

Railhead

The Great Network is a place of great dangers—especially for someone who rides the rails and rides his luck the way Zen Starling does. Once Zen was just a petty thief, stealing to support his family and living by his wits. Now everything has changed. Zen is still a thief—but it could be that the key to the whole universe rests on finding out what else he is . . .

Who'd have thought that the goldsmith would send a drone after him? Zen had come to believe that the merchants of the Ambersai Bazar didn't much mind being robbed, as long as you didn't steal too often from the same shop. Like maybe they felt a bit of pilfering was a price worth paying for a pitch in the biggest market on the eastern branch lines. For as long as anyone could remember, the Bazar had been a happy hunting ground for people like Zen who were young and daring and dishonest, the low heroes of this infinite city. 5

Ambersai was a big moon. The dirty yellow disc of its motherworld gazed down upon the busy streets like a watchful eye, but it never seemed to notice Zen when he filched food or bangles from the open-fronted shops. Sometimes the shopkeepers noticed, and chased him, bellowing threats and waving lathi sticks, but they mostly gave up after a street or two, and there were always crowds to hide in. The Bazar was busy day and night. Not just the cafés, bars and pleasure shops but the stalls of the craftsmen and metal dealers too. There was a whole district of them, selling on stuff that the deep-space mining outfits brought in. Ambersai's local asteroid belt was as full of precious metals as an expensive necklace. 10 15

By coincidence, an expensive necklace was just what Zen had lifted that night. He could feel it in his pocket, swinging against his hip as he went down the greasy stairs towards the station and the approaching train.

He wasn't usually so ambitious. A couple of anklets or a nose ring was all he usually scooped up on his visits to the Ambersai. But when he saw that necklace lying on the goldsmith's counter, it had seemed like too good a chance to miss. The goldsmith herself was busy talking to the customer who'd just been looking at it, trying to interest him in others, even more expensive. The guard she paid to watch her 20

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stuff was watching sportcasts or a threedie instead; he wore a headset and that glass-eyed look that people got when they were streaming video straight to their visual cortex. 25

Before Zen's brain knew what his fingers were planning, he had snatched the necklace and slipped it into his coat. Then he was turning away, trying to look casual as he melted back into the crowds. 30

He hadn't gone twenty paces when someone blocked his way. Zen had his head down, so all he saw of her at first were her clumpy boots and her red raincoat, the belt knotted around her waist. He raised his eyes and glimpsed the dim outline of her face in the shadow of the raincoat's hood. A girlish face, he guessed, but he had only that one glance, because the goldsmith had worked out by then that she'd been robbed, and her guard had woken up and skimmed back through the stall's security footage and seen Zen take the necklace. 'Thief!' the goldsmith screamed, and the guard grabbed a lathi and came wading through the crowd towards Zen. 35

'Come with me!' said the girl. 40

Zen pushed past her. Her hand shot out and gripped his arm, surprisingly strong, almost pulling him off balance, but he twisted free. Behind him he could hear the lathi boy yelling and shoving shoppers aside. 'Zen Starling!' yelled the girl in the red coat—only she couldn't really have said that, he must have misheard her, because how could she know his name? He ran on, losing himself in the crowds on Harmony Street. 45

He was just starting to think his luck had held when he heard the flutter-thud of rotors, and looked back to see the drone behind him, hovering like a May bug over the heads of the crowd. It was sleek and serious and military-looking. Neon reflections slithered over its carapace and its laser eyes glowed red. Zen had a nasty feeling that those pods on its underside held weaponry. 50

At the very least, it would be able to flash his image and location to the local data raft when it found him, and that would bring cops or the goldsmith's thugs down on him.

So he chameleoned his old smartfibre duffel coat from blue to black and pushed on through the crowds, listening out for the sweet sound of trainsong. 55



From *Railhead*, by Philip Reeve

Questions

Read the story on pages 1 and 2.

1. What attitude did the shopkeepers take towards thieves at the Ambersai Bazar?
2. According to the text, where did the metals in the jewellery for sale come from?
3. How can we tell that Zen did not usually steal such valuable items?
4. Why didn't the guard spot Zen steal the necklace?
5. In paragraph five it says Zen 'melted back into the crowds'. What does this tell us about how Zen escaped?
6. How can you tell Zen had not planned to steal the necklace?
7. What evidence is there that Zen did not know the girl in the red raincoat?
8. Write down three things you are told about the drones.
9. Explain what is meant by the word 'chameleoned' in the final paragraph of the extract.
10. What does the phrase 'sweet sound of trainsong' tell you about Zen's feeling when hears the train?
11. What evidence is there that this story is set in the future? Use evidence from across the extract.
12. Zen is described in this extract as one of the 'low heroes of this infinite city'. What impression does this create of Zen? Use information from the extract to support your answer.

Extra activities and discussion points

- Continue the story by describing what happened to Zen next.
- Draw a labelled map of Ambersai based on the description in the extract.
- Have you read any other futuristic novels? What similarities and differences are there so far?

