

# *Dreamchipper*

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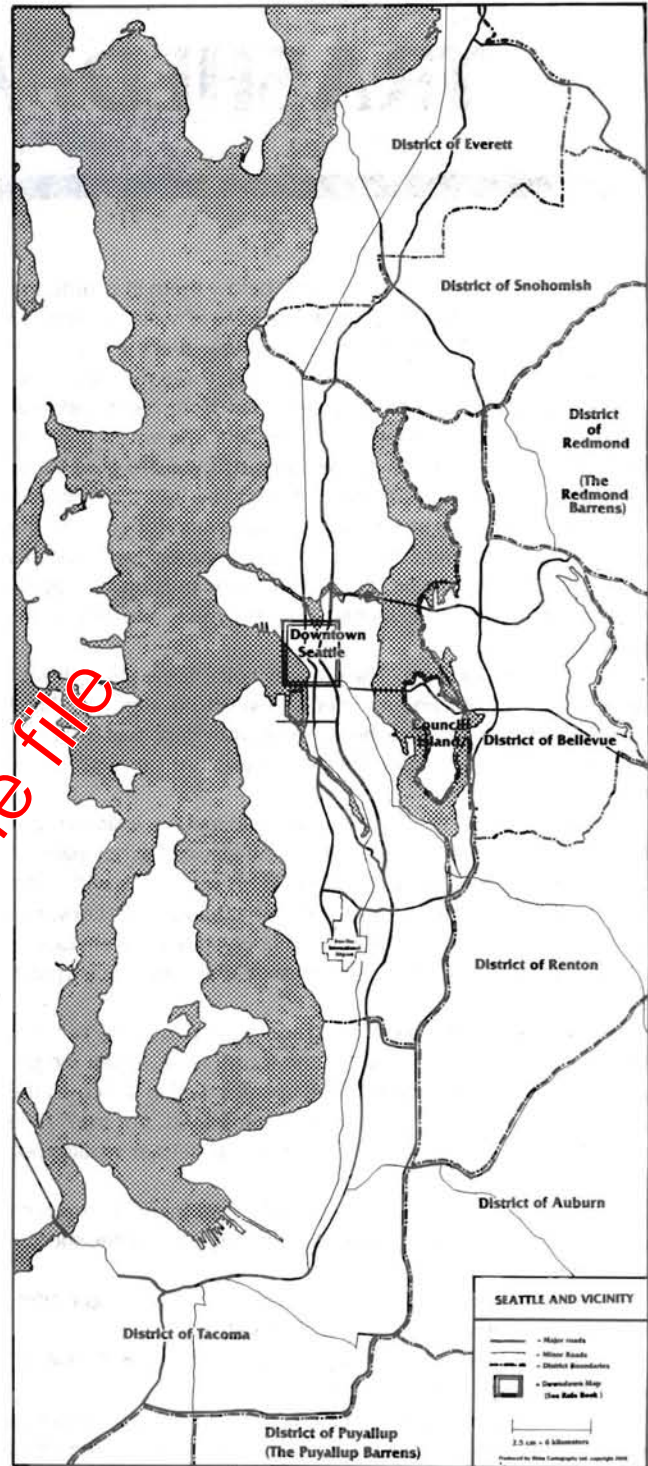
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# TRASHED: A PROLOGUE

The lights of the city spread out below them like glittering diamonds on a thick black cloth. In the eyes of most, these were simple lights. On this night, for those soaring over the city, some of the lights became real diamond gems, there for the taking.

Freya cupped the earpiece with her right hand and held onto the chopper doorframe with her left. The warm night air blew through her long hair as she strained forward to get a closer look at her destination. She didn't have to be told the rigger up front hadn't filed a flight plan with the boys at traffic control. She wondered, for the third time in as many minutes, just what this run was supposed to be about. Her silent musing was interrupted when Mr. Face leaned into his mike and keyed his intercom.

