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THE SERENE LIGHT

The Serene Light

by Chrys Romeo

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The pilot glanced ahead through the windshield.

The sun was reflecting on the glass, blinding his vision, yet he could clearly see the contour of a face. He could see the features well, hung up in the air at 10.000 km altitude, in the freezing silence. Shreds of clouds rushing by, drops of humid steam condensing on the view, yet the vision was still there.

He blinked. The rays of the sun filled the aircraft cabin, absolute and overwhelming. He steered the plane, lost in the view ahead. It was like a dream. The aircraft swished over the top of the mountains, steep cliffs and sharp rocks he could crash into any moment.

Yet her face remained there, in front of his eyes... How many years had passed since he had last seen her?... Ten? Fifteen?... Twenty?... They were teenagers when he had last met her... And yet there she was, in the air, a transparent vision, sweet and serenely melting in the sky... He steered the plane up again. The aircraft control seemed to be slightly stuck. He grabbed it with both hands and tried to point the nose of the plane above the cliffs that were coming closer, zooming in, sharp and still...

“Come on!” he muttered between his teeth.

The aircraft equipment did not seem to respond right.

“Ground control” he heard in his headphones. “Blue Eagle. Are you there? Over.”

“Blue Eagle here.” he answered. “I’m having some difficulties with the plane. Over”

“Blue Eagle, I can’t see you on my radar. You’re off the tracks. Where are you? Over.”

“I don’t know: I’m above the mountain and about to slam into some rocks at the top of it... over.”

“What mountains?! Over.”

“These mountains that I seem to find each time I’m up in the air, over.”

The headphones were silent for a while.

The cliffs were approaching, frozen rocks and snow, lost in the clouds, supreme and implacable... He held his breath for a second, fixing his eyes ahead, glancing in complete stillness through the windshield. The cliffs disappeared underneath. The plane went over the mountain. He heard a scratching sound, rock on metal. And then, the plane hovered beyond, safely and smoothly like a seagull. He breathed deeply.

“I’m off the hook this time.” he said aloud, as if to himself.

But the ground control was still there.

“Next time you won’t be so lucky. What happened? Over.” he heard in his headphones.

“I think the plane went over the top, though it was stuck in a steep angle. I think the rocks scratched the surface a bit, but it’s no severe damage, I’m still flying. It might need some paint and some checkup at the engine when I get back, over.”

“That is, if you know how to get back. Blue Eagle, you’re still not on our radars. Where are you headed? Over.”

He looked ahead. The sun was still in front of him. As if in a dream, her features had started appearing again in the horizon... that sense of safety and serenity gaining strength and filling the cabin.

“Blue Eagle, are you there? Please respond. Over.”

He was lost in thoughts. How many years since he had last seen her?...

“Blue Eagle. Ground control here.”

He snapped from the trance, still glancing at the sweet sunlight that had her presence in there, somewhere...

“I’m here. Over”

“Where are you headed? What are your coordinates? Over.”

He sighed, adjusting himself in the seat.

“I don’t know... Over.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?...Are you having one of those moments again? Code Serena or something? Over.”

He blinked; the sunlight filled his eyes. Beyond the white clouds there were still mountains and cliffs, barely visible.

Her name was Serena – just like the feeling of serenity that she was bringing each time she appeared. Just like the serenity he had always felt around her, when they were teenagers... when they were together. A complete calm, serenity and certainty. Safety. Love. Immeasurable serenity.

“She’s here”, he answered dreamily.

“Blue Eagle, snap out of it. Let it go. She’s not there. The past is the past. Do you hear me? Over.”

He said nothing. The plane had still half the tank of fuel, but was floating freely over the clouds. He turned off the engine. It was freezing outside, most certainly. The windows had ice needles forming from the condensed steam and the clouds, while the plane was roaming over the mountains, lost in silence.

“Have you turned off your engine?” he heard the ground control again, the voice getting anxious. “Have you switched it off? Over.”

“I might have, yes”.

“Why did you do that? You’ll crash. You won’t be able to start it again”.

“I won’t need to, over”, he heard himself speak.

“Blue Eagle, are you high on something or what? How do you plan to get back? Where are you anyway?”

“I’m still above the mountains. Might not need to get back this time.”

He didn’t understand it either. He felt as if there was nothing else he needed, up there, except to fly and be close to her. A transparent vision, yet such a comforting presence. It was getting colder inside the aircraft, yet it was somehow getting warmer at the same time, the sun was getting brighter and closer, filling the corners of the cabin, overflowing. It was like the time when they went sleighing together. He still remembered the freezing winter air of the

night, stinging his cheeks and chin, the stars glimmering above the snow and her hands around him, her whispers in his ear, her smile through the dark, as they were going down the slope, on the sleigh, no more than sixteen years at that time, yet the entire universe unfolding its eternity to keep them in its magic... That light she brought with her each time, had been haunting him in his dreams, over the years... he used to wake up from it, to a rough, uncertain reality – only to feel lost without it. That absolute serenity of light... of love.

