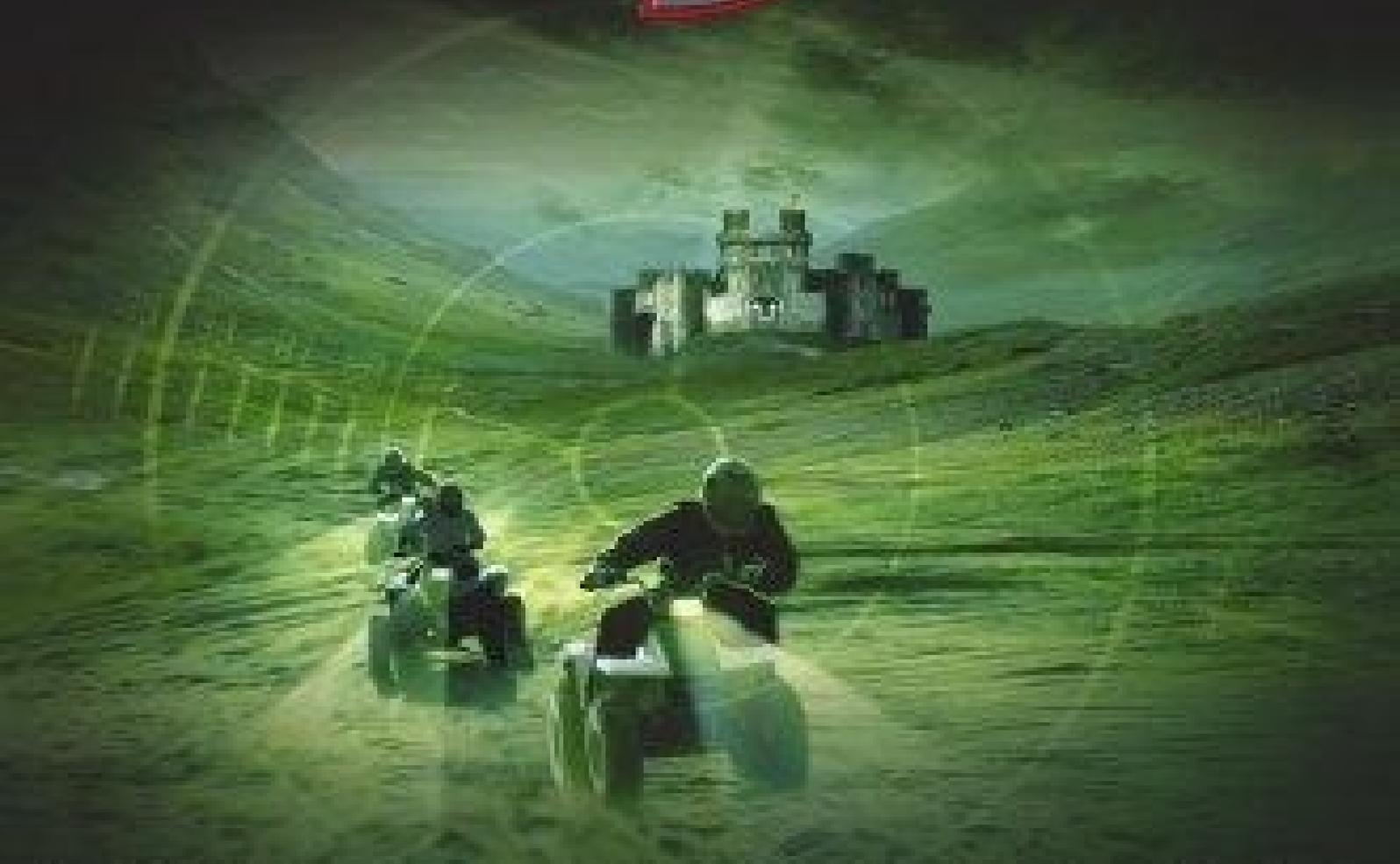


CHRIS RYAN

ALPHA FORCE



UNTOUCHABLE

One Team - One Mission - Alpha Force!

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Answers

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ALPHA FORCE: UNTOUCHABLE

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ALPHA FORCE

The field of
operation...



Meet the team:

Alex – A quiet lad from Northumbria, Alex leads the team in survival skills. His dad is in the SAS and Alex is determined to follow in his footsteps, whatever it takes. He who dares . . .

