

Chapter 2: Baku

Beings that are alike
Attract each other
Forms that are alike only in appearance
Repel one another

We are drawn to one another
Despite having parts the other cannot possess
Hands outstretched, yet unable to grasp
That which we seek

In the mirror
I see my reflection
My hollow heart
Echoing within

Two of the cases inside the room suddenly made a rattling sound.

Jun, who had been staring at his computer screen, reflexively flinched. Embarrassed by his reaction, he turned around and scowled.

It was the middle of the night. If he were a normal middle schooler, he would already be in bed.

Having returned from the Dream World, Shinku and Suiseiseki each opened their cases and were greeted by Jun's tired voice.

"You guys helped yourselves to some of my energy, didn't you...?"

While in the Dream World, Shinku and the other Rozen Maidens, to a certain extent, were able to extract energy from unconscious humans via their dreams. Jun was as exhausted as he was because they could only use so much energy from other humans before consuming them.

"At least give me a head's up first..." Jun was going to continue to complain when Suiseiseki, overcome with dizziness, stumbled out of her case and collapsed onto the wood floor.

"Evil doll!?"

Jun scrambled from his chair and picked Suiseiseki up. She didn't seem to have a fever or anything, but she looked awfully weak and afraid.

"H-Hey!"

"Sousei...seki..."

A single hot tear fell on Jun's fingertips.

"What? What happened...?"

Jun was well aware of the bond Suiseiseki and Souiseiseki shared. He also knew all too well how Suigintou stole Souiseiseki's Rosa Mystica—he happened to be there at the time as Suiseiseki's master.

"The dream..."

Shinku also slightly stumbled out of her case. She stared off into space, her face pale. It was rare to see her in such a state.

"Shinku?"

She nervously paced back and forth.

"It's been swallowed up...and now it's gone..."

"...?"

Even though it was still the middle of the night, Jun woke Nori up and asked her to prepare some tea. Despite looking half-asleep, Nori skillfully arranged the tea set, boiled some water, and grabbed a bowl of tea biscuits, all without the slightest trace of irritation on her face. Meanwhile, Jun, Shinku, and Suiseiseki kept quiet in the living room. The three of them were seated around the table, perfectly still. The atmosphere was still tense even when, several minutes later, Nori finished getting everything ready in the kitchen and came into the living room with a comical yawn.

"I'm so sorry, Nori. I made Jun wake you up." Shinku appreciated Nori's help. Seeing Nori look completely out of it, she now realized that she should have just ordered Jun to do it all.

"It's okay, really!" Nori yawned again. "But having tea this late sure is weird for you girls."

"W-We can handle the rest from here, so you can go to bed now ~desu." Suiseiseki leaned forward in apology. Jun, who was seated on the opposite couch, turned away and sulked.

"Okay. I'm sorry, I feel like I should ask you two not to eat so late...but none of you girls can gain weight, so it should be fine..." said Nori while yawning. With slightly shaky steps, she returned to her room.

"...Nori is truly kind, unlike a certain someone I know."

"Shut up, you cursed doll. Anyway, what happened?"

“I’ll get to that in a moment. I’d like to drink this first, before it becomes cold.” In order to calm herself down, Shinku prioritized carefully pouring herself a cup of hot tea, and she advised Suiseiseki to do the same.

Finally feeling like herself again, Shinku began to talk in a low voice so as not to wake up Hinaichigo or reawaken Nori. She told of how, guided by Souseiseki in the Dream World, she discovered her door. She told of her fight with Suigintou, and how the very dream itself was devoured by a mysterious black wind...

“Suigintou was there too? But Souseiseki can’t...” trailed off Jun, uncertain of whether to finish by saying, “move anymore.”

Suiseiseki, seated beside Shinku, had been looking downward, her cup of tea completely untouched. However, having surmised what Jun meant to say, Shinku confirmed his doubts.

“You’re correct. And yet, I’m certain that a fragment of her dream was there. Not just I, but Suiseiseki and Suigintou both felt that way...that proves it so.”

“Yeah...I can’t be wrong ~desu...” spoke Suiseiseki finally, though her voice was faint. Jun had no idea what to say to comfort her.

“Jun, do you dream?” asked Shinku quietly.

“...?” Jun stared at Shinku with a curious look on his face at her sudden question. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m asking if you dream.”

“Obviously. I’m human, so I dream when I’m asleep.”

“While that is true, I mean do you dream about your future?”

“...Why do you ask?” Jun looked suddenly interested. Ever since he stopped going to school, he hadn’t given any thought to a career path or a future dream, nor had he *wanted* to.

“The majority of dreams that people have while they sleep are about what they unconsciously desire,” continued Shinku, ignoring the look on Jun’s face. “They may long for that which has yet to occur or they may wish to remember past experiences.”

Shinku then glanced at Suiseiseki sadly.

