

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-6-

COMMON GROUND

Gasherdel, Garina

Standing in one of the narrow entrance tunnels to Gasherdel's Cathedral-Prime arena, Freakshow scowled equally at the corridor's dank smell and at Ryla, the bronze-skinned demoness who stood slightly apart from the three humans. Just barely muted, the crowd's tumultuous roar of bloodlust and anger seeped past force field screens, echoing along the dark tunnel, clinging to the walls with malevolent tenacity. It prickled the short hairs on the back of his neck, as if reminding him of something.

Other than the usual promise of death and dismemberment, that is.

Rejuvenation took something out of gladiators. They all knew it, although Freakshow could not put a mental finger on anything specific. He'd felt cold for

weeks after, his flesh blue-tinged and slightly numb. The chill penetrated right down to his bones. Spending hours every day in Ophidian training facilities with the temperatures elevated high enough to make a fire-daemon sweat, he pushed his nanites to bulk up muscle and increase reflexive speed. He swore off bodily pleasures and purchased a full regimen of anti-mutation agents, suffering painful joint aches and heavy migraines as he readied himself for the Demon Wars Invitational.

He felt in top physical form. His aura wrapped warmly about himself, pure and gold and perfect, he knew he had not dropped any weight or suffered a permanent loss of coordination. No. This time it had been a memory. A thought. Something he had remembered, or realized.

Reaching for it again, he slipped back into the disjointed memories of his run-in with Prince of Gates. It wasn't his tactics. He'd reviewed the holotronic footage often enough. The way he had embraced death, causing a ratings spike even in defeat? Not quite.

All that remained was a sense of loss, like a dark hole at the back of his mind. Something important...

But it was gone.

And in its place came searing light, stabbing into the back of his eyes as the corridor lit up so brightly that his entire team stumbled blindly through their first few steps together.

The Stallion crossed one arm across his eyes, electro-spear held out dangerously before him, and nearly ran into Ryla. The demoness lashed out with her talons, sent him reeling away with bloody stripes down his cheek. Naru Kami regained his equilibrium much faster. Nothing put Striking Dragon off his game for long. The elder martial arts master trotted out onto the arena floor at Freakshow's side.

A bright edge of tempered insanity cut at the "Human" team as they emerged from the protection of the intense light—psychic backwash from a sell-out crowd of a quarter million bloodthirsty fans. Freakshow strengthened his spirit shield, needing a few seconds of clear thought. There would be no complicated strategies this evening, he saw. A smooth expanse of pale reddish stone stretched from one side of Cathedral-Prime to the other, littered with drifts of ivory-yellow bones and oily, gangrenous slicks. A deathmatch arena. Holotronic screens towered over each corner, and seating wrapped up and over the gothic ceiling with an applied altered-gravity state. The best seats in the house, looking straight down on the gladiators through individual magnification fields. God's Eye, they called it.

Freakshow strode forward, determined to give them something worth seeing.

His shadow stretched ahead for over a dozen meters. He imagined the effect of the brilliant light on the spectators: Angelic fire flooding one corner of the

arena, hiding the mundane entrance corridor from view. And the other team? Would they arrive in a blast of fire? A chaos of artificial night and screams?

It was fire. Across the arena's battlefield, a vortex of flame swirled and cavorted around the arriving demons, hiding them from view.

With hand motions he quickly pushed Striking Dragon out onto his left flank, Ryla on his near-right where he could best keep an eye on her. Schaeffer Steelarm donned the mask to his bio-suit. The first-tier "Stallion" was left to guard Freakshow's back (and was also to watch out for any treachery by Ryla). The Invitational was supposed to pit human teams against demons. But Ryla petitioned to fight against her own kind, and the Gasherdel promoters saddled Freakshow with her as a novelty. Demons turning on their own was not unknown, though rarely did they champion the Human side of a very bitter rivalry. Did the Ophidians wish to see what she would do? Or were they throwing another hurdle into Freakshow's path?

He wasn't expected to place well anyway after his showing against Prince of Gates.

Then the veil of fire parted, and seeing whom they had matched his team against, Freakshow knew a moment's despair that they had been right.

Dark Arkzilipul led—the Devourer of Souls. His ebony skin reflected the fire, making it a part of himself. Stomping forward on cloven hoofs, lash gripped tightly in the left hand, he bellowed his own challenge against the screams of

hatred which rained down around him. He whipped his lash overhead, the braid of dark energies cutting the air with a tortured scream and a sizzling *snap!* at the end.

