

Fleeting Lunar Phantasia

Part Three

“Serenity?” Romani echoed. “I’m...not seeing a Heroic Spirit matching your description by that name. Is it your real one?”

“As real a name as I ever had,” the woman replied somewhat irritably. “And I’m not a Heroic Spirit. Frankly, the whole concept is an unusual one, as far as I’m concerned.”

“A Demi-Servant, perhaps?” Da Vinci mused. “Or even a Pseudo-Servant. It might explain why there aren’t any records of her existence otherwise.”

One of those, I got. The other one was entirely new, even for me.

“Maybe,” Romani agreed. “I don’t have any better ideas, anyway. And she’s definitely a Servant, there’s no mistaking that. Her Saint Graph is mostly question marks, but the little bit of it we *can* see is definitely that of a proper Assassin Servant.”

“I don’t know what either of those is, either,” the woman cut in, and she was definitely getting impatient. “Look, I woke up here like this about five hours ago. I can’t offer you a better explanation than that.”

“Then you don’t know any more about what’s going on here than we do?” I asked pointedly. “Then why do we supposedly need your help just to survive this place?”

The woman, Serenity, sighed and canted her hip to one side, resting her hand on it. “I can give you the long-winded version once we find somewhere safe to settle down for the night. The short version? In my proper timeline, I lived in Rennes for most of my life. I know this city better than you could hope to if you spent ten years mapping it out, and we don’t have ten years.”

“Miss Da Vinci said we only have about ten days,” Mash said quietly, and I very deliberately forced myself not to send a reproachful look in her direction.

“We have a tighter timeline than I thought,” Serenity mused, and then her brow furrowed. “Wait. Da Vinci?”

“Mash, if you would be a dear and turn us back on to video, too?”

Dutifully, Mash did so, and an image of Romani and Da Vinci appeared above the communicator on her wrist. Da Vinci offered a smile and a wave. “Leonardo da Vinci, at your service, Signorina Serenity.”

Serenity just stared at her for a long, long moment, brow furrowed in confusion. I sympathized with her. Da Vinci herself had never explained it properly, she had only ever really given me some bullshit answer about how everyone would be a beautiful young woman if they had the chance.

Until they had to deal with the plumbing, I had added silently. Plenty of men were probably curious about the experience, up until they had to deal with periods.

Point was, Da Vinci was a man who had put himself in a woman's body and never corrected my use of female pronouns for her. That was all I really needed to understand, if you asked me.

"...Leonardo da Vinci is a woman?" Serenity eventually asked, sounding lost.

Da Vinci lit up. "It's actually a fascinating topic! You see —"

"Later," I cut her off. "For now...where are you suggesting we go?"

Serenity frowned and glanced around. "Well, we're at the *Champ de Mars* right now," she said, pronouncing the French words in such a way that it honestly sounded native to me. "The best place is a little too far outside the city to make the trek under cover of darkness, so our best bet would be to find an inn and settle down until morning."

"But I'm wide awake!" Rika pointed out.

"It *was* morning for us before we came here," Ritsuka added, agreeing.

Serenity shrugged. "The important thing is getting out of the open and somewhere safe, first and foremost. Whether or not we sleep after that isn't as important."

I saw an entirely different problem that was going to make things harder.

"With what money?" I asked. "Finding an inn to stay at is a fine enough idea, but we can't pay for a room, let alone the three we'd probably need."

This caused her pause, and instead of giving an answer, she turned back to the corpse of the man she killed, knelt back down beside him, and started to rifle through his pockets.

"Miss Serenity!" Mash gasped, aghast.

"That's so totally not cool," Rika agreed.

"Under different circumstances, I might agree," Serenity said without looking at either of them. She didn't stop or slow down, either. "Unfortunately, whatever brought me here in this form wasn't convenient enough to leave me with any of my money — ah!"

Metal jingled as she pulled free a handful of silver and gold coins. I had no idea of their value, so how much she had and what it was all worth, I couldn't even have begun to guess. Evidently, however, she did, because she held out her palm and started counting them out under her breath using the index finger of her other hand.

