

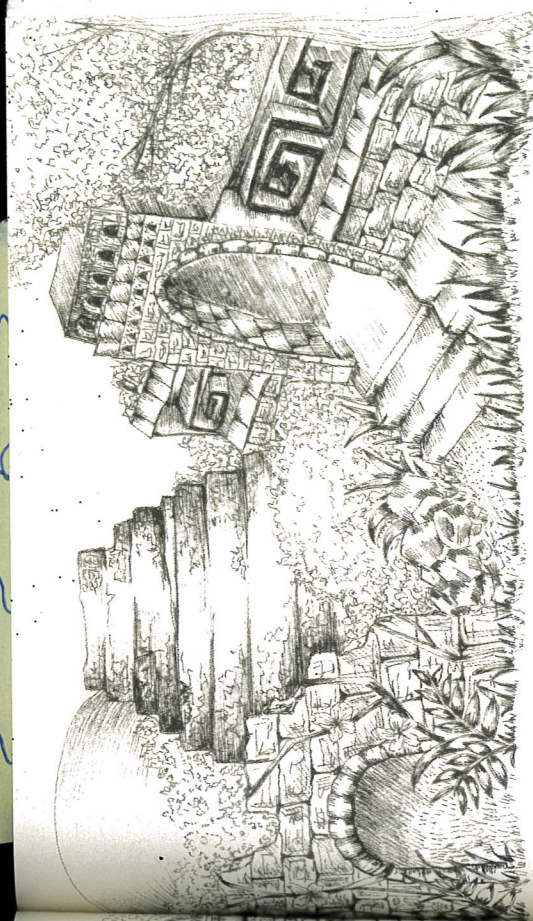
THE RUINED CITY

The man was tall. His arms and hands were covered in scars and burns; old white scars criss-crossed with new red ones. He held the knife at the level of their necks, casually, as if it were a breadstick.

'Like the minotaur,' whispered Con.

At the man's side, close at his heels, waddled an enormous vulture with a red head and a curved beak. Its head came up higher than the man's knees.

'That small person in the dolorous trouser suit.' The man's nostrils had a high flare to them, and they twitched as he spoke. His voice was deep. His accent,



Fred thought, belonged among good tailoring and fast motor cars. 'What's wrong with him?'

There was silence, except for Max's sobs.

'Well?' said the man. He twirled the knife in his fingers. The tip of his thumb was missing.

'He's crying,' said Fred.

'Why? He sounds like a dying screech owl. Like a lion blowing on a ship's whistle.'

Fred's heart was red-hot and beating double time.

He was surprised that his voice sounded so almost calm. 'He's five.'

'That's not a reason.'

'You're pointing a knife at his head,' said Lila.

'That's not a *good* reason.' But he lowered the knife. The man stepped closer, into a patch of green sun, and they could see him more clearly.

His dress was exquisite, but smelt pungent. His trousers, Fred saw, were quite ordinary: green khaki, worn through at the knee and spotlessly clean; but that – along with a white shirt, torn off at the elbow and patched with coconut fibre – was the only thing about him that was normal.

His shoes were made from what looked like alligator skin, with very thin vines for shoelaces. A jacket, sewn neatly from black furs, hung over his shoulders. The buttons were caiman teeth. He wore leather cuffs on each wrist and a signet ring on his little finger.

From a distance, he might have been on his way to a country-house party. Up close, he looked as though he had reconstructed a prime minister from once-living things.

Con swallowed. She spoke in a whisper. 'Is it just

me, or does he look like the kind of person who won't definitely not kill you?' Her eyes were stretched open and her skin was taut over the bones in her face.

Fred's entire body had gone rigid, spine and shoulders and knees frozen, but he managed to nod his head half a centimetre. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'Not just you.'

The man took another step towards them; his right leg swung slightly out to the side as he moved. Fred noticed for the first time that his right foot was strapped with three slim, highly polished pieces of wood. Despite the limp and the scars and the stubble, the animal Fred thought of was a panther. Something with strong jaws and sharp manners.