Li – Expert in martial arts and free-climbing, Li can get to grips with most situations . . .

Paulo – The laid-back Argentinian is a mechanical genius, and with his medical skills he can patch up injuries as well as motors . . .

Hex – An ace hacker, Hex is first rate at code-breaking and can bypass most security systems . . .

Amber – Her top navigational skills mean the team are rarely lost. Rarely lost for words either, rich-girl Amber can show some serious attitude . . .

With plenty of hard work and training, together they are **Alpha Force** – an elite squad of young people dedicated to combating injustice throughout the world.

In *Untouchable*, Alpha Force are in the Scottish Highlands helping to run an activity camp for teenagers. Soon they begin to discover that not all is as it seems on the laird's estate . . .

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HERE'S WHAT READERS THINK OF THE ALPHA FORCE SERIES:

'Instantly readable, and I found it hard to put down.

A cool read!'

Chris

'All the Alpha Force series are great.

Keep writin', Chris, the world of books will be boring without you!'

reader from Leeds

'A really gripping read that is bound to keep your fingernails short'

Andrew, from New Zealand

'This book had me hooked from the start: it was really cool . . . it was so amazing

I went and bought the next one in the series!'

Lisa, from Wiltshire

'To describe the book in one word

– only one word suits the job, GREAT!'

reader from Cornwall

'From the first page you are drawn into the story and you can't put it down. I was excited by every word. This book is amazing! Chris Ryan builds suspense better than JK Rowling! This gripping novel keeps you reading for hours and is ideal for 11–16 year old boys and girls alike'

'Bookworm' Lizzi

'I enjoyed this book because the characters were fun and the plot was interesting. The reader also finds out things that the characters do not know, so they act unpredictably creating unexpected twists and turns. I would recommend this book to teens because this is an action book where the heroes are teens themselves. It also contains the added bonus of Chris Ryan's top SAS tactics'

Thomas, from Middlesex

'I bought this book for my brother and ended up reading it myself!'

Clare, from Plymouth

'It keeps you wondering what will happen and has twists and turns all the way through'

Luke, from Lincolnshire

‘I love these books and think they’re really great.
It’s really great how Chris Ryan can write about such adult matters yet still make them
young adults’ books; they’re a real inspiration! Rating: 10/10’

Kelly, from Edinburgh

Prologue

THE ASTRONOMER

On a cold night in early spring James Fletcher climbed out of his hired Land Rover, checked the battery icon on his digital camera, ran his torch once more over his Ordnance Survey map and set off over the dark hillside.

He picked his way carefully over the boulders, using a ski pole to keep his balance. It was a clear night, the stars twinkling in tiny points. He identified Jupiter to the south, Saturn to the west, the full moon setting. He also identified the circumpolar constellations, Leo and Virgo on the ecliptic, Bootes with its bright star Arcturus, Coma Berenices and Hercules with the M13 globular cluster. James Fletcher's knowledge of the night sky was much wider than average – he was a professor of astronomy. He'd come to a holiday cottage far up in the north of Scotland to spend his Easter break photographing one of the night sky's most spectacular phenomena – the Northern Lights, or aurora borealis.

He'd seen them many times before but never failed to delight in them. Streams of ghostly greenish-blue light caused by electrically charged particles streaming off the sun and colliding with gases in the Earth's ionosphere. And just now there was plenty of solar activity, so tonight's display should be a good one. He was hoping to get some really special shots for his website.

He became aware of a sound – a vehicle was approaching. A white glow appeared from under the ridge: headlights coming up the steep slope. He smiled. Another astronomy nut, no doubt. Well, that was nice – he'd have company.

The headlights bounced up over the ridge. They were closer together than a car's – probably one of those chunky quad bikes he had seen people travelling around on.

It was a quad bike. Over the noise of the engine he heard shouts. Two riders.

James waved. He thought they'd cut the engine and come and talk to him. They didn't. The headlights remained on, the engine idling. He couldn't see the riders because they were in shadow. But he heard them talking. One of them said, 'He's got a camera.'

It seemed a little unfriendly, but James was used to dealing with quirky scientists. Many of his colleagues behaved oddly when confronted with strangers. James held out his hand and walked over to introduce himself.

