

Fleeting Lunar Phantasia

Part Six

It was bad.

Not because she couldn't sing, but because she sang so loudly that my ears were ringing after the first note, and I had to slap my hands over them just so that I wasn't completely deafened by it. The twins and Mash, too, did the same, wincing and grimacing from the pain of having our eardrums assaulted so mercilessly, and even Serenity silently stuffed her index fingers into her ears, looking just as miserable as the rest of us.

Elise, on the other hand, looked delighted. She clapped and smiled, and her whole face lit up as Liz sang a song about love and always being there "in your heart." She was having the time of her life, like a grandmother watching her granddaughter's first Broadway play and listening to her hit all the notes, pitch-perfect.

The worst part was, when I got past the volume, Liz actually was pretty good. I wasn't sure I could say she was professional, but she was at least good enough that she could have made a go at being a pop singer in America. But the volume killed any enjoyment I could have otherwise derived from it, because it felt like ice picks being driving into my ears.

Whoever taught her to sing was probably half deaf himself. That was the only way I could imagine her making it through any lessons without someone shouting at her to tone it down.

Finally, after an eternity of suffering, it was over, and Elise clapped and smiled and laughed all the more, tickled pink. Liz preened like a peacock under the attention as though she was being praised by her actual grandmother, and it made her look all the more like her apparent age, instead of a Heroic Spirit who was probably centuries dead.

I guess when one was hard of hearing and the other sang too loudly for anyone who *wasn't*, they could reach a happy middle ground where both of them enjoyed themselves.

Afterwards, Elise excused herself to go and take a short nap, and that left our group alone in the piano room with Liz.

"So?" Liz asked smugly. "What did you think? It was amazing, wasn't it? The best singing you've ever heard, I bet! There's no one who could possibly match me!"

"I-it was...unforgettable," Ritsuka told her, smiling awkwardly.

He wasn't wrong, he just didn't mean it in the way Liz obviously took it, by the way her grin grew broader.

"Y-yeah," Rika agreed half-heartedly, "unforgettable."

"Hehe!" Liz snickered. "Sebby doesn't know what he's talking about! Obviously, someone like him doesn't understand true class, nor the talent of a born idol like me!"

“Forget about that, for a minute,” I said, because I was *not* going to stroke this girl’s ego just to be polite. “We need to talk about what you’re doing here.”

“Hmph!” Liz huffed. “I don’t know what business it is of yours! I’m here because I want to be!”

“You’re a Servant, aren’t you?” I pointed out. “Servants don’t just pop up out of the blue. They have to be summoned. That means you were, too.”

“By the Grail, I’m assuming?” Serenity asked.

I hadn’t forgotten about her own little mystery, but I could put that off for a minute until we had our measure of Liz. The question of Liz’s allegiance was just that much more important.

“Or by the World itself, to counter a threat,” I said. “That just leaves the question, *Liz*: which one are you? Were you summoned by the World to put a stop to what’s going on here, or are you one of the King of Rot’s minions?”

The tension in the room rose, and next to me, Mash subtly held out her hands, ready to grasp and summon her shield the instant fighting broke out. Serenity, perhaps sensing this as well, shifted her own hands so she could unsheath her sword in a hurry.

“King of...who?” Liz sneered. “Unlike last time, I don’t have a Master commanding me, which means when I kick your ass, it’s because you pissed me off!”

Everyone breathed a metaphorical sigh of relief.

“W-we don’t have to fight!” Mash rushed to say. “U-um, what I mean is, if you’re not here as an ally to the King of Rot, then that technically makes *us* allies...d-doesn’t it?”

“The enemy of my enemy isn’t always my friend,” Serenity chimed in.

“But she can be,” I added. I arched an eyebrow at Liz. “So?”

“Hmph!” Liz folded her arms. “After what you and your thugs did to me? No way!”

“B-but we haven’t actually done that yet,” Ritsuka pointed out. “Is it really fair to hold it against us if we didn’t do what you blame us for?”

Liz opened her mouth, stopped, then scowled and growled, “Grr! This nonsense about tensing and future and past is way too confusing!” She pointed at Ritsuka. “Just answer me this! Do you have that musclebound jerk on your team right now?”

“I...sorry?” Ritsuka said, confused. He looked at me, and all I could do was give him a tiny shrug, because I didn’t have any better idea what she was talking about. “I honestly don’t know who you’re referring to. Could you be a little more specific?”

“You know!” Liz made strange, incomprehensible gestures, like she was grabbing at the straps of a backpack or something. “That huge guy with the muscles and the leather straps and the metal codpiece! That guy!”

