

The Succubus's Silver

Volume 1: Demon by a Thread

Chapter 1

Syracuse, New York
Morning

Chinnamani had set up her pizza stand within literal spitting distance of the Social Services building for a reason; the air was thick with that sanguine tang of loneliness, desperation and heartache that followed humans around when they felt they had no agency in their lives.

Greed and despair languished around the place like a swamp from which she drank deeply. Through whatever twist of fate had created the half-succubus-- aside from her father's penchant for putting his dick in things he probably shouldn't have-- she'd been robbed of the ability to actually *steal* the emotions she didn't inspire in someone, but she still could drink in from the ambient sensations to sustain her Glamour. It was unsatisfying and ultimately pretty futile; she'd *need* to satisfy herself in some other way eventually.

In her little world of food, she was a glutton eating at the dodgiest of Chinese buffets.

But maintaining her Glamour was hard, it took energy and effort, so every once in a while she'd pull on the fishing line tied to the bike rack opposite her stand and trip someone up. She'd put on the air of trying to help them up, of course but the closeness allowed her that moment to steal a bit of someone's anger and embarrassment. It was enough to keep her going for a few hours and they wouldn't remember what upset them in the first place after she was done. It was a small mercy, maybe.

Oh yes, she was a parasite.

But at least she wasn't the dumb bitch approaching Chinnamani's cart with demonic silver in her hand.

Chinnamani looked up to the woman as she approached, already dreading what was going to come out of those botox filled lips. She was pushing fifty with a bulldozer duct taped to a jet engine; pale, gaunt, utterly incensed like everyone around her was in the way of her grand ideas. She was just the kind of person who'd carry around Chinnamani's coin.

The moment her coin got close, the half-succubus felt her legs lock up-- she wouldn't be able to move until a deal was reached or the current holder willingly walked away. This woman didn't look the type who'd do something without a purpose, though; she wasn't going to leave unless it looked like there wasn't something Chinnamani could do for her.

The half-succubus sighed and drew up to her full height, the massive .454 revolver knocked her ribs plaintively as she adjusted her coat to hide its girth. The vacation was over, it seemed. She did her best to remain inscrutable, even putting on an easy going smile that probably looked friendly enough to anyone stupid enough to take her at face value.

The old woman glanced around nervously under the shade of her hundred dollar shawl like someone might figure out what she was doing. Almost like she was proving a point to someone, she tapped the coin on the counter twice. “So it’s true?”

Chinnamani held her smile as she fished out an ice cube from her cooler and munched on it. “Your dime, your time. What’s-- uh--” Great, she’d been practicing this crap for weeks when she felt the druggie had given off her coin. Weeks! Now when the time came to meet her new ‘client’, she couldn’t come up with a rhyme. “Good job, brain.” She planted her hands on the counter and leaned. “Well?”

“I expected you’d be. . .” Just briefly the woman looked admonished. “Taller, I guess.”

“I get that a lot, yeah. So I’m guessing the person you got that from told you some song and dance about *a big spooky demon* or something, right?” Chinnamani wiggled her fingers mystically. “WOoOooo, spoOoky.”

The woman fidgeted listlessly. She looked like she was about to turn away. Chinnamani put a check in the ‘not my problem’ box and went for another ice cube. The longer she could put off dealing with this shit, the more vacation she could have.

She didn’t. “He said you could solve problems. . .”

Chinnamani stopped crunching her ice for a moment. ‘Problems’ were always a red flag. “Did he explain how this works?” She asked tonelessly.

“Uhm--”

“You lay out your problem, I decide if I’m going to accept it-- yeah, I know, you have the coin but I write the rules so bite me-- and if I *do* take the gig, I decide what’s going to come of it. You can’t stop this once its in motion.” Chinnamani smiled at the uneasy look she got. “I’m a natural arbiter, everything’s kept completely fair for all parties involved.”

This would’ve been the moment to walk away, to leave all this silly nonsense behind and go live one’s life and deal with one’s problems the ‘right’ way. It was an obligation, part of the stupid compulsion that linked Chinnamani to the coin- her own way of injecting some humanity in the ‘deal with a devil’ trope. To her credit, the older woman looked like she was keenly aware of that fact. But in the end she still tapped the coin on the counter again. “I get it.”

“Okay! So let’s hear it. . .”

The woman’s gaze trailed off to the side for a moment, when she spoke her voice was hollow and rehearsed-- but the flame under it, the venom and anger in her metaphysical aura swelled. Chinnamani had to fight the urge to reach for it and try to make it hers; she couldn’t take what she didn’t inspire in someone. . . besides, it wasn’t really her place to derive pleasure from someone’s misfortune. If they came to her, she was obligated to listen.

“My husband,” the woman began as Chinnamani grabbed another ice cube. “It’d started with the mail woman at his firm. I get it- I’m getting older and he has wandering eyes, but then he took my father’s Mercedes! He thinks that he’s going to keep it through the divorce, but-- oh, but he can’t! That belonged to my father. . .”

“He can’t marry her while we’re still together and I’m *not* giving him ten years of my life *and* my father’s car.” There was anger in her eyes, in her aura too, but it wasn’t *right*. Something was off here.

Normally when someone was upset with a lover, it was a deep and abiding anger with that tangy hint of jealousy and smooth finish of a deep betrayal the likes of which usually left someone’s aura a craggy mess of colors and senses. But there was none of that with her, just a kind of fragmented patchwork of disjointed emotions that had little relation to one another. “*Maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s psychosis.*”

Mentioning the car made some of the muddier parts of her aura brighten in intensity to the point where Chinnamani was ready to say this whole thing had more to do with the car than her shitty marriage. How boring.

Still, she went along with it. “So what is it you expect me to do exactly?”

The woman frowned in consideration, “He took the car when he moved out. I don’t know, but I have to think he’s *stinking* it up with that little harlot.” As an afterthought she added. “He’s trying to cut me out of our accounts, too! He’s berating me and fighting me every step of the way! He’s made it clear he wanted a clean break, but he’s leaving me with no choice but to-- well, to be *here.*”

“If you’re in the habit of asking for help from street food vendors and want someone to just get the thing back from him, maybe ask Crazy Ray-- he sells hot dogs and stuff on James street. Ex Navy Seal, great guy.”

She wasn’t impressed.

Chinnamani sighed theatrically and made a dismissive motion. She planted her elbow on the pan rack, taking her chin in her hand as she looked the woman over.

It was always better to be completely honest and blunt when dealing with a demon, paradoxically enough and someone, somewhere had informed this new client of that fact. Even if she didn’t really adhere to the idea, the fact that Chinnamani didn’t have to dig this crap out of her was a refreshing change of pace. That was probably a bad sign but it was too late, she already knew she was going to accept this case even without the power of the coin needling her into complying.

“So you understand, this only happens once. You get one shot at it and there’s *no takebacks*. If you don’t like the outcome that’s not my fault or my problem!” Chinnamani plucked another ice cube to munch on. “I’m going to need a name and an address where I can find this guy.”

“Y- you’ll get him to stop calling and to return the car?”

The half-succubus looked at her like she was stupid, then smiled easily. “Pretty sure I’m up for a good seminarian award if I did, huh?” The darker parts of her nature fluttered and she felt her soul wrench against them; the constant desire to take, to destroy and maim filled her mind with all kinds of ways she could permanently fix this couple’s issue. An image of the older woman choked blue by her shawl forced her to stand a little straighter, to meet her ‘client’ head on. “Like I said, nothing’s promised or guaranteed.”

