

# Ticket to Ride

**Someone was following him.** Ning was absolutely certain of it. True, he'd been called paranoid before – and not without reason – but this was different. Ning hadn't been a paranoid boy in six years. At 22 years of age, he was as much a man as any other, and with the courage to show for it. Most of the time, he considered himself well above the paranoia of his youth.

But most of the time, he hadn't been subtly trying to shake his stalker for *ages*.

Logically, Ning realized it was unlikely he'd been at this game for more than ten minutes. But it was hard to reason with himself when the buildings around him were all unfamiliar, and he could hear the shadow's steady breaths right behind him – a stark contrast to his own short, uneven gasps.

*Breathe in, and out. Slowly does it. No panicking.*

Ning picked up his speed another notch. He focused on the rhythm of his soles, slamming into the hard pavement beneath him. He altered his gait, making his steps as long and quick as he could. He listened for footsteps behind him.

Ning breathed a sigh of relief. It sounded like his stalker hadn't sped up to match his pace. Now, if he could just find some obstacle to disappear behind...

*There!*

The street he was on had come to an end. A solid, grey wall loomed before and above him, denoting the city limits. It – and the road in front of it – had snuck up on his preoccupied mind despite their massive size.

Armed guards walked along the top. Traversing such an obstacle would be impossible, both from the inside and – far more importantly – the outside. Few dared to venture beyond the city’s safety, and take their chances with the ruined wasteland.

*No time to dwell on history. Right now, I need to run. And that might be my way out.*

Most parts of the city’s perimeter road were grand and broad. But in his quest to escape his stalker, Ning had slipped into one of the less savory neighborhoods in town. Here, the road was unimpressive and unkempt. Really, that was a blessing in disguise. It’d be much harder to find him here than in a more respectable area, especially at this hour of night.

Ning broke out into a jog as he rounded the corner. A triumphant smile crossed his face as he evaluated each hiding place.

But his face quickly fell. This was no road; it was a dead end. If he hid here, he’d be found in minutes! Ning craned his neck, dreading what he would see behind him.

Sure enough, a single figure blocked his path. Ning soaked up the image, mentally connecting it to the glances he’d stolen over his shoulder. But there wasn’t much detail to discern; whoever this was wore a dark cloak that hid most of their body. They were surprisingly well-groomed, with a fashionable hairstyle. They had green eyes, a calm expression, and a faded scar across their cheek.

*Strange. I wonder how one gets a scar in this city. Simple clumsiness? Surely, not something like that. But what else could it be?*

*Unless they’re not from the city, at all.*

“Ning Jao?” the deep voice rang.

Ning's ears perked up. How could this person possibly know him? He racked his brain, searching desperately for any visual matches. Surely, he would've remembered someone with features so distinctive.

"That is your name, is it not?"

Reluctantly, Ning nodded.

"Ah. Very well. In that case, I suppose I can forgive you for leading me on this needless chase."

"Needless?" Ning fired back, careful to keep any hint of fear from seeping into his voice. "*You* have been following *me*. If your intentions are good, why wait until now to speak to me?"

*There. Now they know to take me seriously.*

"I suppose that's fair enough. But I assure you my intentions are pure. You see, I have a delivery for you. One that cannot be witnessed by passerby."

It sounded like a trick. And not a very good one – the story wasn't very believable. But really, Ning's safest way out of this situation was to play along with his stalker. That type always had backup with them, even when you couldn't see it. So, he gained nothing by being suspicious.

But if the stalker could be believed – if they really *were* genuine – then compliance would make a good impression.

"Tell me more."

The stalker smiled kindly.

“Congratulations. You’ve been selected to take part in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – an expedition into the Wastes Beyond!”

Sensing the spike of apprehension their words had provoked, the stalker was quick to continue explaining.

“You were entered into a raffle some time ago. Well, you’ve won it. You and a few other very lucky individuals are invited to spectate an expedition beyond the city limits. You’ll have the opportunity to get a hands-on experience – or just to watch, if you’d prefer to. Of course, you don’t *have* to come. I’m sure there are plenty of others who would be more than happy to-”

“No,” Ning interjected. “I’d love to join you.”

