Ties of Shooting Stars ch41

After receiving news from Taisuke that the operation was a success, Koichi let out a big sigh of relief. The infamous notebook had been hidden in the Togami family's library. It was ideal, Koichi thought.

"As expected, Shii did a great job. I was worried that he might hesitate because of Yukinari, but it turns out I was overthinking it. I'll pick Shii up somewhere and head back. Let's have a drink, the three of us, for the first time in a while." Taisuke's voice was excited.

"Be careful on your way back." Koichi said as he hung up the phone, folding his arms in front of his computer.

The remaining issue was how to get the police to discover that notebook.

The notebook's true identity was the infamous recipe book. When he left the house he grew up in, he took it as a memento of his late father. That notebook contained the only recipe in the world for the hashed beef rice, which was deeply etched into the memories of Taisuke and Shizuna.

If they found it, Koichi thought, the police would surely arrest Masayuki Togami. Of course, Togami would deny it. He would likely claim that he had no knowledge of it. However, the circumstances were overwhelmingly against him. It would probably be easy to prove that the notebook had been written by Ariake Yukihiro. Moreover, if they made the hashed beef rice according to the instructions in the notebook, they would discover that it was the same as the signature dish of the Togami chain restaurant.

The police would pursue how the notebook was obtained. Masayuki Togami wouldn't be able to answer. After all, he didn't know. But the police wouldn't see it that way. They would likely conclude that the notebook had been stolen from the crime scene, and the fingerprints on the gold watch would support that conclusion.

Masayuki Togami would be bewildered. He wouldn't understand why a crime he had hidden for fourteen years was being exposed now, and he would be arrested before realizing he had been framed. He might realize he was being set up, but there would be nothing he could do.

However, Koichi didn't think Togami would confess so easily. Even with all the circumstantial evidence against him, as long as Togami denied it, the prosecutors might not proceed with the indictment.

Now, it was up to the police, Koichi thought. They had done everything up to this point, so he prayed that the police would somehow find the physical evidence. Kashiwabara's face floated into his mind.

Just then, the phone on the desk started to ring. He glanced at the screen and was startled—it was Kashiwabara calling.

Koichi answered, "Yes, this is Koichi."

"Koichi? It's me, Kashiwabara."

"I know. Has there been any progress?" Influenced by his previous thoughts, Koichi asked eagerly.

"It's about that, but there's something I want to talk about. Are you home right now?"

"Yes, I am."

“Then, could we meet? It’ll only take ten minutes.”

“Sure. Where should I go?”

“No need. I’ll come to you. Actually, I’m very close by.”

“Wait, what…?” Koichi felt a cold sweat break out.

“I was in the area on another matter. I’m near your apartment. Your room is 305, right?”

Koichi stood up and looked out the window at the street below, but he couldn’t see Kashiwabara.

“Uh, well, the place is a mess, really dirty…” Koichi stammered.

Kashiwabara chuckled softly.

“Don’t worry about me. Or do you not want a detective in your place?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be waiting.”

After hanging up, Koichi immediately called Taisuke, but all he got was a voicemail message.

As he was about to leave a message, the doorbell rang. Then, there was a knock. “It’s me.” came Kashiwabara’s voice.

Koichi froze. Kashiwabara wasn’t just nearby — he had called from just outside the door.

There was no time to contact Taisuke. Koichi opened the closet and threw a Prada bag he had prepared for situations like this onto the bed. The cosmetics and accessories inside spilled out.

He quickly took out women’s sandals from the shoe rack at the entrance and hid Taisuke’s sneakers in their place.

The door was knocked on again. “Hey, Koichi.” called Kashiwabara.

Koichi pressed a hidden switch behind the shoe rack and then opened the door.

Kashiwabara raised his hand slightly. He was wearing a brown jacket.

“Sorry for dropping by so suddenly.”

“No problem, but really, the place is a mess.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m not here to judge your lifestyle.” Kashiwabara said as he walked in and glanced at the sandals at the entrance. He didn’t say anything, but when he saw two beds lined up in the room, he asked, “I thought you lived alone?”

“It’s not exactly cohabitation.” Koichi explained. “She only stays over sometimes.”

“So you bought a second bed just for that?”

“No, both beds were here from the start. At first, I shared the room with a friend. We were both on low salaries and couldn’t afford the rent on our own.”

“What happened to that friend?”

“He got married and moved out, leaving the bed. I hear he bought a double bed.” Koichi said, as he gathered the scattered cosmetics and small items and put them back in the Prada bag. “Sit wherever you like. Sorry, it’s cramped.”

Kashiwabara looked around and sat cross-legged beside the low table.

“You’re not planning to marry her?”

Koichi smiled wryly and shook his head.

“Neither of us has thought about it.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-three… no, twenty-four, I think. We’ve only known each other for about six months.” Koichi took a bottle of oolong tea from the fridge and poured it into two glasses.

“Then marriage might not come up just yet.” Kashiwabara said, his gaze sweeping around the room.

There shouldn’t have been anything in the room that indicated Taisuke lived there. Ever since they started making money from scams, they had kept it that way. That way, even if the police came looking for Taisuke, Koichi could claim that he wasn’t in contact with his brother and didn’t know where he was.

Koichi didn’t want Kashiwabara to know that he was living with Taisuke or frequently meeting with Shizuna. He still wanted to keep the two of them far away from the police.

“So, what’s this about?” Koichi asked, placing the glass of oolong tea on the table.

