



The Venus Fly Trap

A Short Story by Jonathan Baumgart

Blaine was surprised the prison cell had a toilet. It was a gnarly one to boot—a Hybex 5G model. Around four years ago they were the interplanetary craze; such excitement hadn't been witnessed since the Darmantix automatic bread slicer revolutionized the various shapes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich could take.

The lid of the stainless steel toilet cast a distorted reflection of Blaine's face, lending his mind to ponder the development of waste management disposal over the last decade.

Back then it had all started with lasers. They were crude, dangerous objects at first but as time progressed the mistakes became fewer, the technology more powerful. As with many of mankind's inventions, it was soon discovered that the power of lasers could be used for both meaningful as well as harmful purposes. Many would profit from their introduction to the world, many would suffer from their use in warfare, and some would get creative. Thus it was only a matter of time that someone, somewhere—a heated controversy concerning the original inventor has yet to be resolved—would come up with the crazy notion of using them in toilet bowls.

As is often the case with experiments in uncharted territory the first models to hit the market produced several unintended consequences. Shortly after their release, hospitals around the IPSS (Interplanetary System and Satellites)¹ witnessed a flood of patients with injuries ranging from minor burns to severe bruises, scratches, and even a few broken limbs. Manufacturers of the original models had been too aggressive in their efforts to be the first to dominate the market. As a result, toilets around the galaxy were falling apart, melting, and in some cases exploding.

The sore buttocks's of a few were all it took to send the profit margins of these pioneer firms down the proverbial tubes. In what would soon become a growing industry, this initial setback put waste management technology on the radar screens of entrepreneurs and businesses leaders who drooled at the prospect of becoming market leader. An arms race had begun and its scale would far surpass the initial attempt at delivering laser imbedded waste disposal to the masses.

Enter Hybex. Leveraging the latest in cutting edge technology, marketing know-how, and a bit of luck, the 5G model took the IPSS2 by storm. The past had shown that safety would be highest hurdle to overcome, therefore it became the focus. Rather than a single laser, a nest of forty seven was carefully constructed deep within the toilet bowl. To prevent explosion each unit was equipped with a temperature sensor which would shut the system down if it reached too high of a level. Hygiene was an important consideration as well prompting Hybex to include an automatic self cleansing & flushing feature in every device. Finally, instructional videos on using the product along with free in-person demonstrations of its basic operation (certain parts of the process were obviously omitted) came free with every model.

Vast improvements from its predecessors made Hybex the leading force in waste management technology, but what put their name on the map was a revolutionary idea they coined "scentology." Proud owners of the Hybex 5G had the ability to select from up to five aromas: Ocean Breeze, Pine Forest Fresh, April Showers, Winter Medley, and

¹ The IPSS comprises both the inhabited and uninhabited planets of the Krad Galaxy. Tarquina, the largest of the planets, has been at warfare with its neighbor Cortia for the past century. Years of battle between the two powers have resulted only in a stalemate; prospects for an imminent end to the struggle are bleak.

Peach Cobbler Pie. For the first time in history it was now possible for the bodily waste of the rich to smell different from that of the poor.

If you were to pry him, Blaine would eventually concede that what got him into this mess was his desire to one day poo like the best of them. He had taken a gamble, lost, and now he would pay the price.

It wasn't just the desire for fancy toilets that drove this pilot from the southern hemisphere of the planet Cortia. Blaine had dreams of one day being paraded amongst the elite of his nation for his bravery in the face of danger. Wherever he walked civilians would nod their heads in respect and the most beautiful women of his planet would fight over each other to gain his attention. Yes, it would be a wonderful existence.

The opportunity to achieve god-like status amongst his people came in the form of a volunteer draft that had gone out amongst his unit. The dangers of the mission were extreme to the point that most of the comrades in Unit A57 laughed at the prospect. Their initial reaction was shock when they discovered a pilot in their very own crew had signed up. They tried to talk him out of it. They reminded him not a single one of them had come back alive. They begged him to reconsider, but it was of no use.

"I'll see you boys in a week," were the parting words to his comrades. Words that floated around Blaine's head long after his ship headed deep into enemy territory. Blaine barely knew what he was signing up for until it was too late to turn back.

A reconnaissance mission sounded easy enough and the first couple of days *were* pretty easy. Gather some data here, make some overpasses there. He spent most of the time flying in silence.

