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Date	03 Oct. 2003
Project	Sharp Edge of Madness

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Chapter 14 - Attacks

The drop of water had followed a long path down to get here. It had started in a rusty old maintenance shaft on sub-level 23 of Darkside City. The arrays of pipes here, leading water to the desolate housing projects of the lower levels, had patiently waited out long decades waiting for the maintenance robot to come by, and finally one of them had given up, letting drop after drop sink into the complete darkness around it.

Unbeknownst to the GridMain XX4 AI who as in charge of this city block, the maintenance robot in this area had gone into a cyclic error causing it to send "All is well" messages on the pre-arranged intervals while it rusted away on a ledge some 23 meters down a waterpipe, and so the maintenance never happened.

By now large chunks of mildew would drop from the pipes at regular intervals glogging up the maintenance tunnel and making the whole scene a surreal landscape of fluffy clouds flowing in irregular patterns on the ventilation shaft winds.

Most of the drops would be sucked up by the hungry clouds, but many, such as this one would make it to the bottom of the shaft where they would pool, grow, and finally have enough volume to work their way to the ventilation grid by the wall.

This led them to another 50 meter drop, where a lot of them was swallowed into the air. But the steady flow of new drops, helped by the many shower stalls and restaurants that led out humid air in the shaft, helped them survive in what would otherwise have been the death of any one drop, and they made it to the bottom.

Here the particularly wet air of a washing room ventilation outlet helped them pooling, growi, and expand once more. This time furthermore helped by a slight tilt of the bottom of the ventilation shaft towards a crack in the aluminium.

From here it continued down another twenty centimeters until it finally reached the cracked white ceiling plate.

Hovering here for about 20 seconds the drop, supported by other drops coming right behind it, finally fell the last 1.5 meters to the rough fabric over a limp shape on a metal gurney, where it was now evaporating quickly oblivious to the voices coming from the two men in the dark concrete room.

"I don't care about your problems. Just ship the damn thing and stop feeding me puddy."

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"You don't understand. We didn't anticipate a live-delivery, and the H-truck is not made for that. It's not even ventilated."

"Well, that's your problem now isn't it. My agreement was for the delivery of the item and says nothing about haggling with you. Take it up with K, he's your employer not me."

"I will, but I'm telling you this won't be easy. Those trucks are ideal for moving stuff because of the randomized walls. Not even a grade-3 sensor scan will tell anyone anything about the content. It all has to be normal scans, and those can be fooled. A live item is much harder. It shows up."

"How about boxing it?"

"That might be the way, but I have to get an atmospheric one, and that might take a few days."

"So what do you want from me?"

"Three, four days surveillance tops. I'll stash her here with a feed and an isolated monitor. I know where to get the containers so it's mostly a question of getting it by the driver."

"Ok, but you tell K I'll be requiring reimbursement for this. Having someone here for four days is an added expense."

"I will."

* * *

Nitch looked over her shoulder as the wailing siren reverberated against the grimy concrete of the abandoned houseblocks. She didn't need MP trouble now, and although she was in a hurry she needed to get off the street quickly.

This lower part of Darkside City had been made back when the psysheval teams still thought it possible to create open-sky simulations good enough to satisfy an upscale community. They'd created huge underground domes, villas, shopping-centres and even amusement parks to create a comfortable underground haven for the rich and wealthy prisoners. The concept hadn't taken. Although some had moved in, it had never been enough, and slowly but surely the neighborhood had degenerated until it had reached the present low. Today it looked more like an ancient warzone than anything else.

She picked her way against the crumpled remains of a lone housing facility, speeding up as the hovering chopter howled nearer. Usually the MP's didn't bother with street people just minding their own biz, but once in a while they would be looking for something in particular or just plain bored enough to hassle someone, and today Nitch didn't particularly feel like being one of those someones.

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She ducked behind a rusted hovercraft, just as the MP-chopter rounded the corner, and entered an old shopping arcade from when this neighborhood was still bustling with life. She stood still to hear it disappear again, but it didn't. For some reason it kept circling these blocks, which was worrying. Someone on the run around here? Were they looking for her? Not likely.

After short hesitation she decided to use the arcade to get away from this. There was probably some old tunnels or something she could use to get away. The arcade smelled of old urine and something rotting, but the faded pink paint somehow managed to convey the cheerfulness the place had one held in spite of the rotted plants and everything else.

She didn't want to linger though. This was not an area to linger in. She needed to be back before dark. Working during the day in one of the souvenir-shops downtown, her nightgig was at Soho's Bar, a worn down hidy-hole for the not-so-famous on sub-level 18. Not a great place, but Soho was a decent enough guy, and the tips gave her something to eat, when the rent-money had eaten away all her pay.

