

10

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!





**KING OF NANIWA
TOURNAMENT BEGINS!**

**GIRLS AND THEIR
DREAMS AT A
CROSSROADS!**

Ai's
move
turns
the
world
upside
down.

“Here,
here,
here,
here

HERE!!”

MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. Transferred to Osaka from Fukui to become a live-in apprentice during elementary school. Not being surrounded by mountains and not seeing stars at night required many years of adjustment.



AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice. Women's League player. A year has passed since she came to Osaka. Thanks to a great deal of support from her classmates, the transition to urban life was smooth. Drinks tapioca at Umeda's Gong-cha restaurant.



GINKO SORA

Yaichi's older sister-apprentice. Sub League 3-dan. She never touched her summer homework until the last day and then would force her younger brother apprentice to do it all.



RINA SHAKANDO

Women's Legend. In her youth, she journeyed from her hometown of Kamakura to a Shogi classroom in Harajuku on days off from elementary school, simultaneously developing her fashion sense.



MIO MIZUKOSHI

Practice League member. Completed the *Biwaichi* (one lap around Lake Biwa) bicycle event in the third grade. Planned to do a lap around Awaji Island the next year, but it was cancelled due to a typhoon.



AYANO SADATOU

Practice League member. Only member of the Grade Schooler Practice Group who wears glasses. Loves reading classic literature at school. Reads more *adult*-themed literature provided by her older sister-apprentice at home.



CHARLETTE ISOIR

Youngest member of the Grade Schooler Practice Group. French girl living in Kyoto. Biggest surprise about Japan: the existence of elderly men who swallow rice cakes whole.



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VOLUME 10

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Shirabii

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PROLOGUE

“Pardon meee.”

Going into the teacher’s office always makes me nervous. I’m especially jittery today.

I’m always getting called in.

But this time I came in on my own.

I make a beeline for my teacher’s desk but it’s empty.

“Ah! That’s right. I’ve got a different teacher now.”

Today’s my first day of fifth grade. I am officially in the upper grades!

A new classroom.

A new teacher.

New classmates.

There’s so much to be excited about But I’m really down in the dumps today. I’ve heard that more students just stop coming to school right after long vacations than at any other time of the year, and I totally get it. The regrets just keep piling up.

You know, the *I wish I’d done my homework sooner* kind of thing?

Regret always hits once you run out of time. Then you get called in to get a talking to. The same thing happens over and over.

I thought the cycle would keep going all the way until graduation day.

Well, no. Part of me didn’t think graduation day would ever come.

But, just like the last day of summer vacation, the end always shows up out of nowhere.

My new teacher's desk is close to the entrance, and she notices me right away.

"Sensei. You see"

There's a news program on the TV set up on the wall in the teacher's office.

"With the new fiscal year underway, efforts to draw crowds to the Osaka Expo have begun in earnest. Young business owners in Dotonbori got a literal jump on the festivities by diving into the river from Ebisubashi Bridge, but the Osaka Police Department is trying to inform Expo goers of the dangers——"

"Naniwa's Snow White's road to becoming the first ever female Shogi player starts tomorrow. Osaka native Ginko Sora 3-*dan* will face her final roadblock to joining the professional ranks along with many other hopefuls in the 3-*dan* division. Sora 3-*dan* arrived in Tokyo earlier today to do her own inspection of the arena for tomorrow's matches. The Shogi Association has provided comments——"

"Moving on, Osaka's largest pharmaceutical company, Tanaka Pharmaceuticals' buyout of Europe's largest pharmaceutical company, Fable Drugs, has been approved. The companies began closed-door negotiations last year——"

..... I'd finished saying what I needed to say around the time the news program finished up.

"Excuse me."

Bowing from the waist exactly how I was taught, I close the door behind me.

My new teacher is young, but she's so grown up. She listened to everything I had to say without stopping me once. I was kind of worried about talking to her, but I'm glad I did.

Now then There's someone else I need to talk to today.

"Head home, send out messages to everyone, get packed for the sleepover——."

Counting down my to-do list on my fingers, the tip of my foot hits something.

"Hm?"

Something on the floor outside of the teacher's office. Something I've seen many, many times before.

But Huuuh?

"..... Why? What's this doing here?"

I pick up the trinket at my feet.

It's——a keychain in the shape of a Shogi piece.

RECORD 1



LEADER
OF THE
GRADE
SCHOOLER
PRACTICE
GROUP

Mio Mizukoshi 水越滢



A wave of young talent has filled the Women's League. The first Queen joins a fan favorite to provide in-depth analysis of the Women's League's new look this year.

H: "It's so nice to see you again! Go easy on me today, okay?"

R: "Of course! You choosing me as your talking partner today is a real honor!"

H: "U-Um, Tamayo? You don't have to be so tense. Just relax and speak normally"

R: "Why, no! I have too much respect for you, Ms. Hanadachi! You're like a big sister to me."

H: “I had plenty of time to watch matches during my maternity leave, and I think your commentary skills are wonderful, Rokuroba 2-*dan*.”

R: “Thank you so much! However, I’m embarrassed that I’m always behind the microphone. I want to be in title matches, like you”

H: “That just goes to show how talented this new generation is. I believe Ginko Sora-*Dual Title*’s success and reaching Sub League 3-*dan* has a lot to do with it.”

R: “Becoming the youngest Elementary Meijin ever when she was in the third grade and she went right into the Sub League from there. You have to start early to get into the 3-*dan* division at the age of 15. TV stations and newspapers have been putting out one story after another and it looks like Women’s Shogi is only going to get more competitive from here.”

H: “There is one woman who became Elementary Meijin and joined the Sub League before Ginko Unfortunately, she couldn’t break through the 1-*dan* wall. Just a few years ago, no one could’ve imagined a woman, let alone a girl Ginko’s age, would be part of the 3-*dan* division.”

—This year’s Elementary Meijin is also a girl.

R: “I got to see her play working as big board analyst in the studio during the Semifinals and the final match. She’s strong all right. Her Shogi’s structure is so complete I could hardly believe that she is in the fifth grade. Not to mention, she’s quite the character.”

H: “I can’t wait to see for myself. Is she planning to join the Women’s League?”

R: “Apparently, she wants to go into the Sub League. Actually, her older brother is already a professional I think she’ll be making waves real soon.”

H: “Her being in the fifth grade makes her the same age as the two girls in the Kuzuryu family tree that everyone’s been talking about, right? It’ll be interesting to see who is stronger.”

—That would be Ai Yashajin Women’s 2-*dan* and Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*kyu*, correct? Miss Yashajin is already well-known as the most recent Queen Challenger. Miss Hinatsuru has also been extremely impressive and has yet to lose since her Women’s League debut.

R: “Ms. Hanadachi, have you met them?”

H: “Honestly Yes. Yaichi brought them to my apartment while the Queen Title Match was going on.”

R: “Oh! That’s why the runt Ai Yashajin played so well in the third match, because of your advice!!”

H: “Hehehe. I’d better be prepared for a lashing on the board should Ginko ever find out.”

R: “The Ryuo has a lot more to worry about first! (lol)”

H: “Very true! (lol)”

—By reaching the final match of the Women’s Legend League qualifier, Miss Hinatsuru was promoted to 1-*kyu*. Should she win her next match, she will become the youngest ever to take part in the Women’s Legend Challenger League. What do you see as the secret behind her rapid ascent?

H: “It’s true that she’s undefeated since her debut. It’s just She always makes mistakes in the early game, runs out of waiting time and somehow manages to turn the tables in the late game. It’s like a broken record, the same pattern each time. It makes me wonder if she’s growing as a player or not.”

R: “More like she’s had lucky matchups so far.”

H: “Analyzing her match records, I’d say her most complete match was back in the Mynavi Preliminaries when she beat Miss Sainokami. She certainly didn’t have the best early game then either, but Trapping and finishing off Worldly Thunder like that, her competitive prowess comes through the match record strong enough to give me chills. However, she lost to Miss Tsukiyomizaka in the

very next match. No matter how good she is in the late game, there's no recovering from early game missteps. That match all but proved it."

R: "Peaking at nine and losing a step at ten. (lol)"

H: "That can happen with extremely talented people. I've seen plenty of elementary and junior high school girls join the Women's League and thought: *how far are they going to go?! only to see them hit a wall.*"

R: "I can relate."

H: "You're not one of them, Tamayo. It's true that you became the Amateur Women's Meijin during your first year of junior high and joined the Women's League after that, but you didn't follow that pattern."

R: "Because I don't have talent. (lol)"

H: "No. You've committed a great deal of effort throughout your career."

R: "!! Thanks. (eyes watering)"

H: "Ai Hinatsuru 1-*kyu* is in a precarious situation. There's no doubt she is extremely talented. But the era when someone could claim a title on talent alone has ended. Solving Shogi puzzles at lightning speed doesn't mean anything because it doesn't translate to an actual match at all. If she doesn't play each match with a do-or-die mindset, she'll be eliminated long before qualifying for the big matches."

R: "She'll never play like that so long as she is only doing practice sessions with girls her own age."

H: "She's practicing with her friends?"

R: "She sure is. The Ryuo invites a bunch of his apprentice's friends into his apartment to spend the night to do Grade Schooler Practice Group sessions. The things that must happen there Seriously, I saw him share a kiss with a six-year-old girl when I was doing commentary for *Nico Live*."

H: "Yeesh Should we be worried? That seems"

R: “Four little girls, a secluded room, Shogi. *Something’s* bound to happen I wouldn’t be surprised if something like really bad happens any day. What happens to the title if he gets arrested? Forfeited?”

—Returning to the topic at hand What Women’s League members have your attention this year?

R: “I’ve known Ai Yashajin Women’s 2-*dan* would show up for a long time now, and I think she’s here to stay. Sure, she lost the Queen Title Match in three straight losses, but she forced Naniwa’s Snow White to choose a Repetition Draw in the third match, which is just as good as winning.”

H: “In that case, I’ll go with the player who beat that Ai Yashajin.”

R: “Huh? Who?”

H: “Her debut got buried under the Queen Title Match news, but she bested Ai in the Women’s Legend qualifier. A Women’s 2-*kyu* who only just entered the league.”

R: “Whaaat?! 2-2-*kyu* There must be some mistake?!”

H: “That Women’s 2-*kyu* was the first female Elementary Meijin, even before Ginko Sora, and was heralded as the most talented woman in our generation. *If she hadn’t decided to go straight into the Sub League*, there’s no doubt in my mind she would have been bestowed the first Queen rather than me. And her next opponent in the final Women’s Legend League qualifier is none other than Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*kyu*.”

R: “You You don’t mean Her?!”

H: “That’s right. She’s back *Undying Wings*.”

NEW CLASS

“Master-I’m-home-let’s-play-Shogi-Master!!”

Back from her school’s opening ceremony, my apprentice comes in with her trademark white beret and trailing cherry blossom petals as she bursts into my room speaking too fast for me to understand her.

I’m sprawled out on my bed reading the latest issue of a Shogi magazine, but I drop it in surprise.

“Th-There’s no rush There’s a practice session today, which means you’ll be playing through the night anyway, right?”

“Butbutbut! There won’t be much time at all for you to teach me one-on-one once the others get here, Master!”

Ai Hinatsuru jumps on top of me with her bright red backpack still strapped around her shoulders.

Reason being——.

“The last Women’s Legend qualifier match is coming up real soon! If I win one more time, I can join the league! I absolutely can’t lose this match!! I want to spend every second of every minute playing Shogi right now!!”

“A-All right! Okay, okay, just stop straddling your Master’s back!”

“I want to study more, more and more so I can get a title before Ten-chan does! Because if I don’t If I don’t!”

“And I’m glad you’re so motivated, really. But, you know? This looks like cowgi- Like you’re riding a horse, yeah?”

I can’t have a grade school girl on top of me shouting *more*! It crosses too many lines.

Her younger sister apprentice Ai Yashajin made it to a title match first. That must've been the spark she needed to get the competitive juices flowing.

What's more, Ai Yashajin losing so early in the Women's Legend qualifier must have fanned the flames. This is her first opportunity to overtake her younger sister apprentice in the standings.

Her mumbling so quietly that I can't tell what she's saying pretty much proves it.

"..... How could Ten-chan be that bold? She declared war on me A war of love That's a battle I absolutely can't lose!"

..... Maybe she's a little too revved up?

"Calm down, Ai. You won't be able to pick the pieces of the board like this. Would you tell me about school first? How was your first day as a fifth grader?"

"Well It was lots of fun!"

She has to think about it for a moment, but then she smiles from ear to ear.

"Mio is in my class again this year, and so is Mihane. We had so much to talk about!!"

"Really? I'm glad to hear that!"

For Ai, who transferred in all the way from the north coast, the friends she makes at school are irreplaceable treasures. They are the only way for her to relieve homesickness and to help her relax.

Having transferred to Osaka on my own in the past, I understand exactly how she feels.

On the other hand, I had the Kiyotaki household to come home to with a very kind older sister in Keika and, even though she's younger, an extremely overbearing and harsh Big Sis waiting for me. I never felt lonely at all. Pain and suffering are a different story though *shiver*

"Master? What's the matter? You're shaking."

“N-Nothing I’m fine. Just fine

Right now, I live together with my cute apprentice. I’ll protect this oasis no matter what

“W-Would you tell me more about your classmates? What’s this Mihane like?”

“Mihane? She’s fashionable, really smart and lets me borrow her books. Her boyfriend is in college, but boys ask her out all the time Why do you want to know?”

“Oh. I’m just interested to know who your classmates are, Ai.”

“..... Are you after them?”

“After them... how?!”

My apprentice’s low, suspicious tone lets me know I need to set the record straight.

“Yeesh What do you take me for? I’m interested because I need to know if this new class is a good fit for you. That changes how and what I can teach you.”

“Teach? You’re talking about Shogi, right?”

“Of course, I am. Your classmates at school have a direct effect on your standings... which is why I want to check before you start playing.”

“Uwhee?! My class at school matters for Shogi?!”

“Yes. Very much so.”

It’s no problem when you’re winning.

But, having a place to relax when you’re hurting after a loss and questioning yourself is a must. Since students spend half the day at school, the other students in their class and the atmosphere are very important.

“Ai, you’re living with me as my apprentice, yes? That means, if you’re

struggling with Shogi, life here with me won't be easy either. If school is stressing you out too, there's nowhere for you to escape and you'll burn out So, what do you think? Has anything changed?"

"....."

She's very quiet all of a sudden. What could it be?

"..... Master, um Mi"

"Mi?"

"N-No, um! Well M-My homeroom teacher changed!"

"Oh?"

The homeroom teacher is a parent's or, in my case, guardian's only way to know what's going on at school.

A new person in that position could have a big impact.

"Yes. My teacher from last year had to retire."

"Oh, I see He was such a nice old man, understood Shogi as well. I'm going to miss him."

He looked out for my apprentice after she transferred to Osaka for Shogi training. Seriously, he was the perfect teacher for a young Shogi player to have.

Ai had to miss time at school to join me during the Ryuo Title Match and to participate in the Mynavi Finals, and he let her.

That teacher even played Shogi himself, so he knew lots of little things that helped him support Ai in many other ways as well, but

"Most matches are on weekdays, you see Now that you're a Women's League player, you'll have to do match records as well, which means you need to take more days off school. The more you win, the busier you'll get."

"Thinking about so many things is too complicated! (>-<)"

Ai loves her friends at school, so I'm sure she doesn't want to miss class or school events.

She loves school, but she also loves Shogi. She doesn't want to give either of them up.

If you're going to be stuck between a rock and a hard place, it's better to be between the things you love, but still

"I had a hard time balancing school and Shogi, and I ended up having to give up life at school altogether. I think the reason why Big Sis didn't go to my junior high is because of what I went through."

"Is that why?!"

"Grade school wasn't that big of a deal But junior high was really, really rough"

I feel like I could shed some weight just thinking about those days.

I went to an average, run-of-the-mill public junior high school. They didn't understand the first thing about Shogi. I guess they thought it was a club or something.

They wouldn't let me miss school to be a match recorder or do what I needed to for the Sub League, so I had to fake sick to get out of it.

I had good classmates, so it wasn't all bad It's just I probably would've turned pro six months earlier if my school had been a little more understanding.

"Big Sis saw what I was going through and went back to her parent's house to attend school in that neighborhood instead. Then again, she was already famous and had a title at that point, so they treated her more like a celebrity"

Ai is famous in the Shogi world, but the outside world knows next to nothing about her, so explaining it would be pretty much impossible.

On top of that ... she's my live-in apprentice

Most people wouldn't just accept that an underage boy and grade school girl are bound by a Master/apprentice relationship and therefore living together right off the bat... no way

"Your homeroom teacher last year was also one of the head teachers at the school, so having his support was huge. What's your new teacher like?"

"Very young. Oh, and she's a woman."

"Oh?"

"Ah! That reminds me."

It's like a lightbulb turned on in her eyes as Ai holds out a piece of paper.

"Since my teacher changed, she's going to do a home visit."

"A home visit?"

I know that it's normal for teachers to see what kind of situation each of their students lives in at the beginning of the year, but a cold chill runs up my spine as I take the paper from her.

"Hm? Hold up. Your teacher, a young woman, will be coming here? When?"

"Today."

"Huh?"

Ding dong.

HOME VISIT

“Good afternoon. I am Miss Ai Hinatsuru’s new homeroom teacher, Misao Kanegasaka.”

The woman standing in the doorway has an aura that just screams *teacher*. Even her suit looks smart. One glance is enough to know she’s extremely intelligent and straight as an arrow.

Age-wise early twenties, maybe?

“N-Nice to meet you! Thank you for coming today!”

Stuttering a little bit from the shock of this sudden change of events, I give a proper bow to make sure I don’t bring shame to my position as Ai’s guardian. She cannot, under any circumstances, find out that Ai was bouncing on top of me like riding a horse only a few minutes ago. It’ll all be over if she does.

Scanning my body from head to toe, Kanegasaka-*sensei* says, “While I hate to cut the pleasantries short, I wish to speak with Ai’s guardian, Yaichi Kuzuryu. Is he here?”

“He’s me.”

“..... Huh?”

She tilts her head, but I say my name loud and clear to hide how nervous I really am.

“I My name is Yaichi Kuzuryu, Ai Hinatsuru’s guardian while she lives in Osaka!”

“Guardian? *You* are her guardian? Not his son but actually him?”

“Yes.”

“Pardon my rudeness but How old are you?”

“I turn 18 this year.”

“So you’re 17 right now? Which would mean you’re still a high school student, yeah?”

Her formal tone as good as gone, she is staring at me with so much suspicion it’s not even funny.

Though it’s really getting on my nerves.

“I may be on the young side, but I have a job and a steady income. I pay rent for this apartment myself and am financially capable of supporting Ai!”

“Yes! I’m being provided for very well! I’m very happy here!”

Ai, standing right beside me, backs me up with a few salvos of her own. My chest is suddenly getting hot.

I still have a lot of growing to do as a Shogi Master.

Honestly, Ai does all the chores around here.

Despite knowing that I’m not providing enough for her, I absolutely can’t back down now.

Ai living with me in this environment is the best thing for her growth as a player. I’ve raised her as a live-in apprentice over the past year believing that with all my heart. What’s more, now is an extremely important time in her career because she just entered the Women’s League.

Ai’s environment ... it’s up to me to protect it!!

“Oh So, that’s how it is. I see, I see.” Our determination must’ve come across because Kanegasaka-*sensei* goes back into formal mode and says, “It is true that Miss Hinatsuru’s grades and living conditions are well within acceptable parameters. It seems I have no choice but to acknowledge that fact.”

“See? What did I tell you?”

“I thought it unusual that a girl her age living away from her parents would conduct herself as maturely as she does. Therefore, I was looking forward to meeting the person responsible for her well-being on today’s home visit. Your age caught me off guard

“That’s all right. I’m used to people making assumptions when they find out how young I am.”

“So? What is your relationship to Miss Hinatsuru, Mr. Kuzuryu? Her cousin perhaps?”

“I’m her Shogi Master.”

“Let’s see, I’m sure I have the number for Fukushima Ward’s Children’s Welfare Services in here somewhere——.”

“Wait, would you please! Don’t call them without understanding the situation first!”

About to take out her smartphone, I desperately push Kanegasaka-sensei’s hand back into her purse and start explaining.

“Yes, I’m young, but I have the ability to take an apprentice! I’m a pro!!”

“What exactly would a professional handler of elementary school students do?”

“That’s what I’d like to know!!”

Who said a word about that?! What kind of pro *even is* that?!

“P-Pardon me I got caught up in the moment there.”

I got so angry at being called a professional loli-con that I yelled at my apprentice’s homeroom teacher.

Relax, relax. Get angry and I’ll lose. I must explain everything as calmly and clearly as possible

“Why don’t you come inside rather than standing here in the doorway? It

would be easier to show you what I'm talking about rather than just say it out loud."

"..... Lead the way."

It took her a few seconds to make up her mind, but Kanegasaka-*sensei* puts her bag down on the floor and starts taking off her shoes.

I use this window of opportunity to whisper into my apprentice's ear.

"..... Ai. Listen"

She stretches up on her tiptoes to lean in close. I bend down a little bit and issue orders.

"..... Find an excuse to get away and call Keika. I don't think I can handle this by myself"

Ai makes a sharp bow before saying, "Oh, I need to go make tea!" much louder than she needed to before disappearing into the kitchen.

I take Kanegasaka-*sensei* into the *tatami* room.

"! Oh? And this is"

Stepping inside, she sounds thoroughly impressed.

Since I'd already prepared for tonight's practice group session, beautiful, legged Shogi boards are lined up around the room. Talk about good timing.

"This is where Ai and I work. The most important part of our job is the league matches that take place at the nearby Kansai Shogi Association, but we host practice sessions and do research here with our colleagues on a regular basis in order to win those matches."

"For Shogi?"

She sounds confused.

"Miss Hinatsuru mentioned it before, but Shogi is just a game, right? That clicky board game that senior citizens do on porches to pass the time, that

Shogi?”

“Yes, that Shogi. And yes, it is a game. The same way that *baseball and soccer are games.*”

“.....”

“And just like them, Shogi has an organized professional system as well. I moved to Osaka at the age of six to live with my Master in order to join the professional Shogi world.”

“S-Six?!”

“Yes. I was born out in Fukui, you see. From there, I spent 10 years living in this neighborhood as Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*’s live-in apprentice.”

“From that young of an age?”

“Plenty of professional athletes start their career as teenagers, yes? It’s just like that. To be more specific, Shogi players ranked from 4-*dan* to 9-*dan* are professionals. Our records and standings determine our income.”

“..... All right. I understand what you’re implying.”

It sure seems like she gets it. Bringing her to this room was the right decision.

“And? What is your *dan* ranking, Mr. Kuzuryu?”

“I’m the Dragon King Ryuo.”

“Are you trying to be funny?”

She’s seriously ticked off. Why?

“In what world does someone introduce himself as the *Dragon King*? Perhaps you’ve read too many comic books? Or are you still in a rebellious phase? I really should call the Child Welfare——.”

“I-It’s not a joke! The Shogi world has several titles that rank above *dan* I mean, you must’ve heard of the Meijin, right?! Right?!”

“Of course, I have. He is mentioned in textbooks.”

Seriously? That guy is amazing

“I’ve beaten that Meijin before!! Here’s the proof!”

I start taking Shogi magazines off the shelf one by one and show her articles covering my Ryuo Title Defense and Ai’s Women’s League debut.

“Interesting It seems that you being famous in this *Shogi world* and Miss Hinatsuru being active at the age of 10 were true after all

“So, you understand?!”

“Howeeever!!”

She cuts me off, her voice snapping like a whip.

“I couldn’t care less how skilled you are or how many tens of millions of yen you earn each year! To be clear, the problem is that a 10-year-old girl and a 17-year-old boy are living together on their own.”

