

## Synchronicity: Rienne's Origin, pt. 1

by Cerine Hero

A brilliant fire roared in the center of the feasting hall, casting its light over the assembled crowd. Long shadows danced their way up the stone walls behind the wooden dining tables and the high-backed chairs, especially when the dancers closed in around the fires as close as they dared with their flowing gowns. Reaching into pouches at their waists, the graceful, twisting felines held powdered salts in their paws and took turns throwing handfuls of dust into the bonfire. The raging red flames swirled with colors as the salts burned up, making the fire flicker with shades of green and blue and yellow. The crowd cheered around mouthfuls of food or clapped if their paws were empty at each rush of blazing color.

Sugar found herself swept up in the emotion of the festivities, clapping and smiling after another bright rush of blue radiance filled the hall. The gluttony demon was squeezed into a wooden throne at the head of the hall, atop a raised dais with the royal advisor and the housecarl to either side of her. A table set in front of her throne was practically bending under the weight of the foodstuffs stacked upon it, and it was a similar sight at all of the long feasting tables down below. Sugar speared another piece of roasted meat with a twin-tined fork and chewed on it, happily watching all of her subjects eat their fill.

When the gluttony demon had roamed into this area, she found a mid-developed society stuck in a rather dead-ending belief that their long-deceased queen would return to them one day, via reincarnation or... well, that would probably be the only way to do it. In preparation for that day, the people had been hoarding food to an absurd degree, limiting themselves to a subsistence diet while their larders were bursting with food. They actually hoarded so much and consumed so little of it that the food was only benefiting compost piles behind the town. Sugar couldn't let such an injustice towards edible food stand, and resolved to show these people the error of their ways. Against her better judgment, she materialized before them, ready to right this wrong.

The people instantly declared her the queen returned and cracked open the larders.

Seeing no reason to correct this mistake, Sugar went along with it, and began making some sweeping social reforms. Mostly she ordered them all to feast weekly, and to enjoy the bounty of their fields and livestock without waste. Getting to be queen and therefore receiving the choicest selection of food was a bonus, too. And it was going incredibly well. The people were happy, they were all looking healthier and full-figured, and Sugar was getting rewarded and pampered.

A cat with black spots underneath his eyes stepped up onto the dais, holding a pitcher of fruit wine. Sugar smiled at him, grunting slightly as she leaned forward in her throne and reached her plump paw towards her beaten bronze cup. She'd eaten plenty, and it was showing. But she got the cup eventually, and held it towards the helpful serf.

The cat just stared directly through her. His eyes were frozen open, unblinking, and his body was unnaturally still as he stood in place. The clay pitcher in his paws hung weightlessly from his fingers. Sugar blinked twice, unsure what was happening. On her left, the housecarl, a burly slab of cat, was locked in mid-bite with a leg of some kind of poultry, and on her right, the royal adviser was half-asleep behind his long whiskers, and given that he wasn't moving at all, looked a little bit dead.

Sugar stood from the throne, still idly chewing on the piece of meat between her teeth, and surveyed the dining hall. Not a single soul was moving. A cloud of colored salt stretched, suspended in the air, from the thrusting paw of one of the feline dancers and hung above the frozen flames. Some of the flakes of salt were catching light, leaving traces of bright crimson-red among the fire. Time was stopped, somehow.

"Hello, Sugar."

The demoness whirled around to see someone sitting on her throne. It was a fox, but also not a fox, and also every single fox possible, stacked and layered atop one another like sheets of glass. The

fox's features flickered and warped through a limitless selection of eyes, noses, mouths, fur colors – everything. His eyes were both colorless and opalescent, mundane and blazing brightly like a pair of young stars. As a demon, Sugar's mind could process and interpret the impossible to a much better degree than a mortal could, a fact she'd learned through possessing her favorite pets over the centuries and seeing the world through their eyes and their thoughts.

Even she was unable to get her mind around one of these things. The gluttony demoness swallowed her bite of meat and whined.

“Oh, no,” she said. “One of *you*.”

The fox stood up from the throne and walked over to beside Sugar, his paws clasped in front of his stomach as he peered out over the dining hall. His movements were agonizingly slow and deliberate, as if he slid through space more than anything. He canted his head slightly to one side as he surveyed the feast. “You are doing a fine thing here, Sugar. These people's queen is never to return to them. Best they were nudged out of this destructive tradition.”

