

A person is seen from behind, walking away into a dimly lit, cavernous space. The walls of the cave are illuminated with a warm, golden light, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The person's silhouette is dark against the lighter background of the cave.

Cry of the Rocks

PIXIE EMSLIE

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For Robin

*Your support and love made all the
difference.*

Thank you.

Acknowledgements

This is a work of fiction. With the exception of some place names, which do exist, the names, characters and events are entirely the work of my imagination.

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Chapter 1

“Did you feel that?”

At the sound of Andries’ words the men stopped, everyone standing dead quiet as they waited, listening for what had alerted Andries. At the same instant, in five other places in the swarming labyrinth of shafts and tunnels of the vast deep-rock mine, other groups stopped; men frozen in mid-movement, straining to hear, to feel; eardrums throbbing. This was something they all dreaded, a change in the subtle sounds of the rocks, a shift in the feel of the walls of stone all round them: above, below and on every side. When a team leader held up his hand no-one doubted him, no-one moved, their bodies reacting instinctively, stomachs contracting in fear.

It didn’t matter how often or seldom you experienced that sudden awareness that something had changed or moved, it was always a moment of naked fear. That was when you knew you were alive, somewhere deep inside the earth, with at least a mountain of rock above your head. In fact, it didn’t really matter whether it was a mountain or only a hill. The rock above your head would flatten you if it moved in any way at all.

Two kilometers away, Bombi and his team had been moving

down a slight incline, single-file, when the man walking second in line heard something, yelled an urgent “*wag!*” and sharply raised his right hand above his head, his knuckles grazing the low roof of the tunnel. Except for those at the very back of the nine-man line, everyone stopped almost in mid-stride. Motionless. The last three had been distracted, chatting quietly, now they stumbled into each other, one tripping and landing on hands and knees. He stayed there, prone – frozen. Then: absolute silence as each man listened to the agonizing sounds of rocks moving, tearing somewhere.

In an underground classroom several levels above Andries and Bombi and their people, Jock was finishing a short lecture on fire-drills when he felt rather than heard the tremor. Through his feet. Through the rock floor of the lecture room.

Moshesh and his two teams of twelve men each were further away from the sounds of tearing rock – but they could hear the grumbling, cracking, rending noises nevertheless. The two groups of men had met for a short break towards the end of their shift and were preparing for the long walk back to the Nkuti South shaft. At the same time as they heard and felt the tremor, the lights in the junction area where the men were resting dimmed, then brightened again, and then went out completely. What had been a gentle murmur of conversation just before the noise and now the intense darkness, changed to complete silence for several long seconds, as two dozen grown men faced their fears and waited for what would come next.

On the surface Ertjies, the mine manager, was two-thirds of the way through dictating a string of memos and notes dealing with the recently held safety awards function when Marie, his PA, lifted her hand to stop him. Both stared at the little chromed model of a miner poised on its platform in the center of the desk; it had started moving back and forth, like a pendulum. Both felt the tremor beneath them. Ertjies leaped up, his hand darting down to the radio clipped to his belt.

The man who held the girl captive in the old stores shed near the shaft entrance also felt the tremor. Immediately he looked at his watch, as if the timing of the shudder was important; he seemed to have been expecting it.

It had all happened so damned quickly. The man speaking to him from her phone; the man with Thandi, the horrible, frightening terror, his anger, the blinding rage, the descending cage; who could it be? Why me? Why Thandi? Who are these people? Why...Then the slip of paper; the instruction; the warning, the order to blast; make the tunnel collapse – half an hour or Thandi dies; he had crumpled the note and squashed it into the top pocket of his overall. He looked around again in the darkness, pierced frequently by the headlamps of his fellows.

He picked up his drill, raised it to where he had been working and was about to grip the hand switch and continue when he felt the ground tremble under his boots; and heard the deep-throated roar from the rocks about him... Together with the sudden fear of any miner faced with the movement and the noise, Andries felt a strange mixture of relief and release. THIS had nothing to do with those who wanted to sabotage the mine; those that held Thandi. THIS was a rock fall – probably a very large and multiple one, and very dangerous. This was not man-contrived. It couldn't be...

Andries stopped, frozen in mid-stride, with his huge pneumatic drill poised just inches from the sidewall where they had been working at clearing rock away after the blasting team had done its job, loosening it. Next to him, Sipho, along

with Simon, John and Nxolisi, were busy securing roof bolts, their work hard and tedious but arguably the most important of any down here. The big metal bolts were forcibly screwed into the hanging wall just above their heads their arms aching with the effort of pushing upwards sometimes at full stretch, sometimes almost crouching. The bolts had expansion arms which worked to compress and hold the rock around them bolstering the hanging walls and adding to the strength provided by the mine props that formed the initial roof support.

