

Dramok Ospar, general operations director of Itga Mining, blinked at his companion. Dramok Misru was glowing with supernatural brilliance, his face growing brighter.

Not just Misru. A bright flash illuminated the entire cavern of the platinum mine. Startled, Ospar wheeled to find the source of the blinding light. The mine wall he'd stepped away from five seconds ago, where he'd admired a thick vein of platinum, disappeared in a thunderous blast. Machinery and over a dozen men vanished, swallowed in the black billow of dust and rocks. He stared in astonishment.

A blast of air streamed his shoulder-length hair back. Ospar had the strange sensation of an invisible force lifting him off his feet, of a giant warm hand shoving him through the air towards the middle of the cavern.

*What? What?*

The stone walls, ceiling, and floor shook violently around him as he flew. He was flung through a shower of rock pellets that stung his face. The thunder of larger chunks pummeled down in the wake of the explosion's boom, sending up a choking billow of dust.

*The floor!* It came up fast, rocketing towards him.

Ospar winced a second before he landed. The Dramok hit the floor ahead of the shockwave, thudding painfully. He slid across the once well-smoothed surface for about ten feet, plowing through debris. When he stopped, 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 about him, as if rousing in poor temper from deep slumber. The vivid work lights that had been installed in the cavern blinked on and off, strobing Ospar's surroundings. It made the stone seem to fall in stop-motion intervals.

*A blast. Cave-in! We're all going to die!*

On the heels of that panicked thought, the shaking stopped. The lights strengthened again, coming to dimmed power as the shudders eased and the grumbling giant quieted.

Ospar remained curled and motionless for a few moments, listening to the larger stones settle, the smaller ones still *pinging* down. Catching his breath. Counting his blessings. He was alive.

He inventoried his body to reassure himself he could still feel everything, and that what he felt wasn't pain. He noted burning 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 his first impression of an explosion—had done him no real harm.

A scream sounded and echoed off the cavern walls.

A surge of adrenaline responded to that agonized sound. Someone was hurt. Ospar leapt to his feet. He noticed Misru had ended up next to him, knocked across the room as the director had been. The elder Dramok blinked 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 features.

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

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

Ospar dismissed the man's confusion, peering at the mayhem of massive slabs of fallen rock and broken machinery. The conveyor belt that carried ore to the refinery was a twisted skeleton of metal. The sifting machine that fed it was a crushed hulk. Black dust sifted down, making the room appear cloudy and dim. The scream had not been repeated. He couldn't spot anything

moving except that shifting curtain of semi-darkness. Another threatening rumble sounded, and a slight tremor rose from the floor up his legs. Fear spiked, but he held his ground. Others were in here, somewhere.

Someone 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, towards the frantic cry. 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 emitted from.

He was right. The worker, his bloody face twisted in pain, was pinned beneath the vehicle from the thighs down. Ospar swallowed the stab of horror to see the blood, which was not confined just to the man's face. It was everywhere. This was bad.

*I'm in charge. This is my mine. This man is dependent on me. Don't fuck up.*

The thoughts helped settle Ospar, switching on the decision-making machine in his head. He stopped looking at the carnage and took in the situation as a whole, as the director of Itga Mining.

The trapped Nobek shivered. The mine was indeed chilly, far cooler than the springtime warmth come lately to the mountain regions of the Wenza Territory. However, Ospar feared the worker was going into shock. He whipped off his jacket and covered the injured man's torso with it, pausing long enough to grip his shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. "Hold on. We'll get you out of this."

The question was, how? The digger was huge, too heavy for Ospar to lift. His mind clicking through the possibilities, he surveyed the room for assistance. His gaze falling on the other digger, which had been working another wall. It didn't look damaged, and its driver chose that instant to stagger from behind it into Ospar's view. He looked dazed, but not hurt. Other than Ospar and the kneeling Misru, he was the only person 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 find. The men you can help. This one first. Manage this situation and then move on to the next.*

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

"I—I think not too badly. Is that you, Director Ospar?" Heca stared at him uncertainly though the dust was beginning to clear the air. "What happened? I thought I heard an explosion."

The man at Ospar's feet, Nobek Patlen, groaned. He teetered on the verge of unconsciousness. Misru was only now climbing to his feet, looking dazed and lost. No help there.

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

Heca's eyes cleared. He hurried over and gazed at the situation with a practiced eye, his concentration jarring for a flash as he recognized the trouble the other worker was in. "Mother of All!"

"Heca. Answer me. Can your machine pull this off him?"

The other Dramok responded to Ospar's calm but intense tone. "I might be able to do it. Hang on, Patlen."

Heca rushed 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.

"Stay ready to yank him out 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, choosing a path that was the least littered with fallen rock.

As Heca neared the destroyed digger, half a dozen men burst in through a gaping tunnel opening. They wore the red-trimmed tan security uniforms of Itga Mining. At the head of the group was Nobek Talu, Itga's chief of security. His intense gaze fell on Ospar.

"Director Ospar! What happened?" 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.

"There might have been an explosion. We've got to get this man out of here."

Heca had 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 countenance filled with intent, took Ospar's place at Talu's side. Itga's director of general operations had no choice but to step away 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 in the other's grip.

"Quickly!" Talu shouted. He and the younger Nobek pulled the fallen worker clear an instant before the busted digger rocked loose and crashed 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. "Take him to the medical department right now. Call in emergency services. This is a Code One situation, so be alert. Let's evacuate everybody in here and the next two caverns. Nobek Jol, make certain that Director Ospar gets to safety immediately."

Ospar 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 second. "With all due respect, Director, leave or Jol will carry you out. I'm not about to explain to the owners why their nephew remained in danger a second longer than was necessary."

