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Opening extract from

Railhead

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Are you ready to enter Zen's world? Your journey starts here . . .

Just before a train went through a K-gate there was a moment of quiet, so short that only railheads caught it, as the wheels moved from the normal K-bahn track to the strange, ancient, frictionless rails which ran through the gate itself. That was what it felt like to Zen when he recognized the girl: a heartbeat's silence, and then he was in a new world.

'Nobody there,' he said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. He took a step back from the window, although he didn't really think the girl would be able to see him. He kept watching her. How had she followed him here? She must have been on the same train as him out of Ambersai. But she couldn't have been; he had not seen her get off at Cleave. It couldn't be the same girl . . .

And then she raised her face and seemed to look straight at him, and although he still couldn't make out her features through the rain and the shadow of her hood, he felt sure that it was her.

'Come with me!' she had said.

She had known his name.

So what was she? Police? An assassin? The goldsmith must have sent her, Zen thought. That didn't make much sense. It was only a necklace that he'd stolen, and once it went through the K-gate the insurance would have covered the loss. But it was the only explanation he could think of. The Ambersai goldsmiths must be hiring killers now, to hunt down anyone who robbed them.

The girl crossed the street towards his building.

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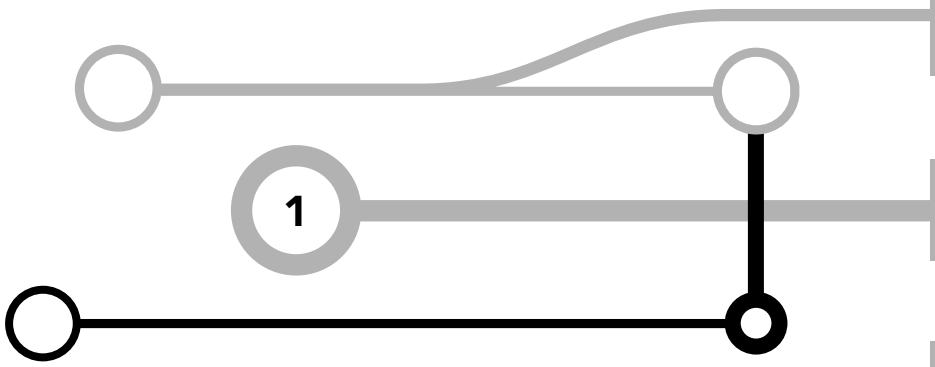
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Listen . . .

He was running down Harmony when he heard it. Faint at first, but growing clearer, rising above the noises of the streets. Out in the dark, beyond the city, a siren voice was calling, lonely as the song of whales. It was the sound he had been waiting for. The Interstellar Express was thundering down the line from Golden Junction, and singing as it came.

He had an excuse to hurry now. He was not running away from a crime any more, just running to catch a train. Just Zen Starling, a thin brown kid racing down Harmony Street with trouble in his eyes and stolen jewellery in the pocket of his coat, dancing his way through the random gaps that opened and closed in the crowds. The lines of lanterns strung between the old glass buildings lit his face as he looked back, looked back, checking for the drone that was hunting him.

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.

Ambersai was a big moon. The dirty yellow disc of its mother-world 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.

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 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.

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.

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.

'Come with me!' said the girl.

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 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.

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. 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.

Ambersai station: grand and high-fronted like a great theatre, with the K-bahn logo hanging over its entrance in letters of blue fire. Booming loudspeaker voices reciting litanies of stations. Moths and

Monk bugs swarming under the lamps outside; beggars and street kids too, and buskers, and vendors selling fruit and chai and noodles, and rickshaw captains squabbling as they touted for fares. Through the din and chatter came the sound of the train.

Zen went through the entrance barriers and ran out onto the platform. The Express was just pulling in. First the huge loco, a Helden Hammerhead, its long hull sheathed in shining red-gold scales. Then a line of lit windows, and a pair of station angels flickering along the carriage sides like stray rainbows. Some tourists standing next to Zen pointed at them and snapped pictures which wouldn't come out. Zen kept his place in the scrum of other K-bahn travellers, itching to look behind him, but knowing that he mustn't because, if the drone was there, it would be watching for just that: a face turned back, a look of guilt.

The doors slid open. He shoved past disembarking passengers into a carriage. It smelled of something sweet, as if the train had come from some world where it was springtime. Zen found a window seat and sat there looking at his feet, at the ceramic floor, at the patterns on the worn seat coverings, anywhere but out of the window, which was where he most wanted to look. His fellow passengers were commuters and a few Motorik couriers with their android brains stuffed full of information for businesses further down the line. In the seats opposite Zen lounged a couple of rich kids: railheads from K'mbussi or Galaghast, pretty as threedie stars, dozing with their arms around each other. Zen thought about taking their bags with him when he got off, but his luck was glitchy tonight and he decided not to risk it.

