone was measured.

'No! There's no time to sit and think!' said Lila wildly. 'You don't care! You don't understand! We have to do something *now!*'

'I do care, in fact. I do understand.' He raised Max

in his arms and began to rub his hands and feet, trying to quicken the circulation. 'I told you I had a son.' He stood and cradled Max against his chest. 'Come. This one will not die.'

'But how do we get to the hospital?' said Fred.

'You said the walk would take a month!' said Con.

'There's another way.'

'What is it? Whatever it is, I'll do it!' said Lila.

'Anything! *Anything!*'

'You fly.'

