

Fleeting Lunar Phantasia

Part Four

“Who?”

For once, Rika asked the question that was on all of our minds.

“You haven’t heard of him?” Father Richelot gasped.

Rika shook her head. “Doesn’t ring a bell.” She turned to Ritsuka. “You?”

Ritsuka shook his own head and turned to Mash. “Do you recognize him, Mash?”

“U-um, I don’t recall a Heroic Spirit in Chaldea’s databases matching that title,” Mash answered.

“Me neither,” I said before they could all start looking in my direction.

Frankly, it was a name equal parts ominous and pretentious, like a serial killer going around and calling himself “Alucard.” I suppose Bet hadn’t been particularly good about that, though, since our most prolific serial killers had been the likes of “Jack Slash,” “Bonesaw,” and “Crawler,” and no one had laughed at how silly and simple *their* names were.

Serenity, contrary to Father Richelot’s reaction, merely smiled. “I guess that means I got him, in the end, if no one remembers him a hundred years from now.”

No, I hadn’t missed that part, either.

“You said you didn’t know anything about what was going on here,” I accused her.

She wasn’t fazed in the slightest.

“I said that I didn’t really know anything about Servants and Heroic Spirits,” she replied, “and I said we could leave the other explanations for after we found somewhere safe to stay.” She gestured to the church we were standing in. “We’re somewhere safe, now.”

She...wasn’t wrong, when I thought back. She *hadn’t* said she didn’t know anything about what was happening, only that she didn’t really grasp the idea of Servants, so she hadn’t lied to us earlier at all.

That didn’t automatically mean she was suddenly trustworthy or anything, but it *was* another point in the “trust her” column, even if it was very obvious that she wasn’t telling us everything.

“Miss, are you certain?” Father Richelot asked, addressing Serenity. “It really, truly is *him*?”

“He’s the entire reason I’m here,” she told him. “I’ve been chasing him for...a long time. I can’t say what he did or what happened to him after he got here, but I can promise you that he

definitely did come here. Otherwise, our Chaldean friends here would be handling this situation on their own.”

“Hey, not cool!” said Rika.

Serenity shrugged. “It’s the truth. He’s my target, so I just followed him here. If he wasn’t here, I wouldn’t be either.”

“If you’re right, then there wouldn’t be a problem for us to solve in that case either, so none of us would be here,” I said.

Earlier, she’d claimed to be a native of Rennes, or at least have lived here long enough to know her way around, and yet she’d also said that she just came here a few hours ago and that she was following this King of Rot guy.

Of course, the simple answer to that contradiction was that really *had* lived her life in Rennes — before, that was, becoming a Servant and following him back here. Maybe she was a Servant in the first place because she’d died fighting him.

The picture was starting to come together. I still didn’t have all of the pieces, but the puzzle was slowly filling in.

“Huh,” said Rika. “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“She’s right, though,” said Mash. “If this King of Rot is the one with the Grail, then if he wasn’t here and didn’t have the Grail, then there wouldn’t even be a Singularity for us to resolve, would there?”

“And the Doc wouldn’t have had to wake us up in the middle of the night,” Rika grouched.

I reached for my communicator, pressing the buttons until I turned the comms back on.

Beep-beep!

“Hello?” Romani’s voice asked, coming from my wrist.

“My God!” Father Richelot startled, pressing his hand to his chest. “What *is* that contraption?”

“A device that lets us communicate with our comrades back in the future,” I answered him simply, and then turned my attention to Romani. “Romani, do you know of anyone called ‘the King of Rot?’”

“King of Rot?” Romani’s voice echoed. Father Richelot was still staring at my arm as though I had grown another hand. “I...can’t say I’m familiar with a Heroic Spirit like that. Hang on, let me check.”

A brief moment passed. For a few seconds, the only sound was the clacking of Romani’s fingers typing on his keyboard. Then —

“No results,” said Romani. “At least, not any recognized from our proper timeline. Why do you ask?”

I looked back at Serenity and stared her straight in the eyes. “According to Serenity, he’s the one behind this Singularity.”

“He is?” asked Romani, surprised. “Wait, does that mean we know the culprit this soon?”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

“Maybe,” Serenity answered for me. “He would have arrived here weak and vulnerable. It might be better for everyone involved if he just died before he could do much of anything with this...Grail you’re talking about.”

