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Elizabeth Bear
Excerpt from HAMMERED

"Friends may come and go, but enemies accumulate."

—Thomas Jones



0307 hours, Wednesday August 29, 2062
Hartford, Connecticut
Sigourney Street
Abandoned North End

I never sleep if I can help it.

So when somebody starts trying to kick down my door at 0300 hours on a rank hot summer night, it isn't quite the surprise for me that it might be for some people. When the noise starts, I'm sitting on a gouged orange plastic chair in my shop. I drop my old-fashioned paperback book, stand and draw my sidearm before sidling across oil-stained concrete to flick the monitor on. The air thickens in my lungs; my heartbeat slows ominously.

And then I curse out loud and go open up the big blue steel door, holding the safetied pistol casually in my meat hand while the metal one turns the knob.

"You wanna pound the damn door down?" I accuse, and then I get a good look at the purple-faced kid dying in Razorface's arms and I'm all somebody's sergeant, somebody's mother. *Not that the two are all that different.*

"Ah, shit, Face. This kid is hammered. What do you expect me to do with this?"

Face shoves past me, skirting a dangling engine block and a neat pile of sheet metal, two of his 'boys'—teenaged hoods—trailing like ducklings. He doesn't answer immediately. Even as I take his name

loudly in vain, Razorface carries the baby gangster gently around the scarred steel lab table that holds up my hotplate. He lays the kid on my cot in the corner of the shop, wrinkling the taut brown blanket. Razorface, Razorface. Gets his name from a triple row of stainless steel choppers. Skin black as velvet and shoulders wide as a football star's. No, the old kind of football. Yeah.

I know the kid: maybe fourteen, maybe twelve. His name is Mercedes. He's rigid, trying to suck air and failing. *Anaphylactic shock*. Besides that, dark red viscous blood oozes out of his nose, and his skin looks like pounded meat. The nosebleed and the wide-open capillary color of his face are dead giveaways, but I give him the once-over anyway. Then I grab my kit and lug it over, dropping to my knees on the cold damp concrete beside the cot. Bones and metal creak. The room reeks of Razorface's sweaty leather, the kid's blood, diesel fuel. Once it would have made me gag. *I ain't what I used to be*.

"Can you fix him, Maker?" Face's boys stand twitching just inside the doorway.

I fumble in my kit, finding epinephrine, the long needle. Even as I fill a syringe I know the answer. "Nah, Face. There's no fucking way." But I have to try. 'Cause Face is one of mine, and the kid is one of his.

I don't look at the punks. "Will one of you two be so fucking kind as to lock the god-damned door?"

"Derek," Razorface says, "do it," and the taller of the two shoots him a sullen-jawed look and stalks away. The other one nods to me, a single sharp jab of his chin. I return the gesture, no eye contact, no smile. They never know what to make of me, these kids. I'm not one of Razorface's old ladies—except in the sense of being old as their grandmothers—but they know he trusts me. And most of them were *raised* by their grandmothers, so I do receive a certain amount of respect on that front, too.

I'm certain none of them understand the real deal, and I bet it drives them buggy.

When you save somebody's life—especially another warrior's—you're brothers. Maman taught me that. Face's Mama apparently taught him the same thing. It all works out in the end. *Assuming you*

Elizabeth Bear

live that long. But I digress.

I know already, from the color of Merc's skin, but I need to ask—so I turn my grim expression on Razorface.

"What'd he O.D. on?" *Please God let me be wrong.*

They can break you of religion, but they can't break you of praying.

Face holds out a twist of pills, and a chill snakes up my spine. I reach out with my metal hand and take the packet away from him, squeezing the ends to pop the slit. Peering in, I curse in French. Yellow pills, small as saccharine tablets, with a fine red line across the diameter. Rigathalonin. Hyperex.

We used to call it the Hammer.

How did a two-bit piece of street trash get his hands on something like this? And just what on God's grey earth do you think I can do for a kid who chewed down a handful of Hammers, Face? But I don't say that. I say, "How long ago? When did he take them?"

Face answers. "An hour ago. About an hour ago," and the taller gangster starts to whine.