How long had it been? It seemed like a moment forever waiting there, in time, for him, for them... in another place, in a parallel world, safe from the course of the years, unaltered, perfect and real. Sometimes, those moments he had spent with her seemed more real than anything he had experienced ever since. Only the plane felt as certain as that. Only flying was as real as those memories. Everything else seemed to lack something... to dissipate... to fade away eventually. Everyone he had encountered afterwards, as possible date or romantic partner seemed to simply not be interested enough in him and his plane, or just not want him enough, or not appreciate him, or not be able to reach him - inaccessible for some reason - so that he seemed to end up alone every time. Every relationship proved to be temporary and unfulfilling. He never found what he was looking for... what he was longing for. And it seemed to never last somehow. They kept getting married – and not to him. They seemed to always leave. He often drifted away from them. They were just not right: either he wasn't enough for them, or they weren't enough for him... It just didn't last: with any of them. He gave it up eventually - trying to be with someone.

He understood after a while that it was going to be like that: just him and his plane. As much as he didn't want to give up hope of finding someone that would stay, he knew there was a reason for it not to happen: he couldn't find any right partner because she had actually been the right partner, the only one – the perfect one, at that time... even if they had both changed afterwards. But however the years seemed to pass by, he couldn't find anyone like her – anyone

able to be the one, for him, as she had been... an absolute match. Sometimes he remembered her words, prophetic as they might have been, spoken in slightly ironic humorous way – yet so true – when she had caught him glancing at another girl, once: “She’s fine, but you won’t find anyone like me. No girl you ever find will be better for you than me. I’m the best...” They had both laughed at her confident words then. He enjoyed her certainty and her desire to be the best for him... he thought it was just her self confidence. Just teenage love bragging. Yet he remembered her words, after many years, and wondered at the depth of the truth. She had been right. She had been so absolutely right. How did she know? She just knew.

He got used to spending most of his time in the plane, flying and drifting away... it was so much better to be up there. He saw no limits, no borders up in the sky, just the endless light... the earth so far away... just freedom from everything.

He hadn’t tried to reach her again. To find her, after so many years... what would have been the use of it? And she was nowhere to be reached anyway... she was lost in the world. She was lost to him – forever? And maybe she didn’t even want to be found anymore. Maybe she wouldn’t have adapted to him now... maybe he wouldn’t have felt needed around her. Maybe she had her life going well for her, as it was, wherever she was: she would have no need for him in the present. And he was too accustomed to the plane and his freedom anyway. Maybe they had nothing more to share now. He was aware of it. It might have been just his nostalgia... yet he sensed there was more to it. He wasn’t just remembering her out of pure memories and present doubts. He wasn’t just longing for something lost. Something was not entirely lost. Something was still there: something was attracting his thoughts to her. Maybe she was thinking about him too? Or maybe it was just an illusion of the plane flying at that altitude.

Yet the light still haunted him, beyond everything... that serene light was often haunting him in the night, in his dreams and shining in the windows when he was in his plane, during daytime... making everything shift to another realm... as if taking him into another existence, beyond reality...

Sometimes he wondered... why had they separated anyway? They had been such a perfect pair at that time. And yet people changed. As teenagers, they needed to grow beyond that point. Both of them. After high school, they just went in different directions and lost touch with each other. He went to aviation school and learned about planes, flying and engines. She went to volunteer for a third world health campaign. And after two years, when she returned, and he was already a pilot, he saw her with someone else. She was with another boy, holding hands, still smiling at him, serenely, as if from another shore... from another life. That's when he knew it was over. He saw her only once afterwards - when she asked him out because she wanted to talk. She was still somehow attached to him: what they had shared was beyond reality. It wasn't something to get away that easily from. He met her where she requested: for coffee. She tried to talk to him about her new life, about her new experiences as a health volunteer in the organization she was part of. She seemed a different person, tougher and more distant. He was aware she had changed and he had changed a lot too. He didn't even try to tell her about his experience as a pilot, about his fascination for planes and the unique feeling of being that high in the air. He was mostly silent. He felt he didn't know who was talking to him. She was already someone else. While he let her speak, he tried to look into her eyes and see a glimpse, maybe a spark of what had been their bridge, their magic. Yet he only encountered a steel wall, shiny and cold. She was lost behind it. She wasn't there anymore. She had a shield that he didn't know anything about. A shield that made him feel like a stranger to her. She didn't care anymore. He got up after a while and told her bye. She let him go, as if it didn't matter. And she never attempted to meet him again. Maybe she had felt that certainty too: that

they had become strangers. He tried to forget her, the best he could, in the following years, and tried to tell himself that his life was going in the right direction - without her. That it didn't matter anymore. That everything else was more important: the flying, the planes, the missions. He hadn't seen her since.

