

Freedom

Jordan trudged along the muddy trench he was forced to call home. He carried a hefty shovel propped up against his shoulder. His right arm hung low, burdened with an electronic bracelet that relayed his orders and kept tabs on his every move, constantly flashing lights to signify obedience. His current schedule was to dig out the collapsed section of the trenches before sunrise, despite the rain. There was not a time he wasn't in some part of the trenches: he slept in the shed with the shovels, he ate meals in the shack that was somehow kept stocked with canned goods and dry food, and he grew up with the automatic workers. He passed along the automated machines that continuously repaired the simpler sections of the trenches, going about their duties like wraiths—making no sound whatsoever.

Jordan finally found himself at the collapsed pile of framework and dirt he was tasked with removing. The work was always mindless, and seemingly endless in nature. The shovel he worked with was his only possible companion, a stalwart friend that got its hands just as dirty as he did. As he dug through the rock and synthetic material in the intense rain, he heard an alien sound. It began as a faint buzzing coming from underneath him, but increased in volume until it practically became deafening. Accompanying the noise was a tremendous rumbling that was also building to a crescendo that he did not want to stick around to experience.

Despite the sensory overload, he turned to run, but the bracelet on his arm began to flash red lights and beep with a piercing wail that overpowered even the cavernous roar of whatever was beneath the trenches. This had happened only once during the first week of Jordan's time in his personal abyss. Whenever he abandoned his duties, he was assaulted with the bracelet's cries,

and would have to suffer whatever consequences resulted when the auditory drilling reached its conclusion. He stopped and turned to face the source of the underground noise.

Suddenly, the noises vanished, and only Jordan's panting was audible in the rain. A moment stretched into a mile in the silence. Then, apropos of nothing at all, the mound of mud exploded. Wet earth flew in all directions as a demonic beast dragged itself onto the surface. This time, he let no mechanical reinforcement keep him from fleeing. The beast, a nightmarish concoction of worm, insect, and reptile, swam through the mud to sink its many jaws into his flesh. The sound of its roars were no longer stifled by the insulation of the earth, and made the bracelet, still interpreting his movements from the collapse as disobedient, seem like music by comparison. A myriad of plans to escape from this horror ran through his head—finally settling on using the metallic gate that the robotic workers would use when maintenance was required. The monstrosity was a bull and Jordan was an ambulatory red cape.

The nightmare that pursued him steadily gained ground. he pushed and maneuvered past a silent crowd of machines. Those robots were the saving grace he had counted on; not only did their interference with the worm give him enough time to reach the gate, but they also provided him the exact platform he needed to jump from in order to reach the top of the gate. The furious creature must have only been able to sense him through sound, because just as he predicted, the enraged beast charged full-force towards the gate.

A disgusting *crack* resounded when the creature collided with the unmovable gate. This crash sent enough force reverberating through the wall to knock Jordan into the empty expanse on the other side. What should have been a relieving moment was pierced by the bracelet. The noise rose in volume as he panicked to remove the accursed band.

The bracelet grew to a fever pitch... Then it stopped completely. Its lights went away, and it fell silently from his wrist. He slumped against the hard wall of the gate. Even though he had escaped with his life, both from the monster and from the trenches, he wondered if this was what the bracelet was trying to warn him about. He had the feeling that the gate would never open to him or the workers again. Jordan wept in the downpour. The rain fell slower and slower. After his eyes were sore and dry, he saw a light in the distance. The sun was rising on a new day.