

Chapter 3 - Dissonance

Part 1

Her friends cheered one by one. Tenma and Suzuka continued cheering as Touji reapplied his seal. Akino gingerly peeked over, still hiding behind a stack of cardboard boxes. Kyouko, who had stopped her divination and looked over through the window upon hearing the noise, tearfully shouted "Ohtomo-sensei!".

It was like a dream come true.....!

Natsume stared straight at Ohtomo. It was honestly like a dream for him to appear of his own initiative when they had basically given up hope of contacting him.

"Hama! At ease. This is our friend."

"Understood."

Hama cut off its power as Tenma instructed. Ohtomo looked at Tenma and Hama thoughtfully.

"Let me make sure I understand this. That rough-looking car over there is Tenma-kun's shikigami? It's quite complex - no, it's even composed of a spell I haven't really seen before."

"Yeah, this is the mechanical shikigami my dad made."

"Your dad? That's quite....."

Kyouko also leaned out of the window from where she had been working.

"Ohtomo-sensei, it's great that you're alright....."

"You too. You've gone through a lot, Kyouko-kun."

"Speaking of which, why didn't you contact us!? Do you understand the situation right now? Are you an idiot!?"

"Hold on, Suzuka. First off, how did you find this place, Sensei?"

"Ah, that. You guys fought the 'Colonel' in this huge car, and the Mystical Investigators hadn't gotten any reports that you abandoned it, so there could only be a few places in this city where you could be hiding out. And with Chief Amami the way he is, I thought it might be in this region."

He got along great with them, as could be expected. Not only did he increase their side's fighting strength, but more importantly, he was a 'friend'. Also, he was Ohtomo-sensei, a former Divine General who had risked himself to save Natsume.

Patter. Kyouko opened the door and hurried down. Amami followed with Suisen pushing his wheelchair.

"Chief." Ohtomo bowed. "I hope you're doing well."

".....I am." A quiet smile. "Let's enter the main topic. You definitely understand our situation to some degree. You've heard the terrorist attack announcement, of course?"

"That's why I hurried here to help."

"Yeah. Can you get in touch with Kogure?"

"You want to get him to defect? I feel like that depends on how Harutora-kun presents himself....."

"Not necessarily. Actually, it's possible for me to go convince him directly. After all, that guy saw me two years ago in that park....."

The conversation between the two of them continued pleasantly without any sentiment about their long-awaited reunion. The topic jumped around rapidly. In this kind of situation, both sides needed to understand the meaning of the other party's words several steps ahead. The atmosphere in the warehouse became tense as everyone watched their conversation.

"But Chief, we have no chance of winning in a straight-up fight against Zenjirou, you know? After all, Independent Officer Miyachi's on the other side."

"Hmph. That chance only applies to a fight of magic. Get Kogure over to our side is much easier."

"A war of information, then?"

"His reputation hasn't fallen at all. If he says a loud 'No', quite a few Onmyouji in the agency might stop."

"You're going to stop the terrorist attack with that?"

"It's the most suitable method right now."

".....I see. I understand. We'll have a huge advantage later if we can rope in Zenjirou. Good luck with that, Chief."

Amami raised an eyebrow. "Later? And what does 'good luck with that' mean?"

"It's because I have other things I need to do."

He said that sentence matter-of-factly, but Natsume didn't miss the implications in it.

"Eh? S-Sensei, you're not going to fight with us?" Tenma asked in a panic.

Ohtomo didn't speak. Another restless atmosphere rose up in the warehouse where they were gathered.

".....I knew something was up for you to suddenly come over here. Say it, what's your real goal for coming back?" Amami pointed out. Ohtomo smiled bitterly and said:

"Chief, I originally wanted to speak with you alone..... I'll put it straight. I came to tell you all to just quietly stand back without forcing yourselves. I'll go deal with the Agency Chief and the Souma. Chief, you guys just need to keep hiding like this."

"Wha--"

What? The word left her mouth reflexively, but she was stunned again. Touji was the only one mostly unshaken, since he seemed to have anticipated this to some level.

"Just you - no wait, are you saying that you're going to confront the Chief, the Souma, Miyachi, and the entire Onmyou Agency alone?"

"Yes." A brief reply.

"Do you think you can win?"

"There was never a need to 'win'."

"Then stopping the terrorist attack is enough?"

