THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

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DARKNESS FALLS

Varrenhold, The Matricc System

Varrenhold's Cyberwarren Arena was a junkyard of crashed starfighters, half-ruined vehicles, and surplus war material. Holotronic mesh covered four-story walls at either end. Advertisements competed with live combat, lighting the arena in a garish backwash of neon-bright colors. No restraint fields protected the audience from the gladiators, or vice versa, and the Ophidian sensory net stood wide open, creating one of the strongest feedback loops between gladiator and audience Freakshow had ever experienced.

So he felt their cringing expectation as he dodged between a fire-gutted tank and towering mountain of destroyed war-bots, chased by a fury of ruby-hued laser blasts.

The Berserker had cyber-rigged a laser turret, manning the seat himself until he could find a way to automate it. One violent beam caught Freakshow just short of cover, glancing across the small of the back. It slashed through body armor, boiling away skin and flesh, lifted him from the floor and threw him forward.

He hit hard, scrambled into the tank's shadow. The smell of burning meat choked the air.

The audience shouted and screamed as a psychic lash burned across their spines. Feeding on the suffering, demon-kind roared their approval. The holotronic displays cut to an instant replay of the action, his rough and tumble landing, dragging numbed legs behind him as he edged up to the corner of the tank, glanced around.

Protected by the dwarfish engineer, Prince of Gates held the arena's center unchallenged. Opening a new portal, the demon reaching deep into inter-dimensional space to loose another horror on Freakshow's stillborn team. Dark laughter echoed across the arena with a power that rivaled even the tumultuous roar of the audience. It scratched fingernails across the chalkboard of Freakshow's soul.

One of Freakshow's new teammates, Leetah Kalynda, ducked around the other side of the scrap heap. Scars crisscrossed her face, standing out pale and puckered against her flushed skin. Her swords dripped green ichor and gore. The cyborg construct looked his way, shook her head. He nodded back. They both recognized the signs of a lost match.

Freakshow had seen it most often from the other side, of course, but that didn't change anything this night. Thrown into the deep end on his first full-team event, he faced last year's Champion. Xarz'ycus, Prince of Gates. The Berserker was a new addition to Xarz'ycus's preseason team, but an effective one, and the demon had recently passed over Goth Garal for soldier-construct Version Nine. Of Prince of Gates' original four only The Stranger remained—a dark, spectral being of mysterious origin and even more secret ambitions.

This late in the preseason, with most teams readying themselves for the full Circuit, Freakshow had been forced to scavenge among cast-offs and unknowns. Mannequin, the AI symbiote, was a true gladiator veteran but difficult to work with. Leetah stood low in the ratings, and Simon Bantus, the new "Fish," was more interested in surviving his one-year sentence to the Circuit than he was in placing for the Champions tour.

But Freakshow did nothing that he did not try to be one of the best. If not the best. He would win an endorsement, and get his stepsister out of the Ophidians' coils. Then he would go on to best them at their own sport.

But not today.

The scrap mountain Leetah hid behind trembled as a giant robotic 'dozer scraped up more robotic body parts and piled them on. She spun away, slid low across the opening between them, and joined Freakshow behind the tank's ruined husk.

"Fish is down," she said, voice rusty with disuse. "The Stranger put him into a mental seizure. Mannequin?"

Freakshow tried to get back to his feet, did so slowly. His nanites released a flood of endorphins to counter the pain. "Commandeered a 'dozer, went off hunting Version Nine." He made certain to face her. Born deaf, Leetah had to read his lips. Her single-word curse pretty much summed up her feelings. His too, for that matter.

David stretched, winced. Strengthening his aura, he built a healing shell around his lower back. "Can you get to the engineer?" he asked.

Leetah shook her head.

"Can you distract him?"

There weren't many ways to distract a man sitting in a laser turret. She paused, understanding lighting up her mismatched eyes. "I do not come back," she said slowly. "I have standard replacement clause only. No reanimation."