“..... I understand your concern.”

Here comes the moment of truth.

I look Kanegasaka-*sensei* straight in the eyes and give my answer.

“But, the fact remains that Shogi is both a mental sport and a valuable part of Japanese tradition and history. The relationship between Master and apprentice is the foundation of the system that has been perfected over 1,400 years. It survives to this day because no selfish desires and other impure motives exist whatsoever!”

“Then, there is nothing nefarious going on here?”

“Of course not! We only play Shogi!”

“Can you swear that the Master/apprentice relationship will not transform into a romantic one?”

“Of course!”

“Then you can say with absolute certainty that Miss Hinatsuru has never straddled you in bed like some cheesy adult comic, that she has never invited her elementary school friends over to receive your *instruction* only for things to get out of hand and you haven’t promised to marry an underage girl, correct?”

“O Of course!”

“Was that a stutter just now?”

“Nope, not at all.”

Keikaaaaaaaaa!!! Save meeeeeeeeeee!!!

Just as my heart called out, I hear.

Ding dong.

“Ah! Coming, coming, coming! I-If you’ll excuse me for a moment!!”

I dash out of the *tatami* room before Kanegasaka-sensei can say anything and head for the front door.

Ai, who’s been making tea in the kitchen, tries to get my attention as I fly by but there’s no time.

The situation is dire. I’m only a handful of moves away from being checkmated.

—But, with Keika here She’ll find a way out of this!!

Praying for a miracle, I reach out and fling open the front door only to see—.

“Cha’s hwere to pway!”

It’s over

THE KING OF NANIWA TOURNAMENT

“Uhhh? Charlette? Why are? The Grade Schooler Practice Group isn’t supposed to come until later tonight”

Charlette flings off her shoes like coming into her own house and slips past me so naturally it’s like she’s gliding on air. I chase after the golden-haired angel, asking questions as we go.

Since it’s Friday, the Grade Schooler Practice Group members are going to spend the night. That plan had already been made.

I already set out the Shogi boards in the *tatami* room for that reason.

But they weren’t supposed to be here until later. That’s why I opened the door without checking to see who it was first I let an angel of death inside with my own hands.

On a side note, Ai can’t leave the kitchen because she has a kettle sitting over a flame to make tea so all she can do is look on with a mixture of confusion and worry. Seems like she didn’t know about this either.

The angel apparently wants to play Shogi as soon as possible and lands in the tatami room without any hesitation.

Kanegasaka-sensei must be having trouble comprehending the little blonde embodiment of overwhelming cuteness that appeared out of nowhere because her eyes are almost blank as she asks.

“And who Are you? An angel?”

“Cha is Cha!”

“Miss Cha? You aren’t Japanese, are you? May I ask why you are here——.”

“You know, Cha? Cha’s dowing a pwactice session with eveweone today.”

“Practice session? What kind?”

“Uwmm, it’s A sweep oba!”

“A sleepover.”

I’ve never resented Charlette’s bumbling pronunciation more than at this very moment.

Working something out in her head, Kanegasaka-*sensei* asks, “..... Are you one of Mr. Kuzuryu’s apprentices? As well?”

“Nooope.”

“You’re not? Then what kind of relationship do you have with Mr. Kuzuryu——?”

“You know, Cha? Cha’s his bwide.”

“...”

Every trace of an expression disappears from Kanegasaka-*sensei*’s face.

“You know, Cha? And Masta? Cha wants to be Masta’s appwentice! But Masta said he can’t. So, you know? In exchwange? Cha gonna be his bwide!”

“Is that right He can’t make you an apprentice, so he’ll marry you instead”

Oh, crap Crapcrapcrap

“But, you know? Cha? Bewing a bwide is okway? But Cha, Cha weelly wants to be Masta’s appwen——.”

“Mr. Kuzuryu.”

Gaze still squarely locked on Charlette, Kanegasaka-*sensei* says to me, “I have decided against calling Child Welfare Services.”

“Really?! Thank you so much!!”

“I will be contacting the police.”

Gaaaaaaaaaasp!!

“Teachers say that all the time, don’t they?! Especially elementary school teachers!! Whenever little kids say they love you, you say: *Then let’s get married*, as a joke, right!?”

“It happens, yes.”

“Then——.”

“However, bringing said child into your domicile for a *sleepover* is a crime.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to that!!”

Powerless, I fall to my knees on the *tatami* mat. “What’s wong, Masta? Want Cha to cast a spwell to make you feel better?”

The *spell* that Charlette is offering to cast is a kiss on my cheek. If she did that now, I’d feel better, sure, but I’d be in prison by this time tomorrow.

“Why did my predecessor overlook such egregious transgressions?! This isn’t a *practice session* or anything of the sort! It’s indecent lolitic fraternization!”

Indecent lolitic fraternization?!

Just as I’m getting chewed out by this extremely new side of Kanegasaka-sensei——.

“Charlette! It’s dangerous, running off alone like that! Try to restrain yourself!”

“Take it easy on her, Ayanon. You’re the one who said we should come over three hours early to ask Kujuryu-sensei to do *it* as fast as possible!”

“U-Umm Yes, b-but this is different——.”

Two more grade schoolers show up in my apartment.

Kanegasaka-sensei stares at one of them in surprise.

“You’re Miss Mizukoshi?”

“Wow! Kanegasaka-*sensei*! What are you doing here?!”

Ai said that she and Mio are in the same class this year, too.

Which would mean that Kanegasaka-*sensei* is a new teacher for Mio as well.

So then Why is it that Mio still can't pronounce my name yet but she can say *Kanegasaka*, which is just as hard, already with no problem?

That very same Mio jumps toward me, sliding on her knees like she just scored a soccer goal, and puts her hands down on the floor in front of my feet with her head low. A new technique, knee-sliding prostration.

“Kujuryu-*sensei*! I have a favor to ask you today!”

“Hm? A favor?”

“We—all of us want to enter the King of Naniwa Tournament!!”

“The King of Naniwa The amateur Shogi tournament for grade schoolers?”

I look over at the other two girls and say.

“You too, Ayano? Charlette?”

“Yes. Practice League regular activities are not held on that day, so Kuruno-*sensei* suggested we enter to test our current skills.”

“Yep! Cha too!”

A tournament Hm.

The last one I was in was almost 10 years ago, the Elementary Meijin Tournament

“If you do enter, Mio and Ayano will both be in the upper grade division and Charlette will be in the lower grade division, right? Boys and girls aren't separated, so it won't be easy but I think all of you have a chance to place

very high.”

“Really?!”

“But you won’t have anywhere near as much waiting time as you do in the Practice League and you’ll have to play a whole bunch of matches in a single day. It’ll be hard to win without training for it.”

Amateur tournaments are difficult in a different way from pro matches.

Which is why ex-Sub League members get steamrolled in amateur tournaments more often than you’d think.

“I understand that! I don’t think I’ll win just because I’m in the Practice League I already lost in the prefecture round of this year’s Elementary Meijin Tournament But!!” says Mio, still facing the floor, but I can tell she’s biting down on her lip to hold back the pain. “That’s exactly why I want you to train me up, Kujuryu-sensei!”

I’ve never seen Mio this determined before.

She came to me around New Year’s and said that she wanted to be a Women’s League player.

I told her to *become the best female amateur Shogi player while in grade school.*

She must’ve taken that to heart in her own way and now wants to be in this tournament.

Two things sparked that flame: my Shogi and the two apprentices I’ve raised.

...Which means it’s my responsibility to make sure she’s ready.

“..... Well, whatever you decide to do, I will be at the King of Naniwa Tournament to do a match. So I won’t be able to give you advice like a coach on the day of the tournament. If that’s okay with you, of course I’d be happy to help you prepare!”

“That’s a Top Earners Match, isn’t it?! Congratulations on qualifying!”

Top Earners Matches are special matches in which only the 12 highest earning players can participate.

They’re unique league matches that take place at tournaments all over the country where we wear kimono and play in front of a live audience. The whole thing is designed to get more grade school kids interested in Shogi.

By the way, I already know who I’ll be playing. A guy that grade schoolers are going to love is coming to Osaka. If the Grade Schooler Practice Group is there too, I’ll be fired up!

Just as my train of thought reaches that point.

“Mr. Kuzuryu. About what was just under discussion——,” says Kanegasaka-sensei, poking my shoulder. “Is it similar to tournaments school clubs participate in?”

“In a way. As long as you think of it as a national level event, yes. The King of Naniwa Tournament is western Japan’s largest amateur event designed for children in grade school and more than 1,000 kids will participate.”

“Will Miss Hinatsuru be taking part as well?”

“No. Ai is classified as a pro because she receives money to play. Only amateurs can join this tournament.”

“.....”

I can see the gears turning in Kanegasaka-sensei’s head.

Then, she suddenly makes a suggestion.

“..... Understood. Then, here’s what we will do.”

“Yes?”

“Mr. Kuzuryu. Please instruct Miss Mizukoshi to victory in this tournament. Do that and I will acknowledge your capability to act as Miss Hinatsuru’s guardian.”

Come again?!

I have to make Mio win the whole thing?

“B-But, if that’s what it takes, Ai has accomplished even more impressive achievements in bigger tournaments That’s how she became a Women’s League player”

“It was Miss Hinatsuru’s extraordinary talent that resulted in her transfer from Ishikawa Prefecture, correct? That would make her the equivalent of a student scouted for a sports scholarship.”

Teachers come up with the best analogies.

“Along the same vein, Miss Mizukoshi has always been a local student. Wouldn’t she be a better example of your teaching abilities, Mr. Kuzuryu?”

“G-Good point”

“I will ensure full cooperation from the school. Oh yes! Would you come teach my class about Shogi?! That way, I can see your skills first hand. It’s settled!”

“Huuuh?! M-Me Teach Ai’s class at school?!”

“Is that a complaint?”

“N-No. Actually, any Shogi player would jump at the opportunity to get kids interested in the sport at an elementary school, but”

The kind of class Kanegasaka-sensei has in mind happens quite a bit: the association sends people to elementary schools to teach the kids about Shogi. Some pros are even guest lecturers at the University of Tokyo.

The association’s greatest wish is for Shogi to be part of elementary school curriculum.

If I go to the board of directors, I guarantee they won’t say *no* to this proposal.

“With the Shogi Association building being so close, a field trip would be nice as well! It would be a great opportunity for students to experience a work environment and perhaps see Miss Hinatsuru during a match as part of class Yes! There’s so much potential!”

Her eyes sparkling, Mio then yells, “So then, I can stay overnight so Kujuryu-*sensei* can train me for the tournament?!”

“Of course not,” answers Kanegasaka-*sensei* immediately.

Figures.

■ CAT-EARED PRINCESS LOLI, ON THE SCENE!

And so, Kanegasaka-sensei takes Mio, Ayano and Charlette with her out the door. Grade Schooler Practice Sessions aren't going to be happening at my apartment for who knows how long.

The issue of Ai being my live-in apprentice seems to be on hold for now.

"Wow, it's already evening Ai, it's been a long day, so why don't we have food delivered?"

"Yaaay! Delivery! I want pizza!"

"Pizza, sure. I'll order it, so go take a bath."

"Okey-dokey!"

Already flinging clothes off her body, Ai heads straight for the tub.

Exhausted, I trudge into my room and flop down onto my bed.

"..... I just can't tell if that teacher understands Shogi or not. Her attitude did a 180 as soon as the King of Naniwa tournament came up"

"I knew you could do it, Master! So convincing!"

Grimacing as my apprentice's voice comes through the bathroom wall, I answer, "Either way, I want you to focus on getting into the Women's Legend League. That'll make me happier than anything else and it's necessary for your career, Ai."

"I will! Just watch, I'll claim my own Women's Title!!"

"Please. Seriously, please. Your mother's been putting a lot of pressure on me recently I had a chance to go back to The Hinatsuru Inn for the first time in months during the Queen Title Match, and she's built a Shogi museum with you as the main exhibit. What's worse is that there's already a space set aside for

when you have your own title

“Pardon me, Master. I need to rinse my hair.”

“Ah, yeah. Sorry about that. Go ahead

Fssshhhhh

Since Ai is getting the shampoo out of her hair, our conversation gets cut off.

“I’d better blow dry it for her before we play Shogi

A full cycle of seasons has passed since we started living together.

I made a promise to her parents when I took her as my apprentice: she’ll have a Women’s Title before she graduates junior high.

Ai is a prodigy among prodigies and her skills are growing like mad.

Her younger sister apprentice, Ai Yashajin’s recent accomplishments seem to have hit home and she’s more motivated now than ever. This is the perfect time to get her to the next level!!

It is, but....

“The current Women’s League isn’t so soft that just anyone can claim a title,” I mumble to myself as I pick up the magazine I started reading earlier.

There is an interview with the Thorn Princess Azami Hanadachi women’s 5-*dan* and the Practice Session Crusher Tamayo Rokuroba women’s 2-*dan* inside.

“They very gently pointed out that there’s a hole in Ai’s Shogi, the early game. It is true she’s struggled with it ever since her debut, but

There are six Women’s Titles right now.

Two of them, Queen and Women’s Throne, are held by Big Sis. Therefore, no one else is getting those.

Then, would Empress be the one to go for?

Worldly Thunder Ika Sainokami has it right now. When it comes to talent,

she's a monster with even more than Big Sis. Ika also has a winning record against pros.

"Ai has beaten Ika before But there was next to no waiting time and a live audience watching. Ika was way too overconfident as well. Ai will need a lot more experience to beat her in a series with plenty of waiting time."

Then, what about Women's King?

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka's title is decided by a series of three matches and they're all short on waiting time.

If she can make it to the late game, Ai stands a chance.

"Then again She doesn't look like it, but Ryou spends a lot of time researching. Then there's the fact that she can pull off so many different aerial strategies like Side Pawn Capture and Double Wing Attack"

...Which is why she's been nicknamed the Aggressive Archangel. Ai's strongest strategy is the Double Wing, but Ryou flattened her so easily it was like taking candy from a baby.

"That was the match that showed the whole world Ai is weak in the early game If I make her study up on the early game like Ms. Hanadachi and Ms. Rokuroba are suggesting, she might get somewhat of an advantage, but...."

But, there's a reason I don't want to do that.

"Because if I did *Ai would never claim a title.*"

Then what about Yamashiro Ouka? Machi the Tormentor is also registered with the Kansai Shogi Association, making her a wall that Ai will have to break through at some point in order to thrive.

"That also means Machi is making a plan of her own. Since she also works as a Shogi journalist under the name *Mato*, there's no doubt she has more information on Ai than any of the other titleholders"

Apparently, Machi drilled so much into her head when Ai was writing an

article for Ai Yashajin's match that now she's started calling her *Master Mato*. She's already built up quite a lot of trust with her.

"The strange thing is, it's hard to win against someone like that in Shogi."

That sly fox The battle hasn't even started yet, but she's already in the lead.

"At this rate, her younger sister apprentice Ayano is starting to look suspicious. Was it really a stroke of luck that the Grade Schooler Practice Group was formed? Machi didn't have a hand in it, right?"

If she's been using the practice group to get information on Ai, then its very existence is going to hold her back Am I just overthinking things?

Experience, early game know-how and the mental strength required for off-the-board tactics....

Ai is severely lacking in each of them. What's worse, there's no time to build them up.

"Which means, the last title is——."

Women's Legend.

Ms. Shakando is strong enough to wipe the floor with Big Sis during practice sessions, but her Shogi is outdated.

More than that *her skills have regressed to the point that she lost to Keika.*

"I'm sure she's busy with being the Women's League Chairman, running her own Shogi classroom and keeping track of how her apprentice is performing."

With all her accomplishments and experience dwarfing every other Women's League player, she's built up so much trust that everyone believes she *should* be strong... when the truth is that she's lost a step.

"..... She's done next to nothing in the other leagues for years. That proves it: she's not as strong as she used to be."

That's especially true for her late game. There's no way to hide it.

And there's no one stronger in the late game than Ai Hinatsuru.

Among all five Women's Title Holders, Ms. Shakando is the best matchup for Ai.

Even better is the fact that, despite being in the same block, Ai Yashajin lost so early in the qualifier. This is a golden opportunity.

"..... I don't know if I should be happy about that or not."

My first apprentice has never won against Ai Yashajin. There's a very clear gap between their skills. Ai Yashajin has shown that she's strong enough to hold her ground against other title holders right now.

Only one of the two Ai's can be in position to challenge for a title.

So long as my second apprentice is around, Ai Hinatsuru will have an extremely difficult time making it to a title match.

But Ai Yashajin lost in the first round of the qualifier. She must've been too distracted by the Queen Title Match happening at the same time.

"Ai Yashajin still has a bit of naiveté left. It won't last long, though."

What's important for Ai Hinatsuru right now is that she has a chance to get into the Women's Legend League.

"As long as she can make it through the qualifier, she can play nine matches in the Women's Legend Challenger League. Building up quality experience against strong opponents like that is the best thing for her"

Only starting Shogi two years ago, experience is the thing that Ai desperately needs.

"As long as the gears start turning she'll get stronger. Should, anyway."

She will sharpen her skills by gaining experience in the high-stakes environment known as league matches.

Then, she'll need to win three out of the five matches in a series against Ms. Shakando as she is now.

It's a risky plan, but

"..... This could very well be her best and last chance... which is why she absolutely has to win her next match in the Women's Legend qualifier"

Though she was overconfident, Ai Hinatsuru's next opponent beat the early game prodigy Ai Yashajin. She must be a strong early game player herself According to what Ms. Hanadachi said in the magazine, she must also have a great deal of talent.

"An Elementary Meijin? Undying Wings, huh I've never heard of her. I wonder what she's like."

Just as I was about to look her up on my smartphone....

Ding dong.

"Coooming!"

I say through the intercom. Who could it be at this hour?

Ding dong. D-D-D-D-D-Ding dong!

"I said I'm on my way! Stop pressing the button already!"

I always get a bad feeling when the doorbell rings and Ai is in the tub, but Big Sis is already in Tokyo for the start of the 3-*dan* division. I know for a fact that she's already checked into her hotel, so the same kind of incident like last time is physically impossible. What a relief!

"But Seriously, who is it? Keika maybe? Or did Kanegasaka-sensei forget something and come back to pick it up? It's too early for the pizza to be here——."

I open the front door with all these thoughts running through my head.

"Yes, yes. Who is it?"



Seriously who in the world could it be?

“You have some nerve, Drakin. Making one such as I wait outside is akin to asking to be put to death.”

This young girl standing in front of me has a tongue far too sharp for her age, she has the tongue of a stage actor.

Just who is she? Seems kind of familiar

“Kha-ha-ha. Taken aback by the sudden appearance of one such as I? Kansai players are as daft as the rumors suggest.”

Daft?

Little girl?

Cat ears Grade school girl?

“Attention, Drakin! Why have you yet to say a word?! You are seeing one such as I, yes?!”

“Oh! Sorry. Just, got a bit distracted.”

“Humph Common weed.”

W-Weed?

She certainly has a unique way of speaking. Is it trending in grade schools right now?

“Umm Are you one of Ai’s friends? Maybe? Sorry, she’s taking a bath right now, so if you could wait for just a few minutes, she’ll——.”

“A friend? Laughable! No one could stand alongside one such as I!”

“Huh?”

“The one true king throughout heaven and earth, Elementary Meijin, is I and I alone! The rest of the rabble and riffraff are no more than weeds at my feet!”

With that, the cat-eared princess loli puffs out her tiny chest with pride.

Most of what's coming out of her mouth makes no sense to me whatsoever, but there is one part I cannot overlook.

“The Elementary Meijin?!”

The Elementary Meijin Shogi Tournament.

Held in Tokyo once each year, it's a national Shogi competition held for grade school students.

In terms of history, formalities and the sheer number of participants, every other children's tournament in the country doesn't even come close. It's been that way for over 40 years now.

The King of Naniwa Tournament is a big one, but Compared to the three months of preliminaries that take place all over Japan to set up the finals to determine the one and only Elementary Meijin, it's nothing special.

I mean, the semifinals and finals are broadcast on TV, so the participants have time in the spotlight.

But above all else the Elementary Meijin has a role to fulfill that *goes beyond the scope of a simple Shogi tournament*.

They become idolized by every young boy and girl who picks up a Shogi piece. And that's——.

“..... One such as you?”

“Your rudeness is appalling!!”

Now the cat-eared princess is angry with me. What the heck is going on?

Then again, she wouldn't have access to my address without being involved in the Shogi world in some way, and that just leaves more unanswered questions.

“Which reminds me The Elementary Meijin finals usually take place around this time of year. The results are always announced on TV, so I've been avoiding the news a lot recently because I didn't want to know until I had a

chance to sit down and watch it

But the results should be posted on the association homepage and in newspapers by now.

I take out my smartphone and start searching. This year's Elementary Meijin's name is——

Maria Kannabe (Tokyo – 5th Grade)

That solves everything.

[illegible]

I yell beside myself.

“Holy cow! You look just like him!!”

Picking up Maria, I lean in for a closer look. This oddball aura she has reminds me of what Ayumu was like way back when. It feels like I've known her for years. I could just squeeze her cheeks right here. So adorably cute.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“A-ha-ha! Your brother’s quirks must have rubbed off on you after living with him for so long ... same goes for your Shogi, too!”

“Cease this at once! One such as I shall not be treated as a child!”

We go back and forth, me teasing her when suddenly.

“Master?! What’s the matter?! I heard you yell ing

Rushing to the front door in a panic is Ai, completely in the buff.

And Despite just getting out of a warm bath, her voice and gaze are chilly and getting colder by the second.

“..... Master? Would you explain why you are holding a girl with kitty ears

.....? After everything Kanegasaka-sensei said, you start fraternizing with lolitas
.....?”

I’m pale as a ghost and Maria looks pretty shocked, too.

“A n-nude girl?! You Loli-King! Just the kind of trash I came to expect from the word-of-mouth! Is it your intention to do the same to one such as I? Disrobe me for this vile harem of yours?!”

“Just what do your brother and the rest of the people over in Kanto think I am?!”

What the hell did they tell this girl?!

“She’s my live-in apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru! She’s a Woman’s League player, so surely you’ve heard of her!? Ai, kitty ears here is Ayumu’s little sister, Maria Kannabe!”

“God-sensei’s?!”

“Attention, weed.”

Still in my arms, Maria strikes a cool pose that she no doubt came up with at home.

“You are in the presence of the Silver Chevalier, Ayumu God Cauldron’s younger sister and the one worthy of becoming the next apprentice to Her Highness, Eternal Queen Rina Shakando—*Women’s Legend*! One such as I am far different from the weeds!!”

Maria introduces herself just as boldly as her brother would.

It’s impressive that she made it through all that without stuttering once, but——.

“Huh? Ms. Shakando’s apprentice? Not Ayumu’s?”

“Her Highness deserves to be addressed as more than *Ms.*, ’o Harem Lord Drakin!”

H-Harem Lord Drakin

“Ayumu Unable to claim the Elementary Meijin crown, the likes of a failure like him is unworthy to instruct one such as I. Only Her Highness, a success through and through, is worthy of becoming Master to one such as I! Yet Master Grumble

What could it be? There seems to be more going on here

Meanwhile, Ai is on full alert as she asks.

“Are you going to join the Women’s League, too, Maria?”

“Do not consider me to be a novice like yourself, Ai Hinatsuru! One such as I, the Elementary Meijin, have only one true goal, the professional echelons! The Women’s League was never in my sights from the beginning!!”

“.....!! Meaning you’re going to the Sub League

I forgot to mention it, but the Elementary Meijin Tournament also has another function.

It serves as a gateway to the Sub League.

That Meijin, Big Sis and I all went into the Sub League after becoming the Elementary Meijin.

Because the Elementary Meijin can skip the Sub League entrance exam.

Just winning that title alone proves that we already have the skill and talent.

