

# MERCURIAL

Sample file

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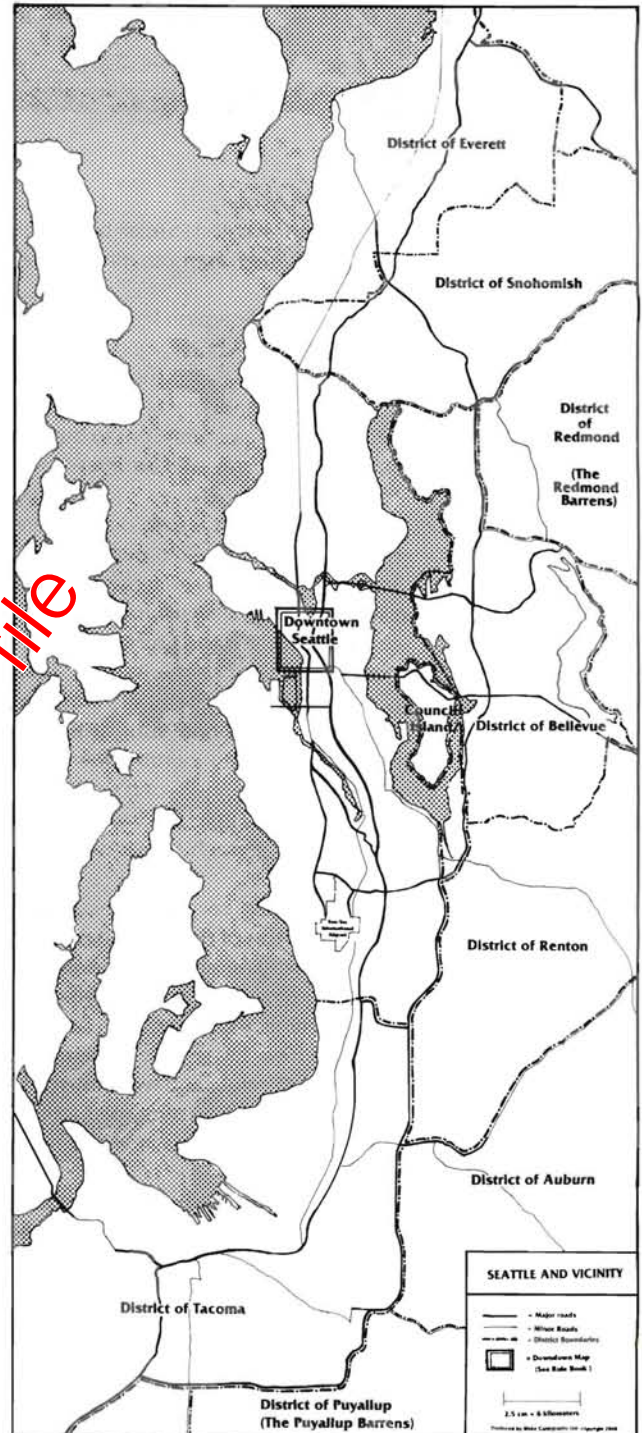
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# OUT AFTER DARK: A Prologue

Just another night in the Sixth World.

Night's usually for working, but I wanted to relax before this latest bit of biz. Some runs are tougher than others and even shadows need a break.

On impulse, I gunned the Harley Scorpion into the fringes of the Puyallup Barrens, heading for the Underworld. Don't ask me what brought it on. Sometimes self-flagellation goes with my line of work. I honestly didn't remember that Maria Mercurial was playing Underworld 93 that night, not until I got to the club and saw her name flashing out over the packed streets in a rainbow of colors from the holographic marquee. I had a crazy impulse to spin the bike around and burn a path out of there, away from the coiling letters of light that spelled out her name.

The crowd was a wild mixture of street slime from the Barrens rubbing shoulders with corporate *shaikujin* from Bellevue, the high and the low of Seattle crammed into a grungy city block to pay court to the rocker queen. Security was heavy, with Lone Star cops keeping things cool. The line coiled back from the main entrance, writhing like a giant python with heartburn. Most of those who made it to the door got a thumbs-down from Newt, the oversized Troll who is the Underworld's arbiter of elegance. No one was going to get in tonight who wasn't either macroflash or outrageously grungy enough to please Newt's sense of the grotesque.

