

# MUD BROTHERS

HEATHER PINDAR

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Maverick

Having grown up in the city, Sol, Olatunde and Shaun must prove that they can navigate across the moors and reach a set place by a deadline. The stakes are high as, by showing their teamwork and resilience, they could secure much-needed funding for their youth club. But strange events convince Olatunde that an alien invasion is underway, so when their guide goes missing, the boys fear the worst. Can they carry out a daring rescue and still make the finish line in time?

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## **Mud Brothers**

An original concept by Heather Pindar  
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# CHAPTER 1

The changing room doors clanged noisily behind Sol as he ran inside. He yanked his blue sleeping bag out of his backpack, then grabbed his basketball from his locker. His backpack creaked and bulged as Sol forced his basketball into it.

Outside, in the early morning sunshine, the coach was ready to go. Mr Zabau, the leader of Dock Road Youth Club, stood up and leant on the back of his seat. 20 excited faces stared back at him. He sighed. “Where’s Sol?”

“There!” yelled Shaun, pointing towards the

youth club building as Sol appeared at the door. Sol raced across the car park and threw himself up the steps and onto the coach.

“Just in time, Sol,” Mr Zabau teased him. “We nearly left without you!”

“Sorry, Mr Zabau,” said Sol. He flopped down into the empty seat in front of Shaun.





“Welcome, everyone, to our latest challenge,” said Mr Zabu in a loud voice. “The Outdoor Explorer Challenge—our first to take place in the countryside.” He smiled. “I know you’re all going to do well. You’ve already won many badges for challenges here in the city. My favourites were the Help Your Neighbours and Advanced Baking awards. Trick Biking was, well...tricky!”

“I’ve still got the bruises!” called someone from the back.

“Me too, Leyla,” laughed Mr Zabu. “But you kept trying and got your badge in the end, didn’t you?”

Leyla grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

“Now,” said Mr Zabu, looking serious, “As you know, if all of you succeed in achieving this Outdoor Explorer Challenge award, the youth club will win a large sum of money from the

mayor. The mayor wants us to show that our club helps young people learn about teamwork, build friendships and feel more confident in trying new things.”

Mr Zabu beat his hands on the top of his seat. “Drum roll everyone! What you don’t know is that the grant is for an amazing, one hundred thousand pounds! This will be spent on wonderful things like music, dance and art studios, and sports pitches—which will be there for you and all future youth club members to enjoy.”

Everyone cheered and stamped their feet.

“And a basketball court!” yelled Sol, raising his arms.

“Yes, maybe even a basketball court, Sol. No promises though,” said Mr Zabu. He held up his hands for quiet.

“Remember, we will only get the money if all of you finish all the tasks in this challenge. That means 20 kilometres of walking across hilly countryside. You will need to use a map and compass to find your own way for ten of those kilometres. You will camp for two nights and cook and eat your meals outdoors. And you must finish the route on time. That means by 10am on Sunday.”

Mr Zabu paused and smiled brightly. “Today you will meet your team leaders who will be your guides and teachers. Listen to them. Help each other. Try your best. I know we can prove ourselves worthy of this fantastic award.”

There was another cheer, then everybody began to chat excitedly.

Shaun leant over his seat to speak to Sol. “You’re

with me,” he said. Sol looked puzzled. “You know, in the teams of three. For the challenge. I saw the list.”

Sol grinned. “Cool!” he said, fist-bumping Shaun. Shaun sometimes played with him on the youth club basketball team, so Sol knew him a little already. “Who’s our number three?”

Shaun pointed down the aisle, to the back seat of the bus. “That boy in the middle. Olatunde.”

“The one with the massive bomber jacket and ultra-white trainers?”

“Yep,” laughed Shaun, “He only started at the club last month, so I don’t really know him.” Shaun looked around quickly, then lowered his voice. “Hopefully he’ll like my mate too.”

“Your mate?” said Sol, puzzled.

Shaun put a finger to his lips and pointed to

his jacket pocket. Sol leant in to look. A pink and whiskery nose poked out of Shaun's pocket. Two black eyes stared at Sol then quickly disappeared.

"Wow!" said Sol. "What was that?"

"Shh!" whispered Shaun. "That's Moby. My pet rat."

Sol giggled. "Do you think he'll like camping in the countryside?"

"Yeah, definitely!" laughed Shaun. "Moby likes nearly everything. He's dead clever as well."

Sol grinned. "Perfect. He can help put up the tent, 'cos I haven't a clue!"

Shaun snorted. "Same with map reading—I have no idea!"

Angela, the driver, started the engine. As the coach pulled slowly out of the car park, Sol smiled to himself. Shaun would be good fun to have on

his team. He nudged him and pointed to his bulging backpack. "Guess what I've brought along."

Shaun smiled. "I have been wondering. A traffic cone perhaps? Or a duck-billed platypus? Or maybe..." Shaun rapped on the bulge with his knuckles, "it's a basketball?"

Sol gasped in surprise. "How did you guess?"

"Well, I do play basketball too," said Shaun. "But mainly because everyone knows you're an absolute three hundred percent basketball nut!"

"That's me!" laughed Sol. "And it used to be my dad's. He played some great games with that basketball."

Sol folded his arms and settled back in his seat. He draped his spare waterproof jacket over the basketball-shaped backpack. It hid it nicely.





## CHAPTER 2

The coach wound through the city centre, between tower blocks and shops, and the grassy squares with their statues and fountains. Later, they passed huge supermarkets and endless rows of houses with gardens and garages. Much later, the coach climbed through hillside villages and fields. At the top of a particularly big hill, a light rain began to fall. The members of the Dock Road Youth Club stared through the windows at miles and miles of rough grass and empty moorland dotted only with muddy pools and sheep.

As the coach rolled on, Leyla broke the silence. “Hey, where is everybody?” A few people giggled nervously.

At last, the coach turned off the moor road and bounced along a rough track. It pulled up on a stony driveway in front of an old wooden hut. A sign across the cracked front door read, ‘Outdoor Centre’.

Mr Zabu stood up. “This is it! Please gather up your stuff. When we’re all ready, we’ll get off the coach in a slow and orderly way.”

There was a loud shriek from the back of the coach. “Help! Get it away from me!”

Immediately, there was a stampede of feet towards the front of the coach. Panic took over as more and more people scrambled to get off.

In less than a minute, the stony driveway filled

with bedraggled, shoving, shrieking outdoor explorers.

