

Hydraulic

By E. Sedia

Lewis watched through the endless, almost solid curtain of rain, as a velorickshaw pulled in front of the Amicio's restaurant across the street. It was difficult to see the faces of a man and a woman that exited the cab - the streams of rain washed over the window of the coffee shop in which Lewis held his vigil. The reflections of the neon signs and marquees in the wet pavement blurred and flowed, a poisoned palette of broken colors and promises.

He folded his newspaper, left money on the stained Formica surface, and ran outside. The vertical jets poured over his head and shoulders, getting inside his rain-slicker and running warm down his back. He jogged across the street and cautiously peeked through the window of Amicio's.

The man talking to the maitre' d was indeed his subject - Jack Eslinger, suspected of illegal battery recharging and possibly worse. Probably worse - otherwise, FBI, the branch of the Bureau of Licensing and Intellectual Property (BLIP)

wouldn't be interested in him. The woman at his side looked toward the window and Lewis retreated, but not before catching a glimpse of long grey eyes between the rim of her storm hat and the scarf that swathed the lower half of her face. These eyes sent his heart pumping; no matter that her face was hidden - he recognized her, recognized her as one would a first love. Callie Swainson.

He stepped under the awning of the shop next door and lit a smokeless cigarette. Breathing deep a cool stream of nicotine and rain vapor, he let his eyes search the neon signs and the holographs, the billboards that bubbled and detached under the battering rain. It didn't take long to find her - there, over the red-lit doors of the ArXade, was a 3D poster advertising their latest VR release. On that poster, Callie wore a school uniform; she crouched down to adjust her sliding knee-high, her knee almost touching the ground, her smooth thigh draped in a tartan skirt; a flash of her white panties, a serious look of her grey eyes from under her dirty blond bangs. "Jailbait", the title read. Lewis cringed - not another rape-a-schoolgirl romp. Why did she keep licensing herself to these creeps? He considered buying the game nonetheless.

He dared another peak at the window, in time to see Eslinger and the star of the video industry settle at the table. She didn't remove her scarf even as she ordered. Lewis

sympathized - he remembered hearing that she had a problem with a stalking fan couple of years back. He guessed that this was why she hid her face and didn't have any games out for a while.

Lewis smiled, thinking that her game releases were the true measure of time, of recall. When people talked about the events of 2012, he first thought of her third-person shooter and not about the decision of the Congress to sever the ties with the rest of the world. 2015 marked Callie's first interactive NC-17 gig, and not the year when Israel was finally engulfed by its hostile surroundings. And 2017 was when he first made love to her - to her image, but really, it was her he was thinking about - and not the year when they switched to the rain powered economy.

He looked through the window again, to see his subjects settled in for their meal, and jogged back to the coffee shop. Eslinger's appointment was nothing more than a date, and Lewis would've felt disappointed if it weren't for seeing Callie. He had to fight an urge to walk up to her and say hello; but of course she wouldn't recognize him. And she had to be weary of the men who treated her as if they knew her because they had bought her licensed image.

Lewis didn't expect anything to happen until Eslinger was done with his meal, and touched the corner of his left eye, switching on his retinal implant. He flicked through the

staticky channels, and wished he brought a movie from home. Or a game - but of course, the console would be too bulky. He turned off the implant, and the static in his left eye disappeared, letting the grey and neon of the outside melt back into his vision. He watched a group of teens run down the streets, laughing and splashing, kicking over the mushrooms sprouting through the cracks between the cobblestones of the pavement. He listened to the low but resonant hum of the electric generators, their membranes strumming under the constant gushing of the rain, their vibration charging the giant accumulators and smaller portable batteries that bore words, "Warner/AOL/Disney, Federal Property, DO NOT RECHARGE."

The air outside grew darker by the minute, and Lewis glanced at his watch impatiently, then to the windows across the street. The door squealed open, and on the threshold stood Callie, her face in shadows, her body hidden under the ample slicker, but unmistakable. He knew her as one would his lover. There was no Eslinger in sight.

She stepped to the curb, her arm flailing for a velorickshaw. Lewis left his table and stepped outside, his lungs filling with water vapor. When he was a kid, they used to have smog; now they had rain. Tit for tat. He was just trying to find a better observation spot, but his legs carried him over to the curb where Callie stood. It was foolish, it was reckless,

but he approached her.

Her dark eyes flashed reflected neon at him, and she took a step back, fearful.

"Sorry, ma'am," he mumbled. "Didn't mean to startle you; just wondering if you're okay."

