

# THE TRAGIC RISE OF DAVID DANGERS

-11-

## STANDING OVATION

**Yashrad, Sept Bracius**

Sprawled over the arena's black stone floor, his left shoulder pressed up against a quaranite fencestone, David Dangers clutched at the ground with bloodied hands. The earth trembled beneath him as he tangled his fingers in those ley lines of golden energy threaded through the hallowed ground of Yashrad's Black Tower Amphitheater.

Ours... One of ours... the spirits whispered.

They sounded stronger now. The barriers separating Freakshow from the eternal had thinned with the raw, savage force which had coursed through his entire being. David felt scorched; hollowed out. He called silently for help, prayed

for relief and the chance—one more chance—to set things right and claim victory. He owed it to his sister. To his teammates and the crowd.

He owed it to himself.

He pulled against the leys and the ground heaved in protest. Grayish powder rolled off the sides of the quaranite fencestone, dusting his shoulders and his coal-black hair. Cracks split through the black stone flooring of the amphitheater, radiating outward from a fracture point.

The stone crumbled into gravel, and then a hand thrust outward to grip the edge of the arena floor.

The rift widened, turning into a gravel pool from which the earth spirit arose—a vaguely feminine form coated in a sheaf of pitted gravel. The rough stones rolled together, grinding against one another. It smelled of dust and loam and a tinge of sulfur from where the earth ran hot at Yashrad's molten core.

One of ours...

Magnificent, David decided. Even better, the crowd loved it. Whatever else might be going on with the grudge match, Freakshow's elation bled through the sensor nets and energized a good portion of the screaming, stampeding audience. Fists hammered against the force fields, and all along the lower amphitheater level the energy screens crackled with new reinforcement.

Buoyed by the shift in favor, Freakshow drew a small measure of new strength and held up a hand. The spirit reached down to grip him by the vambrace, hauling him to his feet.

He staggered ahead, and the spirit minion followed. Through the eyetooth stones and over the innermost brightmetal ring. The spectral whispers retreated from his mind as he neared the Prince of Gates's breeding fields, intestinal sacs bulging with growing larvae, but he bulldozed forward regardless.

Time to end this.

The Broozer warbot caught up with him just short of the Black Tower and the swamp-like grounds. Two of Xarz'ycus's royal guard also moved in to cut him off and protect their master's breeding pit. Freakshow fell back on the defensive, behind his guardian earth spirit, then heard Ryla scream in anger and pain and Naru Kami's violent yell as he summoned strength for a punch or a kick. Close by, the both of them. Around the base of the Black Tower.

Burning up a measure of his carefully hoarded strength, Freakshow ran up behind the gravel spirit and leaped clean over it, putting a reinforced heel into the warbot's turret-style waist. The Berserker's violent toy tumbled back into the breeding field, control circuitry spilling out of its ruptured carapace.

Freakshow stumbled after it, splashing through a shallow pool of muck and sloughed skin. The gravel spirit delayed one of the royal guards, buying him enough time to rip the warbot's head from its shoulders.

The other demonic guard fell back with a hellhound gnashing at his heels. The guardsman raised a barbed polearm, only to have it cut off just below the head by a glowing discus.

PK slid up to Freakshow's side, another discus already cradled in hand. The wiry demon looked shorter, hunched over so close to the ground, and trails of black blood trickled down from half a dozen different wounds, but the demon was there nonetheless and Freakshow felt a surge of confidence as he cast out his Nukatal boom-rang once again to finish the guardsman. The cutting heads slashed at the guardsman's throat and blood fountained, staining the gray waters black.

"Thinks you to be after Prince of Gates," PK said, voice hoarse.

"Thinks I," Freakshow agreed, grabbing his teammate by the shoulder and pulling him alongside.

The two stumble-ran around the base of the tower with the earth spirit in tow. Splashing through the breeding fields, they stepped over several pulsating sacs with creatures inside, clawing their way free. A discharge from the hovering energy collector ripped along the innermost brightmetal ring and into the swamp. Sacs burst, spilling out partially-formed demonic creatures and the odor of rotting flesh. Freakshow left PK to deal with one emerging horror, then swung around one of the tower's supporting buttresses. His Nukatal boom-rang still in hand, he jumped into the fray against Prince of Gates and The Fallen One.