Sugar took a half-step away from the stranger. Unease curled in her gut despite his polite words. She wasn't afraid of him, but his very existence made her uncomfortable. Briefly, she considered just fleeing, but that probably wouldn't stop him at all. “What do you want with me?” she asked, squinting to try to block out some of the sensory overload of looking in his direction. It didn't help. “I didn't think your kind deigned to manifest, like... ever.”

“I have a request for you, Sugar,” the stranger said, his voice flat and featureless and yet carrying hammer-blows of authority that made it clear that the word 'request' was hollow. “I am aware that you have a soul-sensing bond with a mortal.”

A flash of memory immediately appeared in Sugar's thoughts: a pink vixen, one of her favorite pets. What the stranger said was true. Sugar had placed a mark on Cerine's soul after their last encounter, so after hopping from dimension to dimension, the demoness would always be able to track her down and interact with the various other facets of her in branching timelines.

“And what do you want with her?” Sugar asked, raising an eyebrow above one citrus-orange eye. Her tone was tense and guarded.

“Nothing untoward,” the stranger replied. He wasn't looking directly at her. His gaze was fixed on a random cat in the crowd down below for no apparent reason. Sugar didn't see anything remarkable about them, but... she couldn't see the things a creature like him saw. “It is a very simple request, Sugar. I want you to travel to one particular timeline, find her, and then transport her to another one. And that is all.”

The demoness had no idea why the supernatural thing wanted her to do something like that, and frankly she didn't really care. She just wanted this conversation over. “Fine. Sure. But how will I know which dimension to go to?”

“This will guide you.” The stranger held out a paw and a shining, transparent crystal came into being above his ever-shifting palm. It was about the size of a thumb, with six facets along the sides and rough-cut ends. The crystal was completely colorless and had a flawless, clear interior, but as Sugar looked through it, the images on the far side were... wrong. Like they were from somewhere else entirely. Apprehensively, Sugar slowly extended her fingers and then snatched the crystal away into her palm. It felt strangely warm.

Actually, it was the warmth of the fire washing over her once again, and the sound of crackling logs and sizzling salts filled her ears. It was followed shortly after by a round of cheers. The dining hall was bathed in blood-red light as the fire consumed the cloud of salt and turned crimson for a heartbeat. Time was moving again and the stranger was gone.

“My queen,” the housecarl asked, reacting to Sugar suddenly out of her seat and standing. He gripped the armrests of his seat as he leaned forward. “Is something wrong?”

Sugar noticed that many eyes around the dining hall were looking in her direction. Thinking quickly, she grabbed her copper cup and let the serf fill it again before raising it in a toast. The feline

folk all raised their mugs and cups above their heads and, without waiting to hear what they were even toasting, guzzled down their drinks. The unrestrained gluttony made her demonic heart flutter.

She'd have to get this “request” done as quickly as possible and then get back, she decided.

All the corporate-owned gyms were the same thing. Every machine and holo-weight set was arranged on the floor within an inch of their lives with mathematical precision and squeezed in as close as safely possible. Glowing panels stood out on every single piece of equipment with an ID reader to log usage time – not for health tracking, but for payment. Logos and digital posters lined one wall, a mish-mash of various advertisements for health products or network programs made by the same company. It didn't matter which company or what gym, it was the same damn wall with all the same damn stuff, just with the colors and livery switched around. Drones skittered around the floor, cleaning up dust and mopping up sweat to keep the sleek white and silver of modern design as pristine as possible. With the oversaturation of lights in the ceiling, the gym was practically blinding.

The gym patrons were mostly corporate employees with benefits packages and discounts. The even more affluent ones might've even been gene-modded. If that was the case, they didn't even need to be here. They could eat chocolate ice cream all day and keep a six-pack. But the kind of person who'd get gene-modding was the same kind of person who would obsess over showing their store-bought physique off. Rienne couldn't blame them, though. Not really.

Over in a corner of the gym, working a pull-down bar, stood a tall vixen, her wheat-gold fur slick and damp with sweat. She had five more reps to go, but her lats were protesting. Swallowing hard and gritting her fangs, she muscled through them one at a time. The machine, and the golden, shining holo-weight attached to the cable behind her, creaked and shivered on each pull. Three more now. She kept her posture up and tensed her stomach. Triceps flexed underneath her coat on her bare arms. One more... and done. The fox let the bar go and released her white-knuckled paws. Her fingers were tense and prickly as she worked life back into them, and her arms felt weightless.