"Of course." Her words were muffled by her scarf, but he recognized the rich bitter chocolate of her voice. He was a bit more accustomed to this voice saying, "Yes, please," and "Please, no!" and he blushed at the memory, annoyed that it was not mutual. She glanced at the restaurant doors. "Why wouldn't I be?"

A rickshaw skidded to a stop, dismounted from his bicycle, and held open the cab door for her.

"Just a moment," she said. "I'm waiting for someone."

Lewis remembered Eslinger, and stepped away from Callie.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the doors opened once more, and Eslinger's long, lanky frame and a smaller, denser silhouette of the proprietor shook hands in the lit doorway.

"Come back any time," the proprietor said.

Lewis slid into the shadows of the restaurant wall as Callie and Eslinger climbed into the cab and were off in a firework of splatter, but not before Lewis noted the cab number. Tomorrow morning he'd find out whether Eslinger went straight home; but with Callie there, he had little doubt that it would

be the case.

Upon his arrival home, Lewis was greeted by the mewling of his cat, complaining bitterly of his owner's long absence.

"Yeah yeah yeah," Lewis said. "It was horrible, I know. C'mon, I'll feed you."

He proceeded to the kitchen and was somewhat surprised to discover that the normally ravenous beast left his food untouched. He gave the cat a concerned glance. "You're okay, pal?"

The cat meowed and rubbed against his soaked trousers; the cat's fur had an unfamiliar green tinge to it, and it left a grass stain on Lewis's trouser leg.

"The hell?" he said, and picked up the now purring cat. His fur was definitely turning green. Lewis thought that this phenomenon deserved an investigation, and put the cat down. He turned on the retinal implant, and soon was searching the FedNet for information. He found out that indeed many cats in the area had turned green; the scientists claimed that many animals were acquiring algal symbionts in their fur, since the moisture in the air was high enough to support their growth. The authorities recommended the use of full spectrum lamps to facilitate photosynthesis, and urged the pet owners to reduce feeding.

Lewis switched on the desk lamp. The cat immediately curled in the circle of light. Lewis shrugged and went to the kitchen

to get a drink, the lines of text still scrolling across his retinal implant.

The next morning Lewis learned that the velorickshaw had delivered the couple to an address near the marina. That wasn't Eslinger's house, Lewis told himself. It was hers. He needed to do some reconnaissance, and he got ready, frowning all the while. He tried to keep the smile off his face, but it cropped up now and again. He knew where Callie lived. Not that he couldn't had found out otherwise; but his colleagues at BLIP would want to know why he needed her address. Now, it was strictly business. Before he left, he poured a handful of spidercams into his pocket. You just never knew when you'd need one.

He dismissed the rickshaw a few blocks before her house, and walked the rest of the way. The sky was cloudy, but it didn't rain, and the passersby craned their necks at the sky, where a few government crop dusters bearing an AOL logo herded the clouds.

Lewis stopped to watch, and wondered if Canada would complain again about the US Weather Service stealing their clouds. The warming and the increased evaporation did not affect the north of the border quite as much, and their clouds were fewer. Tough luck, Lewis thought. We need the rain.

He stopped outside of Callie's house, activated one of the spidercams, and hooked up to its video and audio feeds. When he first started out, this experience made him dizzy - his right eye looked at the normal landscape, while the picture in his left weaved and changed as the cam moved about. But not any more. Clouds crowded the lens of the cam as it climbed along the wall, and then the bricks of the house as it searched for an entrance point. It found one through the chimney, and Lewis felt as if he went blind in his left eye for a few seconds. Then there was a hearth and the tiled floor, the white walls devoid of pictures or posters, the chipped paint of the chairs. And then there was Callie's foot - long and white, with short bleak toenails.

The spidercam skittered away, its heat sensors warning it from too close a contact with a person. It searched the apartment to make sure that there was no others present, and then returned and settled on the wall, as small and unobtrusive as a real spider, and watched Callie.

She sat in a deep chair, her legs crossed, her head tilted over a book, half-concealed by her long, dirty-blond hair. Lewis wished that she would look up into the camera, so he could catch a glimpse of the perfect face he knew so well. But she remained transfixed until the phone rang.

Lewis looked up at the sky, and walked over to a small

patch of artificial trees. He sat on the bench, damp and slick, and returned to his observation. Callie picked up the phone, and the cam picked up the sound - poor and crackling, but discernible. Lewis wondered why Callie still used a phone, like old people. He guessed that she didn't have an implant either.

The phone was ancient, with a black-and-white video panel, grainy like an old photograph. Eslinger's long face sketched on it in oversized pixels. "Hi," he said.

"Hello. Are you coming by?"

Eslinger's small image cheerfully held up two batteries. "I need to do some recharging. Maybe later, 'k?"

