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Opening extract from **The Trap**

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Our torments also may, in length of time,
Become our elements, these piercing fires
As soft as now severe . . .

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

THE TRAP

By Andrew Fukuda

The train arrives in the dead of day.

The sun, perched high in the sky, scorches the desert a blinding white. Only the black filament of the train's moving shadow taints this bleached wasteland. The train slows, its line of cars rattling like the links of a metal chain dragged. None of the occupants on the train – and there are many, and they are tense, and they are standing with taut backs and frightened eyes – make a sound.

A tiny black dot circles high in the blue sky. It is a hawk, gazing curiously at the rippling shadow of the train beneath. The hawk squawks in surprise as the train suddenly dips into an

opening in the ground. Like a snake, swiftly into a hole, disappearing. Gone as if it were never even there.

About ten miles away, on the other side of a range of low-slung hills, lies a gigantic disc-shaped building spanning several city blocks. It lies silent as a tombstone, circled almost completely by a thin rampart. A tall, slim obelisk rises from the building's dead center. The windowed tip of this obelisk glimmers brightly under the sun like a lit candle. The obelisk is otherwise, as with the entire building, the color of the desert. Nothing moves on, in, or around the building. Not at this time of day.

The hawk observes this building with a steely, unblinking stare. Then, with a sudden squawk, it flaps its wings and flies away.

Chapter Two

We plunge into the tunnel. Its opening gapes wide like a diseased mouth that eagerly swallows us whole. Our world of stark white and cobalt skies, in a sudden blink of an eye, is erased with pure black. A hot wind, dank and moist as a tongue, hurls through the bars of our caged car, gusts through our clothes and hair, our clenched hands, our crouched, shaking bodies.

Under us, sparks of light shoot out from the shrieking, braking wheels of the train. As one, we're flung forward onto the metal mesh floor. Fear hums off our piled bodies in droves. A small hand, clammy with fear, clutches mine. "Not the Palace, not the Palace, not the . . ." she murmurs. One of the younger girls.

Yesterday, after Sissy and I recovered from the turning (the hellish fever broken, our discombobulated bodies knit back together), we told the girls what we suspected about our destination. Not the Civilization, the idyllic city they'd been told by the Mission elders was filled with millions of *humans* populating its streets and filling the stadiums and theaters and parks and restaurants and cafes and schools and amusement parks.

But the Palace. Where the Ruler reigns. Where, it is said, the only humans are those imprisoned in the catacombs like cattle in pens. Their individual fates hostage to the whims of the Ruler's voracious appetite.

For a few minutes, the train drifts along the tunnel before lurching to a stop. Nobody moves as if motion alone will cause the next unwanted chain of events to begin.

"Everyone stay still," Sissy whispers next to me. "Stay very, very still." For three days and nights on the rattling train, exposed to wind and sunlight, motion has been our constant companion. This stillness, this blackness, it is a world too suddenly and starkly reversed.

A loud metallic click rings from the train car door. And for the first time in days, the door begins to slide open. The girls nearest to it, screaming, recoil from the opening.

But I leap toward it, grab hold of one of the bars. I lean back, digging in my heels, and attempt to halt its progress. I sense somebody else next to me, also pulling back on the door. It's Sissy. For days, we've tried, futilely, to pry it open. But now, in this dark tunnel that can only portend one thing, we're trying to close it. But again our efforts are futile. Even as we grunt, our feet scrabbling for position, the door slides open, clicks into place. In the darkness, I hear similar clicks clacking along the length of the train. The doors of each train car are now opened and locked into place.

A wave of cold fear washes over us. Nobody moves.

"What now?" a trembling voice asks from the darkness.

"Nobody move!" Sissy shouts, loud enough to be heard down the length of the train. "Everyone stay where you are!" I feel the strands of her hair brushing against my arm. She's swiveling her head, trying to get a visual on something, anything. But we see nothing. We might as well be hanging suspended in a black void. And that's why Sissy warned us not to disembark. We might be stepping off into a steep slope or even a sheer drop.

A loud hiss suddenly explodes from the front car, jolting all of us. A pungent odor of steam and smoke spreads down the tunnel, drifting through the bars of the cars like sodden ash.

And then, only silence.

We huddle closer together, anticipating the sound none of us wants to hear.

"David," Sissy says. "Toss out one of cans of food." He does. In the darkness, we hear the can land with a metallic rattle against a floor of some kind. It bounce twice before rolling to a stop.

“Everyone stay on the train,” Sissy shouts. “Gene and I are going out to investigate.”

Then she drops through the opening and onto the dark floor of the tunnel. I follow her. The ground is pebbly, rattles under our feet. My eyes are getting used to the darkness and when I look back at the train, I can see the girls. The white of their eyes gleaming slightly, hoping for assurance. But we have none to give them.