Blaine always dreamed of dating a few of the beauty queens from the northern region of his planet. He had specific restaurant in mind he would take one of them, maybe both once he got back. It was a classy place he was never able to afford, but things would be different now. And then the first blast came.

The models with long legs and wild hairdos, the noisy night clubs, the glory, everything disappeared in a flash. His world was now the deafening cockpit emergency alarm. Shots were fired from both sides, there were explosions and screaming. He screamed, screamed until it all faded into nothingness.

"I'm a prisoner" Blaine said aloud. The words sounded foreign to him. Other pilots, weaker ones ended up prisoners, not him, not Blaine. Up to now he was able to beat back the temptation to throw in the towel. He no doubt experienced melancholy as he pondered his lot, but he still believed there might be a way out. The hope was born in the simple fact that the enemy had treated him well. He was expecting much worse, had been prepared for much worse. Yet here he was mentally tallying the reasons why Ocean Breeze was a far superior choice to Pine Fresh. This made him both elated as well as apprehensive. They wanted to treat him well. This would imply they most likely didn't want to harm him, but why?

After another ten minutes of deliberation it was decided that Ocean Breeze would in fact be the best choice. Blaine retired to his lonely cot and began to guess how long he had been a prisoner. Since his cell had no window and the lights were always burning, it made the task ever the more challenging.

Blaine still hadn't figured out what happened after those initial blasts from the enemy. He'd spent hours trying to reconstruct the scene but to no avail. Somewhere

during this chain of thoughts he began to drift into a slumber without fully realizing it was taking place.

He didn't realize he had fallen asleep until he was jolted awake by the nudge of an ugly looking Tarquin guard. Judgment day was here.

Despite several nasty comments from Blaine concerning the guard's mother, not a peep was heard from the disciplined Tarquin sentry as he escorted his prisoner to an empty conference-type room in the corner of the prison. The guard exited as silently as he had arrived. Blaine lunged at the closing door in an effort to escape but was a fraction of a second too late. His desperate attempts at prying the door open with his bare hands were interrupted by a deep voice originating from the other side of room. It was a holographic image of an even uglier Tarquin soldier, except this one's uniform boasted an impressive number of medals.

"If I were a much crueler man I would have left you to rot in your ship. Or have I overestimated your intelligence by assuming you have already forgotten the miserable wasteland outside of this prison?"

"Now that I've seen your face I wish you had let me die out there."

"You are as brazen as the other unfortunate comrades of yours I've come across. Do not forget that you are my prisoner. Continue to test my patience and you'll see where those comments will get you."

"So it's that time of the month, isn't it?"

"Have it your way Cortian."

The guard from earlier along with three others appeared from a different entrance. Blaine didn't stand a chance. They pinned him down, tied him to a chair, sealed his mouth shut, and stood by.

"Now that I have your complete attention, please allow me to introduce myself. I am Commander Thorax, former Brigadier General of the Famed 54th Unit. It is with pleasure that I welcome you to my home, the Venus Fly Trap."

"As commander of this outpost, it is my duty to explain to you how you will spend the final hours of your life. Fate has brought you to my neck of the woods and to avoid any confusion, it is here that you will die. You probably suspected so much but in the case this comes as a shock to you, please take a couple of moments to allow this thought to sink in."

It is fortunate that Blaine's mouth was sealed shut for his response would no doubt cause offense to the reader, especially those who decided to eat while following this story.

"I know all there is to know about you Blaine Babson. That your father gambled away his fortune, that your mother left soon after, and you spent most of your time causing trouble until you were offered a second chance by the army. I've held my tongue out of respect but your comments from earlier have left me no choice. I have an interesting proposal to make. Let us speak to one another as gentleman shall we?"

Thorax motioned for the guards to untie Blaine who leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed, smiling from head to toe at Thorax.

"Alright Thorax, what do you got?"

"We Tarquins consider ourselves to be a fair, albeit superior people. I am willing to be offer you a chance, one last chance mind you, to prove your worth as a Cortian. It

is only a testament to your people's damned persistence over the years that we will be offering you this concession, from one warrior to another."

"I'm listening."

"We've developed a unique way of ridding ourselves of your kind, a competition if you will. If you choose this path you will die an honorable death. In respect to the Warriors' Code² I guarantee you will not be tortured, however, if you accept my offer and reject the death of a coward, do not think for a moment that you have chosen a more easy path—you will die either way. It is therefore up to you to decide whether you will be remembered as the low birth mutations we assume you people are, or a warrior who we can occasionally nod our heads in respect to. You have ten minutes to decide, Cortian."