"Whoever our dearly departed friend was, he had a decent amount of money on him," she concluded. She looked down at the corpse and grimaced, but closed her fingers around the collection of coins. "Sorry about this, but I think you'd agree that it's more important we make sure this gets fixed than leaving behind your money for your family."

“If it even would have made it back to them,” Da Vinci said grimly.

“I hate to agree with that, but you’re probably right,” Romani said, sounding tired. “It’s more likely that whoever found him come morning would have just pocketed that money for themselves. The chances of it making its way back to his surviving family is slim.”

“If they’re even still alive,” Serenity said with grave weight. “With what I know about vampires, it’s not entirely impossible he hasn’t already killed them trying to take the edge off. To have gotten as bad as he was, the impulse to feed had consumed him completely.”

The coins jingled as she slipped them into one of the pouches attached to her belt and she stood, her cloak fluttering back into place.

“We should get going,” she said. “I really don’t like the idea of being out here without having a better idea of what might be out here with us.”

Romani grimaced. “According to the map, the nearest local overnight lodgings should be —”

“I already know,” Serenity interrupted him. “Native, remember? Are you coming along or not?”

The twins and Mash looked at me for an answer. Unfortunately, with things the way they were, we didn’t have too much in the way of options. Whatever the guy with the Grail was doing that was weakening me and Mash made it too dangerous to stay out here in the open without allies.

“We’ll go with you for now,” I eventually said.

Serenity nodded. “Then let’s get going. I’ll lead the way, if it makes you feel better.”

“You’re the only one who knows where we’re going in the first place,” I pointed out.

She smiled grimly. “So I am.” Her cloak fluttered as she spun about, turning deeper into the city. “Come on. If we get inside fast enough, that poor unfortunate will be the last one we have to deal with tonight.”

All the better, if you asked me. If there were other vampires hanging around and they were all as mindless as that one, then we’d be risking ourselves for nothing if we ran into more of them. Killing them might make the town safer, but we wouldn’t get any more information out of them than we already had, and until we had a better idea what to do about what was weakening Mash and making my powers so sluggish, that was a little too risky for my tastes.

Serenity started off, and we fell into step behind her, keeping a little bit of distance just in case. Even the twins didn’t seem eager to cozy up to her, and Mash’s mouth was drawn into a tight line as her eyes bored into Serenity’s back.

“We sure we should be following this lady?” Rika whispered over to me. “My Scooby senses are tingling.”

Ritsuka groaned softly. “If I hear the words, ‘it looks like we’ve got another mystery on our hands,’ at any point, I swear, Rika.”

“I’m just saying!” Rika insisted. “Isn’t her showing up when she did kind of, you know, convenient?”

We came to the other end of the *Champ de Mars* and crossed over into the city proper. Those old style Victorian buildings, the kind that were basically a single large row of residences built so that each one shared a wall with the one next to it, loomed three stories above us, dark and asleep. Not a single light was on in any of them, electric or otherwise. It was like we’d stepped into a ghost town.

“I could say the same about you,” Serenity called back, because apparently she could hear us just fine. “You certainly don’t look like Templars, and you’re definitely not vampires, but that doesn’t mean you’re not responsible for what’s going on here. That lost soul was so far gone he would have attacked anyone — even his own allies.”

“We don’t even know what’s going on here!” Romani sputtered.

“So you say.” She turned her bright yellow eyes on us again. “But it’s just your word right now, isn’t it? Just like it’s just my word you have that I’m not going to turn around and stab you, or wait until you’ve dropped your guard and do it then.”

“You’re an Assassin,” I pointed out. “If you wanted us dead, you could have killed us before we even knew you were there.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Rika grumbled.

“And that’s how you know that *you* can trust *me*,” Serenity replied. “I don’t have any guarantees like that for myself, do I?”

And she was choosing to trust us anyway. She, a Servant who didn’t even know what a Servant was, who claimed to only have woken up a short while ago, without any clues to how she’d arrived here or why. I wasn’t sure I totally believed that, but I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt for the moment, and if she was telling the truth? She was taking at least as big a gamble as we were, with even less an idea what the payoff would be.

“I guess you don’t.” Romani sighed. “And anything we told you know would be nothing but words, too, wouldn’t it? The only thing we can do to move forward at all is extend each other a little bit of trust.”