Of course, if you're a heavy politico, corp exec, media star, or occupy some other niche at the top of the food chain, then ordinary rules don't apply. I was carrying an ID that would get me past the gates of Heaven, assuming St. Peter knew what was good for him. The face on it was mine, though the rest of it was about as real as a politician's promise. I flashed it at the roadie who guarded the side entrance to the club, and was amused to see him instantly straighten up. The 100¥ bill wrapped around it probably helped. With some types, hard cash was a more enticing bribe than a credstick.

Underworld 93 was alive that night. Light blasted into my eyes as I walked down the ramp leading from street level. The dance floor was an amorphous beast, writhing with a thousand limbs, and the beat of the music red-lined my pulse into overdrive. On the stage, a nova was dancing.

Arms, legs, and face of mirror-bright metal, catching the searing beams of the spotlights and throwing them back in a dazzling cascade of color and light. That was the first thing you saw. Then the hair, flaring golden in the glare, surrounding her face like a solar corona around a silver moon. Only afterward did you register the athlete's firm torso, muscles ridged with exertion, the all-too-human core of this robotic finery. Maria Mercurial danced and while you watched her, nothing else mattered.

She was synth-linking the music, driving the banked-up sound machines with the impulses of muscle and nerve. Most

kids who fancy themselves rockers just learn a few basic trigger patterns for their links, and let the programming of the control decks fill in the rest. Hearing and seeing Maria, you knew that every tone was driven by a highly trained movement, that the choreography of sound, body, and voice were all from the heart, as alive as children at play, as intimate as a lover's caress, as real as death.

The voice was uniquely hers, yet it was also that of every woman you've ever loved...or hated. One moment it spit in your face like a street killer high on Black Thunder. The next second it ripped out your heart like the cry of a starving child, or nailed you to the wall with a blazing spike of pure animal heat.

One of my oldest friends collects old rock and roll recordings the way some people collect jewels or antique cars. Maria's voice always reminded me of some from those days, when the juke still ran hot through the music. Grace Slick comes to mind, or Janis Joplin, who burned out like a comet that got too close to the sun.

When the set was over, the Underworld went berserk. Maria stood under a single, searing spot at the center of the stage, her chest and belly pumping in deep, gasping breaths. The metal limbs shimmered as rivulets of sweat poured down from the human flesh of shoulders and hips.

It was almost ten minutes before the demented crowd would let her go. I felt a crazy wave of hate flash through me at the way they screamed for more, when she'd already given more than human flesh, hers or theirs, should be able to stand. If she'd danced her life out on the stage and died for their pleasure, they'd still have shrieked their hunger.

This had begun as a night off, but when your karma says it's time to work, you work. So the Harley and I were ready, waiting in an alley by the stage door, when Maria ran the gauntlet of fans to her limo. The big Mitsubishi Nightsky, mirror-chromed like its mistress from hood to trunk, pulled into the dark streets, and I eased out in its wake, trailing along a block behind.

I was only a little surprised when the limo turned deeper into the Barrens, away from the lights of the city and into Seattle's own little heart of darkness. Sometimes, after a gig, Maria had to unwind. Her file made it clear how she would do it. I thumbed for a weapons check, and the Scorpion's console reassured me that it was ready for any little unpleasantness that the zone might send my way.

A block away from a razor-guy dive called The Armadillo, her car pulled over to the curb. Seeing that the driver had deployed his weaponry, I silently applauded his excellent good sense. The back door opened, and Maria stepped out. She was wearing a black street outfit, armorcloth set with silver splints, that looked like a fetishist's dream come true and would probably stop a magnum slug at close-range. Baroque glasses covered the upper half of her face with black lenses so opaque



## PROLOGUE

they had to be vision-augmenters. She'd have been blind otherwise. She said something to the limo driver, and walked into The Armadillo as the car pulled away. I parked the bike, told it to frag anybody who even looked at it sideways, and followed her in.

