

THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-10-

IN THE SHADOW OF FAILURE

Yashrad, Sept Bracius

A riot of cheering stormed Yashrad's Black Tower Amphitheater as Freakshow dodged around one of the arena's scalloped-edged "eyetooth" stones, avoiding a warbot's blades by bare inches. The Tomtakee's ax-like hand smashed splinters out of the gray-speckled rock. A long, jagged piece stung into the back of Freakshow's neck, drawing blood.

Black pus welled up in the gladiator's eyes, nearly blinding him, but still he set his feet, spun, and thrust forward with the Nukatal shield he carried. Grinding heads on the shield's face ate away half of the warbot's ax-hand. Raising the

shield overhead and pushing his nanite-charged strength, Freakshow drove the shield's leading edge into the warbot's chest.

Angry sparks singed the hair on his forearm.

The warbot toppled over, bleeding smoke and arcs of dancing energy.

The stench of ozone chased Freakshow as he stumbled back, blood hammering in his ears and the vile taste of congealed pus thick on his tongue. There were more warbots where that one came from. Slamming up against one of the arena's thick fencestones, he threw himself up and back to shoulder-roll over the quaranite slab and drop down for a breather next to Ryla.

"You do not look good," the demoness told him. She slapped at a pair of nano-mites, brushing the insect-forms away from an open wound which bled down her chest.

The last time he had seen her, she'd been struggling against two of Xarz'yucus's royal guards. That was before his team had shattered under the violent assault of Berserker-created mechanicals and minions of the Prince of Gates.

Before his own run-in with The Fallen One.

He spat out the foul taste building at the back of his throat. Setting aside his shield, he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, clearing them. The poison ran rampant through his system. He felt it clogging up veins, masking his vision. "A gift from Singazer," he told her.

Rumors had chased them from Meagred to Yashrad, that The Stranger had walked out on Prince of Gates after the confrontation in Purgatory. It cost the

demon a great deal in standings, putting Freakshow's team within favorable striking distance. But by replacing the spectral with Pago, and recruiting the nefarious Archan Singazer, Xarz'yus had put together one of the most virulent, disease-ridden teams possible.

"They have plagues and toxins spread from one side of this arena to the other," he said, coughing up blood.

A cascade of energy crackled overhead as artificial lightning discharged into the arena's brightmetal rings. The thunderclap barely made a dent against the crowd's constant furor.

"We expected that," Ryla reminded him.

Icy fingers trailed up his spine. Cold death... a whisper teased at the edge of his consciousness.

Freakshow nodded, answering the spiritual presence as well as Ryla's comment. Every muscle ached and his vision blurred. He risked a glance around the corner of the fencestone, catching a glimpse of Xarz'yus near the base of the black tower, protecting his larvae breeding fields. Farther afield the diminutive Berserker labored among a scrap pile of old machinery, finishing up an adapter droid before turning his attention to several half-completed engines of terror.

He also saw another half-dozen nano-mites crawling up the side of the stone, swarming toward him. He crushed them against the red-mottled quaranite with a side-arm swat.

When he turned back Ryla was there, eyes blazing bright amber and her talons extended carefully toward his neck.

“Do not flinch,” she warned him, digging the tip of one talon into the side of his neck, dripping a burning toxin into his bloodstream. Fire coursed through his system.

“Anti-mutagen,” she said. “It will help resist their poisons.”

Already the pain in Freakshow’s eyes, the pounding in his ears, was lessening, helping him to think clearer. He reigned in his aura, fed it from his reserve strength until it glowed golden and warm, if a bit thin. He tried to quest out with seeking force to locate the rest of his team.

He hadn’t expected it to be easy. Besides the spiritual presence Freakshow had dredged up into Yashrad’s arena, bloodlust and pain flooded the battlegrounds in a psychic backlash from the enraged audience. Several hundred thousand screaming souls—alien, human, demonic—all whipped into a frenzy by an evening of gladiatorial match-ups and the final grudge match event. It dampened his ability, forcing Freakshow to rely more in his blurred vision than he would have liked.

