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Mindwarp

By John Brancato

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Nothing to be done, except
escape.

Infinisynth.

More fantastic than fantasy.

More real than reality.

The ultimate experience
is Infinisynth.

It's all been remade for you.

And it's anything
you want it to be.

It's your reality.

Let your dreams come true
in your very own world.

Hook in to the happiness system.

Relax, imagine, enjoy.

Hook in.

Bullshit.

Judy, you don't know how
much of a fool you're being.

You don't even know what
you're fighting against.

Leave me alone.

Injustice? Everyone gets
exactly what they want.

Authority.

You can be your own
God. Everything is...

Everything is fake! You're all
just lying to yourselves.

What will it take to
make you understand?

Just leave me alone!

Proximity. Excuse me.

Excuse...

Functioning:

Proximity.

Mom?

Oh, Jenny, you're up.

Judy, Mom.

Judy's my name. You named
me that, remember?

Of course, dear.

That's what I said.
Are you hungry?
No.
You're not feeling sick
or anything, are you?
Of course not.
Good.
Mom,
I want to talk to you.
What are you doing off-line?
Why aren't you hooked in?
I was hooked in.
But it doesn't work anymore.
I just get hassled by the Sysop.
The Systems Operator,
he won't leave me alone.
So, I was sitting, just sitting,
listening to Dad's music.
And I don't know, I just
wanted to talk to someone.
Talk? Come on, now, dear.
This isn't your card.
It's Dad's!
My father, your husband?
Where did you get it?
I've had it for years. I felt...
Weren't we supposed to turn it
in or throw it out or something?
No!
Well...
Mom, what happened to him?
Oh, well, you know, dear,
that was so long ago.
I don't see why you
should dwell on it.
Mom, tell me what
happened. I want to know.
There's nothing to tell.
I unplugged, and he was just gone.
He must have done it himself.
They never told me
exactly what he did.
Did you ask?
Well...

He wasn't happy
anyway, I knew that.
Such a sour man, really,
now that I think about it.
I'm not happy, either.
Just hook back in. You'll be fine.
No!
I want to do something.
I want to go somewhere.
You can do whatever you want.
Go wherever you want.
I mean here.
Here?
There's nothing here.
That's why we have
Infinisynth, honey.
Well...
I'm awake, Mom.
I want to stay awake!
Wake up. Please.
Stop it! Can't you just stop it?
Wake up!
Mom. Mother.
Please wake up.
I need to talk to you.
Mom...
I'll wake you up.
Time to wake up, Mom.
Wake up!
Judy, that's enough.
You're an exceptional girl, Judy.
You've managed to
violate the system.
You've entered the
environments of other users.
No one has ever done that before.
And I can't allow
it to happen again.
You must realize that your
actions have dire consequences.
What do you want from me?
I don't want anything.
I'm the Systems Operator.
The question is, what do you want?

I was only trying to get
through to someone.
We gave you everything.
Everything you could want.
Everything you could imagine.
I... I want something
real. Anything.
Ah!
We're... We're stuck
inside our own heads.
It's worse than a
prison. It's nothing.
Nothing at all. Am I the
only one that can see that?
There has to be more.
More than you can imagine?
Yes. All I want is...
Is something real.
All right.
I'll give it to you.
I'm taking you offline.
What are you talking about?
It's what you wanted, isn't it?
The unimaginable.
Oh, God.
I didn't mean to really kill her!
No! Let me go!
Stop it! Stop!
Let me out of here!
Stop it, you're hurting me!
Who are you? Why are
you doing this?
Let me go!
Stop!
What is this place?
Hey!
Hello!
Hello!
Is anybody there?
Hello!
God, no!
Somebody, somebody help me!
Somebody help me!
Help me!

Please! Please! No!
Help me!
Thank you. Oh, thank you.
Let me go!
Stop it! You're hurting me!
Stop it!
Oh! Let me go!
Get that away from me,
you son of a bitch!
Let me go!
No!
Don't!
If you don't cover up, you'll die.
It's all right.
It's possum.
I don't eat human flesh.
Who are you?
My name's Stover.
I'm Judy.
What the hell is happening?
You were out by the edge of the
Deadlands. Crawlers got you.
Crawlers? Cannibals?
It's the ugly fucks that live
underground in the landfills.
It's just a wash.
It's for the chemicals
in the ground.
Thank you.
Close your eyes.
You're an InWorlder.
A what?
You're one of them.
You don't belong here.
I know.
Well, how the hell
did you get here?
I don't know.
I'd go back if I could.
Do you know the way?
Ain't no maps to heaven.
Well, there's gotta be a way.
Well, I figure it's out
someplace past the Deadlands.