Mr Zabu appeared at the door of the coach.  
“Why...? What happened?”

“Someone saw a rat!” said Olatunde. “It ran under the back seat.”

“Where’s Moby?” whispered Sol to Shaun.

“Back in my pocket,” said Shaun. “Moby likes to go walkabout sometimes, but he always comes back.”

“Good morning!” said a clear voice behind them. Everyone turned to look. A man with white hair was standing there. He was wearing shorts despite the autumn chill. Beside him stood a group of seven older teenagers in matching green sweatshirts.

“My name is Gilligan Wright,” said the man.

“I run the outdoor centre here. Welcome to all of you from Dock Road Youth Club! It’s very nice to see how keen you are to get off your coach and get started!”

Olatunde snorted and hid a giggle behind his fist. Gilligan stared at him for a moment before carrying on. “Soon, you’ll meet your team leaders. They know this bit of countryside very well, and will teach you all they can about finding your way in the wild. But first things first, grab your packed lunches, come inside and eat.”

By two o’clock the rain had stopped, and the seven teams were ready to set off for their first campsites. Sol, Olatunde and Shaun waited with their team leader, Ryan. He moved easily and softly, like a cat. When he explained the basics of compass and map reading to the boys, he

spoke simply, using few words. Sol sensed he was weighing them up. Maybe he thought they were clueless city kids, too soft to cope in the countryside?

Mr Zabu gathered the teams around him. “Before you go, say goodbye to the other teams,” he said. “You’ll all be following different routes, so you won’t see each other again for two days.”

He looked around at the excited faces. “To win the mayor’s generous grant, you must all be at the top of Bog Fell Peak by 10 a.m. on Sunday. If just one team fails, then the money will be lost. Good luck everyone!”

Olatunde pulled out his phone and took a selfie with his team. He tried to send it to his mum. “Ugh! No signal!” he said in disgust.



Gilligan Wright smiled at him. “You’ll find that’s pretty normal around here.”

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun waved goodbye to the other teams. Shaun and Sol heaved their packs onto their backs. Olatunde needed help with his because the straps kept getting stuck on the bulky folds of his too-big bomber jacket. They saw Ryan was already striding towards the start of a footpath at the side of the outdoor centre. They hurried to catch up with him.

Ryan stopped and nodded at Olatunde's gleaming white trainers. "Is that what you're wearing for the hike?"

Olatunde looked puzzled. "Yes. Why?"

"Just asking," said Ryan.

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun followed Ryan down a gravel path between high grassy banks. They hurried around a bend and stopped suddenly, bumping into each other.

Olatunde pointed down the path. "Oh no, check out this nightmare!"

Ahead of them lay a churned-up brownish swamp. Murky pools of water lurked between mushy, muddy peaks.

Somehow, as if by magic, Ryan had already made it to the other side. "Come on," he said. "It's not very deep."

Olatunde shook his head. "No way! I've got my best trainers on, and if anything happens to my brother Ade's bomber jacket... I'm toast!"

"Hurry up!" shouted Ryan.

Sol took a deep breath.

"I've got waterproof trainers on," he said.

"Stand back. I'm going in."



## CHAPTER 3

Sol took a run-up, then charged towards the huge patch of mud. His feet left the ground with a big leap, but about halfway across he began to lose height. Desperately whirling his arms, Sol landed with a loud squelch, up to his knees in the mud.

“Epic FAIL!” yelled Olatunde. He bent over low, shaking with laughter.

Sol moaned. “Wet! Cold!”

Without a word, Ryan stepped up to the edge of the muddy pool and held out his hands. Sol

gripped them. There was a loud sucking noise as Ryan pulled Sol out of the mud.

“Now you,” said Ryan, nodding at Shaun.

Shaun shook his head. “If Sol can’t jump it, I’ve no chance.” He looked up at the high grassy bank to his right. “I’m going to try that way.”

He tested his weight on a scrawny bush. It held. Gritting his teeth, he crawled like a crab along the bank, gripping the long grass and skinny branches to keep himself from sliding into the oozing swamp below.

“Don’t look down, Shaun!” shouted Olatunde.

Without wanting to, Shaun glanced down at the mud. He began to slide. He grabbed frantically at tufts of grass, which came away in his hands. His feet scrabbled against the bank but he continued to fall backwards.



He landed on his back with a loud SPLAT.

Olatunde stared as Shaun stood up slowly. His back and legs were covered in sticky brown mud.

“Ugh! Ugh! UGH! I hate mud!” Shaun bellowed.

This time Olatunde stayed silent.

“Now you,” said Ryan, nodding at him.

Olatunde made a big decision. He bent down and undid the laces of his gleaming white trainers.

Ryan shook his head slowly in disbelief as he watched Olatunde take off his trainers, then his socks, which he stuffed into his pockets. He tied the laces together and slung his trainers around his neck.

Olatunde closed his eyes and stepped barefoot into the swamp. At every stride the mud sucked and gurgled, and Olatunde shouted, “Argh! Ugh!”

When Olatunde reached the other side, Ryan said, “Well, that was different.”

Olatunde did his best to clean his feet with a T-shirt from his pack. Sol and Shaun grumbled loudly about the mud while they watched him put his trainers back on.

Ryan sighed. “Are any of you injured? Or in pain?”

Sol looked at his feet. “Er, no.”



“Well then, stop moaning and let’s crack on,” said Ryan briskly. “So far, we’ve taken 20 minutes to travel 100 metres. That’s a speed of 300 metres per hour. It’s almost six kilometres to camp, so that makes about, um, 20 hours of walking.”

“We need to speed up,” said Shaun.

“Yep!” said Ryan, rolling his eyes and setting off.

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun hurried after him. They followed a dry path next to a deep ditch across the open moorland. They stopped at a wire fence with a stile.

Olatunde looked over the stile. “More mud!” he wailed.

“Why didn’t they warn us about all this horrible mud?” said Shaun.

They watched Ryan as he hopped and tip-toed

deftly along the edges of the path, cleverly avoiding the deepest mud. Sol saw that moving quickly helped stop Ryan from sinking too far into the mud.

Sol climbed over the stile. “I’m muddy already, how much worse can it get?”

He tried to follow Ryan’s route and copied his hopping and tip-toeing run. Feeling more confident, Sol moved faster, until a big stone rolled away beneath him and he tipped onto his side. He slid down into the watery ditch.

“Hang on mate!” shouted Shaun, as he and Olatunde ran to help Sol. The ditch was deep, and it took all their strength, and a lot of sliding in the mud, to pull him out.

