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Project	Sharp Edge of Madness

Sharp Edge of Madness

Chapter 1 - Birth

Flying through the air, dark splinters of unconsciousness closing on the blurry edges of his vision Mitchell, for the second time in his life, started thinking about the grand wrongness of it all. Maybe it was the quiet, spreading in his head as the pain of his lacerated leg was forcefully dampened by his minds defences, maybe it was an incidental moment of clarity caused by adrenaline glands pumping spastically, or maybe it was just a coincidence, but for the first time in many years he felt good.

Glimpses of past flashed before his eyes with painfully throbbing after-effects. The taste of stale train-station air in the back of his mouth; broken record of "why's" slipping inexplicably out of his mouth; complex barrage of colours floating before him as he ran through a white hallway with the coarse feeling of splintered wood in his right hand. Finally the screams; the screams that wouldn't stop; haunting; incessant; his voice?

Nothing from those times made sense anymore. Scattered images of people, places rushing by too fast for him to notice or care. Lying facedown in cold grass as the sun rose over treetops. Running through the streets with the ripping sound his own heartbeat in his ears. The almost lifelike thrashing of the heavy gun in his hand as he emptied into a white office ceiling. A sombre face... then... nothing.. Nothing until he'd suddenly found himself in this confusing world of harsh sensations and impossible situations.

The rush of the wind against his face brought him back to the present, as his consciousness reeled and his vision flared. Something had snapped again. Unlike that first time, it wasn't the incoherent smell of sweats or the fragmentation that he'd come to recognize as his madness. Didn't have the metallic taste of confusion that had scattered his emotions like flimsy leaves in the wind that he remembered so vividly.

It was more like something growing. Something thrashing through the defences of his mind, like an ice-cold whirlwind leaving only cold quiet. At first the coldness frightened him. He fought and whimpered in the seclusion of his head at the inexorable onslaught, and tried to find corners where his consciousness could cover.

Then, at first tentatively but more and more easily, he relaxed. The coldness, still there, still almost overwhelmingly painful slowly became comfortable as it seeped through the last defences and left a certain quiet. A clear quiet like after a thunderstorm when a slight tinge of ozone still linger in the air.

It didn't have the weaknesses he had been riddled with before. It didn't have the many thoughts that his life had been full of. It didn't have doubts or insecurities, only direction; cold calculating direction.

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As he hit the wall with a resounding thud and slipped to the ground, he only peripherally noticed that his leg was not only broken, but virtually hanging from a thread. He didn't feel the blood oozing from his broken nose or the cloud of dust still flowing lazily in the air around him clogging his mouth and throat; didn't hear the thumping of large metal-clad feet nearing to finish him off, or the wailing siren of the alarms going off. His mind was occupied with the new sensations that crept along his synapses with frightening clarity and strength. He laughed.

* * *

Joanna Kugasai stared thoughtfully at the string of DNA hanging in the air before her. Resting comfortably in her battered and ancient ComfiRest 2000 office chair, she absentmindedly fiddled with the loose piece of vinyl where she'd once accidentally knocked it against the rough wall of her cubicle. The chair had been with her for 15 years ever since she'd left her home planet Pinate to join the research team working on abnormal psychology here at the Darkside Research Facility.

Darkside had been a completely new experience for her and just what she'd needed at the time. Her nice but overly attentive boyfriend, the sleek comfortable home of her parents, the eternal parties and trips to the beach, had somehow always annoyed her. Loving parents had taken her to doctors, whose worried looks of consternation as they looked over huge multicolored printouts of her mental architecture concerned her parents, but somehow didn't give her reason to worry too much.

By pre-mod standards she was brilliant beyond anything measured, but by modern standards she was handicapped. She couldn't be made smarter, more emotionally stable or any other of the modern luxuries that normal citizens enjoyed, and so she was doomed to remain her imperfect, stubborn, irrational self.

Maybe it was these sittings, which would always end with doctors shaking their head and mutter excuses for modern science, or maybe it was a curiosity as to why she of all people could not be Streamlined, Efficianated or whatever the new MentalMod was called in those days, but she had been attracted to the wonders of bio-psychology for as long as she could remember.

