

THE LATE CREW

PRAISE FOR THE LATE CREW

“Being neurodiverse myself, it was particularly wonderful to read a story that demonstrates not only the struggles we face, but – more importantly – the immense value we bring too.”

Hana Tooke, no. 1 bestselling author of The Unadoptables

“I thought it was charming! I loved the characters . . . and I loved the idea of a group of children who understood what it is to be young carers, and how cleverly Rab has tied it to the story. I hope they have many more adventures!”

Alastair Chisholm, author of Orion Lost and Adam-2

“Spaceships at school, aliens in need, budding friendships put to the test . . . Get ready for an out-of-this-world adventure with a ton of heart.”

Katharine Orton, author of Glassheart and Nevertell

“Blazing with star-filled brilliance. An alien adventure for our time. Tyler and Levi are both important characters. I loved the way their story was built and unfolded.”

Tim Tilley, author of Harklights

“An exciting new alien adventure with a neurodivergent twist.”

Dashe Roberts, author of Sticky Pines

THE LATE (REW

BY RAB FERGUSON



ONWE

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For young carers everywhere

THE NIGHT BEFORE

Above the town of Morfield, a red light and a green light danced across the night sky.

The green light dodged and spun and darted between the stars. The red light chased after it, getting closer and closer, until eventually . . .

FLASH

The green light was gone. It left behind a dark shape that fell towards the earth. The red

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light was still for a moment, almost like it was watching the object fall. Then it vanished too.

The stars in the night sky carried on twinkling, as if nothing at all had happened.

THE MORNING ROUTINE

Tyler was going to be late. It was Friday, which was a bad day to be late. This was because *The One Who Doesn't Understand* dealt with late pupils on Fridays. When it came to *The One Who Doesn't Understand*, if you were late, you were in trouble. Even if you had a good reason.

‘It’s time to get up now,’ Tyler said to his younger brother, Levi.

‘*Mrmppphhh*,’ said Levi, still in bed.

Tyler suspected Levi had got out of bed in the night to look at the stars again. Levi loved

astronomy, and he'd left his round glasses on the windowsill.

'Please, Levi,' said Tyler, trying to stay calm. 'It's only my third week of secondary school. I don't want to be late again.'

Levi kept his eyes shut. Tyler knew he was only pretending to be asleep.

'You have maths today. That's your favourite lesson. You'd feel rotten if you missed it,' urged Tyler.

Levi opened one eye suspiciously, but didn't get out of bed. Tyler needed to really get his attention.

'We can talk about space on the way to school,' added Tyler.

That did it! Levi jumped out of bed, suddenly full of energy. He was wearing rocket-ship pyjamas.

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‘We have to talk about space,’ Levi announced brightly. ‘You said we could.’

‘Pinky promise?’ offered Tyler.

‘Pinky promise,’ Levi repeated.

The brothers hooked pinkies.

‘Come on now,’ Tyler said. ‘Let’s do your morning routine.’

Levi put on his glasses and gave Tyler a double thumbs up. Tyler did Levi’s morning routine with him every day. It went like this:

1. Wash their faces.
2. Brush their teeth.
3. Chat while getting dressed.
4. Levi: pour out two bowls of cereal.
Tyler: pour the milk.
5. Tuck kitchen roll into Levi’s collar, to stop any milk getting on his top.

6. Eat breakfast together.

7. Tyler: wash the dishes.

Levi: dry and put away.

Even when they were late, Tyler never rushed the routine. They had to do it all properly, or Levi became very upset.

Levi was autistic. This meant he thought in a different way to Tyler. One part of this was that Levi liked patterns, and he needed certain things to be done the same way every day. The morning routine was one of these things.

On this day, by the time they got to Number Seven on the list and Tyler was putting their dishes in the sink, the digital clock read 8.40 a.m. That was when he was meant to start school. He sighed as he scrubbed their bowls

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in the hot soapy water. He still needed to bring Mum her morning cup of tea. He was *definitely* going to be late.

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MUM'S YELLOW BEDROOM

‘Hi Mum,’ said Tyler, holding the cup of tea he’d made for her.

‘Good morning, my angel,’ said Mum. She was sitting up in bed, in her pyjamas. Her blonde hair was sticking up, like it often did in the morning. Mum called it her rock star hair. She looked tired, but smiled at Tyler anyway.

Mum’s bedroom was small and cosy. She’d given Tyler and Levi the bigger room to share.

Mum liked matching colours, so there was lots of yellow in the room. She had yellow bedding, yellow pillows, yellow curtains and a painting of a yellow sunflower.

Tyler put the cup of tea down on her bedside table. Mum always had Earl Grey tea. Tyler liked the flowery way it smelled.

‘Thank you,’ said Mum.

She looked at the bedside clock. It was an old-fashioned one, with bells on the top. It was, of course, yellow. The hands showed it was quarter to nine.

‘I’ve told you before, you don’t need to worry about my cup of tea when you’re late for school,’ she scolded him softly.

‘I like making your tea,’ said Tyler. He spoke quietly in Mum’s room, because her room felt like a quiet, gentle place. It was

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the opposite of the school corridors, where everyone was always shouting.

‘It’s Friday, though,’ Mum spoke in a spooky voice and wiggled her fingers. ‘That means, *The One Who Doesn’t UnderstaaaaAAAND!*’

She said that last part as if she was talking about a ghost or ghoul. Mum didn’t like The One Who Doesn’t Understand. In fact, it was Mum who came up with the nickname.

A few of the things that *The One Who Doesn’t Understand* didn’t understand were:

- Mum’s illness and why she couldn’t take Tyler to school.
- That posting Mum scary brown envelopes didn’t help.
- Why spoons were VERY IMPORTANT.

‘There’s my other little angel,’ said Mum.

Levi shyly entered the room. He stood in the doorway with his hands clasped together.

‘Are you looking forward to your day, Levi?’ asked Mum.

‘Yes,’ said Levi. His face lit up. ‘Tyler and I are going to talk about space.’

‘That’s nice of you to let Tyler talk about his favourite topic,’ Mum said, winking at Tyler.

‘No, I love space!’ Levi exclaimed.

Mum and Tyler both laughed. Levi realised he was being teased and started laughing too. It was nice being in Mum’s bedroom, all laughing together. Tyler wished he could stay there forever, rather than going to school. At school, trouble was waiting for him.

Far more trouble than he knew.

AN INTERGALACTIC WALK TO SCHOOL

As the brothers walked through the kitchen, a man on the radio said:

‘Our top story today is the strange lights seen over several areas of the county last night. Our guest, astronomist Peter Ladley, says it was most likely meteor activity. However, conspiracy callers hav—’

Tyler turned off the radio as they passed.

‘Peter Ladley is wrong,’ Levi said. ‘Meteors don’t move like that.’

‘Like what?’ asked Tyler, confused.

But Levi had already picked up his school bag and left through the front door. Tyler followed his brother out.

‘Meteors don’t move like what?’ he asked again, as he caught up to Levi.

‘I saw those lights last night. They were turning in the sky. Meteors just move straight,’ said Levi.

‘I *knew* you got up to stargaze!’

They were on their way to Morfield Primary School, which wasn’t far from their house. Morfield was a small town, where you were never more than ten minutes from the countryside. There was lots of green grass, and trees, and flowerbeds.

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‘Did you know, there’s ten billion Earth-like planets in our galaxy?’ said Levi.

‘What’s an Earth-like planet?’ Tyler asked. Levi liked to be asked questions about his facts.

‘Planets that are a similar size to ours, that have water on them. They’re the planets scientists think are most likely to have life.’

That caught Tyler’s attention.

‘Aliens?’ asked Tyler. ‘Are you talking about aliens?’

‘Yes. They might come from a planet that looks a lot like Earth.’

They arrived at Morfield Primary. Tyler was disappointed that they were there already. He wanted to hear more about aliens. He walked Levi into the school’s reception. They were late, so the other pupils were already in form time.

The only person around was the receptionist, Mrs Summersby. She waved them over to her.

Mrs Summersby was a plump lady with rosy cheeks, who always wore brightly coloured dresses. Tyler knew her from when he was in primary school, which felt like ages ago now, even though really it had only been a few months.

‘Aren’t you the best big brother, Tyler!’ Mrs Summersby exclaimed. ‘Bringing Levi into school every day.’

‘He’s the best big brother,’ confirmed Levi, with a grin on his face. Everyone liked Mrs Summersby.

‘Levi can wait with me for his teaching assistant,’ said Mrs Summersby. ‘You hurry along now, Tyler. You need to get to school yourself.’

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Tyler nodded. As he left, he looked back longingly over his shoulder to where Levi was chatting to Mrs Summersby. He'd rather have stayed there.

Everything had changed since he'd moved up into Year 7 at Morfield Secondary School. At primary school, everyone had known that Tyler looked after his family. They'd understood why Tyler was sometimes late and hadn't made a big deal out of it. At secondary school, there were too many pupils with too many families. It felt like none of the teachers wanted to hear about Levi and Mum.

Plus, at primary school he'd actually had mates. Now everyone else had split off into their own groups, and he spent breaks and lunches alone. He thought it was probably because he

wasn't usually able to hang out after school, so they all became closer friends while he wasn't around.

Tyler checked his watch. It was past nine o'clock. Registration was over and the first lesson of the day would have started. Despite this, he dragged his feet on the pavement. What was the point in rushing when he was too late to avoid being told off? And when no one would talk to him all day in lessons and breaks?

Eventually, Tyler reached the tall steps with the metal railing that led up to Morfield Secondary School. Sure enough, *The One Who Doesn't Understand* was waiting at the top.

THE ONE WHO DOESN'T UNDERSTAND

The One Who Doesn't Understand's real name was Miss Penn. She was the head of Year 7, which she said meant she was supposed to help pupils get used to secondary school. All Tyler ever saw her do was tell them off.

She was very neat. Her black hair was tied in a perfect bun. Her shirt was perfectly white and perfectly tucked in. Her trousers were perfectly ironed, and her shoes were perfectly shiny.

The perfectness of Miss Penn's clothes made Tyler feel messy. His shirt was baggy and

untucked at one side, and his trousers were creased. There was a blue ink stain on his tie that hadn't come out in the wash.

'Late again,' said Miss Penn.

'Yes, Miss,' said Tyler.

Miss Penn had a way of looking at Tyler that he hated. She looked at him like he was a problem to be solved. She was looking at him like that now.

'Oh dear, Tyler. You did say you were going to try harder,' said Miss Penn.

Miss Penn sighed. Tyler didn't like the way she sighed either. She always sighed like seeing Tyler ruined her day.

'You were warned of what would happen. That's an after-school detention today,' said Miss Penn.

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‘No!’ shouted Tyler. ‘I can’t have an after-school detention! I have to pick up Levi!’

Miss Penn gave him another look. ‘It’s not one rule for you and one rule for everyone else. I’ll see you at half past three in my office.’

Tyler always walked Levi home from school. It was one of Levi’s important routines. When things changed, it was like a thousand alarm bells went off in his little brother’s head, making him feel awful.

If Tyler wasn’t in the Morfield Primary’s reception at the end of the day, Levi would get completely overwhelmed. He’d shout and throw things and cry. Even if Mum was able to collect him instead, Levi would still find it really difficult that things hadn’t gone according to plan.

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If Mum couldn't do it, she'd have to call the primary school and tell them to look after Levi until Tyler was done with detention. The whole time his little brother would be feeling absolutely awful. This was bad. This was *very* bad.

AN OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD LESSON

Later that morning, Tyler was in a science lesson, but he wasn't paying attention. Instead, he was staring at some test tubes at the side of the room, while scratching at his knuckles. All he could think about was Levi stuck in Morfield Primary at the end of the day.

Mum hadn't replied to his text yet. He'd asked if she could walk Levi home from school. It all depended on whether she had enough spoons left . . .

‘Tyler?’ said Mr McNulty, the science teacher. He was an old man, whose hair splayed out to the sides like he’d been electrocuted.

The entire class was looking at Tyler. He had a horrible feeling that Mr McNulty had just asked him a question.

‘Seeing as you didn’t listen to the question, it is unlikely you’ll be able to give me the correct answer,’ said Mr McNulty sternly.

The rest of the class sniggered.

‘Can I ask a question, sir?’ said Tyler. Mr McNulty was easily distracted. Tyler’s best chance of avoiding even more trouble was changing the topic.

‘Go ahead,’ said the science teacher, already sounding intrigued.

‘Do you believe in aliens, sir?’ asked Tyler.

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The class laughed again, louder this time. Tyler felt his face turn red.

‘I don’t know why you’re all laughing. It’s a very good question,’ said Mr McNulty.

He turned to his whiteboard, entirely forgetting the lesson about gravity that he was supposed to be teaching. He drew a small circle in the board’s centre.

‘The problem is that we only have one example of life existing,’ Mr McNulty tapped the circle with his pen. ‘And that’s on Earth. So we don’t know if a planet having life is a one-off, something special that’s only happened here. However, if we found just one more planet with life . . .’ The teacher drew another circle. ‘Then we’d know that it’s not a one-off.’

‘If that *was* the case . . .’ Mr McNulty drew lots of circles all over the board. ‘It’d be likely

the universe was full of planets that supported alien life. Who knows what we might find on them? It could be alien plants, alien animals, maybe even alien people.'

The whole class was staring in rapt attention at their teacher. No one was laughing at Tyler any more. A girl called Grace, at the front of the class, put her hand up. She had short Afro hair and wore big glasses, and teachers liked her because she did well in every subject. Mr McNulty nodded at her.

'So if we find one alien, that means there could be loads of them out there?' asked Grace.

'Exactly. But we'd have to find one first, before we could ever know,' said Mr McNulty. He looked at all his circles and seemed to suddenly remember there was a different lesson he was meant to be teaching.

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‘Anyway, if you’d all turn to page 73 in your textbooks . . .’ said Mr McNulty.

At least Tyler would have something interesting about aliens to tell Levi tonight.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPOONS

Mum had an illness called chronic fatigue syndrome. Sometimes it was also called ME, said like ‘em’ ‘ee’. The letters stood for two long words that Tyler couldn’t pronounce, but what it meant was that Mum was exhausted all the time. Tyler knew it caused her pain as well, which made him sad to think about.

Mum had explained it once by talking about spoons:

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Mum wakes up in the morning with twelve spoons – that's how much energy she has for the whole day. Every activity costs her some of her spoons. For example,



Get out of bed.



Get dressed.



Take her medicine.



Talk to Tyler and Levi in bed.



Shower.



Make and eat lunch.



Do her online course (Mum was learning about art).



Prepare a home-cooked meal for them to eat together for dinner.