“Thanks!” said Sol as he stood on the path. He looked down at his clothes. He was now covered

from head to foot in a layer of dark brown. He looked at Shaun and Olatunde. They too, were covered. Olatunde's trainers were no longer gleaming white—they were mud-coloured.

Sol grinned. "Look at us! We're like brothers in mud."

"Yeah, mud brothers! That's us," laughed Shaun.

Olatunde pulled a serious face. He scooped up some mud on a finger. "I name you Mud Brothers," he said. "Let us mix our mud together and be brothers forever."

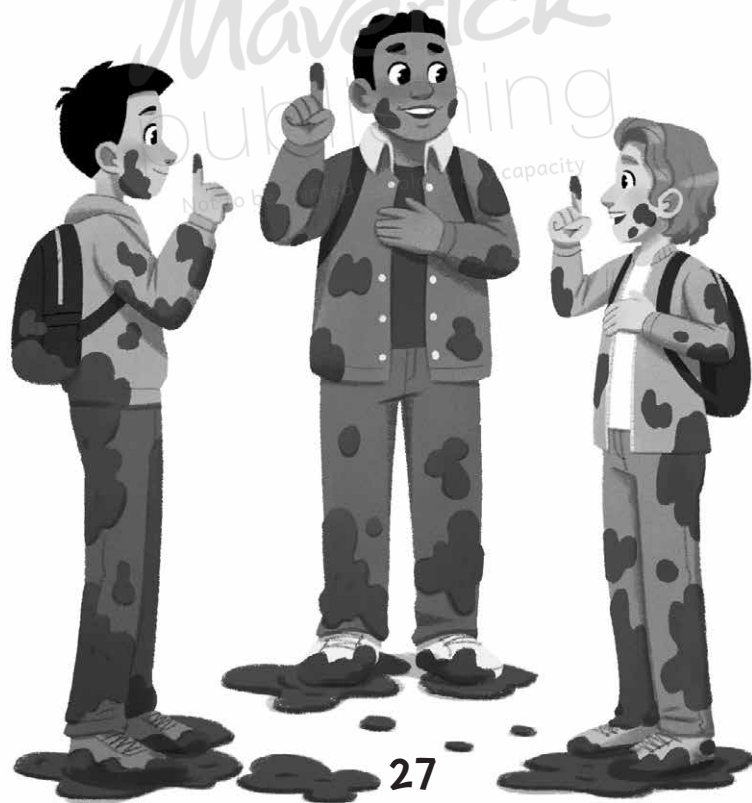
Shaun and Sol giggled. They scooped up mud as Olatunde had done. "Mud Brothers forever!" they shouted, and they mixed their muddy fingers on the palms of each other's hands.

Sol nodded at Olatunde's once white trainers.

"Sorry you had to get them muddy."

Olatunde looked serious. "No worries. It was worth it. I did it for the brotherhood." Then he laughed.

They looked up to see Ryan shaking his head at them. "Come on!" he said, turning away to hide a smile. "And stop messing about."





## CHAPTER 4

“One kilometre to go ’til camp!” called Ryan over his shoulder.

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun puffed and groaned as they struggled to keep up with him. The rain had stopped, but a cold wind had picked up and was blowing in their faces.

“Yay!” said Sol weakly, stopping to stretch his aching back.

Olatunde kept trying to wipe the mud off his brother’s bomber jacket but it just made it worse. “I can’t even think about what Ade will

do when he finds out I took his jacket—and then ruined it!”

Shaun gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

They were walking downhill now. Below, they could see a stone farmhouse huddled in a dip in the hill. Sheep grazed on the tufty grass around them. Shaun stopped to watch them.

“Wait!” he called to the others. “Look at that sheep!”

One sheep was walking oddly. As they got closer, they saw it had a plastic pot stuck over its nose. The wire handle was wedged behind its ears. The sheep was staggering around, upset and frightened.

“It must have been looking for food in that pot and got it stuck on its head,” said Shaun.

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun crept towards the sheep.

Ryan hung well back. Suddenly, the sheep took fright. It bolted past them towards Ryan, who jumped behind some rocks in panic.

Shaun pointed. "Look! There's a guy in the field. Maybe he can help."

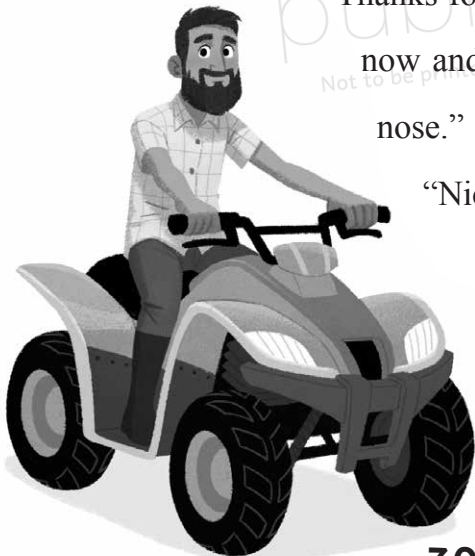
They jogged down the hill waving at the man. As they got closer, they saw he was sitting on a quad bike. Shaun told him about the distressed sheep.

"That's my sheep, I'm the farmer," said the man.

"Thanks for telling me. I'll go up now and get that thing off her nose."

"Nice bike," said Olatunde.

"It's really handy for getting up the hills to the sheep,"



said the farmer. "Only thing is, they cost a lot of money, and I've had three of them stolen this year."

"Oh no!" said Olatunde. "That's awful."

Shaun noticed the key ring on the bike's starter. It was made of wood and had felt ears and googly eyes. It looked like a cartoon sheep. "That's funny," he said.

The farmer smiled. "My son made it for me."

He nodded at the boys, then started the quad bike, turned it off the track and drove up the hill.

Once they were away from the sheep, Ryan joined them and they walked past the farmyard until they came to a wooden gate.

"Campsite's in here," said Ryan.

"Great! I can't wait to have a shower and get clean," said Olatunde.

They followed Ryan through the gate.

“Is this it?” said Shaun. “This must be a mistake!”

“There’s nothing here!” wailed Olatunde. “Where’s the café and the gift shop?”

“Café? Shop? In your dreams,” said Shaun looking around the empty field. “There’s not even a toilet block!”

“Yes, there is,” said Ryan huffily. “Look! In the corner there.”