But there's no way through there.
Why not?
The sickness hits you.
Brain sickness.
You just want to die.
You've seen others
like me, haven't you?
Yep. But they're usually dead.
Is it always this cold?
No. In the winter, it's worse.
I had no idea what was outside.
I didn't even think
there was an outside.
That's because you've forgotten.
You've all forgotten, haven't you?
You poisoned the world, you
stripped a layer off the sky,
and when the ice
came, you just left.
You left us here to die!
You left us in your shit!
And now, you don't even remember.
I never knew!
The system never told
us anything about it!
Well, my people never forgot.
Your people?
My ancestors.
Now, maybe there wasn't room
enough for them in InWorld.
But we never went under.
Where are your people now?
Gone.
Dead.
You'll need these.
Now, what you're looking for
is a pattern in the sand.
You see over here? That's okay.
But over here, you see how
smooth the surface is?
There we go.
That's great.
Crawler hole.
Why do the Crawlers do that?

They don't. I put her up there.
She froze to death.
That's my wife.
Oh, I'm sorry.
Of course, I'd prefer
to bury the dead,
but the ground isn't safe.
The Crawlers, they, uh...
They find the meat.
My father's over there.
They got my mother.
They took her under.
What about that one over there?
Oh, that? That's an InWorlder
I found years ago.
Another exile.
Do you remember what
he looked like?
Couldn't tell.
Not even an InWorlder deserves
to become their food.
Family?
My family's dead.
Just give me that.
With Infinisynth, you live your life
in a room, plugged into the system.
You're awake long enough
to eat and use the toilet,
and that's it. That's all there is.
But there's no pain, no danger.
If reality's all in your
mind, isn't that enough?
Not for me.
It can be beautiful here.
It's safe now.
The sun's low, filtered
through more atmosphere.
Any other time...
I've never seen a real book before.
This is the Bible.
I've heard of it.
But who needs Bibles in heaven?
Then what do you believe in?
Have you no hope for eternity?

If you want eternity,
Infinisynth can give it to you.
It's just a sensation.
If you want to shake the
hand of God, you do it.
It's a program.
What about you?
What did you do in the machine?
I explored other planets.
I tried being a planet.
I rode on dinosaurs.
I ate at nice restaurants.
I had a lot of time on my hands.
But what have you
really experienced?
Not much.
Nothing.
You must have imagined doing this.
About a million times.
But this was your first time?
Yes. This was my first time.
This is pretty.
It's my wedding ring.
I haven't been with a
woman since she died.
I thought I was the
last human on Earth.
What is it?
What's wrong?
Get dressed.
Stover!
Stover! Stover!
Stover!
Stover!
Stover, help me! Stover, help!
Where are they taking us?
Stover! Stover!
Don't! Stop it!
Don't! Don't...
I'm Judy.
What's your name?
Can you please... What?
Infinisynth.
That sign, it's Infinisynth.

I'm from Infinisynth.
That's right.
I'm from Infinisynth and
you must release me.
You must release me and
take me to Stover.
No!
What has become of you, Claude?
Where are your thoughts?
So, Claude, another one.
Skinny.
Hair needs cutting,
but she'll do in a pinch.
Seen too much?
No. No.
No, not seen enough.
Where's Stover?
What are you gonna do to me?
That's for us to know.
Claude, get things ready.
Who are you?
I'm Cornelia. And this is Claude.
We're your friends, dear.
We'll take good care of you.
We'll watch over you.
That's what friends are for.
Claude, those are
unattractive noises.
What's your name, dear?
Judy.
You're from the
surface, aren't you?
Have you seen the sky?
Liar!
There is no sky.
You don't know how lucky you are.
I'll never be as lucky.
Nor Claude.
We can carry no seeds,
but we can serve.
But you, well...
it's the most beautiful
experience a woman can have.
Nothing can compare with...

Nothing can...
There's nothing!
There's nothing. There's no
sores, no scars, nothing!
But you're an OutWorlder. All
OutWorlders carry the disease.
All but...
A dreamer.
Oh, my.
As I told that girl
before you came,
I'm from Infinisynth.
And you must release me.
I've come a long way
across the Deadlands,
and I've come for you.
Free me, and the
salvation is yours.
Well, my little
brain-screwed bitch,
this does change a few things.
Jesus! I'm sorry!
Untie me! I'm sick of this shit!
Oh, you'll get sick, my pretty.
I'll see to that.
And I'll see to it before
the Seer sees you.
Don't go away.
Claude?
Oh, Claude, you must help me.
Claude, you must!
It's too bad you're so pretty,
my pretty one.
But you won't be pretty for long.
You know, you could still be
good for bloating after this,
but only in the hatchery.
No solo arrangements.
No Seer solos.
No!
This is gonna hurt a little,
then a lot.
You are a tough little
bitch, aren't you?