“You don’t think that’s likely,” I said, more statement than question.

She shrugged. “He’s tenacious. You don’t survive for over a thousand years on luck and happy thoughts.”

Romani choked, Mash’s mouth dropped open, and my neck almost cracked from how quickly my head jerked around. The twins, of course, were impressed, but largely clueless.

“A thousand years?” Romani squeaked.

“At least,” Serenity confirmed.

“So he’s super old,” said Rika. “What does that mean, aside from the fact he really needs moisturizer?”

Of course Rika had a joke for that.

“The older something is, the more powerful it becomes,” I answered her. “Things with quadruple digit lifespans tend to be the sort of things that give *Servants* trouble.”

Rika’s face, already washed out in the lighting, went paler. “R-right. So he might need his food to be mashed, but he’s still a total badass who could break me with his pinky finger. G-good to know!”

“You had the right of it earlier, by the way,” Serenity said to her. “The King of Rot is a thousand-year-old vampire. He’s changed his name several times throughout the centuries, so no one even knows for sure how old, only that he’s been around since at *least* the reign of Charlemagne.”

Her math, at least, checked out, if our enemy was indeed this King of Rot guy. Charlemagne... It was unreal to imagine someone who had been alive *that* long, and how much history had happened while he watched it all.

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach.

“He is called the King of Rot because his touch is poison,” Father Richelot added. He still watched my wrist warily. “All who fall under his sway are twisted, corrupted into their worst selves. It is said he takes great pleasure in destroying all that is good and innocent.”

“That sounds like a Dead Apostle, for sure,” said Romani. “That old and that powerful... Is he an Ancestor?”

“You know the term?” asked Serenity, surprised.

“What?”

“Vampires as I know them are classified based upon their age,” she clarified. “Newborns, adolescents, and fully matured adults are more like stages of progression, but a vampire that makes it to three-hundred years is considered an Elder and one that has lived over five-hundred-years is an Ancestor. Because they’ve lived so long, they’ve had time to gather power and knowledge, and that makes them more dangerous than a newly-turned vampire.”

“Oh,” said Romani. “In that case, no, we’re not talking about the same thing. The concept is sort of similar, but Dead Apostle Ancestors are in a different league of existence than even Servants. If the guy responsible for this Singularity was one of those, then we would’ve been in real trouble, so it’s kind of a relief that it looks like it’s something entirely unrelated.”

Serenity’s brow furrowed. She almost seemed insulted.

“You shouldn’t underestimate the sort of power he can throw around,” she said tensely. “After all, he moved the entirety of the Joyeuse Garde over a hundred miles by himself with one spell.”

My eyebrows climbed towards my hairline, because that actually was a pretty impressive feat of magic. There were a few powers from my past life that I knew of that *might* be able to do something similar, but the only one I could think of with that kind of scale was Labyrinth, and Shaker 12s were vanishingly rare.

Other than that, the rest of the list was mostly populated by *Endbringers*. Not a comparison I wanted to be making with an enemy I had to face while Mash was handicapped the way she was.

“What?”

But it was Father Richelot, not Romani, who gasped out a surprised exclamation upon hearing this news.

“The entirety of the castle,” he choked out, “*moved*...in a single spell?”

“Yes.” Serenity grimaced, and then she added, “Although, given the condition he was in when he came here, I don’t think he’ll be doing anything like that again anytime soon.”

I latched onto that. “You’ve said something about that before. What do you mean when you say he was in bad shape when he came here?”

Serenity glanced at me, her lips pulled tight, and she seemed to take a moment to weigh the pros and cons of giving me an answer. It didn't inspire me to start trusting her more than we had before. Eventually, she must have decided it was worth it, because she told us, "It's because I was very close to killing him myself before he escaped."

"Wait, what!" This time, it *was* Romani who shouted his surprise. "H-hang on, that sounds like a really outrageous claim! If he's as strong and as clever as you're saying he is, then you'd have to be —"

"Well-prepared," Serenity said dryly. "Like I've spent years examining his weaknesses and planning countermeasures for his defenses, waiting for the right moment to strike. Right?"