Suddenly, Serenity stopped walking. She patted the pouch she’d slipped those coins into, and it jangled under her touch.

“It occurs to me,” she said abruptly. “We might need this money later for supplies, since you’re all human and have to eat. For that matter, an inn would be better than nothing, but it still wouldn’t be the safest place to hide from a vampire.”

The way she worded that struck me as strange, but I held off from commenting on it. Since we're all human and have to eat? Why wouldn't she include herself in that if she didn't know anything about Servants, like she claimed?

Something wasn't adding up, but I wasn't sure what it was yet. I was going to have to keep a really close eye on her.

"Ah," said Da Vinci. "Yes, that's a better idea. There *is* a cathedral in Rennes, and as luck would have it, it was renovated and restored a few decades prior to that era. If the Church has gotten involved in things, that would be the safest place for you to set up camp, as it were."

"Not exactly my thinking, but close enough," Serenity said dryly. She looked back at us again. "Any objections? It's a little further of a walk, but not by too much."

Our group looked at each other, but no one said anything. I guess we all just wanted to be out of the dark as quickly as possible, and we weren't incredibly picky about where that was, as long as it was safe. Knowing a bit better than the twins, I also agreed with Da Vinci's assessment that the Church being involved in a case about vampires would probably make things a lot easier and safer for us.

That, and if she *was* leading us astray, better to walk into the trap knowing it was a trap than to sidestep it without any idea where the next one would show up.

"To the cathedral, then," I said.

Serenity nodded, and she resumed walking. We fell back into step behind her, and although my bugs were sluggish and slow to respond, I felt through them carefully for any signs of subterfuge or betrayal. They wouldn't be the best warning system, not with my powers on the fritz the way they were, but it was better than nothing.

"In any case," she said, connecting back to the previous conversation, "your disembodied friend there has the right of it. Things here being what they are, we can't know for sure if we can trust each other, so we have to take a bit of a leap of faith. We can work on the other details when we're safe inside the cathedral."

She led us further into the city, through the winding streets and the side roads, and eventually, we crossed a river. When I looked down over the side, the rushing water looked inky and black beneath the moonlight, like it would swallow whole anyone and anything that let itself be dragged into it.

The other side of the river wasn't any less a ghost town than the one we'd just come from. All of the lights were extinguished, all the doors closed and locked, and everyone had barricaded themselves inside. For safety, I had to assume. It looked like the citizens of Rennes were already well aware that something dangerous and deadly stalked the night, because even the crooks and the criminals seemed unwilling to brave it.

It wasn't long after that before the towering visage of a grand cathedral stretched out of the darkness, lit only by the moon. Serenity took us directly towards it, or as directly as the roads

allowed her to, in any case, and it was only a few minutes later that before we were standing in front of it, looking up at the gothic structure.

In a lot of ways, it resembled any other cathedral, with towering spires and an edifice of pale stone, shaped vaguely like a capital 'M.' A thin slab depicting a relief of some kind stood between the two main spires, and an arched window took up almost an entire third of the front face of the building, looming over a pair of enormous double doors fit to accommodate a giant.

We went instead for one of the smaller sets of doors to either side of the main entrance, following Serenity's lead, and against my expectations, they opened for her without trouble. When she saw the look that must have been on my face, she smirked.

"The House of God is open to all those who seek sanctuary within its walls."

That wasn't an explanation at all.

"It's better than fire and brimstone," Rika said dubiously.

Serenity huffed what might have been a laugh. "Quite."

She stepped inside, and after a moment, we followed, out of the dark night and into the pitch black of the cathedral interior. The multitude of windows that lined the building streamed faint moonlight, but it was nowhere near enough to see by. At best, if I strained my eyes, I could see a few vague shapes that must have been furniture of some kind.

"Ack!" said Rika. "Where are the lights? I can't see a thing!"

"Me neither," said Mash. "M-Miss Serenity, was there supposed to be lighting in here?"

"It's the middle of the night," Serenity said dryly. "What were you expecting?"

Ignoring them, I spread out my swarm and had them explore as much of the cathedral as they could, and in the meantime, I fiddled with my communicator until — with a sudden, blinding flash that had everyone shouting and squinting their eyes closed — the flashlight function turned on.