Maybe Ning should have waited to know more details, and to excuse himself from any commitments. But it was like his stalker had said – this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If he let it go now, he’d be letting it go for the rest of his life. How many people could claim that they’d been beyond the city limits?

*What’s the worst that can happen? I’ll regret it forever if I don’t go.*

“Excellent.” The figure tossed a small sliver of material into the air. It caught the artificial light with a brilliant flash, landing squarely in Ning’s palm.

*YOUR TICKET*, the metallic plaque proclaimed, *TO AN EXPERIENCE LIKE NO OTHER.*

*LIFE IS SHORT – GO ON AN ADVENTURE!*

*SEE THE WORLD ABOVE THE GROUND!*

At the bottom of the card, a smaller line of text was engraved into the metal.

*Meet at 05.26.88 before dawn. The journey will be complete by sundown. Only selected guests will be accepted.*

*Sundown.* What a peculiar idea. Ning had lived underground since before he'd even been born. For decades, the city's populace had relied on artificial lighting to simulate the sun's behavior. But the elders who'd lived under the *real* sun had long maintained that it wasn't quite the same. How exciting, that he should be chosen as one of the few humans to see the sun in decades.

Ning looked up. He'd meant to thank his stalker (though the name felt derogatory, knowing what he now knew), or at least to follow up with them.

But every trace of them was gone, vanished into the air itself.

Ning tightened his grasp on the card – evidently, it was still there.

*So I'm not dreaming.*

*Then...*

*This is really happening!*

---

**“I trust that the boy has been contacted, then.”**

Ronan knelt into the floor, attention firmly fixed on the voice above him. The gesture felt silly for a video call – not to mention insulting – but the Boss was not one who took disrespect lightly. Ronan knew better men than himself who'd vanished into the night for “slights” less severe than poor etiquette.

“Naturally, my lord.”

**“Hm.”** The Boss gave a noncommittal grunt of acknowledgment. At least it was better than the unhinged rage that overtook him from time to time. Ronan counted himself among the lucky (or rather, the *less unlucky*) few that had lived long enough to witness multiple of the Boss’s furious rampages.

**“You saw to it yourself, I presume.”**

“Of course, my lord. Just as you instructed me.”

Truth be told, Ronan was always being told to oversee things personally. Far more things than he actually had the time for. He had no choice but to leave many matters to his subordinates. But the Boss had stressed the importance of this one errand enough for Ronan to know that slip-ups were not an option.

**“And my message was delivered?”**

“To the letter, my lord. I wouldn’t dream of anything less.”

Ronan tried not to wince at the booming laughter. He didn’t miss the moment of judgement before it, either. Like the Boss was staring into his soul, as if to ask, “what are you hiding?” Making a joke had been a poor decision, he realized, a minute too late. The Boss saw knives and plots behind every back. Ronan supposed that caution was why the Boss had been able to hold on to power so long – but it was also damn inconvenient for the both of them. Ronan had to watch his every word, and the Boss had to rely on dunces like Ronan to do his bidding, since he’d killed all the smart ones already.

Ronan wasn’t ashamed of his perceived stupidity. In fact, he rather enjoyed the protection it afforded him. In the Syndicate, you couldn’t afford to appear popular *and* clever. Not unless you wanted to challenge the Boss himself, and everyone knew how that tended to

go. And well, being popular was non-negotiable; you needed loyal friends, especially in an organization such as this.

But if you could play the role of dumb satisfaction, then the Boss had no reason to suspect you. If you weren't dangerous, you weren't a threat. Similarly, you couldn't be *too* competent. There were some tasks you had to fail, some objectives you had to fall short on. Fail too much, and you were useless. But succeed too much, and you were a potential threat. And when the Boss saw a threat – no matter how insubstantial – it vanished.

**“No,”** the Boss said flatly. **“No, you wouldn’t.”**

---

**Ning awoke to familiar surroundings.** Simulated sunlight from within his room illuminated his surroundings.

*Today, I'll be seeing the real thing.*

The thought filled him with giddy excitement. It was easier to be enthusiastic while surrounded by the comforts of his home, rather than alone in a shady alley.

He smiled to himself, walking to his window to get changed.

His bedroom oversaw one of the city's numerous parks, as expansive as they were beautiful. This particular park's main attraction was the canal at its center. It was too dark outside to see them now, but little bushes and trees were also scattered across the landscape.

