

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-7-

PROPOSITIONED

Gasherdel, Garina

A dark braid of energies coiled about David Dangers's midsection. His skin blistered beneath the lash, crisped and splitting open. He tasted blood in his mouth, and bit down on a scream as pain blurred his vision.

Where Goth Garal held off Stallion and Striking Dragon, David was aware only of the bright, jeweled blasts that continued to pour from the Pa'chan ray gun. On his right, Ryla was a vague outline of bronze skin and dark braids, tearing into Pestilence and Kos'bargithd without thought or care of what happened behind her.

Ahead, a mystic vortex of malign hatred opened. Freakshow felt it tear at his soul, pulling him forward into the dark core of Arkzilipul. As if the demon

himself was a portal, and Freakshow could see through into a darker place where hungry, red eyes stared out of the depths, never blinking. His heartbeat thudded in his ears, slowing.

Whispers teased at the edge of his hearing. Listen... they seemed to be saying.

Hear the crowds...

Freakshow could hear the crowds. Cathedral Prime had already seen several matches in the Demon Wars Invitational, and would see several more before the evening's entertainment was done. But the Ophidian Lords did not believe in a fickle audience. The savage call of the crowd echoed Arkzilipul's bellow as the demon fed on Freakshow's torment and the throng of spectators reeled under the sensory net's mixture of demon pleasure and human agony. Their rage and their hunger blasted back into the arena with a psychic backlash that slashed through the gladiators.

Feeding on that energy, Freakshow hauled back against the pull of Arkzilipul's lash. He raised one hand overhead, concentrating his willpower until his aura shone through dark and golden, and then slashed down and through the braided energies. They shattered into a hundred arcing threads, squirming off in different directions, finally disappearing as Arkzilipul leaped forward with hands grasping and teeth barred. An odor of smoke and sulfur came with the demon.

He comes...

The Devourer of Souls raked his talons across Freakshow's chest, tearing through flesh and digging at the KEV armor weave. Blood splattered against the demon's ebony skin, and sizzling with the smell of cooking meat.

Now, the otherworld whispers told him. Freakshow did not need to see the opening. He had felt Arkzilipul's overreaching attack, and sensed that the demon's pleasure in the bloodflow would slow him, if only for a second.

He braced both wrists together and struck outward in a piston-like blow that ruptured skin and threw the demon back into one of the oily pools that slicked the reddish stone floor.

Arkzilipul thrashed out of the far side of the gangrenous slick, poison burning at the edge of his wounds. His howl of fury was also laced with something new. Pain of his own.

The banshee wail threw Goth Garal and Kos into violent rages, the demons striking forward with ray gun and with poisoned sword, heedless of their own safety. Stallion fell, a large hole burned into his side. Striking Dragon retreated from Goth Garal's savage assault. Only Pestilence seemed immune to the call. But not Ryla. Freakshow felt a churning within his aura as questing force pulled him around toward possible new danger. He saw the bronze-skinned demoness turn away from Pestilence, as if yanked around by an invisible chain. Her amber eyes burned with crimson fury, staring through Freakshow as if he did not exist.

Or would not, in a matter of moments.

Had he been wrong, earlier? In an attempt to understand and douse her sudden fury, Freakshow retreated from Arkzilipul while reaching out toward Ryla with his aura. Dark blue pulses smothered Ryla, breaking over her black presence like waves against coral-tipped rock. He felt her conflicted struggle, called to the Devourer's side and yet hating everything the demon represented. It froze her in place, while Pestilence and Kos moved up behind her.

Kos levered up his reaver, and thrust forward in a brutal stab for Ryla's back.

Freakshow felt more than saw the swirl of mystic energies which exploded out of Ryla and swirled over her in a sudden protective shell. The sword glanced away as if swatted by an invisible hand. Then the mystic energy took corporal form, rising above Ryla in the spectral image of a large human or possibly a humanoid alien. It had presence. Freakshow felt it as he might a possessing spirit.

He moved quickly toward Ryla, unsure if she required (or wanted) his help, or if this might be his only chance to destroy a traitorous teammate.

Pestilence also leaped forward, plague flies swarming around him and Ryla. The ghostly image swatted them away, and Ryla spun back around with claws raking side to side, tearing out Pestilence's throat. Dark ichor gushed out in great fountains as the body instantly voided itself of all life, and little more than a flesh-shrouded sack of bones was left to collapse into another of the arena's gangrenous slicks.