One of the riders shone a torch straight at him. It fixed on his eyes, flicked down his waterproof jacket and trousers to his boots, then went back up to his face. James put his hand up to shield his eyes and blinked through his fingers. 'Er – do you mind, you're dazzling me.'

A voice came out of the shadows. 'He's on his own.'

Something was wrong. They thought he shouldn't be there. 'Er, I'm sorry,' said James. 'I didn't think this was private property.'

'He's got a camera,' another voice repeated.

James heard someone step off the bike and approach him. But he couldn't see him, so he never saw the gun.

His last moments were a deafening noise, a blow like a sledgehammer – and a torch still shining in his eyes.

The man walked up close to the body and looked down at him. A sawn-off shotgun smoked in the crook of his arm. Birds and night animals screeched and hooted as the echo of the shot died down, but it wasn't an unusual thing to hear in these hills. He broke the breech of the shotgun and flicked the spent cartridge onto the grass. That wasn't an unusual thing to find in these parts either. A smell of cordite and gunpowder rose into the air, mingling with the smell of charred flesh.

'Is he dead?' asked his companion, still on the bike.

The man ran his torch over the body. James Fletcher's throat and chin were a hole filling with dark blood.

The man on the quad lit a cigarette. 'Get that camera.'

The gunman peered closer at James Fletcher's ruined chest. Little pieces of glass and twisted metal twinkled in the dark, wet mess of flesh. The camera was smashed. 'It's not going to tell any tales,' said the man. 'What are we going to do with him?'

'Put him where we always put things we don't want to be found.'

INSTRUCTORS

‘Listen up, guys.’ Amber clapped her hands to get her audience’s attention. ‘As if you haven’t put up with enough humiliation from us, here’s one last ordeal. Come and get your certificate, Joe.’

It was a cosy, stone-built club room, with low beams and a big fireplace. The last rays of an August sun were setting outside, and inside the atmosphere was cheerful. Six teenagers were on the last night of an adventure holiday in the north of Scotland with Alex, Li, Paulo, Hex and Amber. Watching the whole proceedings was Mary, the youth co-ordinator. Although she was in overall charge of the project, she was taking a back seat. This evening belonged to Alpha Force.

Right now, black American Amber was hosting the passing-out ceremony, her Boston accent and easy confidence making her a natural compere. When she called his name, Joe, a lanky, dark-haired fifteen-year-old, put down his pint of Coke next to his chair, pulled his hoodie over his face and stood up to collect his certificate. Wolf-whistles and a smattering of applause accompanied him back to his seat by the stone fireplace, where he sprawled gratefully and picked up his drink again.

‘Joe also wins the Oscar for the most spectacular horse-riding stunt,’ smiled Amber.

Her comment produced another barrage of cheers from the small audience as they remembered all too well a calamity that had happened during the week’s holiday, when the quiet cob Joe was riding was stung by a wasp.

Amber looked down at the next certificate in her hands. ‘Alice?’

There was more applause and a girl stepped forward, her blonde hair held down by a red baseball cap.

‘Alice deserves a Grammy for teaching Alex some new marching songs,’ said Amber. ‘Honestly, we can’t thank you enough.’

Alex, in the corner, chuckled along with the rest. Their six charges looked happy enough now, but the adventure holiday had not started so well. None of them had wanted to be there. They’d been sent by their parents, who were desperate to wean them off PCs, X-boxes, PlayStations and iPods. The hostel, where the main activities on offer were abseiling, orienteering and kayaking, had come as a big shock. The kids were appalled.

They weren’t the only ones. On that first night Alex, Hex, Li, Paulo and Amber wished they’d never agreed to take the project on. Their brief had been to introduce a group of city-bred teens to the joys of the wilds. But they had to force these kids to even go for a walk, let alone climb a mountain. Instead of sharing their love of the outdoors they were running a boot camp. When Alex drove them back to the hostel in the Range Rover at the end of the first day the rear-view mirror showed a row of hostile stares, white iPod wires framing their faces like stethoscopes. But bit by bit, something had changed. They began to enjoy the way a compass could make sense of

a featureless wilderness of rocks and heather; the way you could kayak along the surface of a loch as silently as a fish; the way a couple of ropes and an abseil harness let you defy gravity. They stopped listening to their iPods on the journey back; they talked to each other about what they'd done that day.