“Now it makes sense You really are Ayumu’s sister. Not just because of those weird clothes, either. Do your best, Li’l Maria!”

“You shall not address me as *Li’l*!!”

I ticked her off. But I know her brother, so I can’t help but treat her like a kid.

“One such as I am the strongest of the computer-native generation! It is my destiny to become the god of destruction, annihilating old Shogi to make room for the new, Super God Cauldron!! The next Meijin is neither my sibling nor

Ginko Sora! Shogi world history is about to be rewritten and the new world order shall be dictated by one such as I!!”

Only the strongest grade schooler could throw that many things together at once like a Super Saiyan God straight out of Dragon Ball. Adorable.

“..... Master?”

Sensing something, Ai digs her fingernails into my thighs and, ow-ow-ouch! She’s going to draw blood!!

I put Maria back down on the floor and quickly put some distance between us. Then I pick up on the vibe in the room and match it by yelling, “Y-You’re one scary girl! Why in the world have you set foot in my home?!”

“Keh-keh-keh. One such as I have braved the confines of your harem for two reasons, Drakin” Maria sticks up two tiny, squishy-looking fingers as she declares, “First and foremost, I have come to spread the name of my clan throughout the Kansai region!”

..... What’s that supposed to mean?

“With the crown of Elementary Meijin upon my head, one such as I have come to be bestowed King of Naniwa! Today was my scouting run!”

“You’ll be in the King of Naniwa Tournament Say what?!”

“Ginko Sora, Ai Yashajin, Ai Hinatsuru and you, Drakin Your wretched clan has many in the Shogi world stating that Kansai is coming into power over Kanto. One such as I have taken it upon myself to conquer the King of Naniwa and for my clan to claim victory against you in the simultaneous Top Earners Match to conquer Osaka once and for all!!”

“!! Okay. Now I see what’s going on!”

“What is she talking about, Master?!”

“It hasn’t been officially announced yet, but my opponent for the Top Earners Match that will take place during the King of Naniwa tournament is

Maria's older brother, Ayumu Kannabe 6-*dan*!!”

“Huuu?! G-God-*sensei* and Master are ...?!”

Making fun of the surprised look on Ai's face, Maria asks, “Ai Hinatsuru. Word has reached me that you are quite skilled with Shogi puzzles, are you not?”

“Uwhee? Y-Yes. I completed the *Shogi Zukou* and *Shogi Musou*. Have you finished them, Maria?”

“*Shogi Zukou*, you say?! Hmph! S-Shogi puzzles are merely an outdated training method! Such a meaningless practice is a waste of time!! How unfortunate for you, imbecile!!” says Maria as she tries to mask her own loss by changing the subject. “And, the second reason for my presence here——!!”

“Your second reason?!”

“.....”

She clams her lips shut tight and her eyes fill with tears before she finally squeezes out the words.

“..... My wallet is lost I have no money”

The world sure is a tough place

So, basically Maria, without a yen to her name, in a city where she didn't know anyone else, sought me out by asking her brother for my address.

After that, I had Satoru Hatomachi 5-*dan*, the director for Kanto's Sub League who helped both Ayumu and I out when we were there and who happened to be at the Kansai Association for a match, take her back to Tokyo with him.

She's foolish. The princess look is cute, but so foolish.

Then again Mio and Ayano are going to have to beat her.

A prodigy their age who was already strong enough to claim the title of Elementary Meijin.

🏠 MIO'S CIRCUMSTANCES

"I'm hooome."

Mom, watching TV, is stunned to see me walk in.

"Mio? Weren't you going to spend the night at Kuzuryu-sensei's to play Shogi?"

"That was the plan, but"

I fling my backpack onto the sofa. *Flomp*.

I plop myself right down next to it and take out my tablet and tell Mom, "I'm starving! Anything for dinner?"

"I didn't think you would be here tonight, so I can't make much. There's some frozen rice in the freezer, How about a tuna pilaf?"

"Yaaay! A pilaf~!"

Mom's pilafs are the best!

I'm kinda sad that I didn't get to have whatever Ai was gonna cook tonight, but I guess it's okay because I get to have Mom's pilaf.

"Where's Papa?"

"He's still at the office. He said tonight will be another late night."

It's been a week since I've seen him.

I love Papa so much, so it's really lonely not getting to talk to him. I thought that because today's Friday and I'd get to spend the night with my friends at Kujuryu-sensei's apartment, I wouldn't have time to feel lonely

But, what can you do? After all, Papa works for——.

"Mio," Mom calls as she ties up her hair and turns on the stove in the kitchen.

“Have you told the school about it?”

“..... I talked with my homeroom teacher.”

“I see. She’ll be coming for a home visit on Monday, so we can talk to her together then. You had better be there.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Mio? Are you listening?”

Not really. My mind has already switched from pilaf into Shogi mode.

Booting up the Shogi app on my tablet, I find an opponent online and start a 3-minute timed match!

“Haha! I woooon!!”

I’ve already made up my mind I’m in King of Naniwa to win it, so I can’t let any time go to waste.

If there’s time to play even one more match, I’m playing it. If I can raise my score by just one point, I’m raising it.

I was still playing when my pilaf was ready, and Mom yelled at me to eat before it gets cold.

RECORD 2

NANIWA'S

SNOW

WHITE

Ginko Sora 空銀子

© shirabii

BACK FROM THE DEAD

My 21st birthday. The day———I died.

“..... I lost.”

On that day, when I would be forced out of the Sub League if I didn't win three matches in a row, I lowered my head in defeat on the third and final match.

I barely squeaked by with a win in the first.

The second was a near-perfect victory.

But in the third, I was utterly destroyed.

Winning twice in a row went to my head. It was the first time in I don't know how long I decided to be aggressive in the early game because I had the first move. Except I overstepped and tripped over my own feet.

“..... Well, this is how it is”

A rather dull way for the last Sub League session of my life, but moreso than the pain and feeling downright pathetic, it's the *I knew it* feeling that wins out. 2-kyu at 21. I obviously don't have the talent and don't put in enough effort.

Another member of the Sub League that I'm particularly close to, a 2-dan, is also forced into retirement that same day.

He's in my Shogi family tree, my older brother apprentice, and he's been there for me during my time in Tokyo for everything: from Shogi practice sessions to making sure I'm eating right. He's like a real older brother to me.

I never thought we would both be forced out of the Sub League on the same day as well, but

It's slightly comforting to know I don't have to go through

this all by myself.

“..... Thank you for all your fine efforts.”

The two of us are at the Sub League Directors’ office to say our goodbyes.

There are actually two *Senseis* working as directors. One is a seasoned veteran and the other is quite young.

The veteran seems indifferent, as he has surely seen countless Sub League members come and go in his time The younger one, *Hatomachi-sensei*, is very concerned about how the rest of our lives will unfold.

My older brother apprentice and I, neither of us graduated high school. We’ve never had a part-time job that didn’t involve Shogi either.

Those things are especially damaging to him because he’s already 26 years old.

I’m still 21. On the other hand, even if I did return to my hometown in Oita, there is nothing specifically for me there. I can’t think of anything I’d like to do, so I don’t know what I would do after going home. I lost contact with my old friends a long time ago.

My mind drifts from one thought to another when a sudden burst of chatter overtakes the director’s office.

“They seem rather excited Did something happen?” I asked without giving it much thought, and *Hatomachi-sensei* responds as if he’d rather not say out of respect.

“This? Oh, a Sub League Entrance Exam just took place in Kansai.”

“Mr. Karako was it? The ex-3-*dan*?”

He got into the Sub League at the age of 14 but was forced out due to the age limit.

After that, he went on to take the amateur Shogi scene by storm. Shoji Karako

making another attempt at the 3-*dan* division has sparked many discussions among current league members. Most here in Kanto were staunchly against it, if only for the fact that the process was taking place in Kansai. My older brother apprentice and I were among them. The man just didn't know when to give up.

"It seems that Mr. Karako won just a few moments ago. Everyone had been waiting for the results."

"That's what they're so excited about?"

Silent as the grave on expulsion, jubilant on entrance That's the Sub League. Even back when I entered

"No, that's not the whole story."

"What else could there be?"

"Next in line is his examiner, Naniwa's Snow White. You know, because she can be promoted to 3-*dan* with one more win? It'll be one of those all-or-nothing matches with futures on the line, so of course TV stations are all over it."

"I Um, I see"

Naniwa's Snow White—Ginko Sora-*Dual Title*. Sub League 2-*dan*.

She's Kansai, so I never played against her, but I've seen her face-to-face. I worked as a match recorder for one of her Women's Title Matches.

That was at least four years ago, and she was only a Sub League 4-*kyu* at that time.

And she breezed right by me.

"3-*dan* 15, 3-*dan*"

Nothing is fair. That girl is as beautiful as a delicate fairy, young and extremely good at Shogi as well.

But I've already given up.

People who don't glow like her can't become good at Shogi I never had a chance to begin with A dry, empty smile grows on my lips.

Hatomachi-*sensei* gives my older brother apprentice an encouraging talk.

"It may be hard to consider right now, but please contact me once you've had some time for yourself. You committed to your studies and worked very hard. You have what it takes to succeed traveling down other paths outside of Shogi. I know of several companies that would love to have you"

My older brother apprentice silently nods.

Just as *Sensei* said, my older brother apprentice is a people person who can roll with the punches.

I'd always been jealous of him for that. Even outside of the Shogi world, I just know he'll become something special.

But I

Then, Hatomachi-*sensei* turns to me like the judge about to issue an execution.

"Miss Gakumeki."

"Yes."

"You have the option to join the Women's League. What do you say?"

"..... What?"

"You haven't heard? The new system was implemented at the last Player's Meeting. Any woman who reaches 2-*kyu* in the Sub League can join the Women's League with the same rank."

Twist. The world warps around me.

"Huh? Wh what?"

“Well, personally I think it’s only natural. After all, a Sub League 2-*kyu* is stronger than most Women’s League players already. With skills like yours, you have a good chance to claim your own title.”

Women’s League player?

Title?

Wasn’t today The last day I’d ever play Shogi

“If you’re going to join, time is of the essence. Registration for the Women’s Legend League Qualifier ends today. If you do the paperwork right now, it should go through just in time.”

I collapse to the floor in a heap. I have absolutely no idea what to say.

“That a yes? Then we’ll go ahead and draft the paperwork.”

I I——.

“Ye s,” I said, nodding.

For the rest of my life, I will never forget the look on my older brother apprentice’s face in that moment.

..... But, what was I supposed to do?

I’m not like him Shogi is all I have

“Am I allowed to say congratulations?”

I’m sure my older brother apprentice being there made things more complicated, but Hatomachi-*sensei* celebrates the birth of the new Women’s League player as best he could.

Before I know it, an association staff member is behind me with a pen and paper in hand.

“Gakumeki-***sensei***. I know this is all sudden, but may I ask you to sign on the dotted line?”

I, who should be dead, am now in a position to be called *Sensei*.

My older brother apprentice, who I thought was still beside me, disappeared from the office without making a sound.

He was being thrust into the outside world on his own, and I abandoned him to his fate.

“*Sensei*, your signature.”

“.....”

Following instructions, I sign my name.

I went into the ladies' room immediately afterward and threw up everything that was in my stomach.

SHARKS AND MINNOWS

I wake up before my wake-up call.

“..... Three hours. More than I thought I’d get”

I spent the night in Tokyo at a hotel. The unfamiliar pillow isn’t why I couldn’t sleep. It’s always this way the night before Sub League matches.

A quick shower to wake myself up and I turn on the TV.

“This is a live view of the Shogi Association! Naniwa’s Snow White still hasn’t arrived!”

“..... Probably because I’m here.”

I couldn’t help but take a dig at the TV reporter.

Still getting dressed, I stop for a moment to change the channel.

“Osaka’s Princess of Shogi has come to Tokyo in an attempt to make history!”

“The 3-*dan* division gets underway later this morning and we have all the details! What’s more, we have Ginko’s daily life in check!”

“Our top story today is, of course, Snow White!”

It’s the same on every channel. My daily life is in check

“..... Isn’t there anything more important going on?”

Giving up, I go back to getting ready.

“Ginko’s first opponent will be Sumito Sakanashi 3-*dan*! At 25, he is one of the Sub League’s longest tenured veterans.”

“Ginko is only 15, right? In that case, she’s the talented one.”

“Don’t forget that Sakanashi 3-*dan* came within a single point of advancing last season! Unfortunately, his ranking wasn’t high enough for him to turn

professional thirteen wins and five losses, the same amount of victory stars as the person who promoted last season! This time, however, he ranks at the very top of the 3-*dan* division!”

“She got matched up against someone like that on her first day?! Will Ginko be all right?”

“That’s not all! Sakanashi 3-*dan* actually has a very interesting connection to——.”

I turn off the TV.

I’m starving for information about my opponent. It’s impossible to get match records from the Tokyo Sub League.

I have a few match records from the Newcomers Tournament thanks to Sub League members being able to participate but just a handful. Nowhere near enough to be useful.

“Spotty tidbits of information will just get in the way. Rather than chase leads that go who knows where, I should be focusing on playing my best”

But, strangely.

“..... Sakanashi 3-*dan*. I know him”

Just, I don’t know how or why I’ve thought about it for hours and still can’t figure it out.

An association staff member joins me for the taxi ride to Sendagaya, where a throng of media people are camped outside the Shogi Association. Not one step out of the taxi and we’re surrounded.

“Statements will be issued after today’s matches! Please wait until then!!”

Cameras descend upon me like a tsunami.

Thanks to the staff member shielding me with his body, I manage to slip inside the building.

The biggest difference between here and the Kansai Association is that all the part-timers in the shops, security people and staff are staring at me like an exotic animal in the zoo.

I head up to the arena on the fourth floor to avoid their gazes.

——..... I want to be somewhere I can focus on Shogi as soon as possible

In the arena, I won't be bothered by prying eyes——Thinking so was naïve of me.

“.....!!”

What I see as soon as I open that door is overwhelming Words fail me.

Sub League members, many times more than are in the Kansai Sub League.

Ranking from 6-*kyu* all the way up to 3-*dan*, all of them are packed into the room like sardines and looking right at me

“..... Pardon me.”

With that, I find a spot to sit in the corner of the room. The few people who made the journey from Kansai are also on their own in the corners like me.

Kansai players are outsiders. That vibe is so strong in here I can feel it.

9:00 a.m. The opening meeting starts.

The two directors are doing a joint presentation, one veteran *Sensei* and one younger. The younger professional player oversees the flow.

Very much a fish out of water, I sit down on my ankles in my little corner and wait for the meeting to end. In Kansai, we just do a roll call and start playing right away, but they are doing things like signing up for match recording slots and whatnot, so this is taking forever.

——When will this end? It's irritating

All this irritation is going to make it impossible to keep a cool head. So many different emotions are coursing through my veins that they'll tear my heart

apart at this rate.

“Now then, would all 3-*dan* members please adjourn to the exclusive arena.”

The 3-*dan* division’s exclusive arena, the 3-*dan* EA.”

Among all the different arenas in the Shogi world, this is the most sacred ground.

“I’ve won the right to challenge for titles many times, fought in A-ranking placement matches and, of course, played in title matches themselves. All of that is under my belt.”

I forget when exactly, but I distinctly remember Oishi-sensei telling me that.

“But you see, Ginko, the 3-dan EA Even as a title holder, I can’t just waltz in there whenever I like, especially not on the final day of matches.”

A holy site.

And, being the first female to ever set foot in here, I scan the room to find the person I am set to fight.

—There. Toward the back

I’ve never played against him, naturally.

I highly doubt he ever worked as the match recorder for any of my Women’s Title Matches.

In other words, I’ve never seen his face before.

But for some reason I know exactly who’s sitting there.

“Mr. Sakanashi?”

“Sit.”

I just knew I was right. Making a small bow, I sit down.

Sakanashi 3-*dan* looks around this holy land the 3-*dan* EA and offhandedly says, “This is a holding tank.”

“.....?”

“The 3-*dan* division is filled with sharks and minnows. That’s how it’s always been, and that’s how I’ve sorted my opponents.”

Sort ed?

“Still not clear? Those who eat and those who get eaten.”

“.....!!”

“I start counting the victory stars I should get the moment the schedule is announced. That guy is a shark, that one’s a minnow Strangely enough, I don’t even need to talk to the guy to know what he is. It comes naturally to me ... this *status* thing.”

Mr. Sakanashi isn’t looking for affirmation as he carries out the upper player’s privilege, opening the piece box.

Since he is the highest-ranking member this season, that’s his right.

“It’s tragic for the minnows. Upsets never happen in those matches, so the minnows get targeted relentlessly because the sharks should never fail to feast. Only natural, don’t you think? Losing to a minnow means you are as good as dead because your blood in the water attracts the other sharks.”

“.....”

First year high school student, first day in the Sub League and a girl.

I don’t have to ask to know how the other 3-*dans* see me.

Lining up the pieces on the board, Mr. Sakanashi makes a declaration.

“I am a shark.”

Then, snapping his king into position, he continues.

“Ginko Sora. Which are you?”

I couldn’t answer him.

Just being here still doesn't feel real to me.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. We'll both know what you are by the end of the match."

A beep signaling the time to start the matches echoes through the arena as countless chess clocks click to life in unison.

"Shall we?"

"..... When you're ready!"

I switch on the chess clock beside our board and Mr. Sakanashi slides his Rook to the center.

Now, the 63rd 3-*dan* division——has begun.

Facing Mr. Sakanashi's Central Rook strategy, I open with a Static Rook *anaguma*.

Formations taking shape, we both use the early game to build up our defenses.

Flashy strategies don't exist for *dan*-ranking members of the Sub League.

There's no need for ambushes or the latest magnificent sequences.

Once the King is locked in nice and tight, we focus entirely on crushing whatever our opponent tries to do.

And, the most important thing is *to let the first window of opportunity pass by.*

Rather than venture out, even with an advantage, it's vital to wait for an even better chance to present itself.

Avoid confrontations even when in position to win, just keep drawing out the

match until the opponent's fighting spirit shatters.

It's a style that destroys friendships.

Completely different from stubborn, gritty Kansai players.

Darker Using Shogi to maliciously plunge your opponent into despair. It's that kind of battle.

It's a style only those who have already killed the part of their heart that wants to *play Shogi for fun* can use to push their opponents into the grip of death.

It's that grip that we're tightening around each other's throats with each passing move.

Taking the lead after a long and grueling mid-game—is Mr. Sakanashi.

“Kh!”

—Solid! This is 3-*dan* division Shogi

If we collide now, I would be powerless to stop his advance.

—Should I beat him to it? Or should I try to hold out long enough for him to make a mistake?

I clench my molars together and think it over.

Second after second of my valuable waiting time passes by.

Whether it's my nerves or my opponent's aura getting the better of me, I'm not sure, but I feel like I'm trapped in a dream where I can't make up my mind!

Just then.

“..... I've had two chances to promote during my time here.”

Mr. Sakanashi just starts talking.

“One of which was last season. The other was three years ago, in the 57th

3-*dan* division.”

“.....?”

“Win on the final day, and I would be promoted. Lose, and my opponent would promote. A high-stakes battle I was in the perfect position to win only to misstep at the very, very end. That one loss prevented me from becoming the runner-up that season. Because I lost to an opponent clearly far weaker than I Because of that *15-year-old* kid.”

Could he be?!

“Yaichi Kuzuryu **3-*dan***.”

“.....!!”

Mr. Sakanashi saying that name makes me look up from the board and gulp down the air in my throat.

“That’s right. Kuzuryu I was the final stepping stone that little brother apprentice of yours used to become a professional. Defeating me made him the fourth junior-high-school-aged professional Shogi player in history.”

That’s the final piece of the puzzle.

—Now I understand why I know him

Because I’ve seen him countless times in newspapers and Shogi magazines.

But they weren’t pictures *of* him per se.

He was the man staring at his feet with his back to the camera off to the side while Yaichi was being interviewed.

“If I had won that day Right now, I I!!”

The victor gets engraved into memories forever.

However, memories of the loser are hazy. One single match sent two lives in different directions and changed the landscape of the Shogi world.

It must sting whenever Mr. Sakanashi hears about Yaichi's accomplishments.

Being able to see himself in that position, he must feel a twinge every time he picks up a Shogi piece. Knowing There was a chance he could have been the Ryuo right now.

If that's true——.

"I'm defeating you to advance. Don't hold it against me."

Don't hold it against him

A different thought comes to me in the middle of our battle.

——If Yaichi was still here in the 3-*dan* division What if we fought against each other here?

What if Mr. Sakanashi had *won that high-stakes battle*?

Everything I could visualize felt so wonderful.

——..... That might've been enough to satisfy me. Us sitting across the same board.

However, the reality is different.

I'm here in the 3-*dan* division, fighting all by myself, and Yaichi is standing at the apex of the professional world.

In order to play a league match against him I have many, many stairs to climb.

"..... You're not the only one"

"Hm?"

"I'm here so I can advance, too!"

Skill, experience and talent.

Maybe I can't compare to Mr. Sakanashi. I may be beneath everyone else here.

But my determination to reach Yaichi at the apex is——.

“I! Will!! Win!!!”

More determined than ever, I launch a strong assault.

Advancing every Pawn I have and deploying everything from my piece stand, I exchange them all to force my Rook into his territory and promote it into a Dragon.

My King is safely behind the solid walls of my *anaguma*, so I hold nothing back to frighten his King out into the open with consecutive advances!

However.

“Don’t get cocky just because you have an *anaguma*! Do you seriously think you can survive in the 3-*dan* division like that?!”

Almost as if he were waiting for it, Mr. Sakanashi systematically blocks every one of my attacks.

“You’re a minnow, just as I thought. An unusually sparkly one, but still a weakling born to be eaten,” categorizing me, Mr. Sakanashi says with an upward glance. His eyes, savage like a shark.

“.....!”

Even so, I deploy the last piece on my stand, a Gold, to chase his King.

“What did I just tell you? This kind of straightforward Shogi won’t work here!”

There are two ways for Mr. Sakanashi to block my Gold.

Deploy a Silver.

Or use a Pawn.

“..... A minnow’s attack isn’t worth wasting a Silver. A Pawn will do.”

With that, he takes a Pawn off his piece stand and, pinching it between two fingers, snaps it down onto the board with a high-pitched click.

—He took the bait!!

But that bait was on my hook.

Once he saw me give up my precious Gold, Mr. Sakanashi decided that his Silver was too valuable to deploy.

I can counter with my Silver to win!

Convinced, Mr. Sakanashi jumps at his *first opportunity*.

A move that goes against Sub League philosophy.

Not wasting a moment, I press my Gold forward and put him in check.

“Well, this minnow sure doesn’t know when to give up!! Your attack is already cut off!!” he yells as I stay on the offensive.

But the color drains from his face as soon as I make my next move. Only now does he realize he’s made a grave mistake.

“Drew back the Dragon? Argh?!”

Looking back, I may have been more determined to promote than he was.

His years of battling in the 3-*dan* division, his golden opportunity ranking number one and me being Yaichi Kuzuryu’s older sister apprentice prevented him from staying calm when he had to make a crucial decision.

—Sorry, but I’m using it.

Everything was riding on that move. If he’d played the Silver instead, our positions would be reversed.

All that’s left now is to wear down the hooked shark until I can finish it off—.

“Enough!! Do you actually think a minnow could eat a shark like me?!”

Now backed into a corner, Mr. Sakanashi dissolves his own defenses to launch a counter with his King leading the charge!

—Using that tactic now?! So, this is the 3-*dan* division!!

Containing a King in the middle of the board is excruciatingly difficult, and Mr. Sakanashi is on a rampage.

The hooked shark is thrashing around to snap the line. Afraid of getting devoured if I get too close, I keep up the pressure from a distance. As time robs us both of strength and concentration, it's time to see who can outlast the other!

We're already in one-minute Shogi.