What Heroic Spirit was *that* supposed to be?

“Doesn’t ring a bell!” Rika chirped.

“I don’t remember meeting a Servant like that,” Mash said.

“Me, neither,” Ritsuka agreed. “He sounds like someone that would stick out, too.”

“Because we haven’t,” I said. Yet, apparently. “Although it looks like we will in the future.”

And from the description of the guy, I wasn’t really looking forward to it. Well. Even if he wasn’t a looker and his choice in clothing was suspect, if he was a strong enough Servant, I guess none of that really mattered.

Liz’s eyes narrowed. “What about a red-headed lady in white with big boobs?”

Big... *That* was what she focused on? While supposedly getting her ass kicked?

“Damn,” said Rika. “Now I’m looking forward to meeting these people. I wanna see the look on Onii-chan’s face when he sees this big boobied redhead!”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“Sorry,” said Ritsuka, who ignored Rika with practiced effort. “We don’t know who she is, either.”

Liz squinted at him. “Hmm...”

“It sounds like you meet a lot of interesting people,” Serenity said dryly. “I must be downright boring by comparison.”

“I mean,” said Rika, “compared to Mister Starfish...”

Mister... She must have been talking about the crazy Servant at the end of the Orléans Singularity, Gilles de Rais, the one who fought by summoning a bunch of giant starfish monsters.

“Mister Starfish?” asked Serenity, bemused.

“You do have something of a point,” I told her. “You are, after all, technically the fourth vampire we’ve met.”

“Vampire?” Ritsuka, Rika, and Mash all chorused incredulously.

Serenity grimaced, and ruefully, she asked, “How did you figure it out?”

Rika recoiled. “You mean, it’s true?”

“You left more than enough clues,” I said to Serenity. I gestured to the painting. “That was just the biggest one. But the fact you could teach Abraham Van Helsing about vampires despite the fact you don’t look any older than me, that strange reaction you had to the sunrise this morning, all of these comments you’ve been dropping as we go...”

Serenity let out a huff. “It seems I’ve gotten careless, if I really did let that much slip in front of you. I managed to keep it secret enough to hide in plain sight for almost two-hundred years, after all.”

“T-two-hundred years?” Mash stuttered.

“Your instinct wasn’t wrong,” Serenity said. She looked back at the painting. “But I also wasn’t lying to you when I said I followed the King of Rot here. That woman you see in this painting *is* me...or at least, she’s a version of me, for want of a nail.”

My brow furrowed, but the answer came to me a second later. I’d even considered it a possibility earlier.

“You’re from another timeline.”

Everything lined up if that was true. The way she could know Father Richelot, even though he didn’t know her, the way she could have lived in Rennes long enough to know her way around, but not be sure about who owned this mansion, even the way she could be a native of the city and yet have only arrived a few hours before us last night.

Serenity snorted. “So you figured that out, too.”

“W-what?” Rika sputtered. “Now we’re talking about timelines, too? Stop being all cryptic and explain, damn it!”

“There’s not that much to tell,” said Serenity. “It’s as I told you before: I came very close to killing the King of Rot in my own timeline, but somehow or another, he managed to escape to *this* timeline, a place where my reality and yours converge. My guess? This place only exists as it does because of the Grail he’s using to prop it up.”

Beep-beep!

“Are you telling me both of you used the Second True Magic?” Da Vinci demanded as soon as I answered my communicator.

Serenity’s eyebrows rose. “You were listening in?”

“It’s much easier when the time differential is almost nonexistent,” Da Vinci said. “Now *answer the question.*”

Serenity’s brow furrowed, but she didn’t fight it. “I’m guessing that ‘True Magic’ is the term you use for your version of what I know as Miracles. That is to say, powers that exist outside the realm of ordinary magic and can’t be replicated, no matter how much time and effort you put into it?”

“That’s the basic explanation, yes. Did you use the Kaleidoscope or not?”

“The short answer is no,” said Serenity. “The long answer? If he got his hands on a powerful enough wish-granting device, then even something like that isn’t off the table, is it? Frankly, I don’t have the first clue where he would have come across something like that, but for how vanishingly rare they are, I *do* know that they exist.”

That sounded like a Holy Grail for sure.

“And you? How did *you* get here?”

“I had some help,” Serenity answered dryly, “from a...being fond of meddling. *He* has access to the ‘True Magic’ that you’re talking about.” She spread her arms, fingers splayed, and gestured down at her hips as though to encompass her whole body. “He’s even the one who made this ‘Servant’ form that you all have been making such a big deal about.”