"W-well," said Romani, "I guess, when you put it that way..."

"Of course," she went on, "if he has this Holy Grail you've been talking about and it does what you say it does, then there's no telling what sort of fortifications he's added since acquiring it. We won't be able to just waltz into his castle and pluck it out of his fingers like it's nothing."

Romani sighed. "I guess it really couldn't be that easy, could it?"

"One day, Doc," said Rika. "One day..."

"What does that mean for us *now*?" asked Ritsuka. "We can't just stay here in the church until he uses the Grail to destroy the world."

"The first thing we're going to have to do is confirm whether or not it's this King of Rot guy," I told him. I looked at Serenity. "Right? We can't make concrete plans until we're sure what we're up against."

Serenity inclined her head. "A fair point. In any case, I'll be able to recognize him if we can get a good look at him, but that goes both ways, because he can recognize me, too. We're going to have to do this without me getting close enough for him to see me."

"She could use Spooky Ghost Form," Rika suggested, raising her hand.

One of Serenity's eyebrows cocked upwards. "Spooky Ghost Form?"

"Servants are Heroic Spirits, not strictly living beings," Mash informed her. "As spiritual existences, they can dematerialize their physical bodies to enter what's known as 'spirit form.' A Servant in spirit form can't interact with the world physically, but they can still observe it without taking material form."

Serenity looked interested. "How does it work?" she asked. "Is there a special form of incantation or something?"

Mash hesitated.

"Um," she said haltingly, "I...don't...actually know. You see...I'm what's called a Demi-Servant."

Serenity's brow furrowed. "Is...that what it sounds like?"

"You know, I've been wondering about that, too," said Rika. "Can Servants even have kids? I mean, they have all the bits and pieces, don't they?"

Mash shook her head. "A Demi-Servant is a human being who can take on the form of a Servant through a kind of possession experience. U-um, it's not that the Heroic Spirit inside of me takes me over, but it's more like he lends me his power? S-since I'm a human being at my base and not a Servant, however, I can't take spirit form."

"Depending on how her Spirit Origin was constructed, Serenity might not be able to, either," said Romani.

Father Richelot coughed meaningfully into his fist. "Please excuse my ignorance, but I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean with this talk of 'Servants'."

I exchanged a look with the twins, and Mash turned to me expectantly. It seemed they were going to leave explaining this part to me.

Fine. Time to bring him up to speed enough that he wouldn't be dead weight for the rest of the conversation.

"When someone achieves something grand that is remembered throughout history," I began, "they become immortalized as a Heroic Spirit..."

I went through the whole spiel, although I condensed the explanation down as much as I could. My classes on the subject at Chaldea had included theoretical models on where the Throne of Heroes existed, cosmologically speaking, and had been very detailed about the nature of Heroic Spirits and Noble Phantasms, but we didn't have the time for me to go into all of that and it wouldn't do anything except further confuse everyone else, so I cut away those unnecessary bits.

"I...see," Father Richelot said when I was done. He looked overwhelmed. "I...believe I understand how this works, yes. At least enough to understand your meaning."

"You're in good company," Serenity told him wryly. "I don't know much more about that sort of thing than you do."

Father Richelot nodded. "That...is of some comfort, yes, but perhaps less so in some ways."

"Don't worry too much about it," said Rika. "Me and Onii-chan are pretty new at this, too."

"In any case," I said, and I deliberately stopped myself from sending Rika a reproachful glare, "since Mash is just a human borrowing the powers of a Heroic Spirit, she can't take spirit form. A normal Servant shouldn't have that sort of trouble."

"So she can't tell me how to use it," Serenity concluded.

"It's not that hard," Da Vinci's voice sounded from my communicator.

“Another voice!” Father Richelot exclaimed.

“Calm down,” Serenity told him. “It’s the same thing from before, just a different person speaking. In this case, Leonardo da Vinci.”

“Leonardo...da Vinci?” Father Richelot’s face was pained. “But this... That is a *woman’s* voice.”

“Ah!” Da Vinci crowed, sounding excited. “It’s quite a fascinating topic, actually! You see, it’s true, the historical person known as Leonardo da Vinci was indeed a man, but upon my manifestation —”

“Don’t think too hard about it,” I cut across her, addressing Father Richelot. “Just call her Da Vinci and address her like a woman. The rest of it doesn’t matter for what we’re here to do.”

