

'Like you? But you're saving it!'

'No. I am undoing my own harm. But God knows what I might have done when I was younger. I was hungry to have my name in black capitals on the front page of *The Times*.'

He glanced sideways at Fred. Fred shifted uncomfortably, and looked very hard at the water.

The explorer stabbed again. This fish was still writhing hard, and he had to smack it against the sole of his shoe to kill it; perhaps it was this that made him flush red in the fire's light.

'Europeans have said cities like this were impossible. Europeans never believed in a place like this – they believed the jungle could never have supported such numbers. They said it was too infertile, and called it a counterfeit paradise.'

He paused, staring unseeingly at the fish on the string. 'The tribes the Europeans met were so small that people believed there could never have been great sweeping cities. They didn't realise the tribes they met on the river were small precisely *because* they were

more readily found by men like me – because European diseases were killing so many of them. Measles, influenza. God knows, I have seen enough of that. This place does not need more people like me.' A deep red anger spread down his neck to his arms.

Fred didn't move, he only listened, harder than he had ever listened to anything in his life.

'My wife was born in a village in the jungle. We were young – barely twenty. She breathed the jungle, wore the jungle. She died, from measles, soon after our boy was born.' His voice was flat. 'She caught it from a troop of Englishmen. Amateur explorers.'

'And your son? What happened to your son?'

'He would have turned four the week after he died. Cholera.' The explorer stared at the dark. 'This land could once have supported millions of lives. And one day, the world will know that. The time will come, I hope, when the world values people as much as it values land. But for now, we do not need more men in pith helmets marching through the jungle towards us.'

He looked back down the path they had walked. 'Neither the people who pass through the city nor the city itself would be safe.'

Fred's blood was moving faster than usual through his body. He wanted to speak – to say something that would stop the explorer from looking so fierce and so lost – but his voice wouldn't come.

'Which is why,' the man stabbed again at the opaque water, but this time he missed, and there was a shake of passion in his hand, 'I ask again that you swear not to tell anyone about this place. I ask it with every ounce of my heart.'

Fred was glad it was dark, glad that he couldn't see the explorer's face, nor the explorer his. 'I swear I won't.' He thought, *How can you make someone see that you're not lying, that you mean it?* 'I'll never tell,' he said, louder. 'I swear!'

The explorer bowed his head. 'Thank you, Fred.'

'I didn't understand, before! I hadn't thought – I mean, I thought it was simple.'

'Extraordinary things are rarely simple.'

'But, if you're right about what would happen – if you're sure –'

'I would never dare say I was sure. But I believe I am right. I believe it enough to swear by it.'

'Then I swear too.'

The explorer gave a sigh; it sounded of things that Fred could not untangle. 'Thank you.'

'I'll die before I tell,' said Fred. 'I'll explain it to the others. And I'll never say a single thing about you.'

'Me neither,' said a voice. 'You're *my* explorer! I don't like to share.' Fred jumped. Max had paddled back into the lake, still holding the torch, and was standing directly behind the explorer, rib-deep in water, preparing to hug his knee from behind.

The explorer reared away, startled by the boy's hands.

'Good God! It's best not to show affection when you're holding a naked flame, child,' he said gruffly. He ruffled Max's hair.

Max giggled, and waded through the shallows towards Lila and Con, singing a song whose lyrics seemed to be comprised entirely of the word 'fish'.

The explorer handed Fred his spear. 'Here. Try with mine. It's lighter.'

'But what will you use?'

'I don't, technically, need a spear.' He crouched low, chest-deep in the water, and lowered his hands up to his elbows. One hand flashed out through the water. There was a certain amount of thrashing, then the explorer held up a fish the size of his forearm, clasped in both hands. Its scales shone in the moonlight. 'The only downside of doing it like this,' he said, 'is sometimes they turn out to be piranha, and that can be awkward.'

Fred thought of his father, back home, wrapped tightly in his pinstripe days.

'I wish you were my father,' he muttered, so quietly that the explorer could choose not to hear.

The explorer turned, his eyebrows high. 'I would not wish that. I did not excel at the job,' he said sharply. 'And Fred, it is possible your father will surprise you. It's in the nature of fathers; they're not as predictable as they seem.'