No matter. There's more.
You'll calm down.
He's no good to us anymore.
He shall rise with the dream.
Claude, turn the scream
for a cycle of twenty.
Oh, and Claude?
Mind the chamber with care.
Listen to me carefully, Claude.
There really is a sky, you know.
There's a whole other world. You
don't have to live in the mud.
If you'd let me, I'd
take you with me.
Help me. I can bring you to
InWorld, to Infinisynth.
You could become a dreamer like me.
You can.
There's a way, just
help me find my friend.
We'll all go together. We'll all
go together to Infinisynth.
Hey, you see what this is?
Do you know what this means?
We can get out of here.
Hey! Come on!
You've done the right
thing, Claude.
Now, let's go find Stover.
Judy!
Stover!
Let go of me, you idiots!
Judy!
Where are we?
Our land is full.
What treasures has she borne?
Bless you.
Save this offering.
We are not ready for it yet,
but someday it will
increase our power.
Break open the casing.
Inside is a small motor.
Remove it. It may be useful.

Junk.
Cornelia,
you've been keeping things from me.
You would have gotten
to her soon enough.
But when, Cornelia?
After a rather untoward
preparation by you?
I'm a dreamer. You
have no power over me.
If you don't release me, you'll
never be a part of the dream.
How shall we serve you?
A man was captured with me.
Take me to him and return
us both to the surface.
Why, O great slotgoddess?
Because you've made
a terrible mistake!
And if you disobey me,
you will all suffer greatly.
Suffer? Oh, dear.
No one here has ever
suffered before.
Poor silly girl.
I'm afraid you're not the first
one to fall down a hole.
So, how are things back at home?
How could you be part of this?
To use an archaic expression,
it's the only game in town.
And there can be only
one game master.
Is this contrition?
You seriously overstepped
the proprieties, didn't you?
Some penance is in order.
Your Claude shall rise
and enter the dream.
Prepare her!
No, you can't.
Don't tell me what
I can or can't do.
This is bullshit! You fraud!

Cornelia,
you've got to learn
to share your toys.
And, dear,
don't ever cross me again.
Because of you. I've
lost her because of you!
She leaves behind her vision,
so that we may follow
her into the dream.
Claude!
No.
This is the wine of the blessed.
For the blessed have risen.
They are now free.
They are part of the dream.
Let us partake of what
they have left behind,
so that we may all share
in what they have become
in the hope that when
we depart this life
we shall all be reborn as dreamers.
She died for you!
Bring me the girl.
No!
No! Please, don't!
Stover!
Stop him!
An OutWorlder.
Take him below, calm him down,
and put him back to work.
Judy, I'm sorry.
Stover!
Yes, let it go. Let it all go.
No. No!
I've missed you, too.
No.
Oh, we've been apart so
long, you can't leave now.
Besides, Judy,
there's nowhere to go.
How could this have
happened to you?

I was exiled.
These people took me under.
They'd never seen an
expansion port before.
I convinced them that I could
change their world, save them.
Oddly enough, I have.
Saved them, how?
My little show must seem tawdry
to you after Infinisynth,
but these rituals are all these
people have to look forward to.
I wish I hadn't found you.
I wish you'd been dead.
Believe me, Judy, I've wanted
to die countless times.
Down here, death can be a blessing.
But I've denied
myself the pleasure.
You should have killed me.
No. You're strong. You're like me.
You can stand it all.
I see it in you.
My father.
Yes, Judy. And you're a part of me.
But can you understand me?
The necessity of all of this?
What will it take to
make you understand?
I want to try.
Show me, and I'll try.
Okay!
You bastards!
My father, a freak. A monster.
Am I, Judy? And what are you?
Why did you leave InWorld?
Because InWorld is finished.
I'm the last generation. They don't
even bother to reproduce anymore.
They're already dead.
But you and I, we're
different, aren't we?
We wanted life.
This is life.