“Except selling my soul.” The woman said coolly.

“Let’s be honest, I mean real honest, if you thought this was your *actual* soul on the line here you wouldn’t be coming to me. I mean, demons? Really? Who believes in that silly shit? This is a transaction, just two free people doing business.”

That seemed to mollify the woman for the moment, she eyed the tarnished silver coin in her hand and turned it over a few times, rubbing at the face of some roman guy Chinnamani had never bothered to learn about. She looked as morose and thoughtful as the face on the coin and for just a split second it seemed as though she might do the sensible thing and give it back to its ‘owner’.

The prospect faintly scared Chinnamani, the last time someone had done that, the damned coin had forced her into a six hundred mile road trip looking for someone- *anyone*- to take the fucking thing and give her something to *do*.

But just like that the moment passed and the old woman handed it back to her. A faint thrill roiled through Chinnamani like icy fire as the metal touched her skin and it linked itself to her once more-- sweet agony and ecstasy rolled into one. A thousand images of the various people she’d ‘helped’ with it ran through her mind in the span of an instant, each face and name scribed itself across her soul and in that brief moment she felt more human than she ever had in her short thirty year life. Normal. Natural. At ease with the world and herself.

The staggering high lasted only a second before the client opened her mouth with a pearl of wisdom: “If you go into a church, you’ll still burn. . .”

Chinnamani blinked away the sensation and tucked the coin into her jeans. “Sorry, what?”

She looked irritated at having to repeat herself. “I said: If you do an Internet search, you’ll learn.”

“About what?”

“Are you even paying attention?!” She exclaimed. She tugged on her shawl and leaned in, whispering. “Mark Gonzalez. Gonzalez and Friar Law Firm; you can find them online easily enough. . .”

“Oh, right.” Chinnamani wiped her blonde and brown mane back. “Sure. So I’ll just show up at his *law firm* and steal the car-- you know what. I just might.” She offered her hand with a sly, pernicious grin. What a way to begin a ‘job’. “This is compulsory, by the way.”

The woman hesitated one final time, at least enough to say that she did, and then she took Chinnamani’s hand. A heat sealed their flesh for one brief instant and a flood of recent memories and thoughts burst through the half-succubus’s vision: the drive here in a red Corvette, skipping out on putting money in the meter, looking on a short woman with deeply tanned skin and a shock of blonde hair with brown lowlights. Wondering how in the hell *it* could be her. Then fumbling for the coin with sweaty fingers and that unnatural taint that’d been part of her life since the druggie had given it to her.

And a name: Janet Gonzalez.

Chinnamani smiled when Janet flinched back, looking at her palm and the new circle brand that'd woven itself into her skin. They shared a look before Chinnamani drew back her own hand to show it unmarred. For added effect, she wiggled her fingers. "No going back now."

Some part of her was saddened by the run down woman, that her choices lead her to this and that in the end she may well have screwed herself to get what she was after. Chinnamani wasn't sure what happened to people who took her coin once they died, she didn't have any of her mother's ability to corrupt people or take their souls or any of that textbook demonic shit, all she had was a damned coin that forced her to get people to agree to let her help them with their problems.

Well, there were the other things; the wings that wouldn't let her fly, the tail always rubbing against her belt line, and the regal horns that swept forward from just over her ears-- thankfully hidden under her Glamour. A coin and a bunch of things she had to hide from people. Some demon.

"I'll find you in a few days, if you don't hear from me before then, just wait longer!"

Janet was too busy staring at her brand to do more than mumble a vague acknowledgement.

"That's normal, I promise. It keeps us connected and it keeps me from running away-- much as I might want to." Chinnamani rolled her eyes. "Look, it's fine. Really."

"I-" Janet glanced around. "I- need to go."

"Just-" she hesitated momentarily. "Just don't go into a synagogue, temple, shrine or church until we're done, yeah? Something about 'holy ground' makes me really itchy and I don't like being itchy. It's distracting. 'Kay?"

"Uh- y- yeah."

"All right then, buh-bye now." Chinnamani looked at her cart and briefly considered leaving it there, oven and all, but then she'd have to answer a court summons- again- and risk having her food service permit revoked. . . .and lose out on one of the best feeding spots in the city. She groaned petulantly before she started breaking things down.

She was half way done scraping cheese off the last screen when a woman cleared her throat behind her. "Sorry, I'm packing up for the day."

"That's fine, got your permits?" The voice was like satin-- warm, and smooth and liltingly feminine while also carrying an authoritative edge. Intrigued, Chinnamani looked back.

She almost wished she hadn't-- good heavenly shit she wished she hadn't.

The woman was a cop, slender but tall and robust with pleasant curves hiding under a crisp uniform. And there was that belt, the one ringed with all her gear that made her hips so holdable; that face, those angles-- vaguely Norse or Swedish, maybe. Coppery hair and vibrant blue eyes! Chinnamani actually gaped as she looked up to the officer.

"Holy shit. . ." the half-succubus breathed.

“Is that a no?” The beauty-- Laidlaw, by her name plate-- said. Laidlaw? Like the garbage company? Chinnamani tittered. That only seemed to baffle the red-head as she scrunched her eyebrows, her left hand falling idly to her sidearm. “You got a reason for the iron too?” She was a lefty, too!

Someone in hell was getting ice water and a handjob, Chinnamani was certain.

At some point her coat had slid back to reveal the butt of the pistol but Chinnamani had been too busy gawking to realize. “Um--” she coughed. She’d done this song and dance before. She needed to get a hold of herself, even when every instinct in her screamed fuck, kill or destroy; getting shot wasn’t going to help her do any of those things. Carefully she laid her hands on the counter top and leaned forward. “Sorry, I’m- I have a weakness for tall, beautiful women in uniform.”

“That’s nice, but what’s with the gun?” All business. Fuck, could she get any more perfect?

“So I have a permit for that, too. It’s in my cart here- mind if I get it out?”

“Sure,” Laidlaw said idly. Her eyes followed that hand every inch of the way until Chinnamani laid out her documents. The vendor’s license, the food service license, the concealed carry and legal registration. All up to date and perfectly legit. “Four fifty four casual? Expecting to get robbed by Godzilla?” The officer glanced at her briefly as she rifled through the paperwork. “Bit of a big gun, don’t you think? Who even thought it was a good idea to sign off on this?”

“I like to make a lasting impression and I had people that owed me favors.” Chinnamani clasped her hands together, leaning over the counter to look up just over her carry permit, to meet those beautiful eyes. If she’d had any of her mother’s ability she’d simply have charmed the officer, instead she had to work it like everyone else. “Maybe I can make an impression on you, too.” She punctuated her offer with a vague doe eyed look.

It was earning her no points. “You just might.” She folded up the documents and handed them back. “Mind if I have a look around?”

“If I could get you to open up anything I have and explore it, I think I’d be doing a service to mankind.” Chinnamani stepped aside, offering unfettered access while situating herself in the best position to ‘observe’ Laidlaw’s investigation-- and her firm curves.

The woman was thorough and precise, she went through every drawer, all the condiment bottles, even the dough trays searching for whatever she thought she’d find. Chinnamani reveled in the visage, indulging in the subtle turn of Laidlaw’s body when she’d have to duck low to poke her head in the cabinet to feel around for hidden compartments. In the back of her mind, she imagined the way Laidlaw would’ve looked twisted between her thighs, how her hair would be splayed out in a messy halo of fire on a sweaty pillow as Chinnamani pressed her further and further.

