

Ties of Shooting Stars ch23

They parked the car in the department store parking lot near Kichijoji Station, and decided to walk from there. Using the map sent by fax as a guide, they headed north from in front of the station. It was still a bit early to call it evening.

"It's quite a lively town," said Taisuke in his suit, looking around curiously. He was also wearing a tie. "It's my first time in Kichijoji."

"It's my second time, I think. I came here to shoot Inokashira Park for a job at my previous company." said Koichi.

The streets lined with unique stores were bustling with young people dressed in flashy fashion. The atmosphere they exuded was subtly different from the youth in Shinjuku or Shibuya. They seemed to enjoy their own styles without excessively following trends. Koichi speculated that maintaining a perfect distance from the city center probably gave them this sense of ease.

The Western-style pub 'NAPAN' was about a ten-minute walk from the station. A small blackboard was set up in front of the wooden door, listing today's recommended menu. Tonight, it seemed they recommended herb-grilled sea bass and soft shell crab.

Although the door still had a "Closed" sign hanging, Koichi pushed it open without hesitation.

The interior was dimly lit. A young woman was wiping the counter right by the entrance. She looked at Koichi and Taisuke with a puzzled expression.

"Um...the pub opens at 5:30."

"No, we were told to come before opening." Taisuke said, taking a business card holder from his jacket pocket and pulling out a card. It was a card that Koichi had hurriedly made last night. It read "Shinobu Yamataka, Director, KTS Co., Ltd." KTS was derived from the initials of Koichi, Taisuke, and Shizuna. The name Shinobu Yamataka was thought up by Shizuna, simply reversing the names of a recently scammed person, Takayama Hisonobu.

"Please wait a moment." the waitress said and disappeared into the back with the business card.

Koichi looked around the interior. Besides the counter, there were five tables for four, but they seemed cramped for four people to sit. Posters of Western movies adorned the walls, and old clocks and black telephones were placed on the shelves. The decor wasn't particularly novel, but he thought the sense wasn't bad.

Taisuke gestured as if he was holding a camera towards Koichi. Koichi nodded and took a camera out of the bag he was carrying. Using it, he took random shots of the interior. His role was to be the cameraman accompanying the director of a TV production company.

"Hey, you can't just start taking pictures." a gruff voice said.

A man in a white shirt and black vest came out from the back. His thin hair was shaved, emphasizing the roundness of his face. His body was stocky, making him look older, but he should still be in his forties.

"Are you Mr. Nomura? I'm sorry for troubling you when you're busy." Taisuke said, trying to present his business card again, but Takao Nomura waved it away with a bored expression.

"I already got it from the employee. We don't have much time, so make it quick." Nomura said, sitting on a stool by the counter. "You guys can sit wherever."

"Excuse us." Taisuke said, pulling up a chair to the table and sitting down. But Koichi remained standing, continuing to look around the interior. He thought it would make him look more like a cameraman.

"So, you want to ask about Mr. Togami, right?" Nomura said.

Taisuke nodded. "Yes, that's right. We want to know about Mr. Togami and a bit about Togami Restaurant's hashed beef rice. As I mentioned on the phone yesterday, the project we're planning is 'In Search of Famous Dishes' Origins,' and Togami Restaurant's hashed beef rice came up as one of the candidates for this."

"Hmph." Nomura snorted.

"Then you should go talk to Mr. Togami himself."

"Of course, we plan to interview him too. But for making such a program, the stories of people around him are crucial. We think shedding light on both his struggles and how those around him viewed them adds depth to the program."

Taisuke's tone was smooth as always. Though Koichi wanted to be the one asking questions, he didn't have the confidence to act to this level.

"Even if you say that, I don't really have much of a relationship with him anymore." Nomura said, making a sour face.

"Mr. Nomura, you worked with Mr. Togami at 'Shirogane House' for three years, right?"

"That's right. Before that, I worked at a different place, but it went out of business, so the owner-chef of 'Shirogane House' took me in. But then 'Shirogane House' also went under, so I guess I'm not very lucky." Nomura said with a self-deprecating smile.

As he mentioned, 'Shirogane House' went out of business eight years ago due to the sudden death of the owner-chef. Koichi had learned this from the internet. When he searched for Kichijoji and Shirogane House, he found a post with this information. That post also provided him with another piece of information: a cook who worked at 'Shirogane House' had started a Western-style pub in Kichijoji. That was 'NAPAN,' and the cook was Nomura.

"What kind of person was Mr. Togami?" Taisuke asked.

"It's hard to say what kind of person he was. We worked at the same place, but we weren't particularly close. But he was a diligent researcher. The owner liked him. So when he decided to go independent, the owner sent him off with good wishes. Since the new location was in Yokohama, it wasn't like they would be direct competitors."

"Was Mr. Togami known for that hashed beef rice back then?" Taisuke's question got to the core.

Nomura shook his head. "The hashed beef rice at 'Shirogane House' was something the owner had been making for a long time. When Mr. Togami was there, he made it according to that recipe. But after going independent, it seems he tried to create his own unique flavor."

Taisuke glanced sideways at Koichi. Although his expression didn't change, his excitement was palpable. They had finally found the starting point of Togami Restaurant's hashed beef rice. It was after going independent that Masayuki Togami created that flavor.

"Do you remember anything from that time? Anything related to the hashed beef rice would be helpful." Taisuke asked.

Nomura folded his arms. "Even if you ask that, I hardly saw him after he went independent. Occasionally, he would come to consult with the owner about running his business. Like me, he also seemed to struggle initially."

"I've heard about that. It wasn't very successful, right?" Taisuke said.

