

Excerpt 10 - Caverns of the underworld

"Good enough," said Alexis. Lying down, she wriggled sideways, and barely squeezed through on her hip. Sliding over the rounded boulder, she dropped feet-first onto the sandy ground. Seconds later, Tsam and Jack were there beside her, and they squatted together in the semi-darkness, waiting for their eyes to adjust.

The same excitement always gripped Alexis at the beginning of such an expedition. There was a heightening of the senses, her nose and ears overcompensating for her restricted vision. From deep inside, a solitary bat squeaked, and there was the faint echo of a dripping stalactite. She sensed the pressure within the living rock, and felt its darkness as an entity. No one spoke. The three secured their headlamps and prepared to go deeper. Alexis knew through experience that, unlike the movies, real caves didn't have smooth level floors or predictable tunnels with gentle curves and conveniently placed columns and stalactites. In this world of subterranean wonder, the size and dimensions of caves was limited only by the imagination. Some caves consisted of a network of chaotic fissures that fractured upward through the rock like spider webs, or the branches of a tree. Caves of that type often revealed vertical drops of hundreds or even thousands of feet. Some ran horizontally for miles. Other caves could barely be considered caves at all. Mere crawl spaces, they were nothing more than separations between the rocky strata where the spelunker's body might be wedged between ceiling and floor with their faces in the dust and no room to turn around. Real caves were replete with treachery in all forms – loose shale, spiky ceilings, crevasses, falling rock, oozing minerals, crags and peaks, sheer drops, jagged edges, and steep inclines coated with greasy clay. A caver, thinking his footing safe, might be, at any time, walking on a paper-thin limestone shell above a bottomless pit.