Yet recently, she seemed to appear out of nowhere, in front of his plane.

He saw her flowing in the sky, in a light that made her appear so ethereal, so astounding... it was a vision that continued to show up unexpectedly... at the highest altitudes...

How long had it been? Fifteen years?...

Such a long time... he wasn't even the same person anymore. Nothing in the world was the same as it had been then... Nothing ever stayed the same. Everything changed, nothing lasted for too long... "Good things don't last forever", she had told him once, when he was wondering "How long do you think we'll last?" And her answer came, implacable and calm: "Don't you know? Good things don't last for too long. And that's how it should be..." He didn't agree with her. He didn't want good things to end. And yet, she had been right... again. The world was such a place where everything was temporary... especially good things. Good valuable things had a habit of disappearing into the past... and yet, something from the past was coming back, rising into the present... Something had remained unchanged, eternal... somewhere, in a place out of time and seemingly out of the earth... "Some things should never end", he thought. "Some things are eternal... and that's how it should be..."

As he saw her appearing in the sky, each time, he started to think about her more.

He started to recall the feeling of serenity he had always had around her. He remembered the depth of understanding, the magnetic unspoken bridge between them. He admitted how perfect it had been. How uniquely magical. He realized how much he had missed that. He kept thinking about her again... and again. And as her features appeared in the sunlight, he noticed the plane was

drifting off each time, astray, into uncharted territories. He didn't know those mountains; he didn't know what was happening to the radar. He didn't understand why he had that feeling of peace and certainty, letting go of the entire world to just drift away, in sunlight...

“Blue Eagle! Are you there?”

He closed his eyes for a few seconds, letting the sunlight vision silence his mind. His soul recognized her presence: serenity. It was there. She was there again. Serena... the ethereal vision of her.

“Blue Eagle. Come in, Blue Eagle. Please respond! Blue Eagle. Are you there? Come in, Blue Eagle.”

He heard the voice from the ground control tower, as if from very far away, resonating desperately in his headphones:

“Blue Eagle! Where are you headed? Over.”

“I have no idea”, he answered eventually.

“So, you're still there! Roger that! What do you see? Over.”

He opened his eyes and glanced beyond the window. The ice needles had melted on the glass and the view was clearer. There was a long patch of blue spreading beneath the plane. The patch appeared and disappeared, as stripes of white shreds of clouds rushed by. Water. It was water. An endless surface, with thin ripples, spreading everywhere.

“I think I might be above the ocean or something”, he said, looking at it carefully.

Something began shaking the cabin. He grabbed the control yoke as the plane was banking left and right, trembling unexpectedly.

“That's not possible”, he heard the ground control. “The ocean is too far away. You couldn't have drifted off that way just on the tank of fuel you had.”

“There are strong currents here”, he said trying to adjust the flaps and the rear of the plane. “I might be going down, I'm losing altitude”.

“Start up the engine! You can't let it slide down, you'll fall in the water!”

“I know, I know!”

He struggled with the pedals and the yoke. He tried to start up the engine. The plane wasn't responding. The fuselage was getting wet from the splashing ripples and waves, moving so close to it, like a rocket speeding ahead. The propeller was already cutting through the ripples. He tried again. Then he closed his eyes and he just thought of her, as he was going down, approaching the water surface in full speed. The plane jolted suddenly and the engine started roaring. He realized he had changed direction and the engine was functioning again. He adjusted the plane back up. The aircraft went with its nose just above the water, then dashed higher and passed beyond the clouds.

He could no longer hear the ground control in his headphones. The cockpit was silent. Yet the plane was still rising, higher above the clouds... until it reached a balanced smooth speed, flowing away... In the distance, the pilot could see the clouds gathering up in towers, like mushrooms, like foamy tides, like a castle, like trees... their shapes were changing, as if a fairy tale was displayed before his eyes. The sunlight colors enveloped the horizon.

“Blue Eagle! Are you there? Over.”

He heard the ground control in his headphones, as if coming from another world.

“I'm here, over”, he answered, looking dreamily at the shape shifting clouds.

“Where are you? It's been too long - so many hours and still no trace of you on the radar. Are you still lost? What's happening? Over.”

