

### Synchronicity: Rienne's Origin, pt. 3

by Cerine Hero

Sunlight began to filter between the opening window blinds as the control system engaged the wake up protocol. Soft music rose in volume from the speakers in the walls. Birds seemed to chatter and chirp along with the music outside the window, as fields of flowers swayed in the morning breeze.

Rienne didn't want to get up. The light outside was bright, and she was warm and comfy. She tucked her head tighter against the pillow and tried to push her ears against it to block out the music, but it wasn't working all that well. Sleep was drifting from her brain like sand, and the world was coming back to greet her.

The door to her room opened, with soft footsteps and the click of claws on wood. A tall, friendly figure stood beside her bed. Rienne cracked one eye open and looked, seeing a smiling face with sparkling glasses looking down at her. Beneath the blankets, her tail wiggled happily.

"Mom," she murmured, yawning.

"Honey," her mom said. She shook her head slowly. "Don't make this weirder than it already is. Now get up."

Her mom lifted up a backpack and threw it at her. An explosion of reality slapped hard against Rienne's chest and face, and she woke up with a jolt, muscular arms gripped snugly around the backpack.

"What the fuck?!" she hissed, instinctively opening her eyes and regretting it. "Goddammit..." The sun really was out again.

Blinking away sleep and tears, Rienne brushed her hair back and looked around. She was still on the couch at Erin's place, and the sun was pouring in through the front windows. Cerine was standing in front of the couch, paws on her hips and looking down both her muzzle and her cleavage at Rienne. She was dressed already, wearing clothes for hiking. Which, really, wasn't *that* different from what she had on yesterday. Rienne could barely see it from down here, but the pink fox had that cowbell on still, too.

"Good morning," Cerine said, pink tail curling behind her. Her tone was a little less tight and guarded than yesterday, but still not entirely relaxed. "We're going to Gardenvale."

Rienne lifted her head up and blinked. Rubbing one paw against her face, she groaned, "Do what? Wait, really? What's with the change of heart?"

Cerine shrugged and paced around the living room. "Well, it's not too far away for a drive, so I figured we could make a day trip of it. I have no idea what good it'll do, but..." She picked at the hem of her shirt. "I just figure some fresh air will be nice."

"And the real reason?"

The buxom fox sighed and rolled her eyes. "Because I feel like a bitch after yesterday, and I hurt Erin. I still don't know what's going on and I don't like it, but I let it get the better of me yesterday." She plopped down on the couch beside Rienne and it took her chest an extra second to settle. The vixen seemed to deflate a lot all of a sudden. Her shoulders slumped and she let her head hang down a bit. The hard-assed fox now just looked like someone stuck on a pedestal against her will. "This is as tough for you as it is for me, if not more so. I was too harsh. I'm sorry."

Rienne put the backpack down and shook her head. "You don't have to apologize. You were looking out for yourself and Erin. You feel responsible for her."

"Ah." Cerine looked sidelong at her around the edge of her glasses. "She told you. My friends are generally pretty friendly with her and are getting used to it, *certain* people notwithstanding. But still, Erin feels set apart from everybody." Cerine rubbed her muzzle. "She's idealistic and a bit naive sometimes, but she's not stupid. I think she's just better at reading people than I am. I don't know where on earth she got it from, but she's got intuition and empathy I can't even imagine." She gave Rienne a look. "Plus, I think she just wants a friend who knows less than she does."

Rienne felt a twitch in her chest and looked away. She didn't know what to say to that. Beside her, Cerine adjusted in her seat and looked towards the TV.

"How'd you like the movie?"

The gold fox's ears twitched. Did she see that? "It was good."

"Huh. Figured you would find it lame." Cerine reached into her pocket and took out Rienne's wristwatch. She'd left it in the bathroom yesterday. The pink fox turned it over in her paws and then handed it to her. "Never seen anything like this, but I mean, I'm not a tech expert or anything. Still, it's not something made here, that's for sure. And definitely seems busted, like it's not getting a signal."