“The Dream World contains feelings and memories such as these. Choosing to open one of the countless doors and releasing the housed feelings within, drawing them to the surface of one’s mind...that is what it means to dream. Dreams are inextricably linked to one’s soul. As you have seen the Dream World before, surely you understand?”

Jun nodded faintly in response.

He had certainly seen the countless floating doors of memories while with Shinku and the others before. But now, he had no choice but to accept that such a sight technically existed as a dream.

“Painful or not, all memories shine brightly—beautiful and magnificent sights to behold. Though it pains me to say it...I wouldn’t be surprised if, enamored with such light, someone would try to steal another’s dream.”

“So then, who devoured the dream you were talking about earlier?” Jun interjected, fed up with Shinku’s puzzling speech.

“...An enemy,” declared Shinku.

“An enemy?”

“Yes. Devouring another’s dream, causing it to disappear—that makes you an enemy.”

“...Sounds like a baku to me,” said Jun, also voicing Shinku’s thoughts. “Never mind...” he continued after a moment of silence.

“That...that bastard took Souseiseki’s dream ~desu...” said Suiseiseki in a low, dark voice, her eyes cast downward.

“The dream you were talking about earlier was Souseiseki’s?”

“...That’s right. We were in Souseiseki’s dream. However, now it has been lost. Try as we might to remember, it has vanished from our memories like mist. For now, only Souseiseki’s dream has been lost. But dreams do not exist in a vacuum. Like memories, they are all linked. Jun, you have seen the countless floating doors in the Dream World, yes?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Every door in the Dream World is connected to another one.”

Jun often didn’t exactly understand Shinku when she talked abstractly like this. However, right now he was able to somewhat guess what she was saying.

“So you’re saying...that when one disappears, the dreams and memories linked to that one disappear too?”

“Correct...at this rate, the me within Souseiseki shall disappear, and...and the Souseiseki within me shall disappear as well...”

After hearing that, Jun finally realized what was happening to them.

For them, who could be regarded as beings of thought...losing their memories would feel like their bodies were literally being torn apart.

“Evil dolls...hang in there. All of Souseiseki’s dream was taken, right?”

Shinku nodded. “Right. And no amount of crying will change that,” she said, biting her lip. “We shall take back what has been taken. The same applies for her Rosa Mystica. Suiseiseki, your memories of Souseiseki are important to you, yes?”

“...”

But all Suiseiseki could do for the rest of the night was cry.

“Why do you keep taking everyone’s valuables, Dr. Baku!”

“Why...? That’s easy, Detective Kun-kun. Nothing shines brighter than that which everyone holds dear!” replied Dr. Baku, completely unfazed by Kun-kun's interrogation.

A close-up of Dr. Baku’s eerie, glowing gold eyes was displayed on the screen. Hinaichigo, who was sitting on the couch hugging her knees, trembled in fear seeing him obsess over his loot.

“S-So scary!”

Then she saw Dr. Baku turn to the side with a slightly sad expression.

“I envy those that have beautiful things they cherish. I’ve not had anything like that...”

“...Dr. Baku, you—”

“It seems I’ve said a bit too much. It’s about time I took my leave.”

“Wait! Dr. Baku!”

This time, Kun-kun successfully retrieved Mrs. Horse’s gem-studded swimsuit that Dr. Baku had been eyeing. However, even though he infiltrated Dr. Baku’s hideout, the doctor himself had disappeared like mist yet again.

Dr. Baku turned around, his mantle billowing in the wind. “Oh, before I forget: Detective Kun-kun, you had best be careful,” he said, his mouth curved slightly upwards.

“Why?”

“Before you know it, that which you hold dear shall also disappear...”

“What!?”

And then Dr. Baku was gone, leaving no trace that he had even been there to begin with. Kun-kun stomped his foot in frustration at letting him get away. A few minutes later, surrounded by Mrs. Horse, the police, and all those who rushed over, Kun-kun clenched his fists and bit his lip.

“That which I hold dear...? What could he mean...?”

“Kun-kun sure is worried!” Hinaichigo exclaimed loudly at the end of the episode of “Dog Detective Kun-kun” she had been fixated on.

...But there was no response.

Today, Hinaichigo was the only one in the Sakurada living room.

“What happened to everyone? Today’s episode’s over already...”

Normally, it wasn't necessary to say when it was on—everyone *should* have been in the room (except for Nori, who had her club activities). Shinku always watched a new episode when it aired and Suiseiseki, who made fun of the show at first, was now a total fan. Even Jun, try as he might to hide it, seemed to show an interest in watching it with Shinku and the others so long as he wasn't engrossed in his online shopping; it was one of the few occasions where he would leave his room and come downstairs.