“I think I'm transitioning to somewhere different”, he said, watching the white clouds changing their shapes like an endless constructing site, in the colors of the sunset – or sunrise.

“From where? To where? Ground control here. Blue Eagle, what are your coordinates?”

He glanced at the compass on the board in front of him. The compass needle was spinning madly, round and round, endlessly...

“I might be in an electromagnetic field or something”, he said.

“A magnetic what?...”

The voice in the headphones was getting dim again, distancing itself beneath the clouds.

He could no longer hear it. There was a buzz and the sound just sizzled into silence. He was getting closer to the castle of clouds. He remembered the stories about planes getting lost above the ocean, stories about ships reaching white water and disappearing for decades, yet none of them had been where he was. And none of them had encountered anything like that serene light... like her: Serena, the ethereal vision. He wondered if there was some truth about those stories. If there was something similar to what he was seeing... something similar to what was happening to him. His sense of adventure was getting more intense with the certainty that somehow, something unusual was there. The castle kept shifting its shape, like cotton candy or heaps of steamy white overflowing, rolling in a cascade, endlessly...

He sensed that no plane or ship had ever been where he was going. He was the first one there... the only one. He went ahead into the castle of clouds and the mist covered the windows. For a few moments, he couldn't see anything except white fluffy heaps of clouds, almost getting inside the cabin, stuffing the space beyond the windows. After a while, the windows started clearing up. He realized he had emerged on the other side: the plane was flying over the mountains again. Ground control was long gone. The plane started leaning on one side.

The cliffs looked like a clover leaf, chopped and serrated. And the mountain side seemed to be covered in grass and clover, appearing like a sea of shiny dew, sparkling amazingly in sunlight... He blinked: the image of the clover field appeared and disappeared before his eyes, in a shifting light,

blinding him and throwing sparkling reflexes in the windows. He remembered that he had found a four leaf clover, once... when he was with her. He wasn't even sixteen then. It was among the first times they were out together. And he saw the four leaf clover in the grass. Just like that. He picked it up. She smiled and her eyes shone with that steel light, the color of honey, slightly greenish, like water... something unique that no other person had. That clear light, like an unexplained strength, that made everything seem so serenely true. He held the four leaf clover up, enthusiastically:

“Would you look at that! I'm so lucky...”

She shrugged, her eyes glancing through him, bright and friendly.

“If you believe that, then you are”, she said and stepped on through the grass, with her tall slim boots and her long hair hanging over her shoulders, fluttering like sand: close to her, reality just shifted into something deeper and she made it seem so easy.

It was so easy for her to accept his version of reality. She let him be however he wanted. She let him be himself – and encouraged it more. She seemed enchanted by the slightest details... some of them she found amusing, some interesting, some fascinating... She just watched him, in her own unexplained delighted way. Her nature seemed so different from his. She brought something he seemed to lack, something he needed most: serenity, a steady calm that turned the world into something he hadn't known before. Another realm. A better one. He was as fascinated by her as if he had discovered a gift – like that clover. Something unique and magically influencing reality. Everything was different when she was around. He thought she was marvelous. She was amazing. She was out of the world. They had been under a spell, both of them, from the moment they had glanced at each other.

“Why did you come and talk to me?” he asked her after they went out for a walk.

“Because you’re different. And because... I don’t know”, she replied.
“Why do you want an explanation to everything?” she inquired.

“Why do you like me?” he asked her, insisting on his attempt to understand.
She shrugged.

“What would you want me to say? You can’t answer that. Shall I tell you that I like you because I like your jeans or your jacket? It wouldn’t be true and it’s not the answer you’re waiting for. So leave it at that. I just like you.”

So that was it. He understood later in life that the most impressive, unique and marvelous things, the most miraculous, the most wonderful did not need any explanation. Those were the ones that did not need anything, but just to be... Their very existence was enough. It was more than enough. Like the lucky clover.

He had kept the clover. He stashed it in his plane, wrapped in a piece of paper, by the window. It was dry and it seemed to have shrunk over the years, yet it was still there.

Suddenly, the fuselage touched the mountain ridge. He felt the plane shaking and blowing blazes of snow over the cliffs, as it drifted, half spinning, scratching the rocks and shrieking with its silvery aluminum fuselage until it stopped completely... hanging over the edge with one wing, balancing its tail imperceptibly. “It’s over now... I wonder where’s that ground control this time...” he thought. He was alone in the mountains. The unexplained, uncharted mysterious mountains... He looked over the window: there was an abyss on one side and a steep cliff on the other. The engine coughed a few times – then it went silent too. He looked up to the sky: her features were no longer there. Yet her presence was hovering around. He could feel it: that serenity, like nothing before or after ever mattered.