"A-a little warning would have been nice, Senpai!" Rika squawked, shielding her eyes.

"Yeah," Ritsuka agreed.

"What *is* that?" Serenity hissed at me.

"Our communicators come with a flashlight function," I told them all. "Did you forget?"

A brief moment of silence answered me, and then Mash and the twins reached for their own communicators so that they could turn on their own flashlights. A few seconds later, three more beams of light lit up the place, and it was much easier to see what was around us when there were three people swinging their flashlights around to look about.

"Whoa," said Rika. "Hey, this place is pretty swanky. You know, for a cathedral."

“Haven’t you ever been inside a church before, Senpai?” Mash asked curiously.

“I’ve seen pictures!” Rika said defensively. “And hey, I’ve been inside temples before, too!”

Her head swiveled about, taking in the warm, soft palette that decorated the walls and the golden paneling that framed every relief. In the main room to our left, romanesque pillars stretched up towards the vaulted ceiling, curling at the top and framing the wrought iron chandeliers that hung between them. Whoever had designed this place had spared no expense in seeing it look as grand as possible.

“They don’t really look anything like this, though…”

“Western aesthetics are quite a bit different from Japanese ones,” Mash supplied helpfully.

Rika made a noise in her throat. “You’re telling me…”

We moved out of the side hall and into the central one, and Rika let out a whistle as she swung her flashlight up towards the ceiling high above us. The sound of it echoed back at us.

“If you think this is impressive, you should see the Notre Dame in Paris,” Serenity said wryly. “For how incredible this place is, it just can’t compare.”

My head jerked around as my bugs found a disturbance. “Heads up, we’re not alone here.”

The twins and Mash stiffened. Serenity waved them off.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I-I’m not detecting another Servant,” Mash said. “Although…with my performance diminished the way it is…”

That wasn’t a guarantee, she was saying. And if it was an Assassin, then we wouldn’t know until they struck.

If Serenity wasn’t concerned, though… Well, I wasn’t going to drop my guard, but I was tentatively willing to trust that she knew what she was talking about.

A door opened near the back of the room, and a lantern swung out, held aloft by a man in a robe.

“Who’s there?” a voice asked in French. “What are you doing here at this hour of the night?”

Ritsuka’s flashlight swung around, and the man — he must have been the local priest — hissed and nearly dropped his lantern as it shone in his eyes. He shielded himself with his free hand.

“What the devil —”

Serenity stepped between them, leaving the flashlight to beam against her back, and offered the priest what I had to assume was a smile.

“I’m sorry for the late intrusion, Father Richelot,” she said smoothly, “but I’m afraid that we didn’t have much in the way of options. We’re rather short on funds, and there aren’t many places willing to open their doors at this time of the night, given the circumstances.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose not,” said the newly named Father Richelot as he lowered his arm. “And so you came here, of course, and I am only too happy to extend the church’s hospitality to guests, only…”

“Forgive my poor manners.” Serenity stepped closer, and Father Richelot’s free hand flew cautiously towards his chest — towards what must have been a crucifix. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am a traveler from afar, on pilgrimage from the Temple of Solomon. My feet have bled upon this long journey.”

Father Richelot stiffened, and so did I, because that sounded like a passcode. The twins and Mash, however, looked at each other, dumbfounded.

“I welcome you in the name of Christ, and as he did, I shall wash the blood from your feet,” Father Richelot recited, and that was definitely an answering passcode. A moment later, Father Richelot relaxed. “I was not aware that the Templars had taken to inducting women into their ranks.”

He looked over her shoulder in our direction.

“And none of you seem to be wearing the traditional garb.”

“I’m afraid I’m not a Templar myself, although I’ve worked with them on occasion,” said Serenity. “Perhaps you’ve heard of the Dracula incident?”

Dracula incident? That didn’t mean what I thought it meant, did it?

Father Richelot startled and looked at her, surprised. “That was you?”

“After a fashion,” she answered. “Abraham was a student of mine. I taught him everything he knew about vampires.”

“Wait, Dracula was real?” Rika blurted out, unknowingly beating me to the punch.