Leaving the shattered glass doors of a once revolving front-door behind, she picked her way across the debris, making sure not to make too much noise. She didn't know what might be lurking in the darkness in here, and she didn't want to find out.

Rounding a corner she sensed something moving further down in the murky corridor. Not good. Maybe a cat, but maybe something worse, and finding out what wasn't worth the risk.

Outside she could hear the chopter circling around once more. Definitely on the lookout for something out there. Hopefully not something that had decided to hide in here as well.

She stood completely still, straining her ears to hear any sound in the darkness. Nothing. Nothing. Wait. Something had shifted in the darkness. A rock perhaps? Or maybe something else. She tried to restrain her breath, holding one hand over her mouth as she tried to peer through the darkness.

Suddenly she sensed a movement at the other side of the arcade followed by a curse. Someone was trying to sneak up on her. She turned around, about to move, when a bright light picked her out of the darkness, pinning her to the wall.

"Well, hello there pretty woman! You out looking for some fun?" Two Logums where leisurely walking out of the darkness, a third one probably holding the light. She knew they had altered their nightvision, so they had probably taken their time setting up this surprise revelling in the terror they would spark.

She didn't like the odds. If they decided to do anything serious she was a goner. Although she knew how to handle herself in a fight, three was just at

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least two too many, and besides their modded limbs and reflexes was more than she thought she could handle.

The closest one leered over his shoulder to his partner, who was just now showing off his heavysset muscles under the dark-green skin by sending a rock flying in a low parabolic arc hitting the wall right next to where she was.

She knew the tactic. Intimidation by overwhelming power leading towards total submission of the victim, for whatever purposes. The trick was not to submit. Faking submission was okay though, and might even help her.

The faint chopter sounds faded from her mind as she let herself slide down the wall, in apparent fear, which wasn't too far from the truth. These people where scary as hell and from the rumors she'd heard about them, their plans for her could involve just about anything of which she suspected none would be very nice.

The one closest boldly took two more steps forward as she slumped to the ground. His greenish skin was scaly and smelled very human up close. She tried not to gag as he leaned in closer, letting his thumb-blades extend just a bit as he grabbed her by the ear dragging her to her feet.

A primal scream erupted from her throat as she let the centrifugal force of her outstretched arm with the two kilogram boulder connect with his skull just as he was about to turn his head to leer at his friend once more. The rock connected solidly just below the ear with a dark thump, but she didn't wait to see the effect. She bolted down the arcade jumping across rocks and running as fast as she could across a sandy flat stretch before she reached another pile of debris.

She didn't pay attention to the howl of anger from behind her as the two other took up the pursuit. There was no time to contemplate or worry about consequences now. There might have been some doubt as to their intentions before, but she knew she had cast her dice now. There was only one option and that was not to be caught.

She leapt across a pit in the ground at the last second as the wildly swinging beam from their light revealed it right in front of her. Noises from across the arcade. Probably trying to fence her in, but right now her biggest challenge was simply keeping ahead. Their legs were longer and stronger, their eyes adapted to darknes, and she was in thin loafers, tired from a long days work and almost completely blind in the darkness. If it hadn't been for the beam of light trying to follow her, she would have been completely lost in the darkness. Luckily they hadn't thought of this yet, and right now she prayed that they wouldn't.

A sharp edged metal rod sticking out of the metal bit into her left leg with loud pang sending her thrashing into a pile of old plastic bins. Her eyes watering she pulled herself out of the pile, stumbling onwards while trying to blink away the tears that threatened to blind her. It felt like a shinbone was

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broken, but she forced herself to acknowledge that since she could still move, it probably wasn't.

The sounds were getting steadily closer as she rasping in pain let herself fall towards a doorway where some light was showing. Through the fog of pain she swore silently. At this point getting caught by a team of over zealous chopter MP's seemed the less of two evils.

She screamed as she stumbled over something soft sending her headfirst into a pile of moldy clothes. The lightbeam played against the doorframe as she desperately tried to claw her way out of the smelly fabric that threatened to strangle her. Fighting for breath she finally ripped the last of the threads holding her back and crawled frantically towards the thing sliver of light behind her as she heard the telltale sound of footsteps right outside the doorway.

Bursting through the flimsy plastic door, she fell onto hard concrete rasping for breath and almost started laughing hysterically. There was no sunlight or welcoming chopter here, only the thin sheen of flourescent lights too bright for her darkness adjusted eyes to look at. She squinted around looking for something worth a last ditch effort for escape, but all she saw was long pipes going off in both directions. No way to run and no place to hide.