Andries and his team were working in a deep section several kilometers below the surface. Only the men working on developing the new stope were deeper than they were. Today that was Kalifo and his group. Moshesh was working one level up and as far as Andries knew the Russians were all back at work in their underground workshops, which were nearer the surface.

Andries always said working down there was so oppressive as to be indescribable. “It’s like an elephant bull calf sitting on you, giving you enough room to breathe but just waiting to squash you if he feels like it.” That was the best analogy he could make for his friends and family – and more recently when talking to his Thandi – to try to make them understand the depths and terror of mining. To them a shallow cave in the cliff-side near home was as close to a mine as they could envisage.

Now – in the soles of his feet, more than anything – Andries felt another lurching movement. Through the explosion of brutal fear in the pit of his stomach, he had a moment of crisp panic; but controlled it. God, if I die now what will happen to Thandi; I must get her away from that man. I cannot leave everything as it is. ‘No.’ Over and above the deep instinct of survival, the same inner voice came, stronger and pumped by adrenaline. ‘No! I can’t die today. There must be a way.’

Crisply he snapped out a command to his fellow miners, urging them to remain motionless until they could establish what was happening.

Chapter 2

That morning, as he slipped from the bed and padded bare-soled on the tiles to the shower, Andries glanced back. And stopped. That indistinguishable pre-dawn glimmer filtering in through the lightly-curtained window gave the room an ethereal hue which turned Thandi's naked, sleeping form into a magical – and breath-taking – statue-like figure molded from platinum. In the last short while, their relationship had erupted from what had at first seemed to be mutually rewarding lust, into something much more. Quite profound. Very real. Very fulfilling. Now she was lying on her left hip with her torso turned towards him. He could see the soft rise and fall of her breast as she breathed gently. Contentedly. A sleeping beauty indeed. He resisted the urge to go back to the bed; went through and showered – forcing the blasting spluttering cold water to chill his libido.

Even the way they had met seemed like a miracle. The timing was impeccable; he had been walking across the tiny dance floor to leave the Hinja club for an early night just as she arrived. They nearly collided actually, because neither of them had been watching where they were going. One second later or earlier and their paths would not have crossed – literally. Both apologetic. Both opened their arms, palms

forward in the age-old gesture of ‘sorry...’ and then – playfully – Andries grasped each of her outstretched hands and did a little shimmy step in time to the thundering disco-music. She played along, smiling – that beautiful smile he would never ever forget – and they twirled together to the amusement of those watching. Then they looked at each other, properly, for the first time – and the die was cast. They carried on dancing, and talking, and sharing a drink, and laughing and playing. And as if they had been together always, they left the club together, went home together (to Thandi’s flat in the mine’s neighboring town), and could hardly wait to rid themselves of their clothes before making vigorous (and very satisfying) love together. They had woken early the next morning, entwined and totally relaxed. Coincidentally Andries was only due on shift early the next morning, and Thandi was off for the whole weekend. It was the most natural thing to do, it seemed, for Thandi to take Andries in her car to his bachelor quarters at the mine, where he packed a bag and a few bits and pieces – like his bedside lamp, his clock radio alarm, his shaving mirror – then for him to ride his motorcycle following Thandi back to her apartment. They raced along – the both knew what they were going to do when they got there! Only nine hours after first meeting, they had become a couple, and shared a deliciously greasy breakfast of fried eggs and sausages together; both were ravenous after last night’s bedroom gymnastics, and besides they had to build energy for the hours which still lay ahead.

And they talked. At first there was not much to it – light-hearted banter and chatter of two excited people still washed in the wonder of this chance encounter; and pondering, perhaps, if there was going to be more of it. The ‘it’ had been decidedly enjoyable – and they talked about that with a candor that surprised them both. This was a new level of intimacy for Andries especially. In his previous encounters – and he had

had a fair quota of them – he had never felt the need to have a post sexual episode follow-up meeting, except for the occasional ego-driven question of ‘Was that good for you?’ (‘Did I perform well enough?’ would have been a better way of putting it) and after that conversation usually moved onto other things. Thandi – which was very different for him – was enthusiastic about the discussion, almost jubilant. She had really enjoyed their coupling, she held nothing back in praising his performance, and of telling him in some glee how she had felt the pleasure she was giving him. Then the conversation had moved quite swiftly to another level; and suddenly came an outpouring from Thandi, from her depths – a release for her, this unique opportunity of telling this rewarding partner of the shadows lurking deep inside; which he had helped to lighten. Until now, this lovely, lovely girl with so much to give had been imprisoned by her own evil dragons. As they talked – and as their healthy passion matured into an intensely deep love – the more they realized: this must never, never end.