“I-I thought that was just a legend,” said Mash. “Isn’t that why Dracul had the powers he did, back in Orléans?”

“It was very real,” said Serenity. “Some of the details were changed or hushed up, as I’m sure Father Richelot will confirm, but the events themselves were largely true to life.”

“The report on that incident was sent to every agent, active or not,” said Father Richelot. “To let us know that the situation had been resolved and Dracula was no longer a concern.”

No longer — were they implying that Abraham (Van Helsing, presumably) had dealt with Dracula essentially on his own? Worse, was this same Dracula in the sort of ballpark that Dracul had been in, almost impossible to put down without an attack that destroyed him utterly all at once?

And *one man* had taken him down on his own?

“Holy shit,” Rika whispered. Holy shit, indeed.

Serenity huffed another snort. “Quite.” She turned back to Father Richelot. “As for my companions here, they’re an investigative team sent from another organization — very secretive types, I’m sure you understand. They detected something strange going on and came to see what was happening.”

“I see.” He looked us over again, focusing particularly on Mash. “Has the Round Table decided to send us aid again? The Hessian was the last time we had a major operation with them, but I wouldn’t say no to the assistance of one of their Knights.”

Mash jolted. “W-what?”

She wasn’t the only one who was confused. The twins shared a look, too, and then looked at me, but I didn’t have any answers for them either.

Somehow, I didn’t think the Round Table they were talking about was the same as the Knights of the Round Table from the King Arthur legends. An organization inspired by them, maybe, but unless the person with the Grail had made some pretty drastic changes to history that Da Vinci hadn’t detected, not the original.

And the Hessian... The Headless Horseman? I wanted to close my eyes and massage my temples. You would’ve thought I’d be used to it by now, but just how many of the legends and stories I’d been told as a child had actually been true?

“We should be so lucky,” said Serenity, like she knew what he was talking about.

“We’re from the Chaldea Security Organization,” I decided to say. By the confused looks on their faces, neither Serenity nor Father Richelot seemed to recognize that, which was both good and bad, because it meant that they probably weren’t in cahoots with Flauros. “We’re an organization from the future tasked with ensuring that the proper course of human history is maintained.”

“She actually came out and said it!” Rika whispered, awed.

Both Serenity and Father Richelot looked at me like I’d grown a second head, incredulous.

“From the future?” Father Richelot asked. He looked at Serenity, like she could tell him it wasn’t as ridiculous as it sounded.

“This is the first time I’m hearing this part,” she told him.

“From the year 2015 AD, specifically,” I said. “Our sensors detected a deviation caused by a magical device referred to as a ‘Holy Grail’ located in this time and place, and we were sent here to investigate the situation, neutralize the deviation, and retrieve the Grail.”

“The Holy Grail?” Father Richelot exclaimed.

“Not the real one, I’m sure,” said Serenity, although she didn’t look quite so certain.

I shook my head. “It’s a term used to refer to any device of sufficient power capable of granting wishes. We’ve already retrieved two of them from previous missions.”

“*Two* Holy Grails? Lord have mercy.” Father Richelot shook his head. “If that is true, then they cannot be the real Holy Grail, because there is only one.”

“Their power was certainly real enough.” I shifted a little. “The details aren’t all that important. The important part is that a third was detected here and we need to retrieve it from whoever currently has it.”

“Another?” asked Father Richelot, looking appalled. “A *third* Holy Grail? And it is here, in this city, at this very moment?”

“We can’t say where, exactly, but yes,” I answered. “What we *can* say is that whoever it is who has it is almost certainly the one behind what’s been going on here, and he’s been using the Grail itself to do it.”

“Which, given the theme we have going, means it’s probably a vampire,” Rika said. “You know. Since we fought one before we came here.”

“Good guess,” Serenity said dryly. “That’s where I come in, it looks like. Father Richelot, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there is indeed a vampire behind the recent mess. I can even tell you which one it is, because the King of Rot has decided to make himself at home here in Rennes.”

Father Richelot gasped and stumbled backwards like he’d taken a hard blow, clutching at his chest as his lantern fell to the ground with a crash. His face, already washed out by the flashlights, turned even paler, as though all the blood had drained out of it.

“No,” he said weakly. “Not *him!*”