"We're almost there." The gravelly voice came through with all the warmth of grinding metal. "I want no slip-ups. Am I understood? You're here because of your rep, and that's it. Nothing flashy. Freya and Griffin, you two are simple muscle. Got it?"

"Yea, yea, yea. I hear ya." Freya could feel her insides roil at the thought of working with Griffin. She glanced at her partner as the copter's sudden swerve bathed his stone face with light.

"I hate razors," she groused under her breath. She knew this guy was hanging right on the edge. His crystal eyes were locked straight ahead, while his hands were deathly still. Her earpiece crackled.

"We're after three skillchips," Face continued. "They're being held in the corp's think tank, on the fourth floor. When we get past the door, Freya and I will head upstairs. Griffin will cover the lobby. I'll handle everything else. Nothing loud, got me?" Face turned and looked at Freya and Griffin, but neither would look back.

"The chips are mine, understand? I'll get them. You're both along to provide cover." Face smiled, trying to break the sudden tension.

"It's a breeze, kids. Nothin' to this one." The rigger interrupted Face's attempts with a hiss of static.

"Down in two, back in eight, chummers. We're clear to drop. Beginning final approach."

Time for silent prayers, or chants, or whatever gets you through a run. Freya composed herself, looking for the deep inner calm that would drive her spells. The pitch of the rotors shifted, and her stomach rose to her throat.

"This is it, campers," the rigger prodded. "You're back on the deck in eight or you're on your own."

Freya blinked her eyes open and looked out the door. She was impressed with the rigger's style. Right in the middle of the intersection. Not exactly a quiet entry, but this was supposed to be an easy one.

"That's it," Face pointed. "Blue neon sign with the Armorlite acrylic doors. Let's go!"

The sign on the door said Global Technology, but Freya doubted that the firm did any business outside Seattle. She slid out of the chopper as the rigger gunned the engine. The craft's rise nudged Freya forward, pushing her out the door. Face and Griffin were already on the move, covering the 50 feet in a hurried walk. What a sight, the sleek and smooth goon beside the wriggling little fixer.

"Just like the board room, eh,] Face?" Freya stabbed.

The fixer snarled something over his shoulder, never slowing his pace. These chips sure must be important if this guy is willing to come along on the run, Freya mused. I wonder if I'll ever know what I'm stealing.

By the time Freya arrived at the double doors, the two men were positioned to each side. Face pointed at the guard's station. The chopper had made a lot of noise, but the Lone Star technician hadn't appeared to notice.

"If you please? It's time to earn your keep."

Freya bristled as she pushed back her sleeves. Something subtle, she thought. She began calling on her energy reserves, weaving her hands like feathers in the wind. She began to draw them together, the fingers seemingly tying themselves into knots. Then, with a final flick of the wrists, her hands shot out, fingers wide, just as Griffin and Face drew the doors open. She watched as invisible energy raced toward the guard. Her spell took effect instantly. The guard's head flopped back, his eyes already closed. Arms limp, he tipped backwards, his head bouncing twice off the polished marble floor. He hadn't uttered a sound.

Face did not seem impressed.

"We're in," he whispered into his micro-transceiver.

Griffin was the first one in, as always. He barreled past the prostrate guard and scanned down the hall. All clear. Face and Freya followed closely behind. Face went straight to the elevator, jabbing the controls with a sweaty finger. The door slid open quickly. Freya and Face slipped in and punched the green number 4. As the elevator began its slow ascent, Freya could feel Face sweating. The odor of fear and anticipation was thick within the enclosed space.

"You're not used to this, are you, Face?"

"Not your concern, spellworm." He ran a finger under his collar and checked his watch for the hundredth time since the start of the run.

"Blessed Lady, save us from amateurs," she intoned to the ceiling, thoughts of her Elven haven suddenly more enticing than the excitement of a run.

Face shot her a quick look, but the doors opened and a young decker stood there waiting.