Hoovering, or dusting, or mopping (because of this Tyler did nearly all the cleaning).



Play board games with Tyler and Levi.

Some days, when she was more unwell, she'd only start the day with nine or ten spoons. If Mum used more than her number of spoons for a day, she'd be very ill for the next couple of days. It'd be like she had the flu and she'd struggle to do anything at all. Meeting Levi and walking him home was probably about five spoons. Maybe even six, because Levi's routine would be broken, so he'd be shouting and crying.

Whether Mum had enough spoons to collect Levi from school depended on what she'd done already today. If she had too few spoons left, then Levi would have no one there to meet him when school finished. He'd have to

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wait with someone in the reception until Tyler could come and get him. Tyler didn't know how his little brother would cope with things going so far off plan.

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At the end of the day, Tyler headed towards Miss Penn's office for detention. Everyone else was going the opposite direction and leaving school for the weekend. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

I'll pick up Levi. Mum x

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Tyler sighed with relief, then felt a twinge of guilt in his belly. Mum normally sent longer text messages. She must have already used most of her spoons, which meant the extra task of picking up Levi would make her unwell.

She'd be ill all weekend, at least. The guilt in his belly got even worse and felt like a cramp. He'd have to make sure to be on top of all his jobs in the house, so that Mum would have time to recover.

Miss Penn was waiting for him in her office. There were posters on the wall behind her about working hard and trying your best. Tyler knew that she thought he did neither, even though he tried his best all the time. She had three other pupils sitting in detention, with a fourth desk set aside for him. The three others were:

Jayden Green – who glared at Tyler as he sat down. He was from the year above and had a bad reputation. He had bruises on his arms that people said were from fighting. Tyler avoided him when possible.

Alisha Alva – from Tyler’s year, but not in any of his classes. She winked at him and seemed amused that he was in detention too. From what he knew of her, she could be a bit of a class clown. She wore earrings, which wasn’t allowed.

Grace Roberts – this was a surprise to Tyler. She was the one who’d asked the question in his science class. She got As in all her subjects and never usually did anything to get told off. She was staring down at the desk through her chunky glasses.

‘Sit down,’ said Miss Penn.

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The only seat left was next to Jayden Green. Tyler reluctantly took it, without looking at Jayden.

‘So, here you all are. I’ll call you The Late Crew,’ said Miss Penn, ‘because every one of you was late today. Now, you’re going to write an essay on what you did wrong this morning and how you’ll be on time in the future.’

Tyler glared at the blank paper in front of him. He felt his jaw clench with anger. What was he supposed to write? That he shouldn’t have helped Levi with his breakfast, or given Mum her tea? He’d *tried* to explain it to Miss Penn before. She deserved her nickname. She didn’t understand *anything*.

‘I’ll be back in ten minutes. I expect you to have all started writing by then,’ said Miss Penn.

As soon as she left, Jayden turned to Grace. 'Didn't expect you here, four eyes. Thought you never did anything wrong.'

Grace looked as if she was about to cry.

'Leave her alone,' said Tyler.

'What you going to do about it, pipsqueak?' snarled Jayden.

Tyler was already annoyed, and he curled his hands into fists without even thinking about it.

Jayden jumped to his feet. His chair skittered along the floor behind him. 'You want a fight then?'

Tyler stood up lightning fast. He'd never been in a fight before, but today he'd had enough of people being mean. He wasn't going to get pushed around.

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‘You’re going to get us all in even more trouble,’ wailed Grace. She was properly crying now.

‘Yeah, just leave it,’ said Alisha.

Jayden raised his fists, so Tyler did the same. They faced off, both waiting for the other to make the first move.

That was when the school fell down.

RUN!

BOOooOOooOOM!!!

The office shook. Miss Penn's cup fell off her bookshelf and broke. A 'hang in there' poster drifted down off the wall. Tyler gripped on to his desk, as if it could stop the room from moving. Everyone looked around, eyes wide.

'What was that!?' asked Jayden.

A piece of the plaster ceiling crashed down on Miss Penn's desk, sending up a cloud of

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dust. Everything was still shaking. Another chunk of plaster fell down in the corner.

‘Run!’ shouted Tyler.

They all sprinted out of Miss Penn’s office together. In the hallway, they froze. They were on the ground floor. They just needed a way out!

‘Left or right?’ screamed Grace.

To their right, the roof suddenly fell in. A whole classroom’s worth of desks and chairs fell down with it, sending up a huge plume of dust.

‘Left!’ shouted Tyler, Jayden and Alisha in unison.

They ran to the left.

‘It’s the maths classrooms above us,’ shouted Alisha as they ran. ‘I always knew maths was dangerous!’

At the end of the hall, a set of lockers had fallen diagonally across the doors. They couldn't pull them open. How would they get out? Tyler glanced back the way they'd come. All the tables and chairs from the fallen classroom had made a big pile blocking the hallway. The windows were all too small to climb out of as well. They were trapped!

'Come on, pipsqueak. Help me,' grunted Jayden. He was under the lockers, trying to lift them so they could open the doors. Tyler ducked under with Jayden. Together they were able to inch the lockers upwards, but not enough. The girls joined them. The lockers rose . . . little by little . . . then finally banged back into place against the wall.

'Yes!' Tyler cried.

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They yanked the doors open and rushed through into another corridor.

‘This doesn’t mean we’re friends now,’ Jayden snapped as they all panted on the other side. Tyler rolled his eyes.

This hallway was more intact. A bulletin board had fallen off the wall, but other than that it was all in one piece.

‘The floor’s stopped shaking,’ said Alisha.

She was right. Tyler breathed a sigh of relief. Then he looked up at the ceiling, which was lined with cracks. They weren’t safe yet.

‘Where now?’ he said. This school was so big, and he still hadn’t learnt his way round.

‘That door goes to the gymnasium,’ said Grace. ‘It has a fire exit.’

‘Who calls it the *gymnasium*? It’s the sports hall,’ said Jayden.

Grace ignored him and pulled open the door. She gasped. Her face was lit green by an eerie glow from inside the gym. Tyler and the others rushed up next to her, trying to see inside as well. What could be in there?

UNIDENTIFIED FALLEN OBJECT

They gaped open-mouthed at the gym. Everything was chaos. The basketball hoops had crashed down. The wooden vaulting horse and balance beam had been thrown across the room. The cupboard had broken open; a pile of gym mats sliding out alongside deflated dodgeballs.

And there was a massive hole in the ground. The concrete under the gym floor was

glowing luminous green. Inside the glowing pit there were several large, curved pieces of metal, each about the size of a car door.

Tyler felt a breeze in his hair and looked up. The gym's high roof was broken open, so he could see the sky. A few of the snapped rafters glowed green as well. Something had shot in through the roof and smashed into the gym floor – that was what had caused the school to shake. The large pieces of metal were from whatever had crashed into the ground.

But what was it that had crashed into the school? All Tyler could tell from the metal pieces in the hole was that it was once metallic and smooth on the outside, with dark triangle patterns on the inside. It was like looking at a model that had been dropped and smashed,

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and trying to work out what it was before it was broken.

‘What’s that at the bottom?’ asked Alisha, pointing.

Tyler followed her finger and saw a round object shining a brighter green than the rest of the pit.

‘It’s the headteacher!’ said Jayden.

‘No, it’s not,’ said Tyler, baffled. ‘It’s a bright green thing.’

‘I meant over there,’ Jayden snapped in an annoyed voice.

At the other side of the gym, the headteacher, Mr Hail, was looking in through the fire exit. He was a tall bald man, who wore a suit and tie to school. He took a shocked step back when he saw the four of them. There was no way for them to get across to

him, or him to them, without going through the pit.

‘Stay there,’ Mr Hail shouted over. ‘I’ll get help. Don’t move!’

As soon as Mr Hail disappeared out of the fire exit, there was a long *SQUEEEEEELCH* sound.

‘What was that?’ asked Jayden.

‘And why does it stink now?’ added Alisha.

It did stink. An awful smell was wafting over from the other side of the gym. It reminded Tyler of the time a cabbage went rotten in their fridge. Mr Hail came back in through the fire exit and the smell got stronger. There was something different about the headteacher. He moved stiffly, as if he was holding his body as upright as he possibly could.

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‘Why’s he walking like that?’ whispered Alisha.

‘His eyes are weird,’ said Grace.

Grace was right. There was something *off* in the intense way Mr Hail stared at them.

‘Children,’ the headteacher called out. His voice had changed too. It sounded dull, like all his emotions were gone. ‘I have a new idea. You can help me search the pit.’

The four of them shared uncertain expressions.

‘No way,’ said Jayden. ‘This is too creepy.’

‘Yeah, he’s not acting normal,’ replied Alisha.

‘If we go back through the hallway, there’s another way out further on,’ suggested Grace.

‘Let’s go,’ said Tyler.

They backed out of the gym, watching as Mr Hail climbed jerkily into the glowing green hole. He looked like a puppet, with someone invisible pulling his strings. This was definitely the weirdest day of Tyler's life. Little did he know, things were going to get even weirder!

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JAYDEN'S BAD IDEA

After exploring several classrooms, finding a way around a blocked hallway and going through the sixth form area they normally weren't allowed in, they finally found a way out.

The four of them rushed out of the school through a side door. They all started laughing when they saw they were in the car park, as if being trapped in the collapsing school had been some big joke. Even Jayden looked happy for

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once. It just felt good to be outside in the fresh air.

There were police cars, fire engines and ambulances in the car park. The firefighters were strapping on their helmets and getting ready to go inside, while the police were cordoning off the school.

‘Not a bad escape for *The Late Crew*,’ remarked Alisha, using the name Miss Penn had given them.

‘What was up with Mr Hail?’ asked Grace.

They were interrupted by a police officer striding over. She had a serious expression on her face, and looked like she’d have no time for any messing about.

‘Tyler Harper, Jayden Green, Alisha Alva and Grace Roberts?’

They each nodded at their name.

‘Brilliant. Your head of year, Miss Penn, will be very pleased. She was in floods of tears worrying about you. We’ve had to take her for a sit down.’

The four of them exchanged a look. It was hard to imagine Miss Penn in floods of tears over anything.

‘Are any of you hurt?’ the officer asked, looking across them all with concern.

‘We’re OK,’ said Tyler, and the others agreed.

‘Glad to hear it. Now, move behind the emergency vehicles. Stay a good distance back. We’re worried more of the building might fall.’

They followed the police officer through the gap between a fire engine and an ambulance. Other teachers and pupils who’d been inside

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were waiting there too. Miss Penn was at the other side of the car park, sitting in the back of an ambulance. Her normally perfect hair was frazzled out of its bun, and her shirt wasn't even tucked in properly, but she didn't look hurt at all.

'Oh my goodness,' she exclaimed loudly, standing up and waving at them. 'I'm so happy you're all alright.'

They smiled back at her awkwardly.

'Glad you're OK too,' Grace shouted back.

'I'm not going over there,' Jayden muttered. 'It's her fault we were in there in the first place.'

Tyler felt a bit sorry for Miss Penn. She looked genuinely upset, and it wasn't like she'd meant for the school to fall down on them. He would have gone over and talked to her, if Jayden hadn't stalked off in the opposite

direction and gestured for everyone to follow him. As they walked away, Tyler looked back at the school. From outside, it was even more clear that something had crashed through the school from above. But what could it have been?

‘I want to go back in,’ Jayden said in a low voice, so the others had to lean forward to hear him.

‘Why?’ whispered Tyler incredulously.

‘I want to know what was at the bottom of that pit,’ said Jayden.

‘You’re very brave now that the police officer has said we can’t go near the school,’ scoffed Alisha. ‘You were as eager to get out as the rest of us.’

Jayden grew defensive. ‘Whatever. I’ll come back tomorrow when there’ll be less people

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around. You lot can come with me, unless you're too scared.'

'You'll be by yourself,' snorted Alisha.

'Jayden?' asked Grace timidly. 'If you go back in, can you message me what you find?'

'Me too,' said Alisha immediately.

'Me too,' said Tyler.

A worried look passed over Jayden's face, as if he'd just realised what he'd talked himself into. Then he started acting brash again.

'Sure. Give me your numbers,' said Jayden, then added their contact details to his phone.

'Mr Hail!' the police officer called out suddenly.

The headteacher came out of the school, still strangely stiff. There was a glowing green substance on the bottom of his shoes.

‘You can stop looking, that’s everyone accounted for,’ the police officer shouted to him. ‘No injuries beyond a few scratches and bruises.’

‘Good news,’ Mr Hail called back, his voice cold and emotionless. He stared blankly towards Tyler and the others.

‘Something’s seriously wrong with him,’ said Alisha.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ muttered Jayden. ‘I’ll message you all tomorrow.’

So they left, all splitting off in their separate directions. It was only as he started walking towards home that Tyler remembered Levi and Mum. Levi, whose routine had been broken, and Mum, who was completely out of spoons.

Tyler began running. He needed to get home as fast as possible.

LEVI'S SCHOOL BAG

When Tyler got home, the house was quiet. Levi's school bag was on the floor in the hall, its straps torn at the top. One strap had come completely loose, while the other was still attached by a couple of threads. Levi usually looked after his bag. Worry knotted in Tyler's stomach.

He found his little brother in the front room, watching cartoons. The TV was on a low volume with subtitles turned on. Levi found loud noises difficult, especially when he was stressed. He even had a pair of ear defenders

he took with him everywhere, which he could use to block out sound. They looked like headphones, and had a space and stars design on the outside of the ear muffs.

‘Sorry I couldn’t meet you after school,’ said Tyler softly.

‘That’s OK,’ replied Levi.

Tyler sat down next to Levi on the sofa.

‘What happened to your school bag?’

‘I was swinging it around and shouting when Mum came to get me and not you. I didn’t want to go because it wasn’t right,’ explained Levi.

Tyler could imagine the situation; Levi swinging his school bag faster and faster while Mum and the teachers tried to calm him down.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Tyler. ‘I didn’t mean not to meet you.’

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‘I know you didn’t. Mum said you got detention.’

Tyler nodded, and Levi didn’t ask for any more explanation. They watched the cartoon together for a while. It was about a team of superheroes working together. In this episode, the superheroes had to stop a giant octopus robbing a bank.

‘I didn’t mean to get upset and break my bag,’ said Levi, after the cartoon ended. ‘My brain starts shouting when things don’t go right.’

‘I’ll see if I can fix your bag over the weekend,’ replied Tyler.

‘Thank you. Mum was on the phone earlier, and after she said for you to talk to her when you got home.’

Tyler suspected Levi had deliberately waited to tell him about the phone call so they

could watch the cartoon together. He didn't mind though – it had given him time to calm down after running home.