She nodded. "I miss you."

Lewis cringed on his bench. He could not believe that this guy was so dismissive of her, so blind to his luck. Lewis was going to find out what he was up to, and hopefully would send him away for a long time, to a place where it rarely rained.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll try to stop by later and we'll talk." With that, the video screen went blank.

Lewis had to go, to find Eslinger and track his steps. The BLIP had been suspecting that he was running an unauthorized generator. Not the rain one, but the kind that fed on the upward drafts of air. A convection contraption would be easier to keep hidden and harder to monitor - that was why they were illegal. Lewis had to track Eslinger to the generator. Yet, his feet

refused to carry him away from Callie.

He focused on the image in his left eye, just as Callie settled back into the chair. Her gaze swept up the wall, and her grey eyes met Lewis' for a moment. Then, she emitted a brief scream and tossed the book in her hand at the wall. The hurled paperback obscured the sight of her, and static danced across his implant.

"Fuck," Lewis said.

He caught up to Eslinger near the Chinatown - another agent notified Lewis that his subject took a velorickshaw there. It started to rain again, and Lewis was grateful for the generous shroud of rain and mist that hid his presence from his quarry. He felt at home, like a salmon bounding upstream, across the waterfalls and jagged rocks.

Eslinger walked ahead, in an easy loping stride, his feet barely making ripples in the puddles that accumulated in the pockmarks of the pavement, his long silhouette melting into the greyness of the rain, then reappearing again. He turned a corner by a pagoda that still bore shreds of yellow, red and green paint, and ducked inside a narrow doorway.

Lewis noticed the number of the building and kept walking, reluctant to attract attention of a young man who made camp on the doorstep, his vinyl poncho stretched over his head like a tent. An opium pipe cradled in his hands emitted a thin stream

of blue smoke, almost invisible in the mist. Lewis shook a cigarette out of the pack, and dropped a spidercam. He found a pawnshop up the street. The spidercam transmitted the view of the doors and the young man smoking his pipe.

There were hardly any Chinese left in Chinatown, and one of the survivors stood behind the counter of the pawnshop, and Lewis regarded him with his right eye. A young, round-faced man smiled at him. "Can I help you?"

"Just looking," he said, and let his gaze sweep across the walls and shelves crowded with junks - umbrellas, toys, silk flowers, sculptures made of discarded batteries and bottle caps. A giant metal skeleton leaned in the corner - long legs, a torn rubber membrane flapping like a lone broken wing. Lewis recognized the remains of a convection generator.

"Scrap," the young fellow at the counter said, not moving.

"Don't have any working ones, huh?"

The young man shook his head vigorously, whipping his long skinny braid. "No sir. No illegal merchandise here."

"Where then?"

"Wouldn't know."

At length, Eslinger appeared, accompanied by another man. The youngster with the tent and the opium pipe stirred, and ran to the back of the building, soon reappearing with a well-worn bike harnessed to a covered wagon, a cross between a rickshaw

cab and a children's toy. He helped Eslinger and his companion load the wagon with dozens of portable batteries, jumped into the bike seat, and disappeared into the mist. Eslinger followed on foot. The spidercam skittered after.

Lewis looked at his watch; the spidercam had at least an hour of life left in it. Time enough to dry off.

The man at the counter gave him a tense smile. Lewis bought a lacquered box and headed home.

The cat was greener than the night before, sprawled under the lamp. It wheezed when Lewis entered and made no attempt to get up.

"Fuck you," Lewis said, and threw the dripping wet slicker on the floor. Nothing ever was truly waterproof, and he changed out of his shirt wet at the seams. Callie was on his mind, and he rummaged through the stack of her games. An interactive sex flick did not seem appropriate at the moment, and he settled for a third-person adventure game. It was old - the motion was still a bit jerky, a bit unnatural, with just a hint of mechanical creepiness, but he was willing to disregard it now. He dropped the pretense of work, and disconnected from the cam in favor of rescuing Callie from a group of demons, who meant to do unspeakable things to her in the cutscenes.

He fought the monsters and rescued Callie, and she was

grateful. Then they were ambushed, and fought, and ran, and she cried. He told her he loved her, and meant it. It was just a game, but he felt that there was a deeper truth in it: Callie was caught up in something bad, even if she didn't realize it yet, and Lewis was going to open her eyes. Eslinger would go to the federal prison on the floating island of Orlando, Florida. And Callie... he tried not to set his hopes too high, but it was difficult - he was setting down camp, and she was cold in her gauzy shift. She pressed against him for warmth, her breast flattening against his chest. It rained, and her dress flowed over her lines, casting them in luminous shine. The cutscene played.