Laidlaw would thrust a hand out to stop her- or encourage her- of course, and Chinnamani would keep riding. Harder and faster, massaging lip to lip while she pinned the taller woman down and forced her to cry out her name. . . .oh yes, the way her back would arch and contort to the sound of “Cinnamon!”

“Hey--”

Cinnamon blinked. “Huh?” The officer was holding a baggie of flour. “Oh, that’s flour.”

“So if I open this--”

“You’d best be making a pie. Or letting me make one out of you.” She smiled teasingly.

The officer gave her a disapproving look as she set the bag down and went back to her searching. By the time she’d finished searching the cart and the cheap station wagon Chinnamani used to haul it around, the half-succubus had memorized every line and curve leading down from that slender neckline to her appreciable chest-- even if the body armor got in the way-- to the powerful outline of her thighs and feet. She’d mentally mapped out the hours and hours of pleasure she’d inflict upon the woman and all the things she’d pull from that lilting purr.

Laidlaw didn’t seem to realize it entirely, but there was a caution in her manner that wasn’t there before, some quiet instinct that only ever belonged to the hyper aware; something that had probably warned her of Chinnamani.

“So you’re not selling drugs. . .”

Chinnamani scoffed, “If I had it in me I’d help them, but I can’t stop people from destroying themselves. I’ve tried.”

Laidlaw considered the shorter woman anew, then produced a notepad so she could scribble down her findings. Chinnamani almost reached out to touch her, half to feel her skin and half to show her how honest she was being. But she didn’t have the coin, Laidlaw wouldn’t have received anything and in the end all Chinnamani would wind up doing was looking weird.

Just great. Who the hell dealt drugs to poor people, anyway?

Then it clicked. “Oh-- you saw me shaking that woman’s hand and she didn’t buy anything, so you figured I was probably up to no good.” Had there *been* a cop car parked somewhere nearby? Just the SUV that always seemed to hang out near the bar, but that was. . . that was it. Directly across from where Chinnamani set up. “Ah! I get it now.” She smiled. “So this is our fated rendezvous, you in your bright white Tacoma and me, a humble pizza maker-- It’s destiny, you don’t need to hide your curiosity from me any longer!”

Laidlaw tucked her notebook away, “Maybe you’re dipping into your own stash.” She said half playful. “Turn around, I’m going to frisk you.”

“Part of me wants to ask if you brought flowers and candy to this affair, but I think. . .” She trailed off when the officer’s hands fell to her shoulders. Firm, professional, determined to get to the bottom of this.

“Do you have anything that’s going to poke me? Anything I need to worry about?”

“*I’d love nothing more than to poke you,*” Chinnamani thought. “Nope!” She pulled her Glamour in tighter around her body, painfully compressing her wings into her flesh and her tail around her thigh. She shuddered with the effort and pain even as she smiled back. “Can I ask what those chevrons on your arm mean?”

“They mean I’m a watch sergeant.” She said coolly as her hands ruffled down the oversized jacket. She pulled out the pockets, felt along Chinnamani’s body under it. Chinnamani held her breath, hoping to hell her wings didn’t chose that time to extrude from her skin.

“Sergeant Laidlaw. . . got a card?”

“I don’t.” She lied without hesitation. Smart girl. When she was done patting Chinnamani down she stepped back and removed her shooter’s gloves. “So what was it you handed her?”

Chinnamani tried to suppress the itching along her back and thigh as the unnatural appendages fought her to break free. She produced the tarnished coin and set it down. “I collect ancient artifacts from the Mediterranean, she was a private broker.”

Laidlaw frowned at the coin, peering over it while the itching on Chinnamani’s back turned into a raging inferno. She could feel her skin blistering while the cop fingered the piece of silver.

“Mediterranean, huh?”

“Yeah,” Chinnamani breathed harshly, grinding her heel into the concrete. This woman needed to *go*. “Rome controlled most of the known world at the time! Lovely stuff. But uh, I got an appointment, so . . .”

Sergeant Laidlaw eyed her suspiciously. “You all right there?”

“Yeah, I just. . .” Left the stove on at home, had to meet with a supplier. Had to piss. “Gotta go to the bathroom!”

“Yeah? All right, well, I’ll let you get on your way then. Thanks for your cooperation.”

“M- my pleasure!”

As the sergeant turned to leave, Chinnamani grabbed her coin and the tote of pizza screens, practically diving into her car. She packed herself into the cargo area as best she could, face down and let loose.

It was agony. Fire and pain and ecstasy with the cold chill of a malevolent force trying to assert itself over her while her wings disentangled themselves from her flesh. In the next instant they burst through the holes in her t-shirt and slammed into her jacket ineffectually. Her tail wasn’t any kinder as it tore at her pant leg, juking and prodding, trying to find an escape-- all of them wanted to stretch and be *free*.

But they were trapped in place, just like she was from the monumental soreness that left her dead weight between the tote and bags containing her worldly possessions. She laid there, limp and spent, shuddering as she fought to reclaim her breath. Eventually, when the worst of it past, she climbed over the rear seat and did her best noodle impression over the center column, digging her cell phone out of the glove box to dial an old friend.

It picked up on the fourth ring. “You,” Brian’s voice was raspy and weak. He hadn’t been eating again.

“Y- yeah. He- hey. Meet you at Dennys in an hour? I got a job. I’m buying.”

Brian hung up without another word.

Just as well, really. “My kingdom for a spatula. . .”

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Twenty minutes later she was camped out in a booth near the front door stealing wireless and power while she rifled through what she could find of the Gonzalez’s public life on the Internet. Two things immediately stuck out amidst the slapped on smiles and photoshopped pictures of their vacations to Europe: they never *really* smiled and they never seemed to really hold one another.

It wasn’t for lack of trying, but somehow things never looked *natural* between them. Janet was always a little too distant and Mark always had his eyes on something else. For someone as handsome as he was, it wasn’t hard to imagine he was probably getting eyed like a piece of meat by some of the locals. Chinnamani wouldn’t have thought twice about trying to straighten his gaze out-- right up at her from between her thighs.

“Gah.” Dammit, she knew better than this. You didn’t get ahead by screwing around with those you’re supposed to be investigating! The stupid coin wouldn’t leave her be until she solved this problem and had the coin back in Janet’s hand, then it was on her to find someone to pass it on to and Chinnamani could be free to enjoy herself for a while.

Complicating things by boffing the ‘victim’ of her yet to be perpetrated shenanigans was not conducive to her getting some quality Chinnamani time. Sure, the strong jaw and rich black hair were nice-- and the way his brown eyes seemed to catch the light when he was looking up made him seem like he was gazing into some secret word. . . .but he wasn’t worth worrying about.

Sergeant Laidlaw on the other hand. . .

She was a catch. One Chinnamani would have to find good bait and a strong pole for. She had an infatuation, she didn’t need another! She just needed to focus on the job at hand.

The half-succubus slumped forward over her notepad, chin on the crook of her arm as she ran her pencil down the legal pad she’d marked up. So far she’d learned that he held property in San Diego, New York and abroad, he made more than most doctors did, and had an obsession with automobiles. She’d tracked his profile down several web forums discussing early and mid century German luxury vehicles and filled her mind with all kinds of pictures of people’s overpriced steel and their inane dick measuring posts or sycophantic ramblings.

