

Fleeting Lunar Phantasia

Part Seven

Lunch turned out to be as good as Serenity had promised. I didn't know that I was willing to say that Sébastien was as good a chef as Emiya, but I could at least admit that he was in the same ballpark, and I thought that was a pretty good compliment on its own.

Rika, on the other hand, looked conflicted during the entire meal. Like she didn't want to admit that anyone could be anywhere near as good a cook as Emiya was, and she was having to face up to the reality that he was not, in fact, an untouchable god of cooking, because she was actually really enjoying Sébastien's food.

She was in for a very rude awakening if we ever met a Heroic Spirit who was actually famous for their culinary skill.

After giving our food about half an hour to settle, however, it was time to get back down to business and investigate this Singularity. Namely, we needed to try and find this "King of Rot" figure, or failing that, start eliminating places he *could* be. The most likely ones, at least, because if we had to search the entire city, top to bottom, we were going to be here for a hundred years.

Naturally, Liz elected to stay behind at the mansion — ostensibly to "keep an eye on Granny," in case an enemy Servant came looking for trouble. Since we weren't looking to take the fight to the enemy ourselves just yet, no one saw anything wrong with letting our temporary Servant stay behind at our "home base," as it were.

That wasn't to say that I wouldn't take the chance if we found our target in a moment of vulnerability, but I knew better than to pick a fight I didn't need to without doing my due diligence.

It was right around noon when we stepped back out the door to Sébastien's curt farewell. I had the feeling he would just as soon prefer we got lost and died in a ditch than to have to welcome us back into the mansion, but he was too polite to tell us to fuck off to our faces.

Serenity's hood was back up almost the moment we were outside, like she was trying to hide herself from the sun. Knowing now that she was a vampire herself, it made much more sense that she worried about facing it directly.

"There's one place we should check first before everything else," she announced. "It's a bit of a hike, but we should be able to get there and back long before dinner."

"Ugh," said Rika. "Walking, walking, and more walking. I feel like that's, like, ninety percent of what we do in these Singularities."

Serenity huffed a breath out of her nostrils, not quite a snort. A small smirk pulled at one side of her mouth. "I'll have to sweet talk Sébastien into letting us borrow some horses tomorrow. For today, though, sorry, but we're just going to have to hoof it."

“Horses tomorrow doesn’t do me any good *now*,” Rika grumbled.

She was so busy complaining that she hadn’t even caught the pun.

We set off, heading northwest with the city to our right and a small, homey suburb off to the left. Unlike our trip up to the mansion from Rennes, there was no road to take us directly to our destination, only flat fields that spanned the place between them and sparse patches of trees, so we had to cut through the fields to take the most direct path to where we needed to go.

“Will Liz and Granny be okay?” Ritsuka asked as we walked.

“Hm?” Serenity asked, looking over at him.

“Liz and Granny,” he repeated. “Do we really have to worry about the King of Rot sending a Servant after them?”

Serenity shook her head. “No. They’ll be fine. I just didn’t see the need to argue with that girl, especially since she’s Elizabeth Bathory.”

A grimace pulled at my lips. Yeah, there was that, wasn’t there? That flat-chested teenage girl was actually one of the most prolific serial killers in history, and now we had her on a pretty tenuous leash.

Being entirely fair, I suppose it wasn’t the first time I worked alongside someone pretty terrible for the sake of the greater good. In the end, even Bonesaw herself became an ally against the apocalypse.

“Are you sure, Miss Serenity?” Mash asked. “They’ll really be okay?”

“He has no reason to target them,” Serenity said. “Look. I said that he and I could recognize each other on sight, right? That’s not the same thing as him knowing everything about me. I spent over a hundred years in Rennes, hiding right underneath his nose, and he never found out exactly where. We were both doing our best to make sure no one was suspicious of us. I just had a specific person I had to hide from, too, instead of just the general public.”

“So he never realized you were staying at that mansion?” I asked. “Not once?”

Serenity huffed another not-quite-snort. “What reason would he have to suspect it? Rennes is a city with tens of thousands of people in it, and I’ve only ever been ‘the widow in the tower,’ as far as everyone else is concerned. When we both had to work through intermediaries because of what we are, there was no chance of us accidentally meeting face to face.”

I suppose that made some sense. If neither of them could spend any appreciable amount of time out in the sun, then the odds of them bumping into each other randomly on the street were much lower. On the other hand, if they were both out at night, when fewer people were out themselves, then an encounter between the two of them was actually more likely, not less.