Today, however, Jun, Shinku, and Suiseiseki had barely said a word since the morning, with Suiseiseki notably shutting herself back in her case as soon as possible, looking depressed. Jun had gone to his computer, so he wasn't going to leave his room anytime soon. Shinku had been pacing back and forth, acting troubled about something, and even when Kun-kun had come on, she hadn't made an appearance in the living room. Even Nori apparently had gone out somewhere and still wasn't back.

“...Aww, no one's here.”

Hinaichigo sulked, feeling like she was being left out.

“I wanna play with someone!”

Only the faint sounds of the computer running could be heard in Jun's room, though the clicking sounds of Jun's mouse were occasionally mixed in. He simply stared at the monitor listlessly, seemingly not focused on anything in particular.

There were three cases in his room right now—one for Shinku, one for Suiseiseki, and one for Hinaichigo. They were fairly big and solidly built, though they looked out of place being inside a modern Japanese house. The girls rested in them at night, though on occasion they used their cases—like a witch uses her broomstick—to fly through the sky.

“...Hey, it's time to get up, evil doll,” Jun muttered to one of the cases. Still facing the monitor, Jun kept waiting for a sign from Suiseiseki, but there was no response from her whatsoever.

“No matter how much you cry, it won't bring Souseiseki back.”

“...”

At Jun's words, slight movement could be heard inside the case. Jun sighed loudly and spun around in his chair.

“This isn't like you. I thought you were the kind to take back what's yours by any means necessary?”

Though saying this kinda stuff isn't like me, either..., thought Jun wryly. A small voice from inside the case responded to his intentional provocation.

“...Who do you think I am ~desu?”

“A cursed, evil doll.”

“...”

“Or a strange doll that’s possessed by an evil spirit. A creepy one whose hair grows on its own,” said Jun. Then the case flew open, revealing Suiseiseki.

“Stop screwing around ~desu! Just shut up ~desu! What does a puny human like *you* know ~desu!? Our memories are gone, swallowed by an unknown blackness ~desu!! Souiseiseki...my Souiseiseki...! She said we’d always, *always* be together ~desu!” she screamed.

Large, hot tears welled up in her puffy mismatched eyes and, instead of wiping them as they fell, Suiseiseki sought to vent at Jun.

“My feelings...my pain...a puny human like you could never...”

“I *do* know...you’re depressed.”

Jun looked at his screen again.

“Did you forget? You and I are...um...in a contract. That’s most likely why, since yesterday, your feelings have been...transmitted to me,” said Jun hesitantly, brushing his bangs upwards.

“Ugh...like I would forget ~desu! Don’t get the wrong idea ~desu!” exclaimed Suiseiseki frantically, hiding the fact that until just now she did, indeed, forget.

Suiseiseki, left with no other recourse during a previous fight against Suigintou, entered a contract with Jun, thereby gaining the power to escape her predicament. And a Rozen Maiden that has entered a contract with a master will find that her thoughts and feelings sometimes flow into her master, and vice versa. So intense were Suiseiseki’s emotions that Jun had been as depressed as she was.

“Shinku constantly reads my mind and yet I rarely know what you guys are thinking.”

Though Jun sounded angry, he actually felt a bit awkward with the unfamiliar situation and turned away so as not to show it.

“I can feel your crying. I can feel your pain...and your sadness...”

“Rrgh...”

Suiseiseki, unable to refute him, looked down while clenching her fists.

“Anyway, there’s no point in crying now! Go start searching. Oh, but don’t expect me to help. This is your guys’ problem,” said Jun.

He faced the computer again.

“...You don’t need my permission to use my energy. So long as you don’t make me too tired, I don’t mind,” he added on quietly, not knowing whether Suiseiseki heard or not.

“Jun...”

Suiseiseki stared at Jun’s back for a moment, but soon after suddenly sighed, looking relieved.

“...For a puny human, you make some good points ~desu.”



She then closed the lid to her case and struck a pose in front of it, head held up high.

“If you insist, I’ll go search ~desu! Souiseiseki is my little sister, and she really needs my help ~desu! I’ll beat the daylight outta Suigintou and take back her Rosa Mystica too while I’m at it ~desu!” she declared.

“...Pfft.”

It seemed Souiseiseki had finally returned to her usual self. Jun couldn’t help but let a laugh escape.

“Hey! You laughed at me just now, didn’t you ~desu!? For such a *puny* little human, you’ve got some nerve ~desu!”

“Don’t ‘*puny*’ me, evil doll. Well, like they say, ‘the crow that cried now laughs¹’ or whatever.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s that ~desu!? Are you comparing me to a damn crow ~desu!!? Or worse, *Suigintou* ~desu!?”

Enraged, Souiseiseki wacked Jun’s shin with her case.

“Ow!”

She looked around, seemingly just noticing something.

“By the way, where’s Shinku and the pipsqueak ~desu?”

“C’mon...how would I know...?” Jun tried to argue while rubbing his temples. Noticing she was preparing a follow-up attack to his shin, he hurriedly pulled his leg back.

