

These Tragic Souls and a Sword Reborn in an Intergalactic Space Opera

Story Intro: "Welcome! I'm an evil god, though not that evil of a god!" is what they woke up to. Join our heroes and heroines, having just met their demise, displaced by an extradimensional event."

Story Starts

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Book 1 - The Empty Twin

Ch 4.4 Depersonalization-Derealization

I woke to the sight of my own dangling feet against a backdrop of endless white.

I wiggled the toes. They obeyed. And yet a peculiar doubt settled over me as I watched them curl and flex—a question I had no name for. Were these mine?

The obedience proved nothing. Puppets obeyed. Reflections obeyed. I made the toes curl again and tried to locate the place the command came from, and found that the search itself dissolved on inspection, the way a word repeated too many times sheds its meaning. There was a gap between *I moved* and *they moved*, and I could not find its width, and not finding it was worse than any answer.

I raised my hands and studied them. The delicate palms. The slender fingers. The soft white skin. I turned them over, traced the faint lines across each knuckle, and the certainty arrived like a tide filling a hollow: my fingers. My palms. My skin.

The certainty resonated, and memories flowed into me.

No—the memories had always been there. Every one of them, present and complete, waiting in the dark like furniture in an unlit room. What had eluded them was the sense of distinction that now marked my hands and feet. Ownership. The small, invisible stamp that separated *mine* from *hers*.

I reached for a specific memory to test the stamp against. One of those where she—the other me—hadn't been able to avoid her sister whilst carrying schoolwork to the Emiya residence. A hand closing around a wrist at a street corner. Words tumbling out in a frantic stream. The first touch in eleven years.

I watched it unfold from behind those borrowed eyes, watched Rin trying her clumsy best to make amends.

I could accept it, because I loved my sister.

The other me couldn't, because Rin was *her* sister.

The distinction sat inside my chest, clean as a blade's edge, and I didn't know whether to be grateful for it.

"Dear child."

"Little one."

Two voices echoed through me—rippled through me—washed through the whole architecture of my psyche at once, resonating in places I hadn't known I possessed. And yet 'voices' was the wrong word entirely. These weren't sounds gathered by my ears and assembled by my mind. My ears, I suspect, had not been involved at all. Nor, possibly, my mind—not the part of it I think of as myself.

What reached me was something without precedent. Communication in its most perfect form.

When a person speaks, meaning travels through a dozen lossy translations—thought to word, word to sound, sound to ear, ear to understanding—and something leaks away at every stage. This lost nothing. It arrived whole. Feeling, intent, essence, wrapped in layer upon layer of context, each layer nested inside the next like the rings of a tree, until no doubt could survive about what had been conveyed. I received not a sentence but the entire shape of a thing: its warmth, its weight, its history, the affection

folded into 'dear child' and the amusement threaded through 'little one', all of it delivered in a single, indivisible instant.

My mind ached from holding it. A cup asked to contain a sea.

And the worst of the ache was this: the communication assumed a recipient adequate to it. Something, somewhere, had addressed me as though I were the kind of thing that could be spoken to this way—and my whole being strained upward towards the assumption like a plant towards a lamp, and I could not tell whether that straining was growth or damage.

And how had I not noticed it before? My vision unfocused from my hands and feet, then refocused on what lay beyond them, at the forefront of the vast, empty white.

Had it just appeared? Or had it always been there? Had I only gained the ability to perceive it because it had acknowledged me first?

That last possibility frightened me more than the others, and I didn't examine why.

I dropped my hands and gazed at a massive wall of flesh that swallowed my entire field of view. Before me, four colossal towers rose out of the white void, pale and ridged, climbing towards a peak that my eyes refused to find.

I craned my head back. Further. Further still. The towers went up and up and the white went with them and there was no summit, only a suggestion of curvature somewhere past the limit of sight, the way a cliff face hints at the mountain above it.

I looked closer, because I couldn't stop myself. The surface of the nearest tower wasn't smooth. Ridges ran across it in long, sweeping arcs—parallel lines that curved and doubled back on themselves in patterns I had seen a thousand times before, printed in ink on documents, pressed into clay, left on the rim of a teacup.