In either case, he would have had to have tracked her down back to her house, wouldn't he? If he was as skilled an ambush predator as she had been saying, that didn't sound as impossible as she would like to believe.

"There are parts about this guy that I'm still not entirely clear about," I said. "You and Father Richelot mentioned something about how he took pleasure in corrupting people, but you never really clarified what he's done to earn a title like 'King of Rot.'"

"He's an ancient vampire," said Serenity dryly, "I didn't think that needed much more explanation than that."

"You're a vampire, too, though," Ritsuka pointed out before I could. "So how come you're a decent person and he's...well..."

"A monster out of the bedtime stories parents use to scare their children?" Serenity finished for him.

"I guess that's as good a way to put it as any."

"Senpai," Mash began, "Dead Apostles aren't human anymore. Even those who began as humans were turned into something horrible."

"Another case where your vampires and mine converge," Serenity remarked. "No. I don't know about these Dead Apostles of yours, but the vampires I know are monsters more by choice than by nature." She stepped over the large log of a fallen tree and kept going. "All vampires are created through a kind of ritual enacted by the one who made them. Rarely is that part itself a choice, but afterwards, you have to stare the reality of your situation in the face. You can't go out in the sun anymore."

She waved a gloved hand through the air. "Present circumstances excluded, of course," she added as an aside. "You're always hungry, but no matter how much food you shovel into your mouth, you're never sated. Constantly, you crave blood, because it's the only thing that can take the edge off and the only thing that can sustain you. Everything else about you slows to a stop, leaving you in a state of perpetual stasis, and you have to watch everyone else around you age and wither like flowers in autumn."

"That's...kinda gross and sad," said Rika, "but I'm still not getting it either."

Serenity glanced over at her, unamused. "Then imagine it, for a moment. You're attacked in the middle of the night without warning. Something hot shoves itself into your body, and every beat of your thundering heart spreads fire from the wound that slowly swallows up the rest of you. Every part of you is ripped to pieces, set ablaze, and then stitched together with a blunt needle, and there's nothing you can do but lie there and gasp in air with lungs that won't fill. You can't even scream."

She took a particularly long stride to cross a divot in the ground; I walked around it, paying particular attention to Serenity's posture and Rika's stare as much as I was able with my powers the way they were.

"When you wake up the next morning, it all feels like a bad dream at first," she went on. "But if you step outside into the sunlight, your skin starts to boil. No matter how much you eat, you're still

hungry, and the hungrier you get, the more you crave blood, until the *need* becomes all-consuming and you can't think about anything else. Most newborns last a few days before they give into it."

"Wait," said Ritsuka, "when you say they give into it, you mean..."

Mash gasped. "Oh no..."

I let out a quiet breath. I'd seen what druggies did to get their next fix, how desperate they were. How addiction had ruined them. I didn't need her to explain it to know what happened next.

"The worst part," Serenity said quietly, "is how *good* it tastes. How satisfying it is on your tongue. That first sip is like water to a man dying of thirst, and the flavor is like all of your favorite things all rolled up into one. If you're not careful and you don't know how to pace yourself..."

Then you drained your victim dry — your mother, your sister, your lover, or whoever had the misfortune of being close enough when your will finally crumbled. Yeah, I was beginning to see how bad that could turn.

"And the King of Rot?" I asked.

Serenity shook her head. "I can't tell you his backstory, because I just don't know it. What I *can* tell you is that most newborns go downhill quickly. They break, and they start feeding, and they eventually stop caring about the people they're feeding off of. They become monsters." She shrugged. "Whether he was always that twisted and becoming a vampire just amplified it or if he was one of the poor unfortunates who broke, it doesn't really matter anymore. What he is now is beyond redemption."

"Still haven't explained the whole 'King of Rot' thing," Rika pointed out. "Like, this is really horrible, and I'm not gonna sleep that great for the next week, but how does that get him that icky title?"

"Getting there," replied Serenity. "Like we talked about last night, he destroys people, gets a kick out of watching them self-destruct, but we also just established that he's a monster that doesn't care about anyone else. So you can imagine, if he gets bored or if he feels like he's done with a city or if he just needs to make an escape but he needs a distraction, well, what do you suppose he does?"

Oh. He really was like Jack Slash, wasn't he?

"He does as much damage as he can on the way out."

"That's sick!" said Rika.

"It's his favorite type of game," Serenity answered. "I managed to track at least three incidents down across Brittany, all places with his fingerprints all over them, all places where it seemed like he went in, spent a few years playing with the townsfolk, and then gave things just the right nudge so they would collapse. That's why he's called the King of Rot, because everything he touches decays, it's just a matter of time."