“Shinku’s been in the storeroom on the first floor since this morning! The pipsqueak’s been watching TV! Now that you know, hurry up and scram or you’ll be sorry!” he replied as he stood up and opened his door.

Souiseiseki smiled in content at Jun’s answer.

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place ~desu?”

She then stepped through the door.

“...Thank you ~desu.”

Though Souiseiseki reluctantly entered the contract at first, Jun was certainly her master now. However, Jun already had Shinku.

“Jun...”

Souiseiseki looked back at the closed door with a slightly sad smile and then went to find Shinku.

¹ Japanese proverb that means “a child’s emotions change easily”

Shinku was inside the storeroom on the first floor of the Sakurada Household. It was originally Jun and Nori's parents' room, but before long it became a room to store what Jun considered to be "junk".

Junk—that is what Jun called them, but to Shinku, some of the antiques in the room had fragments of life lying dormant within.

Some objects had fragments of life within them, and some objects did not. For the former, they will occasionally "awaken" in response to Shinku and the other's calls.

A painting that the painter could not help but pour their love into each stroke; a statue that the sculptor put their heart and soul into each chisel; these were but some of such sleeping antiques.

There was not even a single smudge on the surface of the full-length antique mirror Shinku was looking up at. To Jun, it was simply a large mirror left in a dusty room. However, Shinku immediately recognized that it was simply asleep.

And so, in awakening the mirror, it was now connected to the door to the "n-Field", an abstract world of dreams and souls.

"There you are ~desu."

"...Suisseiseki."

Shinku had been staring at the mirror, her hand on its surface, and even though the doorway was behind her, she noticed Suisseiseki come in. She then turned around.

Suisseiseki looked down at her feet and wrung her hands in embarrassment.

"U-Um..."

"Are you going to reclaim your treasure?"

Though the mismatched-eyed Rozen Maiden hesitated for a moment, she nodded with a determined look on her face once more. Her eyes no longer held a hint of doubt.

"...Yes ~desu."

Shinku smiled at her answer.

"Um...can you come with me ~desu?" Suisseiseki asked timidly.

"Is that not a given?" replied Shinku, confused. "I also can't sit idly by while the garden from your treasured memory is ravaged. Besides, Suigintou might show up."

"Thank you ~desu!"

She made a fist and flexed her arm.

"I definitely will get it back ~desu! You're gonna be a humongous help ~desu!"

Shinku smiled a little at Suisseiseki's enthusiasm, but then immediately turned serious again.

“First, we need more clues. We must find out who was behind the black wind from yesterday. It devoured a dream, which means it couldn’t have originated from the Dream World itself. It mostly likely is from somewhere in the n-Field...”

“Shinku, you sound like Kun-kun ~desu.”

“I wish I were as clever as him,” said Shinku. She was then reminded of Kun-kun’s troubling adversary. Dr. Baku and the black wind...they didn’t seem to be directly related, but the timing was just too perfect.

“What should we do about the pipsqueak ~desu?” Suiseiseki asked Shinku, who appeared to be lost in thought like Kun-kun.

“Hinaichigo is still unaware. It would be best to keep it that way for now. Telling her would only give her unnecessary anxiety.”

Also, unlike Shinku and Suiseiseki, who were in a contract with Jun, Hinaichigo was no longer in a contract with her former master Tomoe Kashiwaba, having been defeated in the Alice Game. That meant that, even in the n-Field, she wouldn’t be able to use her proper power.

“Okay.”

“Once Jun is here, we’ll be all set.”

“Oh...the puny human said he wouldn’t help us ~desu,” replied Suiseiseki apologetically, as though it were her fault.

“The nerve of that servant! Does he not know his place?”

Suiseiseki rushed to calm Shinku down.

“But, but...”

“...?”

“He’s been worried about Souseiseki and me...I would give him just a little bit more credit ~desu,” said Suiseiseki. She then told Shinku of how he coaxed her out of her case. Of how her anxiety and sorrow had been transmitted to Jun. Of how he awkwardly cheered her up...

Shinku nodded.

“I see. In that case, I shall help myself to his power. Also, we should bring Hollie and Sui Dream,” proposed Shinku. The two of them called for their respective artificial spirits from the cases on the second floor to the room on the first floor. They then turned toward the mirror, standing side by side, waiting for the shining balls of light to arrive.

“Let’s go, Suiseiseki.”

“Okay ~desu!”

Together they put their hands on the mirror’s surface, whereupon it rippled like water, waves spreading from their palms. And yet, the mirror’s frame did not change; only the surface looked like ripples from a leaf that gently fell onto water. It then began to give off a mysterious light.

The door to the n-Field was open.

The two Rozen Maidens' hands, arms, and bodies...all disappeared into the mirror, as if being swallowed by it.

* * * *

The n-Field.

It is made of truth and lies.

It is positive and negative.