In some ways, Alex thought, the week had been like a trip back in time. Back to when Alpha Force had first met, on a holiday crewing a sailing ship around the islands of Indonesia. Alex had loved it. The sea was like the open moors in Northumbria where he had grown up, only better. However, the other four people on his watch were not impressed. There was Hex from London, whose parents had sent him after he'd wreaked havoc hacking into a computer. There was Li, a striking, fine-boned Anglo-Chinese girl who skived off work by trapezing through the rigging. There was laid-back Paulo from a ranch in Argentina, who seemed to be on permanent siesta and could only be roused in order to flirt with Li. And there was spoiled American heiress Amber, who had recently lost her parents and hated the whole world. But after the group were marooned on a deserted island they became the closest of friends. When Amber found out that her dead parents had been human rights campaigners, this close-knit group of survivors wanted to carry on with their work. Now, every holiday they got together to hone their survival skills and hang out. And very often they found missions in the most unlikely places.

It was Amber's rich businessman uncle, John Middleton, who had found them this gig. A travel company owned by a friend of his had set it up and the original guides pulled out. He needed somebody to help run the adventure holiday at short notice. John Middleton knew the very people. And afterwards, the five friends would have a few days with the place to themselves.

Alex came back to the present.

'Fleur wins the Oscar for best director – for that lovely video of Paulo sliding into the loch on his ass.'

Another round of whistles, laughter and applause, and a girl with long dark wavy hair made her way back to her seat, a certificate in her hands. Paulo's handsome face grinned under his curly mop. He gave Fleur a high five as she passed him to sit down.

The door opened. A petite blonde girl in cropped grey trousers came in and plonked herself down on the sofa next to Alice, her arms folded.

The group stared at her.

'Oh,' she said, noticing their attention. 'Did I just miss the group hug?' Her voice dripped with sarcasm. She stared at Amber and put her hand out. 'Come on, give it to me.'

Tiff's arrival had changed the easy-going mood of the room. Some of the kids looked down, not knowing what to do; others continued to stare at her.

Amber felt her hackles rise but tried to hide it. 'Give you what?'

Tiff popped a piece of gum into her mouth and looked at Amber as she started chewing. The way Tiff chewed was nothing like the way anyone else did. She chewed as if she was daring you to say something. She had chewed that way as she hauled her slight body up a mountain in deliberate slow motion; as she'd sat down during a hike and refused to walk another step. *Go on*, her chewing said. *What are you going to do about it?* The other kids had been just as difficult to start with, but as they started to enjoy themselves Tiff stayed mutinous. Now here she was at the bitter end, still

rebellious.

The jaw chewed. 'Where's my crummy certificate?'

One of the things Alex was especially looking forward to was seeing the back of her. He answered her question. 'You don't get one. You haven't passed.'

Tiff turned her chewing face in his direction. 'They all got one.'

'They earned them,' said Li.

Tiff shrugged. She reached past Alice and grabbed the certificate on the arm of the sofa. Alice tried to grab it but Tiff held it out of her reach.

'Keep your hair on, I'm only looking,' Tiff studied the certificate for a moment, mouth working. Her face broke into a humourless grin. 'What a load of crap.'

'Just give it back,' said Alice.

Tiff held the certificate teasingly between pinched fingers, threatening to tear it in two. Now she really had everyone's attention. Slowly she ripped the certificate in two and let the pieces fall.

The entire room gasped.

Amber's eyes narrowed; Alex was looking at the girl with loathing; Hex's eyes were flinty; Li's knuckles were white as she gripped the chair, as though she was having trouble keeping herself from jumping up and giving the girl a good slap. Tiff sat back and glared at them all, arms folded, her mouth still chewing.

Paulo heard the chair scrape beside him. Mary slipped into the seat. 'Er, Paulo, can I have a word?'

Paulo grimaced. 'Pretty dumb show of authority, eh? Thank God we're getting shot of her.' He smiled at Mary, but Mary didn't respond.

'I have a problem. I had a fax from Tiff's parents. They've been delayed and asked if she could stay on for a bit longer.'

Paulo looked at the others. After the outrage, the cheerful mood was returning to the room. He knew without a doubt that the others were relaxing because they would soon be getting rid of Tiff. He said reluctantly, 'How long does she need to stay?'