The battleground stretched out in concentric circles around the black tower, a spire of obsidian and blackened steel which rose defiantly from the amphitheater’s center. A natural conduit for spiritual energy, ghostly images swirled around the tower in their never-ending search for peace. Above the tower an energy collector hovered. Blue-white arcs danced from arm to arm and

occasionally vented a forked tendril of energy out over the arena. Most lightning strikes concentrated against the first brightmetal ring inset into the stone flooring. Others reached past the wide circle of eyetooth stones and fencestones to ground into a second ring of glowing brightmetal. Very few snaked their way into the final circle, where standing monoliths of rune-carved quaranite stood as silent sentinels, praying to the black tower, but those that did danced from tip to tip for long, dramatic seconds.

The audience loved these. Sitting and standing and shoving forward, they jostled for position along the massive stretch of risers. Metal clashed and flesh clapped and they screamed until their lungs nearly burst. Thousands of fists hammered against the force field screens which protected them from the arena mayhem, and protected the gladiators from the savage crowd.

A scream of tortured anger drew Freakshow's attention halfway around the circle of fencestones, where he spotted a wearied and bloodied Naru Kami in a dance of strike-and-fade against the alien construct Pago. Pago screeched his rage again and jumped in front of the iron monster Xarz'ycus had summoned, preventing Striking Dragon from disabling it.

The martial arts master reeled away, his thigh laid open down to the bone.

Freakshow levered himself forward, ready to sprint to his teammate's aid. Ryla slammed him back against the stone wall with a heavy forearm, holding him back.

A heavily-muscled worpalite had leaped in to Kami's defense, distracting the enraged alien. Pago's blades made short work of the creature. Green ichor sprayed out in cruel jets. Freakshow saw their supply bot lumber toward Striking Dragon, an armored suit draped over its arms. Naru Kami led it back toward a vine-shrouded monolith.

"PK?" he asked Ryla, the worpalite reminding him that their team had a portalist as well.

"Hunting among the monoliths," she said with a disdainful glance. "No longer listening."

Honor-bound as he might be, PK was still a demon, and quick to anger. As was Ryla. Freakshow felt the conflict as her demonic nature warred against that small piece of humanity lodged deep within. Her aura blazed with fierce reds and long, angry spikes of aggression. He was not about to convince her to fall back and regroup with the others. Better to use her aggression, before it used up her.

"You on the right, I have the left," he said, grabbing his chromed shield. The grinding heads stirred to life again. "We have to get Prince of Gates away from those breeding fields."

Or they would be overrun with minions and mechanicals.

The demoness did not bother acknowledging the strategy. With a duck and spin, she leaped from behind the fencestone and ate up ground in long, athletic strides. Green pus dripped from her forearm spikes, spreading her own bio-toxins across the amphitheater floor.

Freakshow raced around the other direction, keeping behind the fence of quaranite slabs. Through the frequent breaks, he saw the Berserker converting a scrapped Tomtakee warbot into a Mark II Broozer. He stumbled once when nanomites swarmed up his leg, biting and pinching. Wasted time brushing them away. Then one of PK's werebeasts appeared at his side—a Putaka running along on all fours. Blood stained its snowy white hair.

No... the spectral voices whispered.

As if commanded, the werebeast braked to a quick halt behind one of the fencestones. Freakshow left it there, then dodged around the corner where he nearly tripped over Archan Singazer.

The Fallen One crouched on one knee, petting a bone beast he had recently summoned from some horror-filled dimension. Singazer's vacant stare, his eerily calm demeanor, belied his speed and his strength. Rising up like a striking snake, he batted the shield aside and grabbed Freakshow by the throat, pinned him against the quaranite fencestone.

Dirty fingernails broke his skin, infecting the wounds, but whatever poison they contained was countered by Ryla's anti-mutagen. The bone beast was less easy to ignore, its sharp canine teeth savaging Freakshow's leg.