"They were never plotting any terrorist attack in the first place."

"What?"

Ohtomo turned to Suzuka. "Suzuka-kun, can you come with me when I return to the Onmyou Agency?"

Everyone present turned to look at Suzuka.

".....A large-scale magic ritual....." Suzuka chose every word carefully. ".....Perhaps it's magic with 'god summoning' at its core. The previous two spiritual disaster terrorist attacks might be parts of the ritual. As for the 'god' part of the magic..... it refers to the Souma clan's legendary ancestor and the ara-mitama guardian of Edo, Taira no Masakado....."

"That's their goal right there. Dairenji Shidou plans to push the Phase Four into the next phase, Phase Five - the 'Final Phase'. The previous two spiritual disaster terrorist attacks, as well as this third one, were all experiments for that theory....."

Judging by the 'next time is for real' that Yashamaru had once said to Suzuka, the terrorist attack this time would most likely be different from the past two. In other words, it would be much harder to warn people beforehand this time.

As a result, they could only defeat the enemies on the other side..... If they didn't know the spell's composition, they couldn't obstruct it, so they could only defeat the caster directly...

"I know the magic they're preparing."

Ohtomo replied calmly.

"It's the 'Tensou Chifu Ritual'."

"T-Tensou Chifu Ritual!? B-But that--"

"The same one you're thinking of. The Tsuchimikado ritual of worship. And the secret among secrets, even higher up than the Taizan Fukun Ritual."

The Tsuchimikados' greatest secret ritual, the 'Tensou Chifu Ritual'. But it had been something from before Yakou's era.

But if what the boy ara-mitama calling himself Ashiya Doman had said, he had been watching the world's changes since the Heian era. Naturally, he would have experienced the chaos during the Pacific War era 'first-hand'.

The great spiritual disaster that had attacked the city during the war period was but a page of history to Natsume and the others. History constantly went on, and Natsume had no way of actually experiencing it with her less than twenty years of age.

But if it were related to Harutora's past, she couldn't ignore it. Natsume asked:

"W-Wait! But..... why? Why were the Souma trying to perform the 'Tensou Chifu Ritual' or whatever if they were following Yakou? Also, didn't the Tsuchimikado family only perform the Tensou Chifu Ritual for the emperor--"

When she was halfway done speaking, Natsume's face paled as she realized something.

"That's right, the Tensou Chifu Ritual was originally a purifying and life-extending ceremony held for the emperor. The Souma clan only performed it for their king - the 'New Emperor' Taira no Masakado. The Souma may be aiming to summon the ara-mitama Taira no Masakado. Also the fact that they're using the Tensou Chifu Ritual means that they're trying to lengthen its existence rather than going after a temporary 'channeling'. That might be Yakou's legacy."

"....."

Natsume stood there blankly, as if she couldn't hear anything.

...Reviving Taira no Masakado?

Was something like that possible? No, hadn't Yakou failed because it was impossible? Even so, were Chief Kurahashi, Takiko, and the others still trying for such a great challenge?

Summoning a god into the world. It was some kind of madman's ravings.

Ohtomo's confidence that he could go alone had come from Doman's information. He didn't need to fight head-on. If he only needed to impair the ceremony, maybe Ohtomo could do it alone. By further exposing the unjust actions of Kurahashi and the others, he might be able to defeat them.

"...Please wait, Sensei." Touji, who had been silent until now, opened his mouth. "If you're going to go obstruct them with all your might, then that's fine. But even if you decide that, it's always better to have some more help. What you said just now makes it seem like we don't have a common enemy."

".....You could also say that."

"Why?"

"Idiot, do I need to say that? Of course that's because it's dangerous."

"Then we really can't just sit back and wait."

".....The Phase Four from last time."

"Hmm?"

"That was something that Souma Takiko did. She did something almost like 'god summoning', and that's how things ended up."

"Huh.....!?"

"Sorry, you can't do this unless you're an elite Onmyouji. My students have no chance."

"But....."

They hadn't imagined being rejected like this. The current Ohtomo was different from the Ohtomo-sensei from before.

He didn't have that easygoingness. The past Ohtomo-sensei had been free-spirited even in a crisis. His principles were firm, but everything else was flexible and unrestrained.

He had changed over this year and a half.

".....What kind of joke is that?"