'He is,' said Fred. 'I wanted –' he stopped, but the darkness made it easier to speak – 'I wanted to tell him about this place. I thought he'd be proud.'

'I'm sure your father is very proud of you already,' said the explorer. He was looking down at the water, half-listening.

'No he isn't!' Fred glared at the man's back. 'It's simple – he'd rather my mother had never had me, then she wouldn't –'

'It is *not* simple, Fred.' The explorer turned and looked him full in the face. 'You must stop saying that word. Cut it out of your vocabulary. The complexity of it all is endless. Almost nothing in life is simple.'

Fred sighed. He was disappointed in the explorer. 'Adults always say that.'

'It remains true. The world is larger than any human imagination; how could it ever be simple?' He ducked underwater, his body disappearing under the black surface, and came up holding in his fist something resembling an eel, which thrashed against his

chest. He went on as if nothing had happened. 'A man can love and fear the responsibility that comes with love. A secret can be at once selfish and necessary. For God's sake, boy, truth is as thorny and various as the jungle itself.'

He turned to crouch in the water again. Then, suddenly, he froze.

He didn't raise his voice; he didn't need to. 'Max. Fred. Quick. Out of the water. Con. Lila. Get out of the water.'

Fred twisted to look round. 'Why?'

'Out!' His voice grew louder.

Con and Lila started wading towards them. 'What's happening?'

'Move faster!'

The explorer sprinted through the shallows, his bad leg dragging behind him. He grabbed Max around the waist, knocked Max's torch into the water, and strode in vast uneven steps towards the bank. Fred ran after them, tripping over submerged roots. Lila pulled Con along through the mud.

The explorer dropped Max on the ground; he landed head first, but Lila scooped him into her arms before he could start screaming. The explorer turned, spear raised, to face the lake.

'What's wrong? What did we do?' asked Con.

'Nothing.' Now that the children were out of the lake he sounded entirely placid. 'We're leaving.'

'What is it, though?'

'See those eyes? They shine red, like the fish – there, at the far side of the lake.'

Lila swallowed. 'Is that ... what I think it is?'

Her eyes must have been sharp; Fred could see only a flash of red and a grey shape.

'Caiman,' said the explorer. 'It's an old one. Maybe eight foot long. Probably not interested in any of you. But.' He didn't finish the sentence.

'Have you ever been bitten?' asked Con.

'A few times. Come. We might as well leave rather fast.' He tossed Max into the air, grabbed hold of one of his ankles and threw him over his shoulder.

'Follow me, you three. Put your feet where I put

mine.' Max, hanging over the man's back, foraged in his pocket.

'Fred,' whispered Max, from upside down. 'I have to tell you something.'

'What is it?'

'I ate a tiny bite of the explorer's fish. While I was waiting. I was hungry.' He held out the fish, which had his fingermarks pressed into it. 'Is that all right?'

Fred looked at the creases in Max's anxious face. 'Yes,' he said. He tried to sound as serious as he could. 'I wouldn't do it again. But people do eat raw fish. I don't think you need to panic.'

'I won't die?'

'No. In fact, I think maybe, in a very peculiar kind of way, we're all safe. For now.'

The explorer twisted round to look at Fred, almost smacking Max's head against a tree.

'Yes, you're safe,' he said. 'Or, rather,' he clarified, 'you could still die out here. But if you pay attention, you will be safe from a lot of things.' He stopped, turning back to look at the file of children behind

him, moonlit, sweat-smeared. He shook his head. 'There is no way to say such things as need to be said without sounding like a cheerleader.'

He did not, Fred thought, look very much like a cheerleader. Cheerleaders, he believed, wore fewer animal teeth.

'Do you see all this?' The explorer held his torch high, casting light on the trees and the sleeping birds. 'You don't have to be in a jungle to be an explorer,' he said. 'Every human on this earth is an explorer. Exploring is nothing more than the paying of attention, writ large. *Attention*. That's what the world asks of you. If you pay ferocious attention to the world, you will be as safe as it is possible to be.' He glared at them, each in turn. For once, Fred didn't flinch under the ferocity of his gaze.

'Speaking of attention, Lila,' the explorer said, 'your sloth is trying to eat your hair. It will give it indigestion, if it succeeds.'

He walked on, Max's thin ribs bouncing against his spine, carrying him home.