

Fleeting Lunar Phantasia

Part Five

Eventually, we did wind up getting a small nap in, which made it that much easier for the four of us to get up and get ready to leave once the sun had come up. We didn't even wait for the day to truly, properly start — the instant the first rays of sunlight started to peek over the horizon and into the cathedral windows, we were on our way out the door and heading for the place we had talked about the night before.

The only thing we stopped for was Serenity herself, who paused for a moment as we came out and turned towards the east and the rising sun slowly cresting over the city's skyline. I couldn't see her face, but her body language was all cautious interest, like a wild animal that came up to a campfire, wary that it might get burned but attracted by the warmth.

“Serenity?” I asked.

She jerked her attention away and turned back towards us. “It's nothing,” she said in a way that made me sure it really wasn't. “It's just...been a while since I took the time to enjoy watching the sunrise.”

Her fingers curled into the fabric of her cloak and pulled up the hood, casting her face into darkness.

“Let's get going. We want to have at least enough time to make it back here if this doesn't pan out.”

The twins shared a look, but didn't say anything. They hadn't missed that something was going on either.

“Right.”

But now wasn't the best time to go digging, so our group set off towards the west, aiming just slightly northwards as well. Serenity had pointed out a place on our map that was vaguely northwest of the cathedral and — as she had said — a ways outside the city itself. This was to be our stronghold, our base of operations, and according to Serenity, a mansion big enough to accommodate all of us comfortably.

It seemed like we were the only ones out as we walked the still empty streets of Rennes. The city was beginning to wake up, but very few had yet decided to brave leaving their homes, likely afraid there might still be a vampire on the loose that would come after them. I couldn't even say they were necessarily wrong.

“Is there anything else we need to know about this King of Rot person you were talking about last night?” I asked as we went.

Serenity glanced back at me. Her amber eyes seemed all the brighter under the sunlight. “I think we covered the most important points,” she said. “If you’re asking if I have more intel, then I’m sorry to disappoint. Anything I can tell you that isn’t generalities is going to be out of date by now, seeing as he came here without anything in the way of supplies. His escape was an emergency, just like my following him.”

I hummed. “His personality? His battle tactics? The way he thinks, the way he fights? Anything like that is useful.”

A breath of air huffed out of her nostrils.

“He’s a sadist,” she told us. “A twisted bastard that enjoys causing others pain. That carries through in the way he fights, too. He likes to play with his prey, pick them apart a little bit at a time, watch them realize how hopeless it is to fight him. Outside of direct combat, though? He’s patient. Meticulous. He rarely does anything on a whim, because being careful is how he’s managed to survive for a thousand years.”

A shiver shuddered down my spine. That...was starting to sound eerily familiar, in more ways than one. A sadist that liked playing with people as he picked them apart? One that liked to savor his victims’ hopelessness? A cautious opportunist who survived things he shouldn’t by knowing when to take risks and when to avoid trouble? I’d already had enough of Jack Slash for a single lifetime, and now his older brother was camping out in this city.

That just made him an even more troublesome enemy. If this guy really was anything like Jack Slash, then he would pick and choose his battles and stay away from any fight that he wasn’t confident he could win — or at least walk away from.

“Any magic we should be looking out for?” I asked. “You said something about him teleporting a whole castle by himself.”

If he could do *that* sort of thing with any consistency at all...

Serenity shook her head. “That was mostly to drive home exactly how powerful he is. It’s not lying to say he’s got enough power — normally, that is — to pull off something so ridiculous, but the amount of preparation that goes into it is a little more prohibitive than I implied. He’s had enough time to master magic that he can pull off some fairly complex stuff with surprising speed, but frankly, he doesn’t use it very much.”

“What?” Rika exclaimed incredulously. “Why not? If I had magic that could do crazy stuff like that, I’d be doing it all the time!”

“And using it to avoid your chores,” Ritsuka added dryly. Rika stuck her tongue out at him.

“Because it’s impersonal,” Serenity answered. “There’s a distance, both figuratively and literally, between you and someone you’re casting a spell on. The King of Rot is the sort of guy who likes to get his hands dirty. He *enjoys* making it personal and intimate. It’s a form of entertainment for him.”

