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Date	03 Oct. 2003
Project	Sharp Edge of Madness

# Sharp Edge of Madness

## Chapter 8 – Running

Joanna ran down the darkened corridor following Michelle once more. The distraction they'd left behind would buy them about two minutes by Michelles estimates and they needed to meet the others at the rendezvous point in eight.

On both sides of the metal gangway well maintained corpsicle freezers gave off an eerie blue glow. She'd always hated the design of those things. Deathmasks and pale hands were visible through three oval windows on the side and a big window on the front showed the entire upper torso of pale exposed bodies.

Blue lights lining the interior suggested the near freezing temperatures inside, and big sliders allowed it to be pulled out like an oversize drawer. Somebody had probably thought the design would be fitting in an old sci-fi kind of way, but given that the content was human beings, albeit frozen, it seemed in bad taste somehow to put them on display like this. Too naked and vulnerable.

After all there was no real reason one should study the facial features of anyone who'd been frozen for more than two centuries in any detail. They were numbered and scanned in three dimensions and any data was clearly accessible from the data-screen at the head of each freezer.

Maybe it was just a way of making the whole ordeal of maintaining and ressurecting them seem more surreal. The reality of it was definitely not a pretty affair. Luckily she'd only witnessed one ressurection. A woman.

Joanna had been a new arrival at the time, and volunteered to assist in the defrost, but the experience had left her more shaken than she would care to admit. The horrid screams coming out of the defroster before the sedation took hold, and the deathlike mask of complacent shock as the woman was gently introduced to the world she was in, was something which could still wake Joanna in the middle of the night.

She knew that resurrection was terrible. The body would feel like it was slowly stuffed through thousands of small slow-churning blenders, as sensation returned to body-parts that had been frozen for centuries, and a nomod-mind which had virtually no protection against handling changing realities and new situations would be instantly borderline when faced with the newness around it.

She put her thoughts aside as a sentry came rolling by in front of them. Her wrist-ID now identified her as a warden of this section so there shouldn't be any problem but she couldn't help but freeze momentarily as the large machine rumbled by with its six huge grabbling arms in stand-by mode.

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It rumbled by without incident however, and she silently gave thanks to the Noworxin, that had kept her from screaming out loud as she carefully walked further down the hall following Michelle who seemed like nothing could faze her.

Michelle might look like a little girl, but Joanna had seen enough of her to know that she was definitely not young, and perhaps not even a girl originally. From what she knew of heavy modding, the girl seemed to have everything money could buy fitted into her.

Definitely some heavy grid-integration and manipulation devices; Probably a whole lot of body-mods to keep her strong in spite of her small frame; and whatever she had done to her mind it was beyond anything Joanna had seen before. She seemed all cogs and wheels in there. No emotion except what was needed in the situation had come from her, and that could easily have been faked by some advanced emo-manipulation mod.

She definitely a high-end merk of some sort, and her presence here was proof that Blakemore had a lot more activities than expected for someone in house-arrest. Whatever he was doing here at Darkside it was probably just as much for his own interests as for the government-officials who probably thought they controlled him.

He was supposedly a nomod himself, but she had seen the man close-up and instinct told her he was not a nomod. He was simply too deft at handling rapidly developing situations for it to be completely natural. Maybe something he had cooked up to give him an edge.

Whatever it was this girl proved that he was not the innocent that she had thought. He was a whole lot more complex and probably a lot more dangerous to be around, and she had been dumb enough to accept his offer of work. Just her stupid nomod mind acting on impulses again.

She watched as the little girl in front of her unconcernedly rounded a corner and pulled up a ninety kilo hatch with her bare hands and indicated for her to follow. She tried to force her thoughts away from the icy fingers which were tap-dancing up her spine, and followed the girl below. Whatever this was, she needed to get smarter. Fast. Before someone decided this pawn wasn't needed in the game anymore..

\* \* \*

The small cleaning robot was rounding the corner in the maintenance tunnel after a hard day of washing out bathrooms in the 4<sup>th</sup> floor gyms. Its light fibre-arms had made short work of washing the floors and cleaning the sinks, but the toilet-bowls had been hard work, since yesterdays' cleaning had been skipped as many of the robots had been up for repairs.