Kos' bargithd might be the lesser threat on Arkzilipul's demonic team, but he was no coward. His massive sword arced up and over, getting behind it all the hatred and jealousy he could muster. Freakshow saw the dark emotions build on the edge of the blade, gleaming in a savage mixture of red and bilious green. The sword cleaved through the apparition which hung above Ryla, and then sliced deep into her shoulder, knocking her to her knees, and then to her side.

He comes...

The whispers again. Freakshow had no time to decide if these were true spirits, drawn to his side against the demons, or if they might simply be the psychic impressions left by gladiators who had fallen in Gasherdel's Cathedral Prime. Either way, a glance over his shoulder confirmed the truth. Arkzilipul was on the move again, striding forward, his cloven hooves striking sparks from the arena's stone floor. Reaching into small portals as he came, he dragged along with him a pair of small, senet worpalite. Heavily muscled with savage claws that might rend a man in two, in the demon's grip the worpalite looked like obedient pets.

Time slipped away from the human team. Arkzilipul might overwhelm them with minions if not with his actual gladiators. But Kos had drawn back his sword for another overhead blow, and as Freakshow jumped over Ryla's sprawled body all he could think about was protecting his teammate.

His flying kick caught Kos in the side of the head, snapping it over with enough force to kill an average human. It barely slowed the wiry demon.

Freakshow came down into a shoulder roll, then vaulted back to lock grips with Kos on the hilt of the reaver. The blade struggled overhead, ready to fall one way or the other.

Ryla stirred, struggled to her feet in time to rush into the embrace of one of the senet. Rather than duck under its toothsome maw she thrust a hand forward and deep into its throat. A new poison, secreted from beneath her talons, choked the reptilian monster. The flesh of its throat melted as if under a powerful corrosive.

The stench of smoke and sulfur swept ahead of Arkzilipul, warning of the demon's presence even before Freakshow's aura churned with dangerous, dark boils. Kos wrestled David around so that his back was to the Devourer. He spared one last glance behind him, as the dark-skinned nightmare threw his second garchek at Ryla and came at him with lips skinned back in a savage snarl and black tongue lolling out as if tasting the air for blood.

Power induces will... the whispers promised as the crowd surged to its feet, hammering against the restraint fields in warning or celebration.

It did at that.

Burning his aura into a surge of raw strength, Freakshow flushed every muscle in his body with a sudden, invigorating pulse. He fell backward, pulling Kos' bargithd after him, and down. The reaver still between them, Freakshow braced it between their bodies as Arkzilipul impaled himself on the massive blade.

Demon-plagued steel ripped through dark flesh.

Corrosive ichor sprayed out of Akzilipul's mouth in jet of vomit, burning over Kos's back.

Already at the edge of his limits, Freakshow pushed for an adrenaline surge and rolled out from beneath Kos's bargithd as the Devourer of Souls collapsed over the top of them. He ended up on hands and knees within the nearby bacteria pool, barely able to move after spending so heavily from his reserves. The skin on his hands and forearms had blistered with reddish welts by the time he waded free. The battle was all but over.

Delayed by the second worpalite, as the Devourer of Souls had no doubt planned, Ryla freed herself from the beast and staggered over to lend Freakshow a taloned hand. But Arkzilipul rolled away from Kos, tore a portal open and lurched through rather than face further ignominy at the hands of the "human" team.

Kos screeched his anguish over the betrayal, but wisely gestured for his complete capitulation. Goth Garal grounded his Pa'chan weapon a moment later, seeing that the fight had irrevocably gone against them.

Striking Dragon accepted Garal's surrender, then moved to the Stallion's aide, to see if there was anything to be done.

"Took you long enough," Ryla sneered to David. She folded her arms across her chest, forearm spines laying against the hard swell of her breasts.

"Didn't think you knew who was on your team."

“I didn’t,” Freakshow admitted. He had to say it again, louder, to be heard over the deafening cheers. “But I think I’m figuring it out. If you are interested in staying on.”

Was that a hint of smile curling up one side of Ryla’s mouth? “That depends on where you are going.”

David Dangers smiled back. “To the Championships, eventually,” he promised.

Ryla’s nod told him it was the right answer.