I was getting more and more Jack Slash vibes. Maybe they were connected in some way? Like on Earth Bet, this King of Rot guy was Jack's ancestor, several dozen generations back. I didn't count that out of the realm of possibility, all things considered.

"This guy gets creepier and creepier every time I hear about him," said Rika.

"Good, you're starting to catch on," said Serenity. "I'm not sure what sort of fight all of you are used to with these 'Servants' of yours, but there are no honor duels with the King of Rot. He doesn't fight fair, so neither should we."

Honor duels? I didn't think we'd gotten into a single one of those in Orléans. For the most part, our fights there were mad, desperate scrambles, ambushes, and surprise attacks the whole way through. The closest we'd come to an actual duel was the rest of our Servants hanging back to handle the wyverns so that Jeanne could confront her evil, alternate self without interruption.

"There won't be any problem with that," I said.

"It's only cheating when the other guy does it," Rika said wryly.

Serenity's head dipped into a nod. "Exactly."

"Really?" asked Mash, bemused. "Does...it actually work like that?"

"More than you'd think," I told her. "The Heroic Spirit inside of you is supposedly a knight, so he might disagree on principle, but when it's life or death, the only thing that really matters is winning. Fighting fair is the sort of thing you can only do when you're strong enough that it doesn't matter."

The rest of the journey was mostly completed in silence, and it took us about an hour of walking to make it out of the city and into the fields and farmland that surrounded it. Perhaps not so shockingly, there was actually a road for us to follow, although it wasn't in the best of shape and it was still more of a beaten path than the asphalt that would come in the future.

We saw our destination long before we actually arrived, but it was only as we came closer to it and realized exactly how tall the building had to be in order to be visible from above the treetops that we could really appreciate the size of the mansion.

And it *was* a mansion, there was no doubt about that. It was made of what looked to be a kind of off white brick or stone with a sloped roof of dark gray tiles. Large windows dominated the front of the building three storeys tall that was easily big enough to fit my old house about four times over, and it had not one, not two, but three chimneys jutting up, although only one of them was puffing smoke. A sprawling garden stretched out in front of the place, and my bugs could feel the large lawn that stretched out behind it.

There was even a second building adjacent to the main one, a squat, one-story thing that looked, now that I thought of it, more like stables than a regular building. Maybe they had horses we could borrow after all.

"So there *is* someone living here," Serenity mused.

“You were expecting it to be empty?” I asked her.

“There’s a lot of things I’m not sure of,” she said. “The city itself is mostly as I remember it, but the people in it aren’t anything at all like the ones I knew.”

More questions that she probably wouldn’t answer if I asked them. Some of the things she said made me think she came from a time a hundred or so years ago, but then she did things like addressing Father Richelot by name, as though she’d known him personally, even though he didn’t recognize her at all.

An alternate timeline? Maybe. It would explain stuff like that, even if it wouldn’t quite explain *everything*.

Serenity made for the front door, and we followed behind her, weaving around the expertly trimmed bushes that were placed in the yard. It was less than a minute before we were standing in front of a towering black door with a brassy knob and old-fashioned knocker. Fittingly, it looked like something out of *A Christmas Carol* or *Pride and Prejudice*.

Serenity didn’t hesitate. She reached for the knocker, lifted it, and slammed it down three times as though it weighed as much as an elephant. I was surprised she didn’t actually damage the door in the process.

“Whoa,” said Rika. “I don’t think they heard you. You know, down in Antarctica.”

“It’s a big house,” Serenity retorted wryly.

It really was, I thought, and surprisingly clean, I found as I focused on the bugs inside. Not impossibly clean, because there was still a thriving population of spiders and creepy crawlies that had made this home their home, but for the time period we were currently in, it was far, far cleaner than average.

A change in the pressure on an interior floor got my attention, and I pulled a few bugs out from where they were hiding to tag the person who was marching our way. Judging by the height and the stride, it looked like a man.

“Do you really think the owner will let us stay, Miss Serenity?” Mash asked.