Cerine was right. No matter what Rienne did with it, the watch wouldn't pop up the holo display. Still, she slipped it over her wrist just for familiarity and comfort. Cerine climbed to her feet and tugged up on her jeans.

"Erin should be about done getting ready. Then we can get your clothes from the dryer and we'll be on our way." The vixen started walking into the kitchen. "Again, though, not sure what you expect to find out there."

Rienne was wedged into the middle seat in the back of Cerine's car. Even though there were only three of them in the car, she still felt crowded in the back. On her left, Cerine's pink tail snaked from the back of the seat, up from the floorboard, and lay in the seat beside her. It was the same story on her right, only a brown, wigglier tail instead. Rienne's own tail was coiled around her legs between the other two. Erin was recounting the movie from last night for Cerine, who half-listened while driving. Occasionally she asked Rienne to corroborate things, but for the most part she just talked about what she liked about the movie to Cerine. The two of them had made up quickly, especially since Cerine had relented and began playing along with helping.

Rienne spent most of her time looking out the side windows. The light was still a big issue for her, but she had her hat again as well as a pair of sunglasses Erin let her borrow. Her own clothes were washed and clean, and she had everything on but her jacket since the weather was warm. Outside the window, she watched as they drove past lots of buildings, all in bright light and few looking anything like what she could call familiar. At first it was houses, then they drove through a commercial area with lots of shops and restaurants. Then, for a bit, they cut through the inside of the nearby city, where things looked a bit more like what Rienne expected. At the same time, it also wasn't what she thought it would be. It wasn't like her city at all. Maybe it was the daytime ambiance. But soon enough, they left the city behind and got onto a road where Cerine could speed up, and they drove into the country, where it was nothing but thick forest and farmland to be seen.

As they rode, Rienne couldn't stop thinking about the visions she'd seen through that piece of crystal in her pocket. The more she saw of Cerine and Erin's home, the more she began to feel like her own world wasn't just "not here." Green, healthy trees swept past her window, their leaves dancing in sunlight. This wasn't anything like what she knew.

"Rienne?"

She untangled herself from her thoughts and looked up. Erin was twisted about in her seat and looking back at her. Rienne ran a couple fingers down her muzzle. "I was distracted."

"I was asking what you thought of the movie, since you haven't—"

"Hey, Erin," Cerine interrupted, tipping her head in that direction for a moment. "Leave her be. She's got a lot to process."

"Alright, *mom*."

"Oh my god, don't you start that, too."

Rienne's ears perked up at that. She remembered her dream just before she woke up and her blood chilled in her veins. "Don't tell me, did I—"

"Yup."

"Fuck!" She dropped her face into her black paws. "I was dreaming, and to be honest, you look

a lot like my mom did, so-”

Cerine cleared her throat. “You know, you could do me a huge favor and just never mention that again.” The pink vixen wriggled her nose and squinted, glancing back at Rienne through the rear view mirror. “Actually. You had a swift dad, right? Out of curiosity, what was your mom's name?”

“Sylvia Ahlmir. Why?”

“Just making sure we're not long-lost siblings,” Cerine explained. “Though we look about the same age, so probably not likely, anyways.”

“I've got my theory,” Erin piped in.

Cerine slowed a bit and took an off-ramp, diving a little further before pulling into a desolate little parking lot surrounded by woodlands. The lot was otherwise empty, except for a couple teenage guys, one coyote and one badger, sitting on a crude wooden fence delineating the grass walking path from the woods behind it. They hurriedly snuck their cigarettes out of sight as the doors on the car opened and three tall vixens climbed out. Erin was first, stretching in the sun and then pulling her top back down over her midriff. Cerine shuffled out of the driver's seat next, and the two teenagers went dead silent as she stepped around the car, pointedly ignoring their obvious stares. She clipped her backpack's straps together above her chest and then around her waist. The two teenagers kept staring until they heard another car door shut, and they turned to see a powerfully-built golden vixen, arms barely contained in her sleeves and a ragged, punk-ish look to her, walking directly towards them. The coyote quailed and fell backwards off the fence, landing on his back. Rienne looked at them both, raised a pierced eyebrow, and then offered a simple wave before heading past. As the vixens gathered on the other side of the parking lot, the coyote and badger looked at each other as if they were unsure that had actually happened.