“Thanks.” Kashiwabara said, taking a sip.

“Have you been in touch with your brother lately?”

So it’s about that, Koichi thought.

“Not yet. I’ve tried, but he hasn’t reached out.”

“Is he doing all right?”

“I don’t know.” Koichi said with a shrug.

“He’s always been irresponsible, so I can’t imagine him working diligently. Maybe he cut off contact because he didn’t want to hear my scolding anymore.”

“You’ve been like a guardian to him since childhood.” Kashiwabara said with a reflective tone.

“Is his testimony necessary?” Koichi asked.

“It might be, but we’re not sure yet.”

“You mentioned the investigation was progressing the other day. How’s that going?”

Kashiwabara frowned and hummed thoughtfully.

"It’s true that we've found various clues that seem promising. We're conducting the investigation based on those, but we still haven’t found a decisive piece of evidence. After all, it’s been 14 years." Kashiwabara said.

"Do you have any suspects?" Kōichi asked.

Kashiwabara hesitated before answering, "We do, but they're still at the stage of being just a person of interest. There's no solid connection to Ariake yet. Honestly, we're at a standstill."

"If you have someone in mind, why not search their house?" Koichi suggested.

"A house search?" Kashiwabara’s eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"They might be hiding something related to the case. You could find that." Koichi said.

Kashiwabara stared sharply at Koichi as he spoke, but soon his eyes softened and his lips relaxed into a slight smile. "If this were right after the crime, maybe. But now, after all this time, I doubt the culprit would still be holding on to any evidence. They’ve probably disposed of it."

"But what if it’s something they couldn’t dispose of? Like something valuable to them." Koichi pressed.

"Valuable? You mean something worth money?" Kashiwabara asked.

"Not just that. People value different things, right? What might be trash to one person could be important to another. Maybe the culprit stole something like that." Kōichi speculated.

Kashiwabara still didn’t seem convinced. He tilted his head, saying, "I’m not sure about that."

Koichi grew frustrated. It seemed like the investigation had really stalled. Maybe the police weren’t acting more aggressively because they didn’t have enough circumstantial evidence.

After a deep breath, Koichi broke the silence. "When we met before, you asked if I knew a restaurant called 'Togami Restaurant,’ right?"

Kashiwabara looked up. "Did you remember something?"

"No, not exactly. But since then, I got curious and did some research on the restaurant."

Kashiwabara frowned. "Come on, give me a break. I told you back then, didn’t I? We’re not even sure if that restaurant is connected to the case. Please, leave the investigation to us and don’t get too involved."

His words had a tone of reproach, as if warning Koichi not to meddle.

"I didn’t do anything major. Just looked it up online and went to eat there." Kōichi explained.

Even after hearing this, Kashiwabara’s displeased expression didn’t change.

"What good is that going to do? If we need your help, we’ll ask. Please, don’t stick your nose in too deep."

"I get it. I don’t want to interfere either. But there’s just one thing I wanted to mention — my impression after eating at Togami Restaurant." Kōichi said.

"Your impression?" Kashiwabara’s gaze grew suspicious. "Did you notice something?"

"I went to the Yokohama main branch and tried their hashed beef rice. And it tasted... really familiar."

"Familiar? How?"

"It reminded me of the flavor from our shop. It was very close to the hashed beef rice my dad used to make. Not exactly the same, but it felt like just a slight variation of it."

This wasn’t a lie. Koichi had actually gone to the original Togami Restaurant in Kannai and tried their hashed beef rice. His theory was that at the original location in Sakuragichō, 'Ariake’s' hashed beef rice had been served without any modification.

"So you’re saying there’s a connection between your restaurant and Togami Restaurant through the hashed beef rice?" Kashiwabara asked.

"That’s right. It could just be me overthinking things, though." Koichi replied.

"Hmm... hashed beef rice, huh..." Kashiwabara’s gaze wandered into the distance.

Koichi wanted to say that there might be a recipe from 'Ariake' hidden somewhere in the Togami house, but he held back.

Meanwhile, Taisuke had picked up Shizuna near Tokyo Station and was driving toward the apartment in Monzennaka Town. She was sitting in the passenger seat, staring out the window in silence.

"Hey, why the gloomy face? We pulled off the plan successfully, so shouldn’t you be in a better mood?" Taisuke asked, steering the wheel.

"I'm just tired. It’s natural after sneaking into the enemy’s house, right?" Shizuna replied in a weary tone.

"Yeah, I guess. But I thought maybe something was still bothering you."

"Nothing, really. I told you, it’s all over now."

"Okay." Taisuke said, falling silent. He couldn’t think of any words to break the awkward atmosphere.

It’s tough for her, Taisuke thought, sympathizing with Shizuna’s feelings. She could never see the man she genuinely loved again. Not only that, but they had just set a trap to bring down his family. Of course, she wouldn’t be feeling cheerful.

They parked the car, entered the apartment building, and climbed the stairs to the third floor. Shizuna still hadn’t said a word.

As they stood in front of Room 305, Taisuke took out the key from his pocket and moved to insert it into the lock.

But before he could, Shizuna's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist.

He started to ask, "What is it?" but Shizuna shook her head. She pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the top of the door.

Following her gaze, Taisuke froze. A tiny LED light, about the size of a grain of rice, was blinking.

They exchanged a tense glance and nodded to each other before quietly retreating down the hallway.

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