

TARANTULAS

By the time Fred got back the others were awake, and furious, and eating.

It is difficult to look angry and chew at the same time, so they put down their bananas to glare at him.

'Where were you?' asked Lila.

'We thought he might have been cutting off your fingers,' said Con.

Fred explained, about the trap, about the statues, and proffered the berries as a peace offering.

By the time they'd finished spitting out the berries, and Max had finished miming being sick on Fred's

shoes, Con and Lila had stopped glaring quite so ferociously.

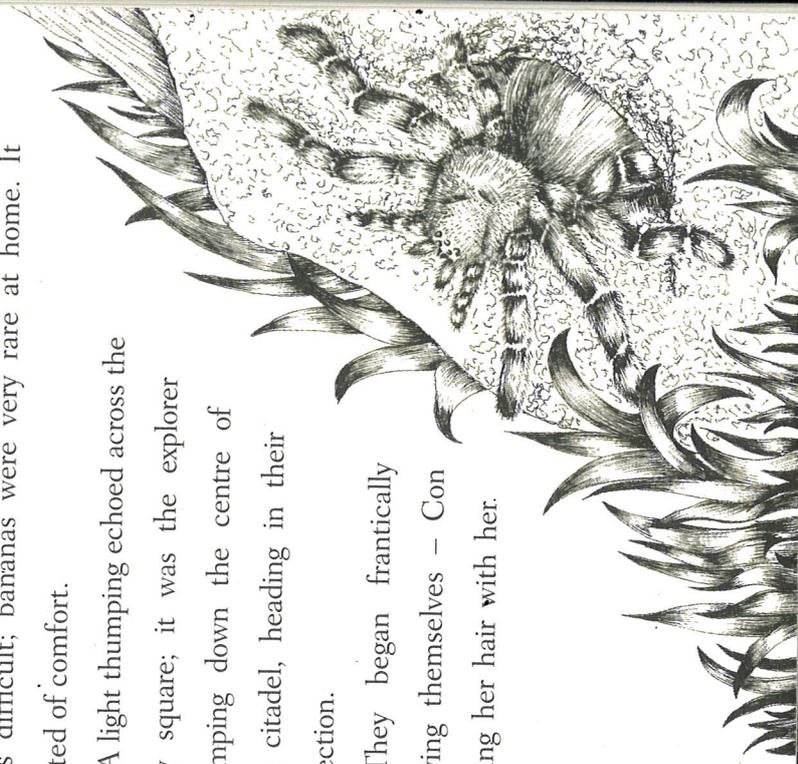
Lila offered him three-quarters of a banana.

'We found them over there – there's a tree, behind that cluster of stones – where the earth shows through. There were five, but we only took three, in case they belong to,' she gestured with her head, up towards the statues, 'him.'

The banana was a little green, but Fred preferred them that way. He ate as slowly as he could, but it was difficult; bananas were very rare at home. It tasted of comfort.

A light thumping echoed across the city square; it was the explorer stomping down the centre of the citadel, heading in their direction.

They began frantically tidying themselves – Con raking her hair with her.



fingers, Lila straightening Baca's fur. Max licked his forearms like a cat.

At that point, several things happened at once. The explorer came closer. He didn't, in fact, seem to be looking at them. He seemed lost in thought, staring upwards at the canopy as he walked.

A rustling made Fred look away, down at the ground.

And a snake reared up suddenly from behind a fallen branch. It stood straight up, like the periscope on a submarine. It was violent green, with a whitish belly. Its eyes were red. Fred gave a hiss and gestured to the others. They froze.

'Don't panic,' whispered Lila. 'Snakes don't attack—remember?'

Fred backed away. It came up over the trunk, its neck still a stalk, heading towards him. It didn't seem to like him staring.

'I think the snake might not know that,' whispered Fred.

The snake started to glide across the log towards

them. Fred's breath halted in the middle of his throat. He stared around wildly for a stick.

The explorer walked straight past them, chewing on a stick with fierce intent. Without pausing in his stride, without seeming to take aim, he pulled a rock from his pocket and threw it at the snake. It cut through the air and struck the snake in the neck. The snake slumped to the ground.

The explorer kept walking. He didn't look back. His eyes returned to the canopy overhead.

Fred stared at Lila, at Con, and saw his own shock reflected back twice over.

'Where did he learn to do that?' whispered Lila.

'And *why*?' hissed Con. 'I thought he'd rather we were all dead — it'd be more convenient for him.'

'Don't you say that!' said Max. 'You can't!' His face was full of righteous fury. 'He killed the snake for us! And he's *mine*!'

The explorer stopped walking, and his head whipped round to look at them. Con's mouth snapped

shut, and she backed behind Fred, but the man's eyes were on Max.

The explorer strode back towards them. He bent, picked up the limp body of the snake and thrust it into his pocket.

His voice was abrupt, and without gentleness. 'I have no wish to have it on my conscience if you die. Have none of you any idea what to do if you see a snake?'

'No,' said Fred. That should have been fairly clear, he thought.

The explorer sighed. 'For future reference, walk away, backwards, as fast as you can. Don't run. And hum, as you go.'

