

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-Epilog-

THE COLD TASTE OF VICTORY

Yashrad, Sept Bracius

Seen from one of the Ophidian skyboxes, the private rooms which ringed the top of Yashrad's Black Tower Amphitheater, the arena looked more like some other-worldly nightmare than a professional venue for the gladiator circuit. Artificial lightning from the replaced energy collector ripped along the brightmetal rings. The Black Tower itself stood silent guard over the lesser monoliths and quaranite fencestones. But the whole of it was a distant, black pit.

A gateway to hell.

David Dangers stood at the skybox's glassteel window, arms folded over his broad chest. He watched as ghostly apparitions continued to circle the Black

Tower—a gauze of near-life, thicker than ever after the souls lost at the end of his grudge match with Prince of Gates.

Despite Ophidian precautions, the contagion screens which dropped into place once the crowd overwhelmed the arena's restraint fields, bio-tek toxins and plagues spread throughout the amphitheater claimed several dozen lives. These did not count the deaths by trampling, those inflicted by Pago's razors or Archan Singazer's strong hands, or who simply vanished into one of Xarz'yucus's portals, cast into some nether region of dimensional space. Hundreds of lives, fed to the riot. And the snakes would simply put Pago back together, and they would reanimate the Berserker.

Prince of Gates escaped through one of his own portals.

Singazer, the Fallen One, had hunched back within a circle of death, watching with dispassionate expression as bodies crumpled around him.

Freakshow told himself that it didn't matter. His team had carried the day and, with the boost in ratings given them by the riot, now sat in the enviable position as this season's odds-on favorites. There would be increased media coverage. There would be greater access to Ophidian mods and operations.

Naru Kami had already been resuscitated without need for full rejuvenation. David had been there to clasp hands with the martial arts master, thanking him for his sacrifice. Striking Dragon's first words had been, "If done right, no can defend."

David still wasn't certain why that was supposed to be funny. Naru Kami's sad and slightly confused smile said that the old master wasn't quite so certain either.

Another question, for another time.

"You've been waiting here for hours," a voice behind David spoke up from the shadowed doorway. "You are missing your victory party."

In the glassteel's reflection, he saw Alice Jenks move into the room. "It will still be going when I get there." No party would be complete without his presence at some point, after all. "I did not expect you to be here for this." Actually, he expected to meet with one of the Ophidian Lords at any time. His five minutes, bought and paid for with the considerable fortune amassed in this run for the main league circuit.

He turned from the overlook. His stepsister eschewed her usual gladiator outfit for a carmine pantsuit shot through heavily with gold thread. Alice's raven-black hair flowed loosely around her shoulders. The jacket stiff collar was drawn closed at her throat by a small clasp with the Ophidian symbol of a white snake biting on its own tail.

Eternity. A promise, or a threat, of what it meant to serve the Ophidian empire.

Not if David could help it.

“You’re making trouble for me,” she said with a girlish shrug. But her tone had an acidic bite to it. “Of course, that’s just like you. Always thinking of yourself first.”

David’s hands tightened into heavy fists. “I’ve thought of no one but you—your welfare—since you hooked up with the snakes,” he told her, then reminded her of their conversations and arguments on Solop Avagar, on Ursai Major. “Even before that, I tried to warn you to stay away. I did everything I could over the years to keep you from this world. I guess I spoiled you once too often.”

She laughed. “And to save me, you went out and made yourself a Champion. One of the top money-earners in the league.” She let the irony sit with him a moment. “How very noble of you, David. What’s next? Take over the empire and call it a justifiable coup?”

He was not here to fight with Alice. “Fortunately for them,” he said, trying to make a joke of it, “the Ophidians do not accept many outsiders into their ranks.”

“No, they don’t. In fact, they are considering for only one opening right now, and I’m going to get it. I don’t care what Bull’s Eye thinks.”

David swallowed dryly. He had never heard Alice sound so completely determined before. Or so hostile to him, after all the things he had done for her over the years. “Not going to happen,” he shouted her down when she tried to go on about her future with the Ophidian empire. “You don’t know what the snakes are capable of, Alice.”

“My name,” she said hotly, “is Jinx.” She reigned herself in with visible effort. “You may have your agenda, brother-dear. But I have mine. Your days with the Ophidian league are numbered. Now if you will excuse me.” She tugged at the hem of her jacket, giving it a quick, professional straightening. “The Ophidians do appreciate all you have done for them, David, but sorry, you lose.”

David caught her as she tried to turn away. “You aren’t going anywhere,” he told her in a savage whisper. “You know why I’m here. I have five minutes coming with an Ophidian Lord, and I will convince them to show you the door.”

She smiled, coy and dangerous. “But you didn’t,” she told him. She glanced at a sub-dermal timepiece implanted under the skin on the inside of her left wrist. “In fact, I gave you six minutes. That’s going to cost, but the extra time is on me.”

She looked back to him, and when she did her eyes were solid black orbs. Like any Keeper’s eyes. Like the Ophidians themselves.

“After all,” she said, “we’re family.”

It was his stepsister’s face and her voice. But layered in behind both were the undertones of another. David remembered thinking before that Keepers might act like a conduit for the mysterious Ophidian Lords. Now, seeing a stranger look out of Alice’s face, he knew.

He knew.

Little Jinx shrugged away his hand. A transport portal opened behind her, rising up from the floor in a wash of pure, white light. She stepped backward, into it. “Goodbye, David.” And she was gone.

He shuffled back to the glassteel window, face set in a hard mask. There would be no appearance at the victory party. No celebration tonight. Alice was gone. Perhaps forever. And the Ophidians had kept their deal with him, to the letter if not the spirit of their arrangement. He was a champion, positioned to become one of the best ever to compete on the circuit, but against the Ophidian Lords, this time, he had lost.

Like any gladiator, he would take the time to think about that, study it, and learn from it. There would be a next time, he knew.

And Freakshow did not lose to the same tactics twice.