“Do you see anything?” Epap whispers. “Sissy?”

“Hold on.”

But he doesn’t. He drops out the train car, rattling pebbles as he lands. He approaches us, arms spread in front. “Only one thing to do, Sissy. Head back the way we came. All of us, we follow the train tracks back outside.”

But Sissy shakes her head. “The entrance to the tunnel must have closed after us. Otherwise light would be pouring in, we’d be able to see more in here.” She’s right. There’s not even a distant dot of light behind us.

Epap speaks, his voice tense with fear. “Doesn’t matter. We need to start moving. Any moment now, dusk might - ”

A loud metallic clang suddenly crashes overhead. Everyone jolts. A few girls scream out. And then there is light.

Chapter Three

The light streams out from a large glass shaft that rises from floor to ceiling near the last train car. I take a closer look: the soft light emanates not so much from the shaft itself as from a glass elevator now descending inside the shaft. Like a falling curtain of light, the elevator illuminates the craggy walls of the tight tunnel. The single elevated platform, seemingly hewn out of the same rock, runs on only one side of the train, and it is onto this platform that Sissy, Epap, and I now hoist ourselves up. We pause, then turn to the sound of footsteps running toward us. It's David, and his hand slides into Sissy's.

The glass elevator reaches the bottom. For a brief moment, its internal light flickers. Then the doors slide open.

Nobody moves. A crackling sound suddenly fills the air, like static over the school PA system. "ATTENTION. ANY PASSENGER ON THE TRAIN MUST ENTER THE ELEVATOR. YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE." The ear-splittingly loud voice - electronic and robotic - blares through the tunnel, its words echoing down its length.

David turns to Sissy. "What happens after one minute?" he asks, his voice trembling. "What happens, Sissy?"

She doesn't answer, only swivels her head, her eyes nervously scanning the walls. She tenses. There are a row of doors set into the far wall. Her eyes flick back to the elevator, her eyes narrowing.

Through the bars of the train cars, the girls' eyes are wide with fear and panic. As one, they start exiting their train cars, first a trickle then a flood of bodies pouring out.

"FIFTY SECONDS."

Sissy grabs David's hand. "This way," she says to Epap and me. "C'mon, hurry." We start running toward the elevator glowing with white light.

The girls are stumbling on the pebbles of the tunnel floor. In their haste, and with their lotus feet, they fall and stumble over one another. They are crying out now, their fear reaching breaking point.

"To the elevator!" I shout to them, swinging my arms urgently. "Hurry, everyone!" Epap breaks away from us, races to the edge of the platform, starts pulling up a few girls. But there are too many of them and too little time. I grab him, try to push him toward the elevator. He resists.

"There's no time, Epap!" I shout.

"FORTY SECONDS."

Epap's jawline ridges out. He lifts up one more girl, then lets me pull him away. The girls on the platform are doing their best to run, but their lotus feet can only plod along so fast. Sissy, Epap, David, and I are the first to reach the elevator.

"THIRTY SECONDS."

For a brief moment, we can only stare into the elevator's interior. Our hearts sink. It's tiny inside, able to accommodate five at the most if we squeeze tight. It was never meant to transport a whole *village* of girls. We tumble inside. There's nothing. No button, no control, to switch. The walls are smooth unbroken panes of glass. I quickly examine the outside. Same thing: no controls at all.

"TWENTY SECONDS."

Sissy's forehead is scrunched into deep grooves of concentration. Then they smooth out, decision reached. "There's still room for one more!" she shouts. "You all stay here, I'll be right back!" And then she runs off, disappears into the darkness.

“No, Sissy!” I shout. “There’s no time!”

Out of nowhere, a girl suddenly stumbles out of the darkness. It’s Cassie, the girl with freckles who’s proven to be a leader among the girls. Epap shouts at her, urging her to hurry. She throws herself headlong into the elevator, her mouth distorted in a silent scream. And that’s it. There’s no more room inside. We’re shoulder to shoulder.

“TEN SECONDS.”

“Sissy!” I scream. “Sissy, get back here!”

No response. No sight of her. More girls are stumbling toward the spread of light now, falling, shuffling, yelling. Then I see Sissy. She’s at the platform, bent over, trying to help more girls up. But in their panic, they’re grasping, clutching at her, and though she’s yelling at them, they’re refusing to let go. Five, six, seven of them are grabbing at her arms, her legs, and Sissy can’t extricate herself. She’s in trouble.

“FIVE SECONDS.”

I’m sprinting out for Sissy, knocking over a few of the girls on the platform. Behind me, Epap is shouting at David, ordering him to stay put. I seize Sissy’s shoulder, pull backwards. But there are too many girls clinging to her, and although Sissy’s screaming at them to let go, more are clutching her.