That in itself was already something to be concerned about. After all, Chaldea required its specialized FATE System to summon Servants, and that had so many kinks that needed ironing that we’d only had five successful summons so far. The only other ways I was aware of involved throwing positively enormous amounts of power around until you managed to get what you wanted, like a Grail, or, you know, being a planetary consciousness, like the Counter Force.

The idea that a single individual could do that on his own was alarming.

“What does that make him, then?” I asked immediately. “If he can do something that’s supposed to be impossible.”

“What she said,” said Da Vinci. “You called him a being, not a person. What does that make this mysterious benefactor of yours?”

“If you’re expecting some kind of long-winded explanation, I can’t give you one,” said Serenity. “There isn’t an exact word or phrase that really captures the truth of what he is. What I *can* tell you is that he’s at least as old as the Earth itself, and that he takes the form of a human being so that he can interact with people without freaking them out.”

That would make him...what, then? Some form of eldritch god from before the era of man? Who took...

A shiver went down my spine. The weight of dread pooled in my stomach.

An ancient being older than the Earth itself with vast and incomprehensible powers, capable of reaching across realities and timelines effortlessly, and who took the form of a human being so he could interact with people, because his true form was too inhuman for us to look upon with the naked eye.

There was no way. Scion and his partner were dead and gone, and they were the only ones we had to worry about...weren’t they?

“What he *actually* is, I can’t say for sure,” Serenity went on. “Only that he seems to get involved only when things aren’t going the way they should. A bit like your organization, now that I think about it.”

“A Counter Guardian?” Da Vinci murmured. “But...the involvement of one of those would normally mean something entirely different, not...”

“Hey!” Liz suddenly cut in. “I thought this was all about me! Weren’t you trying to make me join your secret club?”

“A-ah, sorry!” said Mash. “W-we didn’t mean to forget you, it’s just that... This is sort of a really important issue!”

“I’m not sure I get it, though,” said Ritsuka. “What’s a Counter Guardian?”

“A force of nature,” I answered him. Was that a better explanation? I couldn’t say. An Entity trying to preserve the proper timeline seemed way off base from the ones I knew, so unless it really was something wildly different, I couldn’t see the endgame that came from expending that much effort on something like this. “They’re only supposed to get involved when the situation is beyond salvaging.”

“Beyond salvaging?” asked Serenity. “What exactly counts as ‘beyond salvaging?’”

“When the cascade of human life lost extends beyond acceptable limits,” said Da Vinci. “At the moment when all other options have failed and the projected outcome deviates too far from the proper course of events, a Counter Guardian will be deployed to wipe the slate clean, excising the deviant factors and everything related to them.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Rika nervously.

“You shouldn’t,” Da Vinci said grimly. “It’s widely accepted theory among magi that two of the times a Counter Guardian was deployed, the end result was the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the Black Death.”

“Mount Vesuvi — you’re talking about Pompeii,” Serenity said incredulously, eyes wide. “Are you saying that the eruption and the devastation that followed it was all the result of one of these Counter Guardians?”

“Whoa, what?” Rika interjected, alarmed. “Th-that sounds like some pretty extreme friendly fire!”

It took me an extra second to realize that she’d somehow managed to sneak a pun into that sentence, and I had to stifle a groan and a grimace. Sometimes, I really had to wonder what went on in her head that she managed to pull something like that off so consistently without much apparent effort.

“I thought the Counter Force was supposed to be about preserving human life, not destroying it,” Ritsuka agreed.

“You’re thinking on the wrong scale. To the Counter Force, a single human life is almost universally worthless, because the concern of the Counter Force is always the “greater good.” By that measure, one life against a thousand or a thousand lives against a million don’t matter so much.” Da Vinci hummed. “But by the way you reacted to that, Miss Serenity, I’m going to guess I’m off base, in which case I’m not entirely sure what your mysterious benefactor even is.”

Serenity shook her head, still looking a little shocked. “I’ve already told you as much as I can. If you can’t trust my word that he *is* on our side, then nothing else I say will be enough to convince you.”

“Fair enough,” Da Vinci allowed. “As much as I hate to leave a mystery unsolved like this, I can at least acknowledge that you do have a point. It irks me, but I can let it go.”

“I can’t,” Romani’s voice said now. “You shoved me out of my seat for this, so I’d at least like some compensation for that.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Da Vinci told him. “You’ve had worse bumps climbing out of bed in the morning.”

“My bed isn’t a Servant,” Romani grouched.