It wasn’t any worse than some of the porn forums she frequented, but it still baffled her. Who lusted after something that could be molded and shaped to suit? People had diversity and random *chance* to make them interesting and unique, the draw of the genetic lottery gave humanity things like heterochromia, or red hair, or scoliosis; not everyone would win that lottery, sure, but it was the diversity that made them beautiful and engrossing.

Add to that, you could feel them and kiss them, and hold them as they thrashed. . . .in the end the only thing you got out of lusting after a car was a smear on the clear coat and a friction burn.

Chinnamani tapped her pencil a few times. Cars, money, property and a shitty marriage. Mark worked for everything he got, Janet had been along for the ride it seemed-- she hadn’t made any posts about

buying new houses or going somewhere interesting. All in all, it seemed like she was there for the promise of steady money and not having to work for it.

Lazy bitch wasn't just entitled, she considered earning her way being on her back. How boring. It was possible they'd been in love at some point, of course, social media posts didn't really explain all of a situation. Brian was there for the gaps. . .

Wherever the hell he was.

Impatient, Chinnamani dialed his number again.

His cell phone chimed in the booth right behind her. "Are you fucking kidding me?" She looked back. He seemed startled by that and he shrunk into his oversized field jacket, cataract eyes darting left and right. "I'm right here, Brian." She said as she rose to join his booth. "You could've said something, dammit."

The boy couldn't have been more than twenty but he wore his youth like a noose; he stayed huddled in his army coat, clutching his elbows until he was sure there was no threat. When his milky eyes settled on her he relaxed and smiled half-heartedly, speaking in his wispy rasp. "You hide well."

"Kind of have to, you know?" She shrugged her shoulders to accent her wings which tried to push against her jacket in turn. She leaned back against them for sheer spite. "No stick today? I warned you, people aren't going to take you as being blind if they don't see the stick."

He sighed, "Street sign."

"*Not now. Please, not now.*" Chinnamani mused. If he went into one of his stupid Insights she'd lose him for who knew how long. "Hey, I have a case and you need food. Help me find this guy and I'll get you sorted out for the next month."

Brian gripped the sleeve of his coat, eyes closing for a moment as he tried to wrestle focus. "Gon. . . zolaes? From San Ysidro? No, Janet. Married- Idaho."

"Yeah, I got all that," she took his hand gently and tried to imagine pouring what she knew about the situation into him directly. Even if it didn't work, he wrapped his hand around hers and for that little moment, it was okay. They could be weird together. "I need to know where he's hiding out now."

"Fought Cartel."

"Brian--"

"Do you want to know how you die?" His eyes shot open.

"No. *No* I do not. Look, Brian. Can you try? Please? Focus? Mark Gonzalez, works with a law firm downtown, I need to know where he stays." She gave him the address of the firm. "What do you--"

"Lying. Both of them." He cut her off. "Why run, but you left. . . .key. Key in the lilacs." Abruptly he slapped his hand down on the table- loud enough to get some attention from the patrons around them. Chinnamani waved it off with a practiced smile. "Thirty days. Divorce. Right?"

“Right, Brian. A divorce. Where’s he hiding the car?”

“Outside. Duh.”

She scoffed. “No shit, smartass, but where is ‘outside’ relative to *him*? Right now.”

“Outside.” He repeated.

Chinnamani sat back, frowning. She still scribbled his ramblings down until it was done, even managing to order breakfast for them in the between time. When he was finally done- and nothing of value was learned, she lightly kicked his shin.

“Costing me a fortune in food here, boy-o. I could go down the street and get anal for this-- you’re not even offering me a kiss.”

The young man scooped up his fork as if nothing had happened at all, digging in with vigor. “Can’t control it-” he muttered around a mouthful.

“I know. . .” She looked at the pad, frowning. “I just don’t like Dennys.”

“You’ve eaten worse.”

“How dare you speak about your mother in such a way.”

He snorted and coughed. “My mother’s a saint,” he managed around a laugh.

After breakfast Chinnamani handed him her days earnings and headed out. It wasn’t much, but it’d offset some of the cost of his medications. “Say hi to her for me.” She’d have to get back downtown before the firm opened at twelve, then it was just a matter of waiting.

Great. Stakeouts.

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The Offices of Gonzalez and Friar were perched at the edge of Clinton Square near Syracuse’s downtown district. It was probably the oldest part of the city, with a foot in its turn of the century roots before that part of the Erie Canal was filled in. Objectively it was a block’s worth of grass, pavement and a big fountain that was turned into a skating rink in winter, but in the two centuries it’d been part of the city it had served as the city’s core, serving as a natural commercial district where railroad and shipping lanes intersected.

In its time it’d seen the development of Syracuse’s first bank-- one that still stood today, post office, roads, it’d even hosted the first electric light in the region. Nowadays it was used mostly outdoors events, playing kids, and a very bored half-demon. Chinnamani had stowed her gun in the car-- no sense in risking getting caught using the four and a half pound monster for something her permit didn’t allow. Technically it was only supposed to be carried when she was working, but she’d probably have been cleaning it instead of sitting there like a jackass.

Chinnamani made do as she so often did in these situations, though she managed to avoid public masturbation by sheer force of will. It was a perfect excuse to be lazy, even if it drove her mad.

Not that there was anything particularly *wrong* with being lazy, Mount Everest had plenty of corpses that'd once been highly motivated people, but it still itched at her as she watched the Gonzalez and Friar windows from behind her sunglasses.

Since arriving she'd plowed through all her audio books on four speed playback, scarfed all her snacks-- more out of boredom than hunger-- and had answered three different cops' questions about why she was hanging out here all day. Any sane world would've called it dedication, but she knew it for the insanity it really was. It was hostage taking of a biblical sort.

The moment she'd convinced herself it was the right path to take, the coin's magic would've started working on her subconsciously and any attempts to deviate from that would send her into a fit of itching until she resettled herself. It was the literal embodiment of having someone look over your damned shoulder and make sure you were playing nice.

She'd fought with it enough times to know *when* to settle into being comfortable and when it was okay to push boundaries. Of course the damned thing didn't care about her bodily needs one bit, getting food or going to the bathroom was apparently considered 'optional' to whatever magic bound her-- something that hadn't occurred to her until about hour four into her vigil.

Three hours on from that Chinnamani was pretty sure her bladder was going to pull an Alien and burst out of her. It figured; come from literal demonic heritage and still get saddled with all the baggage of having to eat but none of the cool powers that probably should have come with the wings and tail.

Left with no options, she did the only thing she could do: browse the Internet on her phone to distract herself. It didn't take long before she was digging through social media for a certain police officer. Surprisingly she *did* have a profile, unsurprisingly it was apparently maintained by someone else-- the big reveal started with the bold 'relationship status: single and ready to mingle!' in red text.

The page itself was full of images taken by someone else, usually from a distance: all the usual suspects made an appearance-- spending time with family, hanging out with cats in that same house and getting scratched by one. "Please don't let her be a crazy cat lady. . ."

But the further down the page she went, the more interesting things got. Sergeant Amy Laidlaw was apparently heavy into three-gun competition. Whoever had set up the profile had clearly been downplaying it-- after all what kind of romantic prospect would be interested in that, right?-- but a few pictures had trophies with rifle, shotgun and pistols on them. Below them and far more numerous were pictures of elaborate meals with captions like "Amy's Four Course Surprise!"