“Where are we?” Rienne asked, looking around at the woods. A car drove past the parking lot on the road nearby.

“This is the place,” Cerine answered, fishing in the side pocket on her backpack for something. “I know I had one...”

“Other side,” Erin told her.

As the other two searched the backpack for something, Rienne looked around a bit. The lot was at the bottom of a wooded hill, from what she could tell. A worn-down path leading from the corner of the pavement was the head of a trail leading upwards into the woods, where it was shaded by the thick press of trees on both sides. Beside the trailhead was an informational sign, covered by a quaint little shingle roof to protect it from the elements. Rienne walked up and read it.

“Gardenvale Overlook,” the sign said in large, crisp letters. “State Nature Preserve.” There was more to it, detailing the local ordinances about littering and loitering, which Rienne ignored.

Rienne glanced around again. If this really was the Overlook, then where was the graveyard? From what she knew, this hillside should've been covered in graves, the holo-panels on the headstones illuminating the path for any visitors with their ethereal glow. Of course, her “version” of the overlook had been cleared of most vegetation – and then whatever was left had died off over time – and the area around her right now was practically untamed. There was also the chance they weren't actually at it yet. In her memory, the city wasn't too far off from this spot, but she and the others had driven a while to get here. Looking back over her shoulder, there was little more than thick woodlands occasionally cut through with highways sprawling in all directions.

She looked for any excuse she could think of, really, to push back against the growing realization in the back of her mind.

Erin bumped against her playfully at the sign, a hopeful smile on her muzzle. “We're here. Whatcha thinking? Is it, maybe, uh, stirring any memories?”

“I don't have amnesia,” Rienne told her, frowning.

“Oh, right,” Erin said. She pet her braid and blushed. “I guess I meant, um, is it what you were expecting? Does it look familiar?”

“No,” Rienne answered, “not one bit.” She folded her arms tightly around herself, feeling the breeze catch her tail and play with the fur.

“Well, we’re not there yet, this is just the head of the trail,” Cerine explained, walking over to the others and peering at Rienne’s face. Behind her glasses, she narrowed her brows and frowned. “You alright? Your nose is pale.”

Rienne blinked and shook her head. She could feel the sliver of crystal in her pants pocket, but she resisted taking it out and peering through it. Not yet; not until she was ready. She wanted to look through her eyes first and see what she found. Only then would she want to take a look through the piece of crystal. The vixen swelled out her chest as she breathed in and then sighed slowly. She wasn’t even in the mood to lie to herself. She was just afraid of what she’d see through the crystal.

Cerine finally nodded, realizing Rienne had retreated back into her head, and rolled a small, round object around in her paw. “Anyways, let’s get up the trail. Hold your breath.”

“Hold my wh-” Rienne started to ask, confused, but Cerine didn’t hear her. The pink vixen raised her arm up and whipped the ball at the ground. It hit with a dull *pop* and released a rapidly expanding cloud of thin white smoke. Rienne inhaled instinctively and felt it sting the inside of her nose. She coughed and exhaled sharply to clear her sinuses, feeling her eyes water. The gas surrounded all three of the foxes like a thin haze before being blown away by the wind, and then the small cloud drifted over to the two teenagers on the fence, who gagged lightly.

Rienne waved her paws in front of her face. “What the fuck was that?” she wheezed, starting to push her sunglasses up to rub her eyes, but Cerine got her wrists and pulled them back down.

“Bug repellent,” the alchemist explained. “Made it myself. Don’t rub your eyes for a couple minutes. The actual repellent stuff isn’t bad, but the bomb element’s not friendly with direct contact.”