'You want us to serenade a snake?' said Con. 'Why?'

'They don't like the vibration. Or, if you can kill it — it makes a reasonable dinner. If you really plan to make the journey to Manaus, you should know that. There are a great many things you need to know how to do. Can you fish?'

'No,' said Fred. 'Not really.'

'Can you hunt?'

'No,' said Lila.

'Can you set traps? Any of you except Fred, who should now know?'

'No,' said Con. 'Why would we be able to? I live with a great-aunt. She doesn't trap anything except dust. And mice. But she doesn't eat them.' Lila grinned at her, her wonky tooth shining conspiratorially.

'I see.' The explorer drew in breath, a heave of air that seemed to cement a decision. 'Right, then. Come with me.'

'Just Con,' said Lila, 'or all of us?'

'All of you. Even Fred, despite his idiocy.' His eyes were hard. 'Even the miniature cataclysm in the cardigan.'

'He means you, Max,' said Con.

'I've found a nest,' said the explorer. 'And I will share it with you. But I want to be clear — this is the only help I will give you. I have no time to waste on children.'

'A nest of what?' said Lila. She scooped Baca up and settled him in her arms. He grasped hold of her upper arm, and rested his nose in the crook of her elbow.

'You'll see.'

You'll see, Fred thought as they marched in single file behind the explorer, half running to keep up. *You'll see* were not reassuring words when spoken by someone whose fur coat still had the feet and faces attached.

The nest, when they reached it, sticky with sweat and their hair full of twigs, did not look as Fred had expected. It was a hole in the ground. In fact, it was barely even that; the ground was covered in dry leaves, and the hole was almost invisible.

'What's in there?' asked Fred. He wondered if it might be mice. Did mice dig burrows? He wasn't sure how he would feel about eating a mouse.

'Tarantulas,' said the explorer.

'Oh.' Mice suddenly sounded much more appetizing, thought Fred.

'They're delicious. They taste like shrimp cocktail.' The explorer looked at Con, whose mouth was open. 'Do you have a plan for your face, or are you going to keep it like that?'

'You don't actually eat tarantulas?' asked Con.

'Do they attack sloths?' asked Lila. Baca peered out from her elbow.

'We get to eat spiders!' said Max.

The three sentences were spoken very differently, Fred thought: disgust, cautious interest, sheer unholy joy. He said nothing, only knelt down to stare more closely at the hole.

'Yes. You toast them over the fire, like crumpets.'

'But, aren't they poisonous?' asked Lila.

'I am not eating a tarantula,' said Con.

'As you wish.' The explorer shrugged. 'If you plan to walk to Manaus, the day will come when you'll be glad of knowing how. Right, we'll need some long twigs.'

'I'm not eating one,' said Con. 'That shouldn't be a shocking position to take!' She turned to Lila and Fred for confirmation. 'That's normal!'

'I want to try it,' said Fred.

'Why on earth?'

'Because I don't want us to starve on the walk to Manaus. And what else are we going to eat? And, what if it's good?'

Lila's face was interested. 'What do you think are the chances it will be? Percentage-wise?'

'Low,' said Con. 'Really, disgustingly low.'

'Who wants to go first?' asked the explorer. There was a glimmer in his eyes. Fred didn't absolutely trust him.

Fred looked down at the hole; he thought he saw a shadow move inside it. His stomach rumbled. 'I will,' he said.

'Fine.' The explorer smiled. It was not an easy smile; there was something wolfish about it. 'It's very simple - take a stick, and jab it in the hole. The tarantula will come out to see what's happening.'

Fred crouched over the hole, and shook the tip of his stick backwards and forwards over the tarantula nest.

'You have officially crossed the line between brave

and a medical condition,' said Con.

'It can take a while, so don't give up,' said the explorer. 'It's a good season for tarantulas. They should be meaty.'

'He's mad,' whispered Con to Lila. 'We're alone in a jungle with an actual, real-life madman.'

Fred kept shaking his stick. Nothing happened. Con visibly relaxed.

'It's empty!' she said. 'Thank goodness, it's empty!'

Four legs, jointed, thin and hairy, emerged from the nest. Fred froze.

'Keep going!' barked the explorer. 'Move the stick backwards! Lure it out!'

The spider that emerged was as big as Fred's palm, and light brown.

'It's a female,' said the explorer. 'The males are black.' His hand darted past Fred and he grasped hold of the tarantula around the middle. He held his fingers well back from the pincers, which waved, irate, at the air.

'Do you want to stroke it?' he said.

Sloths, when anxious, make noises halfway between a sheep and a seagull. Baca let out a tiny, shrill bleat. Lila stepped back, her arm shielding the sloth's eyes.

The honest answer, Fred thought, was no. It was a *no* loud enough to shake the foundations of the jungle. But the words that came out of his mouth were, 'Which way do I stroke it?'

'In the direction of the fur - from the head to the back end.'

'Don't, Fred!' said Con. She was standing with her back flat against a tree. She was pale under the dirt. 'He's angry at you, remember! He's trying to hurt you!'