“What, that little old brick shed type-thing?” asked Shaun. “No way!”

Ryan sighed. “Are you injured? Are you...”

Sol laughed. “Alright, alright, we get it. No moaning, right?”

“Right!” said Ryan. “Now, do you know how to put up your tent?”

Olatunde smiled and took the nylon tent bag from Ryan. “Yeah, course! How hard can it be?”

The boys pulled the tent out of the bag. It sprung easily into shape as they unwrapped it.

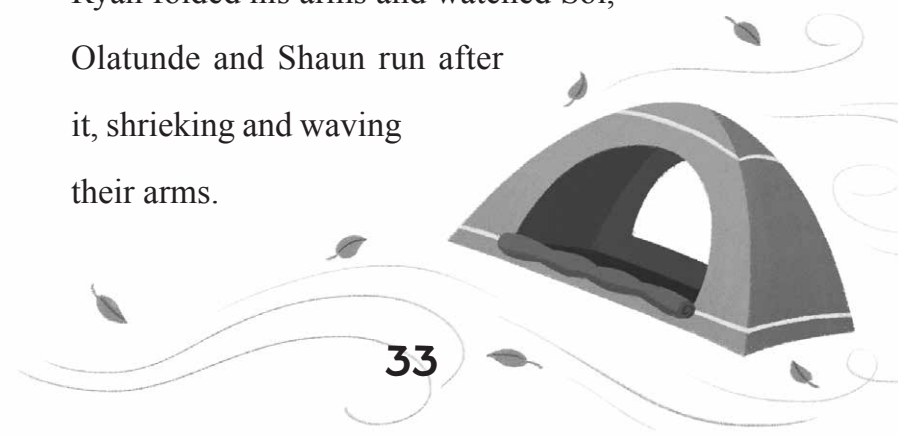
Olatunde flung his arms out wide. “Ta-da!” he said.

“Yes, it’s a pop-up tent,” said Ryan. “But you still need...”

Ryan stopped as a gust of wind swirled the tent into the air.

“...You still need to tie it down with ropes and pegs!”

The tent wafted towards a prickly hedge. Ryan folded his arms and watched Sol, Olatunde and Shaun run after it, shrieking and waving their arms.





## CHAPTER 5

It was nearly dark by the time the boys worked out how to tie the tent down with guy-lines and pegs. Shaun sat in the doorway, secretly feeding Moby from a bag of seeds. He looked to where Olatunde was standing, staring into the distance.

“What’s up, Olatunde?” he asked.

Olatunde waved at him to come over. Sol followed.

“Look!” Olatunde said, pointing. “See those lights?”

Sol and Shaun looked. At first, they couldn’t

see anything except the dark outline of the hills in the distance. Then a red light flashed three times, followed by an arc of white light.

“Those lights have been doing that off and on for at least ten minutes,” said Olatunde.

“What do you think it is?” asked Sol.

“Aliens,” said Olatunde without hesitation. “Those aren’t ordinary light patterns. It could only come from a UFO.”

“An Unidentified Flying Object?” asked Sol.

“Right!” said Olatunde. “It could be the beginning of an alien invasion. Or they could be here for abductions.”

Shaun frowned. “What are abductions?”

Olatunde’s voice shook with excitement. “Taking humans to other galaxies to learn things from, and to do experiments on them.”



Shaun shivered. “I hope they don’t come over to our campsite.”

Ryan helped the boys cook a meal of sausages and beans on a tiny gas stove. They sat together on some bumpy rocks.

Ryan watched the boys as they ate, then gave a sudden laugh. “That’s funny,” he said. “Sol, Olatunde, Shaun! Your initials spell SOS.”

Sol looked up from his food. “What’s SOS?”

“It’s the emergency code to call for help. Your names spell out an urgent message for help!” Ryan rocked back on his heels, laughing.

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun stared at him stonily. “We’re not always in need of help,” said Shaun.

Ryan stopped laughing. “No, sorry, of course not.” He put down his empty plate and picked up his torch. “It’s called Morse Code. Look, this is

how it works.”

Ryan flashed the torch three times quickly, then three times slowly, and then three times quickly again. “Three quick flashes are ‘S’ and three slow ones are ‘O’.”

“So if you’re in danger, you can flash the SOS code and people will know you need help?” asked Sol.



“That’s right,” said Ryan, standing up. “Now I must pitch my tent. I think there’s another fairly dry spot just over there.” He picked up his pack and walked towards a patch of short grass about 20 metres away.

“He’s got a cheek, that Ryan,” said Olatunde

quietly. “Making out we’re useless and need help with everything!”

“Yeah, and he’s not perfect himself,” agreed Shaun. “He was a real wuss around that sheep.”

Sol grinned. “Maybe SOS really stands for Scared Of Sheep,” he said.

Olatunde and Shaun giggled.

The three boys fell quiet as they watched Ryan expertly pitch his tent. When he finished, he checked it was safely tied down. Then he jogged back to them.

“My Auntie Jean runs a guest house near here. It’s down a little lane just a couple of fields away.” He pointed. “Would you like to come with me for a bit of cake and a cup of tea?”

“Yeah!” said Olatunde.

“Thanks, Ryan,” added Sol. “That would be

great!”

“I’ll just grab my torch,” said Ryan, running off.

Sol nudged Shaun. “Now I feel bad about what I said.”

“Me too,” agreed Shaun.

They heard a yelp, and saw Ryan leap backwards out of his tent.

“There’s a huge rat in there!” he said shakily.

“Oh, that’s Moby. He’s mine,” said Shaun cheerfully.

“Oh, what...!” exclaimed Olatunde. “Yours? Now you tell me!”

Ryan gaped at Shaun, then laughed. “Just make sure he doesn’t get in my sleeping bag!”

“Or mine!” said Olatunde.

“Right!” said Ryan, shaking his head. “Follow me.”



## CHAPTER 6

Auntie Jean was very warm and welcoming. She settled Sol, Olatunde and Shaun at a table in the guest sitting room, then disappeared off to the kitchen with Ryan. A few minutes later, they returned with four mugs of tea and a plate of brownies.

Jean perched on the radiator next to the table. “I do admire you camping at this time of year. It’d be too chilly for me!” she said. “Ryan’s told me all about your challenge. It sounds very exciting. How are you finding it?”

Between delicious mouthfuls of chocolate brownie and hot, milky tea, the boys told her all about becoming mud brothers, the sheep in need of help and the flyaway tent. Olatunde added how worried he was about the mud on Ade’s jacket.