Maintaining the space between me and those sharp teeth, I give the line some slack but ramp up the power.

Then.

—One more advance! One more slice and I can beat him!!

Seeing that shark pinned against the rocky outcropping with nowhere to go, my victory is assured—.

“Ah!”

I've made a fatal mistake.

The hook fell out.

Just like a shark spinning to get free, Mr. Sakanashi uses what little space he has between pieces to shift his King back and forth.

So, in other words.

“R Repetition ... Draw?”

Here?

After all it took to corner him I have to start all over again?

—But off-the-board tactics won't work twice

Physically, I'm exhausted.

And I have to play another match today after this one.

What should I do?! What's the right thing to do?! Close in and finish this now?! But I'll get eaten if I don't finish him off?! I I!!

—A Repetition Draw is fine! I'll get the first move, so I'll have the advantage!!

“Repetition Draw?! In the late-late game?!”

“She's going to let him? No way!!”

My not shutting down the Repetition Draw catches a few people standing around us by surprise, but—my sheer will allows me to look at the whole board without rushing.

I have such a big advantage it's hard for them to understand why I'd go along with the Repetition Draw.

—He's checkmated. And it's not a difficult sequence at all.

My whole body had been burning up, but it cools in a flash There I am, tranquil as if awakening from a dream.

The exclusive arena I'd considered to be a holy site now looks like nothing more than an old, worn-out room.

The man who looked like a monster before the match now looks more like a mouse sitting in front of me.

Did Mr. Sakanashi get weaker? Or did I get stronger?

—..... Checkmated.

His King completely in my grasp, I look up and tell him.

“Don't hold it against me, okay?”

“Guh!!”

I break the Repetition Draw and checkmate his King in a single move.

140 moves.

Out of all the matches that just took place, it's by far the longest. Looking up from the board, only then did I notice every 3-*dan* that had finished their own match had gathered around to watch ours.

"..... Sakanashi lost"

"..... She's stronger than I thought"

"..... She's Kuzuryu's the, um Ryuo's woman, right? She can get him to teach her whatever she wants whenever she wants, so yeah"

I hear them talking.

We don't do a review session because the match ran so late and Mr. Sakanashi clears the board clean like destroying a reality he doesn't want to see.

Fingers trembling as he puts the last piece in the box, he tells me with a groan, "So You were a shark after all"

"I'm not a shark or a minnow."

".....?"

Bracing my knees so they don't buckle, I stand up as gracefully as I can.

Then, with all the 3-*dan* players looking up at me in awe, I quietly state my name.

"I am Naniwa's Snow White, the world's strongest female Shogi player."

That composure lasts only 10 minutes.

"..... Agh Haa, haaa *cough*"

After telling the director that I won, I stumble my way into the women's restroom.

Into a stall, lock the door and finally I can breathe again.

The veneer wall is the only thing keeping me upright.

—An old, narrow toilet stall is my only haven Fine by me.

This is the domain given to Naniwa's Snow White. My castle.

It's miserable, but such is life for Sub League members.

—I don't have a single ally But I'm alone in front of the board either way

.....

My first 3-*dan* division match.

My first time in the EA.

The match running long could be part of it, but this whole experience is far more draining than I ever imagined.

—And And now I have to play another match?

But I can't just run away. I can't change how I play either.

Thinking I can try to just find a place to relax, somewhere to clear my head, I step outside of the women's restroom To find a red-haired woman standing there.

"Yo."

Almost posing with her back against the wall, her tone of voice makes it obvious she's been waiting for me.

"A lavatory lunch, eh? Kind of fits you actually, losing all your friends 'cause you can't be bothered to say hello."

"....."

A cheap taunt. Did she come all the way here on a day without a match to be a pain?

I start walking past her without a word—.

"There's a Women's League Player's Room in a corner of the fifth floor," the red-haired woman Ryou Tsukiyomizaka-*Women's King* tells me.

I freeze in place, my back to her, as she continues.

“It ain’t much more than a closet, but it’s got to be better than chowing down in a stall, and I don’t think anyone’d complain if you dropped in. You *are* Lady Dual Title, yeah?”

“.....”

“I doubt anyone is there now, and there’s pretty much zero chance anyone’ll show up before your second match.”

“.....”

The Women’s League Player’s Room really does look like a small, dirty closet. But it’s empty and quiet. And, just as the Women’s King said, no one came before my match started.

So I had a chance to recover physically and mentally.

I hate to admit it, but I needed that.

I won my second match. Even more stubborn and grittier than the first.

HALF DEAD

“Consecutive victories. Just what I expected from Naniwa’s Snow White,” the younger of the two directors tells me.

It’s the victor’s responsibility to stamp the loser’s record as well. My being here again means that I won the match.

Today—I get to stamp two ○○ victory stars next to my name.

Seeing that, joy spreads through my heart for the first time.

“Including yourself, Miss Sora, four 3-*dan* players in Kanto went undefeated today. Keep up the good work.”

“..... Thank you.”

I look calm on the outside, but I’m so happy I may as well be floating. My legs were heavier than lead from exhaustion just minutes ago, but now they’re so light I could skip down the hallway.

Consecutive victories.

It’s only temporary, but being at the top of the 3-*dan* division gives me a gigantic confidence boost.

I look at the rows next to my name on the paper.

—Mr. Karako and Sota are playing in Kansai today, so their results still haven’t come in

Away from home in Kanto for the season’s opening day and against the top-ranking member of the division. I was mentally prepared to lose both matches. But, honestly, it feels anticlimactic now, like I thought there would be more to the 3-*dan* division.

“Um Am I allowed to go home now?”

“Of course.”

The young director nods, confused.

“Now that I think about it, the Kansai Sub League conducts their meetings after their matches rather than in the morning so they can announce the results, yes? Isn’t that awkward?”

“I always thought that’s the way it was done

Yes, it gets awkward when someone is forced to retire.

It downright hurts when someone gets promoted because they defeated you.

Especially in Kansai where critical matches often happen against your biggest rivals. It’s practically tradition.

That also means that, in most cases, those matches are against people you know very well.

“How does Kanto handle forced retirements? Do they have to come back next time just to say goodbye?”

“That happened from time to time when I was in the Sub League, but not so much anymore. Almost no one wants to say anything on their way out anyway. Everyone quietly slips out the door.”

“.....”

“There was a *kyu*-ranking young woman who dropped out not too long ago. She still comes by the Shogi Association because she became a Women’s League player and I made that announcement to the Sub League for her, but

The young director makes a painful sigh.

“The thing is, I almost never see her at the association anymore. I guess coming here is just too uncomfortable for her.”

I understand exactly how she feels.

If I don't make it to 4-*dan*, what then?

Become a Women's player?

Quit playing Shogi?

Or Quit living altogether?

"She had a lot of expectations on her shoulders As a director, I feel partially responsible that she didn't live up to them. I don't want to make excuses, but that may have played a part in my Double Pawn violation and missing my chance to promote in the last Placement Match last season"

".....!"

Just then, I finally remember who this *Sensei* is and what role he had in my own life.

Satoru Hatomachi 5-*dan*.

He fought with Yaichi in last year's C-2 Division Placement Matches to promote to C-1 It was thanks to him breaking the rules that Yaichi was able to grab a victory from the jaws of defeat and advance.

That was the day that Yaichi buried his face in my knees and cried, wasn't it?

"..... I'm sorry."

"Ah! No, no, no! I don't have any bad feelings toward you or Mr. Kuzuryu at all!! Actually, I'm grateful."

"Huh?"

"That loss made me realize that I could have been doing so much more as a Sub League Director A part of me had been regretting it this whole time."

Which is why, Hatomachi-*sensei* tells me, he wanted to do whatever he could to help that girl After saying so, he goes back to what we were talking about.

“Years ago, people would forfeit the remaining matches once their retirement was set in stone, but many come back to finish out the season these days. The curious thing is they usually either win out or lose every single match they play after that.”

Losing because all the tension is gone from the match or winning because there’s no pressure anymore.

Physical endurance is necessary to play Shogi, but I think a strong fighting spirit is just as important.

—Speaking of which

Just out of curiosity, I look at how my first opponent today, Sakanashi 3-*dan* did.

Looking at the top-ranking slot at the top of the sheet—●●. Two black stars.

“What?”

The word comes out before I could stop it.

—Consecutive losses?! The person who won 13 matches last year

“Miss Sora.”

One of the association’s PR staff members calls my name and I look up.

“A taxi will be arriving for you in 10 minutes. Can I get a comment from you before then?”

“Ah S-Sure.”

Forcing myself to forget about Mr. Sakanashi for the moment, I start thinking about what I want to say to the media.

The taxi slowly works its way through the swarm of reporters and journalists.

Passing by Hatomori Shrine, I catch a glimpse of the Tokyo City Gymnasium as

we come to a stop at a red light just outside Sendagaya Station. A woman working for the association riding in the front seat of the taxi asks me.

“Would you like to go straight to Shinagawa Station to catch the bullet train? Or is there somewhere you would like to go first?”

“Please take me to the station. I can buy souvenirs there.”

“Souvenirs? For your family?”

“No, for my Master. Our Shogi family tree is having a get-together. I can tell them about today——.”

One glance out the window and words fail me.

Right in the middle of the throng of people crisscrossing the crosswalk, I see someone.

Someone I know.

“Ah

Sakanashi 3-*dan*.

Is he walking to Sendagaya Station?

But, compared to the savage, shark-eyed man I played against earlier today, this person looks like someone else entirely.

Hunched over, staring at his feet

However, I can see something much more horrifying.

Mr. Sakanashi——is just standing there ... crying.

“.....!”

What a bizarre sight.

A man in his mid-twenties standing in the middle of the walkway with tears of anguish rolling down his cheeks.

The pedestrian *walk* sign is green, but he hasn't budged.

How long has he been standing there?

How many times has the signal changed?

Passersby are pretending not to see him as they scuttle on by.

As if abandoning the fish that got tired of swimming, left at school and now waiting to be eaten

Then, it hits me.

The 3-*dan* division is 18 matches over six months.

The bare minimum necessary to promote is 14 wins.

In other words, you can only lose four times Lose consecutively and half the matches you can afford to lose are gone.

—He *half-died* today.

Consecutive victories out of the gate.

Undefeated and on top.

However, all that means is that my heart is still beating.

—..... If I'd lost that first match Right now, I'd be

My light-as-a-feather body suddenly feels much heavier.

Something has a hold of my ankles.

Looking down, souls of the dead are grabbing at my feet.

And the one looking up at me has Mr. Sakanashi's face.

“Eeek!!”

I kick my legs as hard as I can to shake off the phantoms.

Shocked by my sudden outburst, the association employee in the front seat turns around to face me.

“Miss Sora?! What’s the matter?!”

My heart is pounding so hard I can’t breathe. My chest hurts. The pain

“Miss Sora? Are you all right? We can turn back if you need to rest.”

“..... It’s nothing. Please keep going.”

The light changes and we leave the minnow crying in the same spot where he was when we arrived.

The 63rd 3-*dan* division has begun.

Hell has begun.

FAMILY MEETING

“I’m ... thrilled ta bits!” Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, happy as can be, says as he starts talking to our Shogi family tree. “The Kiyotaki line’s got two pro players, three Women’s League players and a 3-*dan* in the Sub League We’re officially a crowd, with a total of three titles including Women’s!”

Ai Hinatsuru and I got called over to Master Kiyotaki’s place and treated to dinner. Keika made her *okonomiyaki* pancakes. Ai loves those things.

On a side note, I invited Ai Yashajin but she’s absent.

Big Sis being in the same Shogi family doesn’t make it any less awkward to see her so soon after getting swept in a title match. I can’t blame her.

..... I sent her invitation first, but she never responded. Keika is the one who got an answer out of her. The thing is that I can see she’s read my messages, but recently most of them get ignored I’m sure that has nothing to do with her absence today.

No connection at all right?

She’s ... not avoiding me is she?

“We had an in-family bout over a title, Ai’s been on a roll in the Women’s League and is now one win away from enterin’ the Women’s Legend League Sayin’ it’s the year of the Kiyotaki ain’t stretchin’ the truth! Which means——,” skin still glowing from his bath, Master takes a big swig of beer and says, “someone in our line’s gotta participate this year.”

“In the Player’s Meeting, right?”

“Yea.”

Master nods at me before dropping his voice really low.

“Specially ’cause rumor has it somethin’ big’s comin’ up this year. I can

feel it.”

That’s not exactly promising

The Shogi Association’s day-to-day management all happens in Tokyo, far away from us here in Kansai. It feels that far away too.

Which is why Kansai players don’t really care what happens at the yearly Player’s Meeting Honestly, going all the way there is a pain. We just sign away our vote to whoever’s actually going while we hold down the fort here. It’s our standard at this point.

“At’s why I’ve called all ‘o ya here. We’re gonna figure out who’s gonna go represent us tonight.”

“Which is true, but the only ones who can vote are Master and I. It’ll be one of the two of us

“Uwhee? I’m not allowed to go? Even though I’m a Women’s League player?”

Ai sounds surprised to hear that and Big Sis, sitting off on her own in the corner, answers.

“Only players registered as full members of the Shogi Association are allowed to attend. So, basically, professionals, Women’s League players with 4-*dan* and higher or current and ex-title holders. You didn’t know that?”

“O-Of course, I did! Everyone knows that!”

That’s the reaction of someone who just found out.

“But Grandpa-*sensei*? If all of us can’t go, why are we all here?”

“Cause just two *ain’t enough*.”

Big Sis and I perk up right then and there.

“.....!! Are you saying we’re going to use *that* to decide who goes?”

“Yea. *That*.”

Master's lips curl into a bold grin as he nods.

Ai, the only one who doesn't know what's going on, looks back and forth between Master and I before yelling.

"Master?! What's this that you're talking about?! What are you going to do?!"

"It's going to be a long battle Ai, get to bed."

"Uwhee?!"

Already wearing pajamas, Ai points at Big Sis and makes her case.

"This isn't fair! Aun- Sora-*sensei* isn't allowed to go to the Player's Meeting either, right?! So why am I the only one being left out——."

"I can't register as a *full member* only because I'm in the Sub League. If I became a Women's League player instead, I'd have been registered years ago. If it hurts that bad, why don't you go claim a Women's Title?"

"I'm going to!! I'm going to join the Women's Legend League and claim that title!"

"Really? A pipsqueak like you taking Shakando-*sensei's* title? Give me a break. Save those jokes for after you've lost all your baby teeth."

"..... Says the one smooth down there."

"If you want to go that bad, I'll take you there myself As part of your funeral!!"

Another peaceful day in the Kiyotaki Shogi family (grin).

It seems like the problem at school isn't bothering Ai at all. Forcing a smile at the fact that she's still a kid despite how strong she's gotten at Shogi, I put my hand on my apprentice's head and say, "It's already past nine o'clock, which means it's past your bedtime, Ai. Come on, I'll take you upstairs."

"..... Okaaay"

Tucking my apprentice into bed in the kid's room on the second floor (she

must've been really sleepy because she was out like a light as soon as her head hit the pillow), I come back downstairs and see everything is getting set up.

We have a rule in the Kiyotaki Shogi family, all important debates are settled by wins and losses in a certain game.

A game based on real estate that's loved all over the world—Monopoly.

“Monopoly teaches ya every skill a Shogi player's gonna need.”

Master goes into the same spiel I've heard hundreds of times before.

“The one who brought Monopoly into the Shogi world was none other than the undisputed best-ever, *the* Meijin. Back when he was the new guy on the scene, he brought Monopoly to a match after-party an' invited his opponent to join him sayin': *Sides are gone after the match is over*. Now 'at's what I call sportsmanship Though some people think he was just wantin' to play Monopoly.”

“He wanted to play, for sure.”

“He definitely wanted to play.”

He's the kind of person who has to be the best at any game he plays

“He brought the game to Kansai back when he was facin' Mr. Tsukimitsu for the title, and Monopoly's been loved by players all over Kansai ever since.”

“Using dice adds an element of luck, which is a breath of fresh air.”

“It also takes your mind off everything else! Oh, and I love using negotiation to move the game along. Shogi is always one-on-one, but you have to read what several players are trying to do at the same time in Monopoly. It's just like training to take on one of the leagues ... probably.”

Of course, it's not all fun and games.

Only one person can win a game of Monopoly. Everyone else goes bankrupt In Shogi terms, they lose all their pieces. Without any chance to set the

scene for a loss, you have to be stubborn, gritty and strong in the late game. You could say that Monopoly was made for Kansai players.

Taking boxes out of the cabinet, Keika asks, “Standard? Or should we do the Osaka Edition?”

“Course the Osaka one.”

The Osaka Edition has the Kanjo Line, as well as the Kansai Shogi Association. That’s why it’s on sale at the association gift shop!

And so, the game gets underway.

The four of us have been playing this game for 11 years now, so we know each other’s styles inside and out. The early game is slow because we keep a close eye on what everyone is doing.

I like to use negotiation to get ahead when I play Monopoly. It’s fun to get in everyone’s heads and sort through the chaos to find victory.

The first thing I have to do is strike up the conversation Create an *open to negotiation* vibe!

“I’ve been wondering, Big Sis. Isn’t it hard doing the 3-*dan* division and high school at the same time?”

“Not really. Both are going just fine,” says Big Sis as she starts consolidating her properties. “Everyone at school is so nice. They even surprised me with a card the day before the 3-*dan* division started.”

“One that everyone signed?”

Man, you sure are popular.

“I heard the school was considering changing their uniform just for Naniwa’s Snow White. They’re behind you 110%”

The school’s original colors are black and white, but they were going to get rid

of the black. That's what the news said.

"Of course I refused the offer."

"But it must be so nice to have a school that's so understanding! It sounds like they get what Sub League and Women's League players go through."

"If they didn't, I would've gone somewhere else."

"It's a feeder school, right? You don't have to test into college! Ahhh, campus life!"

"I have no intention of going to college. If I turn professional, I won't bother graduating. Now pay me the 100-million-yen rental fee you owe."

Like hell I can actually pay that.

Once I negotiate purchasing the Osaka Airport for 3 million yen from Keika, I shift my attention to someone else.

"You knew, didn't you, Master? About Big Sis going to high school."

"'Cause she asked me for advice," says Master bluntly as he rolls the dice. Normally he gives details no one asked for about anything and everything, but he only says what is absolutely necessary when he plays Monopoly.

"What did you tell her?"

"Have Ms. Oga draw up two schedules, one with high school and one without, an' compare 'em."

"Ah!"

"Since Ginko's been in junior high as well as the Sub League up till now, the association's been lettin' a lot of her title holder PR duties slide. They only made her do the bare minimum of match recordin' and big board commentatin' 'round Osaka."

Going with his usual strategy of monopolizing everything, Master continues.

"But now that her legally required schoolin' is done, the afternoons are wide

open. Popular as she is, Ginko'd get called out to do events all the time."

"City halls would ask her to be a tourism ambassador or make her an honorary citizen And it's payday!♪"

Keika collects even more money.

"That means that Big Sis would actually have more free time by going to high school, right? That makes sense"

I'm amazed at how convincing Master can be. It's because he built up that skill in Monopoly. Shogi and Monopoly teach us everything we need to know in life

"Hm? Wait a minute, Master. You didn't give me much advice at all when I became a junior high school pro. All I remember you saying is: *Quit goin' ta school.*"

"Ya were shootin' up the rankings in the Ryuo League, but ya couldn't make an event just by showin' up like Ginko can."

To be frank, I wasn't as popular as Big Sis is now. Thank goodness for that!!

"Oh, and Yaichi. Why are ya only usin' yar left arm?"

"Sorry. I think I pulled a muscle when I was carrying Ai upstairs"

"Ya did? Then I suppose there's no helpin' it, just keep playin' fast, ya hear?"

"Yes, Master. I won't fall behind."

Master is even stricter during a game of Monopoly than teaching Shogi.

I apologized, but the actual reason is completely different.

Big Sis has ahold of my right hand.

It's under the table where Keika and Master can't see it, but I doubt she'll be letting go anytime soon. That means I'm stuck playing the game with only my left hand

—Why? What's the meaning behind it?

Is she trying to get me to secretly slip her money or properties? That's not negotiation at all. It's extortion.

And

—She's shaking?

Does holding my hand make her so angry that it makes her tremble?

If that were the case, she'd just let go So, what could it be? Is she punishing herself for fun?

As I try to work all this out in my head, I go bankrupt. Game over.

I couldn't focus because Big Sis was holding my hand is the excuse I'll go with.

■ AFTER DARK

“Awhh. I sure lost that one,” I mumble to myself as I, the first one to bow out, sprawl out on my futon.

It came down to an all-out battle between Master and Big Sis. After some furious dice rolls, it was Master who emerged victorious once the dust settled.

You’d think that would be the end of it, wouldn’t you?

It’s not. For pro Shogi players, that’s when the main event gets underway.

The review session.

Just like in Shogi, players look back to the very start of the game saying things like: *Ya built a house here and I should’ve negotiated then.*

Tonight’s review session wouldn’t end, It was three in the morning by the time we put it away. Seriously, that review session took a lot longer than the game itself.

This is how Kansai Shogi players play Monopoly. Bizarre.

“Three million yen was too much to buy the Osaka Airport, I should have got it down to two million! My money senses are all out of whack,”

It’s because of Big Sis’s interference. That has to explain it!

Speaking of Big Sis, she’s sleeping in Keika’s room tonight and I’m sleeping by myself in this makeshift guest room that is actually the living room.

I would’ve been fine with sleeping in the kid’s room where Ai is, but I didn’t want to wake her up and Big Sis and Keika laid out the futon for me in the living room before I could say a word. Basically, I wasn’t allowed to have an opinion.

“Big Sis threatened to kill me if I *take one step out of this room*. Yeesh, does she think I’m going to sneak into her room after dark? What if I have to use the

bathroom? What then, huh? She's a monster, I swear."

Anyway

"The Player's Meeting. I went two years ago when I promoted to 4-*dan* so I could introduce myself, but Man, it was boring. A little guy like me didn't even have a chance to speak."

Then again, most players in Kanto show up, so it's a viable opportunity to talk to people I normally don't have a chance to see.

Since I'm going, maybe it would be a good idea to make some more plans? Practice session perhaps?

"Perfect! I need to ask Ayumu about his little sister. And yeah. I should look into Ai Hinatsuru's next opponent"

My apprentice will be facing a Kanto Women's League player in the last match of the Women's Legend Qualifier. A new one at that. Kanto is the only place to find information on her.

"Ms. Rokuroba seemed to know her. I wonder if she'll show up at the Player's Meeting. Her Master is on the board of directors, so she'll probably be around"

I roll over in the pitch-black living room with my mind still following that train of thought when....

Sliiiiiide——.....

I hear the *fusuma* sliding door open.

——Did someone come inside?

But I don't hear any footsteps. That rules out my heavy-footed Master.

And everyone who was playing Monopoly should be too sleepy to think straight.

Which would mean

“Ai is that you?”

“It’s me.”



Hoooooooooooooooooooooot!!!

“Say what?! Umm What are you doing here?! Why would you sneak in here wearing *that* after dark?! What are you going to do to me?!”

“Shhh! Quiet, Yaichi!”

“Mgh?!”

Press≡ I’m suddenly sandwiched between Keika’s glorious boobs. I didn’t know I could be forced to keep my mouth shut in such a pleasant way Gh, they’re so big and soft I can’t breathe?!

“Mgff! Mghhh ghhh!!”

“Sorry, Yaichi. That can’t be too comfortable. But I can’t have Ai or Ginko hearing us So please, be quiet.”

“Mgg Ngh”

“There, there♪ That’s a good boy≡.”

She pats my head a few times as I finally calm down. I feel like a little kid again.

“..... I used to hold you just like this, patting you on the head when you were too scared to go to the bathroom alone at night or you were getting homesick. Ah, those were the days≡.”