“It depends on who’s taken up residency,” said Serenity, “and how reasonable they are. Last I checked, the lady of the manor was a recluse and most of her estate was being run by her majordomo and her children, but that might have changed between now and when I was last here.”

“How could they resist our radiant smiles?” said Rika. “If this old biddy is really that stingy, Onii-chan just has to put on the charm and we’ll be picking out our rooms before you know it!”

Serenity glanced at Ritsuka dubiously as he shook his head.

“We’re about to find out,” I told them all.

Right as I finished saying that, the front door swung open, and a tall, middle-aged man stood there, looking down at us with watery blue eyes. Shocks of gray ran through his hair, and lines carved grooves into his face, and when combined with his crisp, well-fitting clothes, it gave him the air of a distinguished gentleman.

“Yes?” he asked politely. “Can I help you?”

“Sébastien,” Serenity whispered, surprised.

The man — Sébastien — narrowed his eyes on her suspiciously. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I don’t recognize you, Miss. Have we met before?”

“Ah, after a fashion,” said Serenity. “I’m sorry to come here on such short notice, but I have business with the lady of the manor. Is she available?”

Sébastien’s lips pulled into a thin line. “I’m afraid the lady is indisposed —”

“Sébastien!” a voice called from further in. “Sébastien, I heard voices! Have my fans finally arrived?”

Sébastien closed his eyes, grimacing, and looked very much like he was asking whatever god he believed in for patience. He turned away from us and towards the inside of the mansion.

“Guests, Young Miss,” he called back. “Here to see your grandmother!”

“Oh, oh!” Footsteps resounded as someone — presumably this Young Miss — bounded towards the front door. The thumps of her feet on the hardwood floor were loud enough that all of us could hear them. “They can listen to my latest song! I’ve been practicing all night for —”

A head of pink hair peered out at us from behind Sébastien, a broad grin stretching a face accented by a pair of *horns*, of all things. A long, lizard-like tail swayed behind her, coming out from under the gothic lolita skirt she was wearing.

The instant she saw us, however, her smile changed into a snarl.

“You!” she growled. “You four have some nerve showing up here after what you did to me!”

“U-us?” asked Mash.

“What we did?” Ritsuka asked, bewildered.

“Girl, we’ve never seen you before in our lives!” Rika asserted. “I think I would’ve remembered meeting a cute girl with horns and a freaking *tail!*”

“Don’t play dumb!”

In a flash of light, the girl held a spear, and my eyes went wide as Sébastien scrambled to get out of her way.

“You let that big muscly guy whale on me in that hot spring!”

“M-Master!” gasped Mash. “She’s a Servant!”

“She is?” Rika squawked. “B-but wait, wouldn’t that mean —”

“She’s not talking about something we *did*,” I realized, “she’s talking about something we’re *going to do*.”

“What?” Sébastien asked incredulously.

The girl sneered, and when her lips pulled back from her teeth, I could see a pair of sharp, pointed incisors, like fangs. She opened her mouth to say something, maybe to spout some more vitriol at us, but something must have registered with her, because her expression did a sudden one-eighty.

“Wait,” she said, “*going to do*? You four really don’t recognize me?”

“Like I said!” Rika retorted. “Horns and a freaking *tail*! No *way* I’d forget meeting a girl like that!”

“For sure,” Ritsuka agreed with a nod. “You’re pretty unforgettable.”

Slight red splotches appeared on the girl’s cheeks, and she let out a loud, exaggerated sigh. “Ugh! And there I went with a whole speech prepared for the next time I saw you!”

“Forgive me, I don’t understand,” said Sébastien. “Servants? You also said something about what you were going to do instead of having done to the Young Miss?”

I resisted the urge to frown. The only person we’d really had to explain anything to yet was Father Richelot, but it was already getting to be a hassle to have to explain to everyone who even met a Servant exactly what a Servant was. That was hard enough to do when the person you were explaining it to had the right background to take you seriously, harder still with someone who didn’t know the first thing about it.

“In this case, I think it’s something you’re better off not knowing, Sébastien,” said Serenity.