“Hand it over,” said Jean straight away. “I’ll pop it on a fast wash in the machine.”

When she returned, she nodded at her other guests, who were sitting at their own tables around the room—an older couple who smiled back and a young man with a smartly-trimmed beard who sat by the fire reading.

“That couple, they come back every year and walk for miles, very chatty,” she whispered to the boys. “The other guy told me he’s here to do some walking too, but he doesn’t exactly dress like he’s going walking.”

Later, Jean said she was expecting more guests so the three boys got up to leave. Ryan went to fetch Ade's jacket. Sol, Olatunde and Shaun thanked Jean, and she hugged each of them and said, "Good luck!"

As they waited outside for Ryan, Olatunde grabbed the other boys' arms. "Look!"

He pointed further up the lane where a hedge ran past the house. Behind it, three dark figures seemed to float. Their heads looked domed and pointy, with huge sticking-out eyes. They had unusually long, slender arms, and their shoulders were hunched.

Olatunde couldn't contain himself. "Aliens!" he said. "They're here! I told you!"

"Will the abductions start soon?" whispered Shaun.

"Probably," said Olatunde. He smiled. He really hoped so.





## CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Sol was the first to wake, after a night dreaming about aliens. He found it hard to move because he was wearing three pairs of trousers and four jumpers.

Before bed, he had begged the others to lend him their clothes to sleep in, explaining he'd swapped his sleeping bag for his basketball back at the youth club.

Olatunde's mouth fell open. "Why did you do that?"

"Priorities," Sol replied.

Now, as early morning light filtered into the tent, Sol peeled off the borrowed clothes, crawled outside and began to practise some basketball plays.

Shaun came out too. "Have you seen Moby? He's not sleeping in my pack as usual."

Sol went to put his basketball back in his pack so he could help Shaun search for Moby.

"Found him!" called Sol. "He's asleep inside my T-shirt. He's kind of chewed up some tissue as well."



"Phew!" said Shaun, rushing back into the tent. He looked fondly at Moby. "Yeah, he does that sometimes. He likes to hide somewhere soft and make a nest."

"Huh?" said Olatunde, opening his eyes and staring sleepily at Sol, Shaun and Moby.

Just then, Ryan arrived. “Morning Mud Brothers!” he called. “I’ve got croissants. They’re from Auntie Jean.”

While they ate, Ryan unfolded a large paper map. “Today,” he said, “we’re going to put your map-reading skills to the test. You three are going to lead us most of the way.”

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun glanced at each other. At home, they used their phones to find their way around, but there was hardly any mobile signal out here. They all leant in to look at the map.

“Okay,” said Ryan, “I’ll show you how to find the best routes across the countryside.”

He ran his finger along some long red dashes. “These are bridle paths. They’re usually wider and less overgrown than footpaths because they’re for horses. And these,” he went on, pointing to lines

on the map that had the words ‘disused railway’ written next to them, “are excellent flat, wide paths. You find them in lots of places, even though the railway tracks were pulled up years ago.”

By 10 o’clock they were on their way, passing the map between them.

At lunchtime, the sun came out. They were on a steeper, rockier stretch of moorland than before, so they searched for a flat patch of springy grass where they could sit and eat.

While they ate, Sol nudged Shaun. “Do you believe all that stuff about aliens?” he asked.

Shaun shrugged. “I don’t know. It all sounds so scary and weird. Olatunde seems to know a lot about it, though.”

After lunch, Sol, Olatunde and Shaun sat back and gazed out over the valley to the hills beyond.

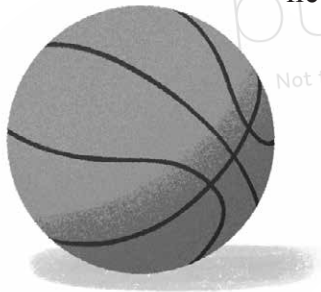


They enjoyed its beauty whilst also searching for signs of an alien invasion, but there were none. Everything looked normal in the bright sunlight.

Feeling restless, Sol jumped up and grabbed his backpack. He wiggled the basketball out of the opening.

Ryan's mouth fell open as he watched Sol. He put his head in his hands and started laughing.

"I thought I'd seen every madcap thing you lot could do but, no! Now I see you brought a huge, heavy basketball on a walking trip!" he said.



"Sol just loves that basketball," said Olatunde. "I think he cuddles it at night-time like a teddy bear."

Sol laughed. "That's actually

true," he joked. He held up the ball. "Ready for a play, Shaun?"

Shaun scrambled to his feet. "Yeah, ready." He held up his hands for the ball, squinting into the sun.

Sol threw the ball. It was a medium-speed throw that he thought Shaun could catch easily. But with the sun in his eyes, Shaun didn't see the ball until the last moment. It slipped through his fingers and rolled down the slope and out of sight.

Shaun went to run after it, but Ryan stopped him.

"Don't!" he said, holding up his hand. "There's a steep drop down there. Let me take a look."

Ryan walked to the edge of the hill, got onto his belly and peered down. After a moment he came back.

Ryan looked at Sol. "I'm afraid it's stuck on a

ledge about ten feet down. It's wedged in behind a bush."

Sol looked pleadingly at Ryan. "Let me try to get it. I could climb down and..."

Ryan shook his head. "Sorry, Sol. It's really steep. If you fell, you could be very badly injured."

Sol sank down on the grass and clamped his hands over his face. "Argh!" he groaned loudly.

Olatunde thought of saying, "It's only a ball, Sol," but stopped himself.

Ryan thought for a minute. He took some rope and a few small metal objects out of his backpack, as well as a lightweight red helmet. He put the helmet on and fastened the strap under his chin.

He led the others to a curve in the hillside. It gave them a good view of the cliff where Sol's basketball had become stuck. "Don't move an

inch until I come back," he ordered.

Ryan got to work. He knotted the two thin ropes onto a metal loop. The loop had a clip on the end, which he pushed firmly into a crack in one of the rocks.

"What's he doing?" whispered Olatunde. The others shrugged.

Next, Ryan fastened a sturdy belt around his waist and clipped the ropes onto it. Finally, he tested the strength of the fixing in the rock and his knots by pulling hard on them three times. Then, to the boys' amazement, he walked backwards over the cliff, playing out the ropes as they took the strain of his weight.

Expertly, Ryan used his feet to keep his body safely away from the rocky hillside. He lowered himself to where the basketball was stuck.