“I I remember”

“And now you’ve gotten so big.”

That’s my line!!

Keika was a high school girl back then and, well, she was many times bigger in that department than Big Sis is (zero times any number is still zero) but That was nothing compared to the mature, filled-out mid-twenties body she has now. She’s sexy as hell.

“W-Well, look at you, Keika A filled full-fledged member of the Melon’s League.”

“I lose quite a bit though.Hm? Did you say something strange just now?”

“You’re hearing things.”

That was too close I was so focused on those glorious twins of hers that I said *Melon’s League* instead of *Women’s League* Thankfully they’re similar words

“S-So, um, what’s up? Coming in here so late at night. If there’s something you wanted to tell me, you could’ve just told me while setting up the futon.”

“..... It’s about Ginko.”

“Big Sis?”

Well, it doesn’t seem like she’s here to confess her love for me or an event like that. I’m suddenly very sleepy.

“I don’t know what I’d be able to do. I haven’t talked to Big Sis much at all lately. Heck, she didn’t even tell me she was going to go to high school and bringing up the Sub League is off limits——.”

“You say that after holding hands for hours?”

“You knew?!”

“It was obvious. The only one in the world who wouldn’t have picked up on it is my father.”

Keika forces a smile before her face turns extremely serious.

“Yaichi, I’m sure you’ve noticed, haven’t you? Ginko won her first two 3-*dan* division matches, but She’s extremely anxious.”

..... So that’s what it was after all?

Big Sis’s hand was cold the entire time.

Except she gets angry at me anytime I try to bring up the Sub League. So long as she doesn't ask for advice, I can't say a word.

Also

"Of course, I'm worried about Big Sis, but I'm also responsible for my apprentices. The Queen Title Match made it clear They may be in the Women's League, but those girls still have a lot of growing to do. So they're the ones who take priority——."

"I will look after Ai, no matter what she needs. Ten-chan is a strong girl who's used to being alone, but she also has Akira and her grandfather for support," Keika says flatly. "But Ginko only has you.... Which is why I want you to prioritize her until the end of this 3-*dan* division season, at least."

She only has ... me?

But——.

"Big Sis's family is in Osaka. She's living with them now so she can go to that high school, right? It's not like they're on bad terms or anything."

"True. Her parents trusted us enough to leave her completely in our care since she was very young. That's because they don't understand anything about Shogi."

"Then"

"That's *exactly why*."

Keika pulls me into her body and whispers into my ear, "Promise me, Yaichi If Ginko ever comes to you for help, promise me you will prioritize her. Promise me you'll only focus on her"

I lived with Keika for over ten years Not once have I seen her this desperate.

The seriousness in her voice is so overwhelming that I nod out of reflex.

“..... All right. I promise.”

Not once did I think about the meaning this conversation would come to have in the not-too-distant future.

RECORD 3

ETERNAL QUEEN

Rina Shakando 积迦堂里奈

INDEBTEDNESS

“Here she is! Tsubasa Gakumeki Women’s League 2-*kyu*! Sensei, come on up to the stage!”

“Uhhh Thank ya kindly

My first job as a Women’s League member is a New Year’s Shogi festival being held in a department store.

The woman working as the master of ceremonies peers at me with curiosity.

“Ohh? I’ve never heard that intonation before. Gakumeki-*sensei*, are you originally from the Kansai area?”

“No I’m, erm, from ‘round Oita. But, I’ve been a’live’en in Tokyo for so long, my words’ve gotten all mixed up.”

“Hahaha. A sweet country girl, how nice! The fans will love you!”

All round of applause comes from the crowd.

—Why? All I did was talk

I hated my country accent.

I had a long losing streak back when I entered the Kanto Sub League, and I knew exactly what other members were saying about me.

“She plays backwater Shogi.”

From then on, I forced myself to stop speaking with an accent and never played the way I always had again.

My older brother apprentice set up practice sessions for me and worked with me day and night to absorb all the latest strategies developed by Kanto Sub League members. I rebuilt myself from the ground up.

But, I suppose my high-strung determination ran out after leaving the Sub

League And now my original accent is starting to come back.

“Gakumeki-*sensei* will be doing instructional matches in the booth over there. Feel free to stop by and say hello!”

—Me? Doing instructional matches? No one would want that.

My Shogi couldn't even make it to *dan* in the Sub League. It's worthless.

I'll be fired from the Women's League once that fact is discovered. I'm sure of it.

But, there's a surprising amount of people already lined up at the booth waiting for me.

People, happy to play Shogi with me

“..... I never knew A world like this existed.”

I have four boards going simultaneously, but it's still not enough. So many fans keep lining up all to see my Shogi, to play with me.

—..... Maybe I have a place in this world after all

Enveloped by a warmth that I never felt during my time as a Sub League member, I'm starting to feel like I could be accepted as a Women's League Player. When suddenly.

I see.

“! B-B Big”

Behind all the fans is my newly retired Older brother apprentice

Unable to continue playing, the instructional matches get called off.

▲ THE PLAYER'S MEETING

"I look up to and aspire to be like the Meijin. I want to have a title of my own one day!"

About 150 Pro Players listen to an extremely nervous newly promoted 4-*dan* introduce himself to the group and started judging him on the spot.

The Player's Meeting.

It always gets held around this time of year. It's become standard for the meeting to start with the new "full members" saying a few words to introduce themselves.

By new full members I mean the new 4-*dans* and Women's League Players who meet the requirements to attend.

There are four new Pros this year and their intros are pretty much just their name, Player number, their Shogi family, and whatever they're hoping to achieve.

—The bi-yearly Board elections aren't happening this year, which makes things easy.

Swallowing a yawn, I listen to what my juniors have to say.

Attendance this year went beyond what the Association expected with almost all Kanto Players present and accounted for.

On the other hand, Kansai attendance is almost nil.

Once word got out that I was going, Master and a bunch of other Pros sent me their voting rights one after another. Seriously, it just snowballed.

Their faith in me or should I say in Chairman Tsukimitsu, is absolute. They'll approve any and all of the Board's resolutions. Basically, I'm just a delivery boy for their voting paperwork.

Mr. Oishi called me yesterday.

“Take care of my line too, would you?”

That added two more papers to the pile and brought my total voter authorizations up to 20.

—Well, I can’t really blame Mr. Oishi. He just lost his title after all.

I glance over at the scholarly-looking man with an aura to match sitting not too far away.

The new King, Yo Okito——Dual Title.

This room wasn’t designed to handle all the people crammed in here, so most of us are sitting three to a table But there’s an icy barrier surrounding Mr. Okito in the corner so no one’s venturing too close.

Mr. Okito has been so devoted to every part of being a Professional Shogi Player that he’s attended every Player’s Meeting without fail going way back.

Therefore, Mr. Oishi would see him for sure if he came here and the awkwardness would leave a bad taste.

—There was so much fire and intensity in that title match, too. Everyone would’ve treaded lightly around him

So, yeah. All that goes through my head as I shake hands with the newly promoted 4-*dans* when——.

“These newly inducted 4-*dan* members, every single one in their mid-20s. Seems you hold the crown of youth again this year, young Ryuo.”

The woman sitting next to me whispers.

“Someone even younger will be promoted next season.”

“As I hope as well. It was such a relief to see Ginko begin with consecutive victories.”

I was talking about the grade schooler 3-*dan* Sota Kunugi rather than Big Sis

..... But it seems that Woman's Legend Rina Shakando, a Kanto Player, assumes that a grade schooler reaching 4-*dan* would be impossible.

—Well, I suppose I can't blame her for thinking that way.

3-*dan* Division matches always end with split-second decision making because the waiting time is so short.

Since everyone plays "not to lose" and each loss carries so much weight, the real battle begins once every second counts.

Sota's talent stands head and shoulders above most, but he's been raised in a way to make sure that talent keeps growing. The downside of that is he can't take full advantage of his talent when it all comes down to speed. He started off with two wins, but he's certainly a long shot to make it through in one season.

Then again, once he makes it to the Pros where there's plenty of waiting time He'll send waves all across Japan.

"At this time, we would like to request that all members of the media please exit the room."

The cameramen lined up along the walls start filing out when the moderator asked them to go.

I turn to face Ms. Shakando and the guy sitting next to her, Ayumu Kannabe, to ask.

"Aren't there more of them here than usual? I don't remember the Shogi world getting this much media attention."

"..... The matter at hand is what it is."

Says Ayumu matter-of-factly. Ms. Shakando just grins ever so slightly.

"Now that you mention it, my master said something big was going to happen. Any idea what—."

"Chairman."

Just as I was asking, Chairman Tsukimitsu gets called on and makes a suggestion concerning our schedule for the day.

“Normally, now would be the time to discuss financial matters but there is something of great importance that requires our attention. I move to begin deliberations as soon as possible.”

“I have no objection. Please explain the situation.”

“Thank you. Ms. Oga If you please.”

“One acknowledges she is overstepping her position, but one shall provide details.”

Stepping out from behind the Chairman, his secretary Sasari Oga takes hold of the microphone.

“Due to the considerable advances in Shogi software achieved last year, there has been an increasing number of people inside and outside of the Shogi world voicing concerns pertaining to the way electronic devices are handled during league matches.”

Shogi software? Electronic devices?

Don't tell me

“The Board of Directors has taken these concerns to heart and therefore proposed the following changes. Please refer to the handouts as I provide further explanation.”

I take a small stack of papers from an association employee passing them out. It's much thicker than usual.

“Specifically, Players must remain on-site during matches, including break time, and are forbidden from carrying any device capable of broadcasting or receiving outside signals including cell phones. All Players must submit to a metal detector screening before and during matches. Punishments for violation of this rule include——.”

There's no end in sight to these new regulations.

Surprise and disbelief spread throughout the room like a shockwave.

"These new policies will of course apply to title matches as well. Specifically, Players must always remain on the premises during two-day matches, may not carry any electronic devices, and must submit their luggage for inspection——."

Now, the mass of Players who'd been quietly listening start making objections.

"W-Wait a second here! Two-day matches as well?!"

"In effect, these regulations were drafted specifically for two-day matches."

Says Chairman Tsukimitsu.

"In the event the arena and lodging are located separately, Players must always be accompanied by an Association employee when in transit. Also, all communication devices and personal computers will be left in that employee's care, including overnight while the match is in session. Please inform your families to contact the Association in case of emergencies."

"S-So We're going to be prisoners at a hotel for three days including the arena inspection?!"

These new strict regulations have the attending Players up in arms about *the reason they had to be made* rather than the rules themselves.

"..... Who's fault is it that we suddenly have to follow these rules?"

"..... If you ask me, the guy that just took a title seems suspicious."

"..... You've got a point there. It's one of the two-day match ones"

"..... Doing all this won't make a lick of difference. The man's pretty much got a machine built into his head."

That kind of conversation is happening all over the place, but they're not really trying to keep their voices down.

Everyone's eyes are focused onto the corner of the room.

“.....”

But if Yo Okito-*Dual Title* heard them, it sure doesn't look like it. He's reading through the handouts like there's no tomorrow.

Mr. Okito has two titles: King and Crown. Both use the two-day format.

And, the Crown Challenger match is right around the corner.

One person playing in it is——.

“..... Should you become Crown Challenger, young Ryuo, you will be the first to experience these new two-day regulations, yes?”

“Well, I'd have to deal with them anyway during the next Ryuo Title Match. Besides, most Kansai Players have voluntarily put their smart phones in the Player's Room lockers for years now.”

These rules are obvious for younger Players like me who have always been inundated with Shogi software.

Actually, it's surprising that it took this long to make them.

Quite a few people are speaking up against the new rules, though.

Retired Players and veterans are being particularly harsh It's almost like they're blaming Chairman Tsukimitsu and Ms. Oga for the whole situation.

“..... We understand that there are many opinions on this matter, however the issue is not exclusive to Professional Shogi.”

Taking hold of the mic, Chairman Tsukimitsu explains in a stiff tone.

“It is imperative that Professionals set a precedence to be followed to help prevent rule violations at amateur tournaments. As adults with responsibilities to ourselves and society as a whole, self-regulation is possible. However, the same cannot be said for children.”

Kids huh.

I immediately think of Ai and the other girls in the Grade Schooler Practice Group.

Them, cheating? I wouldn't even consider it.

Which is why even though I know the regulations are necessary as I cast the approval votes I still feel like I'm betraying them somehow.

Almost as if he read my mind, the Chairman makes one last remark.

"I understand that this isn't easy, but I believe it is our duty as Professionals. Moderator, the vote please."

The new regulations pass By a hair.

After that, the meeting proceeds like always with budget decisions and whatnot. The sun has already set by the time we finish up.

Normally, this would be the time everyone would be deciding where to go for drinks.

But, it seems like the shock from the first topic up for discussion is still too strong. Everyone's keeping their voices down and their eyes on who's listening I guess they're being careful about choosing their drinking buddies tonight.

Amid all that, I hear someone address me——.

"Well, now Young Ryuo."

Borrowing her apprentice's arm to climb out of her chair, the Eternal Queen speaks with such elegant conviction that the idea of turning her down doesn't occur to me.

"Dine with us. I know of a splendid place."

🏠 MS. SHAKANDO, RAMEN CONNOISSEUR

“What seems to be the matter, young Ryuo? It will get cold if you do not eat quickly.”

Rina Shakando-*Women’s Legend* says and I take another look at the *donburi* bowl in front of me.

Soup glistening with white, fatty streaks. Thick, curly noodles.

Yes It’s ramen.

Hope-ken.

A pioneer in pork/soy sauce-based ramen in Tokyo, it’s a chain restaurant that is all over the country. Many Players come here after matches because it’s so close to the Kanto Shogi Association in Sendagaya.

I’ve been wanting to come here at least once.

Though, I never dreamed the timing would work out like this and I’d be lined up at the counter with these people It’s so surreal I can’t pick up my chopsticks

“I’m just really surprised that you eat ramen, Ms. Shakando And even if you did, I was sure you’d go upstairs to sit at one of the tables

“Going up stairwells is rather strenuous for me. It’s far easier to stand at the counter like this. Besides, this is hardly my first time here.”

She sure looks comfortable standing there. The cane she always has in her left hand is propped up against the wall.

“I have even summoned a taxi to venture here from my castle in Harajuku upon feeling peckish.”

“I-I just can’t wrap my head around it

Standing next to Ms. Shakando is Ayumu, constantly making sure that his beloved master doesn't lose her balance while slurping down ramen like a brazen vacuum cleaner.

I know it's none of my business, but that white cape of his being so close to a stray drop of flying broth has me so on edge that I can't focus on my own food

"Hey, Ayumu Could you tone down the slurping or at least use your handkerchief like a napkin?"

"Enough babbling nonsense! Hurry up and dine, why don't you?!"

Ayumu jabs the spring onion tongs in my direction and says.

"Refusing to indulge in the articulate flavors that my royal master herself recommends is a crime in and of itself!! Though The ignorant citizenry of Osaka, their tongues poisoned by 'sauce,' could never comprehend articulate flavor in the first place!! Ha——ha ha ha ha!!"

"Speaking of Osaka, your sister paid me a visit."

"I apologize for the trouble my obtuse sibling has caused you."

A genuine apology and bow from Ayumu. I can't hate this part of his personality.

The reason that Ms. Shakando invited me out tonight had nothing to do with the Player's Meeting——.

"I wish to discuss Maria."

Making surprisingly cute slurping sounds as she makes steady progress through her noodles, Ms. Shakando explains.

"I had been chosen as the lead judge for this year's King of Naniwa Tournament. The Association's desire to interest the female youth in Shogi apparently led them to select me, the Women's League Chairman, to fill that role. As God Cauldon was already slated to take part in the accompanying Top

Earners Match, I thought it would be a perfect opportunity——.”

“Until my obtuse sibling goes and announces she wants to partake in the tournament as well! She seems to believe that seizing victory in Master’s presence would result in her being taken as an apprentice. The utter thoughtlessness!”

“Really? I was impressed with her drive, to be honest. It’s normal for kids in Osaka to travel to Tokyo for a tournament, but a kid from Tokyo coming all the way to Osaka almost never happens.”

Let alone coming down for a preview before the tournament like she did. That’s just how confident she is that she’s going to win.

Sure, she talks like an arrogant brat, but she’s actually cautious and sensitive.

That’s enough to know just how much of a competitor she is.

“And, she took the Elementary Meijin crown her brother couldn’t, yeah?”

“.....”

Ayumu says nothing, slurping down more noodles instead. That must sting.

Maria sure seemed to look down on her older brother, so maybe these two are on bad terms?

“But, you still haven’t taken Maria as your apprentice, have you Ms. Shakando? You’ll need to do that soon if you want her to apply for the Sub League this year.”

Grade school students placing in the top four of national tournaments can apply to enter the Sub League without having a master.

Yet, the fact that Maria still wants to become Ms. Shakando’s apprentice shows how much respect she has for her.

“..... That girl, you see”

Her chopsticks still, Ms. Shakando stares into the murky *donburi* broth.

“I would have liked for Maria to have walked a different path

“You call her by her real name, don’t you? Why haven’t you come up with some cool title for her?”

“Because she has yet to become my apprentice.”

So, that’s the criteria

“I have thought on what would be best for her until my head throbbed with pain. There have been days when I regretted teaching her Shogi altogether.”

“But, Ms. Shakando, haven’t you always said your biggest desire is to see a woman join the Professional Leagues? That’s why you’ve been so supportive of Big Sis all this time.”

“Claiming the Elementary Meijin crown does not in itself guarantee a professional debut, yes?”

“True, but looking at it objectively, winning Elementary Meijin as a 5th grader makes me think she’d have a pretty good shot

“That’s precisely the problem.”

“Huh?”

“I cannot appraise Maria from a distance. As God Cauldron’s My apprentice’s younger sister, I see her as my own child. What parent would ever knowingly send their child into hellfire?”

“.....!”

I had no idea Ms. Shakando cared for Maria that much

“How could her pure adoration for me be anything but adorable? I find myself thinking absurd thoughts like, ‘if I had a daughter of my own, perhaps she would be like this’ without realizing it Heh. You are allowed to chuckle.”

“How could I laugh at that?! I think of my apprentices as family, too!”

If Ai Yashajin heard that, she’d probably say, “gross” and glare at me.

Even so, that's how I truly feel. To me, Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin mean so much more than just "apprentices."

"It's not that I do not see Maria's potential. However, even if she should enter the Sub League, I would prefer her Shogi to be slightly more complete than it is now"

"I was worried about that very same thing when my apprentices made their Women's League debut"

"Because you are much bolder than I, young Ryuo. Kobe's Cinderella is one thing, but wasn't Ai Hinatsuru's debut much too early? With that early game?"

"That's what everyone says"

Even I can tell that Ai's weakness is the early game.

Of course everyone's going to point it out——.

"The problem is whether or not their Shogi changes during their early struggles, right?"

"Precisely. Losing spurs growth like weeds strengthening after being trampled underfoot, but the light of victory can lead the young buds astray. The most magnificent flowers will never bloom under those conditions One worrying thought leads to the next in a never-ending cycle."

"Even you have trouble making decisions sometimes, huh, Ms. Shakando?"

"But of course, I waiver. That's why I have missed my chances to marry."

Ms. Shakando mocks herself while staring into her bowl. Seeing his master like this——.

"....."

Ayumu looks like he wants to say something.

Whether she can feel the gaze of her beloved apprentice or not, Ms. Shakando picks up the bowl and drinks down the last of the broth before

continuing.

“It seems inviting you along, Ryuo, was the correct decision. I’m glad I was able to discuss this with someone who also has young students in their care. I was not intent on allowing Maria to enter the Sub League at first But if students under your tutelage are entering the King of Naniwa Tournament, perhaps the results could change my mind.”

“Hold up! The two Ai’s, sure, but the others are nowhere near ready for the national stage!! They could never beat an Elementary Meijin

“Fufufu. My Maria is quite strong.”

The Women’s Legends smiles with pride. Is she bragging?!

“..... I have observed many promising children through the years. Many of whom that possessed enough talent to become Professional Players went astray due to misplaced guidance. Those memories seem to have brought out the coward in me.”

“.....”

“Quite recently, one promising talent fell into ruin And perished.”

Recent? A talent that died?

I must look really confused because Ms. Shakando gives me a name.

“Tsubasa Gakumeki.”

“Gaku meki?! I-Isn’t she——?!!”

Her bowl now completely empty, the Eternal Queen uses her apprentice’s outstretched hand for balance as she reclaims her cane before saying to me with a deep grin.

“The same. She is the one your apprentice will battle next, young Ryuo.”

■ LADY AI YASHAJIN'S AGITATION

"Actually, the other outfit is better."

My Lady, Ai Yashajin, says as I opened the car door for her. This is the sixth time she has gone back inside to change her wardrobe.

"My Lady. We are short on time"

My name is Akira Ikeda. I'm under the employ of the Yashajin family.

More specifically, I am charged with looking after Ai Yashajin as well as being her bodyguard.

On a side note, I run my own smart phone app development company while My Lady is attending elementary school, so I am an entrepreneur as well. Though I suffered a major setback, I have learned from my mistakes and now run a profitable business.

However, while life appears to be on the up and up, I do have a situation to contend with.

Recently My Lady has become absurdly adorable.

Today, while preparing to meet her Shogi master Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*,

"I don't have any good shoes, so I'm not going."

"My Lady."

Without setting one foot outside the property, this same conversation has repeated itself in some capacity for the past five hours. To be more precise, she has been on edge since yesterday.

The reason is plainly obvious. Though she believes she is keeping it well

hidden, it is out in the open for all to see.

Which is also adorable.

Of course, I feel a twinge of loneliness at the possibility My Lady may be taken away. I've even considered eliminating the man responsible. It would be easy. I already have a hole prepared it to bury the body.

However, My Lady's happiness is far more important than my opinion.

My emotions do not factor into it. It's My Lady's that takes precedent, and her happiness is therefore my greatest reward.

And, since I absolutely love taking pictures of cute young girls, getting to see My Lady dressed in colors other than black is absurdly adorable and very much a welcome sight!

As Kuzuryu-sensei also prefers the young, it should be a win-win relationship as well.

"It's too windy outside today so I don't want to go."

"My Lady."

That may be so, but there is a limit to which he can be forced to wait.

If he returns home and she is unable to see him My Lady will surely be disappointed.

"The bread I had with breakfast this morning was dry, so I'm not going."

"My Lady. Please, calm yourself. That is not a valid reason."

"Calm, I am calm! Can't you see how calm I am?! Why would I ever feel anxious about seeing that piece of trash?!"

"My Lady."

You're forgetting to enunciate. And that is oh so adorable.

This brand-new emotion starting to bloom within you Thinking about it

only makes the ache grow stronger. I fully understand. However, I will ask anyway.

“Your outfit is perfectly coordinated, My Lady. Normally we would have departed posthaste, so why are you so conflicted today?”

“.....”

My Lady lowers her gaze in an attempt to hide her reddening cheeks.

“..... But, it would be embarrassing to be seen in weird clothes”

Oh, so adorable!!

“Oh, so adorable!!!!”

“Wahhh?! Wh-What’s the matter, Akira? Raising your voice like that”

“Pardon me. My inner thoughts managed to come out.”

Wiping up the stream of blood that came out of my nose along with my scream, I collect myself and calmly tell her.

“My Lady. The time of our appointment has long since passed. I believe that tardiness and breaking promises would not reflect well on the Yashajin family name or its heiress.”

“Ngh”

Conflicting emotions pass across My Lady’s face before turning bright red and she yells.

“F-Fine! My hands are tied! I’ll go just because I hate breaking promises! Don’t you dare get the wrong idea!!”

“But, of course not, My Lady. You are an upstanding young woman.”

At long last, she takes a seat in the back of the car.

Going through final preparations to depart, I breathe a sigh of relief and look

to adjust the rearview mirror.