"You stay here," Face told Freya. "Come on, boy." Face pushed the boy forward. Freya watched as the two hurried down the hall. She leaned against the elevator jamb to prevent



the door from closing.

The key to success on a run like this was to be ready for anything at anytime. Anything. So the first gunshot booming down the halls didn't startle her so much as it jolted her into action. She pulled herself off the jamb as a door at the end of the corridor flew open. The young decker came flying out the door, bounced off the side wall, and started beating feet blindly down the hall.

Though her vision was obscured by the fleeing decker, she could just make out Face, backing into the hall, firing his pistol at some unseen enemy. Freya reached up her sleeve and gripped the L36 she kept for just such situations. It looked like she would earn her nuyen after all.

"Hit the floor!" She jumped out into the hall, crouched slightly, and gripped the pistol with both hands. The decker's eyes went wide and he dove for the tiles, beginning a slide that Freya knew would carry him into her legs. Face flattened against the far wall without looking at the mage.

She snapped off three quick shots before the boy crashed into her legs. Though small, the explosive rounds tore huge pieces of plaster off the wall and gouged a fist-sized hole in the door.

Freya tucked and rolled forward as the decker hit her at the shins, coming up in a crouch as Face reached her.

"Three rent-a-cops from Knight Errant," he puffed. "I don't know what they're doing up here." He looked accusingly at the boy. Freya glanced at the closed elevator door.

"Take the stairs," she yelled. "I'll give you 60 seconds, then follow you down." She flattened herself against the elevator doorway, hoping it would offer some protection. She watched Face pick the boy up by the back of his collar and drag him down the hallway. Then Freya began preparing a little magic surprise for her expected visitors.

It only took a few seconds before a profile appeared in the doorway. She considered firing once to scare it back, but she was too busy. When the cop saw her motions, his head disappeared just as she completed her spell. A moment passed, and Freya began to consider her options.

Then two cops jumped into the hall. One came in low, and the other held tight to the opposite wall. Both guns were up and ready. They were good, and they worked well as a team.

"Hall's clear, Sarge," the cop on the floor shouted.

Freya continued her soft, whispered chant as she stepped away from the elevator and began to back up.

"Copy, Barnes. Thomas? We got three on the stairwell, coming down hot. Thomas?"

Freya was six feet from the door when the Dwarf sergeant rounded the corner, still speaking into his headset.

"Thom... Mage in the hallway! Fire at will!"

Freya turned and flew for the door, reaching the doorknob as the hail of bullets began to impact around her.

"Damn his thermal eyes," she cursed to herself, as the door gave way beneath her weight. She shoved through just as the sergeant triggered his only shot.

The 9mm slug tore into her shoulder and threw her into the handrail of the stairs. She could feel her balance begin to go, as her momentum threatened to carry her over the edge. She dropped her Colt and clutched the rail with her good hand. Then the pain rolled over her. She heard the Colt bounce down the metal steps, but her attention was fixed to the slowly closing





door. The bullets had stopped for the moment, but Freya could hear the Dwarf charging down the hall, his heavy jackboots slapping against the floor.

"Not this time, shorty." Freya's pale, white fingers danced toward the corridor, and a sheet of crackling energy reinforced the door.

With a woomph of air, the sergeant hit the door. Expecting little resistance from the door, the Dwarf was unprepared when he threw his weight against the spell wall. He flattened himself against the barrier with a sharp crack that Freya imagined was cartilage. The Dwarf's troopers paused for a moment, then began firing into the magical wall. Fatigued by the spell and the bullet wound, Freya continued her chant as she flattened herself against the wall. Bullets were chewing through the door and her magical barrier, but for the moment she was safe. She could feel the churning wave of nausea begin to wash over her.

In the back of her mind, she knew the barrier had cost her too dearly. Still chanting, she raised a hand to her shoulder. The whole front of her shirt was already covered with blood.