I glare up at Whiny. "Shut up. How many of these did he take? Anybody see?" Nothing I can manage—that anybody can manage—is going to make a difference for this kid. If Merc's central nervous system isn't already so much soft-serve, I'm not a card-carrying member of the Teamster's Union.

"One," Whiny says. I curse him for a liar, but the other one—Dopey? Doc?—backs him up. *Allergic reaction? Merci à Dieu.* I drive the needle into his flesh, through cartilage, into the spasming muscle of the heart.

He quits twitching and his eyes fly open, but there's nobody home. I've seen it before. The funny purple color will drain out of his face in a couple of hours, and he'll be just like any other vegetable. I should have let him kick it when I could. Kinder than letting him live.

You're a hard woman, Jenny Casey. Yeah, well, I come by it honestly. "Shit," I whisper. "Another kid. Shit."

I wipe cold sweat from my face, flesh hand trembling with the aftershock. I'll be sick for hours. The only thing worse than the after-

Hammered

math of a plunge into combat-time is stepping up to the edge and then backing off.

All right. *Time to make coffee. And throw Razorface's gangsters out onto the street so I can pat him on the shoulder, with nobody else to see.*



Later, I wash my face in the stained steel sink and dry it on a clean rag. I catch myself staring into my own eyes, reflected in the unbreakable mirror hanging on my wall. I look chewed. *Hell, you can barely tell I'm a girl. Not exactly girlish anymore, Jenny.*

Hah. I won't be fifty for a month.

You wouldn't think I'd spend a lot of time staring in mirrors, but I never got used to that face. I used to stand there and study it every morning when I brushed my teeth, trying to figure out what the rest of the world saw. Vain as a cat of my glamorous good looks, don't you know?

Stained torn sleeveless shirt and cami pants over a frame like rawhide boiled and wired to bone. An eagle's nose—*how come you never broke that witch's nose, Jenny?*—brown skin and cheekbones proclaim my three mostly-Mohawk grandparents. Shiny pink burn scars. A prosthetic eye on the left half of the face.

Oh, yeah. And the arm. The left arm. From just below the shoulder it's dull, scratched steel—a clicking horror of a twenty-year-old Canadian Army prosthesis.

"Shit." I glance over at Face, who hands me another cup of coffee. After turning back to the steel table, I pour bourbon into it. Shaking my head, I set mug and bottle aside. My arm clicking, I hoist my butt onto the counter edge.

"Where'd he get it?" I hook the orange chair closer with my right foot and plant it on the seat, my bad leg propped on the back. Hell of a stinking summer night, and it's raining again. The tin roof leaks in three places; rain drums melodiously into the buckets I've set underneath. I run wet fingers through white-stippled hair. It won't lie flat. Too much sweat and grime, and I need a shower, so it's a good thing the rain's filling the rooftop tanks.

The left side of my body aches like the aftermath of a nasty electrical jolt.

Elizabeth Bear

Face rolls big shoulders, lifting his coffee cup to his mouth. The ceramic clinks against his prosthetic teeth, and then he eases his body down into another old chair. It creaks under his weight as he swings his feet up onto the counter beside me, leaning way back. Regarding me impassively, he shrugs again—a giant, shaven-headed figure with an ear and a nose full of gold and a mouth full of knife-edged, gleaming steel. The palms of his hands are pink and soft where he rolls them over the warmth of the mug; the rest of him shines dark and hard as some exotic wood. A little more than two-thirds my age, maybe. *Getting old for a gangster, Face.*

“Shit, Maker. I got to do me some asking about that.”

I nod, pursing my lips. The scars on my cheek pull the expression out of shape. Face’s gaze is level as I finish the spiked coffee in a long, searing swallow. The thermostat reads 27°C. I shiver. *It’s too damn cold in here.* “Hand me that sweater.”

He rises and does it wordlessly, and then refills my cup without my asking. “You drink less coffee, maybe eat something once in a while, you wouldn’t be so damn cold all the time.”

It’s not being skinny makes me shiver, Face. It’s a real old problem, but they give it a longer name every war.

“All right,” I mumble. “So what do you want to do about it?” He knows I don’t mean the cold.