Sébastien frowned. “Yes, there’s that as well, isn’t there? You address me so familiarly, but I’m afraid I truly don’t know you at all. There’s also the matter of whatever business you claim to have with the lady.”

“They’re here to see Granny?” asked the girl.

“You could say I’m a friend of the family,” Serenity told him wryly. To the girl, “Yes. Is she well enough to speak with us?”

The girl waved it off. “Let them in, Sebby. I’ll take them to see Granny.” She bared her teeth at us in what was probably supposed to be an intimidating grin — and it seemed to work on the twins. “If they try anything, then I’ll kick them out of the house myself.”

“W-we would never!” Mash sputtered.

Sébastien sighed. “Young Miss...”

“It’s fine, Sebby.”

I could see the moment where he just gave up. Sébastien seemed incredibly professional, but there was no hiding the way his shoulders slumped before he turned towards us, “Then please, come inside, honored guests.”

He stepped out of the way and gestured into the mansion, and the girl spun around and marched further in. Her spear vanished now that we were apparently no longer her enemy, or whatever we would be in the future. I didn’t really know what that was, since if we really had been across from her in a pitched battle, I didn’t see how she could let it go that quickly.

“Let’s go!” she said. “It’s almost time for me to sing to Granny again! She’s gonna love my newest song, I know it!”

The grimace on Sébastien’s face said that *we* probably wouldn’t.

We stepped into the mansion, following the girl with the dragon tail as she led us through the hallways. The polished wooden floors beneath our feet clacked under our shoes, and the twins made noises of amazement as the scope of the building itself became all the harder to miss.

Serenity, by contrast, took in a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. “It’s almost like coming home,” she whispered.

“Miss Serenity?” Mash asked.

Serenity shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

Again, she played it down, just like she had with the sunrise earlier. This one, at least, had a pretty simple explanation: she had lived here in this mansion before. The when was the part I was still trying to figure out.

“Come on!” the strange girl said impatiently.

“Yes, yes,” Sébastien said patiently. “No need to rush, Young Miss. I’m sure the lady will be no less happy to see you five minutes from now than five seconds.”

“It’s rude to keep a lady waiting, Sebby!” the girl said snobbishly.

“Of course, Young Miss, of course.”

The girl huffed and started walking without us, and rather than put up a fight, we followed her. Even as we went, I was already exploring the mansion as much as I could with the bugs inside of it, a task made all the harder because my powers were *still* weaker.

Despite that, I still had enough resolution and enough of a sense of their locations to tell that the mansion really was as big as it looked from the outside. Rooms upon rooms, some with

obvious purpose, like the kitchen, the dining room, and the parlor where the owner would presumably entertain guests, and some whose purpose I could only guess at.

The house staff, on the other hand, turned out to be quite small. There were maybe half a dozen other people throughout going about their business, including a team of three who were working the kitchen together and a young woman who seemed to be running the rest of the day to day tasks.

“Is she really the lady of the house’s granddaughter?” Mash asked Sébastien quietly.

Serenity snorted, having apparently heard her, but didn’t answer.

“No, I’m afraid not,” Sébastien said lowly. “The lady has been quite alone for several years now, with only us household staff to keep her company. Her husband passed away some decades ago, you see, and her children have all moved away to pursue their own ambitions. The Young Miss came here only recently, but Milady was so taken with her that she allowed the Young Miss to stay here, despite her...physical deformities.”

“You don’t say,” Serenity said neutrally, something strange in her voice. “And the lady of the house... She would be quite old by this point, wouldn’t she?”

Sébastien regarded her suspiciously. “The years have not been particularly kind to her, no.”

She shook her head. “It’s like something out of a fairy tale.”

But she didn’t elaborate.

The twins’ heads remained on a swivel as we went. For their part, they seemed just as interested in the ornate paneling on the wall and the upscale decor as they were the company, and if this was their first time in a place so fancy, I guess that made some sense. The Barnes’ house had been pretty nice, considering Alan Barnes’ day job, real upper middle class, the way any lawyer who wasn’t part of the most prestigious firm in the country would live.

