



## INFINITY OF INFINITY

Written by: Hugo M. Franz

### Chapter I – Free sample

#### Junktown

The unrelenting afternoon sun bore down on the massive gray walls of the working square and the endless mounds of discarded electronics—twisted circuitry, cracked screens, half-melted plastic.

Colin's cap, covered with solar strips, absorbed the harsh light, powering the system attached to it. Through his wide-screen glasses he studied the rusted panel in his hands. Data overlays flickered to life, dancing across his vision and highlighting potential components:

Perovskite solar tile – cracked

Graphene quantum-dot sensor chip – corroded

Structural battery composite tile – obsolete

He turned the item over one last time, double-checked a few corroded spots. *Not worth it*, he thought, and tossed it onto the conveyor beside him. The jagged belt caught it and dragged it up toward the interwall disposal system.

Heat radiated from the sun-baked structures, blurring the air, making it hard for Colin to focus on the job, and causing disruptions in the glasses.

He scanned the mound of electronic waste in front of him, starting from the bottom and going all the way up, hoping that something would catch his attention. The two and a half meters

tall pile of trash wasn't the biggest in the square, but it loomed a good half again his height and didn't shine with anything promising. The glasses glitched and finally gave up.

He gently tapped them with his shaky palm, but nothing changed.

"Damn it. What's wrong again?" he muttered, reaching for the power cable on the side of his cap to adjust the connection—

Zzt!

A sharp jolt shot through his fingers—already twitchy on their own—and Colin recoiled with a grunt, yanking his hand back and jerking sideways in a brief, clumsy shuffle.

"Ouch!" he hissed, shaking out his hand and grimacing.

"Tryna make it rain, or jus' seizin' up again?" a voice called from the far back.

Colin smirked, his crooked nose and rough stubble pulling slightly with the motion.

"My glasses. Looks like it overheated," he replied, not having to look up at Robbins, a fellow grunt who always made such feeble jokes.

"Too bad. Only thing you ever made that worked... 'til today."

"Just a charge spike. Sun's frying everything again," he muttered, turning around to face the blonde guy with messy hair and his usual shit-eating grin.

"Add a bigger battery—then we'll see some real sparkles in them eyes."

Colin gave it a thought "Actually, a good idea. But I think to add more fans ..."

"Yeah, add 'em to yer brains too! At least somethin' will work!" Robbins called out, his crooked grin flashing the gap in his teeth.

When Colin had first joined this section nearly half a decade ago, he had found Robbins' cheerfulness annoying, but over time, he'd come to appreciate the attempt at levity. Anything to get a break from the dull monotony.

"You're just jealous like everyone!" Colin shot back, brushing the side of the frame. "This AI stuff is too neat for your old, ramshackle wits. It's a breakthrough! You'll see!"

Robbins raised a brow. "Oh yeah? What they do—tell ya how much trash's still trash?"

Colin smirked. "They help highlight components with potential. Anything that might be valuable gets flagged."

Robbins glanced at Colin's nearly empty shelf and shrugged. "Well, don't look like it's helpin' much anyway."

Colin took off the cap with the glasses attached to it. Pushing damp strands of dark hair back out of his brown eyes he stepped to his portable shelf. Robbins was right. His shelf contained barely few findings. He wiggled it back and forth estimating the value. “Not even enough to fix the implant,” he thought, brushing the L-shaped ridge of polymer at his right temple—a thin strip, no longer flush against the skin. Time had loosened its grip.

He slipped off his gloves and wiped sweat and grime from a sunburnt forehead—only to smear it onto the sleeve of the grey uniform.

Groaning, he stretched stiff shoulders and straightened an aching back. Sweat clung to the shirt like a second skin. At forty-two, the grind hit harder than ever.

The sun was shining right into his face, deepening the lines carved around the eyes over the years.

He grimaced, eager to escape the sun's merciless glare, and shifted slightly, positioning himself beneath the shadow of the Overseer's tower. The fifteen-meter-tall concrete structure, with its three hydraulic arms and claws at their ends, stood at the center of the hundred-meter-wide, perfectly square enclosure. Resembling a giant spider, its shadow crept along the perimeter, moving with the sun's position like a sundial.

6 a.m., just as the shift starts — the shadow rests near the middle of the west wall. Noon — right where it is now — the center of the north wall. And by 6 p.m., it reaches the east wall, just above the exit, pointing the way out.

He looked up. The sun flared from behind the diamond-shaped operating cabin perched atop the tower, blinding Colin in one eye. He lifted a hand to shield them, squinting to make out the silhouette inside. The glass was tinted, making it even harder to see—but he knew there was an Overseer sitting in that cabin.

Some called her Lydia. Others swore it was Lina. No one knew for sure. She came and went like a shadow, rarely leaving the tower—except, perhaps, for the occasional toilet break.