Whorls. Loops. The topography of a fingerprint, rendered at the scale of a canyon system. Each ridge was a cliff I could have walked along for a day. Each furrow between them was a valley deep enough to hold a river. Pores opened in the flesh like sinkholes, dark and vast, and somewhere in the white distance the four towers converged towards a single, continent-sized palm.

Fingers. I was standing before fingers, and the recognition did not make the thing smaller. Recognition is supposed to domesticate; you name a thing and it shrinks to fit the name. This did the opposite. Every familiar detail—the whorls, the pores, the soft creases at the joints—only confirmed the scale by giving me units to measure it in, and the measuring broke something in the measurement.

Somehow, I began backing away—or perhaps the titanic structure was shrinking, perspective bending around me like light around a lens. Distance meant nothing here. The more the thing revealed itself to me, the more my horror mounted, because the revelation didn't diminish it. It only confirmed what those grand forms of flesh—

Oof.

I bumped into something behind me.

I turned my head. My vision didn't focus on whatever had halted me, because the scene unfolding beyond it seized my attention whole, and my mounting horror was proven correct in the worst possible way.

The white void did not end. It blended—bled outward into cosmos, the pale nothing dissolving by degrees into a darkness pricked with stars, and through that borderland between white and black, vast beings of eternity meandered.

My mind tried to hold their shapes and failed. They were amorphous, unintelligible—masses that owned too many directions at once, surfaces that folded through themselves without breaking, outlines that my eyes traced and re-traced and could never close. Looking at one was like reading a sentence whose end rewrote its beginning. Each attempt to comprehend them left a

residue behind, a faint pressure at the back of my skull, as though understanding itself had mass and I was accumulating too much of it.

I want to say I looked away. I didn't look away.

They were of such proportion that comparison collapsed. The largest mountain I could imagine would have registered against them as an ant registers against a cathedral. Less. A mote. A rounding error in the arithmetic of their scale.

And around them, like plankton around whales, drifted a sea of willowy wisps of light.

Thousands. Millions. Bulbous, flickering things in every colour I had words for and several I didn't, bobbing and swaying in slow currents. Some burned steady. Some guttered. Some pulsed in rhythms that reminded me, absurdly, of heartbeats.

Souls.

The knowledge arrived without a source, the way knowledge does in dreams. I had floated once as one of those lights, hadn't I? Somewhere in the residue of memory—the void, the orbs, the old-bearded child on his throne—

'Wait, did that happen before or after now?'

The question refused to resolve. Before and after had come apart here, quietly, like a seam giving way, and I hadn't noticed the moment it happened. I still don't know when it happened. I am no longer certain the question means anything.

I watched the beings weave between the wisps, inspecting each in turn. For what purpose, I did not know. There was no hunger in the ritual, no malice I could detect—only patient, methodical attention. A jeweller sorting stones. A gardener walking rows.

Every so often, one of the beings found something of interest. It would extend a portion of itself—a limb, a pseudopod, a decision made flesh—and touch

one of the flickering wisps. And in the instant of contact, the amorphous mass would collapse inward, folding its impossible geometry down and down into something anthropomorphic. A head. Shoulders. Arms. A shape worn like a garment, put on for the courtesy of the moment. Then the touch would end, the shape would unravel back into contradiction, and the being would drift on to inspect the rest.

The courtesy was the unbearable part. Whatever they were, they could compress themselves into something a soul could bear to look at—which meant the folded shape was a kindness, a hand cupped around a candle flame. And it meant that everything I was looking at now, all the unresolvable geometry filling half the sky, was what they looked like when no one worth the courtesy was watching.

I was watching.

No shape had been folded for me.

"...o....k..a"

I stared at the ritual for what felt like an eternity. Time had no purchase here; I could have watched for a breath or a century and the difference would have been a matter of taste. Something muted rose at the edge of my consciousness, growing louder, more insistent, and I fought to drag myself away from the spectacle—fought, and felt the fight, because the sight *pulled*. It wanted watching. It rewarded watching. Every second my eyes lingered, the shapes made a little more sense, and I understood with cold clarity that making sense of them was the trap.

"...o...ak..a"

".....h..aka"

"Ms Tohsaka."