Sol, Olatunde and Shaun held their breath as he swung his leg out and nudged the ball off the ledge. It bounced down to the wide footpath below and landed in some bushes. Ryan carried on lowering himself, landed gently on the path and unclipped the ropes. He grabbed the basketball from the bushes and ran along the path, which wound upwards out of sight. Sol, Olatunde and Shaun cheered loudly.

Soon they heard panting and saw Ryan sprinting up the hill towards them, Sol's basketball tucked safely under his arm.

The Mud Brothers jumped up. "That was incredible!" yelled Olatunde. "What was that?"

"Abseiling by rope down a cliff," replied Ryan. "It's sort of a hobby of mine. I trained to do it round here so I knew that path would bring me back up the hill."

Ryan passed the ball to Sol.

"Thanks, Ryan!" he said, and gave him a clumsy hug. "Lucky you had all that kit with you."

"Some things you just can't leave home without," said Ryan, smiling. "A bit like basketballs or rats!"

The Mud Brothers laughed.

Shaun helped Ryan pull up his abseil rope. "I'd love to do that," he said longingly. "Ab-whatsit—that's where it's at!"



## CHAPTER 8

Towards the end of the afternoon, just as Sol, Olatunde and Shaun were feeling they couldn't walk anymore, Ryan called from the back of the group. "Keep it up, it's just half a kilometre to camp! You made a few wrong turns here and there, but you got us back on track and found a good route. Well done!"

The three boys came to the end of the path, which opened out into a large car park. There were two cars parked there.

Sol grabbed Shaun's arm and nudged Olatunde

with his elbow. "Look! There's that man from Jean's guest house, getting out of that car."

Olatunde shaded his eyes from the sun, "Oh, yes! You're right. The quiet dude with the sharp beard."

They watched the man walk to the other car.



He leaned in through the open window, speaking to someone. As the other car drove away, he walked back towards his own car. Shaun and Sol saw that he now had a small package wrapped in black plastic in his hand.

“That’s strange,” said Sol. “I thought Jean said he was here to walk like us. I’m going to find out what he’s up to.”

They strolled over to the car. The man had his hand on the driver’s door.

“Hi!” called Sol.

The man’s hand froze on the door. He looked up.

“Hi!” Sol said again. “Don’t I know you? From the guest house?”

“Oh! Er, yes, hello again,” said the man hurriedly. He pulled the car door open and got in.

Sol didn’t give up that easily. “Did you have a

nice walk today?” He pointed to the man’s feet. “It must have been tricky in those flip-flops.”

The man looked away. He seemed to be working out what to say.

“Or maybe you’re not really a walker at all?” said Shaun boldly. “You had a package to collect.”

The man smiled. “You’ve got me there,” he said. “Very clever. You’re right. I’m not here to go walking.” He looked around him. “I’m here undercover.”

Olatunde gasped. “I thought so. An undercover agent. Are you investigating the alien invasion?”

The man stared at Olatunde. Then he smiled again. “Smart boy,” he said, tapping his nose. “Top secret. Keep it to yourselves please boys.”

Olatunde gave the man a wobbly salute. “Yes, sir! Will do.”

“Good lads!” said the man as he started up the car. “Take care now.”

The boys watched him drive away.

Shaun giggled. “This trip is getting weirder and weirder.”

Half a kilometre later, Ryan caught up with the boys as they reached the new campsite. It looked almost the same as the last one. There were no houses nearby, but at least there was a proper shower block with toilets. Most of it was taped off because the main camping season was over, but it was clean and dry.

They ate a meal of hash browns and eggs, which the Mud Brothers cooked themselves on the tiny gas stove.

Afterwards, they played a gentle game of catch before setting up their tent. Inside, happy to be

out of the cold, Olatunde began to tell them more about alien invasions.

“The aliens tie the humans down so they can do experiments on you,” he explained.

Shaun’s eyes were wide. “What kind of experiments?”

“Well,” began Olatunde, “they start by—”

He was interrupted by Ryan poking his head inside the tent. “I’m just for going for a quick run before it gets too dark,” he said.

Shaun looked amazed. “A run? Aren’t you tired after today?”

“I’m training for a half marathon,” said Ryan. “I’ll only be 40 minutes or so, I’m just doing a short loop around the campsite. Any problems, you can SOS me—I can see this hill all the way. Big day tomorrow, Mud Brothers. Get as much



sleep as you can. I'll try not to disturb you when I get back."

"Okay, Ryan, see you in the morning," called Sol.

Shaun whistled. "Abseiling! Marathons! Is that guy some kind of superhero?"



Ryan jogged downhill across the fields as the sun began to set. At the bottom, he followed a path beside a winding wood and then came to a disused railway line. It was a favourite route of his.

As he ran, he spotted strange lights to his left and heard a rumbling noise. Curious, he decided to investigate. When the noise sounded close,

he saw a light shining between the metal slats of an abandoned railway building. Ryan peeped inside, and gasped.

A moment later he was blinded by a terrifying bright light. Unseen arms grabbed him. He felt himself being lifted up. Then everything went black.





## CHAPTER 9

Olatunde woke with a jolt. A heavy weight was pressing on his chest. Struggling to move, he sat up painfully. His backpack rolled off him. It had toppled over onto him while he slept. He looked at the time and groaned—4.55am. So much for a good night's sleep.

There was a rustle, then a squeak. He snapped on his phone torch. Moby was scrabbling about on the top of his backpack. Without thinking, Olatunde shooed him away. The rat bolted over the sleeping bags and clothes, found a small gap

in the door and scampered out of the tent.

Olatunde scrambled after him.

Outside the air was cold. A half-moon cast a pale light across the field.

Olatunde felt a nudge. Shaun appeared next to him. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

“Looking for Moby. He escaped from the tent,” whispered Olatunde.

Shaun crouched down. He rustled something in his pocket. “Here, Moby! Moby!” he called softly.

Olatunde heard a squeak.

“Here he is,” said Shaun. He scooped Moby into his pocket, then paused. “Look at that,” he said, forgetting to whisper. “Ryan’s left his tent door wide open. He must be freezing. I’ll see if I can zip it without waking him.” He put Moby in his pocket, stepped forward and started to tug at

the zip.

He glanced inside the tent and let go of the zip.

“Ryan’s not here,” he said.

“What?” said Olatunde.

They both looked into Ryan’s empty tent.

“I hope he’s alright,” said Shaun, but Olatunde wasn’t listening. He was staring across the fields to the far hillside.