The title didn't quite fit, but it earned her respect. She was a valuable player—shifting junk piles now and then on request. Just not someone you disturbed too often.

Colin was considering her help. He looked at the panel near the conveyor belt—its surface covered in weather-stained buttons—debating whether to press one. He hadn't used his request yet today and was saving it for something of real value. But now, he started giving it a thought.

Colin sighed, taking a deep breath, and regretted it immediately, as his sense of smell was assaulted by the stench of sweat and filth, whether from himself or the others.

He looked around. A couple dozen other grunts were stationed by mounds of electronic garbage, scattered throughout the compound. Their drab, dingy grey overalls—just as filthy and sweat-soaked as his—blended into the surroundings, making them nearly indistinguishable from the waste they sorted.

In some sense, they were too—discarded, by society. The unemployed, ex-cons, addicts, dropouts, drifters, and the forgotten. The Outlands welcomed them all. Most of them he didn't know. They come and go. The others, he struggled to remember—just like the reason why he was one of them.

*Junktown*, he thought, smirking. *It earns its name in spades.*

Countless similar sections arranged in a grid, separated by a massive ten-meter-tall concrete walls. It was the midway stop for all sorts of waste from the Midlands—a city far away, where towering robots had already picked through the trash, extracting anything of obvious value.

By the time it reached workers like Colin, the odds of finding anything worthwhile were slim to none. This was the second stage of disposal—the scraps of scraps.

Most of the trash went unchecked—there weren't enough grunts to dig through the daily mountains.

*How much treasure goes undiscovered?* he wondered, turning back to his pile.

The longer he stared at it, the less he saw. His vision dulled, and the heap began to blur into one big piece of crap. Only the flies were missing.

Discarding another piece of worthless junk onto the conveyor, Colin spotted something and reached for it. The item slipped away, leaving a gooey, foul-smelling mess on his hand.

“Ah, shit. That's nasty,” he muttered, grimacing and shaking it off.

With no clue what it was, he wiped his hand on his pants and slipped his gloves back on.

“Well... could be worse,” he sighed, imagining what the poor sods in the food and refuse sections had to deal with. The thought made him gag slightly.

He forced his attention back to the same item that had caught his eye: a large circuitry board—something he hadn't seen in years.

*It's for... from... damn it!* Its purpose was hidden somewhere in the dark recesses of his memory, just out of reach, but he remembered enough to know that piece of tech had some value. *Maybe someone will remind me what it's for*, he thought, reaching for it with his left hand. *Just as soon as I... ah, crap!* His hand trembled violently, just as it had for the past years. He pulled it back, not trusting it with such a delicate find. Instead, with his right hand, Colin gripped the side of the board and wrestled it free. Debris, dirt, and electronic scraps rained down on him, clattering noisily onto the ground. The sound turned heads, momentarily drawing the attention of the other workers.

"Tryna catch a wave, Frostfee'? Wrong ocean," Robbins called out, grinning.

"Just found the perfect board," Colin shot back, holding up his latest salvage.

"Not quite for surfin'—'less you wanna snap your neck. But I bet it can't beat mine. Found an entire CHAV!"

Colin chuckled at the reference to an ancient bit of tech only a fellow engineer would recognize. "When you get rich, don't forget us little guys."

Robbins scratched his head, throwing on a confused look. "Forget who? "What's yer name again?"

Colin laughed harder, both at the comeback and at the ridiculous idea that they'd ever get rich from their discoveries. True, they got a minor commission—less than thirty percent of anything worthwhile—giving them just enough incentive to keep their eyes open.

The contraption he held had several node attachments, but one caught his eye—a crystalline centerpiece, fractured with a spider-shaped crack. He pulled a tool from his front pocket, gripped the node with its rubber-coated pincers, and yanked it free.

Colin turned it over, gave it a quick glance, then placed it on his portable shelf and tossed the rest aside.

"Good find," another worker commented in passing. "I'd bring it to the hub."

Colin nodded, avoiding eye contact, hoping not to draw more attention.

*What was his name again?* He glanced sideways at the old, slack-faced man, trying to place it. *Rett, was it? Think so—a newcomer.*

He turned back to his work. No point remembering his face. He won't last long. Damn looner looks like one of those Aionians—he'll either quit or get caught stealing.

Rett drifted near, peering into Colin's pile.

“Ooh... do you mind?” he asked, pointing with a crooked finger.

Colin didn’t answer right away. He just stared at the slack-faced old man for a beat.

He worked alone for a reason. No help, no competition. But the pile had nothing of value—not yet anyway.

He gave a short nod and watched him, unimpressed.