In the days when humanity lived above the ground, Ning had heard that plants would change color gradually throughout the year. He'd always thought that would be beautiful.

*I might even get to see something like that.*

*Oh, imagine what the world up there looks like! Blue oceans and purple mountains, vast plains and tranquil forests. The weather must be crazy without any weather control stations.*

The city still got its share of unfavorable weather. The plants still needed rain to grow – but the occasional gentle drizzles had *nothing* on the thunderstorms he'd read about.

*Did our ancestors realize what they had? Did they know their descendants would never get to see it? Did they spare it a thought at all?*

*Perhaps not. I don't appreciate the efficient buildings, the massive parks, the cleanliness, or any aspect of this city as much as I could. As much as I should, maybe.*

*Would ancient humans have been as impressed by our world as we are of theirs?*

Probably not, Ning reckoned. After all, they'd had great buildings not unlike modern ones. Theirs were probably *nicer*, in fact, since they'd have had so much space at their disposal. Underground, architects were forced to make efficiency the focus of every design. Only the few who could afford it commissioned their buildings to be ornate. Even then, as Ning understood it, they had to seek permission from the city's administration.

Even modern technology had its beginnings in the ancient world. Old humanity might be impressed with the implementation of technology, but let down by the theory. Humanity hadn't progressed much since retreating underground. There were too few humans, and not enough resources to remain at the cutting edge.

Ning had dressed for the day quite fashionably, if he did say so himself. He didn't know what the climate would be like up there, so he'd opted to play it safe and wear an extra layer.

He was ready, but he didn't feel the part.



Really, this felt like it was too easy. He was about to see the Wastes Beyond! The dream of every child who'd grown up underground was within his grasp. *Everything* went back to the land above the ground. In school, they learned about ancient civilizations and their achievements. When they slept, they dreamt of clear sky and vast expanses of land – a far cry from the city's brutalist, utilitarian urbanism.

He departed his apartment complex just as the simulated sun began to warm the sky. It wasn't visible quite yet, but it wouldn't be long before it was. Ning had to move quickly if he wanted to be there before dawn.

He boarded a train. It was one of the older lines, but still well-maintained and sanitized. The newer lines stayed mostly within the city itself, whereas this one would take him practically right up to the perimeter wall.

The train was empty. Ning sat himself down on a bench, taking up as much space as he pleased. This was *nice*, far nicer than riding the same lines at rush hour. Maybe he'd have to try waking up earlier, as a rule.

*First, let's deal with today.*

*This line will drop me a short walk away from the wall. These coordinates should lead me to a station at the base of the wall – there'll be guards there. I'll show them my card and – hopefully – that'll be enough to get me inside.*

The train stopped, having reached its final destination. This was his stop.

Ning disembarked swiftly. He checked the coordinates on the card.

05.26.88

The location referenced by the first two numbers was just up ahead. For the 88, he'd have to travel vertically – presumably via the wall itself.

Ning found a station at almost the exact coordinates on the card. The building itself was rather underwhelming, especially compared to the towering wall behind it. The station was no more than two stories tall, with a plain façade and a narrow footprint. There was only one visible entrance – a simple door.

Card in hand, Ning approached the pair of guards posted outside.

“Credentials,” one of them demanded. Oddly, neither guard batted an eye at the circumstances of his arrival. The time of day – and the fact that he was new to this – went completely unnoticed.

Ning extended his open palm. The guard snatched the card without waiting for him to properly offer it. He couldn't help but feel offended – but he made sure to keep that hidden. The fate of this whole trip rested on whether this guard would let him pass; compliance was the best policy.

The guard inspected the card, taking their sweet time to do it. Ning felt his anxiety building up.

*Calm down. You are here as a guest. Don't let this journey end before it even begins.*

The guard chuckled. Suddenly, they clapped a hand on the other guard's back.

“Ticket to ride, eh? Well, you boys have fun.”

The other guard rolled their eyes. With a jerk of their head, they motioned Ning to follow.

The pair ventured through the little station. They ascended a flight of stairs to the next level, which led directly into the wall's interior.

Ning had never been inside the wall. Obviously. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it certainly wasn't for it to be hollow.