It was a snapshot of someone's life seen from the outside, from someone who was *trying* desperately to bring something missing into a friend or family member's life. Maybe it was because she herself didn't go looking for it-- maybe she didn't care, maybe she had social anxiety issues. Maybe, just maybe she didn't *want* to be 'saved'. Chinnamani smiled at that thought.

Then she found it.

The picture that'd be saved to that 'special' directory on Chinnamani's phone for private time-- Amy clad in a maroon dress that played nicely with her tumbling locks of copper fire and naughty with her fair skin and long legs. She was leaning back against a concrete planter looking to the side with an expression that read 'I don't want to be here' but the dress screamed 'fuck me crippled.'

Chinnamani bit her lower lip as a flurry of images roiled through her mind like a tempest. Her heart sped up to try and keep pace but it was pointless; in that moment there was only the image of Amy in that short dress wrapped around her, clenching her tightly- digging her nails into the succubus's back, dangerously close to her wings, risking finding out and. . .

A young boy piped up from behind, "She's pretty."

Chinnamani startled and whirled, the kid couldn't have been more than ten. His parents were some distance away tapping into their phone and here he was peeking over strangers' shoulders? "Hmph." Well, there was one way to make sure that never happened again--

She dropped her Glamour.

Out came the horns, she let her canines elongate and surged forward right in his face before he'd fully registered what he was seeing. "Anyone ever tell you it's *rude* to eavesdrop?"

The look of pure terror was instant and beautiful, pure in those ways only children could manage. She claimed it for everything she could get, sapping the fear from him even as he ran back to his folks crying. Served the little shit right, even if he wouldn't remember where he'd gone or what he'd done by the time he got there. It was petty, she knew it was, but it wasn't like it was a common occurrence or anything.

Not since *the incident*. Sure she'd scared a room full of children and accidentally triggered an asthma attack, but on the bright side, she'd never gotten bothered about babysitting a neighbor's kid again. . . .rough with the smooth and all.

A faint twinge of guilt rippled through her as she flipped through the remainder of the social media stream. Some vague part of her wanted to get up and apologize for what she'd done, but before she could even consider it, her target left his office with a blonde woman.

He was tall and well built, a bit more confident and powerful looking than he'd been in the pictures she'd found of him. With some distinguished greying at the temples and the power stride of a successful lawyer, he looked like he was only a stones throw away from taking over Syracuse itself. The blonde didn't look bad for arm candy, either-- little taller than Chinnamani was with a plain skirt and blouse that said "I'm just the hired help."

They were chatting and laughing about something, strolling down along to the opposite side of the street. Chinnamani got up to follow and almost immediately wished she hadn't as the day's fluid intake suddenly punched its way down, forcing her to brace against her own knees and breathe deep. "Stupid fucking coin. . ."

Or karma. It was probably karma.

“Sorry, kid!” She shouted at the boy. He ignored her, of course and her stomach situation didn’t improve as she followed them deeper downtown to a parking garage a few blocks away. The smart thing to do would’ve been to rush back to her car and keep up with them, but in her infinite wisdom, she’d parked her car near the Federal Building about a block and a half in the opposite direction. She’d assumed he’d just park near the damn firm, but apparently he didn’t mind going the distance to keep his ‘investment’ safe.

Chinnamani filed that away as she navigated the streets, dodging panhandlers and the people who were studiously ignoring her anyway. She feigned an interest in her phone right up to the point where the secretary left the garage in a blue civic. She took pictures and video of the car as it departed and waited.

And waited. . .

Five minutes later Mark still hadn’t left the garage. Or had he? Chinnamani scampered across the road to do a quick survey of the place. Sure enough, not only was there a rear entrance, it was heavily monitored by a security guard booth dead center. Just the kind of place where you’d store an expensive Mercedes.

She tried her best to smile as she walked up to the booth and rapped on the glass. “Heya, did I just miss Mark?” At the guard’s confused look she mimed someone taller than herself. “Big guy, black hair, drives a Mercedes?”

“Oh. Yeah, he just left.”

“Dammit, I forgot something in his car-- hey, could you point me to his spot so I can leave a message for him for tomorrow?”

The guard looked at her like she was dumb. Probably for all the right reasons. “I can *give* him a message if you want. I can’t let you up there, though.”

“Uh, thing is. . . it’s kinda personal?” That sounded terrible, even to her ears. “You know what, I’ll just catch him tomorrow. Thanks.” No sense in tipping her hand this early. There was more than one way to skin this cat, she was sure of it. There was still the secretary, after all.

Chinnamani made for her car, hopping she wasn’t too late.

Chapter 2

Liverpool, New York
Evening

Chi hated villages in general, and Liverpool in particular. It was a quiet township spread out over a lot of hilly terrain with mostly single and two story buildings and a couple highways running through it like shoelaces that'd been dropped on a map. The place was an afterthought compared to downtown.

But more than anything, it was the quiet and diffused nature of people's living situations that bothered the half-succubus. When packed closer together and forced to interact, people's uneasiness and misery coalesced but out here there was none of that; if downtown was a concert, Liverpool was the sleepy after party at an old folk's home.

So when the secretary got on the NY-370 freeway leading to the town, Chinnamani started to pull off the road. Of course, no sooner did she do this than that damned nagging compulsion hit her full force-- there would be no deviation, she'd set her mind to this and come hell or high water, she was going to be forced to carry it out.

She knew the rules, she knew the consequences, but that didn't stop her from chucking the coin out the window every few miles or so as she trailed behind the secretary's civic. It was her own brand of petty revenge and something that- in some tiny way- felt like she was reclaiming her life. Of course the damned thing always wound up in her pocket again.

"Sisyphus is a bitch," she muttered and threw it out the window.

The 370 followed the rough outline of Onondaga Lake, snaking down its mile long coast in the same way a lover might caress the gentle swells of the feminine form, if that form belonged to a druggie prostitute. Uncle Sam may not have given a shit, but the local government eventually wised up that maybe having a crack addict in their back yard was bad for property values and got into rehab mode.

Sure, it was a lengthy process, almost a hundred years all told, but between the new sewage treatment plants and hard dredging worthy of any back alley gang bang, the lake came healthier than it had been in a century. There was work to do, but at least now people could spend some time around it without risk of growing a third eye or something.

For the common resident, it was a pretty mirror to reflect the maroon sunset that carried the scent of shrubbery and trees along its coast, something Chi was all too happy to drink in for the moment. A reminder that in the grand scheme her struggle wasn't all that important, that there'd be a time when she got rid of this fucking coin for good.

All she had to do was get through this investigation, condemn the guilty party and get it back into circulation. The steering wheel groaned in her grip. It wouldn't take long. A day or two, then she could be on her way.

She was due for a vacation as it was, and getting it back into circulation meant she'd have the ability to leave the region for a while as the coin figured out its new owner. It was a small thing, but getting a week's head start was important to getting as far away from Syracuse and her silver as possible. Two

clients ago it'd taken the coin an entire year before it tried to call her back to it, if not for the drug addled brain of the man she'd 'helped' it probably would have been just as long this time, too.

Drug addicts were less than reliable clients, though, and her vacation had been brief this time. Janet, though, she'd hold on to it for a good long time. She was just the sort of person Chinnamani needed--arrogant, proud, willing to hide things she knew better than mettle with. Janet was her key to freedom, maybe forever. All Chi had to do was ride this mess out to its conclusion and all would be well.