Face turns his attention to the corpse-silent child on my narrow bed. “You think the shit was bad?”

I bite my lip. “I hope he was allergic. Otherwise...” I can’t finish. I wonder how many more of those little plastic twists are out in the neighborhoods. I rake my hand through stiff hair and shake my head. Hyperex is not a street drug. It is produced by two licensed pharmaceutical companies under contract for the United States Armed Forces and—chiefly—for the CA. Classified. And complicated.

The chances of a street level knockoff are slim, and I don’t think a multinational would touch it.

“What the hell else could it be?” I wave my left hand at the twist on the table. The light glitters on the scratches and dents marking my prosthesis. He doesn’t answer.

After setting my cup aside, I raise my arm to pull the sweater up

to my shoulder. Face doesn't stare at the puckered line of scar a few centimeters below the proximal end of my humerus. Did I mention that I like that man? I pause to comment, "Half a dozen tabs in there. You want to try one out, eh?"

Then I drag the black sweater over my head, twisting the sleeves around so the canvas elbow patches are where they should be, moth-ball-scented cotton-wool warm on my right arm only. The left one aches—phantom pain. My body trying to tell me something's wrong with a hand I lost a quarter-century back.

Long slow shake of that massive head, bulldog muscle rippling along the column of his neck. "I don't want this shit on my street, Maker." A deep frown. I hand him the bottle of bourbon by my elbow, and he adds a healthy dose to his cup along with a double spoonful of creamer and enough sugar to make me queasy. What is it about big macho men that they have to ruin perfectly good coffee?

I'm shaking less. I nearly triggered earlier, and the reaction won't wear off for a while yet, but the booze and the caffeine double-teaming my system help to smooth things. I raise my own cup to my lips, inhale alcohol fumes and the good rich smell of the roasted beans. Fortified, I brace myself and go down deep, after the memories I usually leave to rot. Old blood, that. Old, bad blood.

Two more breaths, and I'm as ready to talk about it as I'll ever be. "I've never seen anybody do that off a single hit, Face. We'd get guys once in a while, who'd been strung out and on the front line for weeks, who'd push it too far and do the froth-and-foam. But not off a tablet. The Hammer's not like that." I glance over at Mercedes, who is resting quietly on my cot. "Poor stupid kid."

"He's cooked, ain't he?" He's got his pistol out and he's checking the loads.

I nod slowly, tasting bile, and reach for the bourbon. Razorface hands it to me without even looking, and I kick the chair away and hop down, holster creaking, wincing as weight hits my left knee and hip. There's a lot of ceramic in there.

I gulp a quarter-mug. It burns going down. Nothing in the world ever tasted quite so good. *Jean-Michel. Katya. Nell.* Oh, God. Nell.

I fight my face under control and turn back to him, thrusting the

Elizabeth Bear

bourbon his way. "Drink to your dead, Face?"

Face's lips skin back from his shark smile as he waves the bottle away. Thick, sensitive lips, with the grey edge of an armor weave visible along the inside rim where they should have been pink with blood. I don't like to think about his sex life. "I'm gonna find that dealer, Maker."

"What about Merc?"

Face stands up and drops the pistol into a shoulder holster and shrugs it on. He used to shove it into his waistband until I told him a story about a guy I knew in the army who shot his balls off doing that. Standing there in the shade of the porch on a bright September day, I abruptly remember him as a skinny pre-adolescent, blood running down his soot-covered face from a glancing wound on his forehead. It's so vivid an image I can almost smell the smoke. Those were bad years, in the Thirties when things in the States were even worse than they are now. My first time in Hartford, I wore a baby-blue peacekeeper beret and thought I was invincible. South Africa didn't happen until two years later.

No, I really don't have any idea why I came back here to retire. Must be the fond memories. I'm so wrapped up in them I miss the first part of his sentence when he speaks again. "His momma will take care of him."

"Better to put a bullet in his head."

He looks at me, expressionless.

"What's his mother going to do with him? Better to tell her he's dead. He isn't coming back from this."

Another slow roll of his shoulders. "Shit, Maker. I don't know if I can do that." He's one of my boys, one of my kids, his eyes tell me. I wonder if Mercedes is Face's son. I wonder if he knows. Half the bastards in Hartford are his, likely as not.