Goth Ngaral had found a home as Arkzilipul's lieutenant, and would be on watch for any of Freakshow's usual tactics and tricks. After Garal came a cadaverous demon known only as Pestilence, with his open, running sores and a dark halo of plague flies, and then the chitin-armored Kos'bargithd, dragging at his side a massive sword half again as long as he was tall.

"We are so universally screwed," Schaeffer whispered loudly. Striking Dragon silently took up a flat-footed stance. He tugged on frost-white wisps of beard, offering no argument. They watched as Arkzilipul slashed open reality and portalled a Krevloc Screamer into the arena.

A colony-form of gaping maws, it was a creature straight out of nightmare. The Screamer's first discordant screech raked nails down David's spine.

It was Ryla who broke the spell. "We have an audience," she reminded them with a sneer. Her amber eyes flashed with pent-up hellfire.

They did have an audience. And now Freakshow saw what was being done to them—what Arkzilipul had managed from behind the curtain of fire. Spreading out his aura, he pushed back the black miasma of mystical energies which the demon had cast around the humans, dampening their spirits with tainted yang.

Another push and the effect dispersed, wrenched from Arkzilipul's control. The Devourer bent forward and bellowed his rage.

Ryla was already running forward, holding one arm out to her side. Yellow pus dripped from her talons, and the spines along her forearm. Joining battle, or joining the other side?

Freakshow reached back and grabbed the electro-spear out of Schaeffer's hands, nodded Striking Dragon toward Goth Garal, and chased after her.

The demons spread out to either side of their dark master. Pestilence slipped up to Kos, ran a diseased hand along the massive reaver, poisoning it. Goth Garal kicked through a small pile of splintered bones, reached down and uncovered a Pa'chan weapon. The crescent ends glowed with ruby fire as he placed both hands upon the ornate haft. Goth Garal grinned.

None seemed worried about Ryla's charge. They ignored her. Seemed to welcome her.

Freakshow levered the electro-spear back, sparks arcing out from its broad head, crackling in his ear. He had the shot now, he could take it. Ryla's back was open and vulnerable, and better the demon you knew than the demon you didn't. He gave her a handful of seconds, counted them down, stutter-stepped into a hop that shifted all his weight behind the impending throw.

Then Arkzilipul gated in a Drosh warrior, throwing the minion into Ryla's path. Ryla swiped at it with her claws, drawing blood, and the poison worked quickly. In a convulsive shudder the Drosh twisted itself around so hard its spine snapped.

First blood had gone to the “Human” team. It gave Freakshow pause. A heartbeat to reconsider. Then he threw...

And hoped he had chosen right.

The Drosh barely slowed Ryla, but apparently her target had never been the Devourer of Souls. She veered away from Arkzilipul in a determined cut, rushing into the ready embrace of Kos’ bargithd and Pestilence. Kos’s reaver glanced off her arm spines, then he fell back under a flurry of savage attacks that clawed at his eyes, his throat.

Pestilence hesitated, then swarmed his plague flies forward to envelop Ryla in a diseased embrace.

...and Freakshow’s spear came crashing down with a thunderclap of bright power, skewering the Krevloc Screamer. The Screamer died with a choking rasp, teeth gnashing as the colony-form slumped down against the shaft of the electro-spear.

The method in Ryla’s madness showed itself as the demoness burst from Pestilence’s dark shroud of flies, driving back both of Arkzilipul’s lower-tier warriors, separating the demon line. With Striking Dragon and Stallion racing into the blistering fire Goth Garal laid about with the Pa’chan, it left Freakshow head to head with the demon leader.

It also left Ryla’s back completely open to the Devourer, and Arkzilipul was not one to be ignored. He struck his lash against the red stone floor, scarring a

black wound. Drawing back the braid of dark energies, it wound behind him like something alive and sinuous, then he struck forward with the speed of a viper.

To be brought up short by Freakshow, who leaped into the space without a thought for his own safety. Ryla was giving her all. There was no way he would not do the same. Willing to risk everything for the team, for victory. That's what a top-tier team did. He remembered!

And then the lash bit into his skin, wrapping about him, and all he could think about was the pain.