“You could’ve warned her,” Erin said, wriggling her nose.

“Yeah, I forgot. Sorry.” Cerine hiked her backpack and held the straps, her forearms pressing her prodigious bust together between them. “You ready to head on up? We’ll go at your pace.”

“I think so,” Rienne answered.

Cerine nodded and turned to start heading up the trail, with Erin at her side. As soon as the other two vixens took a step off the paved area around the parking lot, they instinctively whipped their tails up around their bodies – in Cerine’s case, wrapping it around her waist twice over. Erin could only get about one and a quarter loops. Rienne blinked and watched them, and then lifted her tail up in her paw. She’d looped her tail around herself sometimes, sure, but only to keep it out of the way, since it was pretty obnoxiously big. They were doing it to avoid getting dirt and brush in their tail fur, she realized. That had never been much of an issue for her in the city. Following their example, though, Rienne flicked her tail around her waist and followed along behind them.

The trail had a slight upward grade as they walked along it. Occasionally, Rienne heard bird songs or small animals in the undergrowth beyond the edge of sight where the trees were clustered. The trail itself was well maintained, especially compared to the rarely-visited version of this place that she remembered. The gold vixen looked deep into the woods, hoping to see anything that would help her place where she was. But as far as she looked, she just saw trees and little rocks.

She didn’t realize that Cerine had slowed her pace up the trail, letting Erin get a decent distance ahead of the two of them. The pink vixen was walking alongside her, tail still worn like an absurdly fluffy belt around her middle. Rienne snapped out of her absent-minded gazing into the forest and looked towards Cerine, now trying not to get re-distracted by those ridiculously-sized boobs as they bounced beside her.

“So,” the pink fox started to say, her voice a bit low. She aborted her sentence and sighed, massaging her temple before trying again. “Look, before we get up there... tell me, like, actually: *Are* you really from Gardenvale?”

Rienne furrowed her brow. Cerine still didn’t believe her. But at least this wasn’t like their conversation across the dinner table last night. The pink fox sounded more weary and resigned. She

knew where they were going. Rienne almost wanted to ask her what they were about to go find, but she couldn't bring herself to muster the words. The mystery would be revealed in due time. Until then...

"I am, but... it was a long time ago. I lived there when I was very little. I don't remember a whole lot, it's kind of... just bits and pieces. I think I remember it being a corp-town, the kind planned out and built by a corporation for their employees. I don't know what they did there. I just went to school and ran around in the fields. My parents were scientists. They worked in the big building in the middle of town. Then I... don't remember much past that. Things went bad after... y'know."

Cerine was watching her intently, listening to her story. She brushed a lock of white hair that had escaped her ponytail back from her face. "I don't know."

Rienne inhaled deeply and looked up. Erin was pretty far ahead of them on the trail now. "There was a bombing. At least, that's what I figured out. I think they blew up something bad. Really bad. All I knew at the time was I was asleep, and they broke the sky. And then Gardenvale just... wasn't there anymore. After that, I got put into the corporate foster system. That I really don't remember much. Just blurs."

There was a long moment of silence between them, broken only by the snap of a stray twig across the trail. Finally, Cerine opened her muzzle and said simply, "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. No one ever believes me, anyways."

"For what it's worth, I do." Cerine picked at the hem of her plaid top. "I believe you're telling the truth. I'm not sure what to *do* with that information, but... well, we're almost there. Erin's at the top."

Rienne looked up, seeing Erin well ahead, waving towards them both. The forest opened up at the top of the hill, where they came up to a pretty sharp cliff. There was a wooden fence erected at the slope, which overlooked a wide valley. The geography lined up fairly well with what Rienne recalled in her mind – though she'd only ever seen it in the dark, with nothing more than her flashlight or the glow of gravestones to light her way. But that was the only thing that looked familiar.