The whole structure seemed to have nothing but scaffolding to keep it up. The wall's metal surface wasn't nearly as thick as he'd like to believe. It stood to reason that only the above-ground sections needed to be thick – but this seemed totally insubstantial. Would this skeletal structure even protect them if an earthquake shifted the earth around it?

*You're being paranoid, again. Look how paranoia worked out last time – totally unnecessary. If I'd acted like paranoia would've had me do, I wouldn't have this ticket. I wouldn't be here right now.*

The guard led him to a lift. Perhaps calling it a “lift” was generous; it was little more than a cage with lifting cables.

The guard opened the door, beckoned Ning to enter, and closed the door behind him.

*Looks like it's just me, then.*

“You'll find someone at the top,” the guard said. “Show them your ticket, and you're all set.”

Ning thanked the guard and swallowed his ridiculous anxiety. As if its wobbling wasn't enough, the lift also creaked like an old stair as he ascended. He winced, willing himself to ignore it. He would not give in to silly fears. It would be much more dangerous above the ground than in some elevator.

The lift stopped. A door opened.

And on the other side, was the most magnificent sight Nin had ever seen.

---

**The wind whipping at his face was cold.** Far too cold for Ronan's taste. But that was just the way of the land above the ground.

The conditions up here were fickle. Nothing like any of the underground settlements he'd visited. Pouring rains could turn to empty skies, gales of wind to static sunshine.

Before the cataclysm, all of humanity had been forced to put up with this erratic climate. At first, Ronan had struggled to believe that. And could anyone blame him? The prospect that people would simply *deal* with such conditions all their lives had seemed ludicrous – in some ways, it was still unbelievable.

But that had been years ago. Years of running superterranean operations had long since hardened him to the merciless climate.

But he strongly suspected he'd never be truly hardened to the *other* horrors of the surface.

Once humanity had fled underground, nature had reclaimed much of the planet's surface. All the cities Ronan had seen were overrun with wildlife. In the absence of humankind, animals had evolved to become apex predators, far more dangerous than the comparatively docile creatures of history.

But even those beasts were no match for modern technology, at least in small numbers. No, it wasn't any regular creature that inspired fear in all who ventured above the ground. It was the greatest. The one clever and foolish enough to destroy the civilization it'd created. The one that had persisted nonetheless, finding new ways to live on a dead planet.

The humans.

They weren't *people*, really. Not anymore. They *had* been, once upon a time. But now, they'd been so warped and twisted that calling them humans was a stretch. They were barbaric Savages, no better than the primates that'd predated humankind.

*Guess that's the price you pay for surviving on the surface.*

Had the Savages chosen to remain there, rather than retreat underground? Or had they been left behind, forgotten, or abandoned by everyone else? Nobody knew for sure, least of all Ronan.

But the scariest thing about them wasn't their barbarity, their numbers, or their strength. They presented a unique obstacle for organized crime. The Syndicate was used to dealing with corrupt politicians or small-scale feuds. All matters where the greatest weapons were deep pockets and delicate tongues. The Savages only understood violence. If the Syndicate wasn't violent enough to take on a single city upfront, what good were they against a race bred and raised for war?

The best policy was to avoid their territory entirely. But that wouldn't do, because the Syndicate needed *some* way to get around between the underground cities.

The second-best policy was to be *damned quick* at running away from them.

And that was where Ronan found himself when he got the message, fleeing from enemy territory on a Syndicate-owned hoverjet. The aircraft itself was high-end, a retrofitted civilian design laden with aftermarket modifications.

Ronan checked the time. Almost dawn.

*Oh, not good. We're going to be late.*

The hoverjet was already moving as fast as it could. Any more speed, and something would blow. See, that was the danger with using illegal parts. You never knew the quality of

what you were buying. It was inevitable that you'd get some junk mixed in with parts *really quite handy* for situations like these.

*Speaking of those handy features...*

Ronan deftly hit a button on the control panel. He ducked, covering his ears as something whistled in the air behind the aircraft. His crew knew to follow suit.

An explosion sounded in the distance. He knew from experience that would keep the Savages away. Not forever, but it'd buy him a few minutes. That was all he needed.

He kept the hoverjet's speed up. Trying evasive maneuvers would only bleed airspeed at this point. Airspeed he needed to get back to the city in one piece.