Who would have been on the phone? Normally it was only Dad who called. Tyler sometimes found it hard talking to Dad because of the way he spoke about Mum. They weren't married any more, and Dad lived far away in London.

As Tyler stood up from the sofa, he thought about Mr McNulty's alien facts, the colourful lights Levi had seen at night and the mysterious object that crashed through the school roof.

Could it be . . . ? Tyler thought, but then dismissed the idea. There had to be a more rational explanation. But still, Levi would want to hear all about it.

THE LATE CREW

‘I’ve got some cool stuff to tell you about,’
Tyler said to his little brother. ‘I’ll go and see
why Mum wanted to talk to me, then I’ll fill you
in.’

A POCKETFUL OF BEES

Tyler took a cup of Earl Grey tea into Mum's room, steam rising from the top.

'Hello, angel,' said Mum weakly. She was back in bed and looked more ill than she had that morning. The colour was gone from her cheeks, so her face was waxy and pale.

'Hi, Mum.' Tyler put the tea down on the bedside table. Seeing Mum looking so unwell made his eyes prick with tears.

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‘I’m so sorry,’ said Tyler. ‘I couldn’t get Levi up in time, and then Miss Penn gave me detention for being late, and then—’

Mum raised her hand, stopping him. She smiled, but there were tears in her eyes too. ‘Don’t be sorry. You look after everyone brilliantly. You clean the house, and you make dinner, and you do Levi’s routines with him. It’s OK to look after yourself as well sometimes, you know.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Tyler.

‘The police called me before. They said you were in school when part of the building fell down – and you’re worrying about me and Levi! Are *you* OK?’

‘Yeah, I am,’ said Tyler. He thought about the glowing green pit, and Mr Hail acting strangely. He wanted to tell Mum about it all,

but he didn't know how, without it sounding silly and made up.

'You're safe. That's all that matters. And I couldn't care less about the detention!' said Mum.

Tyler dried his eyes with his sleeve. He felt a bit better now. His phone buzzed in his pocket. Then it buzzed again. And again.

'You have a bee in your pocket,' commented Mum.

'I'll look later,' said Tyler.

'I need to go to sleep anyway,' said Mum. 'I've used too many spoons today. I won't be up to much at all tomorrow, so it'll be just you and Levi for the day.'

Tyler nodded. His phone buzzed again.

'You go and see what those bees want. I love you,' said Mum with a small wink.

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‘Love you too, Mum,’ said Tyler.

He left the room and looked at his phone.

He’d been added to a message group called

The Late Crew:

Look at morfield news - JAY G

OMG - ALISHAAA

😳😳😳 - ALISHAAA

Mr Hail!! 😳 - GRACE_FUL

THE HEADTEACHER ON THE NEWS

Tyler sat down in the kitchen and searched for Morfield News on his phone. The first hit was a video of Mr Hail standing outside the damaged school. The headteacher was being interviewed by a reporter in a smart jacket.

Tyler pressed play. In the video, Mr Hail didn't look at the reporter, even though she was holding a microphone towards him. Instead, he stared directly into the camera. It felt like the headteacher was looking out of the phone;

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as if he could somehow see Tyler watching the video. It made Tyler shudder.

Reporter: I'm here with Mr Hail, the headteacher of Morfield Secondary. Mr Hail, can you tell us what has happened here today?

Mr Hail: There was an explosion under the school. We think it may have been a gas pipe. Unfortunately, the school will have to be closed for a while.

Reporter: What about the witnesses who say they saw a green streak crash into the roof of the building?

Mr Hail: Utter nonsense. Some people have let their imaginations run wild after seeing the damage to the school.

Reporter: Any final words on the matter?

Mr Hail: It is important for everyone to stay very clear of the school grounds. The building isn't safe.

Mr Hail said everything in a cold and empty tone. It was like he didn't care about what had happened to the school. He wasn't acting like the headteacher Tyler knew. Also, he was definitely lying about thinking that it might be a gas pipe. He'd seen the pit, and there was no way he could really believe the problem had come from *below* the school.

Tyler replayed the video. Something about it was bugging him. It was like Grace said earlier – there was something wrong with Mr Hail's eyes. It was on his third replay that Tyler realised exactly what was wrong. In the entire video, Mr Hail didn't blink.

Not. Even. Once.

TYLER'S DECISION

It's a cover-up - JAY G

No way that was a gas pipe. But what's
Mr Hail hiding 🤔 - ALISHAAA

That's why he said to stay off the school
grounds. He's hiding something and wants to
keep people away - GRACE_FUL

At least school's closed 😂😂 - ALISHAAA

RAB FERGUSON

We're probably the only people other than him who have seen the pit. He must be trying to keep whatever was in it secret. There was something glowing at the bottom, remember? - GRACE_FUL

I'm definitely going back. Tomorrow night. You guys in or what? - JAY G

Can't let creepy Hail get away with a cover-up. I'm in - ALISHAAA

I want to know what's in the pit. I'm in - GRACE_FUL

Tyler hesitated with his thumbs over the phone's screen. The glowing green pit had looked like it could be dangerous. And what

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about Mr Hail? Something *bad* had happened to the headteacher in the school. Something that made him act not like himself.

Tyler didn't want the same thing to happen to him. But he *did* want to know what was at the bottom of that pit . . . and he didn't think he could bear being the only one who didn't go.

I'm in! - TY/LER

SET LASERS TO MAXIMUM BLAST

On Saturday, all Tyler could think about was going back to the school in the evening. Mum was too ill to get out of bed, so it was just him and Levi together for the day.

Tyler had lots of jobs to do on weekends.

On Saturday morning, he:

- Put his, Levi's and Mum's clothes in the wash.
- Hoovered and dusted the house.
- Took the clothes out of the washing machine and hung them up to dry.

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- Went to the shop and used Mum's purse to buy food for the week, from a list she'd texted him.

'I bet that glowing thing's from outer space! *It has* to be something to do with those lights I saw,' exclaimed Levi, as soon as Tyler returned from the shop. Levi had stayed home, because he didn't like how noisy the shop was. Tyler had left his little brother watching his favourite film, *E.T.*, which always kept him happy.

Tyler smiled, carrying in several heavy bags of food. His little brother hadn't stopped talking about the object at the bottom of the pit – not since Tyler had told him all about The Late Crew's adventure. Levi was especially excited about Tyler going back to the school later on.

After Tyler finished all his jobs for the day, the brothers played a game called *Alien Blasters 5*. They kept the volume low because Levi still felt a bit stressed from the day before. As they played, Tyler wondered if the object in the pit at school really was from space.

Had it been made by aliens? If it had, were the aliens similar to the evil blue-headed Scora from the planet Hex they were virtually fighting on *Alien Blasters*?

Tyler didn't tell Mum about anything that happened in the school. Not even when he brought lunch to her bedroom and she managed to sit up and talk to him for a while. He knew if he explained The Late Crew's plan, she'd forbid him from going anywhere even near the school.

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There was one problem. Tyler was supposed to be looking after Levi. It was one thing quickly popping out to the shop, but he couldn't leave his little brother alone in the house all evening. Not when Mum was so unwell. What if something happened?

But he couldn't take Levi with him either. Taking someone to a possibly dangerous glowing green pit in an almost-collapsed school was not 'looking after' them. In the end, it was actually Levi who made the decision for Tyler.

'So, when are we meeting your friends?' asked Levi, after laser blasting a Scora spider robot.

'They're not my friends,' said Tyler automatically. 'They're just the others who were in detention.'

'Well, when are we going to meet the others from detention?'

Levi already assumed that he was coming with them. Tyler looked at Levi's eager face and knew he couldn't leave him behind. Levi would be heartbroken. Plus, his little brother didn't like changes to plans. If Levi already thought he was going, being told he wasn't would feel bad in his head.

Tyler had already done the usual routines for the day with Levi. As long as they did the bedtime one when they got back, Tyler thought his brother would probably manage OK. Especially as they were going to look at a possibly extraterrestrial object.

'We're meeting them at half past eight,' said Tyler.

Levi gave Tyler a surprised look and let himself get hit by a Scora energy beam in the process. Half eight was later than they were normally allowed out.

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Tyler paused the game. 'I haven't told Mum we're going out. We'll have to sneak out quietly, so she doesn't hear us go.'

Levi normally hated to break the rules, especially if it might mean having to tell lies. But Tyler knew how desperate his little brother was to see the glowing object in the pit. Levi wouldn't want to miss the chance to see something possibly from space!

'I guess, if you think we should,' said Levi, his voice wobbly. 'Because you'll need someone who knows about space.'

'And no-one knows more about space than you,' encouraged Tyler.

Levi nodded, and looked a bit happier. Tyler just hoped he wasn't leading his little brother into danger.

THE LATE CREW'S NEWEST MEMBER

The season was turning from summer to autumn. Even though the air was warm, there was a chilled wind. The sky was overcast with clouds, which made it darker.

The brothers put on their jackets before they left, and Tyler double-checked that Levi had his ear defenders in his jacket pocket. Levi remembered not to talk as they were leaving, and Tyler was *almost* certain that Mum didn't hear them go.

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‘Aw, I wanted to see the stars later,’ said Levi, looking up disappointedly at the clouds as they headed on towards the school.

By the time they got to Morfield Secondary School, most of the light had faded from the sky. The streetlights were on, illuminating the pavement with orange light. They found the others under one of the lampposts, sitting together on a metal bench opposite the school.

‘Who’s this?’ asked Jayden, eyeing up Levi.

‘My little brother,’ said Tyler.

‘Mate, this isn’t a family outing,’ snorted Jayden. ‘We’re not going to the zoo.’

‘I’m taking care of him today,’ said Tyler. Levi fidgeted with his fingers, looking worried.

‘Don’t worry about Jayden,’ Alisha said to Levi. ‘He’s part troll.’

‘Good to have you with us,’ Grace added.

‘Can’t believe Tyler’s bringing his little brother into an unstable building and I’ve ended up as the bad guy,’ grumbled Jayden.

Alisha stood up from the bench and patted Levi’s shoulder. ‘Guess that makes you the newest member of The Late Crew. But wait . . . have you ever been late anywhere?’

‘I was late to school on Friday too. I just didn’t get into trouble,’ said Levi.

‘Then it’s official! I pronounce you a member of The Late Crew!’ announced Alisha.

Levi beamed. His joy at being included made the rest of them smile, even Jayden. Tyler introduced them all, so Levi knew everyone’s names.

After the introductions, Jayden took charge.

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‘I looked round before you guys came,’ said Jayden. ‘There’s do-not-enter tape across the doors, and the ones I tried were locked anyway. I did find a way in, but we’ll have to be careful not to get seen. Cars go down this road all the time. I noticed there were a couple parked in the car park too, so there might be someone around.’

As if to illustrate Jayden’s point, a car went past. The driver glanced out of his window at the five of them gathered around the bench. Tyler gulped. He hadn’t thought about getting caught going into the school. He imagined him and Levi being brought home and having to explain to Mum what had happened.

Jayden started towards the school, motioning for the others to follow him. Levi

and the others went after Jayden, leaving Tyler standing by himself.

‘You coming?’ asked Grace, noticing that Tyler was hanging back. Levi stopped too.

He couldn’t let Levi down now.

‘Wouldn’t be The Late Crew without me, I guess,’ said Tyler, and joined them.

THE GREAT SCHOOL BREAK-IN

Jayden led the way, the others following behind him in a line.

First, they snuck along the chest-high wall that went around one side of the car park. Whenever someone drove by on the road behind them, they crouched as low against the wall as they could.

Next, they crossed the car park. They went one at a time, going through a gap in the wall

and darting quickly to the other side. On his turn, Tyler ran as fast as he could, his heart beating hard in his chest.

After that, they crept up to the wire mesh fence that protected the school's Astroturf. Jayden directed them to a hole cut in the fence.

'Older kids come here to play football after school closes,' explained Jayden. 'I know the girl who cut the hole.'

'Of course you do,' Alisha replied snarkily.

They each squeezed through the hole. When Tyler went through, he felt the loose wires scratch along the back of his jacket. It was easier for Levi, who was small enough to step right through. Being on the Astroturf felt strange. There was nothing to hide behind, so they were out in the open. Tyler pictured ghostly figures moving around them, with

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footballs at their feet and hockey sticks in their hands.

There were two doors that opened out from the school on to the Astroturf. One from the boys' changing room and one from the girls'. The girls' door was locked, but the boys' door was damaged by the crash. It hung off its hinges, revealing a way into the darkness inside. It was the entrance Jayden had told them about.

'I can't believe you spotted this,' said Grace.

Even Tyler was impressed that Jayden had found this way into the school, though he wasn't going to admit it out loud. They ran across the Astro, ducked under the door and went inside – into the dark.

It was pitch black and Tyler couldn't see a thing, when suddenly, something grabbed his hand!

THE BOYS' (HANGING ROOM (WHICH DIDN'T SMELL GOOD)

Tyler was about to scream when he realised it was Levi holding his hand. He could hear Levi breathing heavily next to him. He must've been scared by the darkness in the changing room.

‘Use your phone torches,’ said Jayden.

Three light beams came on as Tyler, Jayden and Alisha fumbled with their phones. Now they could see rows of benches with coat hooks,

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and the big bin filled with old PE kits, and the flipchart with football tactics still written on it. Everything cast long, dark shadows.

‘I don’t have a phone,’ said Levi apologetically. Mum’s rule was that they weren’t allowed mobile phones until they went to secondary school. This meant Tyler had just got his first phone, but Levi wasn’t old enough yet.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Grace. ‘Mine doesn’t have a torch on it.’

Grace showed Levi her phone. It was very basic. It even had buttons rather than a touchscreen.

‘So this is the boys’ changing room,’ said Alisha, sweeping her torch light across the mucky floor. ‘It smells.’

Tyler wanted to disagree with her, but she was right. It stank of sweat.

‘We’re not far from the gym here,’ said Jayden. ‘Let’s go.’

The shadows moved around them as they advanced through the changing room. They stopped at a door that opened into the school corridor. Jayden reached towards the door—

‘What was that?’ Alisha hissed.

Jayden jumped, nearly dropping his phone. He gave Alisha an annoyed look, but she looked genuinely frightened. Tyler didn’t think she was joking.

‘I didn’t hear anything,’ said Tyler. The others shook their heads as well.

‘I really thought I heard something,’ stammered Alisha. ‘I must have imagined it.’

Jayden reached for the door again. This time, he opened it without interruption. They all stepped out into the hallway. **BAMF!** It

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was the sound of a door shutting, somewhere deeper within the school.

‘OK, I definitely didn’t imagine that,’ said Alisha.

‘No, you did not,’ confirmed Tyler.

