

“How long were you in there, Fetch?” Colt Caesario said to me. Colt stood a few inches shorter than me, but his tall, curly, black hair added to his perceivable stature. His cut arms held a big basket, and he had two, stylistic slashes on both of his well-kept eyebrows.

The neon yellow, green, and purple lights from the clock-out station shined on his black skin and the aluminum bucket he cradled in his arms.

Colt’s tub of spare parts and metal plates reflected the kiosk’s garish illumination and made a small array of intersecting lights on the ground.

Maynard’s Scrapyard’s gate closed behind us. Its endless mounds stretched to the unroofed, outer city. Mountains of airship, rover, train, computer, and firearm parts filled the yard.

Litterbug’s like me and Colt sifted through the yard’s discarded metal, cords, wires, wheels, discs, switches, triggers, batteries, and any other mechanical bits for functional pieces. We packed as many useful pieces into our baskets and crates as we could carry. It was a big community, but we saw the same haggard people all the time. Men, women, and children scoured Maynard’s every day.

Rays reflected off the scrap and created a sizzling environment, during the diurnal hours, but now, at night, the sun disappeared for a brief respite. It would rise in a few hours, but until then, The Zip’s dust-covered, electric signs would keep the slums lively and bright.

The Zip was a term for the lower city. It got its name from the workers who first constructed the Middle City’s magnetic tracks, because it looked like a

zipper from below. Centuries after the rail's erection, countless other towns and cities built on top of each other buried The Zip under civic centers, skyscrapers, and space ports.

I unwrapped my blue turban and scarf and rolled up my long sleeves. Their thick material cooked me on a low simmer during Arenthal's hot days but protected my skin from the harsh sun and reflective metallics in the junkyard.

My light skin breathed for the first time since I had left the house at dawn. My short, brown hair stood up in a frizz, like a dying, desert shrub.

"Same as usual," I said. We walked to the clock-out counter. "From dawn, until dusk. It was a good day of litterbugging. They dropped off two, totaled luxury cruisers in the morning, and that's where most of this came from."

Tinker, the droid who stood in at the night shift for Mr. Maynard, waved its hand at me and Colt. Tinker had a large hover spout which allowed it to float around station, a big head with an antenna, stylus-width arms, and no legs.

"Welcome, sirs," Tinker greeted us.

I scanned my Collector's Union ID, and put my crate on the scale, located next to the window. The digital numbers ticked upward.

"Congratulations, Mr. Fetch Donaldsen," Tinker said in its high-pitched, robotic voice. "You collected fifty-six pounds of scrap today."

"Holy crap, dude," Colt whispered.

"As per Maynard's Scrapyard policy, we will take fifteen percent of what you collected, as payment for your ventures," Tinker said, "but because you are an official Collector's Union member, I will only need to collect twelve percent."

A large slot behind the balance opened to Maynard's huge, underground bank of recycled parts. The scale tipped backward and dumped a few pounds of my scraps. When the bits landed, they clattered and scraped against each other near the top of the container.

"Oh, Tinker, I'm just going to cash in these parts here," I said.

"Very well," answered the bot. It pressed a button and dumped the rest of my scavenged supplies into the bank. "That will earn you one-hundred-and-eighty-one Civic Marks."

A thin receipt etched on a tin plate popped out of the front of Tinker's body, landed on the counter, and slid toward me.

I snatched the receipt, took my cubic tub from the scale, and waited for Colt to complete the same process.

We walked through The Zip's southside. Bundles of gears, spare parts, bolts, wires, and cords jangled in Colt's crate.

"This gig as a litterbug isn't, too bad, is it?" I asked Colt.

"No, honestly," he said. He repositioned his hands on his heavy box.

"I told you so," I said.