An electronic series of pings sounds from the row of doors on the far wall. Even from where we stand, on the other end of the platform, the sound jars us. Whatever is going to happen next, it’s starting. Now. For the briefest of moments the girls’ hold on Sissy grows slack as they turn to the sound. I quickly slink my arms under Sissy’s armpits and heave backwards. I feel the snap of grips broken, and then we’re crashing onto the platform floor.

On the other end of the platform, the metal doors slam open. Black shadows pour out with frightening speed. Glistening fangs, gleaming claws. Wet, wild, desirous eyes. All in a swift blur of movement. The girls nearest to the doors are killed before they can even scream. All I hear is the wet splat of fluid against walls draped in darkness. More shadows glide out of the opened doors, swim across the walls and floor. Then the screaming starts.

Now it's Sissy pulling me up by the back of my shirt. Before I've even found my footing, she's dragging me to the elevator. The screams sharpen and rise behind us, but we know better than to turn and look. We run around clumps of girls panic-plodding toward the elevator, their faces frozen in the garish elevator light.

"Sissy! Gene!" Epap shouts. "IT'S CLOSING!" He's standing in the doorway of the elevator, his back against one sliding door, his arms and legs pushing against the other. But it's a losing battle. His arms are crooking and folding with the pressure of the closing doors. Inside, David is searching frantically for a control switch I already know does not exist.

The screams reach fever pitch. Knowing better, I glance back. In the wide cone of light, I see girls pouring out the train cars in blind panic now, stumbling and falling to the ground. A few are frozen in place, cowering in the corners of the train cars, arms wrapped tightly around one another, their hands white-knuckled on the bars.

Meters from the elevator, Sissy dives first, sliding between the closing doors and into the elevator. I follow a second later, banging my shin and scraping my back as I slide under Epap through the narrowing gap. Epap, screaming with pain, can't extricate himself; he's too tightly bunched into a fetal position, his ankles pressed up almost against his head. Sissy off the floor, wraps her arms around his legs even as I grab hold of his shoulders. We give each other a quick nod, then lunge backwards. Epap pops inward, ankles and wrists twisting in ungainly angles.

The elevator doors slam shut.

Outside, girls smack against the elevator like birds into windows. Their hands slap against the glass with staccato panic. Their faces smush against the glass, pleading, begging, distorting as they're pressed flat.

"We have to do something," David whimpers. "We can't just leave them."

But we say nothing. Because there's nothing we can do. There's no way to open the doors, no way to squeeze in one more person even if we could. More girls smack against the glass on two sides, then all around, encircling us. Cassie squeezes her fingers into the gap between the closed doors in an effort to pry them open. We don't bother to stop her. Soon enough, she gives up. She places her palms against the glass, head shaking, crying softly to herself. More bodies press up against the glass, flattening those already there.

And then the elevator starts moving. Slowly up the glass shaft.

A cry of panic sounds.

Epap puts his arm around Cassie. "You can't do anything for them. You tried - " His voice stops.

I see the duskers. Surprisingly, despite the mass bloodshed and cacophony in the tunnel, it's only a handful of them. I'd expected more. Their faces are blood-splashed, eyes delirious with this unexpected arrival of culinary paradise. Judging from their drab uniforms, these duskers are nothing more than low-rank crew consigned to work the graveyard daytime shift. They came only to unload the train. Now they'll have a tale to tell for the ages. But it's not over for them. Not yet. Shielding their eyes against the light streaming from the elevator, they bound toward the girls pressing against the glass shaft.

“Close your eyes, David,” Sissy says, and he does, burrowing his head into the crook of her arm. Vicious thumps rock the elevator, signifying the duskers’ arrival. Screams erupt around us, screeching, pleading, seemingly loud enough to crack the glass. David cups his ears with shaky, pale hands.

The elevator rises. Blood splatters on the outside of the shaft like buckets splashing their contents. No matter how high we rise, the blood follows us, the screams surge up at us. Epap puts his arm around Cassie’s quaking shoulders.

Until all is silent. Blood flicks up like the dotted splatters of a paintbrush. Spread beneath us, on the platform, inside the train cars, is the specter of gruesome atrocities. The elevator rises and the arc of light thankfully withdraws from the scene of violence beneath. Darkness blankets the carnage below.

A male dusker leaps up to the elevator, its pale body slapping stickily onto the outside of the glass shaft. Its face, only inches from mine, regards us coolly. Then its hold, compromised by the slick blood, slips, and the dusker slides down.

We stare up, praying for an exit. The black ceiling looms ever closer. And only when it seems like we are going to bump up against it does it suddenly slide open to expose an even darker layer of blackness. The elevator ascends into it. And once again, we are swallowed by darkness.