"Not successful? It was completely dead. I heard that because customers were so scarce, they even started offering delivery. He couldn't afford to hire staff, so his wife would deliver the food. Sometimes Mr. Togami himself did the deliveries. Can you imagine? A chef delivering food. You can guess how unpopular the place was." Nomura said, his tone becoming smoother. It seemed he didn't mind talking about other people's failing businesses.

Nomura then looked off into the distance. "Speaking of deliveries, I remember something funny. One night, Mr. Togami came to 'Shirogane House.' But he was terribly drunk. It was the first time I'd seen him like that."

"Did something happen?" Taisuke asked.

"Apparently, he got into a fight with a customer. Not a physical fight, just a verbal spat. And it wasn't with a customer at his restaurant, but one he delivered to."

"What was the cause?" Taisuke asked.

"He was told the food tasted awful."

"Really?" Taisuke exclaimed. "The food?"

"Yeah. I don't know what dish it was, but he was told it was terrible. The owner told him not to worry about it since people in such places don't have good taste anyway."

"What kind of place was it?" Koichi asked instinctively. "Where was this?"

"A café," Nomura said casually.

"A café?" Taisuke asked. "A café customer ordered delivery?"

"There was a big TV there, and on Sundays, it would become a hangout spot. Since the café couldn't serve substantial food, they ordered delivery from a nearby Western-style restaurant."

"I see." Taisuke nodded with a puzzled expression. Koichi also thought it was a strange story.

"What happened to Mr. Togami after that?" Taisuke asked.

"What happened to him...?" Nomura scratched his head. "It's an old story, so I don't really remember. He was drunk at the time, so maybe he just sobered up and moved on."

From Nomura's perspective, it was an episode he had just remembered, so it would be hard to get more details from him.

Taisuke continued to ask questions, hoping Nomura might remember something more about Togami's hashed beef rice. However, none of the answers provided the insight Koichi was hoping for. It seemed true that Nomura and Masayuki Togami were never very close during their time at 'Shirogane House.'

Taisuke glanced at his watch and then made eye contact with Koichi, silently asking for guidance. Koichi gave a small nod.

"Thank you for your time today. If we decide to use this information in our program, we'll come back for another interview." Taisuke said.

"Hey, wait a minute." Nomura said, pursing his lips in dissatisfaction. "Aren't you going to feature my restaurant too?"

"Of course, if that's the case," Taisuke replied.

"So, it's not decided yet?"

"Not yet. We're still in the preliminary stages, gathering information. We'll decide what to feature after reviewing everything we've collected."

"Hmm, in that case, I could have talked more about Togami's personality and other things..." Nomura muttered. He seemed to realize that he hadn't provided very interesting content. He had probably assumed his place would definitely be featured on TV, letting his guard down.

"We'll contact you if anything is decided." Taisuke concluded, standing up.

After leaving the restaurant and walking a bit, Taisuke let out a big sigh.

"When he mentioned that Togami made the hashed beef rice after going independent, I thought we had a lead. But after that, it was all downhill. What a useless old man."

"Well, it can't be helped. We'll have to look elsewhere." Koichi said.

"Elsewhere? Do you have any leads?" Taisuke asked.

Koichi could only bite his lip in response. Discovering the connection between Masayuki Togami and 'Ariake' was proving to be a difficult task. If Togami was the perpetrator, he would have made sure to keep that connection hidden.

They walked in silence. They passed an electronics store, and a golf broadcast was playing on an LCD TV set up outside.

Koichi stopped. "What's up?" Taisuke asked.

"He mentioned that they watched TV." Koichi said.

"Who did?"

"The café where Togami delivered. He said the customers gathered there because of the TV."

"Oh, right, he did say that. Why does it matter?"

"What do you think they were watching?" Koichi asked.

"Huh?" Taisuke looked puzzled. "How would I know?"

"But I do." Koichi said, patting Taisuke on the shoulder. "Let's hurry. We need to drive back there."

Koichi and Taisuke headed to Sakuragi Town. They parked near the bridge over the Ookagawa River, and Koichi approached a café that looked like a log house, called 'Uma no Ki.' When he entered, the bearded master behind the counter looked up and smiled cheerfully.

"Oh, it's you from the other day."

"Thank you for your help last time." Koichi said, expressing his gratitude.

"Did you go to 'Togami Restaurant' after that?"

"No, not yet. By the way, I have a question for you. But first, could we have two coffees?" Koichi said, holding up two fingers as he sat at the counter.

Taisuke, still looking puzzled, sat beside him. Koichi hadn't explained anything to him on the way here.

"Was there a café called 'Sunrise' around here before?" Koichi asked.

While pouring the coffee, the master looked thoughtful. Finally, he nodded.

"Yes, there was a 'Sunrise.' It was in a building down the street. But it's gone now." he said, a meaningful smile playing on his lips.

"It closed down because of that incident, right?" Koichi said, trying to contain his excitement.

"Yes, because of that incident. You know quite a lot. It caused us quite a bit of trouble too. People thought we might be doing the same thing here."

Taisuke nudged Koichi in the side with his elbow.

"What incident are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'll tell you later," Koichi replied.

As he sipped his black coffee, Koichi was filled with complex emotions. He had finally found the connection between Masayuki Togami and 'Ariake,' but it was also tied to a bitter memory for him.

Four years ago, a bookmaking group in Yokohama had been busted. Among the names in their records was Yukihiro Ariake.

This bookmaking group operated out of a café with a TV. They showed horse racing broadcasts to their customers, taking bets on the races. The name of that café was 'Sunrise,' as reported in the newspapers at the time.

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