As she let her body recover, a cheetah walked past her. Even out of the corner of her eye, Rienne could tell he was corporate. He had the hair and the perfectly trimmed body fur. More than that, he was *probably* modded. A genetech had lovingly sculpted those swollen pecs in a computer program and designed the perfect cocktail to puff his chest out overnight. But they could've been natural. Hard to tell at a glance. But what she *could* see, as he looked her over on his way by, was the glimmer of silver inside of his eyes. The cheetah's cyber-eyes scanned – perhaps literally – the biceps and quads on the vixen. He must have detected some kind of imperfection, because he wrinkled his nose and kept walking. Rienne rolled her natural jelly eyes and stood up.

The muscular fox stretched for a minute before the digital display panel attached to the exercise machine honked at her. Furrowing her brow, she turned and looked at it. There was a pop-up message telling her that her account had gone into negative during her time on the machine, and she was going to be charged an extra service fee for the inconvenience.

“Fuck,” she grumbled, yanking her ID card out of the slot. The display reverted to attract mode, depicting an over-muscled wolf and a perfectly scrawny tigress both admiring one another and themselves. Rienne stuck her card into her green sports bra. “Guess I'm done.”

After taking a few minutes to cool down, Rienne headed to the locker room, walking down the U-shaped ramp to the lower floor, where it was thankfully a bit less lit. She pushed her yellow-tinted shades up to sit on her short, spiky hair. A seven-foot-long tail curled behind her as she approached the threshold to the women's locker room, with the crackle-field covering the entire end of the ramp. As Rienne walked between the vertical poles, each one glowing with amber light along a seam down their sides, she passed through a barrier of energy that sparked and fizzed all over her fur. The crackling continued all the way down her long, fluffy tail as it followed behind her. It was odd and disorienting, and she squeezed her eyes shut as she stepped through, but it completely cleaned her off, burning all the sweat and dirt from her fur. It was like getting a quick shower.

With none of the relaxing benefits.

Rienne plucked her card from her bra and wiped it off on her forearm. The crackle-field wasn't invasive enough to clean underneath clothing. Not *yet*. She pushed it into the slot on her locker and the door popped open. The muscular fox then peeled her clothes off and began to change back into her street clothes. She pulled on a pair of dark jeans, ripped along one knee, and a snug white shirt with a faded logo across the chest. As she was reaching for her jacket, she heard a vaguely familiar voice behind her.

"Hey, Muscles, you here again?"

The vixen sighed. While the clients here at the gym were mostly corporate, there were still other people around, since this was the only *good* gym in the area. Rienne turned around and looked down at a skinny raccoon, gray-furred and blue-eyed. She had black hair dyed red, with the roots long since showing, especially since she had a side cut and it all brushed to one side, making it look more like a bad gradient job. The raccoon also had on little more than tight workout pants, having walked over in the middle of getting dressed. She had her paws on her hips and not a care in the world.

"I was just leaving," Rienne replied, grabbing her jacket and hat from the locker.

"You know, I think you always say that," the raccoon teased, stepping around so that she was between Rienne and the crackle-field. There was another way out, but it was back through the pool area and all the way around the gym. The raccoon flashed her teeth and grinned knowingly. "Lucky for you, so was I! I think I'm gonna drop by the bar and see a few friends. You should really come with me, Muscles. They'd love to talk to you for a little bit."

Rienne's gaze dropped down a bit to the gang tattoo on the raccoon's breast fur. She knew who these 'friends' of hers were. "I've already got plans tonight," she answered, her voice flat and leaving no room for argument. "Give me a raincheck."

The raccoon flicked her ringed tail and turned about. "Suit yourself. People are just gonna wonder who you're loyal to is all."

*I don't care*, Rienne muttered under her breath. She reached into the locker and grabbed the last thing laying at the bottom of it. Her paw closed around the leather sheath of a knife and she clipped it to her jeans as she finished getting dressed. The vixen transferred her yellow shades from her hair to her hat and then bumped the locker door closed with her elbow. With her ID card in paw again, she made her way out of the gym and outside.

Rienne pushed up the sleeve of her leather jacket and checked her watch. An amber holo-face appeared in front of the matte black display and told her the time. It was a little after five o'clock. By this hour, the sky had lost all traces of light and was utterly dark. Rienne glanced up at the lightless black dome above the city and wrinkled her muzzle. Around noon, there'd be traces of detail in the choking clouds, enough to see that there was something blocking the sun. Rienne had almost forgotten what daytime even looked like. At least it was still there in fantasy games.