As she wasn't susceptible to MentalMods, didn't take to any kind of brain-therapy at all, or could insert EmoControl packs to control her outburst of pubescent anger or tears, she was stuck with her own mind, her own inefficiencies and ultimately with her own aversions.

She'd rebelled in mid-term of her last year of college. Too many smilingly beautiful plastiflesh faces honed to dissimilar perfection by complex AI routines constantly seeking that New Unique Personality, that never seen before beauty. Too many well-toned bodies and minds angling for a position

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close to her parents' powerbase as planetary administrators for the house of Myadri, and too many fake smiles vying for her attention.

Throwing caution to the wind, she had quit the science-work-programme she had been sent to by her parents, and applied for a job here on Darkside. Probably some unformulated wish to satisfy her curiosity about those dark corners of the human psyche that no-one had ever seemed to understand in her.

Darkside however had not been an easy place to get into. As the central hub of pre- and unmodded psychological research it was only accessible to the best and brightest. Here scientists hunted down and rooted out the illnesses of the mind that somehow got through the tightly masked net of the public health system, and caused people to become criminals or otherwise socially unacceptable.

To them she was more likely to be a research subject than a colleague, but her brilliant work, her impeccable grades, and not least her parents influence got her in, and consequently what she abhorred earned her what she wanted most, a position as assistant in the research-team on Abnormal Psychology.

Abnormal Psychology would not have been her parents' first choice. Although usually not labelled human experiments or government sanctioned illegality as her beautiful younger sister had yelled at her one night, the bringing back to life of frozen twenty-first century human beings in order to study pre-gen-engineered mindsets was at best morally questionable.

Sitting here in her cubicle two years later, she could see the road that had led her to this moment clearly. Arriving had been a smorgasbord of failures, rejections, and bewilderment at her alien interests, but ultimately she had been accepted in spite of her illogical ways, and had been given access to the necessary AI-time to conduct her own experiments.

The DNA string spinning lazily in the air before her stopped briefly, zoomed out and was replaced by a complex chart of energy levels surrounding a human brain. She snapped out of her reverie as the simulation ran once more with the new properties she'd added to the genes of the virtual brain before her. The energy level meters coloured her face in bright quietly shifting colours as she watched for any telltale signs of the prize she was hunting.

In 2081, more than 200 years ago, a faint field had been discovered permeating everything. At first the field had been thought to be an etherlike ground-substance of the universe, but it was soon discovered that the field became was actually many fields interacting with each other.

Unable to decipher the signals of the field it was considered a curiosity until certain facts began to spring from the research. The field emanated from humans. The field degraded with distance, but didn't seem to disappear

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completely. And most importantly it changed instantaneously everywhere. It was a medium for instant communication.

As the effect was analyzed, recorded, and artificial versions were developed, the discovery spawned a frantic scramble to be the first to create a functional teleportation device, but although a functional one was soon developed, it's usefulness for teleportation was marred by the one major flaw of the psifield: It interacted with other psifields.

The first teleportation had been an unmitigated disaster. The test-person straining to think of the office next door where the receptor was, probably did think about the office next door, but the researchers were not so focused, and even less so where the hundred of other people working in the building at the time. The result was horrifying to say the least.

After years of research the creation of a teleportation device with the ability to block other psifields was finally abandoned. The psifield shields created in the process only worked locally and could not protect information over long distances. In the end the technology was abandoned in favour of the less pretty but ultimately only real use for the psifield: space travel.

Once freed from the gravity well and the clutter of minds, and with the help of psifield shields amplified to overshadow the sedated crewmembers and the planet nearby, a trained pilot could direct the huge teleportation engine of a spaceship through light-years of empty space without delay.

In time this form of transportation had even been developed to a point where the millisecond of reduced brain activity needed for teleportation could be achieved almost without crewmembers noticing the lack. Only a slight sinking of the stomach could be sensed, although seasoned space-travellers sometimes claimed that they could sense both the direction and length of a trip from this very slight sensation.

Other less useful curiosities of psifields were largely ignored. One of these was that psifields, although reducing in strength as one came further away from the source, never quite disappeared completely until about two hundred light-years from their source, where they suddenly disappeared.