“Taylor!” I imagined Da Vinci pouting on the other end of the line.

Father Richelot looked at me askance. “Yes, I...suppose you have something of a point. In the interest of keeping things as brief as possible, I believe I can accept that on its face. Forgive me if I...have a little trouble adjusting, however.”

Da Vinci’s sigh crackled across the communicator. “Ruin my fun, why don’t you,” she lamented. “In any case, Miss Serenity, allow me to repeat myself: it’s not that hard. Servants require a constant expenditure of energy to maintain a physical form, so transitioning into spirit form should be as simple as reducing your energy usage down as low as you can get it. As easy as flicking a switch.”

“I don’t think that analogy works in Victorian France,” Romani’s voice whispered.

“*Shush.*”

“Like flipping a switch, huh...”

Serenity’s brow furrowed in concentration for a moment, and there was a few seconds where we all waited for her to disappear in front of us, but at the end of it, she just shook her head. “Sorry, but it doesn’t seem to be working for me.”

“You’re sure?” Da Vinci asked.

“I followed your advice, but nothing happened,” said Serenity. “For whatever reason, I can’t take on this spirit form you talked about.”

Da Vinci hummed thoughtfully. “Well, if you say that’s how it is, then I suppose I just have to accept that as the truth. Insofar as what could be preventing you from making that transition, well, there are a couple of different things, but frankly, I can’t give you a more solid answer than to tell you that there probably *is* an answer.”

“Well, there goes that idea,” said Rika. “No super spy spooky ghost form action, I guess.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Serenity said dryly.

“So what does this mean for our plans?” asked Ritsuka.

What plans, I wanted to ask. We hadn’t really made any yet.

“It means we’re going to have to figure out another way of identifying our mysterious vampire,” I said. “Preferably without him realizing we know who he is.”

It would be a much easier task if only my bugs were working better. With my powers sluggish and my control fuzzier than I could ever remember it being, finding this “King of Rot” person with my swarm was far more daunting a task that I would have liked to admit.

“I said that I’d recognize him if I saw him,” Serenity told me. “I didn’t say you wouldn’t be able to, as well.”

I looked over at her. “What do you mean?”

She cocked one eyebrow at me.

“He’s a vampire,” she answered wryly. “Exactly when do you imagine he’s going to be out and about in the town? Midday? With the sun beating down on the back of his neck?”

Oh. Yeah, that was a pretty good point, wasn’t it?

“If he’s got a weakness to sunlight, then I guess he really is a true vampire,” said Romani. “In some ways, having that confirmation is a bit of a relief.”

In the sense that we were probably safe during the daytime, in this case, I agreed with him.

“So if he’s still around, we can expect him to be active at night instead of during the day,” I concluded. “That...also makes him a bit more dangerous, though.”

Serenity nodded. “It’s his home territory, so to speak. He’s had a long time to master the idea of moving in the night under the cover of darkness. He’s going to be far more comfortable there than your group will be.”

And that presented its own sort of problems. True, knowing that he wasn’t going to be going anywhere during the day *did* help us to narrow things down a little more, and the fact that most of the city’s population seemed perfectly willing to hole up in their homes instead of risking the streets at night helped some, too.

But the same things that would make it easier for us to find him would also make it easier for him to find us. He already had enough of an advantage to get the drop on us, but the same token meant that he could escape us much more easily, too. Avoid confrontation until he was in a better position to face it.

At least if Serenity was able to take spirit form she’d be able to ambush him the second he ambushed us.

“Maybe we should send for some garlic,” said Rika. “Hey, Da Vinci-chan! Can you send us some garlic?”

Serenity eyed her, incredulous. “What?”

“That one, I’m afraid, isn’t actually a real weakness,” said Da Vinci. “The most you can expect to do to a vampire with garlic is give him some heartburn. If you’ve reached that point, then I’m sorry to say that no amount of garlic is going to make any difference in what happens at all.”

“Drat!”

“Do we have any *other* anti-vampire weaponry?” I asked.

“That wasn’t exactly what we were prepared for as part of our mission.”

