

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-2-

BLINDSIDED

Solop Avagar, Justich System

David Dangers kicked against the muscular legs of Goth Garal as the powerful demon held him suspended above the arena's brightmetal floor. The roar of blood pounded in David's ears. His scalp wound bled freely, and blood mixed with sweat washed down his face, stinging his eyes, burning on the edge of his lips.

The taste of defeat would be salty, not bitter.

He was nearly spent, able to do nothing against the meaty hand currently choking the life out of him. He used all of his strength to hold Goth Garal's other

hand away from his face, his eyes. He certainly didn't expect help from his partner. PK fought his own losing battle against the alien construct, Pago. He quieted his heartbeat, dealing with the lack of oxygen, but his decreased circulation no longer flushed away the exertion poisons building in his muscles.

It also dulled the strident pulse which echoed in his ears. Through his aural filters, David heard the audience roaring their support, chanting his stage name over and over. "Freakshow! Freak...show!"

His name hammered into the arena, millions—billions!—strong. The Solop Avagar audience shouted and stamped. Thousands beat against the arena's restraint fields, causing the thin energy barriers to crackle with golden energy. Freakshow's cheerleaders coerced them into the rousing chant, and the open sensory network dumped raw energy onto the floor as the remote audience on a hundred nearby worlds overpowered anything else.

"Freak...SHOW!"

Digging into the last of his reserves, he pushed his nanite-charged muscles. He levered Goth Garal's hand back centimeter by centimeter. The demon snarled, squeezed tighter. Freakshow pulled the human in close, sucked in a great breath to spew forth a demon-spawned pestilence.

Freakshow pulled one hand back from Garal's arm and pistoned his fist into the demon's throat.

Choking, the demon stumbled back. Dragging Freakshow along with him proved to be a mistake as David batted aside the demon's free hand and used both fists to pummel Garal about the neck and face.

The plague caught in Goth Garal's throat, and the amber-skinned demon flushed mottled red and purple across his barrel chest. Freakshow slammed stiff-armed him in the face, breaking off a canine fang.

Goth Garal dropped Freakshow to the brightmetal floor. The human gladiator collapsed, not an ounce of strength left to him but bending his will to recover as quickly as possible. Thickening his aura, he wrapped several layers of healing blue energy around himself. He hoped for a few seconds—heartbeats only.

PK bought those for him.

A blur of muscles, wiry hair and fangs jumped over Freakshow as PK's latest portaled creature slammed into a recovering Goth Garal. He rolled away from the struggle, saw that his partner in today's Dynamic Duo match had abandoned himself to Pago's razored grip. Black ichor splashed over the glowing floor. Pago screamed his rasping battlecry, consumed with bloodlust.

Garal already had his hands around the pit beast's head, crushing its skull. Climbing to unsteady feet, Freakshow launched himself at Goth Garal, grabbed the demon by his down-turned horns. He kicked his feet up and around, arching his back to swing behind the demon.

With his momentum and a savage twist, Freakshow wrenched Garal's head around, snapping the demon's upper spine. Goth Garal collapsed against the arena floor.

No time to bask in the audience's savage elation. Freakshow threw himself away from the demon and stumble-ran toward Pago. The alien pinned PK against the floor, razors slashing again, and again. PK took most of the cuts against his arms, but dark blood also flowed from his sides and gut and bubbled in a froth over his punctured chest.

A discus lay on the floor not far from the struggling pair. The one Freakshow had thrown earlier. He bent down to grab it on the run, tucked it against his arm and whirled around in a two-step spin.

Pago sensed the danger, and looked up in time to catch the edge of the disc in the side of his glowing skullcase.

The cyborged alien stood up under the first blow, but not the second. Freakshow tucked down, spun, and came up again with the discus smashing up into Pago's chin. Metal-reinforced chitin cracked, caved. Pago flew up and to the side, fell into a tangled heap. He didn't move again.

Bloodied, bruised and still operating on the dregs of his strength, Freakshow stumbled into a wide-legged stance. He grasped his discus in both hands and thrust it overhead in a sign of victory. Waves of energy crashed into him as the audience screamed themselves hoarse and poured its devotion through

the sensory fields. PK struggled feebly to regain his feet, slipped in his own blood. Freakshow's cheerleaders jumped and waved and blew kisses in his direction.

Some of them smiled through a mask of red dye, dashed over them earlier by Pago's mega-fan.