'Until the weekend.'

The weekend. Today was Sunday. They'd have Tiff for another five days at least. That would be almost all of their time together. 'Are you staying too?' he said.

'I've got to leave tomorrow. Her parents are happy for you to be completely in charge, do what you want. I know she's a pain, but she hasn't got anywhere else to go.'

Paulo heard himself say, 'All right, we'll have her.'

But he dreaded what the others would say.

UNWANTED GUEST

Alex liked to sit outside last thing before going to bed. The sun had gone down, leaving a faint line of fire outlining the tops of the mountains. The white walls of the hostel were pinkish purple, the dark slate roof invisible against the black mountain. Lighted upstairs windows were squares of bright orange. Occasionally a shadow flitted across the curtains as the kids packed and got ready for bed. The hostel had started life as a couple of crofts nestled in the heather-covered hills. A two-storey house had been built to join them together, creating a sizeable building that could sleep twelve. They had rented it, through the holiday company, from the laird who owned Glaickvullin Lodge, further down the valley. All the land immediately around – a thousand hectares – belonged to his estate.

It was so peaceful. You only got that deep silence in a huge open space. It reminded Alex of his solitary camping trips on the Northumbrian moors, practising survival skills learned from his dad, a soldier in the SAS.

The north of Scotland was Alex's kind of place – the lochs that ran like silver tongues between the brooding mountains, the thrashing sea, the mists that rolled in like smoke, the heather-covered hills like rumples of purple tweed. He could imagine nothing nicer than cooking mussels and cockles over a pit of fire on a rugged seashore, watching the birds and seals with his four friends. There was Paulo, medic, engineering expert. His charm and easy laugh had meant that he was the first member of Alpha Force to win over the reluctant guests. There was Hex, their computer expert, virtually Paulo's opposite – a loner, preferring to observe or to retreat into the cyber-world of his palmtop computer. If Paulo had won the kids' affections, Hex had won their admiration with his knowledge of arcane websites. There was Li, martial arts expert, so petite that she looked fragile. But Alex had never met anyone with such strength. There was Amber, their navigation expert, who had chaired the evening's proceedings with relaxed assurance.

The thought came into Alex's mind, not for the first time: they were all getting older. They would be leaving school, making career choices. Amber's new responsibilities were just the beginning. Would this be the last holiday together?

Whether it was or not, he certainly didn't want it spoiled by an unwanted guest.

High up in a window in the central part of the building he saw a dim light and a familiar outline – Hex, his cropped head bent over his palmtop.

Alex grasped the drainpipe, tugged it to see if it would take his weight and climbed up swiftly, hand over hand. Hex was clicking on his palmtop keyboard with each ear enclosed by a silver cup. They were cordless Bluetooth headphones – his latest pride and joy.

That meant Hex wouldn't hear him coming. Alex smiled as he slipped in through the window.

Hex looked at him and gave a yelp, but a moment later Alex found himself slammed onto the window frame, his head dangling over the edge, the catch digging painfully into his back and a hand at his throat.

Alex kicked Hex's legs out from underneath him and he rolled away. Alex slid off the windowsill down to the floor and found Hex already crouching on his heels, ready to strike.

Alex relaxed and sat back against the wall, laughing. 'Sorry, mate, I couldn't resist it – your window was open.'

Hex relaxed out of the fighting posture. He retrieved his palmtop, which was upside down on the orange duvet, glowing blue like an upturned book of magic. He snapped it shut and sat on the bed.

Alex dusted flakes of black paint from the drainpipe off his hands. 'Great reaction time. Even with the headphones you didn't miss a beat.'

Hex pulled a face. 'If you'd been Paulo, I wouldn't have stopped. He must be off his head. It was going to be just the five of us; now we have to haul that sourpuss around.'

Alex looked at him. 'Mate, take those off, you look like an alien.'

Hex remembered the headphones and unhooked them. 'What was Paulo thinking? Why on earth did he say yes?'

Amber had grabbed Paulo's phone and was not going to give it back. 'It's a message from Fleur.' She sat back on her bed, pulled her knees up to her chest and read out the text. '*Lovely to meet you. If you're ever in Manchester give me a call.*' Amber's eyes opened wide. 'Oooh, a fan.' She tossed the phone back onto the purple duvet.