She let herself slump to the floor, waiting for the inevitable. After a few moments as her breath slowly started calming down, she started wondering what was going on. No sound came from the darkened doorway behind her. No leering laughter no sudden rip of air as extended thumb-blades slashed towards her to rip her to pieces. Only cold menacing silence.

She rolled over on her back holding up a hand to shield her eyes from the still glaring light peering into the darkness, when she heard a calm voice coming out from in there.

"Dammit woman, next time you decide to have a nighttime jog, couldn't you try to avoid kicking people in the face?"

* * *

Although the hidden dome-lights had dimmed to a nice twilight hue, and the fake horizon showed a beautiful sunset, Dent wasn't quite sure he liked the lush greenes of the park before him. Too many half forgotten memories, too many eyes lurking and too much knowledge of the quick and dirty deeds taking place in the humid darkness.

He didn't know why he felt as he did. There were many places here that were just as bad or worse, but he had an eerie feeling about many things these days and right now he had them about this place. Maybe it was something in the air, or maybe it was just the stark contrast between the beauty and the underlying ugliness that got to him. He didn't know, and right now he didn't have time to care.

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Twitch had given up searching for any anomalies in the power grid. Too many unknowns, in a search through a grid where everyone had hidden schemes and agendas was about as easy as finding the one fish with a headache in a scode of thousands.

Twitch had started a datagrid search instead, trying to find anything on Blakemore, and found something entirely different.

A powerfailure due to a leaky pipe had caused an unscheduled inspection of an unused maintenance tunnel, and the repair-robot had followed the path of water-damage to the ceiling of an unused store-room where it had fixed a cracked ceiling plate.

The film showing the room was not something the maintenance AI would consider looking at, but to Twitch's automated grid-agents filtering through it's memory cores like a pack of hungry wolves on the prowl for pray, the empty storeroom with something not supposed to be there was a blazing fire in a greyish-dark sky.

Hence the park, hence the slug-gun Dent was slowly unclipping as he crossed the wet grass of the park towards the small bathroom stall by the side of one of the paths where muffled voices could be heard from within.

The interior was more true to the reality Dent saw in the place than the beautiful scenery outside. Rot was growing on the fake wooden walls, and the heavy urine scented air had a faint tinge of fear to it as if people had died in here, which they, thought Dent morosely, probably had.

Dirty water poured over the edge of the yellowed sink, where brownish spongelike growths had taken over control of the drain and stopped the dripping water from exiting. Floorboards, once covered with white tiles creaked under his feet as he walked toward the end of the room.

Two muscular Logums where kicking a third lying on the floor making sounds that were hardly whimpers anymore. Dent walked by them to the end of the room where a paper blanket from someone, who had probably spent the night, covered the aircon grille. This was his way in.

He didn't bother with the paper but simply put his fingers through both paper and grille and pulled it out of the floor tearing the screws out of their alloy sockets. The sound was almost like firecrackers going off, and he stepped aside as the rusty pipe whizzed by his head propelled by steroid enhanced muscular arms.

He let the pipe continue it's momentum, taking it out of the guys hand and holding it in a lower hand grip in his left hand, as his right reached over and grabbed the guy by the neck throwing him into the hole as the pipe connected solidly with his groin.

He quickly went to the other guy and hit him hard in the throat, listening to the sound of his thumb-blade rattling against the tiles, and the roar that had

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started to emanate reducing itself to a quickly fading whisper. He wanted to know the depth of this hole, and didn't need the extra noise.

As he listened he thought briefly that it had been terribly careless of him to just turn his back on them like that. It could have been a setup. Another lesson learned and apparently forgotten. Too old perhaps? A loud thump. Three to four seconds fall for a human body. A drop of about 30 meters.

He snatched the fibre-wire to the edge of the stall door and shimmied down to the bottom with the practiced ease of someone whose life often depended on his abilities, breaking only at the very end. At the bottom he made short work of the bolted airshaft door with his boltcutter strength fingers, and continued down.

A few minutes later he detonated the directional charge through the recently fixed ceiling-plates, throwing himself head first into the hole revealing as little as possible of himself before his hands and gun was free. He didn't want to make the same mistake the securMerks had made this morning and who knew what might be waiting in here.

* * *

Hi waited by the busy intersection of Briagon Alley and Slope 10 one of the many tunnels leading down to the lower sublevels. A few years ago they had been the preferred route for cycle-messengers charging in and out of them like crazed bees on a sugar frenzy, but as most of the levels beneath Briagon had become increasingly dangerous checkpoints had been made at all the slopes, and the cycle-messaging, which had been mostly a fad to start with, had soon died out.