The joint was crammed with the wannabees, used-to-bees, and assorted killer-bees of the samurai scene. The vibes were a veritable oratorio of bad-ass. Maria was at the bar, constructing a margarita out of whatever toxic waste they sold under the alias of tequila. Several grimy-nasties approached her, offering dubious pleasures, and backed away when their best efforts didn't merit even a glance. Finally, a guy who might have been a Troll, except that Trolls rarely get so big or so ugly, locked target-acquisition on the lady. When his opening line got nowhere, he decided to drop the coy approach and grabbed her arm.

There was a liquid movement of black and silver, and then the ardent suitor sailed into a knot of onlookers. Maria stood with her back to the bar, her onyx-lensed shades catching faint reflections from the lights overhead. Ugly boy seemed stunned, which was understandable, then let out a roar as what happened sank into his consciousness. He charged forward. Why do these muscle jobs always charge when they run into someone who can take them? Doubtless a shrinker could find deep and mysterious tendencies in the pattern. It's almost like they're programmed for it: get thrown, stand up, roar and charge.

With an avoidance move so fine I expected the crowd to burst into applause, Maria took herself off the guy's line of attack. One silver hand slipped over his outstretched, clutching arm; the other looped up to grasp the back of his neck. She stepped aside, continuing the turn she had begun, and cartwheeled the goon over the bar into a pyramid of bottles. The destruction was awesome.

There is something about the sound of breaking glass in places like this. Within seconds, the bar turned into one, humongous brawl. I pistoned the heel of a hand into a snaggle-toothed face that got too close and followed a trail of flying bodies that marked the quicksilver lady's path to the door. Once outside, I scanned for a second before I heard the wrenching sound of someone being violently sick in a doorway down the block. Moving as silently as I knew how, I moved into position to check it out, and was rewarded with the sight of Maria vomiting against the stoop. I could also see two furtive figures in the shadows, inching closer and closer to the bent-over figure. The lone streetlight on the corner caught the gleam of steel in their hands.

I pulled my Viper. "Nothing personal, guys," I muttered, as the tiny red spot of the laser sight popped into being. The deadly needles *phutted* as they drilled into the thugs' foreheads. Out of the corner of one eye, I could see the silver limousine turning the corner, come to retrieve its owner after her brief night out. Maria was sitting in the trash on the bottom step of the brownstone, hands over her face, crooning to herself in a quiet, steady voice. The elaborate shades lay shattered on the pavement, twisted out of shape as if a powerful, metal leg had stamped them again, and again, and again. Her personal demons had been laid to rest, at least for tonight, by the twin drugs of music and violence.

The chauffeur climbed out of the car, cradling a short, ugly shotgun under one arm. He bent over the rocking figure and spoke quietly. She looked up. I had my eyes turned up to deal

with the darkness, and under the ghostly light of the dim streetlamp, I could see her face plainly. I have never understood why the late and unlamented Reynaldo Texamachach had left the eyes unaltered when he had Maria's skin job done. Maybe there was something about the deep, brown, living eyes looking out of the silver mask of her face that did something for him. It always made me want to cry, or kill something.

I watched as the pair went back to the car. The driver handed Maria into the rear seat like she was royalty. Then he got into the front and burned rubber getting away from that little corner of Hell. Smart fellow.

I walked back to where I'd stashed the Harley, and kicked away the twitching body of a local with more greed than sense who had gotten too close to the electrically charged anti-theft plates. They retracted when I told the bike I was back. As I wheeled my way back to base, I nearly had to stop for a good puke myself.

Maria Mercurial. I'd studied her. Seen her make her art and found joy in it as I watched. With the access to her files that my masters at Aztechnology had given me, I knew her better than she knew herself. Now all I had to do was kill her. Some runs are tougher than others.