It is a Möbius strip and a Klein bottle.

It is somewhere in the world yet nowhere in the world.

It is a world of souls that lies in reality and in dreams.

It is a space where innumerable worlds meet, each assigned a staggeringly large number and separated by their own door. These “doors” are conceptual, and it falls to each visitor to find them and determine where, who, or what they lead to. Each person's dreamworld is but one of them.

Suiseiseki, having the strongest connection to Souseiseki amongst the Rozen Maidens, was the most suited to find the door leading to her.

*Souseiseki...Souseiseki...I'm so lonely, where **are** you ~desu?*

Suiseiseki repeatedly called out to her younger sister in her mind. Bereft of her Rosa Mystica, in the rose mansion in the real world she was now nothing but an empty husk—a literal doll.

Shinku and Suiseiseki were just outside the entrance to the n-Field, in a place known as “The White of 9 Seconds Ago”. It was a pure white space where one must ascertain their existence. Suiseiseki was strongly fixated on her own and her twin's, for if one does not establish their self, they cannot maintain their original form in this space.

For a brief moment, Suiseiseki forgot about Shinku beside her, so absorbed was she in her pleas.

Souseiseki...Souseiseki...

With each thought of her name, numerous memories flashed across her mind.

A garden where the morning sun shone down on them as they walked. An outstretched hand with an apple plucked from a tree.

And then...

“I found her ~desu!” Suiseiseki looked up and cried suddenly. Although, in The White of 9 Seconds Ago, the concepts of “height” and “direction” did not exist. There was only vast, pure white space.

“How? We’re still here.” Shinku stared at Suiseiseki, not even bothering to hide her incredulity. The White of 9 Seconds Ago did not belong to any world—it was, so to speak, a sort of checkpoint.

“It’s Souseiseki!!”

Suiseiseki continued to gaze at a single point in space, however, ignoring Shinku’s bewilderment.

“I feel her presence here ~desu!”

“...!?”

Boom.

Suddenly, as if triggered by Suiseiseki’s words, an overwhelming mass of rushing water appeared at their feet. The roar of the water filled the air as it continued to surround the diminutive Rozen Maidens, the strength of its current able to wash them away with ease. Shinku and Suiseiseki nestled together on the remaining small, white platform.

“Is that a stream of memories flowing from The Sea of Unconsciousness!?”

In the n-Field, countless thoughts and emotions that escaped the boundaries of the world drifted aimlessly. Then they drift into a realm known as “The Sea of Unconsciousness”, and there they become trapped in a bubble at the bottom of the sea known as “The White of 9 Seconds Ago”.

The rushing stream that appeared before Shinku and Suiseiseki might have been a whirlpool of emotions formed by the gathering of someone’s memories.

“Souseiseki!!”

“Wait, Suiseiseki!” Just as Suiseiseki was about to jump into the rushing stream, Shinku grabbed her arm and held her back. “No matter how you look at it, jumping into there is simply too reckless! You have no idea where you will end up!”

“But, but Souseiseki’s in there ~desu!”

“Huh...?”

Shinku looked closely at the stream, but she couldn’t find any sign or figure that seemed to match. However, Suiseiseki seemed confident. She reached for the raging torrent, desperately struggling to break free of Shinku’s grasp.

“Souseiseki...Souseisekiii! Let go of me, Shinku!”

Eventually, Shinku let out a sigh, looking defeated.

“...You leave me no choice,” she told Suiseiseki. “There must be some kind of reason for this stream to appear when it did. If we go together, our odds will increase, even if only slightly. Make sure you don’t let go of my hand,” she said, and then let go of the arm she had been gripping tightly and instead grasped Suiseiseki’s hand, intertwining their fingers.

“Shinku...thank you ~desu.”

“Without Jun here as our Medium, our time to stay in this world is limited. You know this, yes?”

“...I do. I’m sorry for being selfish ~desu.”

The Rozen Maidens were unable to fully exert their powers unless they were in the same plane of existence as their Mediums. They were also limited in how long they were active. In about thirty minutes, their powers would be completely depleted.

If such a thing were to happen, they ran the risk of wandering the near-infinite n-Field forever in a fate akin to death.

“I say we have Sui Dream wait here. That way, it can notify Jun, Hinaichigo or someone else in case of an emergency.”

“We’re counting on you, Sui Dream.”

In response to its master’s voice, the artificial spirit flashed briefly, indicating agreement.

“...Let’s go.”

And so, the maidens of the green and red roses surrendered themselves to the swirling azure torrent.

Their figures were instantly swallowed up, and disappeared...

* * * *

“Uyu...”

“...! Puny Ichigo!?” Jun, who had been resting his chin in one hand while his other hand was on the mouse, was looking out the window when he was surprised to find Hinaichigo next to him, looking up at him.