“Let’s get back to the issue at hand,” I said. I turned to Serenity. “You’re a vampire. I’m assuming the reason you’re after the King of Rot is because he’s the one who turned you?”

“Good guess,” she said, confirming my suspicions.

Oddly enough, that made me more willing to trust her. Her motives weren’t necessarily heroic, especially not by modern standards, and some would say they were downright selfish, even self-destructive, but that just made her easier to predict and her desires easier to satisfy.

Revenge was like that. Simple. Uncomplicated.

I turned to Liz next. “And you’re a Servant without a contract, which means you were probably brought here by the Counter Force to help resolve this Singularity.”

Although I had to admit, if only to myself, I had no idea how and why. At least Siegfried and Georgios had made sense as a counter to all the wyverns flying about, and in a twisted kind of way, Jeanne as a counterpoint to her “alternate self.” Unless there was a karaoke contest involved somewhere along the way — and I shouldn’t need to say how unlikely that was — Liz, on the other hand, hadn’t shown me anything that gave me reason to believe she would actually be all that useful in a fight.

Not *useless*, because I knew better than most how that noise she called singing could be weaponized, but whether she had any actual skill as a combatant, that remained to be seen.

“I don’t know anything about that!” Liz insisted stubbornly. She crossed her arms, harrumphing. “I’m just here to sing for Granny! You can have your Grail adventure without me!”

“Even if your help might be instrumental to saving the people of this Singularity?” I pointed out. “Including your Granny?”

Liz’s face drew into a grimace as her brow furrowed. I didn’t think that alone would be enough to convince her, but it at least hammered at a chink in her armor enough to give me an opening.

So appealing to her heroic impulses didn’t work, but her connection to Elise did.

“Please, Liz?” Rika asked. “We really could use your help, you know. This King of Rot guy sounds like super bad news!”

“If what you said earlier is right and he survived long enough to use that Grail?” said Serenity. “I can guarantee he’s used it to summon some Servants of his own, and no one who calls *him* Master bodes well for this place.”

If the theme was vampires, we might even wind up facing Dracul again. This time, without Siegfried around to blast him to ashes. If the system in place that weakened Heroic Spirits didn't work on Heroic Spirits who were also vampires, then we were going to need all the help we could get, no matter how annoying it was.

"We *can* form temporary contracts," Da Vinci put in. "You don't *have* to form a more permanent, more binding one, if you don't want to."

"Nnnn," Liz grunted. She stomped one foot. "Fine! Just shut up about it already and give me your hands!"

She shoved one of hers out, and those long, pink, claw-like protrusions she called fingers unfurled, stark contrast against her pale skin. Immediately, us Masters reached out and put our hands over hers, almost like a prelude to some kind of demented team cheer.

Beep-beep!

"Temporary contract established," Da Vinci reported, "Miss... Oh my. That's unexpected."

Rika immediately tore her hand away. "What? What?"

Liz pulled her own hand back sourly and folded her arms again, scowling.

"Lancer class Servant," said Da Vinci, "*Elizabeth Bathory*."

A tremor jolted through my stomach. Ritsuka and Rika looked clueless, but Mash recoiled, Serenity's eyebrows rose towards her hairline, and even I couldn't help looking at the bratty teenage girl with a little more wariness than before.

"Um, who?" asked Rika.

"It's...in a bit of bad taste to air someone's dirty laundry right in front of them," Da Vinci hedged.

"Ever heard the legend of the noblewoman who drained young virgins of their blood so she could bathe in it to retain her youth and beauty?" Serenity asked bluntly. She gestured to Liz, as though to say, 'Well, here she is.'

Rika blinked. "Wait, really?"

"It's estimated that she killed over six-hundred people," Mash murmured.

A lot of them gruesomely, as I remembered the stories, although not, in hindsight, as gruesomely as Jack Slash and his Slaughterhouse Nine had. In fact, in that regard, Jack had her beat in every category, from number to cruelty, and on Earth Bet, probably even fame.

Hell, forgetting all of that, Hitler put all of them to shame. It was hard to be worse than the guy who was responsible for more than six million deaths and the suffering of countless more.

"Whoa," said Ritsuka.

Liz's lips curled into a sneer, revealing the sharp incisors that jutted out of her gums, larger than normal, almost bestial. "Do I scare you, *Master?*" she mocked.

Ritsuka and Rika turned to each other, shared a look that seemed to convey an entire conversation, and then Rika turned back to Liz and said, "Um, not really?"

I wasn't the only one who was thrown off guard by that.

"Wait, really?" Liz asked, bewildered. "You're not scared at all?"