Not to make a liar of herself, the vixen began to head in the opposite direction from home. There weren't many other people walking along the streets today, which was fine. It let the vixen be alone with her thoughts. And despite the gloom, it wasn't dark. The linear line lights overhead, running above the edge of the sidewalk and the street, kept everything lit. There were neon holo-signs everywhere, too, plastered on walls and bus stops, giving the city a chaotic patchwork of color. Rienne slid her yellow-tinted glasses on over her eyes again, cutting out some of the sharper wavelengths so she wouldn't get a migraine. Auto-cars zoomed by on the road beside her, their passage mostly heard and felt rather than seen. They didn't need lights. When Rienne glanced towards the road, a red holo-sign flickered into view, warning her to keep her distance, since the auto-cars wouldn't be able to stop on a dime. The warning was brought to her, cheerfully, by Cyclo Motor Vehicles.

After a while of walking, she noticed that some of the cars zooming past her were coming back the other direction a few seconds later. When she got closer, the reason was clear: There was a police checkpoint at the next intersection. The auto-cars were backed up in a line as the armed officers

interrogated the passengers. In addition to their bulky armor, they toted disquietingly large automatic rifles across their chests. And if that was all, it would have been one thing. But standing in the middle of the intersection, as a show of force, was a huge walker mech. The ominous machine's cylindrical, cyclopean head scanned the roads leading to the T-joint intersection, with a shimmering amber eye casting its gaze back and forth, unblinking. Its arms terminated in a pair of rotary cannons instead of paws. These patrols and checkpoints were getting more common the last couple months. Rienne didn't watch the news much, but she'd heard the chatter second-hand, about suspicions of more bombings.

The mech swung its head around and looked right at her. Inhaling and squaring her shoulders, Rienne walked up to the intersection. One of the police broke away from the group surrounding the cars and approached her, left paw held out for her to stop while the right kept the gun against his armored breastplate. He had a masked helmet on, with "Police" helpfully emblazoned right across the faceplate, and it was too dark for her to see what kind of tail he had.

"Stop there," he ordered. Rienne did, waiting. "Produce your ID. Slowly. I see the knife."

"It's legal to have one," Rienne reminded him.

"If it stays there."

She took out her ID card and held it between her fingers, arm outstretched towards him. The officer extended his gauntlet and blue light jumped from a pair of sensors woven into his thumb and index finger, scanning the card top to bottom and then left to right. He checked the report on a holo-display on the inside of his bracer.

"Rienne Ahlmir," he told her, as if this was news to her. "What's your business?"

"I'm headed to Gardenvale Overlook," she told him, putting her ID away.

Even with the faceplate, the officer balked. His body language stiffened and he looked back over his shoulder at the rest of his unit. Rienne noticed that the mech was watching her with its smoldering digital eye. The guns were thankfully still lowered. This close to it, she could make out the blocky, ugly lettering of the corporation that manufactured it stenciled along the armor plating.

"Why are you headed there?" the officer asked, his voice more curious than accusatory.

"Personal business," Rienne replied, not flinching. That was hard to do with a ten-foot-tall death machine looming overhead.

The armored officer's helmet tipped slowly left and then right, and then he shook his head properly. "Whatever. You're logged, so make it quick. Be back through before curfew." He tapped a finger to the panel on his bracer and then waved her by.

Rienne walked through the checkpoint and didn't look back.

Dead grass crunched underneath her feet as she walked up the slope to the top of the overlook. It was dark out here, mostly, except for some helpful light poles jammed into the ground to mark the trail. To either side of her, in the dark, Rienne saw the silhouettes of gravestones lining the path or looming in the distance. When she stepped close by to them, holo-panels installed into the markers sprung to life, emitting the likeness of the deceased in translucent images like otherworldly spirits. Rienne walked by, using the flashlight on her watch to mind her step.

She came to the top of the overlook and passed the last light pole. Her flashlight described an open area, with a couple dead trees casting gnarled shadows and a chain-link fence blocking off access to the gorge below. It was dangerous, especially in the dark, since the ground dropped off so sharply at the edge. There was also nothing of value down there, not anymore. There were more gravestones up here on the overlook, and Rienne strode over to a pair of them in particular, sitting side-by-side.