Even after Suiseiseki left the room, he couldn’t help but be concerned about her and Shinku and thus wasn’t quite invested in his online shopping at the moment. Jun sighed as he realized his thoughts were so scattered that he hadn’t even noticed Hinaichigo’s approach.

“...So, what do you want?”

“...”

“I said, what do you want!?”

She’s totally sulking right now, Jun thought as he looked at Hinaichigo’s face. She puffed up her cheeks and just stared at Jun in silence.

“...Kun-kun.”

“Huh?”

“Kun-kun ended already! And no one came to watch it!”

“Huh? Wow, that time already?” Jun had completely failed to notice due to Suiseiseki. He then looked at the clock and realized it was indeed already past the usual tea time. Since there was no Nori to call upstairs today, he completely forgot about it.

“Jun, Shinku, and Suiseiseki are such meanies!”

“C’mon, don’t be like that...everyone was busy.”

Based on Hinaichigo’s behavior, it seemed she was not aware of this. After breaking her contract with Tomoe, Hinaichigo lost most of her power as a Rozen Maiden. Shinku and Suiseiseki must have decided it was too dangerous to take her with them.

“Besides, when it comes to Kun-kun, Shinku’s gonna record it anyway, right? Why don’t we all watch it together later?”

“Meanie meanie meaniiiiie! We should’ve watched it together earlier!” With both hands balled into fists, Hinaichigo began to punch Jun’s legs over and over.

“Ow! Quit it!”

At this point, the situation was out of control. More like, he didn’t *want* to bring it under control. Dealing with Hinaichigo in such situations was Jun’s least favorite thing to do.

“Okay, that’s it! Just go away!”

Jun found it too annoying to deal with her directly, so he shook her off and turned towards his monitor. Hinaichigo continued to protest in anger, but once she eventually realized that Jun wasn’t going to turn around, she was soon on the verge of tears.

“Uyu...”

“...”

Uyuuu...”

“...”

“Wa...”

“...”

“Waaaaaaah!!”

In the end, Jun had no choice but to admit defeat.

“Argh! Okay, I was wrong! Be quiet and take a nap or something!” Jun covered his ears with his hands and closed his eyes. Shinku and Suiseiseki were causing enough trouble already, it was impossible to handle being bothered by Hinaichigo on top of that. However, Hinaichigo had become even more upset at Jun’s thoughtless behavior.

“Fine! Goodnight, Jun! I don’t care about you anymore!” she retorted. She then took big, loud steps towards her case and, with no hesitation, went inside.

A particularly loud noise came from behind Jun as Hinaichigo closed the lid of her case with a bang.

“Good grief...”

Jun shrugged his shoulders and focused on his computer monitor again.

* * * *

“Are you...crying again...?”

A voice somewhere said.

“Seeing...your teary face...is like watching my true self...in the mirror...”

A face that looked like a reflection of Suiseiseki’s shimmered in the water and then disappeared.

“I hate it...”

“Souiseiseki—!!” Suiseiseki screamed as loud as possible, as if her very being was about to be completely engulfed by the roaring and swirling torrent.

Shinku, trying to ascertain the true nature of the turbid stream of memories they had plunged into, frantically grasped Suiseiseki’s hand once more.

Could this really be Souiseiseki’s...?

Countless bubbles burst and disappeared around the two of them. Souiseiseki’s voice, her figure, her feelings—one by one, they flowed by.

The longing for her creator, Rozen.

Her feelings for Suiseiseki, with whom she spent every single moment.

The many masters she encountered throughout the ages.

The first time she met Shinku, Suigintou, Hinaichigo, and the other Rozen Maidens.

And finally, the Alice Game.

Another large bubble flowed by the two of them, the memory contained within flashing before their eyes.

“When the Alice Game begins, I wonder if we will have to fight someday too...”

“No ~desu! We don’t have to, Souiseiseki!” In a state of confusion, Suiseiseki replied to the memory fragment.

“Whenever we started to walk ahead, it was always you who took the lead, no hesitation.”

“It’s because you were with me! I’m lost without you ~desu!”

Suiseiseki reached her hand out toward the Souseiseki in the memory, but it passed right through her.

“Suiseiseki, get a hold of yourself. This is a torrent of memories.”

Suiseiseki ignored Shinku’s words, however, and continued to scream.

“I just did what any big sister would do ~desu! I would do anything for my beloved Souseiseki ~desu!! That’s why...that’s why—!”

“—*You were always like this...*”

Souseiseki was here and yet not here. Suiseiseki knew that. But was this Suiseiseki’s own memory, or...?

“*I...hate you...but...*”

Souseiseki, gazing at Suiseiseki, smiled painfully.

“*I...love you...the most...*”

Suddenly, the flow changed, the torrent of memories all drawn toward one direction.

“This...it can’t be!”

“Ahh! The black wind ~desu!!”

Suiseiseki pointed toward the scene of a black wind raging faintly in the distance. The torrent caught in that wind disappeared, as if being swallowed up.

