

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-8-

PURGATORY

Meagred, Prelum Bracius

Walking into Purgatory with Queen Alexandra on his arm, Ryla and Naru Kami following, created an instant stir the kind at which Freakshow excelled.

Hundreds of gladiators with their hangers-on, their managers, and a host of Ophidian Keepers thronged through the mighty “Warrior’s Hell” on Meagred, one of the few places where circuit warriors gathered in camaraderie. Or, at least, a semblance of neutrality. A blue haze shrouded the room smelling of illegal smoke and demon sulfur. Balls of copperish fire hung suspended in the air, chasing shadows across the cinder-strewn floor and into holotronic murals which hid the walls and camouflaged entrances to private alcoves. Placed strategically around

the hall, giant pillars carved to resemble the snake-like Ophidians held up a massive slab of quaranite, the heaviest natural rock known to exist. Its red and gray mottle appeared like a burning sky. Usually, lesser gladiators and most of the uninitiated could not help glancing upwards, feeling that massive weight suspended above them.

But now all eyes fixed on David Dangers and his coterie. Stunned applause rippled through the immediate area. A few cheers mixed with good-natured catcalls, drowning out the few who dared to scoff or offer jeering insults. Five victories in five pre-season tournaments—Freakshow’s warriors had rocketed upwards in standing, forcing others to pay attention to them. Showing up with Alexandra as an escort, who’s champion-quality team they had defeated only an hour earlier, was the stuff of legend among gladiators, especially as Alexandra was one of those rare spectrals who chose a human form in which to exist. A form which inspired many erotic visions. Raven hair and perfect, alabaster skin. Sultry eyes gazing upon her peers, her lesser, and the hint of a cruel smile playing at the edge of red, red lips.

Freakshow released Alexandra’s arm long enough for a flourishing bow. His newest tattoos danced on the crests of rippling muscles. Alexandra was less inclined to showmanship. The self-avowed “queen” nodded once, regally, barely deigning to acknowledge the attention.

“One would think you enjoy this,” Ryla said, her throaty whisper raising hairs on the back of David’s neck.

“I do,” he answered. He picked up Alexandra’s hand, tucked it into the crook of his elbow. Alexandra gave him a warm, reassuring squeeze as they began a slow circuit along the curved outside wall. “We all should. Why else consign ourselves to Purgatory voluntarily?” A place of torment, and waiting for their sins to be expunged. The gathering hall was aptly named.

The demoness did not see the humor. “For some of us,” she reminded him, “it is not voluntary.” She dropped back behind Striking Dragon, giving him no chance to respond.

No matter. He knew it was true enough. Some gladiators were sold into contracts with the Ophidians to pay off debts, or crimes. Some had their own demons to chase. A few, like Ryla, had been compelled to battle. Word was that, early in preseason, Prince of Gates had portalled Ryla in from Daemonhelm to help him defeat Kaleem, thought to be a demi-god in the Matricc System. Ryla vanquished Kaleem, but some part of the mystic had possessed her before death.

Which might explain quite a bit, actually.

Alexandra halted the small group just short of a three-dimensional mural in which she danced through a struggle of burning demons and shadow-cloaked spectrals. Pulling him a pace aside, into the mural, Freakshow saw the dark entrance of a private alcove hiding back inside the holotronic display.

“Thank you, David,” she whispered in his ear. “Are you certain you do not want to join me?”

He glanced back into the hall. Naru Kami waited stoically. Ryla folded arms over her chest, the picture of impatience. Tough call. Being “entertained” by Queen Alexandra would have been another jaunty feather in his cap. What made up his mind, though, was seeing his stepsister walk by in the shadow of an Ophidian.

These days, outside of a broadcast arena match, he rarely saw her in any other company. Always with the snakes. Always under their influence.

“We have business to attend to,” Freakshow said with great reluctance.

“Pity.” She nibbled his ear, then retreated into her private room with one hand trailing back as if ready to catch him, draw him after.

Freakshow stepped back from the mural, losing sight of the darkened alcove and returning to the raw, acrid taste of the open hall. “Well, I was enjoying myself,” he said, leading them into the thick of the nearby crowd. “Not anymore.”

Ryla shrugged. “Pity,” she said, heavy on the sarcasm as she unconsciously echoed Alexandra’s parting comment. “We have to pick up a new first-tier gladiator, and we need to do it soon.”

Not only that, but they needed one with decent standing to prevent slipping backwards in team ratings, keeping them in striking distance of the leaders. After today’s match Freakshow had had to let go Simon Bantus, who admitted he was more interested in surviving his one-year contract than he was stepping into harm’s way to grab for the Championship circuit. With Yashrad’s Open Invitational the last major event left in preseason, they needed a spectacular finish.

Fortunately, Purgatory was also a place to feel out potential recruits, trying to find the true warriors among the hopeful and hopeless. Freakshow had a feeling about one of them, if he was here...

He was. Ryla spotted him first as he skirted around the diamelle-cut platform raised in the exact center of the circular hall. The dais, where the reigning Champion was put on display for all to worship, or target.

“Pefdsartsuq Klojmrentoyu,” Freakshow stumbled over the difficult, demon name. He reached out as if to grab the wiry demon by the shoulder, turn him around. PK crouched out from beneath his touch, spinning down into a ready stance, arms wide.

Naru Kami shifted into a flat-footed power stance in response. Ryla never moved, though her eyes flashed a warning crimson.

“Easy,” Freakshow said, calming them all. His eyes narrowed, staring holes into PK’s shoulder. The demon had new tats of his own. A chaotic riot of blues and gold tangled over his shoulders, decorating his grayish skin. “Hey, nice work,” he said.

The tattoos shifted, spreading forward over the demon’s arms as if something alive. Something new! PK rose only a few inches back toward his normally impressive height. “Looks you for me?” the wiry demon asked, wary.

“Yeah.” David stumbled to a halt, unsure how best to proceed. Demons could be touchy about the simplest of things. He decided to start with a

compliment. “You know, I don’t think I ever got the chance to thank you. You saved the win on Solop Avagar. The Dynamic Duo match-up.”

“Chances had,” PK said. His wide, feral eyes slanted down into a frown. “Decides you to takes bows alone.”

Alice had implied much the same to him on Ursai Major, hadn’t she? So caught up in his own image back then, he had overlooked real talent. “Yeah, I did. Look,” he clapped his hands together, rubbing them for a bit of warmth, then pushed more nanite-laced blood into his arms, “I wasn’t a real team player. But I’m making a run for the Championships, and intend to go into the regular season as the odds-on favorite. I’d like your help. Again.”

“So he can betray you,” a deep, rasping voice said from behind David, “again.”

David shivered as a slice of cold, blue hatred slashed across his awareness, and his skin puckered involuntarily. Naru Kami and Ryla shifted around at once, taking defensive stances. The demoness’s eyes burned dark and hot, David saw. He did not need to turn around to know that Prince of Gates stood behind him.

Much too close behind him.