In the meantime, though, she followed the civic until it pulled into an apartment complex nestled in among a row of cookie cutter housing. The building was long and boxy with windows every few dozen feet and the kind of boringly predictable lawn care that one would expect from corporate owned real estate. Safe, sanitized, and absolutely banal.

The sign outside advertised the place as Calm Acres. Chinnamani scoffed and pulled her station wagon and trailer along the building up the road from the parking lot. At first it sounded simple, check for the apartment number and come back later when the secretary was asleep.

Life, it seemed, had other plans. The parking spaces for residents were sheltered by the second story of the building and none of them were marked, the gated doorway had a buzzer panel on the side and plenty of windows overlooking those cars. Chi frowned. "Guess that's that-" was as far as she got before her skin started itching all over. The coin asserted itself and the itching grew worse as she tried to walk away.

"Fuck off, will you?! I'll find another way!" She muttered under her breath. Between her toes a fire rippled over her skin, a thousand tiny needles of poison sumac sparking up like lighters at a rock concert. "Fucking- quit it! Dick!" The half-succubus groaned as she clawed at her jeans. But it didn't stop.

Another step back towards the car and it got worse; diamond sand paper grinding between her generous ass cheeks. She spun on her heel and ran back to the apartment. Fucking figured.

She stood there for a moment, considering her options. Just waiting for the woman to come out again would be a massive time sink, and the coin would make damn sure Chinnamani waited. Just hitting buttons at random on the buzzer might get her the woman's name but. . .

Breaking into her car would solve all of that.

Chi glanced at the civic, then the windows overlooking the parking spots. She made a surreptitious inspection of the corners and overhang for cameras, relaxing some when she didn't find any. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, then.

Her soul wrenched against the temptation of the easy path in front of her. Nothing actually *said* she shouldn't, but her heightened state of awareness made her wonder if she *should*. It wasn't just the risk of getting caught, but the danger that she'd actually be hurting this innocent bystander. The secretary had to know she was boffing a married man- if she was at all- and if Chinnamani started digging around her stuff, then she might actually do some harm.

There was a word for people like that. That word was ‘asshole’ and while she might occasionally enjoy a romp in someone’s own- or even *her* own- being an asshole to someone who was ostensibly innocent felt wrong.

So Chi stabbed the buzzer at random.

“Hello?” An older woman’s voice chirped through the speaker.

“Oh, uh. Hi. So, hey this is going to be a little awkward, but you wouldn’t happen to own a blue Civic? The lights are on, and they’re pretty hot.”

A brief pause. “No, I don’t.”

Chi motioned for her to hurry up and get to the point, more by habit than anything; any second now the natural inclination to help someone would ping and--

“You want apartment twelve.”

Bingo.

“Thanks so much!” She thought it over for a second before poking the button. Even when the answering beep came she had her line of bullshit planned out. “Hi there. You don’t know me but I’d really like to talk to you. . .”

The young woman on the other side of the buzzer sounded rightly skeptical. “About what?”

“I was hired by Janet Gomez.” Chi said, stepping back enough so she could get sight of the various windows overlooking the parking area. “Normally I wouldn’t come to someone’s house, but I’m just following up a lead looking to put this case to rest.”

The silence stretched out for several seconds. When the woman spoke again there was a cautious undercurrent to manner that hadn’t been there a moment before. “What *exactly* are you investigating?”

“I think it’d be easier to discuss face to face-- you’re familiar with the concept of client confidentiality, I’m sure.”

Another bout of silence cut into their conversation.

“Show me your license,” she said.

Chi eased back, watching the windows- sure enough the one just left of the central door shifted some. Just enough that it couldn’t be wind. Chinnamani reached for her wallet, held it up showing her license left and right pretending she hadn’t seen the movement. She doubted the woman could see it was her driver’s license, she just needed a *few* words out of her target anyway.

After a couple moments of acting like an idiot, Chi stabbed the button again. “Dunno if you saw it-- look, I’ll just cut this short. I’m near the end of my process; missus Gonzalez thinks he’s been cheating on her but three weeks on and I’ve not found anything that says he’s been unfaithful. . . .I’m not

accusing anyone of anything, but I just want to know if you've seen him leaving with anyone. Unusual calls, private emails he doesn't want you to read or anything like that?"

Another pregnant pause. Chinnamani smiled privately. This may just be easier than she expected.

When the secretary finally replied her tone was firm, rehearsed and direct. Someone had been practicing for this eventually. "Not to my knowledge, no. The office is an open place, and he works too hard to even have *time* for an affair."

"That's what everyone I've talked to said, too. . ." She pulled her notepad out, going through the motions of making notes. She made sure she was visible to the window and scribbled as she talked. "If I could ask you a couple more quick questions? I had a talk with a mister-" Chi flipped a few pages back to look as if she was checking her work. "Porter? He's a local divorce attorney handling the divorce. He wasn't sure whether or not the Mercedes was kept at the old address or the new one. Do you happen to know if he takes it out to the house or if he parks it somewhere else?"

This was pushing. It was pushing way too hard and way too fast, but maybe. . .

"I wouldn't know anything about that, sorry."

Chi looked at the speaker, trying to transmit how stupid this woman sounded through the air. "I'm not *accusing* anyone of anything, but surely you've stopped by the new place during the last annual cookout." Chi gnawed her tongue, hoping she'd read the social media pictures right. He'd hosted a lot of events for the office before the divorce crap started and the newer pictures showed a different place, suggesting that he wanted to keep up appearances- or didn't care in the first place.

"I. . . .if he's been cheating--"

"It's just a formality, I promised I'd ask after the car just for the sake of making Mister Porter's life easier. Completely unrelated to my case but--"

"Then maybe you should stick to your case."

Smarmy little bitch. "Listen, as someone who's been down this road and 'lost the ring' before, you'd be doing him a huge favor by helping us all get through this mess just a little faster. If I can help Janet get the paperwork done faster, Mark can put this crap behind him sooner. . . .now, please, I'm just asking where you think the car is."

The woman on the other end sighed. "What address do you have?"

Chinnamani made another show of rifling through her notes. "Ah, I have one in East Syracuse and another in Dewitt. . ." She lied.

At least one of those was a real thing. Sort of; Mark's social media profile said he lived in Dewitt. Chi held her breath as she waited.

"East Syracuse? That's not right. . ."

"You sure? Ridgewood drive doesn't sound familiar?"

“No, he lives in Manlius.”

Chinnamani groaned inwardly and flipped to a new page. “Happen to know the address?”

After getting it she felt the itchy feeling begin to subside. Triumphant, Chi stuffed her notepad away and thanked the woman for her time before she trotted off back to her car. She made sure to take the long way around the building so she couldn't be seen- just in case- and started the long drive to Manlius.

If only everything could have been this damned easy.

#

Easy was a subjective thing, it turned out.

Chinnamani compared the social media picture of the cookout to the house she was standing in front of. Third time in as many minutes and they were no closer to lining up; the pale blue shutters of the upper end town house weren't going to spontaneously go brown to match the picture. The two car garage and beautiful pond in the back weren't going to morph into the open grass field of Mark Gonzalez's place.

“That bitch. . .” Chi muttered as she crept around the garage. She wasn't going to let a little thing like trespassing stop her from making the forty five minute drive out here worth her while. As silently as she could manage, she crept up and checked the windows of the garage. Surprisingly there were two cars-- two vans.

Neither of which looked particularly sporty or like they were covering for a mid-life crisis. But one didn't park a Mercedes out in the elements, even in the richest part of the city. This wasn't going to work.