Touji opened his mouth to retort again. "We have to hide because it's a Phase Four? Or is it because there's someone who can cause spiritual disasters at will? Please. I'll fight whatever comes, whether it's an oni or a Nue. It's Taira no Masakado, right? Of course there's going to be head-to-head fighting, right?"

Touji balled a fist with no intention of backing down.

Ohtomo raised an eyebrow. Before he had the chance to say anything,

"Interesting."

His shikigami Doman interjected. "Not bad, youngster, you're definitely a living spirit. Judging by your spirit, it seems that you have some strength too. Let me test you. Gozu, Mezu!"

In the next moment, the two auras that poured out from his waist seeped into the warehouse and formed a man and a woman.

Phase Three mobile spiritual disasters, 'Type-Ogres'.

...W-What were these demonic auras? They were definitely the oni that had fought with Ohtomo-sensei on the academy building roof!

Doman had revealed Gozu and Mezu to Ohtomo before, but at the time Doman had only called them 'shadows'.

In other words - these were the real bodies! These were Ashiya Doman's shikigami!?

"Fight with that youngster. Who's first?"

"Me, me! I'm first, I'm first~~"

"Hey, Priest!" Amami and Ohtomo shouted at the same time.

But Touji grinned and slowly took off his bandanna. "Perfect. I have something I want to try out too."

"Not a bad demeanor. Okay, start."

Touji released his seal in the blink of an eye.

"Third seal, release!"

The demon bound inside Touji's body instantly awoke and demonic aura poured forth to cover his body, turning him into the form of a samurai. A pair of sharp horns and two fangs also appeared with his shout.

It was Natsume's second time seeing him like that. She still felt shocked. The two oni, Ohtomo-sensei, and Doman were even more engrossed.

"Wait, what's that!? What is that!?"

"As I said, that's a living spirit!"

In the next moment, the samurai charged straight at Gozu. The shockwave from his head-on-charge blew boxes away, and the walls and ceiling shook.

Haaaaahhhh---!"

Smashed onto the floor, Gozu let out an angered shout. "You goddamn brat! Die!" Flying into a rage, Gozu attacked Touji like a storm. Though his strength was surprising, his movements were overly monotonous, so Touji skillfully dodged his strikes and counterattacked.

"What's wrong!? Is that all you've got?"

"Graaaaahhhhh!"

Gozu bellowed and his demonic aura swelled up even further into a ball larger than his body. Touji looked on fearlessly, the demonic power burning like a fire throughout his body.

Not good. It wouldn't be good if this went on. Natsume thought this instinctively.

"Ashiya Doman!"

Ohtomo shouted loudly.

"Alright." Doman smiled. "Well, no helping it, stop right there."

Though Gozu looked completely as if he was about to charge forward, he stopped one second later. Raging killing intent showed in the look he gave Touji, but to a shikigami, the master's order was 'absolute'.

After confirming that the opponent had restrained himself, Touji also let go of his strength. "Reboot."

".....As I thought." Touji panted for breath, looking at his hands and smiling in satisfaction. "I thought it was an illusion..... Looks like I really did become stronger, so strong that even I can't believe it."

"...No good."

Ohtomo's opinion still hadn't changed.

"It's certainly a rare, extremely powerful strength, but..... You still can't use it for this."

Touji angrily said ".....What do you mean? If you want to say something, just say it!"

"I mean what I said. It's still more convenient for me to act alone. Sorry, I still want to do things my

own way. Doman."

Doman started chanting an incantation. Ohtomo performed complicated steps alongside the black wind that the incantation whipped up. Far Step. A method of moving through the spirit flow. "Wait", Kyouko shouted. "I met her, Wakamiya Eri's little sister!"

Ohtomo's expression changed, but in the next moment he melted into the black wind.

The tornado vanished.

Ohtomo, Doman, and the two oni disappeared.

Part 2

The roof of an old building in Ikebukuro. This place like a dead space of the city center was Harutora's current hideout. The floor was littered with stuff and the room was only filled with dim candlelight. In a corner of the room, Harutora sat cross-legged in front of a simple bed marked with magic sigils. A young girl with triangular fox ears was on the bed.

Harutora's defensive shikigami, Hishamaru, had returned back to her Kon form on the evening two days before Yasuzumi and the others had been captured. She had been hit by Miyachi's Yamantaka method, run into Takiko's 'god summoning', and broken out of Phase Four since then. Her originally unstable aura had lost its stability completely in that series of battles.