There was no graveyard. The vixen had started to realize she would have begun to pass some of the gravestones a while before now, but it was only until she was here, at the top of the hill, that it fully struck her. The summit was a leveled-out patch of grass, big enough to accommodate several groups of people coming up the trail. Two picnic tables rest on the far end of the clearing, beneath the shade of a huge oak tree. It was idyllic. Rienne took several steps off the trail, feeling sun-warmed grass beneath her feet. The crystal weighed a ton in her pocket, and she ran a fingertip along the bulge of where it lay underneath the fabric of her jeans.

She could feel her heart racing in her chest. In her vision, the wood fence separating the overlook from the vale below seemed to recede further and further away as the grass and sky stretched away from her. A stiff breeze blew against her, knocking her hat off and unfurling her tail from her waist so that it could drift lazily beside her. She glanced back over her shoulder. Cerine was standing a couple paces behind her, waiting patiently. Erin walked over to join the pink fox after running to catch Rienne's hat. They'd brought her to the cliff; it was her job to jump. The chocolate fox looked a bit confused, standing with her paws covering her muzzle and swaying in place. Beside her, Cerine was watching Rienne intently through her glasses, one paw on her hip and the other hanging loose at her side.

The pink vixen nodded towards her. She knew. Cerine had already figured it out. She was just waiting for Rienne to get across the finish line. Or rather, to admit to herself what she suspected. Rienne turned back around, the wind tousling her hair as she took the slow steps forward. She could picture the chain link fence in front of her – the one she'd held on to right before the storm just yesterday. Now it was a simple, rustic, warm, and sun-dappled wooden fence, and Rienne set her paws on its weathered beam. Inhaling, she looked down at Gardenvale.

There was nothing there.

That wasn't quite true. There were flowers. The whole valley was a single, unbroken field of

flowers, growing in patches of color and mingling together. As the wind gusted through the narrow valley below, the flowers rippled and danced in hypnotic patterns.

Rienne sank her claws into the wooden beam of the fence. She knew the town wouldn't just be there, intact and inhabited. That was... too much to hope for. She expected it to lay in ruins still, perhaps grown over with moss and weeds and vines, the white stone, long abandoned, being reclaimed into the earth by nature. She thought that Cerine was baffled by her insistence that she was from Gardenvale because it was destroyed. Why would anyone be from a pile of rubble? That was the reaction she got from everyone else.

But no. Gardenvale just lived up to its name; a valley of colorful flowers waving back at her, protected by state ordinances, or so that sign at the trailhead said. There was nothing there and there had never *been* anything there. The town where Rienne grew up just didn't exist. The gold-furred vixen stared at the waving flowers down below, her black-tipped tail hanging low on the ground behind her. On the other side of the clearing, Cerine inhaled and sighed. Erin, standing beside her, fidgeted on her feet while glancing back and forth between her lookalikes.

Rienne leaned forward, trying to process. She'd already grown to realize she wasn't just somewhere really far away, way out from underneath the blackened sky over her home. Because she was here. She was looking at where she belonged. Her pocket felt heavy. The vixen slid her paw down into it and closed her fingers around the piece of crystal. Slowly, she took it out and looked at it laying in the middle of her black-furred paw. The crystal didn't seem to glitter with the sunlight up above or catch the glare of neon signage anymore. The glow coming through it was just dark.

In a shivering paw, Rienne raised the crystal up in front of her eyes and peered through it, just as she'd done last night. Through the crystal's clear facets, the flower-covered meadow in the valley was swept away. The view was dark to the point of being almost impossible to see, but lightning crackled in the clouds overhead. Rienne held her breath, pushing the bright, colorful world around the edges of the crystal away and peeking into its lightless depths. She waited as charge built up in the storm clouds above and then released itself, striking some tall piece of rock on the hill on the far side of the vale. In the flickering glow, she could clearly see the bones of buildings, twisted and half-collapsed, sprawled across the valley. The chain link fence separating her from the sharp cliff was just a few inches from her face. The vixen reached out with her other paw, but there was nothing there to grab.