"What about Rennes?" Mash asked, worried. "There's...seventy-thousand people here, isn't there?"

“Rennes is the one exception.” Serenity smirked. “It’s his home base. He’s got his fingers in the leadership, but he’s not willing to do anything that would jeopardize his place here. Not when he went to so much effort to set up here.”

It only took me a second to realize what she meant.

“The castle. You said he can’t move it casually, because it takes a lot of time and effort to set up the kind of spell that can do something like that.”

“That’s how I figured it out,” she agreed. “If there’s one thing he possesses that he doesn’t want to leave behind, it’s that castle. He invested so much into it, into fortifying it, into bringing it here to Rennes. He won’t abandon it lightly, not unless things get so bad for him that it might mean his own death.”

So he’d stick around up until the last possible second, right before the noose closed around his throat? Even when he should have seen the way the wind was blowing and ran away as fast as he could? That would have been really convenient — if we were actually facing him in *his* Rennes, with *his* castle, where *he* had so much time and effort put into making it all *his*.

“What does that mean here?” I asked. “Where things are apparently different enough from your timeline that this world’s version of you never got turned into a vampire?”

“That’s part of what we’re going to try and find out,” Serenity told me. “We’re heading in the direction of his castle right now — if it’s there, then we’ll see it in the distance long before he could hope to notice us coming, and we can back off and come up with a plan.”

“That’s where we’re going?” Mash asked.

“Hey, a little more warning would have been nice!” Rika said indignantly. “Even just a, ‘oh, by the way, we’re going to check out the bad guy’s evil lair’ would have done it, you know!”

“What else would we have been going to check up on?” Serenity asked, sounding a little frustrated.

This time, I was going to agree with Rika. It would have been very nice to know that we were going to be scouting out the location of the enemy’s headquarters *before* we came anywhere near it.

“Other resources,” I answered. “Possible Servant manifestations. The ley line. Any number of things. Did you forget that we’re not locals, Serenity?”

“We have *got* to work on our communication!” Rika agreed.

Serenity blew out a huff of air. “Fine. I’m sorry, I should have mentioned it sooner. Anything else you’re concerned about, before we actually get close enough to see it?”

Aside from that half-hearted apology?

“Yes, actually,” I said. “What happens if the castle *isn’t* there? Will he even have stuck around if his prized trophy isn’t around for him to hole up in?”

Serenity stopped for a moment, and the whole rest of our group stopped with her. We kind of had to, since she was the one who actually knew where we were supposed to be going.

“Miss Serenity?” Mash asked, concerned. “Is something wrong?”

“I think that question stumped her,” said Rika.

Serenity shook her head.

“No, it’s nothing.” She started walking again as though nothing was wrong. “I don’t think it’s something we’ll have to worry about, since I’m almost positive the castle will be exactly where it’s supposed to be. If it’s not, however... There are a couple of places in the city where he might choose to stay. Homes of his puppets in the government. Even if they’re like Father Richelot was with me and don’t recognize him, he can subvert them the same way he did the first time.”

“How did he do it the first time?” Ritsuka asked.

Serenity looked over at me instead. “Eye contact.”

Realization struck me like a bolt of lightning, and immediately, I turned my eyes away from hers, deliberately looking directly forward so that I couldn’t even see those yellow eyes in my periphery.

A huff of air that might one day grow up into a snort puffed out of Serenity’s nostrils. I couldn’t see it, but I had the impression she was smirking.

“I was wondering if you would pick up on that.”

“Is this another one of those things you just forgot to mention?” I demanded.

“Wait, what?” Rika asked. “What’s going on? What just happened, Senpai?”

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before. I’d noticed the differences, of course, but I’d chalked them up to the transformation process that turned her into a vampire. A side effect, just like her pale skin and her apparently eternal youth. In a way, I was right.

“The eyes in her painting are green, but her eyes are yellow.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Rika asked, confused.

But Mash gasped. “Mystic Eyes!”

“Just like Medusa!” said Ritsuka, picking up on it now.

“What?” Through my bugs, I could sense Rika’s head swiveling back and forth. “Huh? But I haven’t been turned to stone! I don’t even feel a little rocky!”

“There are other forms of Mystic Eyes, Master,” Mash explained to her. I noticed her slowly positioning herself between the twins and Serenity. “Although Medusa’s turned people to stone, strong vampires are known to possess a hypnotic gaze that can ensnare the minds of everyone who meets their gaze!”