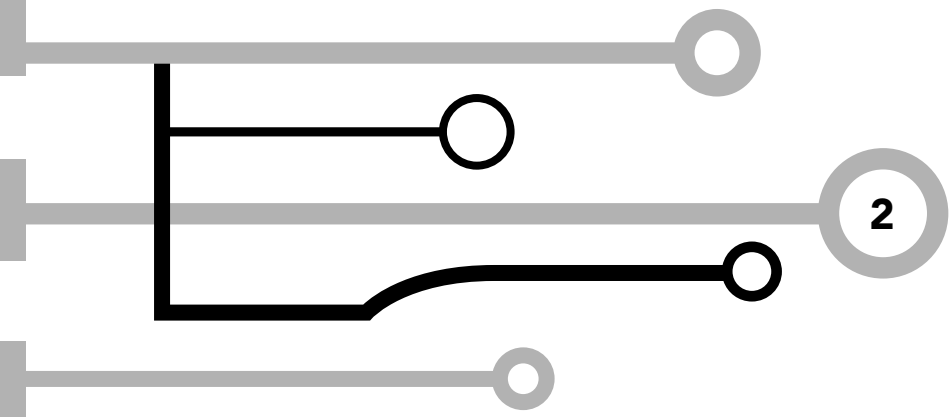
The train began to move, so smoothly that he barely noticed. Then the lights of Ambersai Station were falling behind, the throb of the engines was rising, the backbeat of the wheels quickening. Zen risked a glance at the window. At first it was hard to make out anything in the confusion of carriage reflections and the city lights sliding by

outside. Then he saw the drone again. It was keeping pace with the train, shards of light sliding from its rotor blades as it burred along at window height, aiming a whole spider-cluster of eyes and cameras and who-knew-what at him.

The train rushed into a tunnel, and he could see nothing any more except his own skinny reflection, wide cheekbones fluttering with the movement of the carriage, eyes big and empty as the eyes on moths' wings.

The train accelerated. The noise rising, rising, until, with a soundless bang—a kind of *un-bang*—it tore through the K-gate, and everything got reassuringly weird. For a timeless moment Zen was outside of the universe. There was a sense of falling, although there was no longer any down to fall to. Something that was not quite light blazed in through the blank windows . . .

Then another un-bang, and the train was sliding out of another ordinary tunnel, slowing towards another everyday station. It was bright daytime on this world, and the gravity was lower. Zen relaxed into his seat, grinning. He was imagining that drone turning away in defeat from the empty tunnel on Ambersai, a thousand light years away.



The K in K-gate stands for KH, which stands for 'Kwisatz Haderech', which means 'the shortening of the way' in one of the languages of Old Earth. Only the Guardians know how it works. You step aboard a train, and the train goes through a K-gate, and you step off on another planet, where the sun that was shining on you a moment ago is now just one of those tiny stars in the sky. It might take ten thousand years to travel that far by spaceship, but a K-train makes the jump in seconds. You can't walk through those gates, or drive through in a car. Rockets and bullets and lasers and radio waves can't make that crossing. Only trains can ride the K-bahn: the old, wise trains of the Empire, barracuda-beautiful, dreaming their dreams of speed and distance as they race from world to world.

Nowadays most people rode from one star-system to another as carelessly as if they were travelling between the districts of a single city. But Zen was one of those who still sensed the magic of it. That night, like all nights, he kept his face to the window, watching the worlds go by.

Un-bang. Tarakat: chimneys belching vapour and some big moons hanging. (The train sped through without stopping.) *Un-bang*. Summer's Lease: white streets above a bay; the kind of place people like Zen could only dream of living. *Un-bang*. Tusk: giant gas planets

tilting their rings like the brims of summer hats across a turquoise sky. There was a big market in Tusk. Maybe next time he'd go there rather than risk showing his face in Ambersai too soon. Or maybe he should just keep off the K-bahn altogether for a while; there were plenty of things to steal at home in Cleave.

But he knew he wouldn't. His sister Myka said he was just a railhead, said he needed the K-bahn like a drug. Zen guessed she was right. He didn't make these journeys up and down the line simply to steal things, he made them because he loved the changing views, the roaring blackness of the tunnels and the flicker of the gates. And best of all he loved the trains, the great locomotives, each one different, some stern, some friendly, but all driven by the same deep joy that he felt at riding the rails.

Those locos didn't care what loads they pulled. Shining carriages or battered freight cars, it was all the same to them. They didn't usually take much interest in their passengers either, although they were romantics at heart, and you often heard about them helping fugitive lovers, or good-looking thieves. And now and then a murderer might board a train, or a banker absconding with other people's savings, and the loco would whistle up the authorities at its next stop, or just set its own maintenance spiders on the creep . . .