Which meant Leetah had sponsor troubles. Most gladiators opted for the best insurance they could afford, but it took real money buying a second chance at life.

"You'll have to help me get close, then," he said. Freakshow did not care to push a losing strategy. But when faced with ignominious defeat or going out in a blaze of glory, a top-tier gladiator only had one choice.

And a top-tier team? Where could he find others to whom winning meant just as much?

"Now?" Leetah asked, reversing her blades so that she held one down the length of each forearm.

"Now!"

His first step, Freakshow worried he was destined to end up face-down on the arena floor, at the mercy of The Berserker's lasers or one of Prince of Gates' portaled creatures. His legs felt unsteady, still numb from the earlier laser blast. But they strengthened with each step as he pushed more nanites to the damaged area. Around the tank, racing down the short corridor between vehicle and robotic scrap pile. Leetah hung back several paces, ready to deflect any threats.

It came before they cleared the scrap pile, scrabbling down the side of the heap. An eight-legged raknid hit the arena floor, fangs open and front legs bristling with poisoned quills. Freakshow dodged around the spiderlike creature, leaving it to Leetah Kalynda who fell on it with flashing swords and a grim smile of determination.

Freakshow ran on alone, charging forward with a sudden surge of audience expectancy buoying him. Their encouragement built like a wave, rushing up with inexorable strength. As bloodlust warred with the dawning horror of his suicide

charge, that wave rolled over into a breaking foam of excitement commingled with terror. This was going to be glorious. This was going to hurt.

This was going to hurt a great deal, in fact.

Standing tall at the center of a wide-open area, Prince of Gates reigned in two slithering, slug-like beasts as if they were faithful pets. The demon was thickly muscled, with part of his gladiator costume stitched directly into his corpse-blue skin. His eyes were milky orbs and he slicked his hair back with what looked like congealed blood. The slug-like creatures mutated right before the eyes of the audience, held too long in Xarz'ycus's demonic presence. Already Freakshow felt the other gladiator's dark presence pressing in against his own aura.

Prince of Gates saw him come, of course. As did The Berserker, who opened up with the laser turret and splashed more ruby-tinged energy across the arena. Freakshow dodged and leaped, pulling every last trick from the book. One close call splashed a wide, molten puddle into the arena floor. Freakshow leaped across, hair flying out behind him like a victory banner. Another passed so close to one arm that his skin blistered. He side-slipped, spun, and cut back on target.

He might have actually made it, if the demon had granted him some measure of professional courtesy.

Prince of Gates smiled, cruel and dark. In Freakshow's mind, the demon stood frozen in place while the background rushed away in retreat, as if the arena suddenly grew larger around him. Time poured over them both in a sticky layer.

Freakshow's next step came slower, driving him through the warped shell of reality. The next, slower still.

At the edges of his sanity, Freakshow sensed the barriers that separated reality from the demon dimensions breaking down, thinning. He glimpsed monstrous faces from the shadows which cavorted in his peripheral vision. Hands clawed at him, dragging him down.

Another step.

Another.

How long had it been since the last laser cannonade? Another jump? Should he dodge aside? Freakshow pulled his aura tight about him, creating a thin barrier to protect him from this demonic twisting of reality.

It helped. His senses cleared, but there was little time to free his body from the quagmire the demon had sunk them into. He saw Prince of Gates striding forward, caught in the same web. He saw The Berserker track on him, a fiery stream pouring from the laser turret. Freakshow raised his fists, thrusting them forward in an effort to protect his face. They disappeared in a haze of blood-red light, severed at the wrists, then at the elbows.

Time and dimension snapped back into place with a mind-wrenching thunderclap. Freakshow leaped, a powerful yell skinning his lips back from strong teeth, still trying to reach his enemy when the next laser blast took him in the side of the chest.

Darkness took him. He was not sorry to see it come.