Business was booming as usual in Briagon however. A Pythor secured area, it was probably one of the safest places in Darkside. Pythor had one of the most developed Merk departments of all the syndicates, and anyone disturbing biz here would see the wrong side of airlock before they could mumble an apology. No one had told the tourists this of course, and so the BA was bustling with the usual crowds of glossy eyed tourists sampling the forbidden and seemingly dangerous fruits of Darkside.

He couldn't help but smile as they walked by eyeing his dark grey hide and the tight black mil-grade powersuit showing through the folds of his rumbled brown full-length jacket. He probably looked as one of the fabled hoodlums of this city, and being a logum he probably should consider himself one. Probably soome of the google eyed youngsters would go home and copy the styles they saw here for a short while before they grew tired of it and found something else to do.

Such was life. He remembered growing up among kids like these. The world lying open, uncharted opportunities ahead, and a world which offered the technologies to make anything possible. The only trick was to keep your head

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reeled in and keep finding things to do. Some people ended up in gov-jobs like he'd done, but many didn't really like the hierarchy there and decided for some of the more loose rec-societies like farming or gridding. Hi's parents where shrimp-fishers on one of the equatorial islands of Blue. Not needing to make any real money in the HS they just leisured out their days with their friends, fishing for a few days, then spending a few days of rest sharing stories with each-other and the tourists in handmade wooden chairs by the peer. A quiet life.

Hi hadn't wanted that. He had wanted adventures, something bigger, better. Ending up here, at the ass end of the universe, an apparent tourist-attraction and making his living renting himself out to the highest bidder, hadn't been his idea, but at least he made a living.

Hi checked his ret-clock and glided across the street in long measured steps as was his habit when in full gear. It kept his center of gravity low and vector-changes easier. Not strictly necessary here, but such were habits.

Pushing his way past the throng of kids lined up outside the drug-dealers corner selling brightly packaged "safe"-drugs which the local clinics could clean up in an instant if any problems should occur, he entered the red hush-booth and the sounds of the jostling crowds all but disappeared.

Hush-booths didn't really give that much security in distance communications. They were strictly a place where two or more people could go to share some immediate privacy. In Hi's case he was waiting for a 256Alpha encrypted call which was pretty impossible to tap into unless you did it after decryption, and so all he needed was somewhere where listeners couldn't pick up audio or visual output while he was online.

He flicked the switch and the worn metal box switched on a simple red light, letting him know that the visual field was distorted and locked for outsiders. The setup was pretty simple. Just some wires and a switch to the field-generator underneath the sidewalk. Probably somebody had believed that more sophisticated machinery would make people uneasy about the security of it, which was probably right thinking. After all hiding a bug in a hologram projector was a lot easier than hiding it in a simple switch box with a led on the side.

The call came almost immediately making him suspicious, and not for the first time, that his handlers were tracking him by orbital means as well as the off-chance street-cams that he pretty much figured they'd have full control over.

"Status?" The voice was low and level. Somebody leaned back in his chair sitting in a quiet control-room somewhere safe in the air-tempered orbital stations above.

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"A snatch job. Turned out to be some woman." He sprayed the info across the encrypted line, listening to the light hiss over the audio connection as the data streamed across the ultra-thin bandwidth.

"Surv job?"

"Not much. Same activity as always" He transmitted the comings and goings of the Logums across the line. "Although they do seem a little restless."

"Nothing showing in their movement patterns."

"I know. Guess it's just a feeling I have."

There was a slight pause at the other end.

Hi continued, "Yeah, I know you don't pay me for that, but consider it an added bonus." He knew these HS types didn't quite trust him. He was a logum with all his diazep mods turned to mush inside his head, and no rightthinking gov-spook would trust his sentiments about anything.

He couldn't help himself though. Even as a Logum banished to this hellish place and living out every dark fantasy his mind had somehow harbored, while being despised by everyone, he still felt a sense of duty towards these people. It had taken thousands of years and countless deaths for society to reach an apex where there was one government for humanity and not one of those territorial monkey regimes they'd had a few centuries back, and he would be damned before letting himself become one of it's adversaries however wrong he might think them to be sometimes.

The voice continued at the other end, "We're registering some activity on level 23 column B5. Seems like your people."

Hi felt an uneasy feeling settle in his stomach. "That's where the girl was stashed. What activity?"

"We have biosensors in that area and they just showed a decrease in emission-levels meaning someone stopped sending them."

"How do you know they're my people?"

"Passive tracers"

"Fuck!" Hi switched off the connection and left the booth immediately listening absentmindedly to the complaining screech of the other end trying to reconnect to him. Someone had just made a hit on his crew while he wasn't there. Damn it all to hell. He ran across the intersection towards the closest drop-chute, feeling for his slug-gun and trying to estimate how many rounds he had with him. As long as he had more than one for each of those jerks who'd done this, he would be a happy camper.