"I can," I offer. His eyes flicker from mine down to the piece strapped to my thigh, and then back. The muscles in his face tense and go slack.

"No," he says after a moment. "He's mine."

He hands me back my mug and scoops Mercedes into his arms, letting me hold the door. I lock up after they go, and watch on the

monitors as his back recedes into the blood-warm predawn drizzle, leaving me alone with my thoughts and most of a bottle.

That bottle looks back at me for long seconds before I take it and climb into the front seat of a half-restored gasoline convertible, getting comfortable for a long night of thinking.



*Twenty-five years earlier:
Approximately 1300 hours
Wednesday, 15 July 2037
Near Pretoria
South Africa*

Fire is a bad way to die.

Even as I jerk back against my restraints, consciousness returning with the caress of flames on my face, I know I am dreaming. It's not always the same dream, but I always know I am dreaming. And in the dream, I always know I am going to die.

I suck in air to scream, choke on acrid smoke and heat. The sweet thick taste of blood clogs my mouth; something sharp twists inside of me with every breath. Coughing hurts more than anything survivable should have a right to. The panel clamors for attention, but I can't move or feel my left hand to slap the cutoff. Jammed crash webbing binds me tightly into my chair.

I breathe shallowly against the smoke, against the pain in my chest, retching as I fumble for my knife with blood-slick fingers. The hilt of the thing skitters away from my hand. As I scrabble after it, seething agony like a runnel of lava bathes my left arm. I think I liked it better when I couldn't feel.

The world goes dim around the edges, and the flames gutter and kiss me again.

The pain reminds me of a son-of-a-bitch I used to know, a piece of street trash named Chrétien. I never thought I could like a kiss less than I did his. I guess I know better, now.

I try to turn my head to get a glimpse of what's going on with my left arm, and that's when I realize that I can't see out of my left

Elizabeth Bear

eye and I'm dying, oh God, I'm going to burn up right here in the hot, tight coffin of my cockpit.

If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take... hah. Right. The hell you say. Pain is God's way of telling you it's not time to quit kicking yet.

Whimpering, I stretch away from the flames, reaching out toward the impossibly distant hilt of my knife. I'm listening for movement or voices from the back of my A.P.C. Nothing. I hope to hell they're all dead back there, or far enough gone that they won't wake up to burn.

Something tears in my left arm as I lean against the pain, clinging to it as my vision darkens again and I hear myself sob, coughing, terrified.

Please, Jesus, I don't want to burn alive. Well, we don't always get what we want, Jenny Casey.

And then I hear voices, and the complaint of warped metal, and a rush of light and air that makes the flames gutter and then flare. They reach for me again, and I draw a single excruciating breath and scream with all my little might. A voice from outside, Quebecois accent like the voice of an angel. "Mon Dieu! The driver is alive!"

And then, scrabbling, hands tugging at my restraints, my would-be savior groaning as the flames kiss him as well. I catch a glimpse of fair skin, captain's insignia, Canadian Army special forces desert uniform, the burns and blisters on his hands. Another voice from outside pleads with the captain to get out and leave me.

He squeezes my right shoulder, and for a second his gaze meets mine. Blue eyes burn into my memory, the eyes of an angel in a stained-glass window. "I won't let you burn to death, Corporal." And then he slides back across the ragged metal and out of my little patch of Hell.

The voices come from outside, from Heaven. That's part of Hell: knowing that you can look up at any time and see salvation. "His god-damned arm is pinned. I can reach him, but I can't get him out." *That explains why I can't move it.* I am suddenly, curiously calm. They're arguing with him, and he cuts them off. "I wouldn't leave a dog to die that way. Clive, you got slugs in that thing? Good, give it here."

Hammered

I hear him before I see him, thud of his boots, scrape of the shotgun as he pushes it ahead. What the hell. *At least this will be quick.*

I turn my head to look at him. He has a boot-knife in his hand as well as the twelve-gauge, and I just don't understand why he is cutting the straps of my crash harness. He cuts me, too, and I jerk against the straps, against my left arm. "Dammit, Corporal, just sit still, will you?" I force myself to hold quiet, remembering my sidearm and worrying that the heat will make the cartridges cook off before I remember how soon I'm going to be dead.