Although invisible to the naked eye it's infrared scanners quickly identified the bacteria nesting in all the hidden crevices of a toilet-bowl, and unsatisfied

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with anything less than perfection it had spent more than fifty percent more time than usual making sure that any last speck of unwanted matter had been neutralized by the tiny sonic boom of it's cleaning arm and sucked into the pouch at the pit of it's belly.

It made a short inventory of things it needed to check in for maintenance. One of it's extender arms had made a slight creaking sound, which although not something hearable to any human, was nonetheless something it's internal damage-control system identified as a likely broken fibre-filament within the arm somewhere and although this would probably reduce the strength of the arm by less than one percent, it was something that had to be reported.

Other than that the most pressing matter right now seemed to be the battery level, which on the long drive to its resting creche had reached less than the 40% that was the approved minimum amount.

As it came to the creche its mind quickly realized something was amiss. Something was lying inside filling up the space and connecting itself to the power-outlet that it needed. It's error-handling system brought up a list of proper-responses, and identifying the object at hand as some unknown robot who had been in emergency need of power it sent a short message-spurt to the AI and prepared to do a brief self-check while waiting for the other robot to vacate the creche.

Quickly error signals started returning. Right extender arm not responding. Communicator not responding. Left track not responding. The cleaning robot was still assembling a list of sudden maintenance tasks as the CPU was finally fried by the invasion of nano-robots and the long black arm which had been disassembling it pulled the broken remains into the creche.

\* \* \*

David Brin leaned back in his large leather chair with a coffee mug in his lap and contemplated the four large displays running data-structures by his retinas at a leisurely pace. It still felt almost like magic to him, as his mod worked quickly and efficiently with the AI to identify anomalies feeding them to his subconscious and manifesting them as something resembling unique insights to his conscious mind.

The experience was not unlike having one unique insight after another in a steady flow making him feel almost superhumanly intelligent. He briefly considered turning his opera to full blast as he usually did while working, but decided against it.

The govspooks who'd come in earlier and ordered this analysis didn't look like they would take it lightly, and since he needed that vacation to Blue later this year, he better not raise any eyebrows right now.

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"Downright unfair" he thought to himself. His mod worked automatically and the actual conscious effort of it was so slight that listening to opera, high-pitched punk-rock, or even playing a game of chess wouldn't distract him too much.

He didn't play chess though. He wasn't all that good at it, and it disturbed the self-image of mental superiority that his job gave him. Maybe he should apply for that new chess-mod his friends had been ranting about the last time they went to the debate club. His govscore was high enough that he could afford a little something to himself, and he definitely didn't want a repeat of that Georgie-incident.

He took another sip of his coffee and stopped. Something had spiked. Out of old habit he put two fingers to his temples in mimicry of somebody thinking hard about something, when in fact the item had already been indexed, categorized and fed to him in a fashion that was clearly understandable, and turned to his guests.

"I have something. A cleaning robot went missing as it returned to its creche two minutes ago. It managed to send a burst that some robot had used it to make an emergency power intake." He paused for dramatic effect. "Only problem is we don't have any robots in that area, and now the cleaning robot has stopped transmitting."

"Any power fluctuations in that creche?"

David turned to his screen once more, annoyed at himself for not having checked this beforehand, and found his answer. "Yes, we have a drain on that outlet resembling a SXC class robot. Hmm, that's strange. A SXC is a building robot, and they are not cleared to move in that maintenance area. They are twice as tall as the height in that tunnel. No way an SXC could have gotten in there."

One of the govspooks turned away as he sub-vocalized into his communicator, while the other went forward to see the helpful image supplied by the AI showing and SCX next to a cross-section of the maintenance tunnel. "Bring a recon probe in."

"One is already on the way. Image coming up now." David said satisfied with his own providence in ordering it. One display switched to show the infrared version of a maintenance tunnel. The shaft was rectangular and low ceilinged as it was only used by cleaning robots whose slight bulk enabled them to crawl almost anywhere.

The highly sensitive camera of the recon probe, usually brought in to identify problems in hard to get to places, followed the slight trace of the cleaning robot and angled towards the opening of the creche while two other cameras were extended on arms to give as wide a view of what was going on as possible. Whatever happened, it would deliver a good view of it.

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"I have two combat-units on the way as well. They're outfitted for with the newest HPM-rifles, so if somethings in there we'll get it." Brin said as he looked at the screen intently. "They'll be there in less than ten secs."

As the camera angled the last of the way towards the corner and looked inside however, the point became mute. The creche was empty. Whatever it had been was on the move again.