Andries dressed, walked down to his old, but trusty, motorbike and set off along the road to Nkuti, watching the sun breaking the horizon over to his left. What he didn’t see was the man standing next to the trees across from Thandi’s apartment block. As Andries rode away, the man shifted his sling bag from one shoulder to the other and crossed the road, slipping into the entrance Andries had just left.

Chapter 3

Instinctively Bombi knew this was a bad one. That first rumbling tremor had been followed by three more, the sound like the shriek of an express train, encompassing himself and his men – from above, the sides, below. Standing still was a good option, but not a lasting solution. He turned to his men.

“We must get back to the main shaft; now, quickly. Let’s speak to Ertjies. Find out if...” There was another sound, a harsh, grinding roar rolling up the slope ahead of them, the lights flickered and wavered. The sound stopped.

Bombi barked out the orders: “We’re going back! Let’s do this quickly and safely – no running! Keep all your kit with you, and stay together. You guys go, go, and lead from your end!”

The directives were clipped and concise; the men responded swiftly, their long months and years of training controlling the welling panic within them. Get to a secure place. Get communications. Assess the damage – then build a recovery plan – that was what the safety manual said. That was what they were doing. There was good reason to return to the tunnel assembly area. From there lay escape to the surface; in the ‘cage’ or lift which could carry sixty men – if it was running

– or along a tortuous adit if it wasn't. There was also access to a mini-communication center with phone and radio contact with the surface and other similar comms units at each of the different levels of the mine. Also, and this was top of Bombi's mind as he hurried along behind his team, anxiously herding them forward, at the shaft at this level was a Proto Station – a steel container well stocked with the full array of high-tech equipment used by mine rescue units whenever they were called on. Bombi, himself a fully-qualified Proto team leader, was certain there would be a need for these vital items today. As his men determinedly settled into a cracking pace which was just below a trot, Bombi tried to analyze the exact source of the frightening noise. Despite the tensions around him, he couldn't prevent himself thinking about recent strange happenings in the mine. Could there be something bad behind today's scare – worse even than the horrible potential damage and death, which could come from a natural disaster? Was there an intervention here, like just days before, down at the new stope? He himself had seen evidence there of what could have been a sabotage attempt – could today be a continuation?

Working on the development of a new stope was the thing the men hated most. It was you, your wits, strength and the determination of the team to survive, pitted against the forces of the earth as it clung to its secrets. Every minute was anxious. Every movement hard.

You were at the front, digging into earth and rock that had never, ever since the beginning of time, been disturbed before. It was an eerie thought and every man there knew that it was like disturbing the spirits of the earth gods, moving things that shouldn't be moved, taking out the heart of the earth, physically cutting and chopping, torturing and hurting it, turning it, wrenching it to give of itself. And every spadeful of earth resented being touched, debased and abused. The earth was like a shy virgin desperately trying to keep herself covered,

unwilling to give herself up, naked and exposed to the lustful eyes of men.

But then, once disturbed, once that virginity was exposed, all shyness disappeared. The earth held in its grasp huge forces and strengths just waiting to be released. From that moment forwards it demanded your complete attention and respect. At the slightest lapse of your concentration, it would burst out at you as if to prove its superiority over the indignations thrust upon it and its anger at being rudely woken from the sleep of millennia. It would always have a trick up its sleeve. Water. Rock. Clay. Gravel. Faults. Dikes. And then there were times when there was nothing else, no promise of ore, just soft barren earth or endless bare rock. No mineral would be found, or worse, a promising seam would suddenly just disappear, the minerals it contained simply petering out as if they were never there in the first place. One minute you were working where there was definitely some reason to be, the next you may as well be digging for dirt in a dustbin for all the good it was doing. But always the earth lay waiting, biding its time to catch the unwary, to make sure you knew who the boss was, who could tame whom. And foolish be the man who believed he could be master over the earth and bend it to his will, forcing it to give up its riches. No, the earth was truly an unwilling mistress just waiting for its moment to get its own back, to grab you by the balls, to crush your tender little human bones like soft slugs in its dark embrace.