As she got close, the holo-panels turned on, projecting a pair of vulpine faces underneath their names: Adrian and Sylvia Ahlmir. Though the holographic representation was purely in yellow-gold monochrome, the faces still conveyed their respective species. Adrian's face had the sharp features of a swift fox, and Rienne got her coloration from him, and Sylvia's face had the classical lines and shapes of a red fox. A lot of people always said Rienne took after her mother, but where she got her height and

the size of her tail was anyone's guess.

Rienne sat down in front of the graves, crossing her legs. She pulled her tail across her lap and ran her fingers through the wheat-colored fur. The black tail tip waved slowly back and forth at her side as the tail completely encircled her.

“Hey, Mom; hey, Dad,” she said, sighing deeply. “I know I haven't been up in a while. It's getting harder to. I almost didn't make it today. Cops had one of their fucking mechs blocking the road.” She ran her tongue across her teeth and shifted uncomfortably. “But I guess you guys wouldn't know what I'm talking about. Well... anyways.”

The vixen went quiet for a bit. She pulled her shades from the collar of her shirt and played with them between her paws. She cut her eyes towards her father's image. “I'm staying out of trouble, like you asked. That's getting harder, too. Seems like there's trouble no matter which way I look nowadays. The whole city's on edge.”

Rienne turned and looked back at the city, sprawling out as far as she could see down below the hill. Neon lights glittered like artificial stars, as if they'd all fallen from the sky and left the heavens dark. If she strained her ears, she could hear the sounds of cars and music. Up here, on Gardenvale Overlook, the world was dark and quiet, like she'd wandered into a place nudged slightly out of time.

“No offense,” she said, “but I wish I had anything better to do than come up here. It's sit at home, hit the gym, or come see you guys. Which, I guess, is great for my figure. Mom, you, uh, you wouldn't be happy with how big I'm getting. My jacket barely fits me now.” Rienne extended her arms and then flexed a swollen bicep. The leather creaked and went taut around the muscle. Feeling silly flexing for no one, she lowered her arms back down onto her lap, teasing bits of tail fur between her fingers. “I know you two don't want me moping up here all the time, too, but... I don't know what else to do. I just wish I had somebody. Anybody. Since you guys...”

Rienne felt a drop fall onto her shirt. She lifted a paw up to rub her eye but the dark fur came back dry. Another drop fell onto the fur on her knee, right through the shredded gap in her jeans. The vixen looked up at the matte black sky looming low overhead. Blue streaks crackled through the clouds. A few seconds later, the rumble shivered across the vixen's body, making her fur stand on end.

“Guess I ought to cut this one short,” she said, pushing herself to her feet and sweeping her tail out behind her. “Love you, Mom. Love you, Dad. I'll be back soon, I guess.”

A spear of lightning illuminated the hilltop in silver. The gravestones' shadows stretched long across the dead grass. A gentle patter of rain against dry dirt accompanied the dull roar of thunder. Rienne pulled her cadet hat down tighter and had started back towards the glowing light poles along the path when another flash of lightning convinced her to stop. She glanced up at the sky, letting the brim of her cap shield her eyes from the rain. Slowly, she turned back towards the fence at the edge of the field. Rienne weaved between gravestones, their holo-panels lighting up with faces of the dead as she walked to the fence and threaded her fingers into it. The metal was old and ragged now, barely ever maintained since no one but a silly, lonely fox came out this way.

Lightning flickered again, and for a moment, Rienne could see the whole valley down below. At first, there was a flash of it in her memory. Clean, white buildings with rooftop gardens. Wide streets and open fields full of flowers. Tall wind turbines in the distance. It wasn't a perfect place, but it had been beautiful. And it had been home. Once.

But the lightning illuminated fields of rubble. Tumbled, broken stones lay littered in fields and streets around the bones of buildings. The flowers were long gone; killed off when the sun was struck from the sky. The proud wind turbines lay bent over in the dirt, their props broken and twisted. The town had never even gotten a proper burial.

Rienne pulled her fingers from the chain links. Thunder followed her the whole way home.