He opened the cabin door and got out.

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“You know, when you told me you went on that skydiving camp, I didn’t believe you.”

She had said that to him, once, when he had shown her a picture of himself wearing a skydiving suit and equipment, on the aerodrome, among helicopters and small planes. It had been his fascination for planes to make him enroll on a skydiving camp for teenagers. He had already been there when he met her.

She looked at the black and white picture.

“I thought you were just going to the aerodrome and hanging around”, she said, her eyes still smiling in disbelief, amazed at him - as she always was, for some reason.

“I told you it was for real”.

She just looked at him, with that light, that absolute light, the color of honey and greenish waters, a light so intense and serene it went and cut through everything that belonged to reality, shifting it, switching it on like a steady laser.

He looked back at the plane that remained on top of the cliff, hanging on one side, with one wing above the abyss. Would she believe him now, had she seen the plane? She had never seen him as a pilot. What would she say about it?... Would she like it? Would she be proud of him being a pilot? Would she want to go for a ride – to fly with him above the clouds?... How, when she seemed already there?...

He remembered what he had realized then, when he had shown her the picture: that she loved him – and would love him no matter if it had been true or not... that he had been skydiving. He suddenly understood that truth underneath everything: it didn’t matter to her exactly what he did – or what he said. It wouldn’t have changed how she felt. The fact that he had become a pilot was probably of no utmost importance to her. She would have accepted him anyway then, with his passions and dreams. She would understand him now in the same

way, no matter who he had become in the meantime... and that was what he longed for - and what he had been missing.

He kept walking through the snow. He had his pilot jumpsuit on, but it was getting cold. He hadn't anticipated those mountains. He had taken a bottle water and the clover in his backpack. The path seemed endless. Yet it would have to change soon: he wasn't prepared to be walking around forever.

Bits and pieces of conversations with her kept coming back to his mind, awakening in his thoughts. He still felt that serenity spreading around: he knew something unusual was about that place and he knew he was getting closer to her – in an unexplained, unexpected way. Reality was always flexible when it was about them... about her.

“You don't understand”, he had told her once.

“Is there anyone who understands you?” she had replied, rhetorically. “I think nobody ever will...”

And she had smiled. Understanding and loving did not exclude nor imply each other, in her view. Love was the only certainty that mattered – absolutely...

Yet, after so much time, he knew she had understood him better than anyone after her. She had known him better – because she had loved and accepted him more than the long row of casual meetings and random dates or hopeful relationships he had afterwards. And that was what really mattered: the truth of love...

He went around the steep wall of rocks and the view changed: he suddenly saw in the open, downhill, a small building like a chapel – it was probably a church. Its walls of granite guarded the yard with a fountain in the middle and benches of stone. There was a huge cross in front of it, with many light bulbs, that could probably be seen on top of the mountain from very far away, glowing brightly in the night, like a lighthouse for imaginary ships lost in the snow, in the middle of those cliffs... in the middle of nowhere. The church seemed

deserted, silently closed. There was another abyss beyond it, as if the road ended there, at the edge.

He walked to the gate. The sense of serenity was getting deeper, spreading around like a certainty. He opened the wooden gate. It seemed it had been closed for a long time. When he went inside the yard, he saw someone sitting on the bench, next to the fountain. He stopped.

It was her. She was casually sitting on the bench, as if waiting for him... or waiting for nothing in particular. He knew it was her before she turned her eyes to look at him. He recognized her and the intense feeling of serenity that enveloped reality, which changed it into something else: into love. A different realm, more powerful than anything the world could have come up with.

She looked at him and that light in her eyes, so well known to him, shining through everything, reached his soul instantly. He felt like a lost seagull finally finding his way home after centuries of wandering in the dark. He never wanted it to end. It should have been like that forever. It was where his soul actually belonged: with that light in her eyes. He remembered what it felt like to be around her, as if it had only been yesterday. A serenity so absolute, so overwhelming: another reality, another timeless existence. He walked slowly to her, as if hypnotized. Why? Why had they separated in the first place?... It felt like they belonged there, as if they had been there since the beginning of the world itself... or even before it – and beyond it. Life's struggles seemed to have been unnecessary, compared to that absolute serenity.

“Hi”, she told him.

Her voice... It was the same voice. She seemed unchanged by the passing years. Maybe just a slightly more tired smile... maybe just a little bit more mature attitude - or it was just an impression. Beyond it, however, was the same teenage girl he had known years ago. He recognized everything about her... it was an incredibly blessed moment, to finally see her again, in front of him, after so many years of wandering astray from each other...

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