Serenity gestured down at the sword and dagger strapped to her belt. “What did you think *these* were?”

“Useless,” I said, “unless you can replicate them for us.”

“Damn,” Rika whispered. “Savage!”

Serenity scowled.

“Peace!” Father Richelot insisted, holding up his hands placatingly. “Peace, my friends! We are all allies here, are we not? There is no need for harsh words.”

“She has *something* of a point, at least,” said Serenity sourly. “While I’m confident enough in my own prowess to handle him one on one, if this Holy Grail of his is as powerful as you’re claiming it is, then he could very well summon reinforcements with it, couldn’t he?”

“For what it’s worth, that *has* been our experience so far,” said Da Vinci. “It’s not that it can’t be used for other things, so much as the most effective use of it really is summoning more Servants.”

For all of one Singularity. I wasn’t sure that Fuyuki counted in that regard, because a Grail War had already been underway when we arrived, so Saber Alter hadn’t had any need to use the Grail itself to summon more Servants. Otherwise, our “experience” really only was a single Singularity deep.

“In that regard, we have something of an advantage,” I said. “After all, if he’s using the Grail to weaken the effectiveness of Servants, then he’ll either have to stop to field his own or accept that they’ll be half as strong as they should be.”

“More than that,” Da Vinci said. “Taylor, have you checked our resident Assassin Servant’s parameters? I think you’ll find something quite interesting when you do.”

Interesting?

Frowning, I did as Da Vinci suggested, and I used my Master's Clairvoyance to look over Serenity, who stared back at me, unblinking. She had Golden Rule as a skill, the only one of the three that I could see clearly, which would come in handy during our time here, and high Presence Concealment, which would also be useful. Her stat spread, however, was good, but nothing to start throwing parties about. Solid B's in most of them, although her Luck was only C, and her highest stat was her Mana stat, at Rank-A.

Wait.

Solid B's in most of her stats, when Mash's stats had all been slashed in half.

"She's...not affected by the Grail's block on Heroic Spirits."

"She isn't?" Ritsuka asked, surprised.

Serenity folded her arms. "Maybe because I'm not a Heroic Spirit?"

"I'm beginning to believe that you actually aren't," said Da Vinci. "That raises the question, however: if you aren't a Heroic Spirit, then what are you, exactly?"

Serenity's mouth curled into a grin, showing off her gleaming teeth. The light of the flashlights glinted off of her canines. "A woman scorned, out for revenge."

A flash of annoyance jolted through my belly, because that wasn't particularly helpful at all.

"She really isn't," Ritsuka murmured. "Then, does that mean that she's a loophole?"

"She might just be."

Although that just brought up even more questions. Servants were, by definition, supposed to be Heroic Spirits, and while I'd already known Serenity wasn't giving us anywhere near the full story, there had to be a lot more that we were missing than I'd thought if she wasn't a Heroic Spirit in any fashion whatsoever.

Even if she was some sort of Demi-Servant like Mash, her powers should still originate from a Heroic Spirit. Except apparently, they didn't, and I had no idea where they could come from otherwise — and she still be a Servant, at least.

"Forgive me for intruding," said Father Richelot, "but what is this now about a block on Heroic Spirits?"

I looked down at my communicator. "Da Vinci?"

"The full explanation requires quite a bit of background detail," said Da Vinci. "For your purposes? Just know that the man using the Grail has used it to put up a sort of...field, if you will, that weakens Heroic Spirits. Any Servant that appears in Rennes with you will be at half of their usual strength — except, it seems, for our mysterious Miss Serenity."

"What does this mean for us?" asked Father Richelot.

Nothing I was comfortable with.

“It means we’re going to be relying on her for a lot of our mission here,” I said neutrally. “The fact that she isn’t affected by the block means that she’s automatically the strongest member of our team, which also puts her in the position of being the most valuable member of the team. As far as Servants go, at least.”

And I didn’t like that one bit. Not when she was hiding so much from us and we couldn’t be sure exactly how trustworthy she was. I wasn’t about to forget all of the little clues that had been dropping left and right, like the fact she apparently knew a super secret passphrase that instantly put her in Father Richelot’s good books.

