

THE SCAVENGER
By Russell Zimmerman

You can get everything you need, if you're just willing to look for it.

Mostly, I pick at the machines. When this used to be a fancier, bigger, better, mining facility – not the half-dead Tenton it was now, with a half-dead mine, filled with half-dead miners – the machines had done almost all of the work here. There were big ones that dug big holes, little ones that dug littler holes, and medium ones in between that bored just right. There were some with huge clawed shovel-mouths, some with moving belts for separating rock from ore, some with cylindrical rows of gnashing teeth that broke everything down into smaller bites. Inside each and every one of those machines were more machines, parts of them, engines and circuit boards and nuts and bolts and wiring and levers.

You can eat for your whole life off those machines. I know. I've done it.

I take them apart, break them down, keep the very best bits, the smallest, the lightest, the rarest. The ones I'll get the most for but can carry the most of and can hide the best. Other crews tend to go for other bits – bigger crews with bigger finders and bigger keepers – but me, I stay small. I fit into Tenton better. I set my sights nice and low, and I don't ever reach too far, and I always, always, make it to tomorrow.

Before you can take and break and keep, though, you have to find. All the biggest and best is gone, long gone, used-it-for-food-yesterday gone. Now, you have to go looking. Searching, hunting, snooping. Climbing, crawling, swimming. The mines used to be huge. The mines used to be deep. The mines used to be busy. Now it's a maze, a winding, three-dee, mass of confused tunnels, darkness, and flash floods. Crevices and cracks and cave-in-piles abound, and that's where I make my living.

By staying small, I can get where other people can't.

Yesterday's hunger is today's success. I'm skinny. I'm short. I can wriggle and slither like a stone-rat, I can get in, get the goods, and get out when other, bigger, crews can't. I can still carry a lot. I can wind wires around my arms and legs like I'm a living spool, I can fill my pockets with nuts and my dead-gunslinger's-bandolier with bolts, I can wrap circuit boards in my cloak and lash them tight to my belly.

I can trade. The Bluejacks know people on the Outside, far from Tenton, and they make deals with folks who want the very best of the things I find. The computer-boxes and circuit boards and screens and things like that go to them. I give them to Breaker, he gives them to the Bluejacks. They thank me, they sometimes feed me, they mostly let me live. Miners like the nuts and bolts, they wear them on leather thongs around their necks or sometimes hold them in their teeth all day, making themselves part of the old machines, buying themselves luck, staving off cave-ins. Everyone likes the wire; only some use it for unsteady power, mostly folks use it to tie stuff, lash stuff, booby-trap stuff. Shiloh and her boys like the levers, the great big ones, the ones they turn into maces. Shiloh feeds me, too. Mostly, she lets me live.

I make the best of it. I try to stay small. I try not to get too noticed, make too much noise, attract too much attention. Breaker likes danger, Shiloh likes respect, Smiler likes risks. Me, I don't like any of those things, don't want to have any of those things. I don't want to be some shiny silver 'slinger's buckle, I want to be their boots.

Good boots.

Comfortable. Ignored. Necessary.

Someday, I'll scavenge enough to get my very own pair.