

# THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

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## RAW DEAL

### **Toreador, The Tarn System**

The private room was luxuriously appointed, with one entire wall open to Toreador's Danger Zone arena. Leathery, draco-skin floor covering molded to David Dangers' every step. The fully automated 'tender boasted a repertoire of fifty thousand beverage mixes. And the sensory-net controls had no safety limits. Someone could dial the Ophidians' broadcast emitters to maximum, and a death blow on the arena floor would stop heartbeats or induce comas up here.

David shut the emitters down first thing. His stepsister's pain was not a feeling he wished to share.

It was no accident that his meeting was scheduled alongside Alice's first Tarn Triple event. Ophidians had no sense of humor, or irony, but the snakes knew how to bargain. This was their opening move.

Pacing the restraint field, he watched "Little Jinx" struggle alongside the plague-alien Lothar and circuit newcomer Cryst Mamigoyan. Cryst was an unknown, not yet rated—an alien who looked as if he were made entirely of cloudy glass. The mismatched trio fought against the returning Goth Garal, who commanded Bull's Eye and that wild-haired runt of an engineer who styled himself The Berserker.

The Triple pressed back and forth across the Danger Zone with Lothar's besieged crew barely holding. Blasts of flame and metal spikes thrust out of the floor at random intervals, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats as they waited for a gladiator to misjudge. The engineer used a pile of spare parts to build a small army of deadly warbots. Surprisingly, it was Jinx—Alice!—who countered with her ability to rapidly portal in small-but-vicious creatures with stainless steel teeth and jaws that tore through metal.

She had never shown hints of such ability while growing up. More Ophidian tampering.

As if summoned, the iris-door spiraled open and a Keeper stepped into the room. Not an Ophidian, with their snake-like bodies and hypnotic stares. This Circuit Keeper was of a different alien race, with two elbow joints and long, bony fingers. He had four tiny, red eyes and a horned beak that snicked at the air.

Non-Ophidian Keepers weren't exactly rare, but David had assumed the secretive Ophidian Lords would send one of their own for a gladiator of Freakshow's caliber. They had gone through so much trouble to acquire him, and the rest of the Justich League circuit, after all.

"Am Schreth," the Keeper said. His voice was raspy and coarse, like dry scales rubbing together.

"Took you long enough." David took the high ground with an immediate challenge. Negotiations with the Ophidians shouldn't be too different from battles he'd fought in the arena. Or so he thought then.

The door spun closed behind Schreth. "Not fight today. Request...low priority."

And on days Freakshow fought, he had better things to do than argue for an interview. Which is why he'd waited so long to go through upper channels. Three different worlds in three weeks, every private effort to undercut his stepsister's new career and send her packing for home had failed. Now he wanted her gone no matter the cost.

David began to say as much, but a rousing surge of cheers pulled him back to the open wall. He couldn't help it. His experienced eye caught up quickly. Goth Garal had used mind control to seize several of Jinx's portaled creatures, turning them against their mistress. Cryst was less effective establishing a cyberspace link to the warbots, but he subverted enough to keep The Berserker tied up in a civil

war of mechanicals. Cutting discs and lasers sliced through plate armor. Machines toppled with heavy crashes.

Meanwhile Lothar stood at the fore, brandishing a flaming sword and using his mastery over disease to keep Alice Jenks from falling prey to her own summoned creatures. She stood at the edge of his oily wreath of disease, moving through its fringes as if it were the purest air. Nanotech? Biofilters?

A steel-toothed creature leaped at her, and she skipped back further into Lothar's protection, drawing the beast after her. It convulsed and died right atop one of its brethren, and the crowd cheered her again.

A stand-off. With Bull's Eye as the wild card. David had predicted that early on. A rogue Spectral obsessed with the material plane, Bull's Eye always took near-human shape. The dark-garbed figure skulked along the edge of a Danger Zone fire trap, behind Goth Garal. Bull's Eye liked to play the weakling while building strength.

Waiting for his chance.

"Climbs in ratings," Schreth said, stepping up on David's left. They watched as Little Jinx bunny-hopped over a fallen warbot, moving out from under Lothar's protection. "Good numbers for second tier."

"Good numbers," David agreed. He stroked his goatee. "Doesn't matter, though. I want—"

"Know what Freakshow wants," Schreth interrupted, his beak clacking hard. "Ophidian Lords always know."