“—Ah!?” While Shinku and Suiseiseki were in shock, the black wind scattered the torrent, sucked it in, and then extinguished it by swallowing it whole.

“My...My dream...it’s going to disappear too ~desu!”

“Calm yourself, Suiseiseki! We too are in danger!” Shinku attempted to escape to the opposite side of the current while desperately holding Suiseiseki back, who was inadvertently moving toward the disappearing torrent—toward the black wind. “We’re at our limit! We must leave, Suiseiseki!”

However, Suiseiseki brushed Shinku’s hand away.

“No ~desu! This time, I *will* protect Souseiseki ~desu! How—how can I not ~desu!?”

“What can we do in a situation like this!? We don’t even know who the enemy is!”

Although Jun permitted the use of his energy, without him here, it was impossible for the girls to fully unleash their abilities. And if their springs were to wind down here, then they would likely be swallowed up by the black wind as well.

“Hollie, help!” When Shinku called out the name of her artificial spirit, Suiseiseki’s Sui Dream appeared as well. Apparently, it was worried about Suiseiseki and ended up following them.



The two balls of light approached the torrent and rotated in a circle, gradually increasing their speed, when only the flow in that circle ceased, creating a path of exit for Shinku and Suiseiseki.

“Let’s go, Suiseiseki!”

“Souiseiseki—!”

The tears that flowed from Suiseiseki’s eyes were swallowed up by the black wind and the rushing stream...

“U...Urgh...I...”

Shinku and Suiseiseki, who had finally escaped from the black wind and the torrent of memories, were watching the scene from a distance, breathing heavily. Thanks to the efforts of the artificial spirits, the two of them had escaped their predicament and returned to the edge of The White of 9 Seconds Ago.

The black wind had swallowed up the torrent, and in the end, not a single drop remained.

“I...failed to protect Souiseiseki’s dream again...”

Seeing Suiseiseki, with her shoulders slumped in despair, Shinku had no words to offer.

“To think that it would swallow everything up like that...” Shinku endeavored to appear calm as she took out her pocket watch to check the remaining time. “It seems we can stay a little longer...Still, where did that wind come from...and where did it—”she murmured when she was interrupted by the voice of a new trespasser in The White of 9 Seconds Ago. One which Shinku and Suiseiseki knew the owner of.

“From where does it appear and to where does it disappear? It is an eternal flow that, like the history of humanity, cannot be overlooked.”

“...Indeed. Such as yourself, appearing like a jester that wasn’t even summoned,” Shinku calmly retorted and turned around. “...Is that not so, Laplace’s Demon?”

A tall, slender figure appeared behind the two of them, dressed in a tuxedo and wearing a small silk hat on his head. However, he had the head of a rabbit, with long, upright ears. He, who calls himself “Laplace’s Demon”, has frequently appeared before Shinku and the others as a guide for the Alice Game. Who he really was, they did not know. However, they knew from experience to never give him a warm welcome.

“Is the black wind your doing? If so, then your trickery has gone too far,” said Shinku as she pointed to the black wind that now appeared distant and hazy.

“Now now, you give me too much credit. How can someone as powerless and pitiful as I accomplish such a feat?”

“...Arrogant as always, I see. Do I have to teach you some manners?”

“Return Souseiseki’s memories this instant ~desu!” Suiseiseki, tears spent, transformed her previous feelings of powerlessness into anger and directed it towards Laplace’s Demon. It seemed she had already determined that he was the mastermind.

“Anger and sadness can drive one to madness. Is it acceptable for ladies such as yourselves to be influenced by such trivial things?” Laplace’s Demon calmly told them without blinking.

No matter how much Shinku glared at him or how fiercely Suiseiseki threatened him, his polite yet rude attitude remained unchanged. Since he had the head of a rabbit, his expression was as unreadable as ever.

“You ladies are attempting to become the pure and supreme being—Alice, are you not?”

When the name “Alice” was mentioned, Shinku and Suiseiseki looked surprised. Alice—the existence they aim for but have yet to reach. For them, that name carries a heavy weight—and it would be a lie to say that there is no longing or guilt toward their creator, Rozen, whom they desire.

After comparing each of their expressions, Laplace’s Demon clapped his white-gloved hands.

“Well, it is said that that which someone cherishes the most appears beautifully radiant to another.”

Laplace’s Demon extended his right hand, snapped his fingers, and then a fist-sized cloud of smoke emerged. Coupled with his outfit, he looked like a magician that had performed some kind of trick.

“What if, while your dreams are shattered, others’ dreams are fulfilled...?” He pulled out a slender cane from the smoke, then gave it a spin—when suddenly, the cane along with the smoke vanished. “What if darkness extinguishes light because it is envious of its brilliance?”