The moment I meet My Lady's gaze in the mirror I realize that our entire exchange had been for not.

"I don't like my bangs so I'm not going."

"My Lady."

A FERRIS WHEEL DATE

“You have waited long enough.”

A 10-minute walk away from Kobe Station. The girl who arrives at the commerce center right on the ocean known as “Kobe Harbor Land” waaaaaay past the time she said she would be here strides up to me without a hint of an apology.

Ai Yashajin.

My second apprentice is only 10 years old but already ranks 2-*dan* in the Women’s League. She’s a prodigy who’s already challenged for a title.

“I’d say I just got here but It’s a bit hard to say that now.”

It would’ve been usable five hours ago. I’d really like to ask what took her so long, but——.

“Still, I’m glad you came.”

I give her an honest thank you.

Ai may be my apprentice, but she is already claimed a lofty place in the Women’s League. I’m the one who asked for time out of her busy schedule, so I can’t complain about waiting.

Though, I’d been planning on doing this during lunch and it’s almost dinnertime. I’m starving.

“You’re alone? Where’s Akira?”

“You can find her over at the Anpanman Museum making bread.”

Anpanman is a children’s cartoon, so it would be mostly kids over there, but Meh, no big deal. I mean, she’s basically a six-year-old trapped in an adult body.

In addition to the Anpanman Museum, Harbor Land has a huge complex with a small amusement park, souvenir shops, and tons of places to eat. Since Ai said we should meet here when I messaged her saying “I’d like to ask you something face-to-face,” I figure she wanted to go to one of the shops.

“Where would you like to go? That place has an all-you-can-eat seafood bar. They’ve got crab, too.”

“That.”

“Come again?”

Ai isn’t pointing at a shop or restaurant but above them.

Looking up, I see——.

“..... A Ferris wheel?”

“I don’t want anyone to overhear us talking about Shogi. That’s impossible on a Ferris wheel, isn’t it?”

“Ohhh Great idea!”

Ai wanted to keep our discussion a secret from the start, which is why she suggested this place with a Ferris wheel I don’t mean to brag about my own apprentice, but she’s pretty sharp.

So, the two of us set out for the Ferris wheel.

I walk up next to her and she snaps, “Back off!” and puts a little distance between us. Is it just me, or is she staying further away than she used to?

I don’t remember doing anything to upset her. She must be at a difficult age
.....

“By the way, Ai. Why have you been looking down at your phone since you got here?”

“I’m searching through a match record database. This match is particularly long.”

“Ahh I see”

Hm? That’s strange.

The screen I caught a glimpse of earlier was more like——.

“The Most Romantic Spots in Kobe! 7 Stops for the Perfect Date!”

Or something like that But, Ai would never look at that kind of page, so I must’ve been seeing things.

Buying tickets at the entrance, a staff member guides us onto the wheel.

“Whoa! It just keeps going up!”

“Of course, it does Spare me the commentary.”

Says the cool Lady Ai Yashajin as she crosses her legs across from me.

“So? What did you want to ask?”

“About the Player you faced in the Women’s Legend qualifier——please tell me about Tsubasa Gakumeki.”

“..... Because she’s Ai Hinatsuru’s next opponent?”

“Everything you say here stays between us. I’m not that overprotective.”

“.....”

Her gaze is starting to get a bit icy, but I don’t let it get to me and keep going.

“I saw your parents’ Shogi come out from within you, so I decided against making you play my way. That’s just like how Ai Hinatsuru has a talent that’s all her own. I’ve been doing my best to help it grow, but I don’t know if my methods are really the right way to go.”

..... Like bringing up another woman in the middle of a date”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“I’m saying that remembering a loss makes me angry. Now, take responsibility and jump out the window.”

I'd die.

"And just when I'd finally gotten it out of my mind Fine. I can learn from these experiences. I just have to win in the end."

"Yes, yes! That's the spirit."

"Die, would you?"

"Why?!"

She's really rough today But, our conversation steadily picks up.

Ai wouldn't be Ai any other way!

"So How was it?"

"..... Did you see the match record?"

"Of course. I go through all of your matches for your parents. But"

"You don't have to say it. I know I was overconfident."

She says flatly, waving me off as if she hated talking about it.

"From what I can tell, she's in her 20s and someone I've never heard of with a 2-*kyu* ranking. I'd only fought title holders and people in the same class up to that point, so I didn't think anything of her."

"You captured the lead perfectly in the early game, too."

"I applied pressure in the mid-game and was in position to win by the 60th move. Normally, people give up at that point."

"But, Ms. Gakumeki hunkered down and held out for nearly 300 moves Sure, you might've underestimated her, but that kind of will to live isn't normal."

"I know. I had her down to only her King. She kept dodging my attacks by the slimmest of margins and I told her that I'd 'strangle and kill that King if it's the last thing I do!' What do you think her answer was?"

“You’re saying these things in the middle of a match?”

“*I’m already dead.* That’s what she said.”

“.....!!”

Already Dead?

“I didn’t get it when she said that to me, but the woman looks like a zombie. She isn’t so ‘solid’ that you hurt yourself by punching her like Ginko Sora. More like There’s no response at all.”

Says Ai as she looks down at her own clenched fists.

“It was like hitting a corpse. Looks so easy to knock down Then again, it would never get up to attack in the first place so there’d be no reason to take it down.”

“I get it. It’s not to defend so much as ‘wait.’”

“Yes. Which is why her defenses melted whenever I moved into attack. It was almost like she took them apart herself——.”

“*Nyugyoku*, eh?”

The King crossing deep into enemy territory is called *nyugyoku*.

Since most Shogi pieces are designed to move forward, cornering an enemy that has gotten behind your formation is extremely difficult. The match will never end.

The “stalemate” rule was introduced for just that reason.

Simply put, the pieces in each of the Player’s possession have a certain point value attached to them. They’re used to determine who won or if it’s a tie.

That’s why *nyugyoku* Shogi is called “completely different game.”

“She turned the match into a battle of points And I surrendered before it came to that. There wasn’t any time and the pressure was getting to me My normal Shogi senses weren’t working anymore”

“Unless they change the rules, you’ll need a whole different set of senses to play that kind of Shogi. I’m not sure training would be very useful though

“Exactly! *Nyugyoku* shows up in one out of every hundred Professional matches, if that! And I don’t want to get used to playing that way! I was in the middle of adjusting my play style to face Ginko Sora at the time, too!”

“Which was why you drove the memories out, huh?”

Being able to switch back and forth while important matches are going on is a very important technique.

This could have had a hand in Ai Yashajin making a mistake in the Queen Title Match early game

Not that someone with as much pride as she has would ever admit it.

“I didn’t find out until later, but this Gakumeki woman She was in the Sub League, wasn’t she?”

“She was. Even though she grew up in Oita, Kyushu, she registered with the Kanto Sub League.”

Ms. Shakando told me so.

The dark course of the century, in the same class as title holders

No, even higher.

“She was forced out due to the age limit and apparently joined the Women’s League at the very end of last year.”

“If only I’d known she was ex-Sub League Grr!! I won’t be letting my guard down next time!!”

Frustrated and angry at herself, Ai stomps on the carriage floor with all her might.

The shock makes the whole thing swing much harder than she thought.



“Eeek!”

Losing her balance, Ai makes an adorable little squeal before falling right into my chest.

W-W-Wow! S-So light

My apprentice that I caught out of reflex—is about as heavy as a stuffed animal filled with down feathers, so not at all.

So soft, she fits perfectly in my arms.

Not to mention She smells really, really good

The smell of my fan calms me down in the middle of matches, but For a very brief second, I thought about bringing Ai with me to matches so her smell would keep me calm before realizing how stupid that is. What am I, a pervert?

“L-Let go of me Idiot”

“S- Sorry”

I pick her up as gently as I can and place her on the seat across from me.

Once again I’m reminded just how insanely cute Ai Yashajin is.

Especially today because her outfit and hairstyle are right in the middle of my strike zone

——..... Dating a girl like her would be a dream come true.

Hold it! A-Ai acts all grown up, but she still 10!! And my apprentice!!

Careful not to let her know how rattled I am, I will my face not to budge and get back to our conversation.

“So, how would you fight her next time?”

“

Ai takes a long moment to think before slowly laying out her thoughts.

“Sub League members have a special kind of st Obnoxiousness.”

She was about to say “strength,” but instead changed it to “obnoxiousness.”
..... A sore loser, I see. But, as a master, I sure don’t hate that about her.

“Even taking the lead in the early game doesn’t help because taking the win is difficult either way. The late game turns into a race down a street filled with potholes, someone’s going to go flying. Turn the wheel ever so slightly in the wrong direction and you’ll end up in a ditch in the blink of an eye.”

Shogi is a lot like Jenga.

Both players make mistakes that pile up, but it’s the person who makes the last mistake who loses.

“Get stuck in a pattern that favors the opponent, and there’s no way to win. So

“So?”

“Obviously, take the lead in the early game After that, save as much time as possible for the late game and play more accurately than she does.”

“.....”

Even Ai Yashajin can’t figure out a more specific strategy than “take an early game lead.”

Then Logically, Ai Hinatsuru, who is leagues behind Ai Yashajin in early game strategy, doesn’t stand a chance.

“Now, I have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

“Can Ginko Sora become a Professional?”

That question catches me so off guard that I have to catch my breath.

“Even if she gets forced out by the age limit, that’s still 10 years away. But, if there’s a chance she may someday be in the Women’s League I need to be ready for her.”

Well, I can tell she's not asking just out of curiosity.

Quite the opposite, she's

"Fighting her made it very clear. There's a difference between Sub League members' Ginko Sora's Shogi and my own. If there is a chance that she and I will share the same arena, I must be prepared to change my Shogi on a fundamental level."

Preparation and determination.

As to what that means Ai is just too darn smart, so the whole thing goes over my head.

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

For now, I'll answer the question she asked.

"From an age standpoint, getting to 3-*dan* at 15 makes going Pro look very promising."

"Will she?"

"I honestly don't know. Her chances are pretty high, but there are plenty of reasons she won't make it. Big Sis has trouble staying healthy, so I think she'll have a hard time just playing in all of the Division's matches over the next six months."

You can see how fragile she is in summer, especially, because she loses color by the day.

I wonder how she plans to get through the 3-*dan* Division, because that place physically and mentally drives you into a corner

"I met all sorts of people while I was in the Sub League, but in the end, I turned Pro before I knew exactly how scary the 3-*dan* Division is. Maybe I became Pro *because I didn't know* would be a better way to put it."

"..... Okay. You really don't know."

Ai sighs ever so slightly.

“Either way There’s no mistaking I’ll be facing her again at some point. I’ll begin my preparations today so that I can become the best 10 years from now.”

“You’re going to fight?”

“I am. You see, I’ve decided I’m not running away anymore.”

Ai Yashajin flips her long hair over her shoulder like a black wing as she stares me right in the eyes in front of the orangish early evening light and declares war.

“So, you had better be ready, Yaichi.”

That’s the first time this girl has ever called me by my name.

The sunlight casts her impish face in a red hue.

—What is it that I have to be ready for?

But, our Ferris wheel carriage reaches the ground before I have a chance to ask.

“Thank you for today. You’ve been a great help.”

We only did one revolution around the Ferris wheel, but I got so much useful information from Ai.

“I’m also relieved to see that you’re doing so well. You didn’t come to our Shogi family meeting after all.”

“..... I don’t like to socialize.”

“Do you have plans for the rest the day? We could get something to eat before you go.”

“Thanks but no thanks. I have that to deal with.”

She points to a woman in a black suit wearing sunglasses walking this way.

Akira has a small mountain of freshly baked bread in her arms as she weaves

her way through the crowd of kids around her. Any one of those loaves could fall out of the paper bag and any second and all have Anpanman's face stamped on them.

Oh yeah! Speaking of kids——.

“Mio and the other girls are going to be in a tournament.”

“A tournament?”

“King of Naniwa. I'm sure you've heard of it.”

Since it's been forever since we've talked like this, I excitedly extend an invitation.

“Ai Hinatsuru and I have to be there for work, but why not come with us? You can cheer for the Grade Schooler Practice Group, too!”

“Not interested.”

Figures.

▲ UNDYING WINGS

Saying goodbye to Ai Yashajin, I head straight for the Kansai Shogi Association Player's Room.

The one I want to see just happens to be playing a practice match, in the middle of a review session by the looks of it.

"Ryou, you have a minute?"

"Agh? Got a death wish?"

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka-*Women's King* turns to face me. She's scary as hell, like the girls who hang around with the rough crowd

But, I don't let her eyes frighten me. Staring straight into them, I hit her with a name.

"Tsubasa Gakumeki. You know her, right?"

As soon as I say it——.

"" ""

Not just Ryou, but her opponent Machi Kugui-*Yamashiro Ouka* goes suspiciously quiet.

So, they do know something

Once I know my guts are right on the money, I try to figure out the meaning behind their silence.

"I'm already dead."

What Ai Yashajin said really sticks out. A former Sub League member and death. The fastest way to figure out what it all means is to ask *someone with the same experience*.

But, asking her to talk about it has to hurt so much worse than reviewing a lost match

I bet she's going back and forth wondering if she should dig up

those buried memories or not right now. Ryou takes a minute to think it over before simply saying.

“Fugu.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll tell you for fugu. Feed me some puffer fish, got it? Fugu.”

I was wrong. Seems she was only figuring out her negotiation terms: what she wanted to eat.

“F-Fugu?! I’m sorry to say it, but that’s not something you can just ask for out of nowhere

“O-Ryou, that is heartless. Can you not see that Ryou-san is under duress?”

Machi throws me a lifeline. As wealthy as she is, eating fugu isn’t anything special for her and she isn’t so shallow as to prey on other people’s weaknesses.

“Fugu is a winter fish. Even cats wouldn’t eat it out of season.”

“Tsk! Fine I’ll settle for udon noodles.”

“Oh, in that case.”

I put my hand to my chest in relief. They can help themselves to as many bowls of udon as they like.

“However I get to choose the place, got it?”

She says while flashing rows of sharp teeth. Meanwhile, Machi’s already making reservations on her phone next to her

““And here we are≡””

I realized I’d made a terrible mistake the moment our taxi pulls up in front of the restaurant.

“C’mon, Trash. Get inside.”

“Udon is udon, but This is an ‘*udonsuki*’ place, isn’t it?!!”

Think they sound the same? Well, they're not! They're totally different!!

Udonsuki is an Osakan creation. A lot like *sukiyaki*, you take all the ingredients you want, put them in a pot, and cook them all up at once. Udon noodles just happened to be one of the ingredients.

Especially this restaurant out on the wharf because, aside from being the one that came up with *udonsuki* in the first place, the flavor and prices are through the roof. Master even brought me here once when he was in a good mood, but

Ryou and Machi leave me behind to pay the taxi driver, waltz right into the restaurant and order the most expensive course meal like it's nothing at all. Our "party" starts in a small *tatami* room that we have all to ourselves.

""Gooood stuff!""

They must be hungry from playing practice matches. Go ahead, stuff your faces. Eat all you like, just do it with your own money!

"Another black oolong tea! Scratch that, let's just get the unlimited refills!"

"Has the summer special 'boiled conger eel' begun? Not yet? What a shame!"

You were going to add conger ON TOP OF ALL THIS?!

So, the rich noblewoman whose sense of money is all out of whack has come here to show all of us simpletons just how great she is. Seriously, her ordering something that expensive like buying a piece of candy nearly gave me a heart attack

"..... I'm buying all of this, so would you please tell me already? You've got good info, right? About Ms. Gakumeki"

"Cool your jets, Trash. How about enjoying the flavor? Here, have a shrimp. It's the head."

"Because you already ate the body, so I'll pass!!"

Ryou must've thought it was funny because she's laughing up a storm. Gulping down the last of her black oolong tea, she orders another one before she starts talking very quietly.

"..... Tsubasa, she's a hero to my generation."

"A hero?"

"Undying Wings Gakumeki-san is two grades above myself."

I must've looked pretty confused because now Machi is chiming in.

"She contested with boys all across the nation, claiming victory in Shogi tournaments until finally becoming the first ever female Elementary Meijin in the sixth grade. She entered the Sub League from there. The first girl in history to do that was Gakumeki-san. Her exploits earned her the nickname 'Undying' at that time, and 'Wings' taken from her given name, Tsubasa."

"She proved to all of us that 'even girls can make it that far.'"

"Her Shogi goes without saying, but even her mannerisms were what we all admired and strived to attain We held her in the highest respect."

"Sure do! 'Respect' hits it right on the nose."

Back when Ryou, Machi, and Ayumu were fourth-graders, Ms. Gakumeki was in sixth.

No wonder they saw her as a hero. I quietly whisper to myself.

"Surprising"

"Tsubasa's achievements?"

"No, that I would hear the word 'respect' from both of you like that"

"Want to get boiled up along with the udon, do you?"

Ryou unleashes her menacing aura as Machi turns the gas burner up to maximum, flames enveloping the pot. What terrifying teamwork. Cut it out.

“Just out of curiosity, I’m the one who won Elementary Meijin in third grade when both of you and Ayumu were in fifth Do you have any respect for me?”

“You winning just pissed me off. That’s why I slugged you.”

“I experienced a great variety of emotions, but respect was not among them.”

Wow, they’re cruel.

“What about you, Ryou-san? Gakumeki-san won the title before yourself, so why have you never heard her name?”

“You could say I never thought about what happened before I won The only reason I entered was because my master pretty much forced me to. Win or not, I was going to be joining the Sub League either way, so yeah.”

“Geh! You freakin’ Shogi martians”

Ryou spits out the words.

But

“I don’t want to say this about someone that you two respect so much, but Ms. Gakumeki’s Shogi is a bit”

“..... It wasn’t always like that. Not until she joined the Sub League, anyway.”

Say Ryou, sounding almost angry.

“The first thing I did after taking extended leave from the Women’s League to join the Sub League was go straight to see Tsubasa play. The Kanto Sub League doesn’t hang onto match records, so was the first time I’d seen her play in years But, it was shocking. *She’d never played that style before.*”

“It seemed like she was playing with a different set of rules,” I tell her. “I thought her unique sense for the game was her strength, but That wasn’t originally her style?”

“She is hard-core Static Rook, at least until she joined the Sub League she was. I like to be on offence, but even I could tell she had a real talent for taking the fight across the board. She was leagues better than anyone.”

Says the person called the “Aggressive Archangel” under her breath as she stares at her lap.

“I I wanted to be just like her. But then she damn it!”

“There is not a single one in our generation who does not share O-Ryou’s sentiments.”

Machi ads as if consoling her best friend.

“Most have forgotten about her because Ginko broke all her ‘unbreakable’ records, however Ginko was too strong from the beginning. Comparing the two is downright bizarre. Ascending to 2-*kyu* as a female on the Sub League is a grand achievement in its own, is it not?”

“But, you know. I might sound like a sore loser for saying this, but from where I’m standing, Tsubasa’s talent is right up there with Ginko’s.”

Says Ryou, her eyes flashing.

“I’ll admit it, Ginko’s strong. Haven’t won against her yet. But the way Tsubasa played before she joined the Sub League had a flare to it that Ginko doesn’t have. Talent shone through.”

Talent Huh.

Glancing down at the noodles getting whipped around in the boiling water, I mumble.

“..... Sounds like the Sub League churned her in the wrong direction.”

“The wrong direction?”

Machi sounds confused. She’s the only one here who hasn’t experienced the Sub League for herself, so it probably doesn’t click.

“The Sub League is made up of prodigies that were unbeatable in their hometowns. They always won if they played whatever felt was right. Basically, if they attacked, they’d win.”

Ryou chimes in with, “But, they’d hit a wall for the first time in their lives when they get to the Sub League. Only when prodigies face off do they realize they need to know how to win without just charging straight ahead. There’s some real once-in-a-generation prodigies in the Sub League. Ordinary prodigies’ strats are a joke So, they start studying up on the early game or whatever.”

Her explanation pretty much sums up the Sub League in a nutshell.

Only a handful of players can make it straight through.

The other prodigies have to change their style to some extent.

“Some people switch to a hyper defensive playing style. That’s not a big deal for ones who were defensive in the first place, but that’s a major transformation for the ones who weren’t and it destroys their Shogi.”

I still remember what a defensive Player said to me after I beat him.

“I chisel away at my own life only to lose This hurts too much”

Master Kiyotaki also plays defensively, and he’s gritted his teeth so hard over the years that his molars have been worn down to nothing.

Nobody wants to win by stopping an opponent’s attack.

Play defensively, and you’ll end up pushing yourself too hard.

“Big Sis always played a balance style, so she didn’t have to adjust all that much. Her Shogi sense never wavered. But”

“Gakumeki-san broke, is what you’re saying?”

“She developed an extremely passive playing style where her goal was to force a repetition draw on offense or defense. Then, once her opponent was frustrated enough to do an all or nothing attack, she’d simply hang back and

crush it. If her opponent was onto her plan and took the same passive stance, she'd wait for an opening and try to *nyugyoku* In a way, it's a complete style of Shogi."

Rather than corner the opponent's King and checkmate, she tries to amass as many points as possible for a stalemate. It's muddy, gritty Shogi taken to the extreme.

Sort of like a deep-sea fish.

"Ms. Gakumeki survived of the turbulent waters of the Sub League by sinking down into the dark, painful depths where nothing else could breathe."

Thinking of what spending 10 years that far down would do

"..... Ryou, did you ever play against Ms. Gakumeki when you were in the Sub League?"

"I was only in the Kanto Sub League for a single year. Tsubasa was already up at 2-*kyu* back then. All I did was fall from 6-*kyu* to 7-*kyu*. Never had a shot"

Wounded hearts can heal, but they reopen so easily. I feel sorry for her, making her talk about all this.

"O-Ryou, your time in the Sub League was years ago now, yes? For how many years was Gakumeki-san stagnant at 2-*kyu*"

"No one can advance in the Sub League with the 50-50 record. Do that in the Pros, and you won't be forced into retirement. But, you have to string wins together in the Sub League to advance. Stay at one rank too long and the age limit kicks in."

Thanks to her unique transformation, Ms. Gakumeki was able to just survive in the league.

But, the Sub League does three matches each day. Play for a stalemate every time and your body will give out sooner or later.

In order to reach the *dan* rankings, in order to take flight into the open sky,

you have to stick your face out of the water first.

But for deep-sea fish They can't breathe if they try to do that.

"I'm already dead."

Surely, what she meant was

"Anyway."

Ryou says after downing the last of the broth in her bowl.

"Learning *nyugyoku* Shogi ain't something you can do at the drop of a hat. Playing *nyugyoku* against the computer makes the software flimsy as hell so the match records are worthless. Can't even practice with it. That apprentice of yours makes a beeline right for the enemy King, so this matchup is beyond horrible for her. What're you gonna do?"

"Good question"

It's just as Ryou said, this is a terrible match for Ai Hinatsuru.

There is no strategy I can give, or even a way to teach her how to deal with this style.

If she's going against a deep-sea fish, then——.

"I guess I'll have her take flight."

""Huuh?""

🏠 THE RYUO'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DEBUT

“Riiise!”

40 grade schoolers get to their feet.

“Bow!”

40 grade schoolers lower their heads in unison.

Then——.

““Good morning, Kuzuryu-sensei!!””

40 grade schoolers call my name.

Whoa

They're all over the place

“Th-Thank you for having me?”

Willing myself to smile from behind the teacher's podium, I bow right back.

——So, this is the classroom Ai goes to every day

This is my first time setting foot in Kita Fukushima Elementary's fifth grade class four classroom, and I have to say There are tons of little kids in here. Well, obviously, but

Ai looks nervous but Mio couldn't be more excited as the two of them look up at me from their desks.

“As you all know, today's careers lesson will be taught by Professional Shogi Player Yaichi Kuzuryu-sensei.”

Their homeroom teacher Misao Kanegasaka explains.