This is hell.
No. Hell is for the dead.
But here, it's life.
Look around you.
These people would never believe
in a God of love, a God of light.
Yet, I've given them
a reason to live.
What reason?
Dreadful though it is, I've
given them a structure.
A religion, hope.
They're blind, Judy,
and I see for them.
They've survived.
I'm sorry you don't see it as I do.
But you will, soon.
No!
They'd been living in the landfill
for some time before I came,
but they'd forgotten what
any of this was for.
I've helped them to remember,
to use it as a foundation
for the future.
Now they have a purpose
with each new day.
They don't exactly look
happy in their work.
Oh, sometimes it takes a
bit of encouragement.
The carrot and the stick?
In a manner of speaking.
And the stick?
Sometimes as literal as that.
We have a number of
short-term problems, Judy,
that I'm trying to address.
A solution to one in particular
could solve most of the
others in the long term.
Your people must love you.
Skilled labor is at a premium,
sometimes OutWorlders are

a help in that area.
Willingly?
You must know that a few must
sacrifice for the greater good.
For your greater good.
You learn quickly.
I have nothing to learn from you.
Really? Is this as far
as you're willing to go?
I'll go as far as I have
to, but with Stover.
He didn't sink under. He
survived without all of this.
You think he's going to fit
into your little future world?
So far, he's fitting
in very nicely.
Stover! Stover, I love you.
What have you done to him?
Nasty little creatures, really.
Recent mutations with
an unusual life cycle.
The females swim into
the orifices of a host
to lay their eggs on
membranous tissue.
The males lodge in
the nervous system
to keep the host calm
during incubation.
The larvae are parasitic.
In the early stages, they
feed on nervous tissue.
The host organism starts to twitch
as its dendrites are consumed.
It's said to be pleasurable, like
being tickled on the inside.
Please let him out.
Get him out!
I'm afraid it's too late for him.
No!
I thought you were strong, Judy.
I thought you could face reality,
not as you want it

to be, but as it is.
It doesn't have to be like this.
It does, but not in the future.
We can change it, Judy, you and I.
We can remake this world.
What are you talking about?
You and I, Judy,
we're from InWorld.
We've not been exposed all our lives
to all the poisons and diseases
that the Crawlers and the
OutWorlders have carried for years.
We're of pure stock.
We could rule for decades, and our
offspring, for generations after us.
No!
We can. You must.
No!
I've got to get out of here.
Cornelia?
Oh, my God.
Oh, my God.
You monster!
No, I do what's necessary.
The Crawlers are like mules.
Males and females unable
to breed successfully.
You can see from the offspring.
Cornelia is barren.
We're limited in what we can do
for them to improve procreation.
But you, Judy, you and
I still have a chance.
And you even have a choice.
A life with me in my
chambers, ruling beside me,
or remaining here
with her, like her.
Either way, you will
bear my children!
No!
No!
Good night, Cornelia.
Come on, Stover. Wake up!

Stover! Please wake up, please.
Yes. That's right.
I'm willing to do what
has to be done. Are you?
Oh, yes. And I'll make sure one of
us is dead before you ever touch me.
That won't be necessary.
God. No!
I never imagined I could devour
my own child, but I can.
Here, I can do anything.
It's wonderful.
Start it!
Oh! No!
Now you can see it all.
No!
No!
Oh!
Oh, no, Stover.
Here. Take it. Drink it.
Help me, please.
We have to get out of here.
Leave? Oh, no, we can't leave.
We belong here.
No!
No, Judy.
I love you.
Judy, come back!
They need you here!
Judy, wait! Judy! Come back!
- Don't go up there.
- No! Stop it!
Stop it! Stop!
Let go!
- Stay here with me!
- Let go of me! No!
Judy!
No! Look, we're over the Deadlands!
But it's the only way out!
Judy!
Judy!
Judy!
I love you!
Judy.

Judy!

Judy.

Please come back. I need your help!

Oh, my God, Stover.

What should I do?

The Deadlands... We have to
get out of the Deadlands.

Stover?

Stover!

What's wrong, Judy?

Why aren't you hooked in?

Take a deep breath. Relax.

Sometimes it takes a
moment to recover.

None of it...

None of it was real?

That' depends on
what you mean, Judy.

Is it really like
that on the outside?

I wouldn't know.

I've never been there.

I can't believe it was all just...

Yes. It can be any shape
you want it to be.

Reality? It's up to you.

There's no place like home.

Good.

I didn't think this lesson
would be wasted on you.

There's a reason you had
to go through this, Judy.

You're exceptional, and I can't
continue in this job forever.

Someone, of course, must
take responsibility.

You've inherited my
strengths, my powers.

You've passed the test.

You've proven it.

You never left.

You were right here. You
were always with me?

Yes. Yet, for all our lives,

we have only these few
real moments together.
The new Systems Operator.
It's for you to run Infinisynth.
To absorb all the dreams, all
the hopes and fantasies.
All the minds online.
It will seem frightening at first.
But then you'll realize
it's everything.
What is it?
Nothing. I have no more questions.
Good.