Lightning flashed again and she looked up to see the wreckage of proud wind turbines in the distance, silhouetted against the flickering sky. The lightning faded and the broken towers faded back into the dark. What was she looking at? Was it a memory? Or something more? This little crystal showed her the world as she knew it, rather than the world where she stood. Rienne looked back over her shoulder at Cerine. The pink fox, her almost perfect doppelganger, was watching her still, tail slowly swishing behind her. There were two of her – plus Erin, of course.

Rienne looked back into the crystal. If it was showing her her own world, then... She turned to her right and peered down. In the flickering light from the lightning above, a pair of matching gravestones shimmered in the dark. There was no one physically present in front of them to activate their holographic projectors, but the bolts of lightning revealed the epitaphs clear enough: Adrian and Sylvia Ahlmir. The graves were exactly how she'd left them the day before.

The vixen lowered her paw down and slowly closed her fist around the crystal. Finally, she let herself believe what she already knew was true: This wasn't her world. Everything she knew was on the other side of this piece of crystal. She stood overlooking a cliff with a very different history, one where she hadn't lived – or she had, and she was standing behind herself right now. Tears rolled down her cheeks and along her muzzle as she tilted her head towards the ground and gripped the wooden fence ahead of her. She could only think of everything that she'd left behind. It wasn't family. It wasn't friends. It was just... misery. A twenty-year-long nightmare that she'd finally woken up from.

No more sun-stricken days.

No more tasteless food packs.

No more lonely nights in an old apartment, wishing she had someone, anyone to be with.

“Mom, Dad,” she whispered under her breath. She looked sideways at the patch of grass where her parents were buried in the other world. She seared that spot into her memory forever. “I love you. I found where I belong.”

Rienne lurched backwards, her left paw pivoted back above her head. With all of her might, she hurled the piece of crystal in a long arc through the air. The clear stone sparkled darkly in the sunlight as it spun, tumbling end-over-end until it landed someplace among the flowers of Gardenvale, where everything from her old life belonged.

The vixen stumbled backwards, tears still running down her face. She collapsed onto her butt as her chest began to hitch and heave. Before she knew it, there were soft, brown-furred arms around her. Erin dropped to her knees beside Rienne and held the crying fox tight. Before she completely lost her composure, Rienne turned and shoved her face into Erin's neck. Cerine sat down beside her on the other side and picked up her paw and held it, smiling sadly.

Rienne just let the tears she'd been collecting for years flow out of her.

Sugar found the stranger sitting on one of the picnic table benches at the Gardenvale Overlook, stiff and unmoving aside from his constantly changing, shifting appearance. He silently observed the scene unfolding with the three vixens as they merged into a single, multi-tailed pile in the grass. The fennec-like gluttony demon floated over to the picnic tables, still keeping a healthy distance from the omnidimensional creature on the bench.

The stranger didn't look in her direction, but he sensed her. “Curious,” he said, his voice tight and distant. It was like he was talking to himself, but felt no compulsion to do so until someone was within earshot. His gaze was focused on where Erin was holding the emotional Rienne snugly against her body. “She has bonded with the simulacrum more than the genuine article.

“Sugar,” he said, turning to regard her. His eyes were two different colors. An instant later, they were the same. “Have a seat.”

Petting her iridescent purple scarf, Sugar reluctantly did as he requested, taking a seat on as close to the edge of the bench as her hindquarters would allow. Which was closer than usual, admittedly. A couple universe jumps – including one completely unexpected one – had burned a lot of her fuel. Once this business was concluded, she would be feasting for a couple straight days to put herself back in order.

Sugar peered towards the vixens in the clearing. From this vantage point in the spiritual world, the view was a little... unusual. Sugar could see the foxes' respective souls in bright relief while their physical forms were muted and hazy. To her eyes, there were two Cerines sitting on the grass: one in the middle, with her face buried in the thick fluff of the third, different soul, and another sitting beside the first. The one in the middle was the vixen she'd transported here, Rienne, the one with gold fur and piercings and meaty muscles. Beside her sat the Cerine that Sugar was more familiar with.