The image disappeared. Aside from the faint humming of an air condenser the room was completely still. Now with the mystery solved Blaine at least knew what the score was.

Would he take this jerk up on his offer? As much as he already hated this pompous Thorax, Blaine had signed up for the mission knowing full well he'd probably die. He didn't need Thorax to stoke his national pride. Blaine had signed up for fame and the women that came with it, but none of that mattered anymore. He'd play the jerk's game even though he knew he was being goaded. Thorax wanted to see a show and a show he was going to get. The ten minutes had elapsed.

"Your decision?"

"Alright, sign me up chief."

"A wise choice Cortian. Can I trust you to behave now?"

"I'll be on my best behavior. One warrior to another" he said with a wink.

"Now I am at liberty to discuss our competition in complete detail. Please observe the Commander Detlef Maxmillian Arena, which you now see before you on your screen. Feel free to manipulate the image with your hands in order to study this exquisite piece of Tarquin work from afar or in minute detail. You will be allotted more time to examine this in the next two days for our games are always held after the sun has set."

"Fine, so what do you want out of me?"

"Allow me to change the image on your screen. Using spare parts from old battle equipment, leftover scrap, and the occasional enemy aircraft we've shot down, the engineers of Venus Fly Trap have put together a most remarkable vehicle that we've named the Harbinger.

"I will now bring up a detailed image of the machine. As I'm sure you've noticed, the Harbinger is fitted at the front with a series of seven foot long spikes that recede and protrude when the vehicle is mobile. The challenge for you is quite simple: Try to see how long you can go without becoming impaled. You can run as fast as you'd wish and even attempt to get behind the Harbinger if you have the energy to do so.

² Formally drafted during the Council of Veins, the Warriors' Code sought to provide a minimum set of ethics for planetary conquest and the warfare that inevitably ensued. Using the brutality of the previous centuries as its pretext, the main goals were the elimination of cruelty during imprisonment, avoidance of civilian casualties, and a general respect for the enemy. Considered a step towards peace by its draftees, it fell under heavy criticism by human rights organizations for its generalizations and lack of enforceability.

Eventually your body will reach a point of exhaustion and you will succumb to your death.”

Blaine pondered for a moment at the screen, a bit disappointed that this is what they had intentionally kept him alive for. “Fine. You want to make me your circus boy. Let’s say I outrun this here Hamburger-

“It’s called the Harbinger.”

“Right, so what if I just collapse 10 feet away from it? No fun in that.”

“Ah, you’ve led me to the most interesting part. We employ the latest in terraforming technology. The arena is no simple patch of dirt, rather a form changing environment. Each lap will have hills, moats, rocks, and other interesting obstacles. As your body approaches the point of physical exhaustion these obstacles will disappear and in their place you will be confronted with your fate: a simple stone wall. The closer you reach your physical limits, the closer the wall gets until it all ends.

It would be a letdown if you were to simply pass out away from the Harbinger’s path. This is why we’ve developed a special outfit for you to wear during the event. On the surface it will appear no different than an exercise outfit. It will be fitted, however, with a set of magnets too small for the eye to recognize. As you learn more about our special arena in the coming days you’ll soon discover that it has been equipped with magnetic strips of the opposite pole. The driver of the Harbinger must simply press a button and like magic your limp body will be stand tall once again.”

“Looks like you’ve got it all figured out Commander. So what’s next?”

“Private Briggs will escort you to your new room where you will have an information terminal similar to what we’ve used here. The sun sets in two days. Use the time as you see fit Cortian. I look forward to meeting you personally. End transmission.”

At first he thought the readout was a mistake. 300% was unthinkable, but it was a Tarquin built system that produced the number. 300% had to be correct. Thorax took a big sip of his Halifax cocktail, a rare treat on this side of the planet.

He allowed the bitter drink to swirl in his mouth before he took it down. More Cortians were landing on the Venus Fly Trap. This base was supposed to be a place of reform for soliders who showed potential but had strayed from their path. It was by no means an official outpost.