SNAP.

The fog within my consciousness cleared all at once, and the tantali—NO. I crushed the urge to resume watching. The allure of the spectacle beckoned still, plucking at the corner of my attention like a hand at my sleeve, and I refused it.

I turned my head towards the voice that had cut me loose, taking exaggerated care to minimise my acknowledgement of everything else in my periphery.

An old man stood there, clad in what looked like black militaristic robes, high-collared and severe. I granted him the briefest of glances—enough to register, not enough to invite.

"Little one."

"Dear child."

The endearments came again—but reversed. The voice that had been warm now arrived mocking, sarcastic, aloof, and yet curiously inviting for all that; and the one that had been distant now wrapped around me welcoming, encouraging, warm as a hearth in winter. The exchange happened without seam, as though the two speakers had traded costumes between sentences and expected me not to notice.

Or as though warmth and mockery were not properties of the speakers at all, but garments—like the folded shapes—to be put on and off at will.

My focus redirected, dragged towards—

Blink. Blink. Blink.

HUH?

For a long moment my mind simply could not keep pace. One bizarre thing after another had assaulted me since waking, and now I stared into a reflection of myself.

The current me wore a white dress that fell to my ankles. My reflection carried a slight golden-orange hue, tinted by the surface that held it. I raised a hand;

the reflection raised one back. An unnerving chill crept up my spine as the surface blinked at me.

I blinked back.

The golden-orange mirror was an iris. The pupil at its centre contracted, a well of darkness narrowing to a point, and the eyelid around it lowered by a degree—focusing. On me.

My gaze widened, taking in the beings before me—or rather, their colossal faces, which encompassed the entirety of my vision from edge to edge, horizon to horizon, two visages vast enough that I stood within the compass of their attention the way a candle stands within a room.

Two familiar faces.

My breath hitched. My chest tightened. Another chill washed over me, tingling out through my fingertips, and I did a double-take as my eyes locked this time with a second iris—deep crimson, dark as garnet held to firelight.

Their colossal faces—titanic, otherworldly, all-encompassing—bore my own visage.

My face. Multiplied. Enthroned at a scale that made mountains into motes—wearing expressions I had never worn, and looking back at me with a familiarity I had done nothing to earn.

And I saw myself, small and white-clad and utterly known, reflected in that single, deep crimson eye.

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Sakura opened her eyes.

Normally, she would have offered the ceiling a small, private observation—that it looked more familiar than it had yesterday. A daily nod to her continued existence; quiet proof that this life, that *she*, wasn't merely a delusion dreamt by the original Sakura.

This morning, the familiar ceiling arrived partly obscured by a tangled mess of black hair draped across her face, and the ritual of her awakening was further disrupted by inconsistent snoring from her right.

She swept the bulk of the hair aside and blew out sharply, then picked free the last strands that had somehow found their way into her mouth.

Next came the extraction. She eased the pillow out from beneath her head and positioned it against her stomach—a technique Shirou had taught her the morning after 'the talk'. She guided the pillow up towards her chest, rolled onto her right side, and inched backwards in slow increments, substituting cotton for sister until Rin's arms tightened around the pillow instead of her.

The wall clock opposite the bed read forty-five minutes before her *toban*—her scheduled duty rotation this morning. Time enough. Still on her side, Sakura propped her head on her folded arms and watched her sister sleep.

Her sister.

Her cheeks flexed, and a smile formed on its own as some of the doubts that had shadowed her since waking in this reality loosened their grip. Right after 'the talk'—after she had confessed everything to Illya, Rin, and Shirou—Rin had still insisted on making things clear.

Rin had acknowledged it plainly: Sakura might not be the sister who had been unintentionally abandoned, whether through lack of responsibility, unfortunate circumstance, or misconstrued assumption. And then, in the same breath, she had declared—loudly, chin up, arms crossed—that Sakura was the third Tohsaka. Her youngest sister. And that she was happy to finally meet her and get to know her properly.

The declaration had lasted precisely four seconds before Rin caught the knowing smiles Shirou and Illya were exchanging, went scarlet, and reacted with considerable violence to the ensuing teasing.