They all stopped and strained their ears to listen. At first, there was nothing. Then, in the distance . . . footsteps.

Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump.

The footsteps were far away, but heavy. As if they were made by someone who was walking very stiffly.

Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump.

Tyler thought the footsteps were getting louder, then realised they weren’t getting louder . . . they were getting closer!

‘Turn off the torches,’ Tyler whispered urgently.

They all did, plunging themselves into darkness. They stood stock still. Tyler felt Levi's hand squeezing his own.

Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump.

A torch shone ahead of them and they could see a gap where a different hallway crossed this one. A tall shadowy figure strode across the gap and down the next hallway. The figure's movements were jerky, like a puppet.

Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump.

Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump.

The figure was gone. It left behind a stink wafting down the corridor; the strong smell of rotten cabbage.

'I think that was Mr Hail,' said Alisha shakily.

'You're right,' said Grace.

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‘Why’s he wandering the corridors at night?’ asked Tyler.

Jayden turned his phone torch back on.

‘Come on,’ said Jayden. ‘Let’s get to the gym and find out what’s going on here!’

A GIANT SPACE CHICKEN?

The Late Crew ran to the gym, heading in a different direction to the one they'd seen Mr Hail going. They rushed inside, breathing hard. Everyone kept an eye out for the headteacher, but they saw no sign of him.

The gym was still lit green, but it was duller. The glow inside the pit had faded since they were last there. Everything was in the same place: the fallen basketball hoop, the scattered balance beam and vaulting horse, the pile of

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crash mats and deflated volleyballs that had slid out from the cupboard.

The large pieces of metal that littered the sides of the pit were unmoved too. They were curved and smooth, and reflected the light strangely. The round object that glowed brighter than the rest of the pit was still at the bottom.

‘Are you OK? It was pretty scary back there,’ Tyler whispered to Levi.

‘Yeah, I’m OK,’ said Levi. He gazed at the pit. There was a green gleam in his glasses’ lenses. Tyler could tell his little brother was fascinated by the glowing crater.

‘There’s no point coming all the way here without going in,’ said Jayden. But despite his big talk, he didn’t step forward.

Alisha sighed, moved past him and put one foot into the pit. Her eyes widened when

her shoe touched the luminous concrete. Tyler wondered what the surface felt like. Alisha looked for a moment like she was going to pull back. Then she steeled herself and started taking small steps downwards, towards the bright object at the bottom of the pit.

Tyler and Levi looked at each other.

‘Do you want to go down there?’ Tyler whispered. His little brother nodded.

They followed Alisha together. As Tyler’s foot touched the concrete, he felt a crackle beneath the sole of his shoe. It was like there was electricity running underneath them. Levi must’ve felt it too, because he glanced up in surprise at Tyler.

‘It’s like static,’ said Levi.

Levi was right. It felt like when you rubbed a balloon against your jumper, until it built up

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static electricity that fuzzed against your hands. It didn't hurt, it just felt *weird*.

The slope was steep but as long as they were careful they could edge down towards the bottom, the strange electric feeling buzzing beneath their feet. Jayden and Grace were close behind. They both let out gasps as they stepped down and felt the crackle too.

Tyler ran his hand along one of the curved pieces of metal. It was charged with the same electrostatic feeling as the ground, causing the hairs on Tyler's arm to stand on end. At the bottom, Alisha stopped next to the glowing object. Up close, it wasn't completely round. It was the shape of . . . an egg, standing upright. A luminous-green egg, about half Tyler's height. But if it was an egg, what had laid it?

THE GLOWING EGG

The Late Crew stood in a circle at the bottom of the pit. In between them was the giant glowing green egg.

‘So, what now? Was our plan to just climb in a hole and hope for the best?’ asked Alisha.

‘We should take it with us. Get it away from Mr Hail, then work out what it is somewhere else,’ said Jayden.

‘Let’s do it,’ Tyler agreed.

They all looked at the egg, but none of them moved. It almost felt like it was listening

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to them speak. Jayden stepped forward and tried to lift it. He didn't manage to move it at all.

'Come on, help me with this,' Jayden said to the others.

Pretty soon, the whole Late Crew, including Levi, were trying to lift the egg. But they couldn't even lift it a centimetre. It wouldn't budge. Tyler was about to say they should take a break, when a peculiar sensation fizzed out from the egg and through his body. It was like the bubbles from a cola bottle washing through him. Everyone let go, looking bewildered. Tyler knew the others had felt it too.

'What was that?' asked Levi. He was the only one brave enough to mention it aloud without fearing sounding silly.

‘She was saying hello,’ said a deep musical voice behind Tyler. Alisha gaped open-mouthed over his shoulder.

Tyler spun around. Behind him, there was something that looked sort of like a man.

A man who had emerald eyes and a lizard-like face.

A man who had four legs, and hooves.

A man with scales rather than skin.

A man with long arms that ended in three-fingered hands.

A man with a swishing tail behind him.

He was 100%, definitely, undoubtedly, fantastically, terrifyingly, an alien!

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THE RUNAWAY NAMED RUNAWAY

They all looked at the alien. The alien looked back at them. He was wearing a black robe that started from his neck and went down to his hips. There were gaps for his long arms, his four legs and his tail. Despite the alien's unnerving appearance, he didn't give Tyler goosebumps like Mr Hail had. The lizard-faced man didn't come too close, as if he was trying not to frighten them.

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‘Who are you?’ asked Levi. He surprised Tyler by stepping forward to speak to the alien, completely unafraid.

‘My name is Runaway.’ The alien raised his arm towards the egg. **‘This is my egg. She will hatch soon.’**

When Runaway spoke, his mouth didn’t move. Tyler realised the alien wasn’t speaking aloud but speaking directly into their minds!

Tyler stepped up next to his brother. ‘Why did you come here?’

Runaway turned towards Tyler. His emerald eyes glittered, as if they really were made from the precious stones.

‘A creature called The Slime shot down my ship. I crash-landed in this building,’ said Runaway. The alien looked

around the dimly glowing pit. **‘I apologise for the damage to your learning centre.’**

After the apology, Runaway did a sort of bow by bending his front legs.

‘Don’t worry about it. I’m quite chuffed with the time off school to be honest,’ said Alisha.

Runaway straightened out his legs. He didn’t seem to know how to respond. Tyler thought the alien might not understand humour.

‘The Slime takes over other creature’s bodies. I believe you’ve already met it,’ said Runaway.

Grace gasped and exclaimed: ‘Mr Hail!’

‘Yes. The Slime is in control of the one you call headteacher,’ said Runaway.

‘It wants to control my child, after she hatches. You must help me make sure that doesn’t happen.’

‘How could we help?’ asked Tyler.

‘You belong on this world, which makes you harder for The Slime to track. You can take her with you and hide her,’ explained Runaway. **‘That will buy me time to fix our ship.’**

From the way Runaway gestured with his arms, Tyler knew the broken pieces of metal in the pit were what remained of his spaceship.

‘Looks like it might take a lot of fixing,’ Alisha said, sceptically.

‘How will you know where to find us?’ asked Tyler.

‘I always know where she is,’ replied Runaway. **‘That will be no trouble.’**

Levi moved forwards again, standing closest to the alien.

‘If Mr Hail wants the egg, why hasn’t he taken it already?’ asked Levi.

Tyler was impressed by his little brother. He always knew the right questions to ask.

‘I used the force field generator from my ship to seal everything in the pit in place,’ explained Runaway. **‘The Slime has been looking for me, to force me to turn it off.’**

‘That’s why Mr Hail was wandering around the school,’ said Grace.

‘The generator is running out of energy.’ Runaway’s voice sounded stressed inside their heads. **‘We must act quickly.’**

‘Why should we help you?’ butted in Jayden.

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Runaway's scaly tail flicked nervously behind him.

'I sensed that you were people who would help.' Runaway sounded worried.
'If you don't, we are doomed. I cannot fix the ship and protect her at the same time.'

'Excuse us a second,' said Alisha.

Runaway stood back politely. The Late Crew moved away from him and formed a huddle.

'What are we going to do?' whispered Alisha.

They had a decision to make.

A SPEEDY DEBATE

The Late Crew huddled in close together, Runaway waiting quietly for them to make their decision. His eyes glittered with the pit's dim green light.

‘I think we should help,’ said Tyler.

Grace and Levi both nodded. Alisha and Jayden looked more uncertain.

‘I don’t see why he can’t look after his own egg,’ complained Jayden. ‘Mr Hail doesn’t like me even when he’s not being mind-controlled by an alien.’

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‘Because he needs to fix their ship. We can keep the egg safe from The Slime while he does,’ said Grace.

Thinking about The Slime made them all pause. It was frightening how it was controlling Mr Hail.

‘It’s an alien egg,’ said Levi. ‘If we look after it, we might see it hatch.’

‘That’s actually a very good point,’ said Alisha.

Tyler smiled at his little brother. Levi was right. How could they ever turn down the chance to watch an alien hatch from an egg?

‘I guess I’m outvoted,’ Jayden grumbled, but Tyler could tell Jayden wanted to see the egg hatch as much as the rest of them. He just liked to moan as well.

They went back to Runaway. The alien raised his head hopefully as they approached. He swayed on his four legs and Tyler could tell he was anxiously awaiting their answer.

‘We’ll help,’ said Tyler.

‘**Thank you,**’ said Runaway, bowing his front legs again, even deeper this time.

The alien raised one three-fingered hand above his head. The pieces of his ship began to shake, then flew through the air towards him! They shrunk as they flew, forming into a cracked metal ball around Runaway’s hand. Somehow, all that broken metal had become the size of a basketball.

‘Well, that was cool,’ commented Alisha.

‘So cool!’ echoed Levi.

Runaway trotted over to the egg, placing his free hand on top of it.

‘The Slime will know when I free my egg,’ warned Runaway. **‘It will come after her.’**

‘That’s just great,’ Jayden muttered.

‘I’ll distract The Slime as you escape,’ said Runaway. **‘Remember, the egg must be looked after by someone who cares about her. That is very important.’**

Runaway squeezed the top of the egg. The glow faded away, leaving the egg a much deeper shade of green. There was a snapping sound in the earth below.

‘My egg is free. The Slime is coming,’ said Runaway. **‘I’ll return for her as soon as I possibly can. Please look after her.’**

Then, as simply as turning off a light, the alien disappeared.

LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!

‘How did he do that?’ asked Grace. ‘He just vanished!’

‘That’s how he appeared too,’ said Alisha. ‘I saw him pop up out of nowhere.’

Then they heard the footsteps again. *Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump. Tump-tump.* Somewhere in the school, Mr Hail was heading towards them.

‘Let’s go!’ said Jayden.

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Levi reacted first. He ran over to the egg and picked it up easily, even though all five of them weren't able to lift it before.

'It's really light!' exclaimed Levi. Tyler knew his little brother wanted to get the egg to safety, but was also super excited about holding something alien.

The Late Crew turned on their torches and hurried up out of the pit, Levi taking lots of small steps as he carried the egg up the steep slope. They headed along the corridor towards the boys' changing room, walking quickly rather than running as they tried to stay as quiet as possible.

All the time, they could hear the *tump-tump* of Mr Hail's footsteps. He was somewhere nearby, looking for them. Finally, they saw the door to the changing room ahead.

Unfortunately, at that same moment, Mr Hail stepped around the corner at the far end of the hallway and pointed his torch towards them.

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRING!

Tyler jumped, startled by the loud sound. All the school bells were going off! Normally, the bell only rang in a short burst at the end of a lesson. Now it wasn't stopping at all. Tyler realised it must be Runaway's distraction.

Mr Hail had frozen where he stood. Tyler risked pointing his torch at the headteacher. The sound was doing something to him! His arms stuck out to his sides and his feet looked like they were glued to the floor. His shirt was rustling, as if something mouse-sized was scampering around underneath it. Then Tyler

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saw a red blob pop out from under Mr Hail's collar, seconds later reappearing at the end of his sleeve. It looked like strawberry jam come to life. It was The Slime, and for some reason, it hated the school bell!

The others darted into the boys' changing room. Tyler turned to follow them, then saw Levi. His little brother was clutching the egg tightly and crying. Tyler gulped. Of course. Levi hated loud sounds. They made him panic. And because he was carrying the egg, he hadn't even been able to put his ear defenders on. Levi was overwhelmed – and not moving at all.

ONE, TWO, THREE, ESCAPE

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRING

— *trrrring.*

The bell stopped ringing, just as suddenly as it had started.

‘Levi, we need to go,’ said Tyler urgently.

Levi stayed where he was, holding onto the egg as if it might fly away without warning.

Tyler knew that pulling at Levi's arm, or trying to take the egg, would only make the situation worse.

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Tyler glanced over at Mr Hail. The Slime was out of sight under the headteacher's clothes again. He raised his head stiffly towards them, moving extremely slowly - for now.

Tyler had an idea. He'd play the counting to three game with Levi, where they took it in turns to say the numbers. It was one of Levi's calm down activities, and it usually helped. They needed to do it fast, before Mr Hail started coming after them again.

'Levi, the counting game,' suggested Tyler.

Levi didn't answer, tears still running down his cheeks.

'One,' said Tyler.

'Two,' mouthed Levi, barely making a sound.

'Three,' said Tyler.

'One,' whispered Levi, a little louder.

Mr Hail took a step towards them. He was walking even more jerkily than before.

‘Two,’ said Tyler.

‘Three,’ said Levi, a little louder.

Mr Hail took another step closer. They could smell the rotten cabbage scent coming off him.

‘One,’ said Tyler quickly – ‘Two,’ said Levi even faster – ‘Three!’ said Tyler.

Levi managed to move. He rushed through the changing room door with the egg in his arms. Tyler ran with him. The two brothers sprinted through to the opposite side, still counting back and forth.

‘*One*’ – ‘Two’ – ‘*Three*’.

‘One’ – ‘*Two*’ – ‘Three’.

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They counted as they ran across the Astroturf,

through the hole in the fence,

across the car park,

over the road,

until finally they caught up with the others,
who were waiting on the metal bench under
the streetlight. Only then did they look back.

The school was silent and still, and Mr Hail was
nowhere to be seen. They had escaped with
the egg!

AN EXTRATERRESTRIAL ARGUMENT

The Late Crew went to a park near the school. Levi put the egg down next to a seesaw. They all sat down on the woodchips around it. The night air was cool, which felt refreshing after running through the school.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Levi tearfully, ‘I nearly got us caught.’

Tyler put his hand on his little brother’s shoulder. ‘No, Levi, you did great.’

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‘You were the one who got the egg out of the school,’ said Jayden. Tyler looked at him in surprise. He hadn’t expected Jayden to be a source of comfort.