Almost as if karma was kicking her in the ass, a man from next door called out to her. “Excuse me!”

Chi had her keys in her hand, she casually slid them between her fingers and put on a placid smile. “Hm?” He was approaching with a purposeful stride and squared shoulders like he was going to make himself look more intimidating- if he was actually bigger, it might've worked.

“What're you doing?”

She looked at him like he was stupid, then backed up as he drew closer. “Easy, easy. I'm doing my job.”

“Your job involve looking into people's windows does it--”

“When I'm investigating a stolen vehicle, yes!” Chi lied, holding up her left hand. “Look, I was given the wrong address and I'm leaving, don't read too far into this.”

He paused just briefly, glancing at the station wagon and her cart then back to her. “Do a lot of investigating between selling pizza, do you?” He gave her another once over. “You get out of here, and don't come back.”

Chinnamani rolled her eyes, suppressing the urge to give him the finger as she dropped into the driver's seat. He slunk up to the car, she grabbed her revolver from under the seat and sat it in her lap. By the time he was at her window, the massive hunk of nickle plated compensation was fully visible. Chi slid her hand around the rosewood grip and feathered the hammer. "Help you?"

He paled visibly.

"Whatever bullshit threat you were gonna make against me you can stuff right up your butt, yeah? I'm not in the mood and neither are you." She smiled at his discomfort. "Now, make like a tree and leaf."

He didn't need to be told twice. Chinnamani slumped back as she watched him run back to his house, irritated. Her lead had dried up, no sooner than she'd fucking got it either! Here she was trying to be nice and--

"You know what, I got something for you." Chi slapped the key in and jacked the car into gear. She'd tried to be nice and keep innocent parties out of things they had no business in, but no the silly girl decided she wanted to be a hero?

Didn't she know the mongoose in a snake pit tended to get eaten eventually?

#

Chinnamani was careful to take the back roads on the return trip, chewing through a lot of gas and time to get back just before nine but somehow managing to avoid any police as she snaked her way down the secretary's street. She cribbed a parking spot several blocks away, changed clothes and dug out the tool kit she kept in the back seat. The crunch of its leather strap felt warm as she slung it, ensuring it slid between her breasts. If someone caught her, she'd need every advantage she could get, she couldn't run fast or far; she'd have to rely on her other charms.

Ten minutes later she was crouched down in the shadow of the overhang beside the Civic with a long metal slim jim in hand. Another half minute to shift the locking rods and she had the Civic open. She started with the glove box-- rewarded for her efforts with a spray of paperwork, old mail and a strip of pictures of her and Mark together. They were both smiling, she noticed. Nothing for Mark, though, nothing indicating another address.

It turned out the secretary's name was Tanya Bower, she'd been late on several credit card payments and at least one of them was being charged off- if the big 'Final Notice' stamp was to be believed. If Chi was the type, there'd have been enough to open a line of credit- maybe at a 'toy' shop. . .

But then, there was being spiteful and just being an asshole.

The half-succubus stuffed the credit card mail into her bag and slid the slim jim along the strap of her bag, tying it down to make it look inconspicuous. She relocked the car and slid up to the gated door, taking a quick glance around before she got to work on it with the lock picks.

She was in practice, religiously so, but the keyway on the gate saw more insertions and removals than her on a drinking bender at a frat house, each one leaving a bit of dirt and grime in the way of the pins. What normally would take her five minutes or so ground on for fifteen, until she finally got the pins up

and tensioned the cylinder enough to allow it to open. Triumphant, she dumped her pick kit into the bag and jogged up the steps in search of apartment twelve.

There were a lot of ways to handle this-- the infernal part of her nature wanted her to break in and tear this bitch apart for daring to defy her. How *dare* she lie. But the mere thought made Chi want to vomit, even before the various ways she'd accomplish it began to filter in.

The girl wanted to be a hero? Chinnamani would give her a reason to, then. She snaked her way to the end of the hall and dug a box cutter from her bag. Normally she'd use it to scrape stickers from things or cut police line tape, but it served its purpose when she drew the razor across her finger from palm to tip.

She didn't even feel the pain as she ground it down into the guard, splitting the flesh like the red sea right down to the bone. Blood ran fresh from her wound even as it sealed up with an inferno of pains from the re-forming nerve ends. It tingled and pulled at her all over her hand like her fingers were going to join together to form some kind of mitten. Chi grabbed her hand, intertwining her fingers and spreading the blood over her face with gritted teeth.

The healing hurt like hell and her body revolted with every twist and turn of her mangled finger, screaming about how it was so much worse than it was. She couldn't let it think she needed to see a doctor, though, the fucking coin would probably think she was trying to help her *client* instead of her and then compel her to the damned hospital or something.

By the time she'd finished with her 'make up' the inferno had faded to a dull roar of numbing pain and ache. She wiped the blood off on her jeans and smeared her forehead to look more bruised and battered. A couple deep breaths and she tightened her wings under her hoodie, working herself up to the performance she was about to give.

She started by throwing herself from half way up the stairs to the landing.

Her body landed with a satisfying crunch that stung like shit but put her in the mindset to scabble away, whimpering and mewling like a wounded doe. "No! No-no-no!" She exclaimed as she made a beeline straight for apartment twelve, smacking her palm against the door. "Open up, please, please." Chi cried out pathetically.

Silence.

"Fucking, hurry up!"

The half-succubus smacked the door again, putting more emphasis on her pleading. "Please! Help!" She stepped back from the door to check the stairs like she was expecting someone to come. Chi turned and slapped the doorframe of one of the other apartments trying to diffuse her force along the wall so as not to actually be heard inside.

"Come on, come on. . . .work with me, hero."

Chi spun just in time to see the light in Tanya's peep hole darken, like someone was checking what was going on. She pounced on the advantage, whimpering and slapping the door again. Another quick

check of the empty stairs and she leaned towards the door. "Please let me in, please, please, please. I jus- just need a phone!"

And the door opened.

Tanya- sweet young girl peeked around the door.

There was no chain on it.

Chinnamani surged in with her infernal strength, doing her best to look pathetic and kicked the door shut behind her, sliding down beside the woman in a fit of crying. She'd be damned if she was going to give this up now. "P- please, c- can I use your phone? Please?"

Tanya looked about ready to try and kick her home invader out but then seemed to think better of it, checking the hall through her peep hole and, to Chi's surprise, locking the door. She watched for several seconds, heedless to the real danger behind her.

The apartment was dark with only the hall light on and the flickering of a some low budget sci-fi movie playing on the flatscreen in the living room. Chi hadn't seen the movie before, she noted. The place was pretty sparsely decorated with a simple couch and a tasteful arrangement of silver lamps here and there.

Chi's body itched, a smoldering ember that seemed to emanate from within her instead of the coin's usual method of compulsion-- she saw the crucifix over the door way just as Tanya turned to regard her. Didn't it figure.

Too late now, though.

"Are you okay?" Tanya said quietly as she crouched down, pulling her night shirt tight. She reached up to touch Chi's 'wound' and offer the touch of any compassionate person. The first needle of guilt dug into Chi-- then it struck Tanya what'd happened. Recognition flickered in her blue eyes. "You--"

"Fraid so," Chinnamani dropped her Glamour entirely and surged forward, grabbing the woman by the shoulder and looping around her, hand over her mouth. Crushing her palm into the teeth that tried to bite. There was no contest, though, Chi was too strong and too used to this kind of crap-- she shoved the girl down, held her hands over her lower back and slid the police grade zip ties on. "Work with me here and we'll make this quick."

