

Verticus

By Xavier Banks

The sliding doors of the Old City Metro station slid open flooding Trevor with tons of different sounds and smells. Hundreds of people of all shapes and sizes passed by him without a care in the world as he attempted to make his way to the turnstile. The tall walls of the station loomed over him, as if it watched his every move. Clutching the flimsy ticket in his hand, Trevor pushed past a continuous stream of people.

Eventually, Trevor successfully made his way to the entrance line. A man wearing a dark blue coat with a gold symbol on it stood at the front of the line checking each person's ticket. After a few minutes, Trevor reached the front of the line and could now read what the symbol said.

Layer Guardian.

Trevor stiffened. A Guardian. He had never met someone who was a Guardian. In the inner cities Guardians were fully robotic, but here in the 'countryside' Guardians were normal humans. He had heard tales of Guardians. They kept an eye over everything and--

A gruff, annoyed voice broke through Trevor's thoughts. "I said, 'where's your ticket?'"

Trevor started and quickly handed the Guardian his ticket. Sweat began to form on his face. The Guardian scanned the ticket against a computer terminal. A spinning circle formed on the screen. Each spin of the circle seemed to take hours. The sweat continued to drip down his face. Men shouted across the platforms. Boots clanged against the metal floor. Cold air stormed

by his face as trains flew by. The smell of sweet tea and hot coffee fought its way through Trevor's senses.

Sounds.

Smells.

Fear.

Something was wrong. The circle kept spinning. Hadn't the people in front of him made it through faster than this? Needles seemed to stab at the back of his brain. Trevor would never be able to make it out of the city. He would be arrested and placed in a small cell. No one would feed him. No one would care. No one would--

BING!

The Guardian handed the ticket back to Trevor. Trevor stood still, his body shaking.

"Hurry up now, kid." The Guardian said agitatedly.

Trevor quickly moved through the turnstile. The grating sound it made etched itself into his mind. Attempting to make some distance between the Guardian and himself, Trevor accidentally rammed into a tall man in a sharp, black suit. The man held a slim phone up to his ear with one hand, and a cup of coffee in the other. The coffee splattered over the man's suit.

"What the heck is wrong with you?" The man yelled.

Trevor quickly apologized and pulled out a small rag from his pocket.

The man snatched the rag out of Trevor's hand and walked away. "No, no. I wasn't talking about you Mr. Martin." The man's voice trailed off as he quickly forgot about the young boy standing in the middle of the station with a spilled cup of coffee at his feet.

Trevor picked up the cup and moved to throw it away in a nearby trash can. The trash can he approached reeked of expired food and cigarette butts. The rotten and burned smell caused Trevor to gag.

Trevor swiftly moved away and decided to attempt to find where the train he needed to get to was. The map on the wall rattled his brain. The confusing mess of colored lines seemed to merge together creating some sort of colorful spaghetti. After studying the spaghetti for a little bit, Trevor grasped the correct strand and promptly made his way towards the awaiting train.

The train arrived at a quarter past ten. Instead of being rusty and old with peeling paint along the edges like the rest of the trains in Old City, this train had blue stripes that sat upon the pristine white paint which stood out against the gray walls of the station.

The sliding doors opened releasing another bustling batch of travelers. Trevor pushed past the swarm of people and made his way to the doors of the train car. Stepping inside, pleasant colors and sweet smells bombarded Trevor's senses

He made his way to one of the seats. Unlike the hard, uncomfortable seats of Old City, this singular soft seat managed to make him feel welcome in this unfamiliar environment.

The doors of the train closed with a warm hum as if they were satisfied with their work. Trevor wondered when the train would begin moving. He opened the cover on the window next to him to try and look out at the people in the station.

To his surprise, the station had disappeared. In its place were flashes of pipes and concrete walls from the tunnels.

A blast of light from the window blinded Trevor momentarily. When he regained his vision, Old City stood stoically in all its glory.

Trevor never thought the city was that beautiful while he lived there. People sat along the streets, begging for money or food, while businessmen made their way to important jobs far from the homeless that surrounded them.

Up here in the train, though, Trevor finally realized the appeal. Building stretched high into the sky. Bridges for people and subway cars strung together between the buildings like a spiderweb of transportation.

Trevor closed the window and his eyes began to close. Falling asleep quickly as the soft hum of the train drowned out the noise around him.

Trevor awoke to the sound of a soft bell. An announcement came over the intercom announcing that they were now approaching Verticus.

Trevor stretched and opened the open window. The sprawling city stretched in front of him. Trevor finally understood why they named it Verticus. Tall towers filled his vision. Each spire stretched into the sky until he couldn't see the top anymore.

Soon, the train passed desolation. A large, deep crater sat in the middle of the city. Construction crews worked to fix the lasting damage from years ago. The sight hurt Trevor more than he thought it would.