'Who are you?' said the man.

None of the children answered. They looked at each other. Nobody wanted to be the first to speak.

'How did you get here?' asked the man impatiently.

Fred tried to take a deep breath. 'Our plane crashed,' he said. 'And the pilot died. And we followed

a map. He put his hands in his pockets, attempting to look nonchalant while trying to find something he could fight with if he needed to. He could feel only a handful of squashed acai berries, which would not be very deadly in a battle.

'Show me.'

Fred handed him the scrap of bark, fumbling in his back pocket, his fingers suddenly uncooperative and clumsy.

The man glanced at it. 'Who drew this?'

Silently, Con raised her hand.

'Based on what?'

Con shook her head so that her hair fell in a protective wave across her face.

'Well?' said the man.

'We found a map in a tree,' said Fred, 'and Con made a copy, when it got wet.'

The man screwed up the bark in his hand.

'Please,' said Lila. 'Don't be angry. All we wanted to do was get home.'

The man looked down at the vulture, as if for inspir-

ation. 'And what am I supposed to do with you now?'
'Nothing! Just let us stay for a little? We won't make any noise,' said Lila.

'That small one will.'

Max felt the man's gaze fall on him, and he began to cry again. The man let out a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a growl.

Lila picked Max up. 'Sorry.' Her voice wavered, and Baca caught the fear from her skin and let out a mew like a cat. 'He's only five,' she whispered.

'You all keep saying that as if it's an explanation. Should I like him simply because he's small? I do not like undercooked food. Children are just undercooked adults.'

Con's lip began to quiver. Fred looked at her, surprised — but he moved his shoe half an inch, so that their feet touched.

The man looked at them, ranged in a line in front of him, shaking with nerves and expectation. He sighed.

'Are you thirsty?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Fred.

'Very,' said Lila.

'Very, very,' said Max. He sniffed tearfully, and wiped a great wedge of snot on his wrist.

'Wait here.' He glared at Max. 'Don't touch the vulture. He bites when he's anxious, and it takes very little to make him anxious. Vultures have nervous souls.'

The man strode across the great stone courtyard. He stopped at a tree trunk, a stump of wood as wide as a well, and lifted a slab of stone off its top. Fred shielded his eyes and stared; the tree trunk had been hollowed out and was full of water. The man dipped a large green bowl into the water, and stomped back to them.

'Here.' He thrust the bowl at Fred. The ring on the man's finger wasn't gold, Fred saw: it was bone, coated in flakes of iridescent snake scales.

Fred looked at the bowl in his hands. It was made from an explorer's pith helmet, the brim of the hat bent into a lip. Fred sniffed it. The man raised his eyebrows.

'I assure you it's perfectly clean,' he said.

Fred took a gulp. Thankfully it didn't taste of hair, only a little of wood, birds and the rainforest. He drank deeply, and passed it to Lila, who handed it to Max, who dunked his whole head in the hat.

The man waited until all four had drunk. Then he took back the bowl and offered it to the vulture.

As the vulture drank, the man rested his hand on the bird's head and stroked its wattle with his thumb. His face was tense. 'What is it that you want?' he said.

The children looked at each other.

'We want you to help us get home,' said Lila. She spoke very quietly, so quietly he had to bend down to hear.

'And why should I?'

'I can't look after Max much longer; he has allergies, and nightmares, and I don't know what I can dress him with if he keeps ripping holes in his clothes. Please help us.'

As she spoke the vulture waddled away from the man's side and headed straight for Max, who was

hiccupping and sniffing. A line of snot dripped from his nose on to his ankle.

The vulture dipped its beak to Max's feet and pecked at the snot, then it wedged its nose into the side of Max's shoe and breathed in deeply through the holes in its beak.

'What's he doing?' said Max. His eyes were dilated with fear, wide and round as pennies, but he reached down and touched the bald head of the vulture. It snapped its beak. Max snatched his hand back, then, more confidently, returned it to the vulture's head.