Enraged, desperate, Freakshow pressed himself back into the stone, drawing strength from the heavy quaranite. He forced a knee into Singazer's groin, then rammed out his foot in a heel-kick that would have ruptured organs in a lesser

man. At least it threw Singazer back, tearing his hand away from Freakshow's throat.

A second kick shattered the side of the bone beast, killing the horror. Freakshow's foot ended up stuck in the beast's ribcage, with jagged bones puncturing through the thin KEV armor, slicing deep into tendons and muscle.

His foot still caught inside the corpse, Freakshow fell to one knee as Singazer opened a portal between them. From within the chaotic swirl of energies, a new horror of bone and exposed muscle writhed into being. Freakshow set his Nukatal shield in between himself and Singazer's minion. The Fallen One turned his unblinking stare back to his enemy, and reached out with his mind to create a small micro-portal just over Freakshow's shoulder.

The vortex ripped at his shield with angry strength. The grip tore away, and the shield disappeared into the void.

Leaving Freakshow with the break-away grip, a Nukatal boom-rang, in his hand.

Hear the crowds... the spirits cried out joyfully.

The audience surged to its feet, clamoring for blood as his throw caught Singazer in the side of the head, slicing open an angry wound that bled down the side of The Fallen One's face. Pulling his foot free of the bone beast's desiccated corpse, he rolled forward in a summersault, coming back to one knee again and driving both fists deep into Singazer's gut.

Not enough by far to put the gladiator down. Not even with help.

The putaka had clambered up onto the fencestone. With a growl, it leaped for Singazer. The Fallen One turned and caught the werebeast effortlessly, slicing into its thick pelt with sharpened fingernails. This time the poison went to work at once, and the werebeast screamed as its spine snapped in one violent spasm.

Freakshow levered himself forward, trying to reach Singazer before The Fallen One could turn back to finish him. Too late. The crowd's favor shifted again, and a fickle backlash of hate burned into Freakshow's soul. It robbed him of energy, chained him back.

Time enough, the whispers promised. We will sustain...

They would have to. Freakshow had to meet up with Ryla, with Naru Kami. This fight was not yet finished!

But it was false hope. His strength ebbing, he was unable to stop the writhing horror from moving forward, its toothy maw grasping for flesh. It caught him in the side, teeth slicing through flesh and KEV, chewing at his titanium-laced ribs.

Pain exploded along his entire side.

A scream trembled on his lips as his mind opened fully to the otherworld whispers. They paraded through in a sudden surge of power. His aura bled out into the ground, merging with slender threads of mystic power shot through like veins of hidden gold. He had felt those mystical presences all along, drawn from them whenever he closed on the black tower. Now his body became a focal point in

place of the tower, channeling spiritual power from the surrounding stone and the living, breathing earth.

Old life.

Old power.

Yashrad's Black Tower Amphitheater...it was built on hallowed ground!

And the ancient spirits demanded their own vengeance. Molten fire flooded Freakshow's veins. Working through him, the spirits bled ghostly light out of his eyes, his ears, and his wounds. A wash of mystical force blasted into the horror's face, shredding flesh from bone as the spirits each claimed their own small piece of revenge.

The horror shrieked its pain, its confusion, and then collapsed into a twitching heap at Freakshow's side.

His aura felt thin and black, like a burned-out shell. With the last of his energy, Freakshow drew himself up onto both knees, and matched gazes with The Fallen One.

Archan Singazer had to know that Freakshow was near death. But Singazer also looked none too good himself, and the wide-eyed expression crossing his normally slack face worried over the sudden power which had come to Freakshow's aid.

Opening up a transport portal, The Fallen One silently stepped through, fleeing what he did not understand.

The crowd wavered, uncertain. Freakshow wavered, unsteady. Then he tumbled back, sprawling out over the ancient ground as darkness swam up on all sides, crashing over him in wave after wave of numbing night. Only the thin, golden threads of mystical power held him up over the void. The ground trembled beneath his body as Freakshow held on by these slimmest of tendrils, plucking at them.

Clawing his way back from the shadows which threatened to claim him.