Freakshow spotted the cowardly fan skulking toward one of the exits, wrestling off an artificial skullcase-cap. Turning his back on PK, he stalked forward, jumped, and threw. The discus took the mega-fan in the back, dropping him into a heap that mirrored his gladiator idol.

The audience loved it. His cheerleaders swarmed to his side, surrounding him in a small ocean of beauty. David had hand-picked each one himself. Now he chose two. Blue-haired Jericho and the very svelte Rhiana. Tight leather and revealing halters. Jericho washed the blood off his face, then he draped one of them over each arm and paraded along the restraint fields, basking in the adoration, feeling stronger. He noticed when a pair of Ophidian Keepers slithered out to help PK from the arena. Other Keepers appeared to collect the bodies of Goth Garal and Pago, taking them for medical attention and, if necessary, reanimation.

He smiled. It would be necessary.

A few other Justich Federation gladiators walked out of their ready rooms to congratulate him, no doubt hoping to leech off his success. Some mega-fans who had slipped past guards to gain the arena floor also crowded in. Mostly humans, but not all. Freakshow had fans among all races on every world. Soon he

was hemmed in by a small crowd, all of them belting out

“Freakshow...Freakshow...”

“Hello, David.”

The voice at his ear was honeyed with amusement and very familiar. He looked back. “Alice!” Disengaging from his female accessories, David swept up his stepsister in a violent hug and spun her around once before setting her back on her feet. It had been nearly a year since they had last seen each other.

“What are you doing on Solop Avagar?” he asked, some doubt creeping into his voice as he looked her over.

Alice Jenks wore a revealing setup that looked more like one of his cheerleader’s outfits than something his stepsister should be wearing. All leather and skin. She stood defiantly, arms crossed and head cocked to one side. But her smile was firmly in place. “I wanted to see you fight,” she said with a dimpling grin.

Freakshow gathered Rhiana back to his side. The cheerleader melted against him. With his free hand he waved at the audience, and signed a few high-auction autographs onto clothes, arms, foreheads—whatever was offered. A few of them might have their skin removed to preserve the scrawl. Some would end up in the collectible market. All part of the show.

“You could have seen that on the sensory nets at home,” he admonished Alice as she stepped forward to cut off a couple of mega-fan groupies. He

frowned. He was happy to see Alice, actually. But not here. She wasn't part of this world, and it was going to seriously cut into his after-show recreation.

“Well, I'm traveling at the moment.”

“You are? Great.” He looked for Jericho, found her sulking off to one side. When he shifted toward her, Alice stepped around to keep his attention. “Do you need money? The accounts should be full.” David Dangers supported his stepsister at his personal estates on Chasse. He should have gone to visit her in the off-season time. Now he was unlikely to visit until the Ophidian Circuit moved back through Opali and Tigbar on the regular season, still months away.

She laughed. “Actually, I'm doing fine. I've a nice income of my own now.”

“Doing what? Selling the scandalnets news on your stepbrother?” He reached past Alice to hook a finger into Jericho's studded collar, drew her to him and accepted a deep, hungry kiss. He chuckled. “That's fine, kid. I don't mind.”

“This has nothing to do with you, David. Shocking as that might seem.” She glanced around. “I'd like to talk about this.”

Massaging his bruised neck, he pushed more nanite-laced blood to the area to help speed his healing. Every minute, he felt better. “Love to, kid, but I'm not going to have time. This was my final preseason bout in the Justich System. In three hours I'm outbound, heading for Ursai Major. The Tarn System.” And he wasn't going to spend his victory celebration catching up with Alice, no matter how much he'd missed her. There were appearances to make.

“So we’ll talk on Ursai Major, then,” Alice said with a coy smile. She turned away, releasing the floodgate of groupies and fans massing behind her.

“Whoa!” he reached through the sudden swarm, caught her elbow. “You’re following the circuit to Ursai Major? How are you getting there?” Physical travel over those distances wasn’t cheap. Alice could spend his fortune more wisely than that.

“How are you getting there?” she asked with a shrug.

One of the reptilian Ophidians waited nearby, ready to lead him away to the after-match extravaganza and closing ceremonies for the Solop Avagar matches. Freakshow would be a centerpiece after today’s victory. “My way is bought and paid for,” he reminded her. “I’m competing.”

Alice Jenks pulled her arm free, turned into the crowd and forced her way through. “What a coincidence,” his stepsister called back over her shoulder.

“So am I.”