In the shadow of the Black Tower, Xarz'ycus held the foreground against Ryla who swelled with rage as she reabsorbed a new growth of spines. The demoness lashed out, ripping furrows across the taught, corpse-blue skin of Prince of Gates. With an angry bellow Xarz'ycus slipped back behind the protection of his iron monster and a pair of Turvian warriors.

Naru Kami fought at Ryla's back, phase blades flashing and slashing as he held off Archan Singazer and Pago and a pair of Tomtakee warbots. His EMP suit, ripped open in a dozen places, glowed a bright, eyesore orange. Blood matted his wispy beard and black pus streamed down from the corners of both eyes. Nanomites swarmed over his lower legs, slowing him down, opening him to savage attacks.

Pago ripped long, bladed fingers across Naru Kami's leg. The martial arts master stumbled to one knee, and a Tomtakee warbot slashed a wound deep into his side. It did not look as if he would get back up again.

He wouldn't. By choice.

With a glance back, somehow sensing Freakshow's arrival, Naru Kami nodded once, tiredly, and cast aside his phase blades as the Tomtakee warbots moved in at him. He huddled down toward the ground.

His EMP suit brightened to surround him in a blazing corona of false fire, humming with pent-up energy.

"No!" Freakshow leaped forward into a desperate sprint, knowing he could never reach Striking Dragon in time. Not even at the peak of his form.

Certainly not now.

A blinding flash shattered the battlefield, causing all to glance away as the Naru Kami's EMP suit overloaded. Suddenly thrusting both fists skyward, he channeled the full output of the energy collector, spikes of energy leaping away from him in arcing, lightning-hard strikes.

The nano-mites on his legs and on the nearby ground popped like celebratory fireworks.

The Tomtakee warbots tumbled over, smoke roiling out of their fried circuits and ruptured fluidics.

A backsurge of power dove into the nearby brightmetal ring, feeding back into the energy collector which self-destructed in violent throes of sparks and melting composite.

Xarz'ycus iron monster was too near the brightmetal ring, and became a second lightning rod for the powerful blasting surge. Secondary arcs hissed and spit into the Turvian warriors, electrocuting them as well.

Freakshow's earth spirit was thrown back but not destroyed. One of Xarz'ycus's royal guards weathered the storm of energies from just inside the breeding field, stumbling out of the swamp alongside the Berserker's prescient adapter droid.

And the gladiators remained standing, of course. All but Naru Kami.

Freakshow arrived in time to catch the slumping body. It felt much too light. The old, weathered face looked to be at peace; eyes closed and worry lines smoothed from his skin. Only the blood-caked beard and singed hair testified to his violent end. He lowered Striking Dragon gently to the ground. A stirring of life force tingled in his hands, flowing up his arms with a surge of warmth. One small spark remained inside the husk which had been Naru Kami, a tiny piece of life that the Ophidians might bring back.

Everything else, the martial arts master gave to David Dangers.

Strength bled back into his arms, his legs. His aura thickened with renewed vitality, and his nanite-charged blood flooded muscles, bulking them up against need. A haze of dark fury clouded his vision, narrowing it until only the enemy gladiators stood out in sharp relief.

The Berserker's adapter droid trundled into Freakshow's path, sensing his building fury and directed by its master to head off his wrath. It barely slowed Freakshow, who sliced through its thin neck brace with the edge of the boom-rang in one quick, violent slash.

While the head still bobbed on the droid's shoulders, he leaped up and used a roundhouse kick to bat the angular head at Archan Singazer. The heavy chunk of metal bruised up the side of the Fallen One's face, bloodied his nose.

Freakshow's earth spirit had held back Pago, sacrificing itself as the alien construct tore the guardian apart with razored hands and a bloodcurdling screech. Mad, red-violent eyes searched for new prey as Singazer stumbled up to him and pulled out a hypodermic. In one smooth motion he injected a red fluid into the alien's bloodstream whether Pago wanted it or not. The alien shrieked a banshee wail, his chest muscles bulging up under the growth serum and his bloodshot eyes flushing a deep, total scarlet.

Prince of Gates had called forward his guardsman, the demonic warrior already mutating in the presence of his master. Secondary horns sprouted from his head. Together, the two came at Ryla with a renewed fury.

PK rounded the Black Tower's buttress at the same time. He finished off the guardsman with his last discus, splitting open the demon warrior's skull. He dove into Xarz'ycus's path, stealing the attack meant for Ryla while the audience cheered on his heroics.