A streak of sunlight cut across the landscape. Ronan looked back. The sun was beginning to creep over the horizon. He cursed to himself. He'd have to make up the few remaining miles quickly, or pray that the boy turned up late.

An engine sputtered. Just this once, Ronan ignored it. He couldn't give the boy a chance to reconsider coming. If he failed now, he could say goodbye to his career. His fate would be only a matter of whether the law would come for him before he mysteriously vanished.

*Just a little more...*

Did he dare to inch the throttle up just that little bit more? He decided that yes, he did. Going out in a ball of fire would be better than being held responsible for failure. That was the trade you made when you got involved in a business such as this one; the pay was good, the protection was even better, but it lumped you together with – and under the boot of – those that society would be better off without. It made you one of them.

The city walls were in sight. The sun was slowly pouring over the horizon behind them.

For a moment, the air seemed still.

Ronan backed off the throttle.

He let go of a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

And he allowed himself to simply exist.

To breathe in this majestic splendor. To experience a world that most would never get to.

He'd made a lot of bad decisions in his life. And in all likelihood, he'd make even more.

But at the very least, he could be grateful for this one.

This bad decision, and the beauty that it'd led him to.

A beauty that others would never know.

---

**If Ning had to describe the sunrise with a single word, it would be “striking”.**

Of course, that wasn't nearly enough. Honestly, he didn't think any number of words could. How could language, a thing of the dark underground, capture something so *different*? Something so foreign, that seemed to appeal nonetheless to every primal instinct in his body.

He pinched himself. He still wasn't dreaming. How could that be?

How could *this* be? How could this *exist*? How could it have gone over their heads for so long? Evidently, it wasn't the barren, poisoned wasteland everyone had made it out to be? Had they been lying? Had they been lied to, themselves? Or were they just wrong? Was everyone living a dream? Or was it just him? Only it *couldn't* be, because he wasn't dreaming.

What made sense? Why didn't it?

Too many questions.

So few answers.

Hopefully, this ride would begin to change that.

His emotions were a complete mess. He was thrilled and disappointed, beyond grateful and rightly furious.

Ning stepped away from those emotions. He smiled. He could deal with all that later.

Right now, in the moment, it was enough to feel the breeze and taste the sunlight.

---

**Guilt was not an emotion Ronan was terribly familiar with.** Oh, he'd done bad things before. And he'd even felt regretful. Not enough to reconsider the life he led, but enough to give him pause.

This was different.

Watching this doomed boy smiling in the sunlight, amazed at wonders he'd never know again, blissfully unaware of the terrible fate that awaited him...

It was difficult.

More difficult than any other bad decision Ronan had made.

He'd never come back from doing something like this.

He wanted to stop. To rush the two guards assigned to watch over them, hijack the hoverjet, and fly the boy safely home.

He *should* stop.

But he couldn't. Not if he valued his own life.



Ronan looked back at the boy. He was smiling. A smile so sincere, it pained him. So young. Why did he have to be so young? Why couldn't he be some greasy old crook, the way most of the Syndicate's political targets were?

This boy had done nothing. There was so much for him to look forward to, so much time he still had.

And Ronan was about to take that away from him.

Forever.

It didn't matter that he wouldn't land the killing blow. The Boss never bothered to do his own dirty work, but it was still *his*. It was still his fault.

And this would be Ronan's.

This was horrible. What had he gotten himself into? How could he ever get out of it?

*You won't*, a voice told him. A voice like the Boss's. Ronan knew it wasn't real, but that didn't make it wrong. That didn't make it any easier to ignore.

Tears welled up in his eyes. He blinked them away. It took everything he had to keep them from rolling down his face, and exposing this whole cruel charade for what it was.

Ronan had never been particularly religious. But in that moment, he looked to the dazzling heavens above, and muttered himself a final prayer.

---

**It felt as though time itself had stopped.**

The glorious colors of the morning flew past the hoverjet. They seemed to ebb and flow into each other, rushing around and above the land's contours like a waterfall.

The landscape itself teemed with life. There was greenery *everywhere*, not just in dedicated city parks. Back in the city, only a select few plants were grown – and their conditions were far less forgiving. They were restricted to taking up only the room that'd been cordoned off for them by planners. Out here, countless varieties of plants were allowed to grow as vast as they wanted.