Even that house had nothing on this mansion, though. I felt like I was walking through the home of a duke or duchess, or maybe taking a tour through Buckingham Palace. This place wasn’t anywhere near that big, but it was big enough and fancy enough to feel similar.

It actually had a library. Stretching two of the place’s three stories, it was filled from wall to wall with books of all kinds, although even without my powers being diminished, I couldn’t read the titles on any of them. Chaldea’s might have been bigger by an order of magnitude or two, and it didn’t have anything on a college library either, but it was still impressively sized for a personal collection.

Eventually, we came to a sitting room, obviously designed for entertaining guests like the parlor was, only this one was dominated by a large, ornate grand piano that looked like an antique compared even to the old-fashioned feel of the Victorian decor. A smattering of furniture was set around it for an audience to sit and listen.

The thing that truly grabbed our attention, however, more than everything else, was the large, framed painting that hung upon one wall. A massive thing easily as tall as Rika and three times as wide, it overlooked the whole room, positioned in such a way that the eyes looked to be gazing out at everyone inside of it.

And the woman it depicted...

“Holy shit!” Rika swore. “It’s you!”

...was a dead ringer for Serenity.

“Yes, she was quite beautiful, wasn’t she?” the wizened voice of the old woman at the table said.

“Eek!” Rika squeaked at the same time as the strange girl let out an excited, “Granny!”

“Hello, Dear,” said the old woman.

“Milady,” said Sébastien, “forgive me for bringing them without notifying you, but these guests say they have some manner of business to discuss with you.”

“Pish-posh, Sébastien,” said the old woman, waving it off.

“Granny!” the girl said excitedly and at full volume. “I’ve got a new song to sing for you!”

“Now, Liz,” said the old woman, “where are your manners? You bring these guests with you and you don’t even welcome them into our home?”

The girl — Liz, apparently — scowled. “They’re not that big a deal! They’re just some vagabonds that showed up at the door!”

“Vagabonds?” Rika squawked. My cheek twitched.

Was this revenge for whatever it was we were going to do to her in the future?

“W-we...don’t have a job or a home here,” Mash murmured. “Are we...technically vagabonds in this Singularity?”

“What was that, dearie?” the old woman asked. “I’m afraid my ears aren’t what they used to be. You’ll have to speak up a little if you want me to hear you.”

“N-nothing!” Mash insisted hurriedly.

Rika cupped her hands over her mouth. “She said, we’re homeless!”

The old woman’s brow furrowed. “Are you, now?”

Rituka shot his sister a frustrated look and then stepped forward, gave the old woman a short, polite bow, and loudly and clearly, he told her, “I’m sorry to trouble you, ma’am, but we’re in town on a matter of business and don’t have anywhere to stay. Our friend —” here, he gestured to

Serenity, who arched an eyebrow at his phrasing — “suggested we might find someone willing to let us stay for a few days here.”

The old woman looked over at Serenity, and her eyebrows rose to her hairline as her eyes widened for a brief moment, but it was there and gone in only a second.

So even this old woman could see what the rest of us had already seen.

“Dear me,” she said. “We haven’t had guests in this house in quite some time, and I’m afraid to say this is a *private* residence, not a hostel.”

Rika’s face went bright red. “Th-that’s not what we’re here for! He’s my brother!”

Ritsuka leaned over and whispered something into her ear, and the red only intensified until it matched her hair. “Oh,” she said meekly. “Nevermind.”

“However,” the old woman went on, “this family has never been the kind to turn down those in need. If the five of you need a place to stay while you conduct your business, well, we have plenty of room.”

Some of the tension deflated from the room. “Thank you,” Mash said gratefully. “W-we’ll only be here for about ten days, so we appreciate your hospitality!”

“Granny!” Liz whined.

“Hush now, Liz,” the old woman chided. “You yourself are staying here under my auspices, aren’t you? Can you not sympathize with these travelers, who need a warm bed to sleep in and a hot meal in their bellies?”

Liz crossed her arms and pouted. She already looked young enough as it was, and it only made her look even more childish and immature.

