

Tracks in the Dust, Tracks in the Flesh

By Ian Healy

At nineteen, Haiwee is nearly too old to cut.

Fourteen years running the light now, from the early days of virt games, FPS, and data collection to her prime as a cutter. Surgeon. Takes skill, see. Any lump with a 'set and pod can hack. Hacking is what the newsnet calls it. Still, after all these years. They might as well still be running flatscreens instead of 3D.

But Haiwee, she's got skill. The kind of skill that can run the datastream right out of a megacorp archive through the firewalls and ice and leave nothing but the crawling ick in her wake. When your system's got the ick, you don't call a datadoc. You call the morgue. Game over, man. Thanks for playing.

Five years ago, she was top dog in the game. When you needed data, when you had to cack the system or steal the secrets, you went to the elite. And Haiwee was at the top of that short list. Never as herself, shit no! On the net she was The Dove. It didn't matter that she ran from a corrugated tin shack on the Reservation. It didn't matter that she was one of the last Shoshone. All that mattered was when you needed the best, you hired The Dove to do your dirty work for you.

Problem was, nobody's gotten around to changing the laws about who can own property and earn income and all that. Child labor. When she was top of the list, she wouldn't get out of bed for less than a cool million. Not bad, considering you could still have someone killed for twenty grand. But you can't fool all the systems all the time, and if a fourteen-year-old girl was bringing in close to a billion dollars a year, somebody'd

probably notice. So she stayed on the Res, in her shack, trickling her cash down in dribs and drabs through a thousand dummy corporations until even an ace like herself would get bored tracking it all down.

But two days before her eighteenth birthday, some piece of shit codeslicer did exactly that. The trusts she'd set up for herself? Gone. The accounts in the Caymans and Switzerland? Drained dry. Her laundering chain? Broken. She'd made so much even she wasn't sure exactly what she'd been worth, but it numbered in ten, maybe eleven digits. Didn't matter now. All that work and nothing to show for it but a faded rep and a corrugated tin shack on a Res full of dead and dying men.

She's sick about it, washed up at nineteen. It takes more than skill to do the job of a surgeon. You've got to be *wired* for it. Plugged. Chipped. And you need to take Boost. Lots of it. Adrenaline-analog injectable, loaded with custom hormones. Boosts your reaction time. Gives you that edge when you're racing a trace-and-burn subroutine to the gold mine. But when you take Boost for eight, nine years, it shows. The wetware begins to fail. She gets the shakes. Twitches. Numbness in her face and fingertips. Your reaction time suffers, so you take more Boost. And the symptoms get worse. Soon you're taking an amount that would kill two or three ordinary lumps. And it just stops working.

Haiwee can't take Boost anymore. She's developed some ugly side effects – needle tracks on her arms that won't heal, like some junkie from a big city, gluten allergies, and skin that seems to constantly be itching and crawling. But it doesn't matter, because she can't afford it anymore on the meager income she's been able to scrape up doing low-level code work. Hacking. *Pfagh!*

Some days she doesn't even get on the lines anymore. The Dove has been replaced by others. Instead, she sits by her window, idly scratching at her skin, smoking black market cigs smuggled onto the Res, and feeling the stubble of her hair growing out around the plugs in her scalp.

She watches the kids playing soccer in the dust, marveling at their sun-browned skin, unblemished countenances, white teeth, and feels ugly. There aren't many her age on the Res. Most of them leave as soon as they get the chance – heading off to universities, or to labor on the Moon or Mars colonies. Anything to get off the Res – the last remnant of an age long gone. But there are a few boys who work at the power plant. She tries to be by the window when the old bus drops them off, its propane engine wheezing fitfully in the dusty air. Tall, slender young men, who wear their hair long and braided in the manner of their ancestors. They joke with each other, swinging lunch pails merrily. They leave fresh tracks in the dust, bootprints to be eliminated slowly and surely by the prevailing wind from the west. Occasionally one will look toward Haiwee's shack with curiosity and she shrinks back from the window, embarrassed to be seen with her buzz-cut hair and hypo-allergenic cerebral plugs.

She knows she can't stay in the shack forever. Maybe tomorrow she'll get up the nerve to open her door, to smile at the boys from the bus. Maybe she'll step outside and kick the soccer ball with the kids. Maybe she'll let the cleansing wind blow clean the tracks in her flesh.

But for now, she returns to her pod, connecting the plugs, running the lines. The Dove seeks one more chance to cut.

Maybe this time.