She continued the silent chant, remembering the hours of training she had spent learning such skill. For the first time in her life, she was happy for the extra time she had been forced to study. Easing her way down the steps, she made it to the third-floor landing. Her Colt was waiting for her there. She decided to change clips as she continued on. By the time she reached the second floor, she had to use the wall for support. It left a bright red smear for the cops to follow, but she figured they already knew where she was heading.

Freya slid down the wall to the first-floor landing, where Face was peering through a crack in the door. The decker was quietly bouncing the back of his head into the wall as he waited impatiently.

"Where have you been? What happened?"

Freya stopped her chant and looked at the fixer with disgust.

"Not too bright are you, Face? What do you think happened? The cops up on the fourth were having a little target practice. They're on the way down. Well, two of them are."

"I think I'm going to get sick." The unsolicited observation caught Freya's attention, and she favored the decker with an annoyed glance. She considered it possible that he looked worse than she did. Of course, she couldn't prove that without a mirror.

"Griffin got two of them," Face said, "but one has the hallway and the lobby covered. No chance of breaking for the door with

him in the way."

Freya considered the options, but the sound of heavy footfalls on the way down hastened her decision-making.

"That's last call, Face. Get your rigger down here fast. I got our hallway creeper." Freya pushed past Face into the corner of the lobby. She could see Griffin pressed against the wall on the other side of the hallway arch. He was smiling.

"Figures he'd be having the time of his life." She noticed two dead guards near the hallway. "I really hate this guy." Griffin held up one finger to the Elf and wordlessly pointed down the hall. Freya nodded impatiently.

"One last time," she promised herself. Legs tense, she pushed herself off the wall.

"Now!" Freya thrust her hand in the direction of the hallway. Arcane energy sparked and flew from her hand. Griffin shouldered his way off the wall and ran for the front door. Behind her, she could hear the stairway door spring open as Face and the decker bolted from cover.

Energy welled up in the entryway, covering the opening with a sheet of electric fire. Freya took a step for the door, but found her feet would not keep up. She fell heavily, barely catching herself on the edge of the receptionist's desk. Weakly, she tried another step and found she could barely move. The pressure inside her head was almost unbearable. She fought hard to continue her chant and tried to make it to the door.

An eternity later, she crashed through the doors. The fresh air stung her senses as she fought to get her bearings. She gulped in surprise at the intense light coming from the street. In the distance, she could hear the chopper.

With tears in her eyes, she staggered toward the light. The rigger swiveled the spotlight aside, and Freya could see again. The Airstar was resting lightly on the ground as Face and the decker climbed aboard, its rotor blades revving up to speed. Griffin was, no doubt, already strapped in. Freya staggered forward, leaning heavily on a van parked on the street. She stopped to catch her breath and looked at the waiting chopper. Her eyes confirmed what her ears had tried to tell her.

Face was urging the chopper up into the air. Either the rigger didn't know Freya was still on the ground, or she didn't care. Freya lunged for the chopper but realized she would never make it. Mustering strength she didn't know she had, she broke into a trot. Just when she thought she might make it, the rig eased itself skyward. Freya continued her trot, staring at the door and Face standing there. He smiled down at her and waved. Guards broke out of Global, firing as they came. She ducked low as she ran, dodging between a row of cars.

"It's not over, Face. You're mine now. You hear me? You're mine." Freya summoned the last of her strength and picked up her pace. Passing directly under the path of the fleeing chopper, she headed for a line of dumpsters in a lot opposite the Global building. Hurriedly, she flopped into the nearest one and pulled the lid over herself. With luck, she thought, the chopper and cars will hide the cops' view. Then Face, it's you and me.

She pushed the lid open enough to see across the way. The rent-a-cops were firing at the rapidly departing chopper. None seemed interested in her. Gratefully, she sank back into the garbage.

"Give it a couple of hours," she whispered to herself. "Let the heat cool off. Get this shoulder looked at. I still got some rep with Dr. Bob's. Then, Face, I collect my fee. With interest."