The first work in a new seam was long and arduous. The engineers and rock mechanics studied every little piece of the ground, laying out their plans before the drilling could be done, hundreds of core samples taken, seismic readings completed and finally the budget approved by the Board. The men (and one woman) who no longer worked in the field but sat in their big air-conditioned offices, were the ones who got to decide whether to spend the bucks, whether

this seam would yield the goods to make them and their shareholders richer still. But all of that took place above ground, sometimes miles away from the bush where men would work in the heat and sun, finding the best places to bring in the trucks carrying huge heavy equipment, where to start the drilling, how to get the giant machines in place. Often they had to use bulldozers first to fight a roadway through rocky sand or thick bush so that they could bring everything else in. They would knock together a few makeshift shelters where the laborers would sleep and live with some protection from the elements and they would somehow tow in caravans for the engineers, geologists and technologists. They had to truck in everything they would need, often for weeks at a time, all their food and sometimes even water for both for drinking and for washing. And all the while, they worked like slaves setting up their equipment, building the platforms, slowly erecting the huge drills that would send their probing fingers down far into the ground to bring up the reluctant core samples of earth, clay and – hopefully – ore-bearing rock. This was where the geologists came into their own; reading the samples like other people read fine print on insurance documents. The fat round cylinders of earth material were laid out side by side in rows on especially made racks, until they looked like the pages of some prehistoric book made from rock, hieroglyphics to be pondered over, explained, deciphered and written down.

It was these samples that showed where the dikes and valleys lay deep underground, where the likelihood of finding riches was greatest or least. The samples were drilled on a grid of one core to every thirty meters, so even then no-one could be completely sure what lay beneath the surface, not until they actually went down into the ground itself.

But based on what the geologists and scientists hypothesized the Board made the decisions that would eventually send men

down to depths that defied the natural order of things. They would have the final say.

“This is where the next descent will begin, here at this point in the wild.” So it was decreed and the engineers, rock mechanics, blasters, tunnellers, mine managers and shift bosses would be shown the prints, huge blue-gray sheets of printed paper marked out in hundreds of little squares, each one indicating another piece of ground to be conquered and plucked out of the earth.

Even before the drilling was done, seismic measurements had been completed to give a geophysical picture of what lay beneath the surface. Giant testing machines each weighing several tons and looking like grotesque pre-historic monsters in the veld, were set up after endless effort to get them into just the right position. Their giant steel ‘legs’ stomp down hitting the earth with tremendous force and sending vibrations deep down into the ground. It was these vibrations that were electronically recorded to read what lay below. Rock sent the signals bouncing back, sand absorbed them, and so a computerized picture could be drawn of what lay below the surface. In more recent times the seismic testing had grown even more sophisticated, using small explosives set at regular intervals in shallow holes about two meters deep to create the shocks which were then picked up by geophones every fifteen meters. These computer-drawn pictures were later compared with the drilling samples until what should be – but certainly was not always – an ‘accurate’ underground map, began to emerge.

And all the while the expectation would be building on the mine and in the nearby towns, the anticipation of a new shaft opening and with it the opportunities for new jobs, more money, a longer ‘life of mine’ (the years the mine would continue to produce) bringing greater security to everyone. Renewed hope and optimism for the future. But before the

plans could be completed and the work could begin, there were hundreds of tasks to be completed. Every part of the new shaft had to be plotted and planned, the air vents designed, the angles of the shafts worked out, vertical or incline, access by vertical shaft or by moving chair lifts, the distances, the size of the haulages, the positioning of the shaft head, the logistics of accommodation, change houses, stores, workshops, conveyors, transport. The lists went on and on.

Then came the momentous occasion of the first blast on the surface. This marked the moment of birth, the time when the ground would be blown apart to mark the spot where the new shaft would begin its descent into the nether world. It was always an awesome moment, one which was covered in an array of superstitions and beliefs. It was symbolically the official start of the shaft, and was usually celebrated by a special function that included countless blessings, dances, incantations and songs, depending on the importance and size of the shaft being developed. The first blast was set up on the exact spot where a new pathway into the bowels of the earth would be opened up, dug out, used and abused. It marked the place where men would one day descend into the mine, their fates in the hands of the earth gods, their fortunes dependent on what those gods would give up, yielding to the forces of dynamite and drill, muscle and might. They might also find themselves yielding to forces of Good or Evil – the riches that would emerge from this very spot could be spent with good purpose; but just as easily, it could attract those who wanted to steal, or manipulate, or corrupt.