"I mean, we survived your singing," said Rika. "Not saying you can't top that, but..."

"Why would you want to?" Ritsuka picked up. "You're our friend now, right?"

It was something of a struggle to keep my face straight, to suppress my incredulity; Serenity didn't manage it nearly as well, because she outright goggled at the two of them, like she had just been presented with evidence of Martians living among us.

I wondered what she would make of my passenger, if I told her.

Even Mash looked like she hadn't been expecting that kind of response. She blinked rapidly, stupefied.

Da Vinci, on the other hand, laughed outright. "That's really the sort of thing I should have expected of you two!"

"Ritsuka, Rika, you..." Romani struggled with words for a moment. "You two *do* know what Servants are, don't you?"

"Of course we do, Doc," said Rika.

"But it's easier for everyone to work together if we're all friends, right?" said Ritsuka.

This time, I really couldn't stop myself from snorting.

"You...aren't wrong..." said Romani.

"Sometimes, Romani, you just have to accept your losses and move on," Da Vinci told him, chortling.

It wasn't anywhere near as simple as the twins were making it out to be, but it wasn't all that complicated either. The enemy of my enemy wasn't automatically my friend, but when the threat was right in front of you and you both had reasons to fight it, you could still team up to take it on. The Endbringers had proven that more than once, even if it wasn't a perfect system.

"Hey, wait a second!" Liz interjected. "What was that about my singing? Don't think I'll excuse you for insulting me just because you're my Masters now!"

Ritsuka looked away awkwardly. "Oh. Well, um, you see... The thing is..."

“You’re too loud,” Rika said bluntly.

“That one might not be entirely her fault,” said Da Vinci. “Looking at her Saint Graph, it seems she has a Dragon Breath skill, sonic-based, so it isn’t too far a stretch to imagine she uses it accidentally when she sings, is it? It would certainly explain her unusual volume, if nothing else.”

Serenity looked pointedly at Liz’s tail. “That’s...not the part of that I’m questioning.”

Liz spun to face her, clapping her hands over her backside as though she was attempting to hide her tail from view. It wasn’t very successful.

“The tail...seems to be related to her Innocent Monster skill,” said Da Vinci, “although how she managed to pick *that* up, I couldn’t say.”

“There are some theories in certain circles that Elizabeth Bathory’s crimes were greatly exaggerated,” Romani began.

“You *can’t* mean to say that she’s completely innocent,” Da Vinci said, disbelieving.

“I’m not saying that at all!” Romani insisted. “Look, Dracul wasn’t exactly a saint, was he? He definitely did all of the things history says he did. But he wasn’t a vampire in life, even if his legend got distorted along the way by pop culture and things like *Dracula*. Even if she isn’t guiltless, isn’t it possible that she didn’t kill anywhere near six-hundred people? That’s all I’m saying.”

“We’re getting off track,” I interrupted before they could derail things even further. “We’ve established a temporary contract, which means she’s our Servant for now, and that means she’s on our side.” And if she turned on us, we had nine Command Spells on hand to deal with that issue. “Thanks to Serenity, we have a solid base of operations and a decent idea of what we’re up against. Our next step should be to see if we can find some clue about where he’s decided to hole up so we can be ready to attack him when the time comes.”

A loud growl echoed throughout the room, and Mash ducked her head, her cheeks flushed red. “I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt!”

“After we get some lunch,” I amended. “Any objections?”

Rika’s hand immediately shot up, like a student in a classroom.

“Yes, Rika?”

“Can we order out?” she asked. “I’m gonna die if I have to go a whole ten days without any of Emiya’s delicious cooking!”

Ritsuka sighed, exasperated. Until his stomach growled, too, and then he was just as embarrassed as Mash.

“I-I wouldn’t be opposed to eating something Emiya made,” he said hesitantly.

Serenity chuckled. “I don’t know who this Emiya is, but you’re missing out if you skip one of Sébastien’s meals.”

Rika huffed and crossed her arms, giving Serenity the stink eye. “I don’t care how good of a chef Sebby is, Emiya’s the greatest in the world!”

“No!” said Liz, jumping in. “Sebby’s the greatest in the world!”

“Emiya!” Rika insisted.

“Sebby!”

“Emiya!”

“Sebby!”

“Emiya!”

“Sebby!”

“Emiya times infinity!”

“Sebby times infinity and one!”

Serenity watched them go back and forth, bemused, while Ritsuka tried his level best to sink through the floor. Mash’s head ping-ponged between the two girls, looking like she had no idea what was going on.

“Emiya!”

“Sebby!”