It let out a guttural croak, which sounded almost like purring.

Then Max looked up, smiling, at the man. 'He's mine now,' he said.

The man looked from Max to the vulture and back at Fred and Lila and Con. His face was emotionless, but his eyes were not.

'I shouldn't trust the instincts of that bird,' he said. 'He probably just thinks the boy smells like meat. But. All right. Come with me.'

He led them down the stone boulevard. There was a cascade of questions tumbling through Fred's head: who was the man? How had he got here? Would he help them? But something in the man's walk did not encourage conversation.

The canopy was so thick overhead that the light filtered a succulent green down on to their path. The man led them to a place where blocks of stone and mud had been stacked to make three sides of a store-room. It was empty but for the shocking-blue and green flowers which grew in the cracks. Vines criss-crossed over the top, forming a roof of sorts.

'Here,' said the man. 'You can sleep here.'

'Who built this? Did you?'

'No,' he said shortly. 'I did not.' He looked at the stone floor. 'I might make you some reed sleeping mats tonight. If I have time. The vines will shelter you if there's any rain. More or less.'

'Thank you,' said Fred. Con still hadn't spoken, but she nodded in thanks.

'But, beyond the statues, that curtain of lianas — you

see?' He pointed. Fred followed his hand and saw, at the far end of the city square, falling from the wall behind the statues, a great swathe of tangling creepers. They nodded.

'You don't go anywhere near there. Do you understand? That is my private space.'

Con tried to speak, but only a strangled burr came out.

'We understand,' said Lila.

'I mean it. Keep your word, or I'll cut off your ears and give them to the vulture to wear as a hat.'

'Don't!' wailed Max. He put his hands over his ears. 'I don't like him!'

'Shh, Max,' said Lila. 'He doesn't mean it.'

Fred looked at the man. He was fairly sure Lila was right, but it seemed risky to assume of a man who used teeth for buttons that he was joking.

Max tugged at the man's trousers. 'What time do we eat?'

The man looked down at him, baffled. 'Whenever you want.'

'Oh – but – we mean, whenever suits you,' said Con. Her voice was croaky, but she looked relieved that it had started working again.

'You eat whenever you catch and cook something. That's usually how it works. Unless you don't catch anything.'

'But – don't you – you're the adult.'

'I'm *an* adult, certainly. Look, there are berries. There may be some bananas on the trees in the west corner, if they weren't eaten by monkeys in the night. And you can hunt.'

'But,' said Con, 'you're the grown-up.' Her voice had truly come back now, and she scowled. 'Grown-ups cook for children. Those are the rules. That's how it's always been done!'

The man seemed to be losing patience. 'My dear.' He crouched in front of her, dangerously close. 'Which aspect of this –' he waved his hand at the stone pillars, at his scaly shoes, at the vulture – 'makes you think I would care how things have always been done?'

'But that isn't how it works in the real world!'

'This is the real world.' He thumped his knuckles on the stone floor. 'This, here. The real world is where you feel most real.'

'But, who are -' said Fred.

'But, please -' said Lila.

'But, don't you -' said Con. All three reached out, as if to grab him.

'Good lord,' said the man. 'It's like watching a dog eat a bee. You have six hands between you. Or eight, if you count the small one trying to eat a dragonfly.'

'Max!' said Lila. 'Stop that!'

'Do you at least have knives?' the man asked.

'We have one between us,' said Fred. 'We found it.'

It didn't seem the right moment to explain that, technically, the knife almost certainly belonged to this tall, dark, unexpectedly dressed stranger: he might demand they give it back.

The man sighed. 'I'll give you each a flint. Then you can hunt, at least.'

He crossed to another stump of tree trunk, lifted a

small boulder off its top and fished out something from the hollow space within. 'Here. They're already sharpened.'