The world around the hoverjet seemed so perfect, yet so abstract. It resembled an artwork more than the world he knew. Ning resisted the urge to pinch himself just one more time – though this was far stranger than any real dream he'd dreamt.

The only hint of motion from the thick foliage was gentle swaying in the breeze. Here was another thing he was unaccustomed to – the wind, that was. It was another force, on top of the motion of the hoverjet, that he had to keep in mind when approaching the unduly difficult task of keeping himself upright.

There were also specks in the distant sky. Could those be *birds*? Even from this distance, they seemed so *big*. The city only kept smaller birds, as pollinators for the city's parks and gardens. These birds were soaring of their own accord, flying free above the confines that others were resigned to.

*Not so unlike me, in a way.*

It wasn't that this world was *frozen*, exactly. There was too much life and warmth for that. Rather, it was like it was stuck, like time operated differently here. Events transpired, but nothing really seemed to *change*. Just gentle swaying, like the wind and the trees.

And in this world, Ning and his guides were observers. They were of different stuff than the rest of this world, unable to interact with it. They could only watch the world live and thrive from above.

The underground city – and the world, as Ning the rest of humanity had understood it – was not just a different place. It was a different time, a different rule, a different world entirely.

In this world, in this moment, Ning could let go.

He knew himself.

He saw himself, drifting across the vibrant canvas of the landscape.

He understood his world better than he ever had – better than the vast majority of humanity ever could.

This existence was more than merely existing. It was more than the dull, repetitive cycle of waking up, working, and going to sleep that defined life beneath the ground. To call it *living*, as though that were some special experience, might not be right, either. Was it really *living*, if he was relegated to the role of an observer? Was it really *living*, if the world seemed to exist in a perpetual state of not-quite-stillness?

Ning wasn't sure.

And that was okay.

In this wonderful, weird world, it was enough to just... *be*.

Ning closed his eyes. He couldn't stop the smile from spreading across his face – but then, he didn't exactly want to. He was content with where and what and how he was. In that moment, it didn't matter how confounding this whole situation was. All the pressing questions could wait. Questions and discussions and accusations could all be dealt with underground. This experience – simply *being* – was unique to this world. Savoring it was enough.

He heard a noise somewhere between a gasp and a whimper. Suddenly, the hoverjet lurched to a stop. Ning sighed, his immersion partly shattered. Calmly, he took his time to turn around.

Ning's three chaperones – one of whom was the person who'd first approached him with the ticket – were all huddled together, far closer than they'd been at any point during the ride.

*What's that about?*

He saw a flash out of the corner of his eye.

Something heavy struck him in the stomach.

And he fell to the hard ground beneath.

His breath was shaky. His ears were ringing. A searing bolt of pain had embedded itself in his side. He felt dizzy. Was this a dream? He tried to reach up and pinch himself. Only, there was no strength left in his arm. There was no strength left anywhere. Just pain and shock and discomfort.

What had happened? He didn't know. He didn't want to know. He didn't want to find out. It hurt to think. Maybe... if he could just... rest...

He heard a loud sound. More followed, in rapid succession. A warped, garbled yell sounded from somewhere in the distance.

*Breathe in...*

*And out...*

His breathing spiraled out of control.

He saw a set of cold eyes above him.

Then the darkness came.

---

**He'd done it.**

Finally.

Ronan had done the right thing.

He'd made the right choice.

He'd stood up to the Syndicate.

And somehow, he'd *actually* succeeded.

Ronan – not the Boss, not the Syndicate, not anyone else – had won.

And he was too late.

Too late to change the boy's fate, already dead and devoured by now.

Too late to save himself.

Oh, his wounds were probably treatable – bullet wounds often were.

But no one would treat *him*.

He wouldn't make it that far, anyway.

At this rate, he'd soon collapse, leaving his remains for the Savages.

And if *half* the things whispered about them were true, they'd clean the flesh from his bones by nightfall.

Ronan steeled himself. He wasn't about to let that happen.

He picked up his gun, one final time.

He winced, as pain surged through his arm.

He found the stash of defensive explosives and took aim.

Ronan was dead before he even saw the flames.