But even so, this Cerine was different from the one she'd teased before in another world. Her soul was limned by a black shadow, like a silhouette of darkness that surrounded her. An ornament at the hollow of the fox's neck shined like a bright star in the spiritual world, as well, shimmering with a radiant, red-orange light. Sugar could instantly recognize another demon's bond. As she stared at it, she began to feel a canine presence pushing back against her. Within the shadowy corona surrounding Cerine's soul, a skull-like visage began to take shape. Reddish embers smoldered in its eye sockets. It glared daggers at Sugar, warning her away from its bonded mortal.

Sugar just rolled her eyes. Let the dog bark. She wasn't afraid of it, but neither would she much benefit from pushing the issue. It was a bit disappointing to find this Cerine already claimed, but there was still something interesting to see. The other soul, the one different from the other two, was smaller and weaker than the others, but Sugar could tell that it was just newly-minted, still growing and developing. In short order it would blaze as brightly as any other. That must have been the one that the

stranger referred to as a simulacrum. The word meant nothing to Sugar, but she was interested in that fox's curvier figure. The sense of gluttony coming off of her soul was muted, but maybe she had promise.

The gluttony demon realized that the silence was stretching out infinitely between the two of them. Maybe the stranger didn't care, but she had questions. And places to be. "What," she began to say, pausing to collect her words, "was the point of all this? I've encountered different versions of the same mortal before, sure, but... not like these two. It's similar and yet... not at all."

"Because our individuals here are a different kind of story altogether," the stranger answered. He held out a paw in front of himself with two fingers touching. An flickering indigo flame appeared just above his fingertips. "Souls are strange things. Immortal, inscrutable, and unique. Mostly. When you go to prey upon another version of the same mortal, Sugar--"

"I wouldn't put it like *that*."

"-you're seeing another shade of that soul, fragmented by the branching timelines that the mortal has lived through without realizing it." He separated his fingers and the little mote of fire broke apart, floating above both fingers. "The soul splits and splits, and is reunited in the end. But what you see here, this is something else entirely."

The stranger brought the flame back together. Then he raised his other paw, in the same pose as the first, and created a second identical flame. He held them apart, but as Sugar watched, the two flames danced in perfect sync upon a spiritual wind.

"The same soul, born apart but twice, in synchronicity," he explained. "The timeline I asked you to visit, it branched away from this one many mortal ages ago, long before either of our girls were born. They are not what-could-have-beens of one another. They are *synchrons*, separate individuals who share an entangled soul. The common soul binds them, drawing upon traits of one to share with the other. That is why they appear so similar. Not terribly rare beings, but always beautiful in their curiosity and I could not let an opportunity for study to go to waste. The results are already fascinating."

Sugar's head hurt, and she currently didn't even have a physical brain *to* hurt. "What about the other one?"

"The simulacrum?" The stranger tilted his head, which caused color and shape to ripple nauseatingly across his form, as he looked at Erin. "A footnote of little interest."

"Well," Sugar huffed. "I find her interesting, at least." The gluttony demoness floated upwards from the bench and twisted about in mid-air to face the stranger. Beginning to peel back the edges of reality so she could slip between them, she said, "If you have everything you need from me, then I have a kingdom of feasting cats I want to get back to."

"Do you not want your reward, Sugar?"

Sugar was very tempted to just hop through the gap between dimensions that she'd peeled open. But curiosity got the better of her. She let the tear close and then drifted back down so that she was "standing" on the grass in front of the stranger. "I'd like to know what you have that could tempt me."