Rett crouched, plucking out what looked like a shattered touch plate

*Bloody whacko*, Colin thought forcing himself not to scoff. as he watched the man gather useless junk. *Most certainly meant for their weird shrines.*

The man, Rett, carefully examined the item before turning back to Colin. “That’ll make a good offering,” he muttered with quiet conviction.

*There it is*, Colin thought, rolling his eyes slightly. *Can’t tell scrap from treasure—thinking everything’s a sacred piece of a machine god that will one day deliver us!*

“The cycle ends,” Rett added, as if delivering scripture. He lingered, expecting something.

Colin wasn’t sure what he meant, so he just nodded. That seemed enough; the man carried on.

*I’ve been around electronics my whole life, studied and fixed countless machines. They’re just tools, bits of wire and code.* He looked over his shoulder at the guy, already heading for the exit, enlightened by his find. *Fanatics...* Colin sighed.

Returning to the pile, he spied a larger component wedged beneath several others. *Well, this looks promising*, he thought, reaching for it. He gave it a tug, but it held tightly.

*No way I’m pulling that out alone.* He looked up at the tower. *Well... guess it’s spider time.*

With a sigh, he strode to a chunky, dusty old control panel. Raising a fist, he slammed the large, faint-blue button, which served one purpose - to draw the overseer’s attention. A harsh blare followed, echoing across the yard, and he lifted his eyes up again.

Something shifted above. Behind the tinted cabin windows, a faceless figure leaned forward, peering down, scanning for the requester.

Colin raised his hand and waved it in circles, the gesture for mixing the pile.

Another alarm blared in response—a warning—as the Overseer’s tower lurched into motion. Its mechanized base rotated, swinging the three massive hydraulic arms jutting from its foundation.

A grotesque, tentacled creature—like a monster from legend—made the ground tremble as it moved, shedding rust and dust from its corroded metal arms. One of the three-sectioned arms contorted, rose slowly, and extended to reach Colin’s station. The tip of the grabbing arm spread open above his pile. Like the maw of a ravenous creature biting into its prey, the claws snapped into the upper half of the pile and began shuffling it. The loud clatter of falling debris jarred Colin out of his reverie. It rained chips and screws. He winced, stepping aside. Moments like this were always two-sided. On one hand, the shuffle revealed hidden gems, made the work smoother, even boosted morale. On the other, plenty of good stuff got mangled by the brute touch of the helping claw. Colin tried not to dwell on that, focusing instead on the positive.

Once the heavier pieces were cleared and the part he’d been eyeing came loose, Colin lifted his palm up, signaling the stop.

The spider halted, then slowly retracted its arms, curling the jaws back into itself.

Gazing up, Colin lifted his other arm and pressed his palms together in the air—a gesture of thanks. But the cabin was already swinging back around. *She couldn’t care less*, he thought as he kept looking up. *She never did*.

Still, grateful for the help, he envied her. Not for the position—at least not in that sense—but for the view. He couldn’t help but think of the city beyond these walls, far off in the distance. The Midlands, with its thousands of glittering skyscrapers. Knowing she could see it in all its glory from the closest, highest point made him jealous.

*Well, enough dreaming.* He caught himself staring longer than necessary and grounded himself back down. *That thing won’t yank itself.* Rolling his shoulders, he reached for the piece of tech and clamped his hands around it.

Kneeling slightly, he shifted his weight, bringing the piece just below waist level, and gave it a pull. It budged, but not enough—still stuck fast.

*Come on you piece of crap!* He mentally cursed himself as he kept dragging. *Should’ve let Lydia do the hard work... stupid thing’s already damaged anyway!* At last, he gave it up, breathing heavily. Hands on his hips, he stared at the stubborn part. *I guess I could request more help...* He glanced at the cabin. *But she just pitched in.* He looked around like he could trust the

help from someone—but everyone was busy anyway. Robbins came to mind. He turned to find that old man picking something off the ground, unsteadily. That bent back, spiked with ridges like gear teeth, changed Colin’s mind.

*“Eh, forget it,”* Colin thought, shifting his attention back. *That twig would snap before he moved a crate.*

Determined to yank the scrap loose, he shifted his stance and planted one foot on the mound above it. Gripping the piece tightly, he began to wiggle it back and forth. His left hand was shaking more than usual, failing to hold tight. The tremor only made Colin angrier. His wiry frame still carried strength, but his body no longer matched the broad-shouldered man he’d once been. *Come on*, he thought, putting his whole strength into it. *Come on, damn it!* The object loosed, but just as it appeared it might come free, the section he was gripping dislodged and sent him hurtling backward. Before he could let go and brace his fall— **Crack!**

Stars burst behind his eyes as his head slammed against the unrelenting concrete, rattling his teeth.

Time fractured—darkness swallowed him.