‘You’re the hero!’ said Grace. Alisha gave a thumbs up as well. Levi perked up a little bit, wiping his nose on his sleeve and smiling shyly.

‘Do you think he saw us?’ asked Grace. They all knew she was talking about Mr Hail.

‘What do you call a T-rex in glasses?
A do-you-think-he-saurus,’ quipped Alisha.

No one laughed.

‘Tough crowd,’ said Alisha. ‘I don’t think he did. The bell stopped him.’

‘That was Runaway’s distraction,’ said Tyler. ‘But why’d it make him freeze like that?’

‘The sound must have done something to The Slime,’ said Grace.

‘It did something to me too,’ said Levi.

‘I hate loud sounds. They make me panic.’

They all fell quiet and stared at the egg. It hardly even looked green under the streetlight, just dark. Tyler still felt like it was somehow listening to them speak. That was an even stranger thought, now he knew that Runaway’s daughter was inside.

‘So . . . what do we do with the egg?’ asked Alisha.

‘We should tell an adult about it,’ said Grace at once.

‘If we tell an adult, they’ll tell someone from school. Then Mr Hail will know we have it,’ said Jayden.

Tyler thought about what would happen if he told Mum. She’d worry about him if he started talking about aliens. Even with school

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closed, Mum would get in contact with a teacher to find out if Tyler had been behaving strangely.

Tyler was shocked to realise he agreed with Jayden. If they told adults, it wouldn't be long before Mr Hail found out they had the egg.

'One of us will have to take it home and hide it,' said Alisha.

There was a long pause. Tyler knew what everyone was thinking. They all wanted the egg to go back to their own house, so they'd be there if it hatched.

'Maybe we should take it in turns,' said Grace. 'It will be easy to meet up and swap it, seeing as school's off.'

'That's a good idea,' said Alisha.

Tyler was about to agree, but then he

caught sight of Levi. His little brother's eyes were still red from crying. Levi *loved* space. If anyone deserved to see the egg hatch, it was him.

‘Levi and I should take the egg,’ said Tyler. ‘There’s two of us, so we’ll be better at keeping an eye on it.’

Levi looked up eagerly, his eyes filled with excitement at the thought of the egg staying at their house.

‘No way,’ Jayden argued back. ‘You just want it for yourself.’

Levi’s face fell. Tyler knew he had to say whatever it took to win the argument, for his little brother.

‘It was Levi who got the egg out of the school, and he knows *everything* about space,’ said Tyler forcefully.

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‘I know the names of the stars nearest to Earth,’ added Levi in a quiet voice. ‘I might know the one it’s from.’

‘*See,*’ said Tyler. ‘None of the rest of us would know that.’

Jayden folded his arms stubbornly. Even Alisha and Grace looked unconvinced and a bit annoyed.

‘My mum’s not well,’ said Tyler. ‘I look after her and Levi. Mum’s in bed most of the time, so she won’t notice we have it. I bet there’d be someone who’d find it in any of your houses, no matter where you put it. It’s too big for you to properly hide.’

Tyler immediately felt ashamed, using his mum’s illness in that way. It made him feel like a bad person. But the others looked glum. Tyler realised he’d won the argument – they all

thought someone would probably find the egg at their own houses.

‘Fine,’ snarled Jayden. ‘You two take it. But don’t expect my help if Mr Hail comes after you.’

Alisha nodded, then muttered, ‘So much for The Late Crew being a team.’

Grace gave the brothers a sympathetic look, but even she did not speak up in their defence. It had been sulkily agreed. Tyler and Levi would take the egg home. They might even see it hatch. The only problem was, it seemed like they’d lost their new friends along the way.

WALKING HOME WITH AN ALIEN EGG

Jayden made Tyler promise three times over to send them all a message if the egg started to hatch. Then Alisha made him promise twice more. Even Grace nodded along. Tyler felt like none of them trusted that he'd actually do it. After that, The Late Crew split up and went their separate ways home. The others didn't even say bye to Tyler and Levi. It was like they didn't want to talk to the brothers any more.

The night had become dark, with the clouds lit ghostly grey by the moon hidden behind them. Tyler and Levi walked together under streetlights, with Levi carrying the egg. Despite its size, the egg didn't appear to weigh much, and Levi carried it easily. For a while they walked in silence, and Tyler knew Levi must have something on his mind. It was unusual for his little brother to be so quiet.

‘Are you OK?’ asked Tyler eventually.

‘Is it right that we’re taking the egg?’ Levi replied. ‘Maybe we should have shared it, the way Grace said.’

Tyler’s stomach turned guiltily. He’d thought he was doing the best thing for Levi by arguing that they should keep the egg. Maybe he should have talked to Levi about what he wanted first.

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Levi struggled making friends at his school. He always needed a teaching assistant with him. Other pupils didn't want to play games with an adult there too, so Levi often ended up left out. Maybe Levi wanted friends more than he wanted to see the egg hatch. If he was honest with himself, Tyler wanted friends too. But he'd already made the rest of The Late Crew angry with them.

'We'll keep watch on the egg, so we know when it starts to hatch,' said Tyler. 'We'll make sure they don't miss it. And we'll invite them round to our house, so they can see the egg in the meantime.'

'That sounds good,' replied Levi.

Tyler smiled at his brother, but inside he still felt worried. What if the others didn't want to come round to their house now?

When Tyler and Levi arrived at home, Tyler gasped. The front door was open, letting light out onto the street. That could only mean one thing. Mum knew they'd snuck out.

IN TROUBLE

First, they needed to hide the egg.

‘This way!’ Tyler whispered.

Tyler led Levi down an alley that went round behind their house. Tyler used his key to unlock their back gate and inched it open as quietly as he could. He could see the lights were on from the back garden, but they were in luck. Mum wasn’t in the kitchen.

Tyler waved his hand for Levi to keep following him. There was no grass in their

back garden, only gravel. There was also the bike shed, where they could keep the egg. He unlocked the shed, then pulled their rusty second-hand bikes out of the way for Levi to put the egg down. They stashed it in the corner and pushed the bikes back in front. It wasn't completely hidden, but it was the best they could do.

Tyler felt bad leaving the egg behind. He thought Runaway's daughter might know she was being left alone in the dark. She might be scared of being in the shed by herself.

'We'll be back soon,' he said awkwardly. He thought Levi might think he was weird for talking to an egg, but then his little brother spoke as well.

'We'll look after you, don't worry,' Levi said.

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When Tyler and Levi shuffled into the house through the open front door, Mum was sitting on the stairs in her pyjamas. There was an empty cup on the step next to her. Tyler wondered how long she'd waited for them. The worst thing was, she looked cross. Mum didn't get angry very often.

'Thank goodness you're back. It's quarter past ten,' Mum said to the boys.

'Sorry,' Tyler mumbled. He hadn't realised the time.

'You're not allowed out this late, Tyler. And Levi definitely isn't. You know that. Where have you been?' said Mum.

'We went to Tyler's school,' said Levi. Levi always wanted to tell the truth. Lying didn't really make sense in his mind, so it made him uncomfortable.

‘We only went as far as the car park,’ lied Tyler quickly. ‘So we could see the damage. We didn’t go near the building.’

Tyler knew Levi would back up his story, even though Levi hated to lie. Tyler felt mean making his little brother do that. Lying made Levi feel rubbish, but they couldn’t risk Mum finding out what they’d been up to. She’d probably tell a teacher they’d been in the school, and then that teacher would tell Mr Hail.

Mum’s eyes narrowed. She seemed to know they weren’t telling her everything.

‘Come up to my room,’ she said to Tyler. ‘Levi, make sure you’re ready to do the bedtime routine. I’ll speak to you after your brother, then I want you both straight to bed.’

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Mum climbed the stairs and Tyler followed glumly. He was used to getting in trouble at school, but he wasn't normally in trouble at home as well. He noticed that Mum was moving at a slow pace, her shoulders slumped. Her fatigue was affecting her badly after doing too much yesterday. She was already completely exhausted, and he'd made it even worse by sneaking out.

Mum sat down on her bed and let out a big breath. She looked a bit less annoyed now and patted the space next to her so that Tyler sat down. She smiled at him, but the smile was a bit sad.

'It's not easy for you,' said Mum.
'You spend half your time looking after Levi and the other half looking after me.'

‘I like helping,’ said Tyler.

‘Liking it doesn’t make it easy,’ Mum replied. ‘Looking after us might sometimes make it difficult to do things that are normal for your age. That includes things like coming home late and making me worry, though I’d hoped you wouldn’t start that till you were at least a teenager.’

Tyler always thought of Levi as the one who might miss out on stuff or find things hard. He had never thought it about himself. Maybe Mum had a point.

‘But even when things do feel unfair,’ Mum went on. ‘Even when you do start being a grumpy teenager—’

They both laughed at the idea of Tyler being a grumpy teenager.

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‘—even then,’ Mum said, ‘you can’t go getting Levi into trouble with you. We have to look after your little brother.’

Tyler remembered how close Levi came to being caught by Mr Hail in the school.

‘I understand,’ said Tyler, and looked her in the eye so she knew he really meant it. Mum nodded, as if she was proud of him. He wasn’t sure that he deserved her pride.

‘There’s a lady coming round to see you on Wednesday,’ said Mum. ‘Her job’s to help children like you, who look after their family. Your head of year Miss Penn arranged it, after I phoned and told her that I wasn’t happy about you getting detention. It might be the first good idea that woman’s ever had.’

‘I’m not sure I should do anything that *The One Who Doesn’t Understand* suggested,’ said Tyler.

He grinned to show he was joking. Mum put her arm around him and gave him a squeeze.

‘It’s past your bedtime, funny boy,’ said Mum. ‘And you’re still in trouble for staying out late. I’d better have a quick chat with Levi too, then let’s get him to bed. He looks like he’s had far too much excitement. It’ll be ages before he actually goes to sleep.’

Exciting was one way of describing their adventure at the school. Mum didn’t know the half of it!

CREATURES FROM BEYOND THE EARTH

As Mum predicted, Levi was too excited to sleep, even after being told off for staying out late. Tyler felt the same. His whole body was still buzzing from their escape with the egg. The brothers both lay in their beds with their eyes wide open.

Will the egg be OK out there in the shed, Tyler wondered, or should we have brought it inside and kept it warm?

Eventually, he couldn't take it any more. He went to the window, Levi watching him all

the way. He beckoned his little brother over, and they gazed out together towards the shed at the end of their gravel garden. Everything was dark and still out there. Beyond their alley was another row of houses, which all had their lights off – except from a single upstairs window in one of them. It made Tyler wonder who else was awake this late.

‘What if it hatches tonight?’ asked Levi.

Their plan was to sneak the egg inside tomorrow and hide it in their room. That way they could keep an eye on it and tell the rest of The Late Crew if it started to hatch.

‘I don’t think it will,’ said Tyler. He was trying to be reassuring, but he didn’t really know what would happen. What if it did hatch? What creature would they find in the shed in the morning?

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Tyler opened the window a few centimetres, as if they'd be able to hear the egg start to crack. Both brothers leant forward, listening intently. It was astounding how much they could hear when they really focused on listening. There was the rustle of grass and leaves moving in the gentle wind. A car engine revved far away. Somewhere, water drip-drip-dripped. But – as far as they could tell – there wasn't the sound of an extra-large egg cracking open.

'What do you think she'll look like when she hatches?' asked Levi.

'Like a baby version of Runaway?' suggested Tyler.

They were both quiet for a moment, picturing a baby with four legs, a tail, long arms and lizard skin. It was a strange thought.

‘Maybe,’ said Levi. ‘But maybe not. Caterpillars don’t look like baby butterflies.’

Tyler gazed up towards a gap in the clouds, through which the stars twinkled.

‘How many different species of aliens do you think there are?’ he asked.

‘There’s so many stars,’ said Levi. ‘More than there’s grains of sand on earth. Scientists think lots of the stars have planets around them. There’s lots of places aliens could be from.’

‘Mr McNulty said if we found just one alien, that means there’s probably millions of species out there,’ said Tyler.

‘We’ve found two.’

‘True,’ said Tyler. ‘And one has four legs, emerald eyes and a tail, and the other is red slime that can take over people’s bodies. I guess all the aliens are very different from each other.’

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‘Maybe there’s a species with two heads,’
said Levi.

‘Or a hundred legs like a centipede,’ said
Tyler.

‘Or a body made of stone, and they all
move very slowly.’

‘Or that look like fish, and they wear
spacesuits full of water.’

‘Or are bigger than blue whales and can fly
through the air.’

‘Or are smaller than ants, and they think
everyone else is far too big.’

‘Or are all autistic, and think in the same
way I do.’

Tyler smiled at his little brother. ‘Those
aliens wouldn’t have a word for autism then.
It’d just be the way they thought.’

Levi sighed happily, as if he liked that idea.

Tyler thought it was odd how many different aliens they could imagine, having only met two. No matter how many aliens they met, they'd always be able to imagine more. If they met an alien with six arms, they'd imagine one with seven. If they met an alien bigger than a blue whale, they'd imagine one bigger than a mountain.

They could fit more aliens inside their minds than could be found in the whole universe. Tyler had never considered how big a place the imagination was.

Tyler and Levi could have stayed up all night talking about aliens, but now they were both beginning to yawn. They got back into their beds. This time, tiredness swept over them, and the brothers fell swiftly to sleep, dreaming of strange alien races and the bizarre planets they came from.

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AN EGG ON SUNDAY MORNING, BUT NOT FOR BREAKFAST

The brothers woke up early in the morning. The sky through the window was tinted orange and pink, the sun about to rise. Even though they'd gone to bed late, both brothers felt very awake.

Levi didn't want to go out and get the egg until they'd done his morning routine. Tyler knew how upsetting it was for Levi if they did things out of order, so he agreed, even though he was desperate to go to the

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shed. They tiptoed around the house, trying to do everything without waking Mum. That morning, Tyler did the morning routine with Levi like this:

1. Wash their faces *with the tap set on the tiniest dribble.*
2. Brush their teeth *as quietly as possible.*
3. *Whisper to each other* while getting dressed.
4. Levi: *slowly* pour out two bowls of cereal.
Tyler: *slowly* pour the milk.
5. Tuck kitchen roll *gently* into Levi's collar.
6. Eat breakfast together in *silence.*
7. Tyler: wash the dishes *without any clattering sounds.*
Levi: dry and put away *and shut the cupboards very carefully.*

When the morning routine was complete, they headed out towards the shed. They were pretty sure they hadn't woken up Mum. The last thing they needed was for her to catch them bringing the egg inside.