"I would never dare to tempt a demoness," the stranger told her, and Sugar was pretty sure that was his idea of a joke. He held out his paw once again, and another sparkling crystal materialized above it, turning about slowly. It was another one of those guiding crystals, like the one Rienne had just pitched over the cliff. Sugar couldn't help but be intrigued as she took it from the stranger and peered at it. The stranger leaned back a bit and inclined his head. "There is a fractured timeline that is in dire need of annihilation. I believe it is a perfect opportunity for you."

"Sounds like yet more work," Sugar muttered.

"It is made entirely of sucrose."

The gluttony demoness's eyes widened. "I am now listening."

"As I said. A perfect opportunity for *She Who Can Devour An Entire Universe And Still Be Able to Consume Another*." The stranger knitted his paws together. "Mortals attempted to twist the fabric of their timeline. They failed, of course. It would be pointless to allow trillions of lives to be snuffed out



over such a foolish thing, so my people contained the damage in a fragmented, uninhabited branch. But it will not last forever, and it would be better for everyone if, when the fragmented timeline merges back with its parent, it was empty.”

Sugar clutched the crystal in her paws tight like it was a golden ticket. “And here I suspected your kind didn't care.”

The stranger smiled. “Sugar. We care immensely.”

Space unfolded around the gluttony demoness and she slipped away from view, following the guidance of the crystal in her claws to a universe of pure sugar to consume. The dimensional door closed behind her, leaving the stranger alone to continue observing his pet experiment. The three vixens were climbing to their feet now, completely unaware of their observers. Holding paws, they walked back towards the trail and disappeared from view. The stranger watched them go and then nodded in satisfaction, his essence blowing away on an unseen breeze.

The room was bathed in a silver glow late at night as the credits rolled upwards along the television screen. In front of the TV, the couch was buried underneath a fox pile and the floor in front of it was a tangle of long, colorful tails. By the time the third Star Trek movie was finished – according to Cerine, you had to watch the third one immediately after the second, and she was right – two-thirds of the audience was asleep.

Rienne was pinned in the middle of the couch. Wearing a simple black pajama top and shorts, with her knife on a small belt tied about the middle of her tail, the well-muscled vixen had apparently found herself as the designated pillow, either by choice or incidentally. Erin snoozed adorably in her arms, having cuddled up close with the golden fox halfway through the second movie and passing out shortly afterwards. Her muzzle lay tucked in the crook of Rienne's elbow, with her cheek pressed up against one of her strong biceps. Cerine had held out against sleep slightly longer, and had taken up a more solitary position on her seat of the couch. But when sleep had finally claimed her, the dairy fox slumped sideways onto Rienne's folded legs, her face laying on a flank of golden thigh. Rienne's foot had gone numb under the weight of one of her fat damn udders, but she didn't dare move it.

It had been a strange couple of weeks. Rienne's new, adopted world was as familiar as it was completely obtuse. The people were nicer, but the systems were all different, and she was struggling with some of the technology here. Once she saved up some money, she apparently needed to get a “phone,” which seemed to be what everyone called their pocket computers. Absolutely no one had an *actual* phone, the kind mounted on a wall or a street corner. It bewildered her.

But as tough as some days were, she could count on coming back here, where there would be a warm, snug hug and a friendly couple of faces – even if they were hers – waiting for her. Erin was bursting at the seams with emotional support, and Rienne relied heavily on Cerine for intellectual support. That girl loved to explain things. Sometimes too much. It was amazing that she wasn't a teacher. The three of them set some time aside to play games or watch movies together, which afforded Cerine the opportunity to serve as a fire hose of random trivia.

Rienne reached down and gently lifted Cerine's glasses from her muzzle, putting them out of the way so they wouldn't get lost or stepped on. Then she brushed a lock of hair back from her face. The pink vixen yawned in her sleep and unwittingly snuggled in tighter against her doppelganger. Smiling to herself, Rienne squeezed Erin tighter in her arms and leaned down to lightly kiss the bridge of her muzzle.

These two were her family. Her sisters. And she'd do anything for them.  
She was home.

\* \* \* \* \*

A big thank you to all my Patreon subscribers! You guys are making this possible!  
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