His voice hauls me back when I start to drift. "Corporal. What's your name, eh?"

Spider, I start to say, but I want to die with my right name on someone's lips, not my rank, not my handle. "Casey. Jenny Casey."

I feel him hesitate, see his searching glance at my face. *He hadn't known I was a girl. I must look pretty bad.* "Gabe Castaign," he tells me.

Gabriel. Mon ange. It's one of those funny, fixed-time, incongruous thoughts you get when you know you're going to die. And then the knife moves, parting the last restraint, and he drops it to bring the gun up and brace it. I look at the barrel, fascinated, unable to look away. "Sorry about this, Casey."

"S'aright," I answer. "Preciate it."

And then the gun roars, and I feel the jarring shudder of the impact, and there is only blackness, blessed blackness...



1930 hours, Monday 4 September 2062:

Hartford, Connecticut

Sigourney Street

Abandoned North End

...and the buzz of the door com hauling me out of cobwebby darkness and into the blinking light. My hand's on my automatic, the safety thumbed off—"If I catch any of you using his finger, I will break it." *Master Corporal, I believe you would have*—before I'm fully awake and the reality of the situation comes back to me.

Elizabeth Bear

My clothes are wet, my neck is killing me, and my damn glass has broken on the floor, littering it with pale blue shards and a wet stain that soaks into the cement. The book I was reading is still sliding from my lap, the arrogant, aristocratic silhouette of a long-dead movie director embossed on the spine. I catch it before it hits the floor, check the page number and toss it into a crate with the others I haven't gotten around to yet. They are all paperback, ancient, and crumbling; they—the universal *them*—don't print much light reading anymore.

Holstering the sidearm, I creak upright and limp to the sink, first grabbing my jacket off the back of the chair I fell asleep in. I'll be paying for that lapse of judgment for a while.

The buzzer again, the echo made harsh by the cement-lined, metal-cluttered cavern I call home. I raise my eyes to my monitors. Activity on only one—the side door, a single figure in a familiar dark coat. Wet hair straggles into his eyes; he stares up at the optic and gives me the finger. Male, Caucasian, under six feet, slender but not skinny. The monitor is black and white, but I happen to know that he has brown hair and hazel eyes and a propensity for loud ties.

I lean over the sink and thumb on the com with my left hand.

“Mitch.”

“Maker. You gonna let me in?”

“Got a warrant?”

“Hah. It's raining. Buzz me in or I'll go get one.”

He's kidding. I think. “Got probable cause?”

“You don't wanna know.” There is a certain grimness in his voice that cuts through the banter. I stump over to the door and open it. He drifts in with a smell of seasalt and Caribbean foliage—the alien breath of tropical storm Quigley, who left his fury over the Outer Banks two days before. Seems like we get further into the alphabet every year.

Turning my back and trusting Mitch to lock up, I think *I have to fix the buzzer one of these days.*

I put my jacket down on the counter and turn on the water in the sink, cold. Splash my face. Watching Mitch in the mirror, I stick my toothbrush into my mouth. Mitch slips into the shop and shuts the

door firmly, checking to make sure it latches. Then he picks his way catlike between the hulk of a Opel Manta *much* older than I am and a 2030 fuel cell Cadillac that probably has another life left in it.

Mitch circumnavigates a bucket and saunters over to my little nest of old furniture and ancient books. He pauses once to stoop and offer a greeting to Boris, the dignified old tomcat who comes by to get out of the rain.

I grin at myself and salute the mirror with my toothbrush. Spit in the sink, rinse, and turn off the water as Mitch leaves Boris and ducks under a hanging engine block. "Damn, Maker. It's like a blast furnace in here."

Cops are a lot like cats, come to think of it. They can tell when you don't want company. That's when they drop by.

"Been cold enough in my life." I tuck the hem of my t-shirt into the top of my old black fatigues and tighten the belt. Mitch stares for a second overlong at my chest, and then his eyes flick up to meet mine. He grins and I grunt.

"Save the flattery, eh? I own a mirror."