Travellers trying to test this boundary found that the outer limit of the psifield, didn't follow logical reasoning. Instead of being able to make multiple 200ly-jumps they found that the 200ly limit was focused on earth, and that once they reached its border they couldn't go any further except by traditional means.

In the beginning this spawned numerous theories ranging from the fanciful to the downright impossible, but in the end it was the new spaceborne settlements, which had given the answer. It was discovered that human presence along the edges of the psifield edge, would cause it to give way slowly. The rule it seemed was that the psifield outer range was determined

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by the number of people and their location. As people settled in the periphery of it, it would expand and over time give access to the entire galaxy.

Right now alien-theories and space-exploration, was as far from Joannas mind as anything could be, however. What she was interested in was uniquely human and completely her own. Not allowed to do her research on actual human beings, and stuck with a measly three-billionth of AI-power, she had settled for this old program, an old NeuroMag, one of the most thorough simulations of the human mind ever created but, and to anyone but a scientist with no subjects, an obsolete artefact.

Largely left to her own devices as her security clearance as a nomod would never allow her to participate in the more important experiments at DRF, she had spent her time delving into obsolete research and had stumbled on something catching her interest: The Diodular net.

Hidden deep down in the vast information streams of human DNA, something believed to be a hereditary viral infection had been found. It didn't seem to affect the mind; except that it created a network of small cells hidden in the nervous system that no-one had ever been able to explain the purpose of.

After it was proven that this affliction was common to all humans, it was widely believed that it was just one of the many random leftovers from evolution left in the human genome, and was therefore not something to be bothered about.

One interesting fact had been discovered however, before the whole line of research had been shelved for more promising venues, the Diodular net was susceptible to psifields. Through careful readings of the proteine levels and activity of the cells it was proven that they reacted albeit sluggishly to changes in the human psifield.

As an example of yet another interest brought on by sub-conscious mechanisms built upon her sense of aloneness, and as such probably worrying the hell out of her superiors, Joanna had decided to test what a lack of psifields had on the Diodular net.

So far she hadn't had much luck though. She had run simulations for two months now, tweaking her model into a better likeness of the actual Diodular net, grown and regrown it after tweaking the DNA slightly or changing the strength and type of simulated Psifield shields, but without even the slightest reaction.

Now the simulation was running again. Her last remodelling of the DNA spinning lazily at the edge of her vision, she stared intently at the energy meters showing the activity in the simulated brain. Madness was an unfortunate side-effect, which happened on occasion in these simulated minds, and she wanted to be ready to smooth the levels if it began slipping down this path and become unusable to her.

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The vinyl flap scratched her arm comfortably as the simulation passed the critical point, and she reached out for her coffee mug floating by her chair. It deftly avoided her when she sometimes irritably threw out her arms, but yet always there when she needed another sip. It never minded her tantrums and for that, she loved it.

She leaned back with the cup in both hands blowing softly on its boiling hot content while she looked at her simulation and listened to the soft hum of machinery, which the room generated to give it that "machiney" feel that she liked when working. Growing increasingly frustrated she watched the Diodular net do what it had always done... absolutely nothing.

Finally she smacked her cup on the table, one of the quirks of an un-modded mind unable to stop frustrations before they manifested, and aborted the simulation once more.

If she could just try this on a real human she'd be around this simulation problem and could start doing some actual research. The problem of course was that humans, especially pre-gen-engineered ones, were hard to come by and combined with the tremendous cost of shields there was no way she would have the resources for such seemingly unrewarding experiments anytime soon.

She brought up a close-up of one of the diodes on her screen with a complete list of energy levels and activities in her experiment. The diode had definitely noticed being left with only the psifield of the brain around it, it was slightly larger and seemed agitated somehow, but it hadn't done anything at all. Maybe she should try isolating the Diodular net from even the psifield of the mind supporting it.

It was when she pondered this new tack on things that something outside her mental reverie disrupted her thoughts. At first she didn't realise exactly what it was, sort of a low wailing in the distance rising and falling, but as she shut off the machinery sounds and blinked the simulation off, the source dawned on her and she could feel the small hairs at the back of her neck rise... the general alarm had gone off.