




THE EXPLORER

The explorer returned as they were roasting the caracara, squatting outside their stone room with the meat on sticks. He held a cluster of mangos balanced along one arm, and a gourd of water in the other hand. They didn't hear him until he was very close. Con jumped, and dropped her hunk of bird in the ashes.

The explorer didn't look any of them in the eye. 'You're all still growing,' he said gruffly. 'Especially the small one. It occurred to me the bird might not be enough.' He flushed as he set the gourd down next to their fire, dropped the mangos in Max's lap, and turned on his heel.



Fred jumped to his feet. 'Please - just a minute! We wanted to ask - what is this place? Do other people know about it? Do you live alone here?'

'Why? Were you hoping to throw a garden party?'
'I meant, do other people ever come?'

'Sometimes people pass by this place, yes.' The explorer squatted down, took Max's meat, which had caught fire, out of his hands, and shook it until it went out. He balanced it in the tips of the flames.

'None of them stay long. Some are travelling long distances. Tribespeople. People whose ancestors lived here. They usually stay a few days.' He twisted

the chunk of bird in the tips of the flames. Juice dripped from it on to the fire. 'But yes,' he said, 'in short, people do come.'

Con and Lila exchanged delighted glances. Baca, who was unusually full of energy – for a sloth – waved one claw in the air.

'Would they help us?' asked Lila. 'Could they take us with them, to Manaus?'

'They might. Very possibly. It depends on the people.'

'How often do they come?' asked Fred.

'Oh, every few years.' He blew on the meat, and handed it to Max. 'That's ready.'

Fred saw Lila and Con sag. They each looked a little more tired, a little older.

'Years?' said Lila. 'Our parents wouldn't be able to wait that long.'

'No, I had imagined not,' said the explorer.

'But in that case,' began Con, 'couldn't you –' She stopped as the vulture flapped out from behind a stone pillar and came to rest against the man's knee,

eyeing her meat. The bird ruffled its wings at her and cawed. Con held her food closer to her chest.

Lila took up her words. 'Could you help us get home?'

The explorer gave them an appraising, sharp-edged look. 'Perhaps.'

'Perhaps?' said Lila.

'I could point you towards Manaus. It's a month's walk, or a week and a half by canoe. I could give you some provisions. And a map.. I might come a short, way with you. I'll have to see.'

Lila's eyes lit up. 'That would be absolutely wonder—'

'But –' said the explorer.

'But?' Fred held his breath.

'You will have to swear never to speak about this place; never to tell that you saw a city in the jungle. More than swear – you will have to prove to me that you will not.'

'What?' Fred stared at the explorer, and then past him, across at the stone landscape sprawling green

and yellow and gold away from them into the jungle.
'Never tell about all this? Why?'

'Or about me. Ever. All of you. Including the little one.'

Fred searched the explorer's face for evidence that he might be joking. 'But my father will ask where I was!'

Fred had already imagined the conversation they would have; how he would draw for his father the layout of the city; how he would pace out the distance of the city square and memorise the measurements; how his father would squeeze his shoulder and tell him he had done something remarkable. He had imagined his father telephoning his friend from Oxford who worked at *The Times*. He had imagined his father's voice: 'Tim? Listen, my son has done something extraordinary.'

The man was watching him, and his face was not sympathetic. 'It is very likely,' he said, 'you will have to lie to him.'

'But - no, the whole point of explorers is that they

tell people about what they've found! That's what explorers do.'

'Exactly so. And I am not an explorer. I am a man who happens to be here.'

'But people have been talking about a place like this for hundreds of years!' said Fred. 'You have to let everyone know that they weren't just stupid old men with mad theories - they were right!'

'Why do I?'

'Because - if this place does exist, it means they weren't fools - it means they were heroes!' It meant, though Fred did not say it, that it was not foolish, not mad, to dream of being an explorer himself.

'Heroes don't exist, boy - they're inventions made up of newsprint and quotable lines and photogenic moustaches.' He grunted in disgust. 'Can't bear moustaches myself. Grotesquery mouth-eyebrows, I always thought.'

'That's not true! Men died looking for something like this! They died wanting to prove to the world it existed!'

'People have died for many things. It is not difficult to die.'