Even now, with Harutora constantly regulating her, Hishamaru was already in a dangerous state where she might disappear at any time if left alone.

"How's the situation outside?" He asked Saotome, who was next to him.

"It hasn't gotten as chaotic as anticipated."

"Really. Meaning the people trust the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau."

".....How's the recovery going?"

"She can move normally tonight. She can use some stealth and magic, but....."

"She can't fight?"

".....I don't know."

In the end, he hadn't found any ways to resolve it and could only take responsive measures.

"Anyways, this way we can have Kon go and get in contact with the 'Full Moon' first--"

"Harutora." Kakugyouki and the Raven's Wing had returned.

"What happened?"

"It's not here. It seems like there's activity over at the Full Moon."

Harutora reached his left arm out to take the Raven's Wing, staring into the depths of the Raven's Wing's golden eyes with his own.

".....Are there any problems?"

"It looks like..... Some emergency situation has happened where the Full Moon is."

If the Full Moon were in a crisis, then Natsume, who was with her, would also be in danger. At such a time, he would only be able to rely on the link between the Raven's Wing and the Full moon and head there with Far Step to help.

"What's important is recovering the Full Moon, right? I could go too..... or should she go?"

"No. Senpai's stealth is great, but it would be hard to bring her out even if you got close."

"Then what do we do? Is waiting all we can do?"

"Yeah. That's why we shouldn't move for no reason. Just hold the ritual here."

"Is that possible?" Kakugyouki and Saotome glanced at each other.

"It's technically a big violation of the rules, but in theory it can be done even if the Full Moon isn't nearby."

Harutora asserted. Saotome murmured something about being unable to accept it.

".....Harutora." Kakugyouki asked.

"It's almost time. Should I speak with Tsuchimikado Natsume? About her body's 'problem'."

"No..... You can't..... If Natsume knew that, it might have a negative effect on her. I can't take that risk."

"So--"

".....And I'm afraid of it." His lowered head gave away his true thoughts.

He might lose Natsume due to his own mistakes.

He couldn't help an overwhelming terror from pouring forth when he thought of that.

Harutora closed his eye and breathed deeply.

"Come help. It's the final task of the Taizan Fukun Ritual."

□

Fortunately, the warehouse where Natsume and the others were hiding hadn't been destroyed during Touji's fight.

"Come to think of it, there isn't any better place where we can hide Hama..... Kyouko-chan, sorry for making you try to perform divination on Kogure again so soon."

"It's alright."

The air in the warehouse was even heavier than normal.

Obviously, that was the fault of Ohtomo, who they had managed to reunite with.....

Ohtomo recognized the Souma's strength. In other words, Ohtomo judged that they didn't have the strength to contend with them. It was a big shock for all of them.

And what's more, the traces left from Touji's battle during Ohtomo's visit had forced them all to move.

".....Hmph, I knew he would just be trouble....."

Suzuka said with an irritated look. Natsume, Tenma, Kyouko, and Touji who had come close to winning against Gozu, were all wearing downcast expressions right now.

Just like Ohtomo had said, right now was a time when they needed to use all their strength. Ohtomo trusted his own judgments more than anything else and based his actions on them.

The 'my students' phrase that Ohtomo had said to Natsume and the others made them feel happy. But,

".....What is he joking about. We're not students anymore. And we left by our own wills, too. Isn't that the same for Ohtomo-sensei? Why do we have to keep letting Sensei shelter us?" Touji spat angrily. Half was because his opinion differed, and the other half was because he hadn't been viewed as an equal at all. Though his power certainly couldn't compete with Ohtomo's, it was hard for his heart to accept being scorned for this.

"Honestly. Ohtomo's still a newbie of a teacher. That stupid hot-blooded newbie teacher only teases his students because they're too cute. You should be magnanimous and forgive him." Amami said with a smile.

"Anyways, that stupid white-hair[6]'s acting like an adult in front of you guys? Ridiculous. Don't believe what he looks like, he's actually just a boy at heart."

"Hahaha....."

Tenma and Suzuka laughed at him. Touji's mood improved quite a bit upon seeing that scene.

...The situation hadn't improved.

But those brief words improved their mental states. As expected, Amami was amazing.