If she wasn’t a Heroic Spirit come back to finish what she started in life, then a lot of those things started making much less sense.

“Good to know I’m going to be so appreciated,” said Serenity.

My lips twitched. I fought a scowl down, but only barely.

“Maybe we should think about bringing some of the others here now,” Ritsuka suggested hesitantly. “Wouldn’t someone like Emiya or Arash make finding this guy a lot easier?”

“I don’t think Archers come pre-installed with night vision, Onii-chan,” said Rika.

I shook my head a little. “No, he’s got a point. A frontline fighter might not be worth it, but ranged combatants shouldn’t be hit as hard by the block.”

“Skills, at least, don’t seem to suffer as much,” Da Vinci chimed in. “It’s mainly raw physical parameters that are affected. Of course, even someone like Arash is likely to see *some* decrease in his abilities and his attack strength, but a bowman doesn’t need pure strength alone to take out the enemy.”

“If he can help out with the scouting, then I’m all for it,” said Serenity. “But if the King of Rot *did* manage to survive and recover, the final fight is probably going to be at close range.”

So we might need to bring in Siegfried after all. He was sure to be a formidable fighter, even diminished, but I worried about how much more difficult it would be for him to defend his glaring and obvious weak spot when he would have less strength and speed than normal.

“We can talk more about those options at a later point,” I said. “Before we can worry about that, we need to figure out where we’re going to set up our base of operations, because without a ley line connection, we won’t be summoning any Servants at all.”

Serenity shifted a little, and after a moment, said, “I might know a place.”

I looked in her direction. “Might?”

I thought you were a native of the city, I didn’t say. I waited for her to elaborate.

“Well, it depends on who’s occupying it, right now,” she hedged. “I’ll have to check before I can say for sure, but as long as the owner here isn’t too cantankerous, we should be able to stay there. The only real problem is that it’s a little ways outside of the city. Getting there and back is a bit of a walk.”

I thought of the handful of coins in her pouch. My original thought had been to use that for food, maybe room and board, if we had to, but if she was right about this place she was talking about, then those would all be covered, wouldn’t they?

“If we have to invest in a few horses, then we’ll do that.”

“I didn’t pocket enough for us to afford something like *that*,” Serenity told me dryly. She shook her head. “But as long as the owner of that place isn’t too far gone, I’m sure he can be convinced to part with some funds.”

And if he refused, well, I guess I could use my bugs to collect some loose coins throughout the place. If the guy was as well off as she was implying, there should be at least some hanging around for me to swipe, one way or another.

Did that count as going back to my roots? My career started with a bank robbery, so I guess you could say I was going full circle.

“If we’re lucky, he might even have a stable on hand, and we can just borrow his carriage,” Serenity went on. She turned to Father Richelot. “In the meantime, Father, it seems we need to impose upon the Church’s generosity. It’s not safe to make that trip in the middle of the night.”

“No, of course not,” Father Richelot agreed immediately. “Come, come. The cathedral isn’t built for housing people in large numbers, so it might not be overly comfortable, but I think we can find a few cots for you to rest yourselves on.”

We weren’t tired, I wanted to tell him, because our internal clocks were set at mid-morning, but there wasn’t much for us to do about that. Bold action could be effective, and audacity could cover many sins in a fight, but our position was tenuous enough that I was leery of taking unnecessary risks.

Until we had a better handle on what was happening and what sort of enemies we were up against, going out at night was a bad idea. That meant we had to stay inside until morning and start our investigation when the sun was out.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I decided.

“But we just woke up, like, an hour ago!” Rika whined.

Father Richelot blinked, bemused. “Truly?”

“Chaldea’s local time is about half a day behind yours,” said Da Vinci. “Or half a day ahead. It’s all a matter of perspective, really.”

Father Richelot nodded sympathetically. “Then none of you are ready to sleep again just yet. My apologies.”

“It can’t be helped,” said Romani’s voice, and a sigh crackled through my communicator. “With things the way they are, there really isn’t anything to be done about it.”

“We’ll find some way of keeping ourselves busy,” I assured him. “For now, though, why don’t you show us to those cots, in case we decide to take a nap?”

“Yes,” said Father Richelot. “Yes, of course. It’s the least I can do.”