Sakura studied her sister's face now. Eyes slightly open. Mouth agape, producing sounds no language had claimed. Saliva tracked down one corner of her lips, the edge of the flow already drying to a crust.

She reached over and brushed Rin's hair back with her fingers, tucking it behind her ear, then let her hand rest against her sister's cheek and stroked the soft skin with her thumb. Rin nuzzled into the touch without waking.

"Baka, Shirou."

Sakura pressed her lips together against a laugh. Even asleep, her sister had priorities. She sat up, drew the blanket to Rin's neck, and stretched—arms overhead, a yawn suppressed, several joints in her back popping in sequence—all executed without a sound that might disturb her overworked sister.

She shuffled towards the foot of the bed as Cuspey, their assigned brownie, popped quietly into existence with a hairbrush already in hand, and Sakura summoned her black shadow to begin the morning routine.

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Sakura eased her door shut, rotating the knob through its full arc so the latch would slide home without a click. She turned towards the kitchen.

The back of a tall figure with broad shoulders greeted her, currently engaged in slicing and dicing the ingredients for the day's breakfast. No doubt existed as to who it was; Shirou's towering frame was quite distinct. The only residents of the camp who stood taller were the recently awakened centaurs and merfolk, and the only members of their thirteen who came close to his two hundred and thirty centimetres were Rose and Gabrielle, at two hundred and twenty-six and two hundred and seventeen respectively.

To Shirou's left stood their resident grey-haired former waitress, right cheek puffed out in a pout aimed squarely at him. Highly probable that Shirou had been teasing her—Ryuu had warned the entire camp, in her flattest and most

serious register, never to let Syr near any part of the cooking process. At minimum, no process involving seasoning or the application of heat.

A scene like this—Shirou and another woman, shoulder to shoulder in a kitchen—would once have driven a spike of anger, irritation, and jealousy through Sakura's chest. But the possessive undertow that had belonged to this body's previous occupant simply wasn't present in her. The channel existed; nothing flowed through it.

She still didn't fully understand her own situation—how she had both lived and not lived the life of Sakura Matou. She carried that life entire, had seen every hour of it through those eyes, and yet the whole of it sat at one remove, observed as much as endured.

Marin's framing remained the best anyone had offered. She had compared it to a first-person role-playing game, and had even demonstrated, booting one up on her PC while she explained.

Marin had described how she related to the games she loved—how she *became* certain characters, felt happy and sad and furious on their behalf whenever events befell them. How she developed genuine feelings for a character's love interests, genuine loathing for their enemies. And yet, despite placing herself so completely inside a fictional life, she carried none of the character's trauma out of it. None of its weight followed her when the screen went dark. She could rage at a heroine's suffering, but raging about it was a different creature from having lived it. She could love a fictional man and imagine a life beside him, and the love was real in its way—and then she'd start a new game, and it would fade, and she'd move on.

The difference in Sakura's case, Marin had concluded, was simple and enormous: her game had been real. Its characters were non-fictional. There was no starting over.

Unfortunately, the majority of Marin's favourite games were of the ero-hentai variety, most of them explicit to a degree Sakura had lacked the vocabulary to anticipate. So Marin's passionate, empathetic counsel—delivered with a

sincere face and genuine concern shining in her eyes—had been backdropped, on the monitor behind her, by a scene in which the princess of a freshly pillaged kingdom, naked and gagged, was being passed around by foreign invaders against her will. To put it lightly. Marin had not once glanced back at the screen. Sakura had not once managed to stop.

Well. Whatever the mechanics, her feelings for Shirou remained—her attraction persisted regardless of which Sakura had grown it. As Marin put it, she had lived vicariously through the tragic life of the fifth Holy Grail War's heroine, Sakura Matou. And she, Sakura Tohsaka, would simply have to sort out everything else in time. Inherited feelings included.

She crossed the kitchen and bumped hips with Shirou, her greeting pitched as a question.

"Good morning, Shirou? Syr?"

The questioning tone was necessary. She had no idea which iteration of either of them she was addressing.

The morning after 'the talk', Rin and Hermione had gathered everyone to unveil the fruits of their many late nights, opening several velvet-lined chests with theatrical flourish—to a semicircle of raised eyebrows.