The first blast for the new Nkuti south shaft had been a huge affair, planned for months in advance of the actual event itself. Luxury buses were hired to bring dignitaries from Head Office and from some of the other Group mines. The chairman, Bok Worrall, had presided over the whole affair and various officials had been invited along. The government Inspector of

Mines, the safety officers, the President of the Chamber of Mines and even the Deputy Minister of Minerals had all been there, along with such labor union honorables as the president of the National Union of Mineworkers (known as NUM), the regional chairmen of the other unions, as well as the mayors of no less than three of the nearby towns. Two huge marquees had been set up in the veld standing out for miles around and attracting a great deal of interest and speculation. A wedding perhaps, or some sports gathering? Ah no, the new shaft at Nkuti! All the surrounding communities were involved, the school children brought in to sing, their choirs immaculately dressed in neat navy blue and gray uniforms. Teams of tribal dancers practiced for weeks beforehand, perfecting their steps and brandishing their *knobkierries* in wild abandon as they prepared for the festivities.

On the day of the official opening, a row of glowing braais sent up delicious fat-is-flavor smells as about thirty sheep and big joints of beef were slowly flamed, smoked, and basted over the heat. Dozens of trestle tables and hundreds of white plastic chairs were brought out and serving points were set up in a huge circle. Teams of women rushed around preparing mountains of food and drink. There were huge cauldrons of pap and tomato sauce, supplied by Ma and her kitchen workers, giant galvanized iron baths filled with fresh cabbage, potato and carrot salad and veritable mountains of fresh bread rolls. Ma made sure all the dignitaries and the hundreds of miners who were invited to witness this momentous occasion would definitely not go hungry. Every worker from Nkuti was invited, the only exceptions being those few who would be keeping things going elsewhere on the mine on this particular day.

Andries, Kalifo and Bombi, along with the General Manager of the mine, Ertjies Green, kept a watchful eye over everything. Ertjies, who had been General Manager of Nkuti Mine for nine years now, was universally known by his nickname rather than

his given name of Anton Green. Peas are green, and the Afrikaans word for peas is *ertjies*. Somewhere back in his school days someone had used the name and it had just stuck. Forever. Indeed, probably only four or five people in the whole of Nkuti even knew the name Anton as being Ertjies' real name. Even his mother had given up on calling him Anton and so Ertjies it was to young and old.

The men had prepared the explosives for the 'first blast' using a small amount of plastic primer and piling quite a few wheelbarrow loads of stones and sand on top so it would make a suitably spectacular eruption but send only harmless dirt and dust into the flying air, all to look impressive and give the guests something to 'ooh' and 'aah' about without actually doing any real damage, particularly to the tents or people. The real work on the new shaft would begin later, once all the brass had gone and the men were left to get on with the job.

That first blast had been two years ago and now Kalifo and his team were the ones pioneering, digging into a new rock face, extending the length of the stope meter by meter, gradually creating a new tunnel in the earth, a deeper darker hole than ever before as they went in search of the riches the earth so reluctantly gave up.

Kalifo had been a crew captain for a year now though by rights, he should have had the position a long time ago but in the archaic system of the mines, black men had been precluded from holding senior positions. Those harsh laws were now outdated which was one of the better changes of recent times, though it was yet to benefit everyone. He and his team had been working on advancing the new tunnel face for the past six weeks, the work slow and heavy. Every rock, every piece of earth had to be blasted, loosened, moved and cleared to make the intrusion ever bigger, deeper.

Of the twelve of them in the team, three had their 'tickets' – blasting certificates and exams passed in some of the more

intricate systems of the mining they were immersed in every day. Ironically, some of the men who didn't have their tickets knew more than any examiner could ever even dream up, about rock and earth, its ways and habits, its movements, and pressures, its favors and its moods. But they didn't have their tickets because they were illiterate when they had started mining, or had barely mastered the necessary writing skills needed for the maths and theory tests so even though they were experts in their field they remained at the lowest ranks, A- and B-level workers with little chance of promotion despite their experience which was worth its weight – literally – in gold or even platinum. They were also the men you wanted with you when things got tough, which was really all the time. It was just the degree of toughness that varied day by day.