It wouldn’t help solve his problem but another glass made sense. That stubborn prisoner Blaine didn’t seem scared of the Harbinger or of dying in two days. What would happen if more of his like were sent? As Thorax relaxed in his chair, small pangs of nervousness began to issue from somewhere in his abdomen. A third glass started to make sense.

Blaine was never one to show fear. He felt he put on a good show for old Soreass—a name he preferred to use when thinking of the commander. Now that he was alone the

reality of the situation sunk in. It was tough to calm down his nerves and he found himself sitting on his Hybex 5G for the fifth time in less than three hours.

Blaine was glad he tried the April Showers scent because it immediately conjured images of her. Thoughts of Jane took him away from this desolate wasteland for a few moments. He had the opportunity to relive those two months again, months which he could now say with confidence were the best moments of his life. Up until that point he never quite understood why people listened to those awful love songs when there was death-syntha-pop. Then it all made sense.

It was a fleeting affair. Blaine was offered the rare chance to become part of the Elite Corps. The missions would be risky but for those who survived the rewards would be well worth the risk. This was that one chance to make a name for himself. Jane was a great woman but how would it look for one of Cortia's elite to be paired up with a stewardess from Interplanetary Travels Inc.?

He could see the look on her face to this day when he left her apartment for good. That was two years ago. Blaine wondered if she ever thought about him. By now she was certain to have found someone else. She was very attractive after all, a great cook, and like everyone else was just looking for love. Blaine Babson was probably the last thing on her mind. He sighed, depressed at his attempts to calm himself down.

At least he would spend his final days in a cell. This one was larger with enough room for him to pace back and forth if he desired. It also came with an information terminal, which he had been staring at out of the corner of his eye for some time. It wouldn't hurt to have a glance. Maybe it would take his mind off of things.

Blaine was curious to see where the current bets on his performance stood. He was shocked when he saw the number. 40:1! What kind of odds were those for beating Maynard's record? Granted, Maynard was quite a hero in his own right, but 40:1! What did they think of him anyway? Apparently twelve confirmed kills on land and ten in the air didn't count for much these days. The other odds were no less encouraging. 10:1 that he'd last an hour and a half. 500:1 he'd die in the first 20 minutes—that was reassuring at least.

There were plenty of other stats to look at but his mind began to wander back to Jane. Did he really love her after all or was she only attractive now that he was going to die? He did love her, hell he told her for an entire month, but in the end he loved himself more.

As he lay on his cot his nerves began to settle a bit. Soon his thoughts drifted into that strange state in between consciousness and sleep. In a matter of minutes his chamber was silent save for the sounds of his snoring. A rather tipsy Thorax peered into the cell. A smile of approval crossed his face. The young boy hadn't even noticed there were sedatives in his meal. After all, Thorax wanted a well rested circus boy.

Time moved at a swift pace for Blaine in those last two days. His recollection of how he spent the time was fuzzy at best. All he could recall with certainty were the whirlwind of thoughts that plagued his mind. How it would feel to be crushed by the Harbinger? Would Jane have taken him back anyway? The arena, Thorax and his stiff movements, Private Briggs smirking out of the corner of his mouth at the young Cortian soldier, the

Harbinger, beating Maynard's number. One thought melted into another which melted into another until his mind turned into some type of mush that reminded him of the meals he had during his first weeks in the barracks. And then the suns set and he was there.

Blaine never cared much for pop stars. All that glamour, money, and women just for singing a song like a pansy. A man ought to earn his dough through work, not prancing around on stage. Nevertheless, when the two Tarquin escorts brought him out to the arena, he came as close as he ever thought he would to stardom. He had to confess that even though he was being escorted to his death, in a strange way he enjoyed the attention.

The spot lights of the arena lit up to mark Blaine's entrance. He needed a few moments to adjust his eyes—they were the brightest lights he had ever been exposed to. When he regained focus it was an interesting surprise to see his own face staring back at him on a large screen mounted on the far end of the arena. Next to the live video of himself he could see a display of his odds and close nearby the top five record times. Except for Maynard the names were foreign to him and if those who set the odds were as good at handicapping as they thought, there was an 80:1 chance Blaine would find himself in the top five.

Before he had time to let that thought sink in, the guards took him to the center of the arena. A thin mesh of criss-crossed wire netting, no doubt electric, was all that separated Blaine from the platoon of Tarquin soldiers that operated and defended the Venus Fly Trap. It was surprising to see the men crunched so closely together in an otherwise spacious arena. This was no doubt the thinking of Thorax.