“What did you say...?” In response to his playful posturing, Shinku’s irritation grew. However, Laplace’s Demon continued to speak in a sing-song voice, ignoring Shinku and Suiseiseki’s questions, and this time, he pulled out a cane from behind his back and began to twirl it around.

“Does black stain white because it struggles to not be overshadowed by its brilliance?”

Laplace’s Demon stopped the spinning cane with a flick and suddenly pointed it in the direction behind Shinku and Suiseiseki.

“Observe. This white world is being dyed black.”

“...!?”

Shinku and Suiseiseki turned around and then gasped and widened their eyes in surprise.

The black wind that had been swirling earlier began to spread in all directions and started to erode the very fabric of The White of 9 Seconds Ago. Like a thin piece of paper set on fire, the world of The White of 9 Seconds Ago began to deteriorate and dissolve.

“It can’t be! Not just dreams, but even the n-Field itself...”

“It’s swallowing it up ~desu...”

Shinku and Suiseiseki were both at a loss for words.

The ticking of the pocket watch in Shinku’s hand was unusually loud at that moment. Startled, Shinku looked at its face.

“Let’s head back, Suiseiseki. We’re out of time,” she said.

“But, what about that?”

“For now...we can do nothing.”

Even Shinku was hesitant to simply leave the situation as is. The White of 9 Seconds ago and eventually, the entire n-Field—both erased by the black wind. Such a thing concerned Shinku and Suiseiseki, conceptual beings that they were. However, if they were to stay any longer, they risked becoming unable to move at all, unable to do anything. And logically, Shinku knew it was not worth the risk.

“Let’s head back. This is no longer a situation that we can handle on our own. We must seek Jun and Hinaichigo’s help.”

“Uuu...I know ~desu.”

“Please return this way, ladies.”

With a playful gesture, Laplace’s Demon pointed the cane he had been spinning earlier towards the Rozen Maidens, and once again, smoke emerged from the tip with a “pop”. As the smoke spread, a hole that seemed to connect to the original world appeared.

“A rabbit hole, is it? What are you planning, Laplace’s Demon?”

He tilted his head in response to her question, unfazed.

“Come now. A jester simply wanders to wherever life takes him. If I were to disappear here, then my wandering would be at an end.”

“We would be most relieved if you did,” said Shinku, though she doubted that Laplace’s Demon would be swallowed up by the black wind.

“You will find what you need. What you do not need will disappear.” Ignoring Shinku’s words, Laplace’s Demon resumed talking, this time with a riddle. “Is that which you are searching for, truly what you need?”

“Why you...! Souseiseki—and her dream—are very important to me ~desu...!” objected Suiseiseki, on the verge of tears. However, Laplace’s Demon simply continued to make his cane appear and disappear as if he couldn’t hear her.

The water of the sea rises into the clouds. The clouds turn into rain. The rain falls into the sea once more.”

“A lady does not take too kindly to such a roundabout manner of speaking,” muttered Shinku.

Laplace’s Demon suddenly stopped playing with his cane.

“My apologies. However, a lost existence may be a stepping stone to the birth of a new being.”

At that moment, the rabbit’s mouth lifted at the corners for the first time, resembling a human smile.

“The heart of a lost maiden—what will become of it, I wonder?”

As he asked that final question, the hole he opened suddenly grew larger and swallowed Shinku and Suiseiseki up.

“Until we meet again, ladies.”

* * * *

“A stepping stone to Alice...” whispered Shinku softly after returning to the Sakurada family’s storage room, just as the hands of the pocket watch she had been grasping tightly completed their cycle.

“What are you talking about, Shinku?” asked Suiseiseki quietly, curious about the words that Shinku had let slip.

“Souiseiseki has disappeared, leaving the Rosa Mystica that she possessed behind.”

“...Yes ~desu.”

For Suiseiseki, who had the Rosa Mystica taken away by Suigintou right before her very eyes, it was a very painful thing to hear.

“If we gather all of the Rosa Mystica, we will be able to hatch into Alice. That...could be considered the birth of a new being.”

Eyes closed, Shinku raised her head, weaving her words with a sad expression on her face.

“But at the same time, that would mean losing all the other sisters...”

“...”

“A lost existence is a stepping stone for the birth of a new being,” said Shinku before Suiseiseki’s sorrowful profile, repeating the line that Laplace’s Demon had spoken. “Even if we lose everything—like our memories and the people we hold dear...should we go that far to become Alice...?”

She thought she knew the outcome of the Alice Game. They have lived a long time just for that purpose. However, just like Souiseiseki is for Suiseiseki, the peaceful time spent together with everyone in the Sakurada household has become something irreplaceable and precious to Shinku. She was made to realize that fact once again.

My feelings...I wonder if the Alice Game and the black wind will swallow them whole.

The Alice Game and the existence of a voracious black wind that swallows all dreams, memories, and hopes, were starting to blend together within Shinku’s mind.

“Father...you...”