She got through the checkpoint again mostly without incident, though they made her wait while the mech scanned her for contraband, just in case. Finding nothing, they let her go on, and the vixen

headed home before curfew set in. Her apartment block was a few streets down from the corporate gym, away from the brighter lights of the main roads and illuminated storefronts with the quilt of neon patchwork covering everything. Back here, it was old street lights with sodium lamps, a comfortable and dim reminder of the past. Rienne walked through pools of orange light as she approached the building and jogged up the stairs to the third floor. She could hear music from one apartment under the rumbling of the storm in the distance. Her neighbors next door were arguing; about what, she couldn't tell. As she fumbled for her card in her pocket, she tilted a black ear in their direction. Something about a food pack that was, or was not, expired. They fought over absolutely everything, but they stayed together. It was hard to tell if they were really in love or if they just stayed together because they had no where else to go. Rienne's heart said one thing and her brain said the other.

Fishing out her ID card once more, she swiped it through the reader in the lock and the door popped open. Rienne was happy enough to be home. Her muscles ached from the workout, and adding on top of that, her legs and feet were tired from the walk to and back from the Overlook. She pushed the door open and stepped inside. The automatic lights showed their age by humming and flickering before slowly brightening the front space to little more than a dim glow. The room wasn't much, just a couch to flop on and a video display unit pointed at the wall. There was a game console hooked up to it, sitting next to it on a flimsy stand. Her well-worn copy of *StarKnights* was wedged into the slot. Rienne took off her damp cadet hat and threw it onto the couch before running her claws through her hair and fixing it.

As she was shrugging off her jacket, a sound like a *thunk* of something being dropped from deeper inside the apartment made her freeze. Her ear pivoted towards the kitchen and she looked out of the corner of her eye. The vixen's blood went chilly and her muscles tensed. She always knew this was going to happen one day. Reaching down with her left paw, she gripped the handle of the knife on her belt and tugged it from the sheath. Her knuckles throbbed as she squeezed the handle and stepped forward, putting her back against the wall before turning to peek around the edge of the doorway with little more than one eye and her nose.

Her refrigerator door was hanging open, the light from inside falling onto a couple fallen food packs. There was no one, and nothing else, in sight. Still holding her knife, Rienne slid around the edge of the doorway and peered around. There weren't any other ways out of the kitchen area, so... where were they?

"Hey!" she hissed, leaning forward and swiveling her head around to see around corners and behind the fridge. "Who's in here?"

No response. Of course. Rienne wriggled her nose and put her knife back in its sheath at her hip. She walked past her small dining table and checked the window. It was locked, and as far as she could tell, hadn't been tampered with. Returning to the front room, she did the same with the windows there and the door. Tapping the inside of the lock with her fingers, she engaged the holo-panel and pulled up the access history. There was her entry just a couple minutes ago, and then nothing since yesterday. Maintenance hadn't been by in over a week. So she could rule out an intruder, probably.

Maybe it was an animal, which wouldn't be much better. Rienne knelt down beside the food packs on the floor and picked them up. They were opened on the ends, and some of the sludgy food paste inside had splattered out onto the floor when they were dropped. Or fell from the fridge right after the door opened in some freak circumstance. But they weren't shredded or torn open.

"Weird fucking day," the buff vixen muttered, pushing herself up and throwing the opened and possibly contaminated packs into the trash. That made her think of her empty credit account balance and she sighed. Now that she was looking at all the food, as unappetizing as it was, her stomach growled at her. She hadn't eaten since well before her workout. Rienne opened a cabinet and grabbed an individual snack block. Unwrapping it without bothering to look at the flavor, she sank her fangs into the soap-like puck of foodstuff.

Baked potato and cheddar cheese, with hints of sour cream and chives. Supposedly. She could at

least agree that the wedge of yellow material tasted like cheese, though cheddar may have been a stretch. Holding it in her muzzle between taking bites, Rienne cleaned up the floor, double-checked the remaining food pouches in the fridge, and then bagged up her trash. The lightning outside was flashing brighter, and she could hear the rain against the roof more clearly. Rienne checked the weather on her watch. It was only going to get worse, so she might as well get the trash out now rather than later. She ducked into her bedroom and grabbed her ear-pods, clipping them to her ears around her piercings and connecting the cable to her watch. Intense music like crashing waves filled her ears as she returned to the door. Pulling her jacket and hat back on, the vixen slipped back out the front door, threading her long, black-tipped tail through behind her before shutting it.

Hovering insubstantially and invisibly behind the refrigerator in the kitchen, Sugar wholeheartedly agreed with this fox's assessment of the day. She should have been happily enjoying the company of mortals who thought her a queen and were happy to bring her food and eat themselves silly, but the gluttony demon was doing work for an... omni-dimensional *thing*.