“Wait, so she can hypnotize me?” Rika asked, still sounding confused. “Make me do a silly dance routine or bark like a dog?”

“That, and a number of other things,” Serenity answered. “It looks like this is another area where our vampires are similar, isn’t it? Well, to a degree. Not every vampire has eyes like these, even those we call Ancestors. No, these are the lineage of the King of Rot. Every one of his *children* inherits them.”

“Were you ever planning on telling us about them?” I asked evenly.

My swarm was still sluggish, but there were enough bugs nearby to at least make for a distraction if things turned ugly. It wasn’t an elegant solution, but as long as we could all get behind Mash, her Magic Resistance should shield us, let us come up with a plan.

Serenity waved it off, almost flippant. “I just did, didn’t I? It’s not a secret I normally share, for exactly this reason. When they know you can subvert their will, people start to question if you already *have*. It makes it difficult to build trust.”

“You don’t say.”

Of course it did. When someone you barely knew told you they could twist you around their pinky and make you a willing slave, most people would turn the other direction and get as much distance as they possibly could. *I* would be putting my distance and throwing around Master-Stranger protocols even now, if I seriously thought she had already tried to Master one of us, and the fact that I could even consider that she might be an enemy was the only reason why I wasn’t.

“The reason I’m telling you now,” she went on, “is the same reason I would tell anyone who was about to launch an assault on the King of Rot: because you have to know, if you want to beat him. With a younger, weaker vampire, you could fight it off, resist the effects. With him? A second or two is all it would take for him to convert you over to his side.”

Surreptitiously, I slid a glance over at Serenity, keeping my eyes half-lidded to avoid eye contact, and with a little bit of focus, my Master’s Clairvoyance bloomed in my mind’s eye.

Before, she was all question marks. Now, however, I could see all three of her skills and get a feel for them, because they were no longer hidden. *Golden Rule B*, of course, because she had cultivated a talent for building wealth, plus *Vampirism B*, which was a rank lower than Dracul’s had been, and then the most important of the three, *Mystic Eyes A*, functionally sealed.

Slowly, I allowed myself to relax. It was written — so to speak — right into her Saint Graph exactly how much she hated using them, to the point that they were all but useless right now.

“Have you ever used them against anybody?” Ritsuka asked solemnly.

“A few times,” Serenity admitted. “When something happened and someone figured out what I was, or back during the Terror when tensions were high in France. It was the only way to sidestep something ugly, so I did what I had to in order to avoid a larger problem.”

“Yeah, I think I’d call people screaming, ‘Off with her head!’ a pretty big problem,” said Rika.

Mash looked less certain and was still tense, “I-I guess so...”

“There are only so many ways to turn away a mob with torches and pitchforks marching towards your house,” said Serenity wryly. “I was bedridden for almost two weeks afterwards. I barely had the strength to lift my head.”

Ah. I could see what she was doing there. Clever, to build trust by sharing a vulnerability, making herself more relatable.

“If he’s as weak as you say, will it still be a problem?” I asked.

“That all depends on how much he’s managed to recover since he got here,” she answered. “If this Grail you mentioned really is as powerful as you say it is, and I’m inclined to trust you know what you’re talking about, then he might just be back to full strength. In that case, yes, the most important part of fighting him will be keeping yourself from making eye contact.”

Easy enough for me. I focused for a second on the twins — they would need to stay behind Mash’s shield, which was going to put us in the position of having Serenity and maybe Liz as our main combatants. Not unexpected, since Liz was just as affected by the Grail’s prohibition on Heroic Spirits as Mash was.

If we were lucky, the King of Rot was the only one we’d have to face, but I seriously doubted we were going to be that lucky.

Over the course of our trek, we’d crossed through several fields, well-kept and grassy, and we’d had to step through a few sparse patches of trees, and eventually, in the distance —

“So it really is here.”

“Whoa,” said Rika. “We can see it from all the way over here? It must be huge!”

“That’s it, then?” I asked. “The Joyous Guard?”

“He’s made some modifications,” Serenity said dryly. “But yes, that’s it.”

Modifications, she called them. I wasn’t sure what she meant by that. The castle was still far off enough that the finer details were too far away to make out, but it didn’t look like it had been altered all that much. It was all a uniform white stone or brick, gleaming in the sunlight, with a silhouette and a structure that looked like it had come straight out of a Disney movie.

“That...really is the Joyous Guard,” Mash mumbled. “It’s...”

“Yeah,” Ritsuka agreed.