On one of those days, Bombi and Kalifo had assembled their respective teams and gone down on the Number 1 shift, the early morning start, getting up at 4 am to be ready to descend underground by the time the shifts changed at 5 am. After the long descent with all the other early teams, they still faced an hour's hard trudge. Bombi's team peeled off to where they were doing development work on the far deeps, while Kalifo and his group made their way down endless tunnels and makeshift stairs to reach the end of the tunnel where the rock face stood, waiting for them, grim and unforgiving. Here, unlike the developed and mined levels which were all clean, rails laid, sidewalls and hanging walls washed with limestone, electric cables in, air vents working, water channeled off and steady daily progress being made on the stopes, it was dark and desperate. This was where the mine extended only bit by bit, day by day and night by night, every hard-fought meter being excavated by men both rough and tough. Every piece of earth was reluctant to be moved from its resting place, refusing to budge until it was forced to and then always ready waiting to release its pent-up energy, to burst out of its resting place

into your face. These were the rocks that had lain there, safe and dormant for millions of years until today. And today, on this shift, it could be the day the earth said enough and just spewed forth tumbling rocks, sand and water, blocking their way, or rolling great rocks at them as if to say, get out, I am the beast you dare not disturb.

As they wrestled and struggled sweating in the hot airless space they often had to stop, doubled over in the effort to get enough oxygen into exhausted lungs. Sometimes they crawled on their bellies to make their way between ledges, the overhangs from the roof wall rocks above them almost meeting up with the floor in places. At other times, the ground suddenly gave way creating its own cavernous holes just waiting for the unwary to sink down into them. It was treacherous ground.

Snaking along in the new section with them was a myriad of pipes and cables, bringing air, power and materials to the face. The electric cables stretched along hundreds of meters to power the pneumatic drills and a few lights, which seemed to try in vain to illuminate the black area, found little to reflect back from. How feeble the effort of those bulbs seemed when every shard of light was absorbed by the dense darkness giving back nothing from its deep cracks and crevices. Instead, the light was never more than a faint glow always seeming on the edge of disappearing altogether. It was like trying to light up the depths of darkness, flickering and transitory. The minute you turned away, moving the light elsewhere, the place where it had been returned to its state of pitch darkness as if there had never been light there. The reflective strips of material on the men's overalls shone eerily in the dark when they caught the light from the bulbs or from each other's head lamps, making it look as if a field of glow worms was busy working down there, green, yellow, orange; the luminous colors at least giving them some comfort knowing they were close to other human beings. Sometimes one could not see the actual person,

just the movement of the beams and the reflector strips. Even sounds got absorbed by the density of the rock around them so that the drilling and banging, clanging of metal was dampened too, adding to the surreal surroundings.

Water dripped everywhere oozing out of the walls and overhangs, looking for the lowest levels, seeping, running rivulets and drops. Their boots were never dry, the water always threatening to overwhelm them and challenging the pumps, which could never stop working, draining the water away from the rock face and battling to keep one step ahead of the cold streaming flow. Occasionally they would move some rock only to have a new stream of water pouring out in their faces threatening to wash all the work away, along with men and machinery, in one fell swoop. And the puddles underfoot were sometimes hiding a deep pool or hidden broken rocks, ready to trip the unwary.

Despite the constant wet, it was hot and airless too; close and muggy so that the men sweated freely beneath their overalls, until they were as sodden on the inside as on the outside of their clothes. Hot, sticky, wet and uncomfortable while working often bent nearly double beneath the narrow ledges, always working their way forward into the new development.

And then, just a week before the tremors and shudders, working on the new stope Kalifo heard one of his team curse loudly against an already rowdy background.

“Shit.” The expletive came from one of the men battling with a long hose-like pipe and it was in a tone that made Kalifo stop his own struggle with a drill for the moment.

“What’s it?”

Words were not wasted down here.

“It’s this air hose. Somewhere it must be kinked or blocked. There is nothing coming through, no air at all.”

One or two of the others stopped what they were doing.

These air pipes were vital down here, where they could easily run out of breathable air, or any air at all for that matter. Because they were working on the advance, the front of a tunnel that had not previously existed, there were not yet any air ways to force fresh air into their level, nor were there any adits built yet to the surface where they would eventually be bringing the ore out.

The air hose pumped a life-giving stream of almost pure oxygen and often, when someone was near to being overcome by the lack of fresh air, combined with the effects of the high humidity and heat, and loss of sweat and salt, it had saved them from passing out or worse. Without the air hose, they couldn't carry on and if they didn't get on today they were not going to make their team's target of new ground cleared and none of them would get their incentive bonus for the week. As if that weren't enough they would also have a hard time from the shifts that followed them as they in turn would also not be able to meet their own targets. The teams worked in tandem and they were currently all targeting a record development for the month.