Paulo watched from a chair, while Li sank back on her elbows at the foot of the bed. They were in Amber's bedroom, keeping out of the way of the kids, who were searching the common areas checking they hadn't left anything behind.

'I bet Fleur's hoping you'll ask her to stay another week too,' said Amber acidly.

'Bet she can't understand why you singled out a monster like Tiff to keep on,' said Li.

'Law of the jungle,' Amber told her. 'Nice girls finish last.'

Paulo grimaced. He normally gave as good as he got when they started teasing but right now he was thinking, What have I done?

Another bleep – another message. This time Li got to it first. Click, click-click. 'Claire.' She looked at Paulo. 'She says, are you free for a party in Ipswich next week?'

Paulo shook his head and winced again.

'We could all go to Ipswich, wherever that is,' said Amber. 'Instead, what have we got to look forward to?' Her voice took on a parodying whine. '*I can't do it . . .*'

Li joined in, matching Amber's tone perfectly. '*It's minging. This harness won't fit me, it's not small enough.*'

Amber reverted to her own voice. 'And the kayaks!' she exclaimed. 'She just sat in hers and drifted. She never even got her oars wet.'

'I think she just wanted Paulo to rescue her.'

'Well congratulations, Paulo – you can spend the next week rescuing her,' said Amber.

Another bleep. Li snatched Paulo's phone. 'Ooh. It's Tiff.'

Paulo sat bolt upright, glowering. 'It's not.'

Li tossed the phone to him. 'No. It's Alice.'

Paulo caught the phone and lay back in the chair, one hand over his heart as though calming it down. '*Dios*, you nearly killed me.'

Amber's phone beeped on the bedside table. She had a text. 'Ah,' she said.

Paulo and Li looked at her. From the tone of the 'ah' the message was not good news.

Amber looked up. 'It's Mary. Tiff's parents are very grateful and have wired the necessary funds.'

THE CAVES

‘Geronimo!’ called Paulo. The tunnel was like a helter-skelter and he was sliding – fast. Millions of tiny fossils glinted in the light of his headlamp. It occurred to him that millions of them should also be grinding into his backside, too, only it felt nice and smooth. The tunnel must have been worn down by many sliding potholers.

He landed on his hands and knees in a cave. It smelled of wet rock and algae. He looked around. On the roof was what looked like an immense, wide chandelier – thousands of tiny stalactites, glittering in the light of his headlamp.

‘Wow.’

They were exploring the potholes on the estate, etched out of the limestone over millions of years by natural water courses. Alex and Paulo had done a week-long course in caving leadership, and were now qualified to lead expeditions.

Alex’s voice came down the tunnel. ‘Paulo? Are you there?’

Paulo scrambled to his feet. ‘Yeah, come on down.’

He heard a thudding and the sound of waterproof overalls slithering on rock. It grew louder and combined with a female voice whooping in excitement.

Amber was deposited at his feet. Like him, she looked around, saw the roof of stalactites and boggled. ‘Awesome.’

Another body swished down the tunnel. Li slithered out and, unlike the others, landed on her feet.

‘Were you cheating?’ said Paulo. ‘That was twice as fast as Amber.’

‘I greased my overalls,’ replied Li. Then she too noticed the ceiling. ‘Wow.’

Another person was in the tunnel. Amber listened. ‘I bet that’s Hex.’

‘How can you tell?’ said Paulo.

‘He doesn’t sound like he’s enjoying it. He’s very quiet.’

Hex kept his eyes firmly on the spot of light beyond his feet. He just wanted it to be over. It was the thought of all that rock around and above him. No matter that it had been that way for centuries; today might be the day it moved – and then he would be crushed like one of those millions of insects that eventually became oil reserves. Whenever he’d been in confined spaces he’d had horrible experiences. And these potholes weren’t like he’d imagined caves. They weren’t the neat corridors of rock you saw in films. It was more like somebody had thrown a pile of rocks into a jar and they were squeezing between the gaps. There was no order to it – a big space could dwindle to a tiny crevice. It was all so haphazard; how could it be stable?

When he popped out, he breathed out with relief. But the relief was short lived. He was still in a cave, and the floor sloped sharply. Why couldn’t anything be a simple, regular shape down here?

A sound of cursing came from the tunnel. Hex jumped out of the way. ‘That’s got to be Tiff.’