Blaine stood several feet away from the soldiers. They had been heckling at him since his entrance into the arena. What was at first an incoherent din became very clear to him now. Some of the curses directed towards him he was familiar with, others he would add to his mental list, perhaps using one or two in the few hours left of his life.

Back at his base, Blaine's superiors always found his temper to be what would hold him back from more prestigious positions in the future. *What future?*, he thought as he hurled a handful of dirt at the fence. This caused a flurry of sparks to pour out of it, further instigating the troops. Bottles, rocks, anything the unruly soldiers could find were tossed above the fence in Blaine's direction. One soldier vainly attempted to lunge at Blaine but was held back at the last moment by his fellow comrades.

The two guards responsible for escorting Blaine into the arena quickly grabbed hold of the unruly pilot, dragging him by force to the center of the arena. Blaine found himself standing face to face with Thorax.

"Hey there Captain. Hope you had a chance to place your bet," Blaine said with a wink.

Thorax ignored this challenge. As he walked to a special podium which appeared out of the ground the lights began to dim. With an air of gusto he addressed the audience, "Men of the guard post Venus Fly Trap, let us all bow our heads in honor of our most sacred nation Tarquinia" The Tarquin anthem began playing. Blaine recalled a similar occasion a few years back when he was forced to take his cousin to see the latest sensation in teen pop, The Boys of Plasma. During the show it was tough to determine whether the screaming girls around him or the actual music was more painful to his ears. Now that he was forced to listen to an anthem his entire nation grew up despising, he would sadly prefer to have been back at that concert. As the song neared its ending the

sound of gun blasts could be heard coming from the section reserved for the Tarquin soldiers. They had waited patiently for Blaine to show up on their doorstep; now they would finally be entertained.

Thorax made his way to the Harbinger. On the side of the machine Blaine could see images of his fellow comrades with red Xs drawn over their faces. It was easy to spot his picture since it was the only one without the obvious marking. Although the weather was pleasant, Blaine began to feel cold.

The lights remained dim as Throax slowly climbed up the machine. “ATTENTION” yelled Throax from the top of his lungs. The drunken soldiers immediately stood up, empty cans of Spicerol 3 hitting the ground as they gave their commander 100% of their attention.

“I am proud to present to you the Harbinger!”

Thorax jumped off the machine, which began its tour around the arena. Holographic images of previous events were beamed onto the arena floor, images so real Blaine thought for a moment he wasn't the only Cortian stuck out here. Then he watched the destruction as the Harbinger demolished his own people. Segment after segment was marked by cheers from the soldiers. During the presentation the two guards escorted Blaine to the starting point. The lights turned on again.

“Tonight's contestant hails from the poorer section of North Cordessia. Born to a father who drove transport vessels for a living and an invalid mother, Mr. Babson fled his broken home at the age of 15 after his father gambled away the family's meager savings.

“Youths of such character are perfect targets for the desperate Cortian army. Although he was under the legal age at the time Blaine served as a junior infantryman for two years. He would later become a poorly trained pilot, lacking the practical navigation experience required to evade falling onto the doorstep of the enemy.

“Mr. Babson we hope your stay at the Venus Fly Trap has been a pleasant one. On behalf of my unit I wish you a healthy and vigorous workout.”

The engine of the Harbinger roared; the cheers of the men were louder than before. They were hungry for blood.

A flash of light nearly blinded Blaine for a moment. When he came to, he looked back to see the metal spikes of the Harbinger in near striking distance. Shocked, he began to run from it. The beginning of the end had begun.

The thought of finally watching Blaine agonize in a painful death lifted the spirits of Thorax. The past couple of years had been miserable. Waking up, going through the drills, assessing the supplies like he had the prior day. He was as much of a prisoner as those who occupied his cells.

“Commander, the news from East Halitosis is quite encouraging. Did you see how the troops reacted?”

“I was right there.”

“Yes sir,” DeVries said, a bit flush with embarrassment after taking a chance to make small talk with the big cheese.

Toadies like DeVries made it even more intolerable for Thorax. Of course, docile soldiers were the only type he could command out here without constant fear of mutiny. The higher chain of command would never admit to this yet it was no coincidence the men he oversaw were order takers, pure and simple.

“DeVries what do you feel this one's chances are of cracking the top five?”