Zen was thinking about that as the Interstellar Express tore through one last gate and the long darkness of a tunnel gave way to a cavernous rail yard. Stacked freight containers like a windowless city. Chilly reflections in ceramic tiles, the name of the station sliding past the windows. The gentle voice of the train announcing, 'Cleave. End of the line. Cleave. All change.' Stepping out onto the platform, he noticed a couple of maintenance spiders scuttling along the carriage roofs. It made him wonder if the drone had pinged his details to the train before it left Ambersai. Maybe it was going to turn him in. Maybe he was not good-looking or romantic enough. Maybe the train felt sorry for the goldsmith he had robbed. As he went along the

platform he imagined those many-legged robots jumping down on him. Pulling him apart with their mechanical pincers, or just holding onto him till the local law arrived.

They did neither. He was just letting his fears run away with him like Ma did. *I ought to watch that*, he thought. He knew where too much imagining could lead you. The spiders went about their work, checking couplings, repairing scratches in the train's paintwork, while Zen walked through the barriers and out of the station amid a little crowd of other passengers, a herd of roll-along suitcases scurrying behind them, nobody looking exactly delighted to be getting off at Cleave.

Zen's hometown was a sheer-sided ditch of a place. Cleave's houses and factories were packed like shelved crates up each wall of a mile-deep canyon on a one-gate world called Angkat whose surface was scoured by constant storms. Space was scarce, so the buildings huddled into every available scrap of terracing, and clung to cliff faces, and crowded on the bridges which stretched across the gulf between the canyon walls—a gulf which was filled with sagging cables, dangling neon signage, smog, dirty rain, and the fluttering rotors of air taxis, ferries, and corporate transports. Between the steep-stacked buildings a thousand waterfalls went foaming down to join the river far below, adding their own roar to the various dins from the industrial zone. The local name for Cleave was Thunder City.

Zen had been just ten standard years old when he came there with Ma and Myka. Before that they had lived on Santheraki, before that Qalat, and before that he couldn't even remember; so many worlds; a blur of cheap rooms and changing skies. They tended to leave places in a hurry, always running from the people Ma said were following them. But by the time they got to Cleave, Myka and Zen were starting to understand that the people were just bad dreams leaking out of Ma's imagination, like the 'thought waves' which she saw coming

off walls and windows sometimes. So there they had stayed, managing Ma as best as they could. Myka had found a job for herself in the factories. Zen had been drawn to easier ways of making money.

Well, not *that* easy. The chase in the Ambersai Bazar had shaken him. As he came out of the station he could still feel the weight of that stolen necklace dragging his coat down on one side. It felt like bad luck. Wanting rid of it, he walked through the neon puddles and the white noise of the falls to the street where Uncle Bugs kept shop.

He did not notice the drone which followed him, training its cameras on him through the rain and the spray and the crowds.

Uncle Bugs wasn't really anybody's uncle. He wasn't even technically a 'he'. He was a Hive Monk, a colony of big brown beetles clinging to a roughly human-shaped armature which they'd made for themselves out of sticks and string and chicken bones. *There must be millions of them*, thought Zen, as he stood in the dim little office behind the shop, holding up the necklace. A rustling sound came from under Uncle Bugs's grimy burlap robe. In the shadows of the hood there was a paper wasp's nest of a face, like a chapatti with three holes poked in it—two eyes and a ragged mouth, with shiny bug bodies crawling and seething in the dark behind. The voice that came out of the mouth hole was made by a thousand saw-toothed limbs rubbing together.

'That is a nice piece, Zen. Better than the usual junks you bring me.' Long black antennae wavered at Zen through the holes in the mask. Most Hive Monks spent their time riding the K-bahn on endless, mysterious pilgrimages. It was odd to find one running a shop, but Uncle Bugs was good at it; he could haggle as well as any human. 'Two hundred,' he buzzed.

That was at least a hundred less than Zen had hoped for, but he was tired, and he didn't like that necklace any more. So he put it on Uncle Bugs's greasy counter, and a crude, insect-covered,

coat-hanger-sculpture hand reached out from beneath the burlap robes and took it.

He came out of the shop counting the wad of notes, each with its smiling video portrait of the Emperor. Then he headed for home, feeling like he always did at the end of a job—like he'd flown free for a while and now he was going back into his cage.

He didn't think to look back. He did not see the drone descend out of the neon fog onto the roof of Uncle Bugs's shop. There was a flare of light, a quick clattering sound from inside the shop, and the drone reappeared. It hovered outside until a girl in a red raincoat arrived. She looked up at it. The drone angled its rotors and took off after Zen, with the girl following on foot.