The train entered the tunnel, blocking his view of the destruction.

Another announcement came on as the train slowed to a stop. As Trevor began preparing to leave, the doors at the end of the car opened. Nervous shuffling from the other passengers filled the quiet. Trevor looked up to see what caused this strange feeling among everyone.

A tall metal figure strided through the walkway. Its head shimmered from the reflected light from the ceilings. Blue light shone through the eyes of this terrifying, and majestic, being.

Trevor sat absolutely still, his breath caught in his throat, as the Layer Guardian continued past him into the next car.

The doors opened with a satisfied sigh. Trevor grabbed his bag and swiftly stepped out into the place known as the Verticus Central Station.

The crowds rushed to surround Trevor. His breathing started to increase. His knees began to shake. Then something unexpected happened.

The needles that poked into his brain stayed away. The headache never came.

Trevor glided through the crowds, careful not to bump into anyone, and made his way to a ticket booth. Unlike the Old City ticket booths, Verticus had the most advanced train ticket system on the planet. It didn't seem like much to brag about -- especially with the Finten Corporation on the verge of discovering intergalactic travel -- but after seeing the ticket system Trevor was impressed. Too impressed. There seemed to be hundreds of buttons that lead to countless different scenarios for your travels. From lost tickets to lost parents, this system had everything. Eventually, Trevor admitted defeat and decided to look for help.

His eyes passed over the hundreds of people who made their way through the platform. He eventually found what he was looking for: a station conductor.

The Vertican man stood with a slight hunch. Lines wrinkled across his face and his eyelids squinted until you could barely see his eyes. He wore a light blue coat and a peaked hat with a gold trim. Embroidered onto his coat was the logo of the Verticus Central Station--a swooping golden bird surrounded by tall, silver buildings--and a name. Jon Stevensen.

"How can I help you young man?" The conductor asked as Trevor walked up to him. His voice was raspy, like a man who had too many cigarettes.

Trevor asked for help using the ticket booths. Studying the screen, Conductor Stevensen directed him through the buttons and tabs of the system until Trevor ultimately ended up with a small paper ticket in the palm of his hand.

Trevor thanked Conductor Stevensen and promptly went on his way. He looked at the ticket while he walked towards the next platform. The faintly green ticket only took up space about the size of his thumb. Despite being so small, it was surprisingly firm. It had a small arrow

pointing in the direction Trevor needed to enter the ticket in along with other information about the train he would be taking.

Distracted by the ticket in his hand, Trevor bumped into another traveler, a shorter woman with slick black hair. Trevor quickly apologized and braced himself for another screech of hatred from the individual. Instead of a shout, Trevor was treated with a quick apology and bow from the woman before she scurried away.

Trevor stood in the middle of the station for a moment, startled--and amazed--by the recent encounter. He shook himself before continuing his journey to the nearby platform.

He flowed easily with the large crowds that crowded the station. No one here seemed to be bothered by any minor inconveniences caused by the other travelers. They all would apologize, no matter who actually caused the disturbance, and would continue on their way after a quick bow.

Verticans sure were strange.

Trevor soon found a seat on the platform his train would soon be arriving at. He watched the busy people move around him some more. Everyone seemed to know exactly where they needed to be. No one stood in the middle of the crowds searching for their exit. No one blocked the walkways between train platforms. No one purposefully bothered one another. Trevor began to smile. These crowds were oddly calming. The smooth flow, the politeness of the staff and travelers, the neatness.

Trevor noticed that while trash cans were rarely seen, the floors never seemed to have any trash scattered on them.

The sound of a train horn caused Trevor to jolt up in his seat. The ground shook slightly as a train zipped past the platform. A rush of cool air pulled the ticket out of Trevor's hands and threw it across the platform.

Trevor bolted after it. The ticket danced through the feet of others, avoiding his grasp. A metal hand clamped down on the green ticket, stopping the dance.

Trevor skidded to a stop, fear filling his face. The Layer Guardian lifted up the tickets in its cold, metal hands. Trevor wanted to run. He wanted to get away from the Guardian as fast as possible. He tried to force himself to move, but his body wouldn't budge.

"Is this yours?" The soft, yet robotic voice startled Trevor. The glowing eyes stared at him. Trevor nodded eagerly.

The Guardian reached out towards Trevor, holding the small ticket. Trevor snatched the ticket out of its hand and held it close to himself.

"Hold onto that tightly," the Guardian said in its soft voice. It gave what Trevor assumed to be a smile, then turned and strode away.

A voice sounded over the intercom announcing the train's arrival. Trevor swiftly made his way on the train and towards one of the open seats. He looked out the window next to him and watched all the people move around the platform. The headache he had before was gone. There were no needles. There was no aching feeling.

There was no pain.

THE END