

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-1-

CENTER STAGE

Solop Avagar, Justich System

A pair of neural-sai danced around David ‘Freakshow’ Dangers, dripping bilious green energy across the arena’s brightmetal floor like some kind of poison. Blood oozed from a deep set of scalp wounds. It matted his long, sweat-soaked hair and trickled down the left side of his face. Where blood dripped onto his shoulder and bare chest it was lost among a tangle of dark, tribal tattoos and body piercings.

He circled warily, his last discus curled tight against his right forearm, trying to watch the swords, his opponents, his partner. One neural-sai struck

against his hardened, golden aura. Freakshow stumbled as his protection shattered into a shower of prismatic flashes. Overhead, the holotron monitor magnified the blow to titanic proportions, and a sell-out crowd of two million fans shouted and clapped and stomped their approval. The voice of the telecommuting audience, billions strong, roared through the open sensory fields like some kind of avenging spirit sent to encourage the violence and the bloodshed.

The gladiators needed little encouragement.

Questing out with his aura, Freakshow felt tendrils of demonic power linking the swords back to Gothu Ngaral's mind. The amber-skinned demon limped up on the arena's far right side, controlling both sai telekinetically. Down-turned horns gleamed black with new polish and his fanged snarl promised death. 'Goth Garal' roared, spewing a gust of red spores into the air which swirled and swarmed toward PK—another demon with a nearly unpronounceable name, and Freakshow's partner in today's Dynamic Duo preseason match-up.

A first-tier gladiator on the downslide in ratings, PK barely belonged in the same arena as Freakshow, or even Goth Garal. He couldn't even resist a simple, demon-spawned plague. PK had just opened a portal, summoning a pair of two-headed hell hounds. Now he backed away quickly before the spores found him. They swarmed the hounds instead. One beast flopped over immediately, twitching and foaming at both mouths. The other hound scampered aside, then bent back to PK's will. It charged the alien construct Pago, who came in from the left with murder burning in his bloodshot eyes. Pago caught the beast in razor-tipped hands,

raised it overhead, shredding muscle and bone as if they were nothing to his drug-induced strength.

Blood and gore dripped down onto the cyborged alien's glowing skullcase.

One of Pago's mega-fans ran up with a bucket of red dye and dashed it over the heads of several of Freakshow's cheerleaders.

The crowd loved it.

Outrage came later. Freakshow fainted with the discus, threatening an overhead throw at Pago. He felt the shift in Goth Garal's attention, spun at the last moment to swat one of the neural-sai out of the air. It clattered across the brightmetal floor but quickly skipped back into the air.

The second sword drove in at him and he took it against the ebony vambrace protecting his left arm. The discharge of neural energy scalded his arm from elbow to wrist, pricking him with thousands of tiny, white-hot needles. Hundreds of spectators gasped, feeling only a shadow of the psychic wound through the Ophidians' broadcast emitters. Something you couldn't get at home, even through the live feed.

PK hunched down impossibly low, opened another portal, reaching into the vortex of energies with a long, muscular arm. Dragging some new monstrosity in from the demon dimensions or from the other side of the galaxy, Freakshow didn't care. Not so long as it kept Pago fully occupied this time. He wanted Goth Garal. Freakshow swiped at his chin, smearing blood up the side of his face. A measure

of his battle-weary state, that his regenerative powers had not scabbed the wound yet or that his nanite-laced blood could not be pushed to stitch it closed.

Or maybe Pago had coated his razors with one of Goth Garal's anticoagulant infections. He wouldn't put that past them.

The swords dove in again, and this time Freakshow pushed to meet them with great, swinging arcs, bashing them aside with the flat of his heavy discus. He pumped more nanite-laced blood into his muscles, and then still more. His next swing smashed one neural-sai against the glowing brightmetal floor, and its green, poisonous light sparked into a hundred wriggling worms which died in black crisps of smoke.

It bought him a few precious seconds.

Freakshow ducked the remaining sword, sprinted past Pago and PK, closing with Goth Garal before the demon fully recovered from the psychic drain. Blood flowed freely, stinging his left eye. He leapt almost twice his own height into the air. A flexible spine of titanium-laced graphite allowed Freakshow to whipsaw about, hurl his discus back at Pago, then continue the mid-air spin as he dove down at Goth Garal.

His flying kick caught Gothu in the throat, driving the demon back several paces. Freakshow landed hard, rolled, and sprang up with adrenaline-charged reflexes.

The crowd's favor shifted back toward Freakshow, where it belonged. In the Justich Federation, no gladiator topped the ratings as he did. He deserved their

full attention. Their tumultuous roar buffeted the battling combatants, shaking the Ophidian arena with loud fists. Freakshow strengthened his aural suppressors, slammed both hands into Goth Garal's brawny midsection and then again into the demon's groin.

Freakshow's scalp wound gushed blood now, the simple wound growing worse the longer he stood in the demon's shadow. He tasted the blood on his lips, salty, copperish. Both eyes burned as blood washed over his face. Now the human gladiator knew that Ngaral had somehow affected his healing ability, either through infection or by inducing a bio-tek mutation that Freakshow's nanotechnology couldn't counteract. Not good. He had to push his advantage, now, before he bled out from a simple laceration.

He wouldn't get the chance.

Freakshow felt the telekinetic shield slipping in between them, pushing him back from the muscular demon. His next blow never landed, slowing, as if caught in a repulsor field, and easily avoided.

Goth Garal snarled, slammed meaty hands down onto Freakshow's shoulders once, twice, nearly driving the human gladiator to the arena floor. The demon raked bloody furrows down Freakshow's sides, digging thick nails past skin and flesh, tearing into KEV armor beneath.

The weave of monomolecular threads filed down Goth Garal's claws to blunt nubs.

Which did nothing against the monster's great strength. With one large hand, Goth Garal grabbed Freakshow around the throat, raised him in a stiff-armed grip above the brightmetal floor. Freakshow managed to lock both hands around the demon's other wrist, keeping Goth Garal from gouging out his eyes. It was all he could do to hold the thick fingers back from his unscarred face.

Not much of a victory, he thought, his vision darkening as Goth Garal squeezed and slowly began to choke the life out of David Dangers.