She never faced the spidercam. It became a game - watching the cam's feedback, waiting for her to turn toward it. But every time she did, the cam was smashed, showing only her long eyes flashing fear.

Sometimes Eslinger showed up, but he'd become a nuisance rather than the reason for Lewis' surveillance. He was a convenient excuse to watch Callie reading, Callie taking a shower, Callie washing the dishes. For two days, Lewis did not move from the park bench, didn't go home. He watched. Eslinger was visiting. He brought batteries.

Callie pushed the door open with her rump, and entered the

room backwards, carrying a tray with a steaming kettle and two cups.

"Thanks," Eslinger said from the couch. "You didn't have to."

"You must be freezing." She set the tray on the table and sat next to him, burying her face in his shoulder. "I worry about you."

"I'll be fine."

"I worry. There're spiders here. Maybe we should move. To the wheat belt, maybe. I hear there's less rain."

"And less electricity."

Callie thought for a moment. "I could do with less electricity."

Eslinger shifted. "It'll be okay. Now, let's get your machine hooked up."

He went rooting through a large plastic bag he brought with him, extracting a monitor and a plastic box.

Lewis had seen computers like that - outdated, but they still cropped up here and there. Not everyone had an implant.

Callie crouched down and watched. "You're saying we can put a movie on the FedNet?"

"Not Fed. Just a net."

"I can't believe it's still around."

Eslinger's narrow shoulders jerked in a shrug. "Why

wouldn't it be? Just because it's illegal?"

She snorted a laugh.

Lewis watched, his body hunching over instinctively. This, right there, was enough to put Eslinger away for a long time. He tugged on his eyelid, saving the footage.

The machine was assembled, sitting on the floor amidst the entwined wires, hooked up to one of the batteries with stolen energy in it, connected to the illegal net. He saved again.

Eslinger fiddled with a camera - just a thin tube pointed at Callie. She seemed nervous, her shoulders tensed, her arms wrapped around her in a childish protective gesture, her fingers kneading her shoulders.

"Ready when you are," Eslinger said.

Lewis found the cat under the lamp again. He barely looked like one - a puddle of green slime with some fur and a lone tooth. The mass quivered and tried to meow.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Lewis said.

He tossed the disk on the table, not quite ready to watch it yet. He stretched on his unslept-in bed that smelled of mold, and closed his eyes. On the dark side of his eyelids stitched with red veins he saw Callie's face again, the melted face of a doll tortured with a magnifying glass. It was the first thing he saw when he entered after the agents who busted down her door,

and the only thing he remembered. Concave cheek, one corner of her mouth lifted on a knot of pink scar tissue, her teeth bared in a leer all the more horrible for the fear in her eyes.

He sighed and got up, pacing back and forth, past the puddle of light in which his ex-cat was slowly disintegrating, turning into ooze. Whatever was on the disc couldn't be much worse than what he'd already seen, and he turned on the player.

"Is this thing on?" the horrible Callie said, with a fretful look to her left.

"Go ahead," Eslinger said off camera.

She looked straight at Lewis. "I'm Callie Swainson. This is not the way you remember me," she started. "I'm sorry. I wanted to show you, but they keep reusing my old images. Everything about me has changed, but people only see the old scans and motion capturings. I'm almost sorry there're no live action movies anymore."

"Tell them what happened," Eslinger said off-camera.

"A man who liked my games met me in person, and he was upset that I wasn't the way he remembered me. He threw acid in my face." She fidgeted a bit, her fingers twisting the hem of her cable-knit sweater. She didn't seem upset, as far as one could judge from her hideous face, just nervous. "I just thought that you should know. My company wouldn't let me tell anyone, they were afraid that it would cut into the profits from the

licensing fees..."

There was a bang, and the camera swept toward the entrance. The door swung open and hanged off one hinge, as the men in BLIP uniforms, yellow and black like wasps, crowded the camera.

Lewis turned off the video. His heart felt like it had turned to ash and crumbled, leaving a large Callie-shaped hole in his chest. The hole yawned, empty, and even the thought of Eslinger in detainment and his forthcoming imprisonment in a place where there was almost no rain did not satisfy it. Only the real Callie could, and he wasn't sure if he would be able to go back to her pure, unspoiled image, if it would be strong enough to displace the hag in the seized video.

He turned on his implant, and watched the cutscene from the game he played a few nights back once again. The heavy droning of the rain grew more distant, blending with the background music in a percussive counterpoint. The ex-cat bubbled and lolled on the desk, with a soft kissing sound. Callie's face, magically mended and whole, took up the entire implant, blotting out the sight of the room, of the cat, and the flooded world outside.

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