“Now you know why he clings to it so much,” said Serenity. “If you had a castle like that — a piece of history straight out of an Arthurian Romance — would you abandon it until you didn’t have a choice?”

It depended on the circumstances. If it was just an ordinary castle, then there wasn't any reason to really risk your neck defending it if the enemy made it deep enough inside to actually attack you.

But in the legend, the Joyous Guard was anything but an ordinary castle.

"When you say it's straight out of an Arthurian Romance," I began, "are you being literal?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Serenity said grimly. "There are twenty autonomous sentries stationed inside the castle itself — the knights from the legend."

"Autonomous?" said Ritsuka. "They're not human?"

"No. They're like a kind of golem. They're programmed to be strong and skilled with a weapon, but they're not very smart."

I nodded. That was useful.

"So they can be tricked."

"If you do it right? Yes. They're not going to respond to something like 'look over there!' but you can fool them by, say, tossing a rock against a nearby wall to divert their attention."

"So you're saying they're like turkeys," said Rika. "Will they drown if we can make them look up while it's raining?"

Serenity looked at her like she was crazy.

"It's a meme about how stupid turkeys are," I explained shortly.

Serenity still looked perplexed.

"...What's a meme?"

Rika turned to her and shook her head, "Oh, you poor, sweet summer child."

"Is it possible to sneak past them?" Ritsuka asked, pulling us back on topic.

"And what if they see us and all jump us at once? What are we going to fight them with, our Gandr?" Rika countered. "I didn't bring my infinite ammo bandana, Onii-chan!"

"Infinite ammo bandana?" Mash parroted, as confused as I was. She turned to me for an answer, but all I could do was shake my head.

"That's a thing?" Serenity asked. "You have an artifact that powerful?"

Ritsuka sighed. "She's making a reference to a popular stealth action video game."

There was another beat. I knew the question was coming before it even left her lips.

"...What's a video game?"

We were going to be here all day if we had to answer every question she had about the things we took for granted.

“It’s a type of interactive entertainment from the future,” I answered succinctly. “The bandana isn’t a real thing.” Not as far as I knew. If something like that was sitting around Chaldea, I would have requisitioned it as soon as I could. “More importantly, *can* we sneak past them? Can we distract them and then sneak past them? Or do we need to fight them directly?”

Serenity frowned. “There *is* a way past them, but since that’s how I got in last time, he’s probably shored up that weakness —”

“Enemy Servant incoming!” Mash shouted suddenly.

She threw herself in front of the twins, shield raised defensively, in the same moment as Serenity stepped in front of me, drawing her sword with a sharp, metallic rasp. I didn’t even blink, but in the space between one instant and the next, Serenity swung up with her sword to a loud *CLANG*, and something small and dark tumbled up into the air.

A pitch black dagger landed in the dirt, sinking up to the hilt.

The wind whistled. Too fast for me to see, more daggers came — a brace of them, this time, instead of a single one. With expert precision, Serenity deflected three, and four more bounced off of Mash’s shield.

“W-where is he?” Rika asked, peering cautiously from around Mash’s shoulder.

“I-I don’t know!” said Mash. “I-I can sense him the instant he attacks, but then he just vanishes!”

Hit and run tactics, standard guerilla warfare. Textbook, in fact. Appear only long enough to attack your target, then disappear and reposition yourself for another attack. It was a style of fighting I was intimately familiar with.

There was only one kind of Servant that would use it, though.

“It’s another Assassin!” I told them.

“An Assassin?” Mash echoed, alarmed. “Master, stay behind me!”

“Don’t need to tell me twice!” Rika said.

“Miss Taylor —”

A flutter of cloth from behind me. A weight settling down, disturbing the bugs in the grass. Serenity wheeling about, eyes wide as she turned to me. “Damn it!”

“The clever one,” a voice murmured, “goes first.”

“Senpai!” Ritsuka screamed.

Instinct kicked in, and I threw myself to the side and turned in the same motion. My hand went down and found the hilt of my knife right before my shoulder hit the ground — the sudden surge of adrenaline was so intense that I barely felt the jolt of my landing, and I rolled over my shoulder, pulling Last Resort free of its sheath.

A black dagger, identical to the first one that Serenity had deflected, passed through the space my back had just occupied — at that angle and from that close, it would have gone straight through my heart.

Watching it, I couldn't help but feel that he was so *slow*. He had the element of surprise. He was a Servant. Even for an Assassin, he should have been more than fast enough that even with that slight bit of warning, he could kill me without any trouble at all.

