

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-9-

HARD CHANCES

Meagred, Prelum Bracius

“I never betrayed you, PK.” David Dangers winced. “Though I certainly took you for granted.”

Standing between Ryla and Striking Dragon, David forced himself to keep his gaze locked with Pefdsartsuq Klojmrentoyu, PK, and not break away to challenge Xarz’ycus. Aware of the demon’s looming presence, he felt the dark charisma pressing against his aura like a cancer growing on healthy, living flesh. Close enough to touch if he were to reach back. Close enough that Prince of Gates could rip out his spine and beat him with it before he so much as flinched.

Only the recognized neutrality of Purgatory, Meagred's "Warrior's Hell," likely held Xarz'ycus back. As reigning Champion, the demon master enjoyed many benefits of Ophidian stewardship. He would loathe to jeopardize them here and now, for no real gain.

Demons were, for the most part, extremely selfish.

But PK was a demon too. "Says you to come fight," the wiry demon said, hunkering down into a deeper crouch. Readying himself, or pulling away from Prince of Gates? "Sees I no reasons to helps you."

"Then you may join me, Klojmrentoyu." The hard syllables rolled out of Xarz'ycus naturally. Almost seductive.

"Sees I no reasons to helps you either," PK said in a savage hiss.

David felt Xarz'ycus's rage. A searing heat spread across the back of his neck as his skin blistered up with crisping, black pustules. More formed on the backs of his hands. One burst, and a slender tentacle slid out to form a sixth, searching finger.

Freakshow tensed, gathering his strength for a spinning assault that would launch him into the teeth of his enemy. He felt the Prince's mutation powers picking scabs at his aura, trying to find a better grip. He burned energy to strengthen his mystic shields, and pushed nanites to his neck, his hands, to counter the damage already done.

“Rein back,” Ryla ordered Prince of Gates, her former master. Her talons dripped a brackish green poison which puddled on the floor at her feet one drop at a time. The acrid scent of corrosion lifted from the small pool.

Silence had descended on the immediate area as conversations fell off and all eyes turned to the budding confrontation. A crowd began to gather, made up of gladiators several rows deep as cheerleaders and agents were quickly shoved toward the back of a thick pack. Freakshow lifted onto the balls of his feet. Next to him, Striking Dragon noticed the nearly-imperceptible shift and nodded, ready.

But then Xarz’ycus dark presence retreated. Physically, Freakshow could tell that Prince of Gates moved not one hair’s breadth. He pulled inward instead, as if the demon had somehow diminished himself.

Feeling a touch stronger with Ryla and Naru Kami backing his play, Freakshow shifted his stance just enough to bring Prince of Gates into his peripheral vision. Polished, corpse-blue skin stretched back tightly from the demon’s bony ridges. His milky-white orbs glared at Ryla, not Freakshow.

“Still a slave to Kaleem?” Xarz’ycus asked. “You could be so much more.”

Ryla bared her teeth and hissed at her former master. But she held herself in check. A good thing, as Freakshow noticed The Stranger slip up into the shadow of one of the nearby great pillars. A serpentine tongue licked out from the darkness contained inside his cowl.

He had to guess that another of Xarz’ycus’s minions or mates had already found a place in Naru Kami’s blind spot as well. Fortunately, several Ophidians

had slithered forward through the wall of warriors, their obsidian eyes watchful and dangerous.

Prince of Gates dismissed them all with a slow blink, turning back to PK. “You have been more,” a raspy voice reminded the wiry demon, “and less. I can offer you a chance at him. Together, we might destroy Arkzilipul. It is what you want.”

This was not an arena in which Freakshow felt comfortable. It was the kind of fight in which he had never before competed. As he was learning, there were levels of understanding behind and between every gladiator on the Ophidian circuit. Champions had to master those levels, both inside and outside of the arenas, and he was late getting into the game.

But Xarz’ycus was interfering with his team composition. Which meant the demon might actually be worried, watching Freakshow climb in standings. So this was a preliminary skirmish to the coming battle. No more, no less.

And one which Freakshow intended to win.

“I won’t make promises I can’t keep,” he told the wary demon who crouched nearby, “but if I can help you with whatever your goals, I will.” He swallowed dryly, coaxing some reassurance into his voice. “I didn’t betray you,” he repeated. “But you know that Xarz’ycus will.” A glance toward Ryla. “He betrays all, in the end.”