“One of only two Shogi Association buildings in Japan is located right here in Fukushima Ward, where all of you live. Your classmate Ai Hinatsuru already

works as a Women's Shogi Player and another one of your classmates, Mio Mizukoshi, is hard at work studying Shogi to achieve the same goal."

Kanegasaka-sensei must have studied up because there is no falter in her voice whatsoever.

"Kuzuryu-sensei holds the title of 'Dragon King Ryuo,' which is the Shogi world's most prestigious title. At the same time, he is only seven years older than yourselves. Please ask him questions about Shogi or being a Shogi Player and use them as inspiration to find the path to your own dreams."

""Okay!!""

Class 5-4's motto is "strive for your dreams."

Also, Kanegasaka-sensei knows how to get things done.

She set it up so that I could come teach the class today and even got permission for the group to visit the Kansai Shogi Association on a field trip to watch one of Ai's matches on a weekday. It just so happens that Mio will be working as the match recorder, too. It's great that Ai and Mio won't be marked as "absent" that day, but that meant I had to endure Chairman Tsukimitsu and Ms. Oga saying, "You truly go all out when it comes to elementary school students," and a whole bunch of other comments. Yeah, yeah, loli-con, loli-con.

"Hmmp? So, this is the 'Master' I've heard so much about?"

A girl dressed in really flashy clothes sitting next to Ai says in a voice loud enough that everyone in the room could hear.

"Nowhere near as cool as I've heard, but also not as easy as I thought. Those clothes and the magazine I gave you bowled him over, right?"

"M-Mihane?!"

Ai's gone bright red as she awkwardly glances up in my direction.

So, that's the culprit who gave my apprentice that cursed edition of "Elementary 4 Reader" and the "Loli-con Assassin Gear" I better keep a

good eye on her

Even the kids that aren't as bold as Mihane are whispering amongst themselves.

"A grown-up" "A grown-up boy"! "My brother is as old as he is." "That guy there is Ai's master?!" "They're living together but they're not family, right?!"

It seems like everyone is more interested in my relationship with Ai than Shogi.

"I've already taught them how each piece moves. You can take it from here."

Kanegasaka-*sensei* heads for the corner.

"..... So long as you stand at the podium, you have to be in charge. Don't let them eat you alive"

She whispers as she passes behind me.

But, I can't slip up now. So I can continue raising Ai as a live-in apprentice And more importantly so I can get the next generation of young people interested in Shogi, I'll use every technique I know!!

"Well, why don't we divide into pairs and play a match? Ai, help me out."

"Y- Yes, Master!!"

Ai jumps to her feet with a start as the whole class stares right at her.

In order to keep children under control, it's necessary to draw their attention.

There's nothing worse than when they lose interest and decide to entertain themselves.

"..... It's good that they're so interested in the two of us. Now we just need to get that interest focused on Shogi."

"! Master, you're so smart"!

Talking amongst ourselves, we pass out the vinyl boards and plastic pieces so the kids can play, but——.

The word “play” must have registered a bit too well with everyone, because the kids start goofing off and the situation tumbles out of control.

“Hey, everyone! This is serious!!”

Mio tries to get her classmates to concentrate, but the chatter is still going strong.

“M-Master What do we do?”

“..... It’s alright.”

I encourage my flustered apprentice before saying in a loud voice.

“Everybody! There’s a special secret technique to getting good at Shogi really fast Would you like to know?”

““!!””

Suddenly, countless pairs of surprised eyes are locked on to me.

Yes! I got them!

“Honestly, I don’t want to say it and I haven’t even told Ai or Mio what it is. But, I suppose I could make an exception today and let you in on the secret Are you interested?”

““.....!!””

I drop my voice down low and the kids lean toward me with bright eyes.

Now that I’ve taken plenty of time for buildup, I tell them the answer.

“The secret to getting good quickly. It’s Manners!””

““Man ners?””

That’s probably the last answer they expected, and it seems to have stirred up even more interest.

“You can’t level up without defeating strong monsters in games, right? That’s just like how you can’t get stronger at Shogi without playing against lots of strong people. Then, what do you think is the best way to do that?”

““.....?””

“Make friends with strong people! That’s why your manners are very important. Always saying hello, being friendly and polite, do these things and you’ll make so many friends.”

Little lightbulbs of recognition are going off in their eyes.

“Shogi is a game for two, yes? That means the more friends you have, the stronger you will become. On the other hand, offend people and you only end up hurting yourself.”

So—I puff up my chest and say.

“If you want to get good, greet everyone with a smile and be friendly. Okay?”

““Okay!!””

Everyone says at once. It’s almost like they’re a completely different group of kids than just a few minutes ago.

Almost on cue, Mio turns to her opponent and says, “When you’re ready!” in a big voice to provide an example. One by one, the kids start copying her before sitting down and starting their matches.

“Ohh?”

Kanegasaka-*sensei* seems to be impressed because she’s nodding away in the corner and jotting down notes. Sweet! I scored some points!

“Aaall right! Tell you what. Just for today, I’ll tell you anything you want to know! Who has a question for me?! Don’t be shy! Ask me anything!”

“U-Um!”

A quiet looking girl works up the courage to raise her hand—.

“Is it true that You’re going to marry Ai?”

That’s one hell of a bomb she just dropped.

““Huuuuuh?! Marry her———?!”

The whole class erupts in a frenzy. Of course they would. I’m just as surprised.

Ai jumps to her feet and yells.

“N-No! ‘May,’ got it? ‘May!!’ Like one of those romance games!!”

Not giving a definite “yes” or “no” only adds fuel to the fire. Then someone yells out “I heard Mio has spent the night at Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s apartment before!” “That also makes them lovers already!” came another. Now this flaming snowball is picking up speed as these grade schoolers’ imaginations run wild.

“I get it! Kuzuryu-*sensei* is so strong because he has lots of lovers, not friends!”

“Lovers are even better than friends!”

“But, if he’s getting married, wouldn’t that make them wives?!”

“Then, Kuzuryu-*sensei* is married to a whole bunch of girls!!”

You’re a legend, Kuzuryu-*sensei*! And a whole bunch of other claims that for whatever reason made me the unexpected idol of this grade school class, but The room is even louder than it was before.

Being an elementary school teacher is rough!!

■ MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING AFTER SCHOOL

Ayano and Charlette come to the school once classes were over.

“P-Please Excuse us.”

“Cha, Cha’s neber been to a Jawpanese scwool before!!”

Charlette’s excitedly bouncing around, opening the locker in the back of the room where the cleaning supplies are kept before trying to catch the class’s pet hamster. Free-spirited as ever.

To start things off, I have everyone take a seat and get them up to speed on the situation.

“A-hem Thanks to Kanegasaka-*sensei*’s good will, the Grade Schooler Practice Group can now use this classroom after school!”

I thought it would be a last resort after my apartment became off-limits for practice sessions, but Now that I’ve taught a class in here myself, I like it better in here.

Desks, a chalkboard, and everything that we could ever need are all right here. I can do lecture style lessons, which are very difficult at my apartment or even at the Association classroom.

People normally avoid teaching classes, but it’s so easy to focus in a classroom that this just might work!

Ayano and Charlette are going to stay at Mio’s house tonight, so there’s no need to worry about the session running late. Mio lives walking distance away and Kanegasaka-*sensei* said she could drop them off, too.

This place has so many good things going for it. Wow Elementary schools are the best!

“All right, let’s get started!”

““Okay!””

Four grade schoolers respond with gusto. This must be what being the cool teacher feels like.

“Amateur tournaments have very little waiting time, so you have to play fast. Therefore, you’ll place very high if you have a thorough understanding of how to play fast. This is the formula for success!”

I write out the formula on the chalkboard.

“Your King invulnerable + Enemy King in danger = victory”

“This! This is the epitome of playing fast!”

I thump the chalkboard for extra impact and explain.

“It’s hard to read all the way to checkmate when you only have a few seconds, right? The good news is you don’t have to. You can win as long as your King is safe.”

Figuring out if you can or can’t checkmate your opponent in a few seconds isn’t a skill anyone can learn overnight, and talent has a lot to do with it.

In that case, what can you do to give your skills an immediate boost?

If reading is too hard, memorize.

“So, remember as many ‘invulnerable formations’ as possible! Once you know them by heart, you can keep attacking and get stronger and stronger!”

This method goes against most modern teaching styles, but it’s the most efficient.

Passing out printouts of different types of invulnerable formations to the girls, Mio almost nosedives into the paper with her eyes wide open in shock.

“Gahh! There’s a lot of these things.”

“Well, there aren’t a lot of ‘cannot be put in check formations,’ but there are quite a few ‘can escape check formations’ to learn. There are also ‘invulnerable without a Rook or Gold formations’ and ‘invulnerable without a Knight formations,’ too!”

Yeah, there are lots. With all these details to remember, it can’t be easy for them.

Ayano, on the other hand, is beaming.

“If I can just memorize these ‘invulnerable formations,’ I won’t have to waste seconds on it reading my own King even in the closest of late games! The late game is my weakness, but I have an excellent memory! I’ll do my best!”

“Cha, too! Cha twies hard in the wate game!”

If your own King is safe, you can focus entirely on finishing off your opponent’s.

Having to read half as much as your opponent means you’re only fighting against half of your opponent’s Shogi skill. Meaning, your chances to win go way up.

“I’ve got a treat ready for you if you can memorize all of these perfectly by the end of today!!”

““Yaaay! Treats!!””

Dangle a carrot in front of them and their concentration skyrockets! I can handle grade schoolers, no sweat!!

“Um Master?”

As the other girls are getting to work on their own printouts, Ai is the only one left without anything to do. She raises her hand and asks.

“There isn’t a one for me?”

“I’ve got something special prepared for you, Ai. You have a league match coming up.”

I’ve done a lot of research on Ai’s next opponent learning as much as I can about Ms. Gakumeki.

Putting it all together——.

“The next person you’re going to face is probably going to be the strongest you’ve ever played in an even match. Winning won’t be easy. But, with the right preparation, you should be able to find a way.”

“! Yes, Master! What should I do?!”

I hand a sheet of paper to my suddenly nervous apprentice.

“Solve these Shogi puzzles.”

“Uwhee? Shogi, puzzles?”

“Yeah. I’ve got some puzzles ready for you. I’ll be timing you today, too.”

“U-Umm But Maria said that Shogi puzzles are pointless Hanadachi-sensei also said so in the magazine”

“There is a point. I’m asking you to trust me and just do it.”

“..... Okay. I will.”

She agrees but looks less than convinced.

I suppose she wouldn’t be. After all, I just said “you don’t have to put the opponent’s King in checkmate.”

But, Ai loves doing Shogi puzzles.

“..... Here Here Here, here, here”

And, starts working on it right away.

“Kanegasaka-sensei. Ai is working on something like a test, so please check her answers when she is done. I’ll look after the other girls.”

“I can do that.”

“Here is the answer sheet.”

Glancing over the paper, she looks up at me with suspicion in her eyes.

“..... What exactly is this?”

“The answers to these Shogi puzzles.”

“Preposterous. The book of Shogi puzzles I bought at the bookstore doesn’t have any of this grimoire-esk mumbo-jumbo anywhere to be found. Is it even possible to solve this puzzle?”

“What book did you buy?”

“It has a pink cover. The sign said it is the bestseller.”

“Ah, that one has 3-step and 5-step puzzles. Of course, it’s a great book, but If you think of that one as a grade school workbook, Ai is working a prep course to get into graduate school.”

“There’s that much difference?!”

“Yes. These ones were used for the Shogi Puzzle Championship.”

“Shogi Puzzle Championship?”

“It’s an extremely competitive tournament that even Pro Shogi Players join. The puzzle makers in charge of the whole thing put all their brainpower into making the puzzles as hard as possible, and sometimes even Pros can’t solve them all.”

The puzzles I gave Ai are from the first round.

They’re easier than the wide array of next-to-impossible puzzles from Round 2, but even these ones are so hard that they blows regular Shogi puzzles out of the water.

There’s a 90-minute time limit, but this year’s champion needed less than half of it, only 40 minutes, to solve every single puzzle correctly.

Ai may be good at them, but even she'd struggle with these.

“Um Master?”

"Hm? Is something wrong, Ai? Did you find a mistake in a puzzle?"

"I'm finished."

Say what?

"I'm finished."

“Oh Okay! I see! B-But, this isn’t a speed contest! It’s about accuracy! How’d she do, Kanegasaka-*sensei*?”

“..... 100% correct.”

Come again?

Uhhh It's only been, about 10 minutes Since she started

“Master? Um Did I take too long? I wanted to make sure I didn’t make a mistake, so I went over them many times, so it took me longer to finish”

What? Whaaat?

I knew she was good at Shogi puzzles, but This good?

“Th-The next ones are the ones that counts!! Those were just a warm-up!”

“Okay, Master! I’ll do my best!!”

This time, I give her the puzzles from Round 2.

These are so difficult that no one answered perfectly. Even Ai has to be feeling overwhelmed just looking at them.

“Here, here, hereherehereherehereherehere——.”

Brain firing on all cylinders, Ai sets to work.

I take a moment to step back and look at all the Grade Schooler Practice Group members hard at work on their own assignments and Kanegasaka-*sensei* comes up to me to quietly say.

“..... It’s quite impressive, Shogi.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t mean to sound arrogant, but I was always the top student in my class ever since my elementary school days.”

Far from bragging, she sounds embarrassed.

“Junior high, high school, college All I ever did was go to whichever school my parents and teachers said was the best around and then become a teacher myself. However, not one thing I learned in college has been useful as a member of society

“Sensei

“Being entrusted with a class of my own for the first time made me realize that I know nothing about the world outside of school walls. That’s why seeing children carve their own path in life outside of school makes me anxious, as though I don’t have the right to teach them anything.”

I’m shocked but, at the same time, I know exactly how that feels.

Just how I’ve gone back and forth about how I should raise Ai Hinatsuru, Kanegasaka-sensei has been grappling with her own problems as a teacher.

“..... I’m not sure if it’s right for me to say this as a guy who gave up on studying in junior high school, but——.”

“?”

“I’m so relieved that someone like you is Ai’s homeroom teacher!”

“Huh?”

“There are so many things I can’t teach my apprentice because I never went to high school. Please, teach her for me! Let her know what it’s like outside of the Shogi world. What she can learn and what she can’t.”

“Mr. Kuzuryu

“And, this might be asking a little much, but I would really appreciate it if you could overlook her absences for league matches. Maybe? Ahaha!”

“..... I can handle that.”

There are many ways it can be done She adds with a reassuring tone.

“Really?! Oh, you’re a lifesaver!”

Kanegasaka-*sensei* is strict, but the Shogi world isn’t over her head at all. That alone makes Ai and Mio very lucky.

“I had a rough time when I had to miss school to play a match or work as a match recorder. The only thing I thought about was what excuse I would make to get out of class next time. But I can’t tell my apprentice to just skip school. With her future in my hands, I feel like that would cross the line and be kind of pathetic”

“Well, *Yaichi*, you’re still the same age as a high school student, yes? You don’t have to overexert yourself to fit in with adults.”

“! Sensei”

Hearing kind words out of her for the first time, I feel like a student again.

I’ve always had a weakness for older women.

But, more than that I like the aura teachers have.

I mean, my first crush was my kindergarten teacher And then Keika

Kanegasaka-*sensei* looks a little bit hesitant before—she leans in to whisper in my ear!

“..... *Yaichi*. The truth is——.”

She starts saying something, when.

“?! ”

Zing zing! I turn around and see——.

“.....”

Ai is silently standing there without saying a word. Kinda scary.

“I’m finished.”

“O-Ohhh That was fast”

It hasn’t even been 30 minutes. Too fast. Almost peed my pants.

If If she got every answer right

“Y-You must be tired by now, yes? How about taking a break once we check your answers? I’ve got your favorite strawberry flavor as a treat when you’re done, so——.”

“Yaaay!”

Ai throws her arms in the air, expressing happiness with her whole body like any little kid would do, before sticking her face up toward mine and saying.

“Okay, Master, can I have strawberry kisses like always? On the cheek is fine *today*.”

In that moment, the whole classroom freezes over.

“*Mr.* Kuzuryu? Would you care to explain?”

The budding relationship we had snuffed out mere moments after being born, Kanegasaka-sensei grabs a long, forked pole from the locker and points the business end right at me.

“Uh um, Kanegasaka-sensei? That’s a *sasumata*, right? Used to fend off strangers on school grounds, right? Why are you holding it?”

“Because I found a suspicious individual.”

Come again? Where? Where?

“Master always gives all of us a special treat after practice sessions! Isn’t that right, everyone?”

HEEEEEEEEEEEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!! What are you doing throwing napalm on a nice campfire?!

“Huuh?! Treats?! You’ve been getting extra treats all this time, Ai?! No fair!” yells Mio.

“Cha, too! Cha, Cha wants more of Masta’s tweets!”

“I-I as well Would like a treat, from Kuzuryu-*sensei*

It seems the grade schoolers have followed latched on to the word “treat.”

“You were doing depraved things after all, weren’t you?! Those alleged Shogi practice sessions were just a front for lolitic fraternization at your apartment

Pointing the *sasumata* rod like a spear and glaring at me like she’s caught a pervert red handed, Kanegasaka-*sensei* closes in on me with very deliberate steps.

“No, wait, wait! The treats I give them are just strawberry ice cream——.”

“Caressing?! You caress them as a reward?! I knew you were a predator all along!!”

Crap, I can’t get through to her!

“Ai?! I was so close to settling things and you had to go burn it all down?!”

“That’s not my problem! Master *dara*!!”

Calling me a dirty word from her hometown, Ai angrily puffs out her cheeks.

..... Shogi puzzles may be difficult, but they’re nothing compared to figuring out what’s going through a fifth-grader’s head.

🏠 GRADE SCHOOL PRACTICE GROUP FALLS APART

“Bye-bye. Kuzuryu-sensei!”

“Bye. See you later.”

I watch as the grade schoolers with backpacks over their shoulders hold today's printouts under their arms as they wave goodbye.

Grade school teachers have so much to do.

They can't go home as soon as class is over. There's Shogi puzzle homework to check before getting the homework for next lesson ready and a lot of planning to do first. Then there's the Grade Schooler Practice Group session to lead after school.

“Whew Grade school teachers are really busy!”

Then again, I feel so much more fulfilled than ever before.

An unfortunate series of misunderstandings led to the Grade Schooler Practice Group being held at the school, but having it there along with teaching Class 5-4's Shogi lessons has become a rhythmic routine.

I said it before, but as a building designed to be a place to teach, it's really easy to do lessons at school.

“If only I had one of those at home!”

“Playing Shogi at a place like that would be great!”

Everything I've ever wanted is right here, so the scope of what I can teach has grown by leaps and bounds. Elementary schools are the best!

Just it seems that people make assumptions when they hear that the Ryuo, the face of the Shogi world, is teaching lessons at a local elementary school——.

"I heard that Trash Ryuo's been hanging out at an elementary school a lot recently."

"Beyond fishy."

"He didn't even get permission from the Shogi Association"

"Who knows if even got permission from the school, being the loli-con king that he is."

..... Those rumors are all over the net.

But that's fine!

Compared to the happiness of the Grade Schooler Practice Group and watching their skills grow like mad Being called a loli-con is a tiny little thing. No sweat.

Even my "careers" classes with Kanegasaka-sensei have been going well.

All the arrangements to go see Ai play a match are falling into place and it seems like Shogi has become the go-to game all over the school.

"I must say, Kuzuryu-sensei, more and more students are saying hello each morning after taking part in your Shogi class!"

"I can see why you made it to the top of the Shogi world at such a young age, Dragon King Ryuo!"

"If you have an opportunity, I would love for you to teach a Shogi class for my homeroom as well!"

Once the principal liked me, my reputation in the school just keeps going up.

I even have my own desk in the teacher's office now, so I feel like an actual elementary school teacher. Maybe I have a talent for this?

I just feel everything is on the rise. Mio and the rest of the Grade Schooler Practice Group, my own teaching technique, my classes together with Kanegasaka-sensei, all arrows are pointing up.

..... With one exception.

“Hm? Ai? What are you doing outside the teacher’s office door?”

“Uwhee?!”

I say from behind the girl on all fours, trying to go unnoticed as she peeks into the teacher’s office, and she jumps straight up like a scared cat.

Why was she on the floor?

“Were you trying to sneak inside?”

“Um! I, uh Agh, agh”

“What is it? Come on, tell me.”

“Uh, um! Umm I have to apologize to you, Master!!”

She goes from being on hands and knees into full-out *dogeza* prostration.

Something she has to apologize for? No she didn’t peek at the test answers, did she?!

“I lost to the Shogi piece keychain that you gave me! I’m so sorry!!”

“..... That’s it?”

What was I so nervous for? I pull my apprentice to her feet and say.

“They’ve got tons of those things that the Association. I’ll buy you a new one.”

“N-No!! That was the first thing you ever bought for me, Master. It’s too important to just replace with another one That’s why I always kept it on my backpack as a good luck charm, but”

She says with tear-filled eyes.

Amazed and deeply moved that she would treasure a piece of plastic only worth a couple hundred yen this much, I ask her.

“Do you know where you lost it?”

“School I think. I’m pretty sure, but I’ve looked all over the school and

even checked the lost and found. The teacher's office is the only place left"

Which is why she was trying to sneak in.

"All right. I'll have a look around and ask the other teachers if they've seen anything."

"Thank you so much!!"

But, she still hasn't moved from her spot.

"What? Is there something else on your mind?"

"..... Shouldn't, we be doing more"

Ai starts talking as if squeezing out thoughts that had been building up for too long.

"God-sensei's little sister The Elementary Meijin will be in the King of Naniwa Tournament, right? But all we've been doing is memorizing things and solving Shogi puzzles. Just late game training"

"So, you'd like to do more early game practice?"

"....."

That silence is just as good as a yes.

"I understand that the Women's Legend qualifier final match is making you anxious. But, improving your late-game skills is the most important thing right now. That goes for the other girls and of course for you, Ai."

"You don't have to worry about me! It's——."

"We'll be starting a different training exercise today. Go on ahead and get ready."

"..... Okay."

Still not looking convinced, Ai nods and finally walks away from the teacher's office.

Once I watch her tiny frame disappear down the hallway, I go inside and set my stuff down on my desk.

“Haaaa Late-game skills.”

I pick up some papers off my desk and look them over.

One is Ai’s Shogi puzzle answers, fully checked.

The other is this year’s Shogi Puzzle Championship results.

3rd Place: Sumito Sakanashi 3-*dan* 80 Points 180 Minutes (180 Minute Time Limit) 2nd Place: Taishi Shinokubo 7-*dan* 82 Points 180 Minutes (180 Minute Time Limit) Champion: Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan* 94 Points 180 Minutes (180 Minute Time Limit)

Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*kyu* 100 Points 30 Minutes (180 Minute Time Limit)

“..... She’s too good to just be a prodigy Solving everything correctly six times faster than the Eternal Meijin”

Mr. Shinokubo in second place is a former titleholder. Chairman Tsukimitsu is a Shogi puzzle creator and has an A rank right now.

How am I supposed to guide a talent that can calculate faster than the person who can do it at the speed of light? I’ve thought about it more than anyone.

“Line up!! Face front Follow me!!”

Wearing gym clothes and the sunglasses I bought a while ago for a match in Hawaii, I blow the whistle hanging around my neck.

The girls lined up by height in front of me are wearing polo shirts and gym shorts (Charlette, for whatever reason, has bloomers on instead).

“Today we train in the gym!!”

I feel just like one of those hot-blooded PE teachers. It's important to act the part!

Kanegasaka-*sensei*, also in gym clothes, says in a low, cold voice.

"You're welcome to use it, but Why the gymnasium? You don't need all that space to play Shogi and honestly it seems very out of place."