Sugar had gotten into the apartment early to wait for her quarry to return. This would be easiest if she had to deal with as few mortals as possible, and luckily, the vixen lived alone. Waiting gave her time to get some lay of the land, but to say this world was strange and unpleasant, though, was an understatement. Even lurking here in the apartment, Sugar felt the latent energy of this world in her essence. Corporatized weight loss programs, food rations processed half to death, gene-modification to sculpt "perfect" bodies... *blegh!* The whole place left a sour taste in her mouth.

And so did the "food." Sugar had been investigating these plastic food pouches in the refrigerator when the vixen came home. The paste was nutritious, in a way, but it was so synthetic and foul, it made her food-loving heart quail. It didn't matter if it kept mortals alive if they didn't *want* to eat it – at least, that was her thinking. She tried, and failed, to picture the equivalent of a bountiful banquet with bowls of food paste and stacks of plastic blocks flavored like the genuine article. How depressing.

But all thoughts of the stuff that passed for food here were gone once the vixen came in through the door. Sugar shifted out of her physical form as quickly as she could, dropping the food packs in her paws in the process and leaving the refrigerator open. When the golden-furred fox stepped through the door, all muscles and short hair and carrying a knife, Sugar barely believed her eyes. She had a decent idea of who she was looking for and this, well, wasn't it. But it really was her. The soul that pulsed underneath the fur and skin and bones was the same one she'd marked a long time ago. She held the piece of crystal that the stranger had given her in one paw. It was shimmering and warm, like it was telling her that she was in the right place.

Some parts of the fox were the same. The height, for one. And the face. But the rest, like her fur color and her build, were different. So was the name on some items around the apartment, which Sugar found while snooping. Rienne Ahlmir? That wasn't who she was looking for. She must have been far, far away from the neighborhood she usually prowled in. Despite being trans-dimensional herself, the demoness had only a little understanding of the mechanics of multiple dimensions, universes, worlds... whatever they were called. The eldritch being that put her up to this could probably explain it to her, since his people studied this kind of thing, but she would rather do anything but ask him.

In fact, what she really wanted to do was get this business done and get her butt back in her throne so she could gain back some of the mass she was spending hopping between universes. The vixen was here, she was alone, and Sugar was wasting time. Adjusting her scarf as it floated on unseen spiritual winds, Sugar twisted about and floated through the wall of the apartment and back into the open. Rain shivered through her insubstantial body as she drifted overhead, two and a half stories above the ground.

Rienne walked under a covered pathway towards the back of the apartment block to avoid most of the rain. Trash bag dangling from one paw, she nudged her sleeve up with a finger and hit skip,



moving on to another song with high vocals over a frenetic melody told through electric guitar. She was reaching the end of the walkway now, which unhelpfully did not extend all the way to the dumpsters. Sighing, Rienne flattened her ears down and tucked her hat over her face before jogging out into the downpour.

Puddles rippled on the concrete, with concentric circles reflecting the sodium light from up above as they rippled and crashed against one another. Rienne splashed through one as she reached the dumpster, grabbing the wet lid with one paw and putting her shoulder into heaving it upwards. The wet plastic straps from the trash bag slid from her fingers and she stooped to pick it back up. When she stood, she slung the bag into the dumpster and let the lid slam back down with a loud crash, splattering her in the face with water. Rienne groaned and tried wiping her face with her paw, taking a couple awkward steps backwards.

She bumped into something that wasn't behind her a moment ago. Whatever it was, it was soft, and rocked backwards like a person. A paw grabbed her by the shoulder. Already on edge from her scare earlier, thinking someone had broken into her apartment, Rienne fumbled for the grip of her knife at her hip even as she twisted about.

But then the world disappeared. It stopped raining. Rienne peered into an infinite black void. Time seemed to stretch and twist in every direction. Negative pressure threatened to yank the breath from her lungs. She hovered in mid-air, but there no air. There was nowhere. She was facing forwards and back, upside-down and tumbling sideways. The sensation lasted for less than a heartbeat before reality slammed back into her brain like a sledgehammer. Her twisting momentum carried her about, and she spun around one foot, grasping at anything to break her fall, but there was nothing about for miles, and she landed on her side in dry, parched, ochre dirt. Her knife tumbled from its sheath and bounced across the earth next to her.