I wondered exactly how old she was supposed to be, in this form. For that matter, which Heroic Spirit was she, that the “ideal” form her body took was that of a girl barely in her teens? There couldn’t have been all that many, and even fewer that could accept a nickname like “Liz,” and the tail and horns should narrow it down even further.

“Sébastien,” said the old woman, and he leaned forward slightly to show he was listening. “Prepare a few rooms for our guests, if you would. Miss, ah...”

“Taylor Hebert,” I said, taking the cue to introduce myself. I pointed out each of my companions one by one. “The redhead is Rika Fujimaru, her brother, Ritsuka, Mash Kyrielight.” And lastly, “That’s Serenity.”

The old woman’s brow furrowed, like she didn’t quite believe that. “So it is.” She turned back to Sébastien. “In any case, if you would see to it...?”

“Of course, Milady,” said Sébastien. His own thoughts about her decision didn’t show on his face. “At once. I’m sure Euphemia and Vivienne will be only too happy to accommodate our...guests.”

He gave our group one last suspicious look, and then he turned crisply on his heel and left. I attached a fly to him, unnoticed, once he was out of the room to watch his path through the mansion, and turned my attention back to our resident mystery: the painting that was hanging on the wall.

“Who is she?” I asked.

The old woman looked at it, too and smiled. “An old ancestor of mine,” she revealed. “My great-great-great-something grandmother. Extraordinary woman, I’ve been told. She died over a hundred years ago.” She chuckled. “At least she had the fortune to miss the Terror.”

The Terror — the French Revolution, she meant. I wondered how it was that the family managed to avoid losing this mansion in the aftermath of that whole situation.

“What year did she die, exactly?” asked Serenity.

“Seventeen-fifty-three,” the old woman answered. She smiled ruefully. “Peacefully in her sleep, as the story goes.”

“She would have been seventy-two,” Serenity said quietly.

Deliberately, I didn’t look in her direction.

The match wasn’t *quite* perfect. The skin tone was a little off, for one, because the painting had a far healthier pallor than the woman next to me, the hairstyle was obviously more ornate — but hairstyles could be changed with either patience or a pair of scissors — and the painting’s eyes were a brilliant, sparkling green, not gleaming yellow.

But the face? The shape of the nose and the brow, even the way she smiled? It was all identical.

“She was quite the patron of the arts, I’m told,” the old woman said. “Unfortunately, she was born a little too early to have enjoyed the likes of Mozart and Beethoven.”

A wistful smile crossed Serenity’s face. “She would have liked them. Beethoven especially.”

Was...she *trying* to drop all of these hints, or was she just so caught up in...whatever she was thinking that she didn’t realize she was giving us all of these clues? She’d all but confirmed that she had at least *some* relation to this woman, whatever it was. Her mother? Her daughter?

The problem that kept butting its head against all of that was the fact she was a Servant in the first place.

“I’m sure she would have,” the old woman agreed. She suddenly brought her hands together with a clap. “Ah, but where are my manners? Only a moment ago, I was chiding dear Liz for her

rudeness, and now I've gone and been so rude myself! Please, allow me to introduce myself — my name is Elise, and this is my home, but you can call me Granny, if you like.”

“Okay, Granny!” said Rika. “Nice to meet you!”

“I...wouldn't want to be rude,” Ritsuka said hesitantly.

“Should we really address you so familiarly, Lady Elise?” Mash asked.

“Oh, it's fine!” Elise assured them. “Goodness knows I don't see enough of my own grandchildren these days. Indulge me a little, would you?”

Mash smiled shyly. “Granny it is, then!”

I kept my face neutral. Her friendly attitude was nice enough, and I appreciated the fact that she actually was willing to let us stay here while we investigated things, but she wasn't my grandmother, so despite her insistence, I couldn't see myself calling her “Granny” anytime soon.

“I thought *I* was the only one who got to call her Granny,” Liz grumbled sourly — too quiet, it seemed, for Elise to hear her, or if she did, she pretended she hadn't.

“Now,” said Elise, “Liz, my dear, you said something about a new song you were going to sing for me? I'd love to hear it!”

Liz perked up immediately and grinned. “Yeah! Sit back and listen, Granny, and this pop star is going to knock your stockings off!”