"Ah, Chief Amami. What was with Ohtomo saying that Harutora 'got mad at him'?"[7]

"To be honest, I don't know either. Maybe there are other reasons."

".....That means that Harutora's on his own?"

"That's already certain. The problem is how Harutora ended up on his own..... Anyways, Ohtomo judges that he 'can't team up' with him right now."

Natsume inadvertently sank into dejection as she listened to their conversation from the side.

Noticing the atmosphere, Amami waved his fan. "Well, nothing will happen right now by thinking about Harutora. We can't ignore that attack announcement. Anyway, you'll be able to meet him soon, right?"

...Right. Soon, probably.....

".....Speaking of which," Touji opened his mouth. "Chief Amami, did Kyouko say anything strange as Ohtomo-sensei was disappearing? Something about running into someone's little sister....."

At Touji's question, Natsume, Suzuka, and Tenma all recalled it.

"Ah....." Amami's expression was difficult. "Wakamiya Eri was Ohtomo's former teacher. But she died many years ago, and it was recorded as a suicide..... and that she was a fervent Yakou fanatic. Anyways, there are a lot of unclear things about it."

Suicide. Yakou fanatic. The combination of those two phrases gave Natsume a bad premonition.

The 'little sister' Kyouko had run into called herself Wakamiya Rika. She was a reporter for the Monthly Onmyouji, a famous magazine in the magic community.

"C-Come to think of it, what about asking that person to expose what the Onmyou Agency's doing to the media?"

Amami immediately rejected the idea that Tenma suddenly thought of.

"Kyouko said about the same thing. This isn't easy to accept, but we wouldn't be working this hard if a single reporter could successfully expose the Onmyou Agency."

"What if..... What if you spoke with the media directly? Maybe if it were you, who worked in the Onmyou Agency for many years and who suddenly vanished..."

"But it's 'Monthly', we won't be able to make it--"

"No no, the web edition is updated every day, you know?" Suzuka retorted.

".....Eh?"

"Also, I'm the Onmyou Agency's poster idol, so I can bring up something. The combination of the 'Child Prodigy' and the former division chief might be convincing."

"Well, that..... you see, the internet's kind of unreliable..... And even if we announce it on the net....."

"Daizen-sama!"

The door to the workroom opened and Suisen came out supporting Kyouko.

"I read Kogure's star!"

"Really!?" Natsume instantly brightened. "What about the other two?"

"Sorry, I still can't understand much..... But Kogure's star was eclipsed..... It might be some bad omen! We have to warn him quickly!"

"Well done. Thanks, Kyouko."

"Chief Amami, let's depart."

"Okay. Kyouko, tell everyone the specific time and place. Natsume and Touji, hurry to the area right away and forcefully come in contact with Miyoshi and Yamashiro. Suzuka, continue watching the

area. Tenma, you're on standby this time. After all, you're the only one who can use Hama, and the living spirits have high mobility.

Then,

"W-What about me? I'm a living spirit too, and I'm confident in my legs.....?" Akino asked. Her tone seemed more like she was pleading than asking.

"Akino, you're still on standby. I understand your feelings, but right now we need the right people for the job."

".....Okay....."

She didn't fight back, but the pair of rabbit ears hanging down clearly showed Akino's dejection.

Natsume approached Akino and put her hands on her shoulders to console her, and then--

...Eh?

A distortion appeared on Akino's face in Natsume's vision. She instantly lost her sense of balance and she momentarily forgot where and when she was.

It was only for a moment. Since she was holding on to Akino, no one noticed Natsume's abnormality other than Akino, who was right in front of her.

"N-Natsume?"

".....It's nothing, suddenly standing up made me dizzy."

Come to think of it, she had experienced a similar sensation yesterday. Just like that time, traces of disruption were left in her circulating aura.

...Why?

She had gotten good sleep, so why - before she had time to think about it, Touji's "Natsume" pulled her thoughts back.

Kyouko explained the results of her divination in detail after she came down the stairs.

"Uh oh. Then, Akino, wait here for our good news."

After Natsume said that, she returned to Touji and the others. This time it was Tenma approaching her saying "Akino-chan, can you help me with something?". Though Akino agreed, her gaze still stayed on Natsume's figure as she walked into their strategy room.

Three minutes later, Natsume and Touji left the warehouse.