“Well sir I’ve studied his stats very carefully. His fitness score put him in the 95th percentile of all Cortian soldiers, for his age his number of kills are quite impressive, and—“ DeVries paused for a moment. His thoughts were interrupted by what he was seeing in the arena. “Sir, is that permissible?”

Blaine spent a fair amount of time planning his strategy in the two days prior to the race. He was proud of what he came up with. An honorable way to go out, and who knows maybe he would end up in the top five? It was a solid strategy until he set foot in the arena.

What sounded like a good idea during the first go-around became imperative by the second. They wanted to see a show, didn’t they?

The Harbinger had kept a healthy distance during the first lap, leading Blaine to believe there would be little change in tempo until he began to fatigue. He let a tiny smile cross his face as he sprinted up the top of the upcoming hill. Its random placement couldn’t have been better—the restless troops had a perfect view of their enemy as he pissed on the oncoming Harbinger.

The reaction from the troops was the antithesis of Thorax’s calm composure. Years of conditioning had taught him the merits of keeping ones emotions in check. More importantly, it was impossible to ever move rank with a wild or over-reactive personality. This didn’t take away from the anger he felt watching this young punk make a mockery of his show. Throax squeed his fists and let out a breath of air, “we’ll see how much fun he is having in around an hour or so, won’t we?” DeVries nodded in agreement.

Blaine knew he had wasted precious energy, but that was the point. With the bets booked the only way of stopping him would be to call off the show. The troops would walk home with their heads down, nothing to look forward to until the next victim arrived. In a way Blaine had done them a favor. Regardless of whether or not he placed in the top five, there was no doubt his little spectacle would be discussed for months afterwards.

The Tarquin troops, who by this time were feeling the intended effects of the Hydropole they had consumed (the only drink available to them this far out), debated amongst themselves how Blaine’s stunt would affect their odds. Some felt he should immediately be killed for such a blatant disregard of respect for the enemy, volunteering themselves for the job while others expressed anger at the loosely defined rules to the game.

A similar discussion was taking place in Thorax’s special section, which was on the other side of the arena allowing for the only ground view without barrier.

“You see DeVries if I create a stipulation for every possible action, it takes the fun out of the event.” There was truth to the statement although Thorax was partly defending a misjudgment he would need to correct for the next victim.

“But some of the troops have made a fair wager based on the information presented to them. Now those numbers are skewed.”

“That’s part of the gamble now isn’t it? As we both know the physical stats, kills, and rank of the victim play a small role in the eventual performance. Take Hilbert as an example. Ten years of service, an impressive number of tours and the Harbinger breaks him in an hour.”

“That was disappointing. We had to wait three whole months for him.” The subject of the rules put DeVries in an uncomfortable position. As one who lived to please his Commander he chose to bring the discussion to more neutral points of topic.

“Commander, I had an opportunity last evening to review the incoming victim reports. Without making any serious calculations it’s obvious we’ve had more events in the past six months than we’ve had over five years.”

The question upset Thorax because soon it would be on the minds of his troops as well. “Are you concerned about this?”

DeVries mentally scolded himself for bringing up an even more controversial subject. “Well, uh, no sir...perhaps, I am a bit.”

“The wind patterns of this planet allow for unskilled pilots to be easily carried off course. Remember, the Cortians have little intelligence in this regard. They’ve lost so many veterans it is only the youth of their population who are able to fill these empty spots.” To emphasize the point he pointed at Blaine. “I’ve studied the patterns quite closely as of late. They are shifting you see which is why more troops are coming our way. Be cheerful about this DeVries for with each death our men grow stronger.”

“Thank you for that explanation sir. It has put my mind at rest.” DeVries had lied. He was terrible at it and he knew Thorax knew it. His stomach turned in embarrassment. Thorax, however, shrugged off the comment. He has to look at the positive side of things. It was now his turn to allow a smile to show for a slight moment. “Why it is only the twentieth lap and it appears as if our friend is getting tired already.”

There were no regrets about his little spectacle, Blaine just wished he still possessed the energy he had when the event had begun. Fatigue. When the body hungers the mind fools it into thinking the stomach is far larger than its actual proportions. In a similar manner the mind plays tricks on the body when it is to be used in a physical manner. The first laps around the arena are the easiest. However, as time passes they become slightly more difficult. Sadly, when one is put to the limits the slope of the endurance is not gradual, rather severely acute.