He crosses the last few feet between us. "I like tough girls." Matter-of-fact tone. Good God.

"I'm not exactly a girl anymore." I'm old enough to be his mother, and I wouldn't have had to start real young, either. "And I look like I've been through the wars."

His grin widens. "You have been through the wars, Maker." He hops onto the edge of the old steel table, with the agility of the young. I hate him for it for a moment, and then I swallow a grin. *If you'd died at 24, Jenny, you never would have found out how much fun it is to get old.* Mitch's jacket falling open to reveal the butt of his gun. Hip holster, not shoulder. He wants to be able to get at it fast, and he doesn't care who knows he has it.

I turn my back on him and pick up my own jacket from the edge of the sink, shrugging into it before turning my attention to the buckles, biting down on an urge to tell him the truth: that you think you have it under control and then one day you wake up and discover that you hurt all the time and everybody you love is dead or won't return your calls. You wake up one morning and discover you've

Elizabeth Bear

become a brutal old woman, and pain makes you nasty company.

If you're lucky enough to live that long.

A smaller population was a mixed blessing during the real bad years, a quarter-century or so ago. Canada stayed a little more civilized than most of the world—in part by selling itself to the highest bidder—but it also meant that my generation went almost entirely to the military, and our historic freedoms went out the window with the Military Powers Act of 2035, following our little altercation with Japan over panMalaysian trade when the beanstalk went in.

And then there was South Africa. And the U.S. And everywhere else I've been. Climate change makes for a lot of hungry people.

Despite the weapon on my own leg, I have an itch between my shoulder blades. Some people get used to guns, with practice. I never did. Guess I've been on both ends of them too many times.

I turn back to him. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

His smile becomes grim. "A bunch of dead people."

"We get a lot of those around here." I turn back and take three limping steps to fuss with the coffeepot. Damn knee hurts again, no doubt from the storm. What's worse is when my arm hurts, even now. Metal can't ache, but you could sure fool me.

"These dead people might worry you some."

"Why's that?" I pull gloves out of my pocket and yank them on. Driving gloves. The metal hand slips on the wheel, without. It's an excuse not to look him in the eye as I adjust black leather over rain-cold steel.

"Because you know something about the Hammer, Maker. From when you 'weren't' in the army. Special forces, was it? Nobody else gets that stuff."

In the silence that follows, the coffeepot burbles its last and I jump, fingers of my right hand twitching toward the piece strapped to my thigh before I stop them. Wisely, Mitch does not laugh. Jenny Casey's law of cops: there are three kinds—five percent are good, ten percent are bad, and the rest are just cops. The good ones want to help somebody. The bad ones want power. The rest want to ride around in a car with a light that lights up on the top.

I tolerate Mitch because he's one of the five percent. Snot-ass atti-

tude and all.

He gets off the counter and reaches for the coffeepot, turning his back. “What makes you think I was Army?”

“Where’d you get the scars?” He hands me a cup of coffee before pouring one for himself.

I take it in my right hand, savoring the heat of the mug. “Playing with matches.”

He laughs again, and again it doesn’t sound forced. Stares at my tits, laughs at my jokes: boy knows the way to an old woman’s heart. “Did Razor ever find that dealer?”

I don’t wonder how he knows. “Any bodies turn up in the river?” The broad, blue Connecticut. Lake Ontario, it isn’t. But hell, it’s a decent sized river—and every time they drag it, they find a couple of people they didn’t know were missing.

Mitch sets his cup aside and pins the floor between his lace-up boots with a glare. He’s wearing brown corduroy trousers, ten years out of style.

I wonder if I’m still drunk. The glass on the floor annoys me, and I turn away to get the broom and dust pan. Stooping over, I look up at Mitch. He’s stuffed his hands into his pockets, and he leans back against the table to watch while I sweep the concrete. I have to drop down to hands and knees to get the shards that scattered under the chair, and I wince and groan out loud when I do it. Something that feels like shattered pottery grinds in my knee and hip when I straighten.

Mitch chews his lip. “Getting old, Maker.”

“Still kick your boyish bottom from here to Boston, detective.” I carry my loaded dustpan over to the trash.