Alice Jenks tripped over a severed warbot arm, stumbled to one side. A jet of flame erupted from the arena floor where she'd been about to step. The audience gasped and David's heart hammered in his throat. Stupid little girl. "So show her the door," he ordered.

"No."

The response came too fast, like a door slammed in his face. "For a second tier? Look, Schreth," he made the name a gargling noise, "they don't need her." Meaning the Ophidian Lords. "They need me. Call it a 'request' from one of their top-earning gladiators."

"Freakshow not top-earner," Schreth said.

"Not a...?" He couldn't complete the question.

The Keeper made a complicated gesture that might have been a double-joined shrug. "Humans do well, but not draw real money." His voice was lighter, hungrier, saying those last two words. Part of a special vocabulary the Ophidian Lords forced him to memorize perfectly, no doubt.

Freakshow threw off his surprise. "Maybe not in the Tarn System. But in the Justich Federation—"

"Better," Schreth agreed, cutting him off again. "Still not top-earner. Freakshow fights too much Singles and Doubles. Never be Champion."

True. The Justich League circuit might be the newest acquisition to the Ophidian's gladiatorial empire, but he knew the score. Ophidian Circuit Champions were crowned out of the highly-rated four-on-four team events, and he

had little interest in them. Freakshow hated to share the spotlight. But then, he had never noticed it limiting him in status before. Or influence. It was almost enough to make him think.

It was certainly enough to distract him. He had failed to see Alice trip her way into a dangerous position.

With Goth Garal moving up to grapple with Lothar, demon claws against flaming sword, Jinx suddenly found herself trapped between Bull's Eye and The Berserker. David watched as the spectral rushed up from the backfield with dark apparitions swarming around him—spirits which he had summoned and bound to his own life force.

On her right, the diminutive engineer clambered onto the back of a treaded warbot, driving it at her...

...and into a sudden forest of long blades that thrust out from the Danger Zone floor. Sharp-edged steel punched through warbot and engineer, impaling them on mechanical crucifixes.

The audience went nearly berserk. Several rows rushed down to the arena's edge—humans, aliens, even demons—to hammer their enthusiasm against the restraint fields. They made as if she'd planned the entire scene, when really it was just a healthy dose of grisly luck; the kind which had earned her the nickname Little Jinx. Alice played it up. With a laugh and a twirl she spun away from the gruesome scene, sprinting back toward Lothar, unconcerned.

She hadn't seen Bull's Eye!

But Cryst had. The alien moved like flowing water, smooth and fluid as he threw himself forward into the spectral's path. Cryst's eyes flashed cobalt blue as the spirits swarmed over him, wrapping about him in a cascade of negative life force. Bull's Eye kicked him into a wall of fire, raced onward.

Alice would never have stood a chance if not for that small delay. And for Lothar. Lothar swept back from Goth Garal's embrace, sending a choking fog of death at the amber-skinned demon. He cast his flaming sword side-armed, whipping it past Jinx with barely a hand's breadth to spare. The fiery blade caught Bull's Eye in the chest, driving him upwards and back, and then it dissipated in a flash of orange flame.

Energy bled from Bull's Eye's wound in a wash of silvery light.

The flaming sword reappeared in Lothar's hand.

Trading the mad engineer and his warbot minions for Cryst put Goth Garal and Bull's Eye at a serious disadvantage. Freakshow knew Lothar's ability to command an arena. He knew his stepsister was in safe hands. For today.

But tomorrow? What would the Ophidian Lords put her up to when she really became popular.

"If," he began, then waited for Schreth's attention. Four beady, red eyes stared through him. "If a top-earning gladiator was making this request? If he asked a favor from an Ophidian Lord...?"

The Keeper paused. His fiery eyes dulled, then turned a hard onyx black as he considered David's request most carefully. His stare was very much like an Ophidian. Cold. Hypnotic. It felt as if another presence had entered the room.

"Even best-earning gladiators...hardly afford five minutes time to talk with Ophidian Lord," he finally said. His beak clicked and clacked against an underjaw of hard bone.

Freakshow nodded decisively. "I'll take that as a deal," he said.

"Still in pre-season. Am unsure how Freakshow accomplishes this."

He smiled a hard smile, copied the alien's pattern of speech. "Will become odds-on favorite to qualify for Championship tour," Freakshow said easily. Then he broke away from the Keeper's obsidian gaze, turning back to the arena to watch Lothar and Little Jinx move in quickly on the wounded Bull's Eye.

Now he only needed to figure out how.