For Blaine, the time of pushing on with unfettered courage had already elapsed. The aching realization set in, the understanding that one is not infallible. He started to see the folly in attempting to break the record. It only took twenty laps to break the man.

The empty cans of Hydropole slowly began to pile up in the pit of the arena. With each new addition the collective bantering of the Tarquin became louder, more incoherent. With a small clink another can landed next to the others. After the event the troops would file back to their barracks, the cans being crushed in the process by their boots. The unfortunate soldier who lost the most in the prior week’s card game would have to clean up the mess. Another event, another mess to clean. Not to worry the troops would say, another one would happen soon.

Of course none of troops enjoyed being stationed on the Venus Fly Trap. Similar to the Cortian victims there were different ways for a Tarquin soldier to receive the assignment. Some had sustained injuries in combat that had impacted their cognitive abilities, while others served on “The Trap” as they liked to call it as a form of punishment. Out in this wasteland bodies mattered more than brains. The Venus Fly Trap was somewhere between a prison and a labor camp. Nobody wanted to be here; you

hoped with a little luck you could get out soon, move on to something else. Whether or not you were the spectator in the arena or the victim, The Trap was a purgatory and depending on how you looked at it, sometimes the line between the two became distorted.

“Commander, shouldn’t we check to see if Central Command has issued any orders?” asked DeVries.

“At an hour such as this and with our current entertainment, I believe Central Command can wait for us to conclude. It would be a tragedy to miss out on the death of this insolent rabble-rouser.”

“A good point indeed, sir. I can’t even recall the last time we were required to muster.”

Thorax had become adept at channeling out most of DeVries’s comments. He continued as if he hadn’t heard what his subordinate said. “This Babson mocks everything our people stand for. Each soldier is to receive footage of his death. If I were one of the soldiers on this assignment I am certain I would not allow a day to pass without viewing it. Why in the next briefing with Central Command I think I’ll suggest releasing some of our footage to the neighboring outposts. It would be a great rallying point for our men.”

“An excellent idea sir.”

“Why look at the little devil now. His time is already approaching. A sad day for those who placed large bets on this one.”

On the thirty-fifth lap Blaine sustained his first fall. More to do with misjudgment than exhaustion, it could have occurred on his go around in the arena for he simply fell over his legs trying to negotiate a tree root.

The seconds of respite he gained were like gifts from heaven, albeit brief. When he looked up to see himself in the video screen, the Harbinger appeared eerily close. Not chancing a peek over his back he got up, only to feel a new kind of pain. The crowd roared.

The fine tip of one of the spikes had punctured Blaine on his ascent from the fall. The cut was not severe but deep enough to draw blood as well as cause unnecessary pain. Every step carried with it a new challenge.

Only a week ago Blaine had been at his base. The familiar faces of his troops, the smell of the bunker, the taste of the food were all crisp in his mind yet it seemed like an eternity ago. Death would come swiftly now.

Blaine tried to muster the energy to continue on, not to give up. He thought of his nation, his comrades, even Jane. Then he looked at his exhausted face on the screen. *What did it matter anymore*, he thought? As soon as he crash landed it was over. This whole event was simply the icing on the cake. As he passed by blur of faces that were the Tarquin troops he could see lust for blood in their eyes. The looks on those faces spoke more than the curses coming from their mouths. Blaine realized his fellow soldiers who had found himself in this place must have had a similar thought process as the end drew near. The wall, his fate, was waiting for him.

It was a simple looking wall. Perhaps if something antagonizing were written on it or if its color and size were out of the ordinary Blaine would have an easier time facing his fate. Instead it was just a plain and ordinary wall. In many ways it spoke for the let down that was Blaine’s life. What he once dreamed would be grandiose ended up being

plain and simple. He wouldn't crack the top five and as the war progressed his name would soon be forgotten.

Still in his final moments he mustered the strength to continue on. He would "leave it all out there on the field" as they say. He tried his best to simply focus on the wall.

"The pain is outside of the wall, if I can just focus on the wall, he told himself. It helped for seconds, but then the pain, the pain of an exhausted body that wanted nothing more than rest came back to the fore.

The wall in front of him began to allow him room. This time it was more difficult to channel out the pain. He debated letting it happen right there, just stopping and facing his fate. There is no doubt many of his comrades had gone this way. Even if it was all of them, they would be lifting his exhausted body with magnets before he made that decision.