He handed them each a stone, expertly chiselled to the size of a large arrowhead. Fred tested the edge with his thumb. It bit into his skin and a drop of blood ballooned out.

The man raised his eyebrows. 'You can use banana leaves as bandages. If you lose any fingers worth eating, give them to the vulture.' He handed a stone to Max. 'There you are, young cacophony. That one's the sharpest.'

'Max is too young for knives,' said Lila. She tried to take it from her brother, but he jerked away and held both hands behind his back.

'Is he? How do you know?' said the man. He sounded interested.

'It's ... just a fact! People don't give little boys knives.'

'I feel fairly sure I was given a knife at a young age. And I turned out perfectly normal.'

Fred looked at the buttons on the man's shirt; they glinted white and sharp in the sun. He said nothing.

The man sighed. 'It's getting late,' he said. 'You can have something from my own stores – but just tonight. Don't think it's going to be routine. You'll have to hunt for yourselves.'

All four let out deep sighs of relief. The man strode back to the hollowed-out trunk, and bent to a pile of stones next to it. Up close, they seemed to be arranged into something more definite than a pile; a rectangle, with wide slabs across the top. The man lifted two of the slabs, reached in and brought out the body of a bird, plucked but ungutted.

'Caracara,' he said. He dropped it into Fred's hands. It was cool, and clammy. 'They're common as rats here.'

'Thank you. Could you tell us how to gut it?' Fred asked tentatively.

'With the flints, boy!'

'But how's the best way? Sir,' he added, just in case.

'When the first man learnt to cook, he did so

without recipe books. He worked it out. *You work it out.*

They all four stared at him.

He sighed. 'Cut along the stomach, scoop out anything that looks too detailed, and cook the rest. As a rule of thumb, with innards, if it would take more than one colour to draw it, don't eat it. So, kidneys are fine – all reddish-brown – intestines less so, unless you're feeling exceptionally brave.'

'But – just quickly, before you go – how do we cook it?' said Lila.

'With fire.' He smiled a half-smile. 'Or that one – the blonde one, wearing her face like a weapon in a barroom brawl – could try to cook it by glaring at it.'

'Wait – please, just a second – Fred made a last effort as the man turned to go. 'Who are you? What do we call you? What is this place? How did you get here? Are you an explorer? Do you live here? Are you planning to help us? We need to know!'

Fred thought of all the explorers he'd read about –

there were so many who had strode into the jungle and never reappeared. Percy Fawcett, and his son Jack. Raleigh Rimell. Christopher Maclaren. He tried to remember what the photographs in the newspapers had looked like.

The man turned to face Fred full on. His face shifted from wry to something darker and harder to trace. 'I'm a bush pilot. Not an explorer. I used to ferry supplies back and forth from the smaller towns to Manaus. I crashed here some time ago.'

'What happened to your plane?'

'What happened to yours?' he countered.

'It burnt,' said Fred.

The man nodded. 'Exactly so.'

'And your name? I'm Fred - and that's Lila, and Con, and Max.'

A look as blank as an iron wall came down over the man's face. 'I'm not interested in names. This is the Amazon jungle, not the Travellers Club on Pall Mall.'

'But what do we say, then?' Con asked. 'I mean, if we need your attention?'

His eyebrows went up so high they nudged at his hairline. 'You don't,' he said, and turned away.

He strode across the square, his shoulders hunched, heading towards the place where the vines grew into an impenetrable curtain. He pushed past some branches, and disappeared. His footsteps, despite the limp, were astonishingly silent.

'You scared him off!' Max said to Con, his voice full of accusation.

'It wasn't just me! We all did,' said Con. 'And technically, I think we *annoyed* him off.'

'I didn't know,' said Lila, 'that asking someone's name would be so controversial.'

'I know what we call him,' said Max. He beamed up at them proudly. 'We call him the explorer.'

'But he just said he's not one!' said Con, exasperated. 'Weren't you listening?'

'He has an explorer's hat,' said Max. 'And a vulture. So there.'