

Chapter 1

A bright flash illuminated the mine cave in which Dramok Misru had been guiding the tour of Itga's general operations director. Startled, Dramok Ospar wheeled around to find the source of the blinding light.

The mine wall that he'd stepped away from barely five seconds ago, where he'd admired a thick vein of platinum, disappeared in a thunderous blast. Machinery and the half dozen men vanished as well, swallowed in the black billow of dust and stone.

The young Dramok had no time to register an explosion had occurred. Ospar had the strange sensation of an invisible force lifting him off his feet. An instant later, a giant warm hand shoved him towards the middle of the cavern. The stone walls, ceiling, and floor shook violently around him as he flew, sending rock pellets down on him in a stinging shower. He heard the thunder of larger chunks pummeling down in the wake of the explosion's boom.

Ospar winced a second before he landed, sure he would be dashed to bits. He had the good fortune of not being thrown far, however. The Dramok found himself sliding ahead of the shockwave across the well-smoothed floor with its marbled finish. He instinctively curled into a ball, covering his head as best he could with his arms.

For several seconds, all was chaos. The whole of the earth rumbled beneath and around him, as if rousing in poor temper from deep slumber. The bright work lights that had been installed in the cavern blinked on and off, making Ospar's surroundings strobe. He peeked to see stone continuing to fall in a curious stop-motion manner. Then the lights strengthened again, coming back to dimmed power as the shudders eased and the grumbling giant quieted.

Ospar remained curled and still for a few moments. He inventoried his body to make sure he could still feel everything, and that what he felt wasn't pain. He noted stinging hurts on his face, forearms, and hands, the parts of him where the skin had been exposed to the shrapnel. Otherwise, he detected no severe agony and no numbness. The cave-in—he assumed it was a cave-in and not an explosion as it had first seemed—had done him no real harm.

The first scream sounded and echoed off the cavern walls.

Ospar leapt to his feet. He saw the man who'd ended up next to him, the mine supervisor Misru. The elder Dramok blinked confusedly at his surroundings as he shakily came to his knees. A thin line of blood ran from his scalp, the red shockingly bright against the gray dirt covering his face.

Ospar bent and took the other man by the arm. "Are you all right, Misru?"

"I—I think so, Director." He gazed up at Ospar uncertainly. "There aren't supposed to be explosives in here."

Ospar dismissed the man's confusion, peering around at the confusion of massive slabs of fallen rock and broken machinery. The conveyor belt that carried ore back to the refinery was a twisted skeleton of metal. The sifting machine that fed it once the precious metal had been extracted was a crushed hulk. Black dust still sifted down, making the room appear cloudy and dim. The scream he had heard had not been repeated. He couldn't see anything moving except that shifting curtain of semi-darkness. Another threatening rumble sounded, and a slight tremor rose from the floor up his legs.

Someone else cried out. "Help! Help!"

Without thought for his own safety, Ospar ignored the warning mutterings of the damaged earth. He dashed towards the twisted metal carcass of what had been a digging machine. He jumped over the larger pieces of fallen rock to reach the vehicle, which had been knocked onto its side. The operator was nowhere to be seen, but Ospar was sure that was where the call had come from.

He was right. The worker, his bloody face twisted in pain, was pinned beneath the vehicle from the thighs down. The trapped Nobek shivered. The mine was indeed chilly, certainly far cooler than the springtime warmth come lately to the mountain regions of the Wenza Territory, but Ospar feared the worker was going into shock. He gripped the injured man's shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. "Hold on. We'll get you out of this."

The digger was huge, too heavy for Ospar to lift. He surveyed the room for help, his gaze falling on the other digger, which had been working another wall. It didn't look damaged, and its driver chose that moment to stagger around it into Ospar's view. The man looked dazed, but not hurt. Other than Ospar and the still-kneeling Misru, he was the only one moving.

How many had been in the cavern as Ospar was being shown around? A dozen? Two? Most of them had been standing where the thickest of the rubble now piled. Sickness roiled in Ospar's belly.

*Concentrate on the ones you can see. The ones you can help.*

"Hey! Dramok Heca," Ospar called, glad he had a good memory for faces and names. "Are you hurt?"

"I—I think so. Is that you, Director Ospar?" Heca stared at him uncertainly though the dust was finally beginning to clear the air. "What happened? I thought I heard an explosion."

The man at Ospar's feet, Nobek Patlen, groaned. He looked on the verge of unconsciousness. Misru was only now getting to his feet, still looking dazed and lost.

Ospar concentrated on the most important matter. "It's not important what exactly happened, not at this moment. Nobek Patlen is pinned and I fear gravely injured. Can you use your digger to get this one off of him?"

Heca's eyes cleared to hear his co-worker had been hurt. He hurried over and looked at the situation with a practiced eye, his concentration jarring for only a moment as he recognized the trouble the other man was in. "I think I can pull it off him. Hang on, Patlen."

Heca rushed back to the intact digger and jumped in the cab. A second later it fired up, its drone surprisingly quiet for such a large machine. It still drowned out the growing chorus of moans from other unseen victims.