"Hey, we wanted to put on a show!" Rin had stomped her foot, defensive to the last.

Inside the boxes: more time-turners. A lot more time-turners.

"First cycle of the day," Syr reported now, raising a hand. "Haven't touched the time-turner yet."

"Third and final rotation for me." Shirou rubbed at the nape of his neck.

"Figured I'd get a head start on breakfast and lunch prep before I sleep out the last hours of this cycle." He paused, frowning at the chopping board as though it had personally scheduled him. "Though I should probably start correcting my

sleep to align with everyone before the raid. Or something close to it—we've still got rotating look-out duty to cover."

Sakura exchanged a glance with Syr. Both of them rolled their eyes in unison at their friends' notorious blindness to their own self-destructive overworking.

She wrested the knife from Shirou's grip—gently, but with a finality that brooked no negotiation—set it on the chopping board, and turned him bodily towards the quarters area.

"Rest. Rin's about to wake—if you hurry, you can spend some time with her before you finally sleep." She planted both hands between his shoulder blades and pushed him towards her and Rin's room.

"Good night, both of you." He went obediently, pausing only to pin a brightly coloured badge—a large '4th' embossed at its centre—to the board beside the door. Fair warning to any of his previous iterations still wandering the camp that the fourth Shirou of the day was inside, and that encountering himself was to be avoided.

Sakura looked back at Syr, the other half of today's *toban*, who released a long, gloomy sigh.

"Well. They work themselves half to death, but at least one of them is getting some out of it."

"Getting some? Getting some what?"

Both their heads turned. The third girl assigned to today's rotation had arrived: Rose Potter, hair in its usual state of crimson insurrection.

"Oh, Rin's getting the bone of Shirou's sword this morning," Syr replied, grumpy as a cat in rain, already laying out stainless-steel trays, setting pots of water to heat, and putting on the kettle.

"Oh. *Ohh*." Rose's face cycled through three expressions before settling on studied neutrality. "Well. Good for her, I suppose."

Her wand materialised in her hand—one of the more unique advantages she and her fellow witches had gained from the transfer ritual with Zelretch, having soulbound their wands amongst other items. They could summon them at any moment, and if one were ever broken or destroyed, it would re-knit itself within the owner's soul, ready to be called again after a few moments.

Rose checked the clipboard listing today's breakfast and lunch, then waved her wand—swish, flick—and the knives rose from their block and set to work, slicing, peeling, and dicing everything the day's meals required.

The time-turners had been strictly rationed at first, assigned only to the handful who genuinely needed to stretch their days. And according to Hermione, even that had been a stopgap: the devices could manage only two complete twenty-four-hour cycles per day, and the number two—magically speaking, in anything relating to the temporal—was apparently volatile. Some of the earlier users had reported inconsistencies in how far back a turn carried them, missing the target by as much as two hours.

Hence the request for another raid on the twentieth floor, and the order for its strip-mining—every possible blackstone to be pried loose and carted home.

The new ones could manage a full thirty-nine-hour cycle, several times a day.

Everyone had been feeling the pressure—the fact that the first boss of the dungeon was a Wea—

"Sakura."

She surfaced from her thoughts and turned towards Rose, head tilted in question.

"I'll concentrate on the lunch preparations. Can you solo breakfast—or do you need Syr to help you?"

Sakura turned her head towards Syr, who had bitten her lower lip and was deploying the sad puppy-dog eyes at maximum aperture. She turned back to Rose, one eyebrow rising at the grin now spreading across that freckled face.

Deliberately put on the spot. Trap constructed, baited, and sprung in a single sentence.

Sakura sighed and stepped into it.

"Syr can help me."

Syr cheered aloud and rushed to her side. Both of them called for their assigned brownies—Cuspey and Sobby—who popped into the kitchen a heartbeat later.

Cuspey, who had once been unfortunate enough to be subjected to Syr's cooking, took one look at the arrangement and pinched the bridge of her nose against the incoming headache.

"This being bad, bad idea, Mistress Sakura." A succinct prediction of the future.

Syr stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth and threw them a peace sign.

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End

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