It might have killed him, but Freakshow was ready. His team look battered to the point of near death. He saw it in the defeated slump of PK's shoulders, and Ryla's slowed pacing. It sank lead weights into his titanium-laced bones, dragging at him as well. Where his gladiators had sacrificed themselves to buy time, and to protect certain minions, Xarz'ycus and Singazer felt no such compunction. They looked far too fresh. Too ready.

Freakshow channeled mystical energy from the Black Tower, searching among the spirits to find a willing soul. This time, he whispered to them.

Zdantal... he mindspoke to the otherworld presence, forming it into a blanket aura which lay over the nearby battlefield.

Spiritual energy rushed back into him, extending his life, and the lives of his warriors. A double-edged sword, as the gift of new life also benefited Prince of Gates and the demon's warriors as well. Xarz'ycus smiled, his mouth pulling into a thin, cruel line. Only a flicker of doubt showed when Freakshow grinned back in defiance.

Freakshow had realized something. An edge that might mean the difference between victory and defeat. Time was not on their side, it was true.

But the crowd was.



Since Naru Kami's sacrifice and PK's heroic stand against the Prince of Gates, in fact. The audience rioted at the edge of Ophidian control, held back from the amphitheater by force fields and the very real danger of bio-tek contagions. Feet stamped wave after wave of tremors through the black rock flooring. Fists pounded against the force fields. Freakshow saw his cheerleaders rallying a large group of humans and aliens—even demons!—beneath a large, holotronic banner that glared with neon life FREAKSHOW!!!

A backlash of energy flooded the arena. It gave them all strength. Those who would tap such power.

Concern for his stepsister and attempts to pull together a winning team had plagued David for too many battles. His loss to Prince of Gates had all but blinded him to the savage fury he had harnessed in so many bouts. This was what it was all about. Competition. Victory.

To be the best, no matter what cost.

“Push them!” he called out to his teammates. “Take them now!”

Ryla needed no further encouragement. Her aura blazed with fierce conviction. Freakshow felt it. Xarz'ycus shied away from it. Consuming the blazing aura for a rush of strength, Ryla fell against her old master with a renewed fury, slashing and hacking at him with her claws and a flood of virulent poisons.

Feinting toward Pago, Freakshow turned and cast his boom-rang in a final throw at Singazer. The Fallen One portaled himself in a quick-dodge retreat back behind Prince of Gates.

Opening up a second portal, Singazer reached inside for a new minion, searching the lower dimensions for horrors yet unseen.

Freakshow saw Pago spring forward with a surge of fresh strength. Trusting PK to catch the alien's advance as he did once before on Solop Avagar, the team leader instead sprinted for Ryla's side against Prince of Gates.

The crowd rallied and railed and rolled forward in a massive surge against the amphitheater's fields, caught up in this final moment. The gladiators' last stand. But time and space warped into a parody of reality as Freakshow ran up on Prince of Gates. The demon expanded his presence, pushing back against the crowd's disfavor even as he readied his new attacks.

A portal opened behind Ryla, and thickly-muscled arms reached out to grab at the demoness, pulling her into the prison.

Prince of Gates stalked forward to meet Freakshow in single combat.

It wasn't going to happen. Ryla surged forward, escaping her old master's attempt to imprison her. No fancy moves. No mystical shielding. She leapt for Xarz'ycus throat even as Freakshow jumped high and long for the demon's readied embrace.

He hung in the air, frozen in time as Prince of Gates held the moment suspended.

Then the dimensional pocket collapsed.

Ryla ripped her talons across Xarz'ycus's throat.

Freakshow drove a foot into his chest. Hard enough to throw the demon back through the air, over the bodies of his fallen guardsmen, and into the swamp-like breeding grounds where he splashed into an ooze of muck and mud.

And the crowd surged forward as force fields collapsed under their assault, storming the field. Cries of “Ryla! Rogue Ryla!” rose up alongside chants of “P...K...P...K.....” There were screams for the martyred Naru Kami as well.

But overriding all were the hoarse yells and the waved fists celebrating one name more than others. The one who inspired, and brought savage smiles into the eyes of the crowd even as they tore Pago limb from limb and chased Archan Singazer back toward the Berserker’s temporary refuge.

The name that rang in the mind of Prince of Gates as he was buried under a wave of tormented fans.

“FREAK...SHOW!”