Ospar scowled, his temper flaring to be ordered about. Yet he could never fault the head of security for doing his job. Talu had been with Itga almost since its start. He had been a familiar presence for most of the young Dramok's life. Ospar's rank would not deter Talu from doing what he said he would. The man would make good on his promise to have somebody lug him out of the mine.

The brooding Nobek Talu had nodded to was the one who'd aided him in pulling Patlen out of danger. Nobek Jol looked all too ready to obey his supervisor, his purple eyes riveted on Ospar, hands flexing in anticipation of grabbing the director and hauling him out.

Ospar gave in, but only because arguing would slow Talu's rescue effort. The men under the debris were the priority, and he wouldn't chance their lives on his pride. It didn't keep him from scowling as he marched from the scene. He paused to wrap his arm around the shattered-looking

Misru's waist to lend support, though the mine's supervisor appeared to be gaining his wits again.

Ospar could 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 didn't have to hear or see the security guard to be assured he was there.

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In Misru's office, Jol watched with interest as Ospar examined the shaken mine supervisor's injuries. Misru'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. The man had great presence, even covered in grime.

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. He knew the Dramok for the easy grin he wore, an expression that came as if it were second nature.

*Charming* was the word many used to describe Ospar. *A bully*, his detractors claimed.

Just then, the man's attractive features and warm grin were nowhere in evidence. Dust and soot from the explosion had turned Ospar's visage dark gray in places, flat-out black in others. Under that mask, he could have been the most stunning man in existence, but no one would be able to tell. With the filth in the way, it was a wonder Jol could read the concern filling the director's expression.

"I'm fine, Director. I just had my brain rattled for a moment," Misru insisted. His face was 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 keep from glancing 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. Talu calling a Code One bore that instinct out. Perhaps Misru's record would be allowed to stand as uninterrupted. Espionage was no accident.

"You were out of it for more than a moment." Ospar's blue-purple eyes were vibrant, almost glowing from a face darkened from mine dust. "The cut on your head isn't bad, and I think you're only in shock. It would still be best if medical personnel checked you over to be sure." He turned to the aide. The hovering Imdiko was 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 an instant's hesitation. "Absolutely, Director."

Misru continued to act slow on the uptake, blinking at Ospar. "But the reports...and...and...the men..."

Ospar patted his shoulder and smiled. Or maybe it was a grimace. It was hard to tell under all that soot. "I'll take care of everything here until Rost returns back. In fact, I don't want you 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 is 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. Ospar was doing the right thing in sending him to be checked out.

Rost wasted no second in coaxing Misru out of the office. As the door shut behind them, Ospar appeared 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 to where the real action is. Or are you incapable of anything more complicated than babysitting?"

An instant of anger lit inside Jol, a spark that if unleashed, would have been more than a match to the director's. However, Ospar had been remarkably calm thus far, given he'd just survived an explosion. Not for a single second had Jol noted a crack in that controlled veneer.

*He's antagonistic, because it's better than having a screaming fit after nearly getting killed. Now that the danger is passed and he doesn't have Misru to take care of, everything is going to start hitting him.*

It also could be that the Dramok was frustrated that he was stuck in the office himself. It had been obvious to Jol that he'd wanted to assist 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.

Jol wanted to give the other man the benefit of the doubt. However, he was well aware of Dramok Ospar's reputation. The cynic in him wondered if he wasn't seeing the director on the brink of living up to that character.

Many accused Ospar of being a bully when he didn't get his way. He was known for resorting to intimidation tactics when he couldn't charm situations to his satisfaction. Maybe that was why he baited Jol, acting the tyrant with no redeeming reason for his actions.

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 hot 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, rescuing them? They need help. I do not."

*Asshole.* Jol had punched others for far less condescension.

*Stay in control. He's scared after the blast. His main concern seems to be 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 during the entire stretch as Ospar fussed over Misru.

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

Ospar mocked him with a comically shocked expression. "It speaks! The creature is capable of communication. 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 strong Nobek to pull them out. Why are you here?"

*Because Talu is thinking the same thing I am about that explosion. Code One is rarely called unless sabotage is suspected.*

Beyond the cold calculations of his job, Jol was starting to believe the tales of Ospar's arrogance. It was in every word he uttered, the words of the rich boy handed everything to him on a silver platter. Jol decided he wouldn't make anymore excuses for the pompous jerk.

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 arrived at, starting by correcting him. "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 busy digging out ore and minerals."

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

Jol kept dangling tidbits at him, curious if the blowhard would catch on. "It was known you'd be making a visit, Director. It's always a big deal when you make a scheduled stop in your 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. Suspicion was beginning to occur to him. "Make your point."

"It's obvious why Misru trotted out so many people he didn't need. He did it to impress you, to make the operation more notable. However, he would never detonate anything to show off to the heir of the Itga fortune. Especially when a blast could 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 have been targeted?"

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

Jol told him, "You've made a few enemies in the past few months. Particularly Dramok Urt, owner of Pladon Industries? I'm interested in learning 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 second. 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 thought first of the others who'd been caught in the blast. He possessed wealth and rank, yet cared for those who worked for him, the men who literally got dirt under their nails. Could a man be a jerk and possess a conscience at once?

The Nobek shared none of those notions. He addressed the matter of his favorite suspect in the unexplained explosion. "Just in case your competitor or anybody else would attack you in such a fashion, I'll do as I was ordered and stay right here. I'll make sure they don't get another chance."

Ospar stared at him, real distress pinching his features. Horror even. Jol felt a twinge of sympathy for the man. Realizing his presence might have placed others in danger was an ugly epiphany for Ospar.

Maybe he wasn't such a jerk after all.