And yet, he had missed. He *wasn't* fast enough. He hadn't even turned with my dodge to keep tracking me.

My control was sluggish, but I didn't need fine motion and pinpoint control to induce as many fliers as I had nearby to converge on my assailant, a man in a black cloak with a skull-like mask over his face, and he recoiled warily, swiping at the sparse swarm with his dagger. It was a petty distraction, but it bought me all the time I needed.

Back on my feet, I rose, and as I stood, I took a firmer grip on my knife. With my other hand, I reached out for his arm, the one he was holding his dagger with, and I grabbed his wrist and *twisted*.

I didn't expect it to do much of anything. It was more like muscle memory than a conscious, deliberate decision, but somehow, it worked, and he dropped his dagger as his gangly forearm turned in a way it probably wasn't supposed to — just as I thrust the point of my knife between his ribs.

The Assassin gasped, and then I flicked on the nanothorns, and half of his chest suddenly disappeared in a flurry of red mist.

“Holy shit,” Rika breathed.

An instant later, he vanished, gone, just like any other Servant. A second later, even the motes of light were gone, too.

“Did...Senpai just kill a Servant?” Ritsuka asked faintly.

“Yeah,” his sister said. “It was kinda cool, but also really gross.”

I stared at the place the Servant had just been, at my now empty left hand, and absently turned off the nanothorns now that they were no longer needed.

There was no way that should have worked. Even with Servants weakened and diminished by what the King of Rot was doing with the Grail, that Assassin should still have been too strong for me to manhandle at all, let alone force him to drop his dagger. The idea that an otherwise normal human could fight and kill a Servant was supposed to be laughable.

But he'd been so weak and so slow that I'd actually forced him to drop his weapon.

"You're okay?" Serenity asked me.

"Yeah."

Against all odds and common sense, I was. I'd killed a Servant.

Mash suddenly gasped again. "Enemy Servant detect —!"

Another brace of daggers clanged off of her shield, and Serenity was in front of me in an instant, one arm held out as though to protect me as she used the other to deflect another trio of daggers with her sword.

A figure landed in the grass in front of us, dressed all in black, wearing a cloak, and the same skull-like, bone white mask. The body was different, but everything else was identical, down to the posture.

"Hang on," Rika said. "Didn't Senpai just...?"

"Intruders," the newcomer rasped in a much deeper voice than the previous one.

Another figure materialized in a burst of darkness, like the shadows in the grass had merged, lifted off of the ground, and twisted into the shape of a person. This one was leaner and smaller than either of the other two, with a long tail of purple hair that her cloak couldn't hide.

"Enemies of Master?" she asked.

A third appeared, larger, hulking, at least seven feet tall. "Or are they after the Grail?"

The same way, yet more coalesced into being, their numbers rapidly growing. Rika looked over at me nervously. "Uh, Senpai...? I know you're a badass, but... I don't think you can kill them all."

Of course I couldn't. There were too many of them. Even with Serenity at full power, facing off against that many at once had way too many chances of her getting killed. Ten, then fifteen, and they didn't seem ready to stop anytime soon. Twenty. Did the King of Rot really have this many Assassins at his beck and call? How was he supporting all of them, even if they weren't at their best? Twenty-eight.

The answer struck me like a bolt of lightning. (Thirty-two.) The identical look, down to the clothing, the way they were all in sync, the way they'd appeared after I killed the first one — it wasn't Assassin Servants, it was an Assassin Servant, a singular one who had the power to duplicate himself, or maybe split himself. It didn't explain why each one was a different shape and size, but how else had they known to come here so quickly? (Thirty-nine.)

"It doesn't matter," said one of them. "Keep one alive, kill the rest."

"Master will get the answers," agreed another.

“Run,” I said, even as I rooted around in my supplies. The twins looked at me, hesitating. I turned to glare at them. “RUN!”

(Fifty.)

My fingers closed around a familiar rock as the twins suddenly jolted into motion, Mash bringing up the rear. My circuits spun up as the image of a spider’s thread snapping filled my mind’s eye, and I started turning myself, using the momentum it provided to give an extra bit of *oomph* to my stone.

My head was already turned away from it when I shouted, “Anfang!”

Cúchulainn’s runestone emitted a bright flash of light, but I was already running, legs pumping, back in the direction we’d come from. I didn’t wait to check if I’d caught that ridiculous Servant or not, I just lifted every single bug I could between me and them and made as much of a screen as possible.

Five of us against an army. The only thing we could do was retreat.