Tanya thrashed and whimpered. Chi hauled her up with an arm around her waist- she dumped the secretary on the couch still holding her hand over her mouth. "Listen carefully, I'm not gonna repeat this: tell me what I want to know and I leave here and you go back to trading tequila shots out of each others asses or whatever it is you do with Mark. Don't tell me what I want to know and I'm going to make our time together deeply unpleasant.

"Hell, I might drink your beer, eat your snacks and leave your shower drain clogged trying to get this shit off my skin." Chi eased her hand from the woman's mouth, holding her gaze firmly. Tanya's gaze kept flicking up to her horns- not unexpected really- but eventually she looked Chi full on.

"W- w- what--"

“Well I’m not with Girl Scouts of America, now am I?”

She blinked, uncomprehending.

“Joke. That was a joke. Oh, come on, tell me this is the first time you’ve been died up and held at gun point.” Chi smiled at the woman’s quick processing of the implied threat. Tanya became much more docile and shrunk back, lowering her gaze. It was a total lie, of course, Chi’d left the gun back in the car, but the horns had probably won her some points on the ‘unexpected behavior’ scale.

Tanya swallowed. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Should I? Probably not-- think of this as a learning opportunity.” Chi pushed her back and hopped up to her full size, just tall enough to look down at her captive. “Do you stop to consider that not everyone you try to help is worthy of it?”

At the mention of her name the woman blanched. The air of fear thickened, savory and warm, tempting Chi with every breath she took.

“This is where I point out that I don’t want to be here all night. Faster you help me out, the better!” Chinnamani leaned forward, smiling a toothy grin to accent her canines. Tanya’s aura shrunk even more. “Now I asked you a question.”

“I- I-” She eased back away from Chi.

Chi lowered her voice, following her all the way to the back of the couch. “I. Asked you. A question.” her voice was cool and calm.

“H- H-”

“Boring.” Chinnamani danced back and turned the TV off. “It’s like watching the opening of 2001: A Space Odyssey-- great for scene setting, but not terribly great to live with! So, let’s cut the foreplay and get to the good parts, huh? I’m going to ask you a few simple questions and the sooner you answer me the sooner we all go back to our lives. “Where does Mark live, Tanya?”

She whimpered.

“One demerit!” Chi strode back into the hall towards the kitchen. “Don’t get to three, I’d hate to see that happen.” She cracked open the fridge. “Wine cooler. . . .pale ale? And *I’m* the heathen.” She stole one of the beers before returning to find Tanya on her feet near the TV stand.

She had her cell phone in her hand, eyes wide as dinner plates, staring at Chi.

“Go ahead,” Chi crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, sipping the beer. She flexed her wings back against her hoodie just for emphasis. “Just think *really carefully* what you’re gonna tell the cops. I mean, what, a demon came and held me hostage? Neither of us are gonna win that one.” Another casual sip. “You look like an idiot and I’m no closer to finding Mark.”

They held each others gaze for a moment, Tanya's eyes roamed Chinnamani's form. She clutched her phone. "W- why him?"

Chi shrugged. "I've been nothing but honest up to this point because I wanted to give you the benefit of basic respect." She took a sip. "See, Mark isn't exactly in his wife's good graces- she thinks he's banging you so she sent *me* to find out what was going on and get that damned car back. . .

"Now for what you get out of this," Chinnamani strode over and grabbed the phone. The screen was waiting for a password. Figured. "Is a life lesson." She tossed the phone back on the stand and sat Tanya down. "Seems like he's kind of a piece of crap- or at least enough of one to warrant some pretty heavy intervention."

Tanya muttered, "he said his wife was a mean witch. I didn't think he meant it like *this*."

Chi had been half way into a sip, she laughed and sputtered. She tried to regain her composure, but couldn't help herself. "Pretty sure she thinks as highly of herself too, but no that's not how this works. Look, I'm just after the car. I'm not going to hurt him, I'm not going to hurt you *unless I really have to*."

For just a moment she looked about ready to rebel, but then she looked at Chinnamani. "He's not a bad man-"

"I don't *care* what he's like. The faster I get done with this, the faster I get on with my life. Look, I promise you, mine's the only blood that's going to get spilled."

She squinted. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I haven't hurt *you*, have I?" Chi sipped her beer. "Janet's a bitch, but she just wants the car back. I don't kill people, I don't go around stealing souls and shit- I'm the lamest of the demons."

"But- but you *are* a demon."

"Could be worse," Chinnamani touched Tanya's cheek- she recoiled and Chi grabbed her by the shirt, yanking her close. "I could *do whatever I want to you* right now and *every* part of me is telling me to-- it's the *human* part of me that keeps me from acting on it but I have my limits. Unless you want to find them, I *really* suggest you tell me where I find that chunk of metal."

Tanya whimpered and tried to draw back. Chi pulled her closer and she flashed her canines again, settling mere inches from her face. "Well?"

"E- H- He lives in the Village."

"Village-- like what, East Syracuse?"

"Yeah. . ." Tanya recited an address by memory.

Chi groaned. "You fucking kidding me? That was a joke!" She eyed the woman. "Got any proof to back it up?"

“N- no?”

“Then why would I believe you, hm?”

Tanya sighed. “J- you want the car, right? Then you go away? I have no *reason* to lie to you.”

“Mmm. . .” She was technically right, Chi supposed. Well, it was a lead if nothing else. Chi dampened her fingers with some beer and wiped the blood clean from her face simultaneously rebuilding her Glamour to hide her horns. “So if I come back here, you know we’re going to have this conversation again, you know we’re going to have it out in a different way, right?”

Tanya nodded with mock coyness. She was going to call the cops the moment Chi left. Or thought she would.

That was fine with Chinnamani. “Turn around,” she said as she produced the box cutter.

After cutting off her restraints and packing them away Chi immediately drank of the woman’s fear and unease, like a glutton she savored that particular flavor of concern that only came about when someone cared for another who was being threatened. In doing so, she learned what she needed to know; the girl cared for this man.

Maybe even loved him.

Tanya blinked a few times and looked at her with fresh eyes, as if the last few minutes had never happened she was all piss and vinegar with a new kind of fear. “Who the hell’re you?!”

Chi raised the bottle and giggled, “Haayyy. Come on, don’t look at me like that- we were gonna play spin the bottle!”

“Wh-” confusion and worry warped her features, she checked her own breath looking for alcohol and finding none, turned her suspicion to her visitor. “Get the hell out-”

“Come onnnnn, I thought Todd was gonna be here and we were gon’ have . . . a threesome. Or something. I got drunk for this, you can’t kick me out!”

“I don’t know who the hell Todd is, but you got the wrong apartment--”

“Wait!” Chi blinked at her. “Waitttttt hey! I know you!”

“Huh?”

“You’re internet famous!” she giggled and prodded Tanya “Yeeeah, didn’t I see you on Fail Army in one of those videos? Mom must be so proud.”

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

Chinnamani hoofed it back to her car and dumped her gear, rubbing furiously at her skin to rid herself of the itching from the coin and the religious 'taint' of the apartment. Even fifteen minutes later it burned, but it was a small price to pay for a lead. . .

So close to her quarry, she could almost taste her freedom.

It tasted like cheap pilsner beer stolen from a middle class secretary.