It was still there. Tyler felt a knot loosen in his stomach. Somehow he'd imagined it would be gone, and they'd never know what had happened to it. This time Tyler carried the egg. It was incredibly light, like lifting an oversized balloon or a big multipack of crisps.

Again, Tyler had the feeling that the alien baby inside the egg was reacting to him. Like she'd been lonely in the shed by herself and now she was grateful that Tyler was there.

Once they were back upstairs, they rolled the egg sideways under Tyler's bed, where it could

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easily be hidden by throwing the covers down over the mattress. Tyler hoped Runaway's daughter wouldn't be uncomfortable on her side, because this was the best place he could think of to hide her.

After Tyler put away the clothes he'd washed and dried the day before, the brothers stayed in their bedroom together. That way, they could keep on peeking at the egg under the bed. They drew pictures of Runaway and The Slime, wrote down what the aliens' histories might have been before they came to earth and created fact files about everything they'd learnt about the two aliens.

Tyler took a break to make lunch. He made soup and toast, and including some for Mum as well. She managed to come down to the kitchen to have it with the brothers.

‘You two have been very quiet in your room all day,’ said Mum. ‘What have you been up to?’

‘Making up aliens,’ replied Tyler.

Mum raised her eyebrows, and Levi smiled at him. Tyler thought Levi quite liked that they were sharing a secret, as long as he didn’t have to lie to keep it.

Later in the afternoon, Mum came to their bedroom to see what they were working on. Tyler pulled the covers down over the gap beneath his bed just in time. Mum looked at the sheets of paper laid out in a circle round them. Each sheet either had drawings of aliens on it or writing about aliens.

‘You two have wonderful imaginations,’ said Mum. ‘I don’t know where you get the ideas.’

The brothers grinned at each other.

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Fact File One

Name: Runaway

Size: Similar to a tall adult human

Appearance: Dark and scaly

Limbs: Four legs, two long arms

Speech: Psychic speech - talks directly into your mind without moving his mouth!

Power: Can appear and disappear from nowhere

Weakness: Scared of The Slime stealing his egg

RAB FERGUSON

Fact File Two

Name: The Slime

Size: About the size of a small mouse

Appearance: Like a blob of strawberry jam

Limbs: None. Currently in control of two arms and two legs (Mr Hail's)

Speech: Makes Mr Hail's voice slow and emotionless. And creepy!

Smell: Awful - like rotten cabbage

Power: Takes control of other's bodies

Weakness: The school bell - but why???

A PERFECTLY NORMAL WEEK OFF SCHOOL, APART FROM THE ALIEN EGG

On Monday, Mum was having one of her better days with her chronic fatigue. She sat down with Tyler and Levi for breakfast, which was rare. Watching the brothers go through the morning routine made her smile.

‘Can I not go to school today?’ asked Levi, between mouthfuls of cereal. He wanted to stay at home with Tyler and keep watch over the

egg. If Levi was somebody else, he might have pretended to be ill. But that sort of thing just didn't occur to him.

‘Tyler’s school is closed. Yours isn’t,’ said Mum. ‘Tyler and your alien stories will still be here when you get back.’

For the next few days, Levi went to school while Tyler stayed at home. The best part of each day for Tyler was walking Levi to and from Morfield Primary School. They always talked about the aliens the whole way.

The days were long and boring when Levi was at school. Tyler stayed in their room most of the time, to be near the egg, but it showed no signs of hatching. Some of Tyler’s teachers set homework to do while school was closed, which they sent by email. There wasn’t enough to fill

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the time. Tyler ended up finishing everything they sent quite quickly.

It felt weird for Tyler being ahead on his homework. When school was open, Tyler often struggled to get it all done because he was busy looking after Mum and Levi.

When Tyler was confident Mum wasn't nearby, he'd take the egg out from under the bed and stand it upright. He thought Runaway's daughter would prefer it that way. He shone Levi's reading lamp on the egg and examined every centimetre of it closely. The shell was smooth, different shades of its dark green across it. The colour reminded him of the precious stone jade, which was used in jewellery and to make little green statues. No matter how hard he looked, Tyler couldn't find a single crack on the egg's surface.

Tyler tried messaging the rest of The Late Crew a couple of times. None of them replied and it made him sad to look at the ticks that meant they had read his messages. They were ignoring him. Tyler didn't think they'd respond unless he told them the egg was hatching.

Then, on Thursday, Tyler had two visitors – the second of whom was extremely unexpected.

SPACE STATIONS AND POWER CRYSTALS

On Thursday morning, Tyler walked Levi to Morfield Primary School. On the way, the brothers discussed whether aliens of different species could ever be friends with each other. They agreed that just because Runaway and The Slime were enemies, that didn't mean that all aliens hated each other.

They invented an imaginary space station where loads of different aliens lived together

in peace. It was shaped like a giant ring, and had special habitats for each type of alien. The more they talked about it, the more Tyler could picture the place in his head.

‘I have an idea why The Slime didn’t like the school bell,’ said Levi, as they arrived at the primary school. ‘I think it might find loud sounds overwhelming, like I do. I can’t think when it’s too loud. Maybe The Slime’s the same, and that’s why Mr Hail froze.’

‘You could be right,’ said Tyler, impressed. ‘That could be The Slime’s weakness!’

After dropping Levi off, Tyler headed home. The woman who helped children that looked after their families was meeting him at lunchtime. Tyler answered the door when she knocked.

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She was young, with red hair and tattoos on her arms. She wore a T-shirt and jeans, rather than anything too smart, and had a plastic badge with her photo on it hanging on a lanyard round her neck. She looked a lot different from what Tyler had expected.

‘Hi, I’m Ash,’ she said.

Ash spoke to Tyler first, explaining that she was there to talk to him about looking after Mum and Levi. After that, she went upstairs to introduce herself to Mum, then came back down and sat with Tyler at the kitchen table.

‘I saw you have *Alien Blasters 5*!’ Ash said. ‘Do you know how to get past the Scora Warlock on the ice planet level? I’ve been stuck for weeks!’

Tyler told Ash about the secret power crystals under the snow slope, and they chatted

for a while about games. Ash knew a surprising amount about *Block World Builder* and *Cars of Speed*, and even started giving Tyler tips as well.

After that, Ash asked him questions about looking after Levi and Mum, and wrote down his answers on a paper form she'd brought with her. Unlike some of the teachers at school, she didn't seem surprised by how Tyler looked after his family. She nodded along as he told her about Levi's routines, doing the cleaning and clothes washing, and making meals. She said she'd done the same when she was his age.

'You're a young carer, Tyler,' Ash told him. 'Do you know what that means?'

'I'm not really sure,' said Tyler.

'It means a young person like you, who looks after one or more members of their family,' said Ash. 'Carers often have a lot on

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their plate, so my job is to be there to help out and make sure you have someone to talk to.'

'That sounds good,' said Tyler. He'd never really spoken to anyone other than Mum about taking care of her and Levi.

'We can get you an ID card that shows you're a young carer, if you want,' said Ash. 'They help teachers understand a bit more if you find it hard to get your homework done or be on time for school.'

Tyler liked the idea of having an ID card for looking after Levi and Mum. It made him feel responsible, like a firefighter or a police officer.

'That's everything for today,' said Ash, after they'd talked a bit more. 'I'll sort out your ID card, and we'll arrange a time to have another chat. I'll tell you then if I managed to beat the

Scora Warlock! Is there anything else you'd like to speak about before I go?'

Tyler hesitated. Ash was nice. He felt like he could talk to her about everything that had happened. About Runaway, and the egg, and The Slime controlling Mr Hail. About how he became friends with The Late Crew and now they no longer wanted to talk to him.

Then Tyler thought about what the rest of The Late Crew would say if they discovered he'd revealed their secret adventure. They were already annoyed at him. They'd definitely never forgive him if he told an adult about the egg and it was taken away.

'No, there's nothing else,' said Tyler.

After that, Ash said goodbye and left. Tyler was going to make some lunch for him and Mum, but there was another knock at the door.

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This one sounded strange. There were three solid knocks, with long pauses between them. Like this:

thud

thud

thud

The hairs stood up on the back of Tyler's neck. Something felt wrong about that knock. Rather than going to the door, he went to the front room window. He pressed himself to the glass and peered out. When he saw the tall, rigid figure at the door, Tyler gasped. Mr Hail had come to his house!

THE UNINVITED HEADTEACHER

Tyler heard Mum coming down the stairs. She was going to answer the door to Mr Hail! He had to stop her. Tyler raced across the front room, but was too late, getting there just in time to see Mum open the door. He ducked back, where Mr Hail wouldn't be able to see him, but he couldn't see the headteacher either.

‘Oh, Mr Hail. We weren't expecting you?’ said Mum. She sounded taken aback to find the headteacher on their doorstep.

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‘I’m aware your son was in detention when there was an explosion under the school. I’m here to check that he’s well,’ said Mr Hail.

Tyler silently urged Mum to realise something was wrong with Mr Hail. Surely she’d notice his emotionless voice, or the stiff way he was standing.

‘That’s very kind of you. Come on in,’ said Mum. She stepped aside to let Mr Hail in and saw Tyler in the front room. ‘Tyler’s just here.’

Tyler felt like time was slowing down. There was no way to escape!

I have to pretend that everything is completely normal, Tyler thought to himself, like we never found the egg. Like I don’t know about The Slime controlling Mr Hail. That’s the only way to get rid of him.

Mr Hail stepped inside. He looked even taller now he was inside their house.

‘You two can sit down in the kitchen,’ said Mum. ‘I’ll be upstairs if you need me.’

Mum turned and went back up the stairs. Tyler felt like shouting after her, begging her not to leave him alone with the headteacher. He knew he couldn’t give himself away like that and kept his mouth tightly shut.

Mr Hail stared down at Tyler with his creepy unblinking eyes.

‘Kitchen’s this way,’ mumbled Tyler.

Tyler led the way through to the kitchen. They sat down together at the table, just like he and Ash had earlier. Even the robotic way Mr Hail pulled out a chair to sit down was disturbing. As they sat opposite each other, Tyler could smell The Slime’s rotten cabbage stink filling the room.

THE LATE CREW

‘You were in the school when the explosion happened,’ said Mr Hail. His voice sounded as hollow and empty as an abandoned building. ‘Did you see anything strange?’

‘No,’ said Tyler quickly. Then he changed his answer. ‘Well, apart from the fact that the whole school was falling apart. But everything happened so fast I couldn’t really take it in.’

It took a long time for Mr Hail to respond. He sat completely still, staring blankly at Tyler. It was like the headteacher had become a statue. Tyler waited, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Then Mr Hail spoke. ‘Have you returned to the school since?’

‘Of course not!’ squeaked Tyler. He hoped Mr Hail wouldn’t notice how high his voice had become. ‘It said on the news the building was unstable. Why would I go back in?’

Mr Hail was silent and like a statue again. Tyler peeked at the headteacher's shirt. He couldn't find a lump that showed where The Slime was hiding. Then Mr Hail did something really weird. He started sniffing the air. Suddenly, he looked straight up, towards where Tyler and Levi's bedroom was above them. It was like when a police dog found a scent.

Tyler felt a chill as he realised that was exactly what had happened. Mr Hail could smell the egg! That must have been how the headteacher found their house. He'd followed the trail like a sniffing dog. Mr Hail knew the egg was nearby. Tyler needed to think of a way to get rid of him – fast.

‘Mum!’ shouted Tyler suddenly. ‘Mr Hail and I are all finished!’

THE LATE CREW

Mr Hail turned his cold stare back towards Tyler.

‘I’ll come down and say bye!’ Mum called down the stairs.

Mr Hail would have to leave. He could hardly just start searching their house with Mum there. She’d call the police. Tyler expected the headteacher to be angry, but his face didn’t change at all. When he spoke, his voice was still stony and dull.

‘You will bring the egg to Morfield Woods tonight at 6.30 p.m. Meet me at the entrance to the bicycle track. If you don’t, the consequences will be severe,’ said Mr Hail.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ said Tyler, trying his best to look confused.

Mum came down the stairs, and Mr Hail stood up from his seat. Mum thanked him for

visiting as she led him to the front door. She didn't seem to have noticed the change in the headteacher's behaviour at all.

Tyler heard Mum shut the front door and he watched through the window as Mr Hail strode rigidly away from the house. A shiver ran down his spine. What had the headteacher meant when he said if Tyler didn't bring the egg to Morfield Woods, the 'consequences would be severe'?

THE SEVERE CONSEQUENCES

When it was time to pick up Levi, Tyler ran all the way to Morfield Primary School. He needed to tell his little brother everything about Mr Hail's visit. Tyler was breathing hard by the time he arrived. He hurried through the playground, dodging round children being picked up by their parents. A couple of Tyler's old teachers smiled at him as he passed.

As soon as he went into the reception, Tyler knew something was wrong. Mrs Summersby

looked surprised to see him, and Levi wasn't there.

'We weren't expecting you today, Tyler,' said Mrs Summersby, sounding confused.

'Where's Levi?' asked Tyler.

'The headteacher from your school came to get him, halfway through last period. Mr Hail said that you weren't available to pick Levi up and that he'd take him home,' Mrs Summersby explained.

Tyler's heart started beating fast. 'Did Levi go with Mr Hail?'

Mrs Summersby sighed. 'You know how Levi gets when things don't go to plan. When he came out of his lesson and saw Mr Hail, he got very upset. He was shouting and throwing things.'

Tyler felt sick. Levi tried to tell them he didn't want to go with Mr Hail, but the primary

THE LATE CREW

school staff hadn't listened. They'd assumed he was upset because he was autistic.

'So what happened? Where's Levi now?' asked Tyler urgently. *They should have called me or Mum*, he thought.

'It was odd, actually,' said Mrs Summersby. 'Mr Hail put his hand on Levi's shoulder and Levi suddenly calmed down. It's the fastest I'd ever seen him calm down from being overwhelmed. They left after that.'

Mr Hail had hypnotised Levi somehow – and kidnapped him!

'Don't worry,' said Mrs Summersby, seeing how concerned Tyler looked. 'It's only a mix up. I'm sure Mr Hail has dropped Levi off at home already.'

Tyler turned and rushed out without saying another word. It was rude to Mrs Summersby,

but he didn't care. She should have listened when Levi said he didn't want to go with Mr Hail.

In the playground, Tyler started to panic. Mr Hail had taken Levi and Tyler had no idea where his little brother was. This was what the headteacher had meant by '*or the consequences will be severe*'. If Tyler wanted Levi back, he had to give Mr Hail the egg.

That meant he had to meet the headteacher at the entrance to Morfield Woods tonight. Tyler pulled his phone out from his pocket. He needed help. And fast.