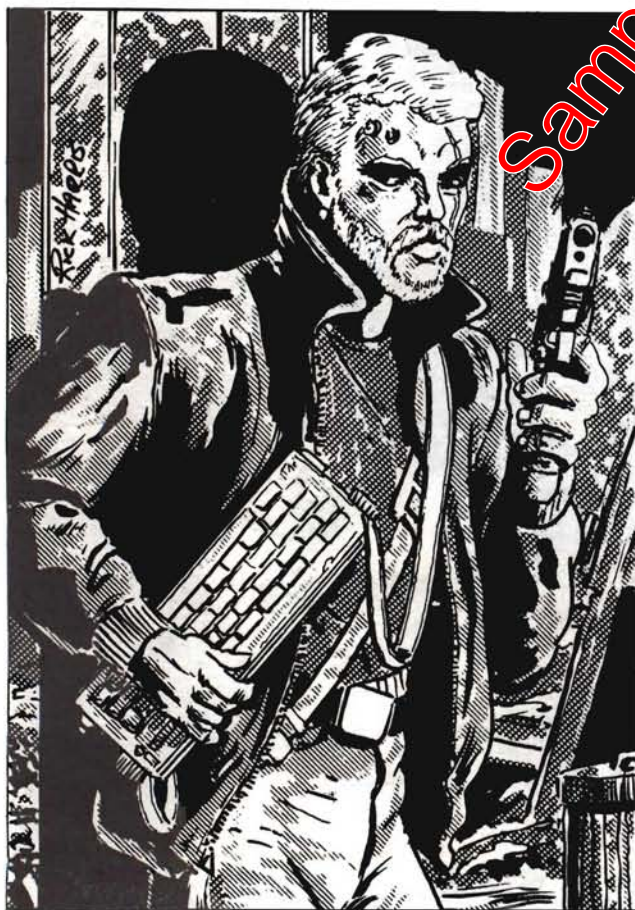




# INTRODUCTION

**Marla Mercurial** is a roleplaying adventure set in the world of **Shadowrun**. The year is 2050. Advances in technology are astonishing, with humans able to blend with computers and travel through that netherworld of data known as the Matrix. Even more astonishing is the return of Magic. Elves, Dragons, Dwarfs, Orks, and Trolls have assumed their true forms, while megacorporations rather than superpowers rule much of the world. Magicians and Shamans wield another kind of awesome power. Moving among it all like whispers in the night are the shadowrunners. No one admits their existence, but no one else can do their secret work.

This story takes place in the streets and shadows of Seattle, now an urban sprawl encompassing some 1,600 square miles from Everett to Tacoma. Yet even this vast megaplex is but an enclave set amid even larger states ruled by Native American nations and other sovereign states of metahumans and Awakened Beings.



## GAMEMASTERING NOTES

Except for certain items clearly marked as handouts for the players, the contents of this book are for the gamemaster's eyes only. To run the adventure, the gamemaster needs familiarity with the basic **Shadowrun** rules. For convenience of play, some character stats have already been factored to reflect enhancement or modification by certain gear or abilities. These are so noted.

Six is the optimum number of players for roleplaying **Marla Mercurial**. Any fewer and the players' team is likely to be overwhelmed. Any larger and the group could become so unwieldy that the pace of play begins to drag or totally bogs down. Experienced gamemasters are, however, the best judge of their own and their players' abilities when it comes to size of the group.

This adventure combines several approaches. Some encounters are planned and others remain open-ended. Hints for gamemastering the various situations are included with the individual sections describing the adventure.

The players are free to select their own characters, but the gamemaster should be aware of several types that will enhance the team's ability to roleplay **Marla Mercurial**. As the adventurers will encounter magical opposition, it would be handy if they have their own wizard among them. Also, the team will miss out on some useful clues unless they have a decker. Finally, this run includes a lot of combat, so the player characters should include some decent muscle.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Aside from the basic **Shadowrun** rules, this book includes everything needed to play this adventure. For best results, the gamemaster will familiarize himself with the contents of the book before the start of play. The twists and turns of the plot are intended to take the players by surprise, *not* the gamemaster.

Though this booklet tries to cover all the likely—and even unlikely—things that can happen during the adventure, it is impossible to foresee everything. The gamemaster may find that sometimes it is a good idea to just let the unexpected lead where it will. Even if it does turn out that everyone gets killed, hey, they knew the job was dangerous when they took it. On the other hand, if the players do something truly clever to outsmart the bad guys and win the day, the gamemaster can keep them on their toes by wrapping things up with a big fight when the thwarted villains come back for revenge!

The **Plot Synopsis** is a fairly detailed summary of both the story background and the course the adventure is intended to follow. The interview with Marla Mercurial from *Rocker Stars*