“I can see more UFO lights.”

There was a rustling sound behind them as Sol climbed, yawning, out of the tent.

“What’s going on?”

“Ryan’s missing,” said Olatunde. He pointed to the lights on the hill, white this time. “And the aliens have landed again.”

Sol looked where Olatunde was pointing. There was a white light all right, and it was flashing.

Three quick, three slow, three quick.

“Those aren’t UFO lights,” said Sol. “That’s the SOS signal.”

“Ryan!” yelled Shaun. “He’s calling for help.”

Olatunde nodded. “The aliens have got him. For sure.”

“Let’s go!” said Sol. “We’ve got to help him!”

Sol tore off his borrowed clothes so Shaun and Olatunde could get dressed. They grabbed their torches and raced towards the flashing light.

They followed a long winding path next to a wood, and climbed a bank onto a wide raised track. “This used to be a railway line. I remember it from the map,” panted Sol.

The light flashed again. They ran towards it and found themselves in a scruffy yard in front of an old building. There was no one there.



“Up here!” hissed a voice. “It’s me, Ryan. I’m locked in.”

The boys pointed their torches upwards. Ryan was leaning out of the building’s only window. It was about five metres from the ground. “The door’s locked. I can’t get out. It’s too high to jump down from up here.”

Sol thought for a moment. “What if you had your abseil kit? Could you lower yourself down?”

“Yes,” said Ryan, “but how will you get it up here?”

“I think I know how,” said Sol. “I’ll run back to camp for it. Is it in your tent?”

Ryan nodded. “Yes, in my backpack.”

Sol ran off into the darkness.

“Olatunde and Shaun, you’d better hide,” whispered Ryan. “Whoever did this knocked me

out for a few hours and locked me up. They're not here now but they might come back any second."

Olatunde and Shaun hid behind some bins from where they had a clear view of the building.

"What if they come back before we get Ryan out?" asked Shaun.

"You mean what if the aliens come back?" asked Olatunde.

"Yes, the aliens, whoever!"

"I don't even want to think about that," Olatunde said darkly.

The wait felt cold and tense, and much too long. Slowly, the sun began to rise and warmed them a little. At last, Sol came running up the track towards them.

"Get ready to catch this, Ryan," he said, standing beneath the window. When he saw Ryan tense up,

Sol grinned. "Don't worry, I'm a basketball pro."

Sol held Ryan's pack steady at his shoulder, then threw it towards the window. The throw was too low for Ryan to reach it. Sol's second throw was higher, and Ryan managed to touch the pack with his fingers but he couldn't hold it. The third throw was on target. Ryan grabbed the bag.

Ryan disappeared for a moment inside the upstairs room. Sol, Olatunde and Shaun could hear him fastening his ropes. A moment later he abseiled down into the yard.

"Great work, Sol!" Ryan laughed. "And you even remembered my helmet!"

Ryan hastily packed his helmet back into his pack. "You won't believe what I saw in that old building..."

In the distance they heard the deep rumble of

an engine.

“Someone’s driving down the lane behind this yard,” said Ryan. “Let’s get out of here!”

They reached the disused railway track just as a lorry swung into the yard. A solid-looking man jumped out.

“Oy! You lot! Get back here!”

The man lumbered after them, but he was slow and quickly gave up. He pulled out a walkie-talkie and started shouting into it.

“He’s not an alien!” Olatunde panted furiously as he ran.

Ryan frowned. “What? Course he’s not an alien! He’s a mega thief. There were loads of stolen quad bikes in that building.”



## CHAPTER 10

“This way!” shouted Ryan. He led them to a narrow road. “Maybe we can stop a car and get help.”

Moments later, they heard a car engine.

“Wow, that’s lucky!” said Ryan as he waved at it.

The car pulled over and stopped next to them. The driver wound his window down. “Alright, lads, need some help?”

“It’s the undercover agent!” said Olatunde, smiling with relief. “Hello again, sir! Can you give us a lift?”

“Anywhere with a working phone?” added Ryan.

“No problem!” said the driver. “Hop in!”

“Thanks!” said Sol. He glanced inside the car.

Something on the dashboard caught his eye. Something very unusual—a homemade wooden keyring with felt ears and googly eyes.



Sol stepped back. “He’s one of the thieves!” he said. “Everyone, run!”

The group ran back to the disused railway, only to see a group of three quad bikes roaring towards them.

“This way!” yelled Ryan. He scrambled through a hedge and led the others at a run across a field. They could hear the quad bikes roaring up and down behind them, looking for a weak spot in the hedge.

They raced into a small, wooded area, their breath catching in their throats. The quad bikes were spreading out across the field.

“Listen,” said Ryan. “Hide here until the quads are gone. I’m going to lead them away from you and get help. Once the quads are out of sight, you three are going to run to Bog Fell Peak. It’s too big to miss. It’s only eight kilometres east from here. You’ve got 90 minutes. You can still do it!”

The boys just stared at him.

“Here’s the map,” he added, pulling it out of his pack and thrusting it into Sol’s hands. “Good luck, Mud Brothers!”

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun continued to stare at Ryan.

“Guys?” Ryan said.

Sol gave a shaky thumbs up, while Shaun and



Olatunde blinked and smiled uncertainly. Then they dived under the nearest bushes.

They watched Ryan run into the open field where the thieves spotted him. The bikers gave chase as Ryan sprinted away.

When the noise of the quad bikes had faded, the Mud Brothers jumped out from their hiding place and studied the map over Sol's shoulder.

"East is that way, where the sun rose," Sol said pointing. He tapped the map. "There's Bog Fell Peak. So, it's this bridle path here, down across these two streams, and then about three kilometres uphill to the finish. We're going to have to move fast!"

Olatunde groaned. "I knew you were going to say that."



## CHAPTER 11

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It was easy running downhill, but once the Mud Brothers had crossed the two streams and started uphill, their legs turned to jelly. Their breath came in gasps. The path wound upwards, deeply pitted with brown pools of water and slippery mud. There was no time to skip around the shallow edges. They stomped through the mud as fast as they could. It flew up all around them, splattering their faces and sticking to their clothes.

"It's five minutes to ten," yelled Sol from the front. "Keep going! I can see people at the top!"



The people were specks in the distance.

“It’s too far!” wailed Olatunde.

“I can’t go on!”

“Yes you can!” said Shaun. He grabbed

Olatunde’s arm.