'But you're wrong! The world deserves to know!' Fred felt his forehead burning; he knew he must be turning red. But if they told, his name, and Lila's and Con's and Max's, would be part of history. Their names would be included in the list of great discoveries.

As if he had read his thought, the explorer curled his lip. 'And you, perhaps, wish to be the one to tell them?'

Fred's head jerked backwards as if the man had flicked boiling water in his face. 'It's not that!'

The explorer blinked a slow, contemptuous blink. 'Isn't it?'

Fred clenched one fist. 'It would be selfish not to tell!'

'Would it?'

For the first time, Fred realised the others weren't joining in. Con sat, looking down at her hands. Lila was stroking Baca with unusual intensity. Max was

sucking his wrist, his mouth turned down at the corners.

'Fred,' said Lila. Her voice was very quiet, and she didn't look at him. 'We need to go home.'

Con moved closer to him. She whispered hotly in his ear. 'You're being ridiculous! Just promise whatever he wants to get us out of here.'

'No,' said Fred. He edged away from her.

Con's whisper became a hiss. 'We can still tell everyone when we get home – how's he going to know? He's hardly going to be getting newspapers out here!'

'No,' said Fred out loud. 'I'm not promising anything.'

The explorer rose, lit red by the flames of the fire. The light shone on the scars in the crook of his elbow, and on his knuckles. 'I have asked you to perform an easy task – to keep your mouths shut. You are refusing?'

'No!' said Con. 'We'll do whatever you want. Fred, for goodness' sake, just say it!'

'You can't keep it a secret,' said Fred. 'It's not your secret to keep.'

'Look,' said Con to the explorer, 'he might not promise, but we will! Can't you help us, at least? He can stay here for all I care.'

But the explorer's face was growing red at the neck and white around his nose and mouth, his whole face cross-hatched with anger. 'You,' he glanced at Fred, 'are a fame-hungry, thin-brained ignoramus – and you,' he glared at Con, 'would apparently happily desert your friend. You disgust me, the lot of you!'

'He's not my friend! Not now.'

'Quiet!' Keeping his temper did not seem to be the explorer's speciality. His voice rose to a roar. 'I see no reason to help any of you! Why should I? Good God, if children had any use we surely would have discovered it by now.'

He turned away. He shoved his fists into his pockets – and then drew something out. 'I'd forgotten: I brought you this. I had not expected your response to my request. You none of you deserve it.'

Max let out a mew, and curled up his knees. The explorer dropped the thing on the ground, and strode into the dark. He reached the wall they'd fallen down, and began to climb it, fast, using both arms and only one leg, the other swinging loosely at his side.

'Fred!' said Con. 'You're completely unfair – and you're welcome to die here yourself, but you've got no right to ruin everything for the rest of us.'

Max began to sniff and hiccup with the beginnings of tears.

Fred picked up the thing the explorer had dropped. It was a screw of soft leaves, fastened at the top with thick grass. He opened it. Inside was a pinch of salt, mixed with some flakes of dried green something.

'It's seasoning,' he said, 'for the bird.'

'Stop changing the subject!' snapped Con. 'Look, you've got to agree. Go and run after him and tell him you've changed your mind.'

'I can't.'

'Why not? You don't have to actually do it – you just have to say it!'

'I just can't.' He thought of his father. He thought of going back to school, not just as *that Peterson boy, the one with no mother* – but a boy who faced down the jungle and discovered a whole world.

'Please, Fred,' said Lila. 'Please – do what Con says – run after him. Our parents will be so worried. They might die of it.' Max's eyes widened and Lila sighed. 'I didn't mean it, Max, it's an expression.'

'It's too late, anyway,' said Fred. 'You heard him. He won't help any of us now. He's too angry.'

'Because you *made* him too angry!' said Con.

'So did you!' snapped Fred. 'You can do whatever you want. I'm not swearing to a lie, all right?'

'What, because you think you're so high and moral?' Max covered his ears with his hands.

'No! Because I won't, all right? Because it would be lying about the most important thing that's ever happened to me.'

'He'd never know! You just want to get your name in the papers!'

'Yes he would! He would find out, wouldn't he –

because people would have to come and try to find it again, to take photographs, and do archaeological digs. 'I don't care what happens once I'm home! This whole place can burn!' Con said.

