

Freking Out

By Bert Van Vliet

Cloaked in the shadows of a nearby support column, Captain Vaeria stood on a catwalk overlooking a cavernous room illuminated with a combination of barrels of burning debris, and floodlights. At the far end of the room was a makeshift three-tiered podium, occupied by a trio of motley Freaks. She could see a fourth draping what looked like a crude medal around the neck of one of them as the gathered mob on the main floor cheered and hooted their approval.

The muscles of her jaw tightened visibly, and her fists clenched a couple of times as she fought to contain the growing tide of anger she'd been fighting against for the last several hours. It had been almost a full day since the Freaks had gone on their frenzy of mindless destruction that they were calling 'The Freaklympics', and Vaeria had been fighting them every step of the way. Her anger and outrage over the senselessness of the whole thing had been building steadily.

As a rule, she didn't like to get angry. Anger clouded judgment, and having a clear mind was very often the narrow margin between victory and defeat. Fatigue had eroded that margin to paper-thinness – not only was it getting harder to hold onto her temper, but she could feel her edge dulling. Her responses were slowing down by that critical second or two, and that was enough to get her killed if she wasn't careful.

Coffee and determination had their limits, and she was running into them now.

Stepping out of her concealed position, Vaeria broke into a run and sprinted along the catwalk towards the medal podium as the medal presenter pulled out another medal. Anger flared briefly as she heard him declare the winner of a silver medal for the Freaklympics, and she launched herself over the railing of the catwalk, angling for the top position on the podium.

“And finally,” she heard the voice of the presenter boom out again as she hurtled through the air, twisting around to deliver a massive kick. “The gold medal for the highest points total in the Freaklympics goes to...Captain Vaeria?! NO! Wait!! That's not what I meant!!”

The medal presenter's exclamation was lost in the pile-driving crunch of Vaeria's boot hitting the Freak on the top of the podium in the center of his chest. He flew off the podium, landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the steps as she flipped around in midair and landed nimbly on the now-vacant stage. Swiping the last medal from the shocked presenter's hand, Vaeria kicked him backwards off the stage. Two quick strikes to either side of her dispatched the bronze and silver medal winners, leaving her in sole possession of the platform.

Vaeria straightened up, drawing on her last reserves of strength and resolve in order to appear as formidable as possible. She cast a quick glance at the medal she held – a crude chunk of steel painted gold and hung off a strip of computer ribbon cable – then looked up at the remaining Freaks who were all staring at her in stunned, disbelieving silence.

“It gives me great pleasure to declare these games officially closed,” she announced, folding her arms across her chest defiantly. “Any objections?”

“GET HER!” A mob of Freakshow rushed the stage brandishing shotguns, claws, and other edged metal implements. Vaeria snorted contemptuously, then jumped down to the main warehouse floor, meeting the charging mob head-on.

The first Freak unlucky enough to reach her was smashed to the ground with a double-overhand clenched-fist strike. The second was sent staggering backwards by a kick that snapped his head back on his neck like a rubber band. And then it was total bedlam as the mob surrounded her and started to swing in frenzied earnest.

Captain Vaeria grinned wolfishly, totally in her element. The Freaks were interfering with each other so much all she had to do was put them down one at a time. It was going to be easy....and then one of the Freaks thrust a shotgun towards her head. Reflexively, she ducked; the boom of its discharge made her ears ring, and she felt the hot whiff of buckshot go past her.

Fury ignited and broke free, and the next few moments were lost in a haze of wild, frenzied fighting laced with screams and yells. Bones crunched and snapped, gunshots bellowed, streams of electricity hissed angrily, and shards of metal from broken cyber-limbs flew everywhere. Then it became ominously quiet.

Vaeria stepped back as the last Freak toppled to the floor with a groan, chest heaving as she fought to regain her breath. The side of her face felt wet, and her gauntlet came away stained red when she gingerly touched it - evidently one of the Freaks with the arm blades had nicked her after all. Bastards.

“You’re ruining our fun,” a deep voice rumbled from the far side of the room. Vaeria spun sharply towards the sound as ponderous footsteps thumped towards her. Light glinted off dull steel plating as the massive bulk of a Freak Tanker loomed out of the darkness. Red-lit eyes gleamed maliciously. “I think I’ll use your head as the trophy for the next games.”

“There’s not going to be a next time!” Vaeria spat, her lips curling into something resembling a snarl. “It ends tonight!” She sprang towards the tanker, intent on taking him out quickly.

An overhand swing of a huge steel mallet knocked her out of the air and sent sparks shooting through her vision as she crashed to the floor, hard. She tasted blood from somewhere in her mouth as she rolled back onto her feet, barely blocking a second swing that shoved her back further. She renewed her attack with bitter fury, ducking under a third strike and driving the tanker back as she struck at the exposed wires and tubing in his mid-section.

Bright green fluid splashed everywhere as she succeeded in smashing the feeder tube for the combat drugs that were keeping him going. Realizing he was in serious trouble, the tanker tried to back off, but the relentless scrapper pressed the attack, systematically breaking off and smashing fragments of his cybernetic systems.

The tanker gave a final bellow as Vaeria speared a hand into a gap in his armour plating that had opened up, and tore out what looked like a sophisticated battery, trailing wires and a shower of fat sparks. The tanker crashed to his knees, and then folded over with a clattering bang, the electrical glow fading from his systems.

Vaeria pitched the power module aside as she spun around looking for more attackers...but she found herself alone in the warehouse. It took a moment to register, but finally she allowed herself to believe that she’d won. As the adrenaline faded though, she began to feel every single hit she’d taken, and it hurt. A lot.

Luckily she only had one thing left to do.

Draped across the wall behind the podium was a dirty bedsheet crudely painted with the symbol of the Freakshow. Walking over and reaching up, she tore it down and stuffed it into a nearby fire barrel. The flames licked hungrily over the material as she watched it shrivel and burn for a moment, a satisfied smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“Sir! The last of the Freaks have been taken away,” the trooper reported with a crisp salute. “The recovery teams are still cataloguing the stolen goods.”

“Good work, carry on,” Inspector Rodriguez nodded and saluted back, then returned to scribbling more notes in his report book.

As he wrote, he glanced sidelong at a nearby packing crate, and at the woman clad in the blue and white armour seated on it. She hadn't moved since the cops had arrived and started cleaning up the remains of the Freaklympics, and at first he'd been concerned she was injured. Her armour was dented and scratched-looking, and it looked like she'd been bleeding at least once.

Despite his concerns, she'd refused the offer of paramedical services, and ignored his attempts to try and pull rank on her. After filling in the details of the bust for him, she'd been silent for several minutes, leaning back against the warehouse wall. Even to a casual observer, she looked beat.

“Why don't you go home and get some rest, Captain?” he asked without looking up. “We can handle things from here on out.”

No response.

“Captain Vaeria?” Concerned, Rodriguez lowered his notebook. “Hey, are you all right?”

His only answer was a faint snore.

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