ASKING FOR HELP

I know none of you want to talk to me -

TY/LER

But I need help - TY/LER

Mr Hail took Levi - TY/LER

Tyler took a deep breath and waited for a message back. The seconds ticked by incredibly slowly. He hoped The Late Crew would respond to him. He didn't think he could face Mr Hail by himself.

RAB FERGUSON

It was Grace who replied first.

WHAT? 😳 What happened? - GRACE_FUL

? ? ? - ALISHAAA

Mr Hail came to my house and knows I have the egg. He went to Levi's school and hypnotised him somehow 😳 he wants us to swap the egg for Levi. - TY/LER

Ofc we'll help! - GRACE_FUL

Defo 👍👍👍 - ALISHAAA

Tyler sighed with relief. It was just Jayden he was waiting for now. Even though Jayden could be grumpy, Tyler still thought he'd help too.

THE LATE CREW

I knew we shouldn't have let you hog the egg
😞 I guess we'll have to get you and Levi out
of trouble - JAY G

What will we do? We can't give the egg
to Mr Hail. We said we would protect it. -
GRACE_FUL

We might have to let him have it 😞 we
can't let that stinky rotten cabbage smelling
headteacher keep Levi - ALISHAAA

Levi's one of us. It's not our fault if we have
to give Mr Hail the egg. We never asked to
look after it - JAY G

Levi wouldn't want us to give up. I think we
can save him and keep the egg. Something

RAB FERGUSON

Levi said this morning gave me an idea -
TY/LER

I have a plan - TY/LER

SNEAKING THE EGG OUT

The Late Crew agreed to meet at Grace's house because she lived closest to Morfield Woods.

Tyler went home first to get the egg, and to give an excuse to Mum as well, in case she noticed he and Levi were out.

Tyler went through the door making as much noise as possible. He stamped his feet against the floor and pretended to be talking to Levi about video games. He wanted it to sound like there were two brothers coming in, rather than one.

'Hello boys,' shouted Mum, from her room.

‘Hi Mum,’ Tyler called back. ‘Levi’s just getting mud off his shoes.’

‘Mucky pup,’ called Mum, and laughed.

Tyler grabbed one of Mum’s jackets and carried it quickly up to his and Levi’s bedroom. He rolled the egg out from under the bed and covered it with the jacket. He could almost feel Runaway’s daughter shifting around inside, as if something had unsettled her. It was like she knew that Levi hadn’t come home from school, or that she and Tyler were going to meet with Mr Hail.

‘It’ll be OK,’ Tyler whispered to the egg, through the jacket. ‘We’ll get Levi back *and* keep you safe.’

Tyler headed downstairs with the egg under Mum’s jacket. He stopped before he reached the front door, cradling the egg in one arm. It was easy to hold it that way, because of how light it was.

THE LATE CREW

‘Mum,’ he yelled, ‘Levi and I are going to a friend’s house.’

‘That’s lovely, whose house?’ Mum called back. She sounded pleasantly surprised. Tyler and Levi hadn’t been over to a friend’s house in years.

‘She’s called Grace. She’s a new friend.’

‘That’s great! Text me her address, and their parent’s phone number, before you go.’

Tyler texted Mum the details, which Grace had already sent along to the group chat. He could only hope Mum wouldn’t actually call, and find out that Levi wasn’t with him.

Mum’s phone beeped upstairs as Tyler’s message arrived. ‘Thank you!’ she shouted. ‘Have a good time. Look after your brother and make sure you’re not back late again.’

‘Will do!’ shouted Tyler. He swiftly went out through the front door and closed it behind

him. Mum had believed him. Now all he had to do was get Levi back.

Tyler went the quiet way to Grace's house, avoiding the busy centre of town. He carried the egg hidden under Mum's jacket, the jade green bottom sticking out. A few adults passing by looked at him strangely, but he just kept walking.

Tyler missed having Levi next to him. When he looked at that empty space where his brother should be, his stomach dropped like there was a heavy stone inside. He'd told Mum that he wouldn't get Levi into trouble.

When Tyler finally reached Grace's house, he breathed a sigh of relief. He'd felt sure someone would stop him and ask what was beneath the jacket. He held the egg with one arm again and knocked on the door. It was time for The Late Crew to get back together.

THE LATE CREW REUNITED

Grace's dad, a man with a big moustache, let Tyler in.

'What you got there, son?' he asked, looking at the jacket barely covering the egg.

'That's our science project,' Grace shouted down, appearing at the top of the stairs.

'Top secret until it's done, Dad. Up here, Tyler!'

Tyler rushed up the stairs, grateful to Grace for saving him. He followed her into her room.

Grace sat down next to Alisha on the bed, while Jayden was on a beanbag on the floor. Tyler propped the egg up against the wardrobe and hung Mum's jacket up next to it.

Grace's room was much tidier than Tyler and Levi's. There were art supplies lined up in neat pots along her desk. On the wall there was a weekly planner, which Grace had written notes on in different colours.

Tyler told the others everything that had happened with Mr Hail.

'The consequences will be severe?' snorted Alisha, after Tyler finished explaining. 'That's such a *bad guy* thing to say.'

'Whatever our plan is to get Levi back, it's going to be dangerous going up against Mr Hail,' said Grace, looking at Tyler. 'We have to be able to trust each other.'

THE LATE CREW

Tyler suddenly felt nervous. What was Grace going to say?

‘After Runaway gave us the egg, you told us you looked after your Mum and Levi,’ said Grace. ‘I wanted you to know you’re not the only one. I help look after my uncle. He’s a bit older than dad, and he’s needed a hand with things over the last few years.’

Grace was a young carer too!

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Tyler.

Grace nodded. ‘My uncle lives on the other side of Morfield. Helping him in the morning was why I was late that day, when we all had detention together.’

‘Me too,’ said Jayden. The others looked at him in surprise. ‘I don’t really talk about it. I’ve got four younger siblings. Because Mum and

Dad work all the time, it's me that mostly looks after them. It's why I was late too.'

'I take care of someone too,' said Alisha. Her voice was softer and more serious than usual. 'My mum. She can find her feelings really overwhelming. I help her with it.'

'We met in detention because we'd all been looking after people and it made us late,' said Tyler. 'That's why we're The Late Crew.'

'I help Mum, but that wasn't why I was late,' laughed Alisha, back to her jokey self once again. 'I just don't like getting out of bed.'

The Late Crew looked at each other. None of them had known, but there was something they all shared. They were all young carers.

'I guess Runaway found the perfect group to look after his egg,' said Tyler.

THE LATE CREW

‘Maybe we should be called the Young Carers Crew?’ said Alisha.

‘I like The Late Crew,’ replied Grace.

‘Well, this is all lovely,’ said Jayden snarkily. ‘But Mr Hail still has Levi. So I have one question.’

Jayden got up from his beanbag and stood face-to-face with Tyler. It reminded Tyler of when they nearly fought in detention. However, rather than looking angry, Jayden grinned.

‘How are we going to beat that stinking headteacher?’

MAKING THE TRADE

Tyler walked along the dirt path that ran next to Morfield Woods. The trees bordered this side of the town, behind the swimming pool and the old church. The woods looked like something from a fairy tale. Even though there was still daylight left, it was dark between the trees. Tyler had heard stories of darting foxes and swooping owls, but had never been lucky enough to see either.

He was alone, carrying the egg. He swore he could feel Runaway's daughter trembling

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inside, but maybe that was because his own hands were shaking with nerves.

‘I’m sorry it’s scary,’ Tyler said to the egg. ‘But if we do this right, you’ll never have to see Mr Hail or The Slime again.’

He hoped that the others had done everything they needed to and would arrive on time. He held the egg with one arm so he could check his phone. No signal. There was no way of knowing where the others were.

Up ahead, he could see the entrance to the BMX track. There was a gap in the trees, next to a tall wooden sign. The sign pointed out two routes: a red triangle for the steep downhill route, and a green circle for the easier route that stayed more level.

Tyler still couldn’t see Mr Hail. He felt panic rising in his chest, but he had to do this to

save Levi. He took a deep breath and continued down the dirt path.

When Tyler was nearly at the gap in the trees, Mr Hail stepped out from the woods. The headteacher's hand was on Levi's shoulder. Levi looked zoned out, as if he was sleepwalking. He still had his school bag on his back.

‘Levi!’ shouted Tyler. Levi didn’t respond.

‘Give me the egg,’ demanded Mr Hail, in his cold tombstone voice.

‘You give me Levi first,’ said Tyler, trying his best to sound brave.

‘At the same time,’ Mr Hail intoned in reply.

Tyler gulped, then nodded.

They approached each other slowly. Mr Hail seemed to get bigger with each step closer. Eventually he was in arms reach and—

THE LATE CREW

Mr Hail let go of Levi! The headteacher grabbed the egg with both hands and yanked it from Tyler's grasp. Tyler took the opportunity to pull his little brother away from the headteacher.

'Tyler . . .' whispered Levi. He sounded groggy, like he was just waking up.

'You're safe Levi. I've got you,' said Tyler.

'We can't let him have the egg,' said Levi faintly.

Tyler looked over at Mr Hail. To his horror, he saw The Slime slip its strawberry jam body out from under Mr Hail's sleeve. It crawled down the headteacher's wrist, heading towards the egg's dark green shell.

'Levi, do you trust me?' asked Tyler.

'Yes,' his little brother replied straight away.

‘Put your ear defenders on, fast,’ said Tyler. Levi pulled them out from the front pocket of his school bag, swiftly unfolding them and pushing them down over his ears.

Tyler looked over at Mr Hail. The Slime had reached the back of the headteacher’s hand and was slipping down towards the egg.

‘Now!’ shouted Tyler, hoping somewhere nearby The Late Crew were listening.

WATCH YOUR STEP

Suddenly, music blared out from every direction. It was an ear-splitting cacophony of rock ‘n’ roll, dance beats and hip-hop playing at once. Tyler saw Levi jolt with surprise, despite the defenders blocking his ears.

Alisha and Grace appeared from the woods, and Jayden rushed down the hill behind Tyler. Jayden carried a big bluetooth speaker, Alisha’s phone was in an MP3 player dock and Grace had a portable CD player. The three of them

surrounded Mr Hail, different music pulsating from each of their speakers. The headteacher desperately held on to the egg, while the loud sound made him stand rooted to the spot.

It was the same as when the bell rang in the school. It was working!

The Slime still clung to the back of Mr Hail's hand, but something strange was happening to it. The music was making it grow. The Slime's strawberry jam body was stretching and expanding. It tried to crawl back under the headteacher's sleeve, but now it was too big to fit.

Levi's hands were screwed into fists and his face was turning red. Tyler knew that even wearing the ear defenders, his little brother could still hear the pounding music.

'Not much longer,' Tyler mouthed to Levi. He hoped he was right.

THE LATE CREW

The rest of The Late Crew pushed their speakers as close to the headteacher as they dared. Mr Hail's arms were shaking, but he still didn't let go of the egg. The Slime ballooned even bigger and started to slip down Mr Hail's wrist. It was losing its grip!

Alisha leant forward and held her MP3 dock right next to The Slime. It grew larger and larger, struggling to hold on to Mr Hail as its size increased. Finally, it *sliddddd* down the headteacher's skin, clinging on for a few seconds before falling and landing on the grass.

The headteacher rubbed his eyes, looking at The Late Crew as if seeing them for the first time. Jayden, Alisha and Grace stood uncertainly around him, music blaring through their speakers. Mr Hail took a step forward and—

POP! He stood on The Slime and it burst. It looked like strawberry jam from someone's picnic had been spread across the grass. The mind-controlling alien had been squished, meeting its end under the headteacher's foot!

'Why's everything so loud?' asked Mr Hail, staring perplexed at his shoe, which was covered in sticky red goo. His voice was back to normal; no longer cold and robotic.

The others turned off their speakers. Levi, realising the music had stopped, looked questioningly at his big brother. Tyler gave him a thumbs up and a smile.

'You used my idea,' said Levi, taking the defenders off his ears and folding them up.

'You said The Slime might have a weakness to loud sounds. You were right!' replied Tyler.

THE LATE CREW

Levi beamed at him. It had all gone according to their plan. Unfortunately, just as The Late Crew were high-fiving and celebrating their victory, everything was about to go wrong.

EVERYTHING GOES WRONG

Mr Hail frowned, looking bewildered. ‘Aren’t you the Year 7s who were in detention for being late?’

‘That’s right,’ Grace replied, sounding disappointed that the headteacher knew she’d had detention.

‘We’re The Late Crew,’ said Jayden, much more proudly.

‘At your service,’ Alisha added.

THE LATE CREW

‘Well, would one of The Late Crew mind explaining how I got here?’ said Mr Hail. ‘The last thing I remember is speaking to you all over the hole in the gym floor.’

The Late Crew exchanged a look between them. He had no memory of being controlled by The Slime! How were they possibly going to explain that?

In the end, they didn’t have to. Because Mr Hail looked down and seemed quite surprised to discover that he was holding a giant green egg. He was so surprised, in fact, that he dropped it.

CRACK!

The sound as the egg hit the ground made Tyler's heart sink. Then something even worse happened. The egg began to roll towards the BMX track; each roll revealing a big crack in one side of its shell.

It tumbled down the steep downhill track, marked by the red triangle on the sign. They all heard it bouncing away with increasing speed. Tyler started to run. He was followed by Levi, then the rest of The Late Crew. They had to catch the egg!

CHASE THE EGG!

Tyler led the charge, rushing down the BMX track. He could hear the egg up ahead, still rolling and smacking off the sides of the track.

Tyler jumped down a dirt slope,

stepped quickly across wooden posts for
bunny-hopping,

leapt off the end of a jump ramp,

ran round the side of a curved
bank,

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clambered over mounds made
to bounce bike wheels,

and jumped down a straight
drop

to where the egg was caught between the roots
of a tree. Its shell was now riddled with cracks. It
looked like a window that had been hit by a stone.

‘Oh no,’ breathed Tyler.

He knelt down on the mossy ground and
put his hand on the egg. He couldn’t feel
Runaway’s daughter inside like before. The egg
felt empty.

‘I’m sorry,’ whispered Tyler, feeling like he
might cry. ‘I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.’

Levi arrived next, jumping down next to
Tyler.

‘It’s glowing,’ said Levi.

THE LATE CREW

He was right! In Tyler's arms, the egg was glowing faintly, like a faded glow-in-the-dark toy. Tyler felt the tiniest movement inside.

Please be alright, Tyler thought.

Was it his imagination, or did the egg glow just a little bit brighter in response?

What was it that Runaway had said when they first met him? **The egg must be looked after by someone who cares.** Tyler concentrated, willing Runaway's daughter to be OK. He felt another movement inside the egg, stronger this time.