Something metal—cold and sudden—clamped around his throat, lifting him clean off the ground and slamming his back into something unyielding. His bones jarred from the impact.

“Don’t play with me!”

The low voice rattled furiously through the dark.

A wide, solid grip locked around his neck, still pressing—holding him there. Eyes rolled back under pressure, tear fluid flooding over his pupils and blurring everything further, as he clawed at the grip.

Low in his fading field of view, a bulky figure took shape—a chunky metal arm gleaming faintly, ending at his throat. Behind it, more shapes hovered in the dark. Watching. Silent.

His lungs burned. His heart pounded.

Panic surged as darkness crept in over his vision.

And then—

The darkness shattered.

Colin jolted back into the present, gasping on the ground, feet kicking up dust, hands still clutching the piece. The conveyors rattled on, indifferent, as the sun baked him into the floor.



His entire body seized, heart hammering. A few workers paused at their piles, eyeing him in brief bewilderment before returning to their work

Still lying there in horror, eyes clinging to anything around him, he speculated:

What the hell just happened?

The thought surfaced—like a shadow flickering across water—then vanished, dissolving before he could grasp it. All that remained was the echo of fear, ringing in the hollow space where memory should be.

“Buddy, you alright?” a voice called from somewhere.

Colin wasn’t sure. He wasn’t even sure if he’d really heard it—or just imagined it.

Just as he wasn’t sure who had spoken. And a moment later, he’d forgotten it entirely.

Winching, he pressed a hand to the back of his head, jaw tightening.

The world spun nauseatingly as he brought his hand around to check it. *No blood.* He blinked hard, willing to stop the spinning as he pushed himself upright.

He stared at the disconnected piece in his hand and frowned, trying to place its origin. Slowly, he climbed to his feet, still staring at it—then at the pile of junk he’d apparently pulled it from. He saw where it must have been attached but couldn’t understand why he’d been so desperate to free it. *What was I doing before that, actually? The object, the... thing... what’s this?* he wondered, looking back at it in his hand. *What is going on?*

Somehow, part of him knew this confusion wasn’t unfamiliar—but that knowledge faded just as quickly, as a veil of fog settled over his mind. He stared again at the metallic item he was holding, before letting it drop. It clattered on the concrete, bouncing loudly. Colin closed his eyes and shook his head, swaying on his feet as a wave of nausea took him over. He opened his eyes again and looked around, trying to figure out where he was and what he was supposed to be doing.

His breathing quickened and his heart-rate surged as a sharp ring filled his ears.

Sweat pooled in his palms. Panic set in. *I have to get out of here!* Still nauseous, he staggered forward, wincing as the grey mountains of garbage swayed and warped in his blurring vision. His legs buckled, and he collapsed onto all fours.

Something glittered across the concrete—a small pillbox rolling into view, catching the light as it skittered to a stop in front of him. Its surface shimmered unnaturally, with a bold sticker wrapped around it: “Take Me.”

*Take me... yes... I should...*

He didn't know why—only that it seemed like the right thing to do.

He reached for it—but another wave of nausea crashed over him. His vision wavered, splitting the shimmering box into a dozen copies. He doubled over and vomited.

Staring at the mess, he spied a figure running toward him at the edge of his vision. His sight contorted and wavered, distorting his sense of reality. The man yelled something—maybe a name, maybe a curse—but Colin couldn't tell if it was directed at him, or someone else. Suddenly, a bony hand set him upright and shoved something into his mouth.

"Pop it and drink, buddy! There ya go—now, down the hatch!" the man commanded, holding the back of Colin's head.

He did as told, crashing it between his teeth. A bitter, noxious substance burst across his tongue. He winced at the horrid taste and hoped he was doing the right thing.

Colin drank greedily, the liquid splashing down his chest. He kept gulping, both parched and eager to drive out the lingering bitterness.

"You okay?" the man asked. "Better now?"

He shook his head, still wondering where he was and what was happening. As if from a far distance, a dull beeping began and rose in pitch. From somewhere far off, a dull beeping began to rise in pitch. He glanced about to find the source, only to realize it was coming from his own head.

His surroundings blurred and, as suddenly and inexplicably as the noise had started, he found himself walking with the man's support—watching the wavy silhouettes of bystanders grow blurrier with every step.

After what felt like mere seconds, the world quieted and the heat weakened.

He wanted to look at his surroundings, but his vision—still blar—wouldn't focus on anything other than the metal slab he was seated on, in the spacious grey room.

"Lay down, buddy. You need a rest." The hand pressed gently against his chest, guiding him back, while the other settled behind his head.

As soon as he lay prone on the slab, a wave of deep, asphyxiating drowsiness swept over him. The edges of his already blurry vision darkened, and he shut down—unwilling, and unable, to fight it.