Groaning, Rienne planted her dripping-wet paws on the ground and pushed herself onto her paws and knees. The rainwater running out of her fur and dripping from her clothes soaked into the bone-dry ground beneath her, disappearing almost without effect as if the ground had never experienced moisture before in its existence. Rienne grabbed her hat and her knife, pulling them closer to her. The handle of the knife bumped into something else laying beside her, and she picked it up between her fingers.

It was a small sliver of crystal, about the size of her thumb and completely colorless. It had a hexagonal cross-section and rough ends. The light coming through it looked... weird, as if it wasn't just passing through the stone. There wasn't anything else around here like it that she could see, just more dry dirt.

Actually, where was here? Rienne sat up on her knees, putting her hat back on. Her vision trailed up from the empty, flat expanse of red-orange ground stretching all around her to the impossibly-tall mountain peaks stretching towards the sky along the horizon. They were jagged and spiny, like seashells. Above them was a blood-red sky that swirled with incandescent blue eddies. Rienne's eyes went wide as she peered into a colossal black hole, with bands of color being sucked into its depths. It was eating the sky whole and sucking away almost all the light from a dying red star beside it.

The ground rumbled and shook beneath her, and Rienne almost fell over onto her side before she caught herself, knife and crystal still in her paws. At the edge of the world, one of the mountains was shivering and twisting, rising up from its foundations. The entirety of the landmass began to circle around, rotating to face her. And it was coming closer. Slowly, as it crest the horizon and moved in her direction, she saw a dozen crab-like legs carrying the mountain across the open field. Arms topped with vice-like pincers extended out from underneath the shell and grasped the ground, helping to pull it towards the tiny, golden-furred invader.

Rienne didn't know what to think. She couldn't even breathe. The vixen sat on her knees, slack-jawed as the monstrosity came closer. The ground roared and shook with earthquake force. Her teeth

rattled in her head and her heart pumped adrenaline to a brain that had no idea what to do with it. The fox's fight-or-flight reflex burned out in the face of the sheer size of this thing, and it was almost on top of her.

Someone grasped her arm again and once more she fell through the crease between worlds. This time it was like the moment when she tipped a chair just a little bit too far, except that feeling of impending falling lingered forever. When the world came back, the first thing she noticed was that brilliant light stabbed into her eyes, blinding her. She hadn't even been in the hell world long enough for her eyes to adjust to that dim light. This was eye-searing. Then that feeling of everlasting falling finally resolved itself and she fell.

Rienne plunged downwards into water, her eyes already squeezed shut. The water rushed into her nose and mouth as she gasped, and she found herself sinking into the cold depths. Struggling to get her bearings, without knowing which way was up or down, the fox kicked and flailed, swirling and splashing water in all directions. She kept sinking, dropping deeper under the surface. With her eyes shut, it was dark; if she cracked them open, it was a useless blur of brightness and blue everywhere.

Finally, her rump hit something solid underneath her. A bottom. Ground. Feeling her lungs heave and hitch, Rienne twisted herself about and got her feet against the bottom of the water. She pushed off of it in the direction she assumed was up. She wasn't an experienced swimmer, but she could flail for dear life, and she dragged herself back upwards until her head broke the surface. Wet hair was on her face, and she pushed it back. The world was still painful white and blue and green blobs. Swinging wildly, she reached for anything solid. Her knuckles smacked painfully against a rock next to her. She grabbed it with both claws. Solid concrete. Rienne heaved herself up and out of the water, hearing a rush of liquid pour from her fur and her clothes onto dry ground beneath her. She hacked up even more water from her lungs. Her massive tail was like a lead weight, completely soaked and laying flat like a mop on the ground behind her. Half of it still hung over the edge, submerged in the water.

With her chest burning, muscles aching, brain still swirling in confusion and eyes throbbing painfully, Rienne flopped onto her side and groaned, feeling water run out of her clothes and fur. The crystal she'd been gripping tightly in her paw tumbled from her fingers and bounced across the concrete. The vixen just lay there, breathing deep and making sure she was actually alive.

She actually recognized that acrid chemical stink in the water, the kind that seared the inside of her nose. But it had been years since she'd ever smelled something like it. Not since she was a little girl, living back in her old home with her parents, walking down the street to the community pool. She could feel the sun warming her face, like when she'd lay on the grass to dry after getting out of the water.

Was she home?

\* \* \* \* \*

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