'It worked,' gasped Tyler. 'Quick, Levi, put your hand on it too. Think about wanting to help her.'

Levi placed his hand next to Tyler's. This time Tyler actually saw the egg move. It was definitely brighter too!

The rest of The Late Crew jumped down over the edge as well.

‘You need to touch the egg,’ said Tyler.
‘And care about her as hard as you can!’

They all put their hands on the egg. It shone brighter and brighter, until all the trees around them were illuminated in lime green. The egg began to rattle as Runaway’s daughter moved faster inside, until eventually the whole shell

S H A T T E R E D

Up flew a beautiful alien dragon. She was shaped like a snake, with insect wings buzzing over her shimmering multi-coloured scales. She didn’t have arms or legs at all.

‘She doesn’t really look like her dad,’ commented Alisha.

THE LATE CREW

‘Like caterpillars and butterflies,’ said Levi.

‘She’s wonderful,’ said Tyler.

Runaway’s daughter flew joyfully above them. She danced in the air, spinning, flipping and twisting, before diving down low then rising up high. The alien dragon circled Tyler three times, then swooped down and rubbed against his leg like a cat that wants to be friends.

She flew up to a tree branch and wrapped her snake-like body around it. She settled there, as if her dance had tired her out. Her wings stopped buzzing and they all saw the beautiful way the light struck rainbows through them.

‘Thank you,’ the alien dragon said.

She said it inside their heads, the same way Runaway did.

‘Her first words,’ said Grace.

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‘Pretty good first words, to be fair,’ said Jayden.

‘The best,’ said Tyler.

THE LATE CREW



THE BEACON

The Late Crew stared up at Runaway's daughter, who was curled around her tree branch. The alien dragon craned her neck to gaze back down at them. She appeared to find the human children as interesting as they found her.

'So, what do we do with her?' asked Alisha.

'We need to find her dad, I guess,' said Tyler.

'I am here,' said Runaway's voice inside their heads. The Late Crew all turned around.

THE LATE CREW

The four-legged alien stood between the trees, where moments ago there was an empty space. He bent his front legs in a bow to The Late Crew.

‘You saved my daughter,’ said Runaway.
‘Thank you.’

She bounced on her branch, excited to see her dad! Runaway looked up at her, and Tyler had the feeling the two aliens were talking with their minds.

‘She tells me her name is Freedom,’
explained Runaway. **‘Because you have
freed her from being hunted by The
Slime.’**

Freedom untwisted from the tree and flew down, landing across her father’s shoulders. It looked oddly like Runaway was wearing her as a scarf.

‘I will take you home,’ Runaway told his dragon daughter. **‘There are trees on our planet twenty times as tall as these ones.’**

‘Did you fix your ship?’ asked Grace.

‘I didn’t need to,’ said Runaway. **‘Follow me.’**

Runaway’s four legs were perfectly designed for the woods. He galloped easily across the uneven ground, skipping past tangled roots. The Late Crew ran behind, struggling to keep up with him.

Freedom watched everything from her father’s shoulders. She looked at every tree and stone. A sparrow fluttered by, and she turned her snake-like head to track its flight. Tyler thought it was no wonder she was fascinated. Everything was new for her.

THE LATE CREW

Eventually, Runaway stopped. He had led them all to a wide clearing in the woods. In the middle of the clearing, there were leaves somehow suspended in mid-air. They were floating several metres above the ground, as if they'd drifted down from the trees and piled on top of something invisible.

'What on earth?' said Grace, at the same time as Jayden said a bad word in amazement. Levi and Alisha both laughed at Jayden swearing.

Runaway raised his three-fingered hand towards the invisible shape and narrowed his reptilian eyes. A red triangular spacecraft appeared in the clearing, covered in leaves. There were round engines on the back and a see-through pod on top.

'The Slime's spaceship,' said Runaway.
'This is how Freedom and I will get home.'

Runaway took an object out from his robe. It looked like a yellow flower, except the stalk was a long black spike. He bent down and stabbed the flower into the ground. As soon as it was in the earth, the yellow petals turned towards the sky and slowly started to spin.

‘What’s that?’ asked Alisha.

‘The flower transmits a message. It tells spaceships that help can be found here,’ said Runaway.

‘Like a radio beacon,’ said Levi.

‘Yes,’ said Runaway. It was hard to tell in Runaway’s alien face, but Tyler thought he was smiling at Levi. **‘Any spaceships out there in trouble will come to it.’**

‘More aliens will come to Morfield,’ gasped Tyler.

THE LATE CREW

‘And we’ll have to be the ones to help them,’ muttered Jayden. ‘Typical.’

‘I can remove the flower if you wish,’ replied Runaway.

‘Oh, um,’ stammered Jayden. He seemed surprised someone had actually listened to his complaining. ‘Leave it in. I suppose we can give a hand to any aliens that need it. We’re good at helping and caring. It’s what we do.’

‘So be it,’ said Runaway. **‘Now, it is time for my daughter and I to leave.’**

WE HAVE LIFT OFF

Even though Freedom had only just hatched, Tyler felt like he'd known her for ages. She'd been there the whole time, inside her egg. He was sad she was leaving.

Runaway climbed up into the ship with his daughter over his shoulders. Tyler's eyes blurred with tears and his chest felt tight. The rest of The Late Crew were downcast too. Even Jayden sniffled a little.

Levi looked especially distraught. Tyler could understand. Levi loved aliens so much.

THE LATE CREW

Now, the first ones they'd ever met were going away.

'Hey,' said Tyler, speaking gently to his little brother. 'It's better than never meeting them at all, isn't it?'

Levi nodded glumly. Freedom was looking back at them from her dad's shoulder. She buzzed her wings softly without taking off, then slumped her body down sadly.

'Go to them,' said Runaway. **'Before we leave.'**

The alien dragon dropped down excitedly and flew to The Late Crew. She flitted between them, nuzzling against each of them in turn. It made them giggle, because Freedom moved so fast and her wings tickled. She even understood that Levi didn't like tickling. She hovered in front of him instead then bopped

his nose with hers, which made Levi blush delightedly.

The alien dragon brushed against Tyler last, rubbing against his arm. Her scales felt soft against his skin. Tyler wished he could see how she'd change as she got older. It didn't seem fair that he wouldn't see her grow up. She flew back to Runaway and settled on her dad's shoulders once more.

Runaway closed the see-through lid of the spaceship. There were still tears in The Late Crew's eyes, but they all smiled now as well. The engines at the back of the red triangle spaceship hummed into life, making a low *brrrrr* noise and glowing orange. A smell a bit like petrol filled the forest clearing.

Tyler reached out and held Levi's hand. Levi squeezed his fingers tightly.

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The spaceship rose into the air, leaves sliding off its surface. The front tilted upwards, pointing towards the evening clouds. There was time for a last glimpse of Runaway and Freedom. Then, in a great burst of power, the ship shot into the sky!

Dirt flew across the ground in all directions, sweeping across The Late Crew's clothes, but none of them cared. They watched as the ship flew up and away. The red triangle got smaller and smaller and smaller . . . until finally it was gone.

The Late Crew's adventure was over. They all looked down at the flower that Runaway had planted in the ground, its yellow petals slowly spinning. Tyler knew they were all thinking the same thing. That flower was sending a signal

RAB FERGUSON

out into space, telling any aliens in trouble to come to Morfield.

It was the end of their first adventure, but it was unlikely that it would be their last.

WHAT NOW?

The Late Crew followed the bike track out of the woods, leaving the same way they came in. They walked quietly, thinking about Runaway and Freedom heading off into space. When they got to the top of the track, they saw Mr Hail was gone. The strawberry jam substance had melted away, turning a patch of the grass red.

‘Didn’t even stick around to thank us for saving him,’ muttered Jayden.

‘I don’t think he realised that we’d saved him, or that he’d needed saving,’ Grace pointed

out. 'He didn't even remember being controlled by The Slime.'

They all stopped, looking down at the red grass.

If Mr Hail doesn't remember The Slime, Tyler thought, then we're the only five people on Earth who know what happened. We're the only ones who know that this is the spot where an alien was stepped on.

'So, what now?' asked Alisha.

'We keep a watch on the night sky,' responded Tyler. 'Looking out for aliens following the beacon and arriving in Morfield. They'll need help, and The Late Crew will be there to give it to them.'

The others nodded at Tyler, even Jayden, who clapped his hands in agreement.

'That was an inspiring speech,' commented

THE LATE CREW

Alisha. ‘But I meant what do we do right now? I need to get home to my mum really.’

They realised they all needed to get back, and then laughed together at the possibility of The Late Crew all being late home. Before splitting off in their different directions, they promised each other they’d meet up regularly to discuss signs of possible alien activity in the town.

The sun was setting by the time Tyler and Levi arrived at their house. Their shadows stretched down the road ahead of them, as if the brothers were much taller than they really were.

When they went inside, the hallway smelt of Tyler’s favourite food. He wouldn’t need to make dinner – Mum was cooking curry! That meant she was having one of her good days.

‘Well, you’re home on time,’ said Mum, coming out to meet them in the hall. She stopped when she saw them. ‘But you’re both filthy.’

Tyler and Levi looked down at their clothes. They were covered in dirt from when the spaceship lifted off.

‘We went to Morfield Woods,’ explained Tyler.

‘With your friends?’ said Mum. She didn’t seem too bothered about the dirt.

Tyler and Levi nodded. The Late Crew were definitely all friends now.

‘What did you get up to there?’ asked Mum.

‘We listened to music,’ said Tyler. ‘And I’m not sure you’d believe the rest.’

Mum looked at the brothers shrewdly but didn’t ask anything else. Instead, she smiled.

‘Well, I’ve been making curry. It’s nearly ready.’

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She went back through to the kitchen. When she opened the door, the scent of curry was even stronger. It smelt spicy and sweet, just like Tyler liked it. Mum was the best cook.

He let out a contented sigh. Mum had enough energy that she'd chat and joke through dinner. Maybe they'd even play board games after, if she was well enough. The aliens had left, but that didn't mean there weren't good things still on Earth. Tyler, Levi and Mum eating curry together was one of the good things.

RAB FERGUSON

Fact File Three

Name: Freedom

Also known as: The Egg (now hatched)

Family: She is Runaway's daughter

Size: The length of a snake

Appearance: Beautiful - her body glitters and glimmers in all different colours

Wings: Like an insect's, but bigger

Speech: Psychic speech - like her dad

Power: She can fly!

Status: SAVED BY THE LATE CREW

AFTER THE END

Not long after The Late Crew's adventure ended, Morfield Secondary School reopened. There were still some areas pupils weren't allowed in, marked off by yellow and black tape. Maths and science lessons were moved to temporary buildings that looked like big plastic boxes.

The gym was out of bounds. There were construction workers inside, using loud machines. They were filling in the pit. Everyone

had to do all their PE sessions outside, even when it was raining.

All sorts of rumours went round about what had caused the damage. Tyler's favourite was that an old World War Two bomb had gone off under the school – even though no bombs fell anywhere near Morfield during the war! None of the rumours came anywhere close to the truth. Only The Late Crew knew the real story, but they knew no one would believe them if they tried to tell it.

Mr Hail took a few weeks off, then returned to school. He was back to normal and didn't appear to have regained any memory of being controlled by The Slime. There were only two ways in which the headteacher was different.

Firstly, he'd always nod to Tyler and the others when he passed them in the hallway.

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It was like he'd worked out that they'd done something for him but didn't quite know what it was.

Secondly, he was now terrified of strawberry jam. When a Year 10 girl unwrapped a jam sandwich next to him, he ran out from the lunch hall, white as a sheet. Afterwards, Mr Hail sent out a letter banning jam from packed lunches, which utterly perplexed a lot of people.

Miss Penn, aka *The One Does Not Understand*, started being nicer to Tyler. This might have been because she felt bad about having The Late Crew in detention when the school fell down. It could also have been because Tyler showed her his Young Carers ID card, which had arrived in the post.

The Late Crew hung out together after school whenever they could, though their time together was often cut short when at least one of them would need to get back to their caring responsibilities. It helped that they all understood what that was like. They spoke every time about watching out for signs of more aliens arriving, but they'd seen nothing yet.

One Saturday, The Late Crew came round to Tyler and Levi's to play *Alien Blasters 5*. Everyone had a good time, until Alisha pointed out how weird it was to shoot aliens even though they'd become friends with Runaway and Freedom. After that, they decided to watch a film instead.

Every night, before bed, Tyler and Levi stood at their bedroom window and looked out at the

THE LATE CREW

stars. They kept their eyes peeled for a streak of light, or a strangely moving object, or anything else unusual. The brothers knew Runaway's flower was still spinning in Morfield Woods, a beacon calling aliens in trouble to their little town.

As Tyler and Levi kept watch of the night sky, the stars carried on twinkling. Maybe one day soon, they'd see the colourful light of another spaceship on its way.

Young Carer Card

Name: Tyler Harper

This card is to confirm that I am a young carer. This means I help to look after one or more people at home.

I might need:

- Extra time with homework
- Your understanding if I am late to school
- For it to be OK if I am tired in the day

Signed by,

Young Carer: T Harper

Staff Member: Ash B.

SAYING THANK YOU

Hi, my name is Rab. I wrote this book! This is the bit at the end where I thank all of the people who helped me do that.

The first thank you is to you, the reader. Without you reading the book, The Late Crew wouldn't get to have their adventure! If you enjoyed reading the book, you could always try writing a story – and making up your own aliens to include in it.

Thank you to Mr Burnell and Ms Rees' class at Fishergate Primary School, who told me

what books they liked and why. That was really helpful when writing this one.

Thank you to Christine Miserandino, who invented using spoons to explain what it's like having chronic fatigue. She calls it The Spoon Theory. It's a very clever way to describe it.

Thank you to my friends at Onwe Press. I only wrote the words down – they took those words and turned them into an actual real-life book!

Thank you to my wife and family. It's a bit soppy to say, but I think they are the best people ever.

Thanks to my cat Hugo, for sitting on my knee while I write stories. If he's lucky, I'll put him in the next book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rab Ferguson lives in the North of England, where he goes on walks in the countryside and thinks of stories. When he gets home, he writes those stories down in a notebook or on his computer. He used to live in Scotland, but they kicked him out for causing too much trouble.

Rab started writing when he was in school, and he saw a competition to write a short story in under 100 words. He wrote one about a man with a high-tech box that let him live forever, and he's been writing sci-fi ever since. He tells

RAB FERGUSON

everyone to try writing a story in under 100 words – it's harder than you'd think!

When not writing, Rab works for charities, doing things like helping young people with their mental health or encouraging adults to read books. He claims he's never *really* met an alien, but he might just be keeping it secret.