"Get ready to yank him away in case I lose hold on it!" Heca shouted to Ospar.

Ospar squatted behind Patlen, grabbing hold of the now-unconscious Nobek by the armpits. He set his feet and braced as Heca brought the digger close.

Half a dozen men wearing the red-trimmed tan security uniforms of Itga Mining burst in through a gaping tunnel opening. At the head of the group was Nobek Talu, Itga's chief of security. His intense gaze fell on Ospar immediately.

"Director Ospar! What happened here?" Talu dashed over. He hurdled the slabs of fallen stone with more ease than Ospar had, though he was more than twice the Dramok's age.

"I think there might have been an explosion. We've got to get this man some help."

Heca had gotten his digger in position. Talu shouldered Ospar aside. "Let me and my men deal with this. Stand back, please."

Another Nobek, his ferocious but handsome face one of intent, took Ospar's place at Talu's side. Itga's director of general operations had no choice but to step back and watch as

Heca threaded his machine's massive drill piece through the top of the broken digger's cab. The drill rose, lifting up the metal carcass of its twin to free Patlen's blood-soaked legs. The machine wobbled uncertainly in the other one's grip.

"Quickly!" Talu shouted. He and the younger Nobek pulled the fallen man clear an instant before the busted digger rocked loose and crashed back down to the stone floor.

A rumble sounded, as if in protest. The floor beneath Ospar's feet shifted, and a sheet of dirt and pebbles flowed from ceiling.

The creases in Talu's brow drove deeper as he handed Patlen off to another member of his team. "Get him to the medical department right away and call in emergency services as well. The rest of you, let's get everyone evacuated in here and the next two caverns. Nobek Jol, see that Director Ospar gets to safety right away."

Ospar took the safety of Itga's miners seriously. He was quick to protest, "I can help."

Talu gave him a level look that managed to be polite and yet said don't-fuck-with-me at the same time. "With all due respect, Director, leave or Jol will carry you out. I'm not about to explain to the owners why I allowed their nephew to remain in the way of danger one second longer than was necessary."

Ospar scowled. Talu had been with Itga almost since its start. He was more often in the background than not. Even so, Talu had been well-known presence for most of the young Dramok's life. He knew the security head would make good on his promise to have someone unceremoniously lug him out of the mine.

The man he'd nodded to was the one who'd helped him pull Patlen out of danger. Nobek Jol looked all too ready to obey his supervisor, his purple eyes riveted on Ospar, hands flexing as if ready to grab the director and haul him out.

Ospar gave in, but only because arguing would slow Talu's rescue effort. It didn't keep him from scowling and marching away from the scene. He paused to wrap his arm around the shattered-looking Misru's waist to lend support, though the mine's supervisor seemed to be getting his wits again.

Ospar could practically feel his unwanted security escort on his heels. Like most Nobeks, Jol was silent. It didn't matter. Ospar had known his share of the deadly breed. He had every confidence that Talu wouldn't hire any man who lacked certain skills. He didn't have to hear or see the man to know he was right there.

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Jol watched with interest as Ospar examined the badly shaken Misru's injuries. The mine supervisor's aide Imdiko Rost hovered over them, but the Nobek paid him little mind. He found it was easy to dismiss all others with Ospar in the room.

Itga Mining's director of operations and the nephew of the company's owners was usually a handsome man. Jol had seen Ospar from time to time at the headquarters, and knew the Dramok for the easy grin he usually wore. Charming, many said. A bully, his detractors claimed.

Right then, good looks and warm grin were nowhere in evidence. Concern filled the director's face, or at least what Jol could see of it. Dust and soot from the explosion had turned Ospar's visage dark gray in places, flat-out black in others.

"I'm all right, director. I just had my brain rattled for a moment," Misru insisted. His face was just as filthy as Ospar's, smeared where they'd tried to wipe away the blood. He perched on the edge of his desk. His balance wavered every now and then, as if caught in spells of dizziness.

Jol couldn't help but glance at the vid commendation hanging on the wall behind Misru. It declared that Itga's platinum mine had gone seven years without an accident. The streak was ended, it seemed.

Then again, what had happened minutes ago might not qualify as an accident. Perhaps Misru's record would be allowed to stand as uninterrupted.

"You were out of it for more than a moment." Ospar's blue-purple eyes were vibrant with his face darkened from dirt. "The cut on your head isn't bad, and I think you're only in shock. It would still be best if medical personnel looks you over to be sure." He turned to the aide. The hovering Imdiko looked so clean compared to his two begrimed bosses that he damned near sparkled. "Rost, the emergency personnel who are here are busy with the injured being brought out of the mine. I doubt they'll be able to attend the supervisor. Would you take Misru to the hospital yourself?"

The Imdiko took Misru's arm without a moment's hesitation. "Absolutely, Director."

Misru still seemed slow on the uptake, blinking owlishly at Ospar. "But the reports...and...and...the men..."

