

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-3-

JINXED

Ursai Major, The Tarn System

“This is so unlike you.” David hiked himself up onto the edge of a steel table. Alice stood to one side as an Ophidian Keeper and a trio of Freakshow’s cheerleaders prepped him for tonight’s ‘Head On’ collision match. Resting on a thick coil, the Keeper prepared a nanite ‘cocktail,’ loaded it into the pneumatic injector. The women paraded by with a choice of accessories.

“I can’t understand why you feel this is necessary. Don’t I make enough for the both of us?” Enough for her to live like a duchess on his Chasse estates.

Enough to make the right pay-offs to keep Ophidian influence far away from his only remaining family.

“It’s not about the money.” A storm of applause hammered at the ready room’s thin steel door. Alice dimpled, sharing a private joke with her stepbrother. “Not just about the money,” she said.

“It’s never a sure thing,” David told her, as if explaining one of life’s great truths. This was his second attempt at talking her into going home since arriving on Ursai Major. His head should have been in the fight about to happen.

“Especially for a lower-tier gladiator.”

“Well, Jinx is second-tier and doing quite nicely. She has sponsors now.”

She still talked of her gladiator persona like it was a different person. Wake up little girl.

“Ask Version 9 how much that’s worth. He was an Ophidian champion. Now the cyborg’s sinking so fast in ratings you’d swear he had neutronium tied to his servos. And the demon, who slipped from third rank to first... Ah, what was his name?”

“Pefdsartsuq Klojmrentoyu,” Alice said easily, rolling the hard syllables of her tongue as if they were simple music. She brushed at her razor-mesh skirt, fussing with the weave. “P.K. You were his partner on Solop Avagar. Forgot him already, David?” Her tone was teasing, but with a serious undercurrent.

Not many people talked to him like that. One of Freakshow’s women stared at Alice, fascinated. He snapped his fingers and sent her to get his vambrace.

He had to admit, his stepsister had the touch. A perfect mix of childhood innocence, played up with pig-tails and shy smiles, and hard-core gladiator. He'd looked up her stats, too. Sponsored in a run of minor Justich League circuits, the same ones which has so recently been his primary stomping grounds, her list of wins wasn't half bad.

But this was the Ophidian Circuit. He was just getting used to it himself, but one thing he knew: The snakes played for keeps at this level.

"You have no idea what you're doing."

'Jinx' shrugged. "I'll take my chances. You certainly have."

Freakshow let two cheerleaders remove his suede drawstring pants, helping him into skin-fit neoleather that stretched where he needed. Strapping on his armored belt and codpiece, he felt not the least bit uncomfortable with his stepsister in the room. You lost inhibitions quickly on the circuit, after a few wins and the victory parties.

Was that what bothered him? The idea of Alice being exposed to his world? He'd always thought of her as a sheltered, spoiled girl. She was growing up fast.

"Issstime," the Ophidian hissed at him, slurring the words together. The snake-like Keeper hunched forward, injector held ready, black eyes staring at him with a predator's gaze.

David grunted and thrust an arm out—the one without KEV sub-dermal armor. A brief sting and the nanite upgrade went to work in his bloodstream. His

arm prickled with warmth. Euphoria floated right behind, quickly stealing over his entire body.

The Keeper wrapped his arm in a hardening brace of steel-strength plaster. The cheerleaders groomed him, oiling his skin and plaiting his hair.

“We’ll continue this later,” he said finally, jumping off the table.

Alice nodded. “I can’t wait.”

The Keeper slithered ahead, keyed open the door. Calls of “Freakshow!” rolled into the room, chased by equally strong chants for “Lothar...Lothar...” Freakshow’s alien opponent had a good following in the Tarn System.

“David,” Alice called, stopping Freakshow at the door. He glanced back. His stepsister paused, then shrugged. “Knock him dead.”

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But it was never so easy. The Ophidians knew how to handicap a match, balancing augmentations against natural ability. Freakshow wondered when he stomped into the arena, seeing sparks shoot up from the glowing, brightmetal floor at each step. Cosmetic effects only.

Then Lothar rose up from a chasm split through the floor. Skin like pale milk peaked out between black leather straps. He held a dagger in each hand, arms crossed over his chest in a semblance of the sleeping dead. A dark fog rolled around the alien’s thin frame, and warning lights flashed as bio-filter screens dropped over the arena.

Disease. Tendrils of plague reached out for Freakshow, but his supercharged nanites kept him safe for a time. Charging to one side of the arena, then the other, he sought a weakness in Lothar's defenses. Wondering if Alice watched, he quested out with his aura and pulled back whenever queasy-yellow tinged his probes.

All too often.

Lothar controlled the arena, hunting Freakshow like a trapped animal, waiting for the right moment. The alien never dropped his guard. Finally he rushed forward on a wave of sickening plague, blades flashing, catching Freakshow in the arms, the gut.

KEV armor turned most of the blows. He took another series against his ebony vambrace.

Freakshow's strength waned as disease overwhelmed his nanite enhancements. Coiling in on himself, he exploded out with every ounce of force at his command. He caught Lothar with double palm-heel strikes, throwing the alien across the arena.

He stumbled to one knee. Retching.

Lothar climbed up on unsteady legs.

The audience cheered their sport. Head-on matches rarely lasted so long.

Forced into the role of prey, prodded by the emotional outbursts slamming into him through the sensory fields, Freakshow snarled his rage. Pacing from side to side, he struck back only when Lothar cornered him. Poisons worked inside

him, sapping his strength, slowing his responses. Making him look weak—inadequate—in front of Alice.

Distracted by thoughts of his stepsister, Freakshow missed Lothar's charge and the alien very nearly took him.

Slipping in under a new pestilence, Lothar spiked a brain fever in Freakshow that he countered by concentrating a healing aura around his head. A knife flashed at his throat, nicked an artery through the KEV armor. Warm blood splashed on his shoulder. The other knife stabbed at his eye. Freakshow met it open-palmed, letting the point drive through his hand, locking his fingers over the tang. He pulled Lothar off-balance as the first knife drove in again. He met it open-palmed as well.

Wrestling for control of the knives, refusing to let them be pulled from his hands, Freakshow raised one foot and stomped into the middle of Lothar's chest. Bones cracked. Lothar stumbled, losing his grip, and Freakshow dove after him. His backhand slap put three inches of dagger blade into Lothar's throat.

An overhead strike drove the second blade through one glassy eye.

Lothar slumped forward, dead on his feet, held up only by the blades run through Freakshow's hands. The fog of pestilence disbursed. Freakshow carefully lowered the alien down to the floor as the crowd roared. Stepping back, he willed his hands open so he could remove the daggers.

His muscles trembled, refused.

So be it. He'd have them pulled in his ready room. There would be no answering the crowd's call for his usual parade. No victory party. He had let his mind wander for a moment, and nearly paid for it at a high cost. Champions did not make that kind of mistake. Ever.

And if he were going to prevent it from happening again, there was only one solution. Alice Jenks had to go.