“Remember you’re a Mud Brother!” urged Sol. He turned back and grabbed Olatunde’s other arm.

Together, Sol and Shaun hauled Olatunde up the hill.

As they got nearer, they could see all of the other teams and Mr Zabu waving and clapping. They could hear cheering and a countdown—“60 seconds, 59, 58...”

“We’re too late!” cried Olatunde. “They’re counting too fast!”

There were two flags at the top of the hill. The boys kept running.

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1!”

The countdown finished just before they ran through the flags.

“Did we miss it? Are we late?” called Shaun.

“No, no!” said Mr Zabu, stepping forward. “You did it! Actually, you’re a minute early. Your friends started the countdown when they saw you, just for fun.”

Sol laughed in relief. Olatunde rolled his eyes.

All the teams had finished on time. People were jumping up and down and cheering. Sol, however, felt cut off from the celebrations. Where was Ryan now? Did he escape from the thieves? He looked

at Olatunde and Shaun, and could see from their worried faces that they felt the same.

When they told Mr Zabu about their escape from the thieves, his brow furrowed. He tried his phone but there was still no signal.

“We’re due to start walking down the hill to the car park to meet our coach soon,” he said. “But I’m going to hurry things up.”

He clapped his hands loudly and held them up. Everyone looked up. “We need to get moving now, please. Let’s go, quick as you can.”

Following the crowd, Sol, Shaun and Olatunde walked in silence. But as they approached the car park, they were surprised to see how busy it was. Angela and the coach were already there, as was the mayor in her fancy outfit, but there were also police cars, a TV news van, photographers and

what looked like four farmers wearing wellies. And in the middle of it all, talking to someone with a fluffy microphone was... Ryan.

Sol, Olatunde and Shaun whooped with delight. They weaved through the crowd to reach him.

“They call themselves the Mud Brothers,” Ryan was saying. “They were incredibly brave.



And it was a brilliant idea of one of the boys, Sol, to fetch my abseil kit so I could escape from the building. I'm just glad I got to a phone fast enough so the police could find the thieves before they got away. Apparently, they've stolen lots of quad bikes recently. I saw vehicle lights last night while I was out running and went to investigate. They were secretly loading the quad bikes onto a lorry."

The reporter nodded and faced into the camera. "Lots of people round here will be very happy indeed that the thieves have finally been arrested. In fact, the local farmers have offered a large reward to anyone who helps track them down."

Sol felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Mr Zabu. "I just spoke to a police officer who told me it's a

big reward, and it will be shared between you and Shaun, Olatunde and Ryan.

"Wow!" said Sol. He thought for a moment. "If I give my share to the youth club will there definitely be enough money for a basketball court?"

"Definitely!" smiled Mr Zabu. "That, Sol, would be a truly wonderful thing to do."

Sol heard excited chatter behind him. Shaun, Olatunde and Ryan appeared at his side.

"Well done, Sol," said Ryan patting him on his muddy back. "Great map reading."

Sol grinned.

"Ryan's just told us he's teaching an abseiling course next month," said Shaun. "Want to go for it?"

Sol high-fived them. "Yeah! I'm in! It'll be

Mud Brothers Two, the sequel.”

Mr Zabu clapped his hands loudly. “Time to board the coach everybody!”

He turned to Sol, Olatunde and Shaun. “Your backpacks are on that bench over there,” he said, smiling. “A lovely woman called Jean brought them over for you in her car.”

Grabbing their backpacks, the boys headed back towards the coach when three cyclists turned into the car park. They stopped and drank from their water bottles. One of them waved at the Mud Brothers.

“Hi!” the cyclist called. “Did you enjoy your long walk?”

When the boys looked confused, the cyclist continued. “We stayed at Jean’s guest house, too. We arrived on our bikes just as you were leaving.

Jean told us all about you and the walking challenge.”

“Oh,” said Sol. “Yes, it was a great walk, thanks!”

When they reached the coach, Sol looked back at the cyclists—at their pointy helmets, high-tech sunglasses and tight black clothes. They looked just like...

He poked Shaun in the ribs. “There go our aliens!”

“Oh, yes!” laughed Shaun. “Question is... do we tell Olatunde?”

“Nah,” said Sol, grinning, “Let’s not spoil his fun.”

Slowly everyone said their goodbyes and boarded the coach. Sol, Olatunde and Shaun sat together on the back seat.



As they drove towards the city, Olatunde's phone beeped. "At last!" he exclaimed. "I've got a signal."

He looked at the screen and frowned. "Uh-oh, 37 missed calls. All from Ade!"

Olatunde took a deep breath and called him back. Shaun and Sol could hear muffled shouting at the other end of the line.

"Ade, man! Your jacket's totally safe!" Olatunde protested. "I kept it in my backpack all the time... nearly." He switched to a video call. "Look! I'll show you."

Olatunde went to pull the jacket out of his backpack but a horrified look spread across his face. His hands lifted shiny strips of torn fabric from his pack. Moby's little head poked up from the mess that used to be Ade's favourite jacket.

Shaun gasped. “Moby made a nest out of Ade’s jacket!”

There was a shout from the phone. “Wait ’til you get home, Olatunde! I’ll...”

Olatunde hastily ended the call.

“Man! Did you see the look on Ade’s face!” marvelled Shaun. “Olatunde is toast!”

“He’d have been safer with the aliens,” agreed Sol.

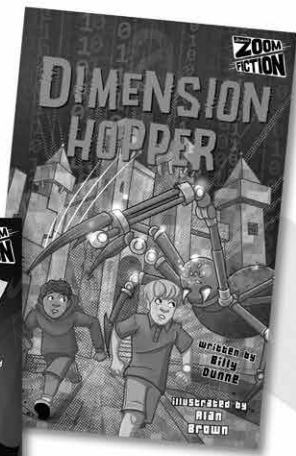
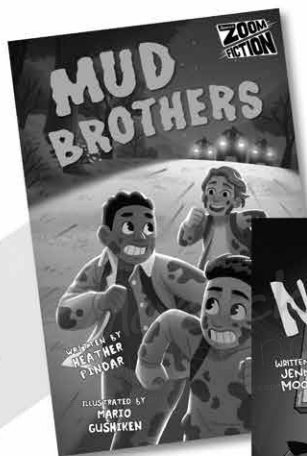
Shaun and Sol doubled up with laughter. Olatunde smiled weakly and closed his eyes. He prayed for an alien invasion sometime soon, preferably before he got home.

**The End**



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