'Stop it!' shouted Lila. Her voice rang through the courtyard. They turned to her in surprise. 'Shut up, both of you!' Every inch of her body was stiff with anger. 'You're both being disgusting. If it's too late then there's no point in fighting. And if you make Max cry again, I swear I'll punch you both.'

Max climbed into Lila's lap, and buried his face in Baca's fur.

Fred swallowed. He tried to re-catch his temper. He held out the seasoning.

'Do you want some? We might as well eat.'

'No. It could be poisonous,' said Con.

Fred withdrew his meat from the fire. It was black in patches, and the skin was charred and steaming. He pulled off the skin with his fingers, wincing at the heat, and sprinkled a pinch of the salt and unknown herbs on to the bird.

Defiantly, averting his eyes from Con's glare, he took a bite. The first taste of it shot through his body; it was a flavour that got into your fingertips, hot and rich and wild.

'Not poisonous,' he said. 'It's good.'

'I hope you choke on it,' said Con.

Soon it was entirely dark, but for the fire and the moon. The flames cast light out into the city square, throwing its corners into strange dusky shapes. Con shivered as a cloud swept past the moon, lengthening the shadows. Lila hunched over and began to search Baca's fur for ticks, avoiding Fred's eye.

Fred looked towards the curtain of vines. They hung in the dark, a great green sweep of shadow covering the right-hand corner of the square.

'What do you think's behind there?' he asked.

'What do you think he doesn't want us to see?'

'I don't know,' said Con, 'and I don't care.' She had brushed her hair in front of her eyes, so nobody could see her face.

'It could be an animal,' said Lila. She glanced up, and then away. 'A panther. Like in *The Jungle Book*.'

'It might be food stores,' said Fred.

Max sat up. 'Real food?'

'Why would he keep it there?' said Lila.

'I was thinking, there must have been a place for storing food, when this city was alive. And it's where I'd keep stores; somewhere almost invisible.' Fred looked around, checking the explorer was nowhere near. 'I think we should go and look.'

'Oh, sure, that's a great idea!' said Con. 'You've already made him so angry he's going to let us rot here – why not add stealing his food? He could kill you with his bare hands, but I'm sure that doesn't worry you.'

'I wouldn't steal! It would be borrowing. And even then, not unless we have to.'

'What do you mean, have to?'

'If he won't help us, we might have to find other ways.'

'To do what?' said Con.

'To find enough supplies to start the journey to

Manaus.' Fred gestured around the empty city.
'There's not much food here.'

Con was growing red. 'You do know this is your fault? You said if we followed the map we'd get home! And then the second you get here, you ruin it!'

'I didn't!' Fred could feel his neck and cheeks flushing. 'I didn't expect the map to lead to a madman with a pet vulture living alone in an ancient city! That's not something any of us predicted!'

'You promised we'd get home!'

'We *will* get home,' said Fred, though he was fairly sure he hadn't promised. Who was he to promise anything? But he only said, 'I want to know. Aren't you curious?'

'No,' said Con. She swivelled on her bottom and turned her back to face him. He could see the sharp thinness of her shoulder blades poking out through her blouse.

'He would never find out.' If he could find food, Fred thought, then it wouldn't matter what the explorer said or did; they could get back on the raft

and go looking for Manaus. If he could find food, then the chill of Con's anger and Lila's disappointment might be swept away.

'Do what you want. I'm not going over there,' said Con.

'Lila?' asked Fred. Lila had been watching them argue, her head turning from one to the other, her eyes growing steadily more unhappy. 'It's getting dark. He wouldn't see us. Do you want to come?'

Lila hesitated. 'I don't know. He trusted us.'

'But he doesn't! He clearly doesn't trust us at all. He won't even tell us his name! Please,' said Fred. The wall of vines hung like a threat in the corner of the city square. 'It's just to look.'

Lila stared out across the dark square. 'Fine. OK. I'll come.'

'Thank you!' Fred jumped to his feet. 'Are you sure, Con?'

'Very, very sure.'

'Could you look after Max?' said Lila. 'He's not yet figured out how silence works, really.'