“Where the hell does that name come from, anyway? Maker. Radio handle? You guys used those, didn’t you?”

I shrug, setting the cleaning tools aside. “Maybe it’s my real name.”

A tube of toothpicks squats among the clutter on my table. He opens it and selects a red one, working it into his teeth with the vigor of a man who is trying to quit smoking. “Yeah, a body turned up in the river.” He hesitates.

Elizabeth Bear

I award him the round. “Whose body was it, Mitch?”

He sweeps a chair over and throws himself into it with all the grace of youth. For a moment, I am insanely jealous, and then I make myself smile. *If you'd died at twenty-four, Jenny, you never would have found out how much fun it is to get old.*

But Mitch is talking, head down on his hands and words stumbling out in a rush. “So we’ve got this floater, right? Turns up three miles downriver, snagged on a boat anchor, just like the opening scene of a detective holo. A woman. About thirty. A cop.” His voice trails off, and he pulls the toothpick out of his mouth and flicks it away, littering my clean-swept floor, but he does not raise his head.

“Is that important?”

“You tell me.” He looks up finally, and digs in his jacket pocket for a minute before lighting a nicotine stick. The red light of the flame remakes his face into death’s-head angles and the rich, hot scent reminds me that you can’t quit smoking, any more than you can quit any of the other addictions of which I have had my share. He holds the smoke in for a long minute and then breathes out like a self-satisfied dragon, relishing every moment of sensation and effect.

He wants me to ask, and I don’t want to give him another round, and so we hold an impromptu duel. He has a cigarette: something to do with his hands. I have years of practice waiting. I could pick up my mug, but I don’t. Instead, I lean my head back and watch the unpleasant old movies inside my skull.

He finishes his cigarette and clears his throat. “She was a detective sergeant. Were you a sergeant, Maker? When you weren’t in the Army?”

“I was Admiral of the Seventh Space Fleet, eh? What was her name?” *How much about me does he know? Or worse, think he knows?* I open my eyes and raise my head, catching him staring at me.

He waits again and again I do not ask. *He needs to learn who to play games with. It’s not me.*

I grunt. My fingers—the metal ones—itch for a cigarette, and I get up and pour myself a bourbon instead, washing down a handful of aspirin with it. I turn around to face him and study the water stains on the wall behind his head. More every year.

Hammered

“You wanna avenge a dead cop, Mitch, I’m not who you’re looking for. Get a ronin.” *Why is he’s coming to me for this? Why is he off the department investigation?*

She must have been a partner. A friend. Or even dirtier than the general run, and they’re covering it up. I’d like to say that sort of thing never went on back home in Kahnawá:ke, but I’d be lying. Warrior ethos. Whatever.

“Don’t need a hit. I need information.”

“So tell me your girl’s name, Kozlowski.”

He laughs bitterly. “Mashaya Duclose. West Indian. You heard of her? She was a good cop, Maker.”

I have not heard of her, but I don’t know everybody. *Sure. They’re all good cops when they’re dead.*

Mitch continues. “She’d been supposed to meet up with your boy Razorface the night she vanished. Something about him having witnessed one of the kids who got hammered, and some question about whether his organization might be involved. You know about the O.D.s?”

“I’ve heard stuff.”

He spreads his hands wide, helplessly: the look that breaks through his veneer chills me further. You get to know that expression, after a while. You see it on the ones who’ve adopted goals other than survival. Dead men walking.

“Look, Maker. I’ve got a dead detective. I’ve got Razorface maybe linked to a murder. And not one of his little cleanup killings. I don’t give a damn about those. A dead cop. A dead cop is not good for you and it is not good for me and it is not good for your gangster boyfriend. I got a street full of kids poisoned by Canadian combat drugs—that’s not good for you either. Since I know how much you like people poking into your history. No?”

Mitch’s eyes flicker around my shop in that way he has, recording everything. I’m damned glad I took that little plastic twist elsewhere. I’m not in the US illegally. I have every right to be here. It’s just there are some old friends I don’t really want to run across any time soon. And. Kids.

I sigh, and the nod comes unwilling. “All right, Michael. I’ll play.”

HP