Kalifo thought quickly. He did some rough calculations measuring what he guessed was the amount of time they could count on having enough air to breath in the area and the time it would possibly take to locate and fix the problem. If they could find the source of the problem and sort it out in the next thirty minutes, they could stay and get on with the next drill and blast. He knew he might be cutting it fine but there wasn't much choice so it was worth the gamble. He wished that one of the engineers was near but they were all working further back with a small group of men, busy extending the water pumping system to try and alleviate the ever deepening pools and streams of water. They would be unaware of the air problem where they were.

"John." Kalifo spoke to one of the older hands, a big fellow,

a Pondo who had long worked the mines, and who wasn't afraid of the darkness down here in the deeps. "You go and take Darky with you and work back along the line to see if you can find the kink or whatever the hell the matter with this hose is. We will wait here for twenty minutes, so if you haven't found it by then go to one of the safety bays and call for the kibble from there. Then give us a call on the safety bay walkie talkie. Take a tap-tap with you just in case the talkies aren't working for any reason. We will know if you want us to come out and join you. One tap every three seconds means all is OK, otherwise use the usual emergency SOS and we will come out like jack rabbits."

The tap-tap is an ingenious simple method of communicating underground using a hollow pipe which reverberates and echoes uncannily in that confined space when tapped against other metal, especially piping. It had saved more than one man's life down there, it certainly beat the hell out of radio and telephones in certain situations as it couldn't break. It just depended on finding metal, something which was not usually too difficult a task in a shaft.

"The rest of you take a break for now."

Kalifo knew better than to expect them to work while there was no chance of getting a gulp of fresh air. Wearily they downed tools but none of them could settle down and relax. For a start, there was nowhere dry or flat to sit and secondly everyone knew they would not be staying there for long if the oxygen lead was not back in operation quickly.

John and Darky gathered up a few tools they might need and, checking their safety belts and lamps, set off the way they had come, into the darkness lit only by their own head lamps and the occasional light bulb dangling down from the roof every twenty meters or so.

A rope runs along the sidewalls of all tunnels, with a marker every ten meters. All markers were designed to feel rather

than look like arrow shaped knobs, pointing in the same direction, always pointing in the direction of an exit, towards safety and towards emergency bays where there were first-aid kits, extra batteries for their safety packs, emergency stores, radio phones and tap-tap pieces of metal. A man could feel his way along any tunnel in total darkness as long as he kept his hand on the safety rope. Kalifo paced around the development area, automatically going through the process of feeling for the safety ropes, making sure they were in place, even though he knew that between them they had safety lamps on their hard hats that would last for many more hours.

Lifting the oxygen hose, John and Darky ran their hands along the first few meters of it. The heavy hose was made from thick rubber tubing covered in strong nylon webbing that protected it from the possible cuts and gashes it could sustain as it lay snaking its way into the stope. As they moved along the men lifted the hose, trying to separate it from the other cables and wires lying on the floor and checking carefully as they moved forwards. Darky laid the piping down again behind them making sure it fell back into a fairly straight line.

They worked mostly in silence, making their way as quickly as they could through the treacherous water, over broken ground, avoiding the heavy ropes and cables curling along the ground all the while lifting the next section of the hose, checking it and letting it fall as another piece was lifted free of the mud and water. It was slow hard work but they knew what to do and did not waste their breath on talking about it.

Strong wooden roof supports, mine props, had been forced into the narrow spaces to help give the newly excavated haulage some protection from falls of ground. Later, when the area was cleared and cleaned the roof bolts would be drilled and fitted, but for now, the huge bluegum beams had to do. The men were careful not to disturb any of the supports as they made their way onwards, hauling and checking the hose.

Just as he was beginning to think they would have to give up on their search and call for the others, Darky found it, a break in the hose where the life-giving compressed air-oxygen mix was leaking out.

“Here it is,” he said, “The air is coming out here, look at this.” He held out the hose showing a gaping cut in it, the edges of the cut smooth and even as if it had been sliced open with a sharp blade. Even as he held it, he was taking a deep breath of the refreshing mix before holding it out for John.

“How on earth..?” John did not finish the sentence. They were both thinking the same thing that it looked deliberate but then you never could tell down here. Sometimes the strangest things happened; sharp pieces of metal could slice through a pipe by accident, even one as strong as this.