Con agreed, though without much pleasure.

Fred and Lila moved slowly across the square, feeling their way in the half-dark. In between the avenue of trees the ground was smooth, entirely free of weeds and leaves and jungle debris; but on either side there were piles of stones, two half-ruined circular mud buildings that looked like grain stores, and shoots of growing things springing up everywhere.

'What do you think this was?' Fred asked.

'I don't know. But, if this was the city square, then those statues would be their town monuments. Or maybe their gods.'

'Like we have lions in Trafalgar Square?' At the thought of them a gust of longing for home swept over him.

'Yes! Our papa talks about them. And then everyone would live around the sides of the central avenue, or up in the jungle in tree houses — that's how I'd do it, anyway.'

'He's crazy to tell us to keep it secret,' said Fred.

'It's amazing — it's not like anything I've ever seen in my life.' He glanced at Lila from the corner of his eye. 'He can't keep it all for himself.'

Lila didn't reply. She only stared fixedly ahead.

There was the sound of footsteps running behind them. Fred sprang round; but it was Con, with Max in tow.

'We changed our minds,' said Con, panting hard. 'But we're not talking to you.'

'She made me come,' said Max. 'She saw a shadow and thought it was a snake.'

'I didn't, you little rat!'

Lila and Fred exchanged glances. 'You'll have to be quiet, Maxie,' said Lila.

'I'm always quiet,' said Max with dignity. He turned to put his tongue out at his sister, tripped on a stone and let out a howl loud enough to wake the sleeping birds. 'My toe!'

'Shush!' said Lila.

A tree rustled, then stilled abruptly. Con looked around nervously. 'Should we go back?'

Fred shook his head. 'You can,' he said. 'I need to see.' As they approached the far end of the square the clouds moved over the moon, sweeping black shadows over the statues' faces. They looked alive.

Behind the statues ran a mud and stone wall, high over their heads. The left edge of the wall ended in a crumbling ruin, overrun with patches of light-yellow flowers. The right side vanished in a curtain of vines – the vines the explorer had forbidden them from touching.

Fred approached the vines. They rustled. He stepped backwards; it might have been the wind, or something living behind them. He tried not to think of snakes.

He reached out and pushed a handful of vines away. Lila joined him. Behind the vines was another, thicker curtain; they seemed plaited together like wickerwork, woven so densely Fred could barely fit a hand through the green mass. He pushed both arms into the vines, elbow-deep, and tugged. There was a

flash of colour amid the green, then the vines fell back.

'I can see something!' he hissed.

'Shh!' said Con.

'What?' asked Lila.

'I don't know – a piece of yellow – I can't see it any more. We'll have to cut the vines,' he said. He took the knife from his pocket.

'No, wait!' said Con. 'I don't know if that's a good idea.'

'It is,' said a voice over their heads, 'an exceptionally bad idea.'

Fred froze. There was the smack of shoe on stone, and the explorer jumped down from the top of the wall, landing inches in front of Fred's face, grunting as his bad leg hit the ground. He straightened up, his face rigid with fury.

'I asked you to *stay away*,' he said softly. 'Is that so difficult?'

A cold dread shot through Fred; the look on the explorer's face was worse than being caned at school.

'I'm - really sorry.' Fred's tongue was suddenly dry.
'We just thought -'

'You *thought*. Are you so grotesquely lacking in self-control that you cannot let a single idle thought pass through your minds without acting on it?'

'We're so sorry -' began Lila.

'Just get away from here!' said the explorer. His skin radiated hot rage.

Desperation was rising in Fred's blood; he could see Max shaking with fear. He stepped in front of him. 'We weren't going to take anything,' he said. He felt the burn of the lie flood through him, and stumbled over the words, 'We just needed to see -'

'I said go! Just go!'

'It was my fault,' said Fred. 'It was my idea, not theirs -'

'I don't care whose idea it was.' The explorer pulled the knife from his belt. He pointed it at Fred's chest.

'Go to bed. If I *ever* find you anywhere near the vines again, I'll cut off your fingers while you sleep and fry

them in banana oil and feed them to the vulture for dessert.'

Fred turned and led the way back down the centre of the boulevard, shame pulsing in his chest. Even Max didn't make a sound.