Ospar patted his shoulder and smiled. His teeth were blinding, set in all that blackened skin. "I'll see to everything here until Rost gets back. In fact, I don't want you back on the job until tomorrow, and only if the doctors clear you for it. Anything Rost and I can't handle will wait. The mine is closed until an investigation can be completed."

Either Dramok Misru was one of those who subscribed to the belief that the director's word was law, or he was too shaken to argue. Having read the man's file prior to accompanying Director Ospar's entourage to the platinum mine, Jol was inclined to assume it was the latter reason. He decided Ospar was doing the right thing to send him to get checked out.

Rost wasted no time coaxing Misru out of the office. As the door shut behind them, Ospar seemed to note Jol's presence for the first time. He scowled, and a flash of temper lit those brilliant eyes.

His tone accusing, Ospar said, "You're still here, Nobek? I'd have thought you'd run back to where the real action is. Or are you incapable of anything more complicated than babysitting?"

A flare of anger lit inside Jol, one that if unleashed, would have been more than a match to the director's. However, Jol recognized Ospar's show of antagonism probably had a lot to do with nearly getting killed. It could be that the Dramok was frustrated that he was stuck in the office himself. He'd obviously wanted to help with the rescue efforts and had resented Talu sending him away. Jol experienced a sense of similar helplessness, playing bodyguard in a safe area rather than rendering aid to those who needed it.

Then again, Dramok Ospar had a reputation. Many accused him of being a bully when he didn't get his way, resorting to intimidation tactics when he couldn't charm situations to his satisfaction. Maybe he baited Jol, being a tyrant with no redeeming reason for it. It didn't matter. In the end, Jol worked for Itga, which meant he worked for its director of operations. He tamped down the flash of resentment, bowing to the chain of command much as Misru had. He kept his mouth shut.

When Jol didn't offer an answer, Ospar grew more annoyed. His voice rose. "Hello? Are you hearing me, Nobek?" The tone turned insulting, as if he instructed a child. "There is a mess in the mine. An accident has occurred. People may be under that rubble. Shouldn't you be down there, helping them?"

*Asshole.* At least Ospar's main concern was for the workers. Jol could forgive the man's rampant insolence in that light. And ignorance, considering the larger issue to be considered. Jol had been considering it the entire time Ospar fussed over Misru.

Cocking an eyebrow at the man, his one concession to dealing with the disrespect from his employer, Jol quietly answered, "There were a lot of men in there, weren't there?"

Ospar mocked him with a comically shocked expression. "It speaks! The creature can communicate. How amazing." He dropped the act and glared with disdain. "And yes, by my count there were at least a dozen men in there who could use a decently strong Nobek to pull them out. Why are you here?"

*Because Talu is thinking the same thing I am about that explosion.*

Instead of answering the director outright, Jol indulged his pique at the way he was being treated. He teased Ospar with the conclusion he'd come to. "There were almost two dozen workers in there with you. That's a lot of men for a mostly automated job, wouldn't you agree? But then, the site supervisors do like to put on a show for the director and owners when they come to visit. It looks so much more impressive when you have workers busily digging out ore and minerals."

Ospar scowled. "What in the ancestors' names are you talking about?"

Jol kept dangling tidbits at him, curious to see if the blowhard would catch on. "It was well known you'd be making a visit, Director. It's always a big deal when you make a scheduled stop in one of the mines, isn't it?"

"Of course. If you've got something to say, Nobek, I'd appreciate you doing so."

"How often are explosives used in mines? After the initial opening of a new chamber, that is?"

Ospar's eyes narrowed. Good, suspicion was finally beginning to occur to him. "Make your point."

"It's obvious why Misru trotted out a few experienced people he didn't need. He did it to impress you, to make the operation seem more notable. However, I'm sure he would never detonate anything just to show off to the heir of the Itga fortune. Especially when a blast might squash said heir under a ton of rock."

Ospar froze. He stared at Jol, his mouth hanging open. "You're saying that explosion was no accident. That I might have been targeted?"

At least the man was as sharp as Jol had been told. That was good. It might help Talu's security force keep him alive during office hours, if Jol's suspicions proved correct.

Jol told him, "I've heard you've made a few enemies in the past few months. Particularly Dramok Urt, owner of Pladon Industries? I'm very interested in seeing what the investigation into this incident digs up—no pun intended."

The space between Ospar's brows creased, driving the mine dust into darker lines. "Hold on a moment. I wasn't the only one in there. There were a lot of innocent men with me. Urt wouldn't dare—I mean—he couldn't."

Jol shrugged. He was again struck by how Ospar, rich and highly ranked, thought first of the others who'd been caught in the blast. Could a man be a jerk and possess a conscience at the same time?

The Nobek shared none of those thoughts. He addressed the matter of his favorite suspect in the suspicious explosion. "Just in case your competitor or anyone else would and could attack you in such a fashion, I think I'll stay around to be sure they don't."

Ospar stared at him, real distress pinching his features. Jol felt a twinge of sympathy for the man. It looked as if the director found it difficult to come to grips with his presence perhaps placing others in danger.

Maybe he wasn't such a jerk after all.