



### Lullabies

Walking in a daze, Chenine pattered down the hall of her apartment building. The massive taupe-colored hallways were obnoxiously dry and antiseptic. The cold building lacked the sooty, vibrant smells of the city outside. She guessed that it was two hours to sunrise, and the stuffy apartment complex had all the activity of a tomb. She was wiped out, she was cranky, and her ears had popped like corn kernels after her elevator had passed the 150<sup>th</sup> floor: it would be an understatement to say that she wasn't in a good mood.

She stopped at room 254-614 and, swiping her keycard, slipped into the dark apartment with a cat's stealth. She wearily dropped her coat and sandals on the floor beside the door.

"That you, Chen?" A deep male voice called from the bedroom.

"Yeah." She said with an involuntary yawn. The thin girl navigated through the darkness to the kitchen and found the refrigerator. That wasn't a tricky feat: the 'kitchen' was mere inches from the front door. She pulled a half-drunk carton of orange juice from the fridge and drank it straight from the carton. It wasn't something she would do normally, but she didn't exactly have the energy to get a glass.

"I heard about those fireworks they had on the news," the man said from half a room away. "I thought you might be late, tonight. I didn't think they'd make the *secretaries* stay late though. Those inconsiderate assholes..."

"Desk-work's a bitch..." she said simply, her voice flat and unemotional.

"Glad *I* don't have that kind of problem." He gruffly laughed. "Oh, by the way, our crew was putting in the new wiring a block away from the Central Library, so I popped in at break, but I couldn't find anything from that Winston guy, sorry."

"It's Windsor." She corrected. "Windsor McCay."

"Oh, yeah." He said. "And his stuff, it was called Little Nero, was it?"

"Nemo, actually. It's called 'Little Nemo'." Chenine brought the jug of juice to her lips and drank very deeply. The light from the fridge reflected off her soft, catlike eyes. "It's no big deal." She closed the refrigerator and made her way into the bedroom.

The man was waiting to greet her with a kiss. His lips tasted of beef and tobacco. Chenine detested the ashy taste, but kissed him long and deeply nonetheless. The bedroom was nearly pitch-black, only small slivers of light intruded from the ever-glowing streetlights of Nash Ultima outside.

“Chen,” he said calmly, “Thomas from next door said you had a little run-in with his rug rat?”

“Oh,” the girl’s eyes were downcast. “Yeah, I- well, she was kind of pestering me this morning... I was up way too early, and I guess I was a little irritable...”

“Jenny’s a really snoopy kid. She’s, what’s the word, ‘inquisitive’, you know? And you said you’d work on bring nice, at least...”

She nodded. “Yeah, I know.” Her face was very different: gone was the even-tempered, cold-eyed girl in the Raiden flight suit. Chenine’s eyes were sad and low, her face was long and emotional. In the dim light, she appeared to be a chastised child, a little girl scolded for bad manners. “I’m sorry. I really am...”

He looked at her for a few minutes, then nodded slowly. “Don’t worry about it.” The man’s hands wandered from her cheek, down her throat and to her chest. “Nice to see that you’re still ‘perky’.” He grinned in the darkness. The slivers of red and white light from the shuttered window bounced playfully off his hard eyes. He changed his demeanor, his grin widening. “Say, you’re not too tired to, well, go a round, are ‘ya? A little night-cap, you know?”

Chenine’s gaze was distant with both apathy and sleepiness and her eyes were literally swimming in the black room. She hid that sentiment from her voice, though.

“Oh, no, sure.” She said, enthusiastically, *overenthusiastically*. “Just a sec.” She stumbled into the bathroom, tripping over her boyfriend’s work boots. As soon as she crossed into the bathroom, motion-sensors activated a bank of nightlights. The bright azure beams burned into her eyes and she had to stare for a few seconds, like a deer in the headlights, until her pupils adjusted.

Chenine took off her turquoise shirt and khaki pants. She spent a few minutes at the sink, absently splashing water on her face. In the back of her head she could still feel the warm stickiness of her cockpit and the rubbery grip of her flight suit. She ran a hand over her bare shoulder, wincing slightly.

*The Link...* she thought. *That thing is real: it’s too real.* The injury to her Raiden was deep and debilitating, but because of her Sensations Link, it was equally debilitating to her.

*Or at least my brain...* Chenine spent a few moments rubbing her porcelain-white shoulder, kneading the flesh until the pain became a distant, throbbing memory.

*That’s all it really was, anyway: a memory. Or a nightmare.*

A flashback hit her: the Sphinxes surrounding her ship, shredding her wing like a tin can. She felt the injury acutely. She remembered how she had been on the outer edge of panic, seconds from disaster. She remembered the smell of her own sweat.

And, in the back of her head, she remembered the fear.

Chenine tried to let those thoughts slide away from her. She rooted around in the medicine cabinet until she found her scentless skin cream, which she layered on her shoulder. Those thoughts, about the speed, the danger, the certainty of death, they were flooding her, penetrating her senses, filling her head with some semblance of life. She

could feel her heartbeat; she could almost see her hot blood pulsing as it throbbed inside her naked chest.

Chenine watched herself in the mirror, her eyes hot as coals and her breathing hard and fast. Her hand had moved down her shoulder to her navel. There was a burning life in those eyes, like a caged tiger staring outward from its pen. The white-haired girl shook her head and snapped back to reality.

Chenine knew that look in her eyes all too well.

“Whenever you’re ready, Chen...” her boyfriend patiently called. “Nothing helps someone get to sleep like a nice, strong ‘lullaby’.” His voice was lascivious.

Before going to bed, she re-opened the medicine cabinet and, working on pure muscle-memory, deftly snatched one bottle off the shelf. This bottle had a thin white prescription label. She popped the top, shook two chalky white pills into her hand and, with one last glimpse into the mirror, downed them in one gulp.

*Kill the tiger... she thought, bleakly. And to hell with the lullabies...*

“If you’re tired, I can understand...” her boyfriend’s voice was quiet, but with an impatient edge to it.

“No, no,” she answered, pleadingly. “I’m good.” She slipped back into the dimly-lit bedroom, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “You of all people should know that I’m *very* good...”

The sun was already up by the time Justin shuffled up the steps of his apartment complex. The light scent of palm fronds and lilacs greeted him from the red-brick building’s front porch. The morning commute had yet to begin, and the suburb streets were deserted. The blazing lights of Nash Ultima flickered from across Trident’s Bay like fire on the water.

He made his way up the fifteen floors to his apartment. Like a zombie, he stumbled into the empty nest and kicked-off his shoes. The place was deathly still and lifeless. Through thin walls, Justin could hear his neighbors preparing for their days: the sound of a coffee grinder spinning through one wall, plates clanking together in another, as breakfast was served.

There was no life in Justin’s apartment, and there was very little in the pilot himself. The raven-headed youth stumbled to his bedroom and absently stared out his window. Far below, several early-risers were playing an early morning game of hoops. Sweat danced from their moving bodies and glittered in the angelic light of the rising sun.

*I think I’ll go out and join their game... Justin thought. Yeah... shoot some hoops... have a good old time, then maybe join the guys for a cup of coffee and a doughnut. He smirked bitterly. We’ll laugh and joke about the j-o-b, pals we all know, maybe the women we’ve fucked, have a good old time...*

A very bitter lump rose in Justin’s throat. His words danced through his head like a dark lullaby. Justin drew the curtain and crawled onto his bed. He didn’t bother undressing, and he was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.



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