The thought was easier than it sounded. The arena became silent in Blaine's mind, the light around him brighter. He returned to consciousness with a new type of pain, this much more acute than the mounting pain of exhaustion. His shoulder was on fire as blood began to drip down the side of his body.

As he rounded the bend where the troops were he mustered the energy to throw back a few of the curses they had used on him earlier in the evening. This would be Blaine's final lap. Exhausted, bleeding, he was beaten. Thorax had won.

Blaine placed little weight on preposterous notions such as divine intervention. The high priests back home had plenty of followers so he didn't feel the need to subscribe to their viewpoints. Even in these final moments of his life he found no respite in a greater being who would grant him mercy if he prayed to him. Blaine hoped there was a place after death, and if there was that it was better than where he had come from.

Feeling like an invalid on his death bed, Blaine wished it would just end. In moments he would become one with the wall. His fate was awaiting him. He took a couple of steps and for the first time could feel the special suit lifting him back onto his feet. He closed his eyes.

Thorax's jaw dropped to the ground as the arena lit up in a brilliant explosion. The ground shook several times as alarms began to sound. His first reaction was to run to the anteroom where he communicated with Central Command. It was difficult to tell if the display on his screen shocked him more than the explosion:

<21:29:11> CODE RED

<21:29:12> CODE RED

<21:29:13> ENEMY APPROACHING. ETA 30 MINUTES.

<21:29:14> NO REINFORCEMENTS.

Blaine thought death would be quite different from what he was experiencing. Strangely, it felt very much like life. He hoped the place he'd end up would be free of pain but his body was telling him otherwise. To make matters worse there was even a Harbinger in this new world. Then it dawned on him that he wasn't dead after all.

His world had changed though. The Harbinger lay on its side out of commission, the crowd of heckling soldiers were now fighting for their lives, and the arena itself had sustained significant damage. Then there was Thorax.

Blaine picked his aching body off the ground. Caked in mud from the falls he sustained, he had seen better days. An attempt at moving his right shoulder resulted in a sharp burst of pain. The blood from the encounter with the Harbinger had finally started to clot but it would take some time before he could use the shoulder again.

“I didn’t see any odds for an event like this Commander Soreass.”

Thorax appeared no better than Blaine. Based on the way he cradled his left arm with his right hand he had most likely broken it during the attack.

“The odds of success for Cortia are far worse. What are you people thinking attacking this part of the planet, my part of the planet.” An attempt to lunge at Blaine resulted in the Commander falling to his knees.

“Your people will never defeat us, never.”

“I didn’t sign up for this to win some war. I did it for the glory. You know pretty ladies and stuff like that.”

Thorax looked up with a smile at the young man. “You better stay away from politics. You’re a terrible liar.”

“Then I won’t need to dance around the subject when I tell you what happens next.”

“The Warriors’ Code. Think of the Warriors’ Code.”

“It’s up to interpretation.”

With that Blaine used all his might to pick up Thorax as if he were a fallen comrade. He thought about the stupid Code as he neared the metal spikes of the fallen Harbinger. Despite the bloody battle, the steel rods still managed to glisten. Thorax continued to repeat his opinion of the Warriors’ Code, but at this point it sounded more like the whimpering of an upset child. Blaine, digging deep for the last time that day swiftly delivered justice.

As he stared at Thorax’s impaled corpse, he didn’t see the hated commander’s body, rather his fallen comrades. Blaine stood there for a good minute, a moment of silence for those who had died before him. It began feeling awkward which meant it was time to move on.

Cortian troops were already buzzing around the place like bumblebees, carrying wounded soldiers into a make shift infirmary and corralling the captured Tarquins into their own prison. For a moment Blaine thought maybe he was in heaven after all but then he looked down to see a bottle of Hydropole. There was no way that excuse for a drink could exist in the afterlife.

When he picked his head up he realized the monstrous video screen from the event was still operational. The soldiers appeared to ignore it, their minds on more important matters. If the image from the screen could be trusted Blaine had seen far better days. He grew angry at what he had gone through. With the strength he had left he heaved the bottle as hard as he could at the screen. A loud explosion ensued, catching many of the soldiers off guard.

Blaine limped towards the other side of the arena, brushing away a medic who offered him assistance. It had been a long day and he needed a moment to himself. His goal of course was the Hybex 5G. Of all the aromas he still hadn’t tried Pine Fresh.