“OK, hold that end of the pipe straight and let’s pull the two sides together.”

The two men struggled with the heavy hose pulling it from both sides to take the pressure off and give them enough purchase on it to force the two sides of the cut together, a bit like joining two pieces of skin. It was not going to be possible to make a permanent repair down here without the proper tools to secure the joint and keep the pieces together so that the lifesaving oxygen would flow onwards again reliably.

“I’ll call Kalifo on the line,” John said, “and tell him we can’t fix the hose so they had better come out.” The line phone was a direct old-fashioned walkie talkie set up between safety bays. It worked much like those children’s toys where you could talk to each other from different rooms with a wire or string carrying the voice along.

“If you need air you have it right there in your hands,” John managed to tease. “Just open it up and take a pull. I will carry on ahead and call for the kibble and you wait here for the others. They should be here in less than ten minutes as they will be moving much faster than we did.”

John set off once again in the direction of the exit, hurrying now to get to the lift shaft where they could alert the banks man on the surface and get a kibble sent down. The proper lift cages would only be fitted when the new levels were completely opened up and in the meantime, the men were hoisted up and down in the giant open buckets that were used to carry endless loads of cables, tools and equipment down as well as to move men up and down.

While he waited John listened to the banging and clattering of the heavy cables as they began to move, one side running upwards as the other came down. He was unhappy about the whole episode, wondering how the hose could have been severed like that, so neatly it looked as if it had been cut almost in half.

At last the kibble came thundering down, its big round shape looming out of the distance. They signaled to the surface that it was there and just then heard the sound of voices in the distance as Kalifo and the rest of the men came tramping steadily along. At last, they could make out the pin-pricks of their lamps bobbing up and down in the semi darkness, slowly growing bigger as they got closer.

“All here?” John was relieved to see Kalifo as well as his companions. It had been worrying leaving them behind at the new face without air. Darky joined up with the rest of the group and John took Kalifo to show him the sliced hose. There was a tense moment of silence as they examined the damage. There was no discussion – both knew what they were thinking.

“OK let’s get going then.”

They helped each other over the high sides of the bucket-like kibble clambering in clumsily in their boots and overalls, until the last one was hauled in over the side by many willing hands.

They rode up in silence watching the sides of the shaft slide past, almost touching as the open kibble went smoothly

up towards the surface. Nobody spoke until they were once more on solid ground. Then Kalifo said to John, "I want to see you two as soon as you have showered and changed. I'll go ahead to report to Ertjies. I'm sure he will want to see us along with the engineer and we will need a full report from you guys. *Ja*, I know it is a pain, but the safety officers will also need a detailed account of the whole thing and of course, everyone will want to try and find out exactly how that happened – if it was an accident – so they can prevent it happening again. Damn dangerous," he added as an afterthought.

Thandi heard the click of the door latch as it opened – had Andries come back? She grinned as she rolled over in the bed reaching out for him in the early dawn light; and then froze in terror when she realized this was someone else. And he held a gun, with both hands, pointing straight at her as he walked rapidly across the small bedroom to press its muzzle against her bare chest. Hard.

"Don't make a sound. If you do, I'll kill you." The voice was calm, almost conversational and absolutely convincing.

"Get dressed. Quickly. We're going to the mine."

He stopped pressing the gun against her, and stepped back two paces. Clipped movements. Practiced. All the time knowing exactly what he was going to do next. Firm, in control. Hurriedly she reached for clothes; feeling her way – unable to take her eyes off his. She pulled on a T-shirt, panties, jeans, from her bedside chair. He had ignored her nudity, which actually heightened the icy fear she felt within. This wasn't going to be an assault, or a sexual attack, or a robbery; it was something much worse. A kidnapping. Involving the mine. Andries? That was her only connection to the mine.

When she was dressed, he tossed her a pair of handcuffs, telling her how to ratchet the one bangle onto her left wrist. Then he moved close to her, yanked that arm behind her back and brought the other arm around – hurting her with the swiftness of the movement – and cuffed that wrist into the second bangle. Then he stepped to her cupboard, opened the door and pulled out her long black coat – had he known it was there? – and draped that over her shoulders, buttoning it at the collar and pulling the belt tightly around her middle. She was effectively trussed and very manageable with one hand – which was how he steered her out of the flat, down the steps to the front hall and out of the door. The whole process – from the moment he opened the door until he pushed her into the passenger seat of the car parked around the corner – had taken just three minutes.

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