“Certainty of betrayal allows you to make plans against the day,” Prince of Gates offered. “I make no promises that he can keep.” Xarz’ycus’s tone was

mocking, and dark. His grin was feral. Hungry. “Humans,” he said with loathing. “They are so unpredictable.”

“Yes,” PK whispered, “unpredictables they are. Knows you they might win.” He side-shuffled away, toward Freakshow’s side. He stood up to nearly his full height. “Knows you better, we might win.”

More Ophidian Keepers swarmed forward now. Jinx and Bull’s Eye led a small group of gladiators along with them, all with direct Ophidian sponsorship or other close ties to the snakes.

Too late, as Xarz’ycus suddenly manifested his arena-level strength.

Boils erupted on the exposed skin of the humans standing nearest the demon, Freakshow included. Exhaling a jaundice-yellow vapor, Prince of Gates stepped forward to backhand the lithe PK hard enough to send him flying backward into a phalanx of alien gladiators.

Charging his muscles with a surge of adrenaline, Freakshow reacted with lightning-fast blows to Xarz’ycus’s legs, then to the side of the head as the demon prince stumbled. He spun around behind the demon, bumped into Ryla who accidentally scored his side with her forearm spines. The cuts stung terribly, and Freakshow’s nanites flooded the area to cauterize the wound before more poison seeped into his bloodstream.

Remembering The Stranger, and how the spectral had slipped up behind Ryla, Freakshow spent a fraction of a second looking for the threat. The Stranger was gone. Missing. And the delay was costly.

It gave Xarz'ycus time to regain his feet.

It gave Alice Jenks time to slip in between the brawling gladiators.

Her reputation for lucky accidents notwithstanding, Jinx was in the wrong place at the very wrong time. Xarz'ycus picked her up by the neck as if she were nothing more than a plaything. Her jaunty pigtails flopped into disarray as he shook her, and then the demon threw her hard enough into one of the carved pillars that the stone cracked.

Above, the titanic slab of quaranite groaned as its weight distribution shifted across the pillars.

Several lesser gladiators and many guests ran for one of the exits. Several more ducked, as if it would help. The quaranite groaned again, but settled. Purgatory was not about to be brought down with a single brawl.

An Ophidian stood in between Freakshow and Xarz'ycus now, scaly hide glistening darkly with secreted oils and fangs extended in challenge, warning either gladiator from making another move. Freakshow froze, his muscles trembling with pent-up energy. If he hadn't seen Alice moving, injured but alive as she slowly picked herself up from the floor, he doubted he could have held himself back. He nodded to Ryla, who backed off. Xarz'ycus diminished his powers with a reluctant snarl.

The Keeper glanced to Freakshow's left. Naru Kami released the Berserker from a choke hold. The dwarfish engineer had a handful of insect-form bombers,

which he shoved back into a pocket. David had not seen that threat, nor noticed the martial arts master moving to counter.

“Isssfoul,” the Ophidian hissed. His black eyes froze, as impassive as obsidian glass, and everyone waited for the judgment. “PrinceofGatessss, isssfault.”

“He attacked my team,” Freakshow said quickly, sensing a weakness and moving in for the kill. His muscles still did not want to obey. They wanted to rend and pummel and break. But his mind worked at its usual tenacity, the same heightened problem-solving ability he relied on in any arena. Here was an advantage. “I claim privilege.”

“Issstrue?” the Ophidian asked of PK as the demon climbed back to unsteady feet. PK hesitated, then nodded, and the Keeper looked to Freakshow.

Left to their own devices, the Ophidians would have inflicted a harsher penalty on Xarz’ycus for his breach in protocol. Not only for attacking PK, but for the savage assault on Jinx as well. If anyone could discipline a demon, it would be the snakes. But the penalty would not keep Prince of Gates from competing, nor would it likely cut the odds standing in between the two teams. Freakshow knew how to do that.

He also knew that by intervening, he denied his sister a measure of her own revenge.

So did she. Jinx limped forward, supported on one side by another Ophidian Keeper. She wiped blood from the corner of her mouth with the heel of her hand. “What do you have in mind, David?”

One match left. One last chance to cut the standings. If his team had a chance, this was it.

“Grudge match,” he said.