The explorer's voice was dangerously mild. 'The bite of this species is no worse than a bee sting,' he said. He held the tarantula very gently. 'My boy used to -' and then he stopped, shook himself and said, 'I knew of a child, once, who had one as a pet. It got tame enough to sit in his lap while he ate.'

Fred glanced at the explorer, but his face was

impassive. He laid his finger on the tarantula. It was unexpectedly soft and quivered under his touch.

'Now,' said the explorer, pulling a knife from his pocket, suddenly very brisk, 'you slice along the back, from the neck - here, so it feels no pain, like this, but don't cut the head off.' He cut across the spider's neck. 'And then you wrap it in leaves.' He dropped the spider on to a large leaf and handed it to Lila, who shuddered but held it in both hands.

'Now you tie it with grass, as if it were a parcel - yes, good. There's another nest, east of here. Remember, you can tell a tarantula hole from the opening: shallow at the front, and then a sudden dip into a tunnel. The journey to Manaus takes you through rocky terrain; you'll be able to find them there quite easily. I once went a whole month eating nothing but spiders and bananas. I had terrible yellow diarrhoea, but I survived.'

He set off through the jungle, without glancing behind him. Fred looked down at his hands. They smelt very slightly acidic.

By the time they caught up with him the explorer was leaning over another hole, sweeping back leaves and plants with his caiman-skin shoe. This hole was significantly larger.

'Now, this one you have wrapped up like a birthday present is a common tarantula. But this hole — he prodded it with a stick — is different. This is the hole of a Goliath tarantula: *Theraphosa blondi*.' He glanced pointedly at Con's hair. 'The Goliath tarantula has hairs on its rump, which it sheds if it feels threatened. And God knows I'd feel threatened if faced with a bunch of children. The hairs sting if they get on your skin; like nettles, but far worse. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Never mix up your tarantulas if you're planning to stroke them.'

It seemed sensible advice. Fred thought, if useful only in very rare circumstances.

'Are they the ones they call birdeaters?' asked Lila.

'Exactly,' said the explorer, looking down at her

with something like approval. 'Although they rarely eat birds. Mostly toads, and worms, and the occasional rat.'

They didn't need to tempt out the Goliath tarantula; as Fred leant forward to peer into the hole, the front legs emerged. He stepped backwards, fast.

Four legs more followed, and a great round body, covered in thick hair. Con retched. Max squealed with delight. Lila stepped in front of her brother, pushing him behind her. She clutched Baca more tightly.

The spider was as big as Max's face. It moved slowly, towards Max's ankles.

As calmly as if he were tying a shoelace, the explorer reached down, pressed the spider to the ground with a stick, and gathered up the legs in his fingers. 'Hand me some leaves, one of you. And watch your feet! There'll be more.'

By late afternoon they had six tarantulas. They took them home, to their fire, and Lila laid them neatly in a row.

'Good. Now, you toast them on sticks until all the hair burns off,' said the explorer. 'They'll start giving off a squeaking noise – it's the hot air escaping from the space between the leg joints. That's a sign they're done. You can eat all of it, including the face.'

'The face,' said Con weakly.

The explorer laughed. He picked up two of the parcels, leaving them four. 'You're on your own now,' he said. 'Don't disturb me again, or I'll serve your eyeballs to the caiman like olives at a cocktail party.' They stared at the bulk of his retreating back as he strode into the jungle.

Fred speared his tarantula on a stick and held it over the fire, watching it turn dark brown in the flames. Lila toasted Max's for him. Con's lay still in its parcel. She refused to look at it.

'It's a *spider*,' she kept whispering.

After ten minutes the spiders began to whistle, a sound like a tea kettle.

Fred gathered all his courage together. He pulled the tarantula off the stick; it was hot and crispy, but it

looked unambiguously spidery. He held his nose and bit a leg off.

He was astonished. They tasted a little fishlike, and salty, like the sea. He took another, larger bite. 'It's not bad!' he said.

Con stared at him, incredulous. 'You're eating spiders, you do realise that?'

Max took a bite of his. 'It's *very* delicious,' he said. 'Can I eat yours, if you're not having it?'

'No,' said Con.

'Try a leg of mine,' said Fred. The spider made him feel more awake. He could imagine the journey home – really imagine it – for the first time: walking by day and eating spiders and whatever fruit they could find each night. He thought of his father meeting him at the dock in Portsmouth, bending to pull Fred into his arms. He shook himself, and tried to push the thought away.

'It tastes of fishy-chicken,' said Lila. 'Really, truly, it's not bad.'

'Promise it's not a trick?'

'Promise. Try mine; Fred burnt his.' Lila held out a spider leg.

Very gingerly, Con took the leg from Lila. She sniffed it. 'It doesn't smell of anything – just the fire,' she said suspiciously. She closed her eyes and bit the tip off the foot. Her eyes opened in surprise. 'It's ... not terrible!' she said. 'It tastes almost like food.'

'I love them.' Max spoke with half a spider leg hanging out of his mouth. 'They should sell them at the pantomime, with the ice creams.'