"It's that out-of-place-ness that we need to train for!"

"Meaning?"

"The King of Naniwa Tournament will be held in the Osaka City Gymnasium. They need to practice in similar surroundings beforehand. Otherwise, they'll be nervous when the time comes."

"Could the surroundings have that much impact on a match?"

"Of course! Pieces can slip out of your fingers if you're sweating too much and muscle pains can have a big impact on your concentration. Shogi is a sport, after all!"

It's already the middle of May. The weather is officially starting to get hot. School is done for the day, but it's hot and muggy in the gym.

There's also a good chance it'll rain on the day of the tournament.

"High endurance is a must if you're going to play a lot of matches in a hot and humid gymnasium Which is why I had them wear gym clothes, so they can get some exercise in at the same time! Not for personal reasons, not at all!!"

"I never said anything of the sort"

We've got half the gym to ourselves while the basketball team practices on the other half. Now, let's get this training started!

"We focus on practice matches starting today!"

They've crammed their heads full of invulnerable formations. It's time to see the results in actual matches.

The important thing is——.

“Believe your gut and press forward!”

I didn’t teach them how to defend so they can outlast their opponent.

I did it so they can focus on attacking!

“If you start out playing to win the safe way, your pieces will be out of position to attack when the time comes. That’s why it’s better to practice forcing your way into enemy territory. With enough matches, you’ll be able to sense the timing on your own!!”

““Yes!! Kuzuryu-sensei!!””

“Call me Coach!”

““Yes!! Coach!!”

I’m using the gym’s competitive atmosphere to get them to keep pushing forward on instinct rather than logic. It has nothing to do with my preferences.

I play two matches at once while Ai goes one-on-one against each of the girls in turn.

Since there’s a big gap in skill, the two of us are playing with a handicap.

“Mio, don’t doubt yourself so much! Trust your eyes and charge!”

“Yes, Coach!!”

“Ayano, missed opportunities don’t come back! That’s what defense is for! Never give up! Keep coming again, again, again!!”

“Y-Yes!!”

“Charlette! Keep your tempo up! Don’t wait to the last moment to make your move, play quickly! Never, ever let yourself run out of time!”

“Okway! Cha, Cha will pway fwast!”

Ramping up the intensity of our practice session to prepare for the

tournament, the girls' confidence is getting shattered by losing to Ai over and over despite having the handicap advantage, but I can see improvement.

In the Grade Schooler Practice Group.

And—in Ai's Shogi.

"All right. Take a breather."

"Whew I played a bunch!"

Mio flops back on to the gym floor after playing for two hours straight with no breaks.

"Haauuu. My fingers are hurting"

"Cha, Cha's so shweatty. Sticky."

Ayano, who typically takes time to thoroughly read the board, nurses her fingers after playing much faster than she's used to while Charlette pulls at her shirt that's stuck to her skin. Is she trying to pull it off? DON'T!!

Catching her breath while sprawled out on her back, Mio says.

"..... It takes a lot out of me but playing Shogi with you guys at school is so much fun!"

"Think so?"

"Yep! Ai and I come here every day, but Ayanon and Charlette go to a different school. Now that they're here, I want to do other things, too"

With that, Mio springs to her feet.

Then, eyes twinkling, she asks.

"Hey, Coach! Since we've got the gym, why don't we all play something? We've never done that before and it's not like we can do it every day!"

"That's true"

To be blunt, there's still a ton of things to do before the tournament starts.

What's more, only Ai and I know that the Elementary Meijin, Maria Kannabe, will be participating in the King of Naniwa Tournament.

—No amount of preparation will be enough to win against the Elementary Meijin

On the other hand, getting stressed out now can only make things worse.

Having taught this girl over the past year, I think I have a good grasp on their personalities.

They love Shogi, but they're not cut out for cramming in a ton of matches at once.

That's why I smile at her and say.

"Well then, why don't we see if the basketball team will let us join in for a bit?"

If there's any sport that grade school girls are into right now, it's basketball.

"Yay! I'll go get a ball!"

Mio disappears into the gym's storage room and returns at a light jog while sure handedly dribbling a basketball at the same time.

Charlette looks excited, too.

"Cha! Cha woves basquette ball!"

"I-I'm not the best at sports like this, but But you think, Ai?"

"..... Not good enough."

""Huh?""

Ai, the only one still sitting at a board tells Mio in a cold, harsh tone.

“I’m saying that wasn’t good enough. Didn’t you hear me?”

She’s not talking about playing basketball.

After playing matches against everybody, Ai must’ve picked up on what I did.

“The matches we just played; everyone’s late game was terrible.”

“W-Well We can’t just rush towards checkmate like you can, Ai, so——.”

“Then when will you be able to?”

Ai corners her with a hard tone.

“If you can’t, you have to practice until you can. And, Master told you to memorize those formations, but you couldn’t even get them right. Isn’t it common sense to study at home until you can remember everything?”

Her onslaught of logic continues.

She’s not mincing words with a girl her own age.

“And now you want to play basketball? Are you even trying?”

“Of course we are! That’s why we have been coming to these practice sessions every day! You’ve seen how hard we’re trying, haven’t you!?”

“Practice session? This?”

Ai laughs her nose, almost taunting Mio as she says.

“This isn’t a practice session. For me, it’s an *instructional match*.”

In the face of those chilling, harsh words——.

“..... Is that what you think?”

Looking like she just got stabbed in the heart, the ball slips out of Mio’s hand and falls to the floor.

“What else could it be? I’m giving you a handicap. Solving Shogi puzzles and playing handicap matches right before an important league match isn’t a practice session, now is it?”

“!! I’m not playing handicap match because I want to——.”

“If you hate it that much, you have to get stronger, right? But you’re running away to play basketball?”

Stomp!

Mio slams her foot down.

“And what if I am?! I don’t need you to teach me anything!!”

“Master.”

With no emotion her voice whatsoever, Ai turns her attention to me and says in one breath.

“I’m already in the Women’s League. I can research on my own and I want to focus on preparing for a very important league match. So I’m leaving this practice group.”

L-Leaving?! The Grade Schooler Practice Group?!

It’s true there’s a difference in skill level, but this practice group For Ai, it might be more of a place to teach now rather than a place to learn.

I’ve raised her the way that I think is best. Unfortunately, now’s not the time to explain what I have in mind

And, no matter how I look at it *What she’s saying is just too bizarre.*

I mean, earlier today in front of the teachers office, she was more worried about——.

Almost as if trying to confirm my theory, Ai starts storming out of the gym.

“Ai!!”

I call out to her just before she reaches the door and finally she comes to a stop.

“Keep solving Shogi puzzles. Ones longer than the ones you haven’t been able to solve, and like your life depends on it. Don’t you dare look at the answers until you’re finished.”

She doesn’t answer. Without another glance, Ai leaves the gym.

The Grade Schooler Practice Group, which was formed all because Mio and Ai met, is falling apart because they couldn’t see eye to eye.

▲ SISTERS

It's the night after a crack appeared in our practice group.

I took Charlette with me to visit Big Sister Machi at her family's manor.

She kept insisting "Cha wants to pway more!" and wouldn't take no for an answer, so I couldn't think of anyone else to go to.

Despite our unannounced visit, Big Sister Machi welcomed us inside without so much as a frown And even instructed to Charlette and I in Shogi

But her hospitality didn't end there. "I presume you shall be spending the night?" She said with recognition in her eyes

Though I'm ashamed to say it I cried during our Shogi session.

"This is no good. Seems almost as though I'm the one who induced to those tears."

"Nggh *Sniffle* S-Sorry"

"The best method for cooling the heart? For starters, warm the body."

Charlette had pushed herself so hard that she dozed off and fell asleep on top of the board. Once Big Sister Machi and I had moved her to a futon, she invited me to join her for a bath.

Though we are sister apprentices This was of course our first time bathing together.



“Your beloved friend, Ai, said such harsh things? Though Hehe. That’s just like Ryuo-san, having her be the upper player in handicapped matches. Such an intriguing take.”

After I explained what happened, Big Sister Machi tells me with a smile.

“However, I fail to understand the point of the puzzles. Solving extremely long sequences has no bearing upon actual matches. That’s common knowledge Particularly when it comes to the late game against ‘Undying Wings.’ While puzzles get solved with a neat little bow, playing against her is akin to crawling through knee-deep mud in a pigsty. Ryuo-san should be well aware Yet?”

“.....?”

“Oh, just my own musings. Let yourself relax, Ayano.”

“Ahn?! Haauuu”

The heat of the bath and her hands massaging my shoulders combine. I was helpless to stop those sounds from escaping.

H-How embarrassing!

Big Sister Machi has lent me many comics detailing how friendships between boys suddenly escalate but Can the same happen with girls?

I change the subject to soothe my nerves.

“..... Have you ever, fought with your friends?”

“Not with everyday people, nor my friends from college. I’ve made it my personal mantra not to delve too deep with anyone. But——.”

“But?”

“When I faced O-Ryou in the title match Whether that was a fight or not eludes me. Both of us were completely serious in our endeavor.”

“Ah”

I saw that battle with my own eyes and can still vividly recall every detail.

Their fierce dual unfolding on a stage built above the flowing Kamogawa River, the fireworks they unleashed.

Just as memories of the view I had from the Sanjyo Gawara river side Big Sister Machi, sitting before me in the nude, puts her hand on my cheek and tells me.

“In any case, watch Ai’s next match closely.”

“The Women’s Legend qualifier? Will there be coverage?”

“Women’s League matches, much less preliminary rounds, getting Internet coverage happens rarely if ever. However, once I made the director see reason, that this match would draw all sorts of attention, he agreed to stream it online. Though, no one had anything to lose.”

“I knew it Ai is different. Her popularity, her talent”

The first time I was matched against Ai Hinatsuru in the Practice League, I was driven into a corner and surrendered after a mere 34 moves.

“That gap is just getting wider now Even with the benefit of a handicap, I was thoroughly and utterly defeated Her King reached *nyugyoku*”

That’s why We’re nothing but a bother to her anymore

“Talent varying from person to person is only natural. We are born with it, after all.”

Says Big Sister Machi in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Ayano, do you believe the difference in talent alone is what determines the result of a match?”

“I, well I don’t think so. Effort plays a part As do a variety of other factors.”

“If that’s the case, there is no point assigning blaming to a ‘difference in

talent.' Those thoughts lead nowhere."

"Haauu"

"..... Nine years prior, I too was confronted with a talent that seemed insurmountable."

Big Sister Machi continues.

"In the face of such an incredible talent, I convinced myself from the start that I could not win. A far cry from claiming victory, I wholly believed I didn't belong on the same stage."

"?! Y-You did"

"Though recently, I've come to believe that that choice was in error."

Big Sister Machi sets her hand upon her sizable breast.

"Watching one younger and more beautiful than I continue to strive for a goal I had given up on from the start and make it that far Of course, it pains me. In a word, it's jealousy."

Big Sister Machi Jealous?

As a woman and Women's League Player, everyone envies her. Such a perfect person knows that feeling?

"B-Big Sister Machi? May I ask who——?"

"The last thing I wish for you, Ayano, is to repeat my own mistakes. The only result of giving up based on talent alone is regret."

"Regret"

That word reminds me of something.

Reminds me of why I decided to take part in the King of Naniwa Tournament with Mio in the first place.

Why Charlette has become so driven to play Shogi.

And, the slightest bit of recognition came to me as well.

No matter the difference in talent, age, or even gender So long as we are human, all of us experience the same worries, sorrows, fears, and pain.

So, surely, Ai as well———.

“I have one more thing to impart. My working on the Women’s League qualifier internet coverage isn’t for Ai or even Ryuo-san.”

“It’s not? Then who was it for?”

Big Sister Machi embraces me before whispering into my ear.

“It’s to support a poor soul that walked this path before myself who was unable to recognize her own desires and To congratulate my own little sister advancing to the next grade. Please do accept my gift♪”

RECORD 4



UNDYING

WINGS

Tsubasa Gakumeki 岳滅鬼翼

© shirabii

ON THE ROAD

It's been three months since I came to the Kansai Shogi Association.

"..... Not a'once did come here dur'en my time in the Sub League, but twice already after start'en in the Women's League"

There's no pressure here. 'Cause nobody knows who I am.

I don't want to go to the Association building in Tokyo. I might run into someone that knows me.

I would hate that.

Which is why I asked the staff to hold this match in Kansai.

The person from the scheduling department looked at me like he couldn't believe what I just said.

"As your opponent is in elementary school, we would of course be very grateful to you, *Gakumeki-sensei*, for making the trip, but Are you sure about this?"

Women's League Players registered in Kanto that volunteer to go to Kansai don't exist.

Some Players don't even play a single match nor go there their entire life.

"There's Some other details concerning this match, requests that need to be discussed"

I okayed them all. The match environment doesn't matter.

If I lose from losing my concentration, so be it.

In a place where no one knows who I am I want this to quietly end without anyone knowing I was there.

Thinking these things to myself as I enter the arena——.

“Good morning!”

“G ood mor ning?”

A young girl greets me. A happy, energetic girl.

She was leaning over the board, meticulously wiping it down before squaring her shoulders to me, putting her hands on the *tatami* mat, and very politely lowering her head.

“It’s nice to meet you! I’m Yaichi Kuzuryu’s apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru!!”

A few seconds pass before it clicks that she’s my opponent today.

—Whaddya know, the same line as that Ai Yashajin Sister apprentices, maybe?

Her master, Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*.

The same family line as Ginko Sora 3-*dan*.

A young prodigy among prodigies who became a Women’s League member one year after learning how to play Shogi. The reason that this match is getting Internet coverage despite being a qualifier must be her. After all, no one would want to see my Shogi.

“I’m pleased to meet you. I am Tsubasa Gakumeki.”

Perhaps she can—.

“..... Would you, kill me?”

■ WATCHING AND LEARNING

“Everyone, are you listening? Do not, I repeat, do not say a word inside the arena. Also, walk as quietly as possible, is that understood?”

Kanegasaka-*sensei* crosses her fingers in front of her lips and makes absolutely sure the grade schoolers know the rules.

“Does everyone have socks on? You won’t be allowed inside if you don’t, so please let me know. I’ll lend you a pair.”

Today, the students of Class 5-4 are visiting their classmates *at work*.

A field trip.

In order to see what a career in Shogi looks like, the students have left the school and arrived at one of the holiest sites in the Shogi world!

However, it’s not just one or two.

When people see me leading a group of nearly 40 of them into the Association, I get comments like:

“Holy cow, Ryuo” “Pulling this off, you’ve got my respect.” “You sure love kids, don’t you!”

And more as I, the Ryuo, get praised for doing my best to get more people interested in Shogi.

Once all the kids are ready, I stand in front of the arena door and explain.

“The Association’s fifth floor is called the *Onkuroshoin no Ma*. Long ago, Shogi matches were played for Shoguns, and the layout is a replica of what that room in Edo Castle once looked like.”

“For real?!” “Awesome!”

A few kids blurt out in amazement, their eyes lighting up before remembering

the rule and clapping their hands over their mouths. Kids are great.

I lead the way into the *Ongedan no Ma* arena and see that the pieces have just been lined up.

Tsubasa Gakumeki Women's 1-*kyu* is in the upper seat.

Just like Ai, she was promoted from 2-*kyu* after making it this far through the Women's Legend qualifier.

—So, that's

This is my first time seeing her in person, and I have to say she has a very strange air about her. It's not intimidating More like she doesn't feel alive.

Ai Hinatsuru is in the lower seat. Even though she officially became a Woman's League Player a few days before Ms. Gakumeki, her opponent is older and so she probably gave her the upper seat out of respect.

And the match recorder is—Practice League member Mio Mizukoshi.

"That's Ai" "Mio's right next to her So many cameras"

Seeing familiar faces gets all the kids excited at once.

"That lady she's playing has really long hair" "Kinda scary, isn't she"
"Looks really strong if you ask me" "Ai is playing against an adult" "Can Ai win"

"T-Time f-f-for the piece flip!!"

Says Mio, stiff as a board and stuttering.

Her classmates are watching her every move with "What's going to happen next?!" written all over their faces. Picking up five Pawns, she gives them a few shakes and drops them on the board.

"..... Since five are faceup, the first move is yours, Gakumeki-sensei"

Mio's voice doesn't have any of its usual energy.

Maybe she's disappointed because she wanted to give Ai the advantageous first move, or maybe being here is awkward because they haven't made up yet It could just be nerves from being the recorder, too.

—It can't be easy to call one of your classmates "sensei" either

I'm surprised she agreed to work as the match recorder at all.

It's not that Practice League members never work as match recorders.

The thing is that Pro and Sub League matches have a rule that match recorders must be in junior high school at least to work matches, so this is definitely Mio's first time doing one. Of course, she's nervous.

—That anxiousness can spread to the Players Ai, stay calm and focus on the fight!

I send mental support to my apprentice as she closes her eyes to psych herself up.

The icing on the cake is that tons of her friends from school are watching.

They'll only be able to watch a few moves of the early game inside the arena, but if those moves affect the formations, the Shogi can get thrown out of whack.

There are even some Pros who refuse to make a single move when other people are watching in the arena. It kind of defeats the purpose of coming to watch, but

"T-The appointed time has come. Gakumeki-sensei, please begin the match!!"

Mio shouts in a shrill voice.

""When you're ready.""

Ai and Ms. Gakumeki exchanged bows.

Caught by surprise, many of the grade schoolers bow right back to them. Ms. Mato, along with reporters from several different media outlets, aim their

cameras and take pictures in unison.

“.....”

Without using any time at all, Ms. Gakumeki opens her Bishop path.

“Haaa Nm!”

Taking a deep breath, Ai leans forward and advances the Pawn in front of her Rook.

Ms. Gakumeki didn't use a single second of waiting time to make her next move either, but Ai takes a few moments to think things over.

“..... Kanegasaka-*sensei*, it's about time.”

Once I could see that a Bishop Exchange is taking shape, I guide everyone out of the arena.

As soon as the students make it into the multipurpose room downstairs, it'll be time to explore the Association!

But, before then.

“You'll be able to see every corner of the Kansai Shogi Association today, but We have a special guest who will be joining us on the tour! Here she is!”

“I'm Woman's League Player Keika Kiyotaki. Hello everyone.”

““Heeello!””

“Hehehe. I'm glad to see you're excited this morning!”

Keika smiles with her eyes at the grade schoolers' warm greeting.

“Rather than introduce myself, I'm going to give you a quiz, okay? You all already know Kuzuryu-*sensei*, but what is my relationship to him in the Shogi world? Any guesses?”

“Huuh? No clue!” “Like, a big sister?” “His senior?” “Lover?”

No one gets it right. Though, I would say that “lover” is correct for me

personally.

Seeing the kids couldn't come up with any more ideas, Keika announces the answer.

"I'm his 'little sister!' Maybe that was a little too hard?"

"How is anyone supposed to get that? This old lady is a younger sister? Yeah, right!"

Mihane says out of reflex.

That one comment transformed the fun field trip into trauma.

"Old Lady?"

Snap!

Keika's aura shatters the air!

The multipurpose room becomes the scene of pandemonium in the blink of an eye. The malice emanating from Keika's eyes after her confrontation with the terror known as the age limit and rising from the ashes of hell simply isn't human. Age is really a touchy subject.

Mihane takes the brunt of Keika's malice head-on.

"Ngh nnnnnngh"

There is a small puddle forming at her feet. She just wet herself

"Oh dear, are you okay? This nice *young woman* will clean it all up so don't cry? Okay?"

Keika flashes a kind smile and corrects Mihane's mistake.

Coming face-to-face with a Player's a true intensity nowhere near an arena has half the class in tears. There are even a few whose faces are looking feverish after only a few seconds and staring right at Keika The thought that they're having a weird "awakening" movement of some kind is worrying.

“Speaking of being worried, we should check to see how the match is going.”

It’s easy to predict about how long most matches will take.

The thing is that I might have to shorten the tour or take the kids to see the big board analysis earlier so that we can make it in time to see the review session. This is just as hard as a title match.

But, this match just started.

“There is no way pieces have started to collide yet, but——.”

Just in case, I check my phone and,

“Say what?!”

Couldn’t stop myself from blurting that out.

I do a double, triple, quadruple take, looking at that screen again and again before I finally get it.

No matter how much information I gathered in advance, there are parts of Tsubasa Gakumeki’s Shogi *that are impossible to understand*.

“..... Well, she sure surpassed my expectations.”

“Is something wrong, Yaichi? Has the battle already started?”

“No. It’s over.”

“Huh?”

I show Keika the final formation and say.

“A repetition draw. Ms. Gakumeki gave up the advantageous first move the first chance she got.”

“.....”

Keika is speechless.

Just like me, she’s got “I don’t get it” written all over her face.

🏠 THE CURSE OF IMMORTALITY

The instant the same moves repeating for the fourth time, Mio Mizukoshi yelled from her spot at the board-side table.

“Ah! Ummm R-Repetition draw! It’s a repetition draw!!”

A repetition draw occurring on a match recorder’s first assignment is extremely rare. Mio’s mind went blank.

—A repetition draw What do you do for a repetition draw again?!

“In 30 minutes We start again at 11:15.”

Tsubasa interjected as though she had been through this process countless times before, deftly cleared the board, and left the arena without another word.

Ai also left the arena without a glance in Mio’s direction immediately after. Most likely, she was focused on getting to another room as soon as possible to put the match that just transpired out of her mind and mentally refresh herself.

Unfortunately, the match recorder doesn’t have that luxury.

The office needs to be informed that the match has concluded, the repetition draw match record needed to be printed and submitted, the arena needed to be cleaned, and fresh tea needed to be served.

By the time Mio completed all her tasks, the rematch was set to begin.

“The appointed time has come, so Ai Ah! P-Pardon me! Umm, Hinatsuru-*sensei*, please begin the match!”

Mio corrected herself after accidentally calling her classmates by her first name, but Ai wasn’t fazed in the slightest. The two Players exchanged bows and the match was underway.

Ai only had half of her waiting time to work with. Rather than using it to set up her formation in the early game, she raced ahead as quickly as possible.

On the other hand, Tsubasa had waiting time to spare. Since she matched Ai's speed move for move, the lopsided discrepancy in their waiting time remained solidly in place as the match progressed.

—Whaaa?! I-I can't keep up with them?!

Mio worked as fast as she could, desperately trying to accurately record each move.

Noon snuck up on her before she realized it.

"It's time for the lunch break."

As soon as the words were out of Mio's mouth, Ai and Tsubasa were on their way out of the arena.

With everyone else gone, Mio finally had a chance to catch her breath.

"Wheeew All I'm doing is writing things down, but I'm exhausted I thought this job was supposed to be easy, all you do is sit here"

Having sat on her ankles the entire time, Mio started to stretch her numb legs when suddenly—the arena's sliding *fusuma* door flies open.

"Huh?! You're back already?!"

She quickly fixed her posture in surprise, but it was the people who appeared on the other side of the door that really shocked her.

—Oh, wow! The W-Women's King and Yamashiro Ouka! I can't believe they came all the way here just to watch!

As Machi Kugui was on assignment as a journalist, Mio could understand her being present. However, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka making the journey from Kanto was anything but normal.

— That's just how much attention this match is getting, isn't it? Ai is a true-

blue prodigy

But, one glance at the board and Ryou snapped her tongue in disgust.

“Tsk! That Small Fry Fallin’ for Tsubasa’s game hook, line, and sinker all ‘cause she got the first move.”

“Ohhh? And what is the Women’s King’s opinion of the match thus far?”

“Repetition draws don’t happen without both Players going along with it. In other words, Tsubasa wasn’t after that first repetition draw. It happened because *Small Fry wanted it to*. And why? ‘Cause she obviously wanted the first move.”

Generally speaking, offense has the advantage in Shogi.

By going from her original defensive position to claiming the first move after the repetition draw, Ai had achieved her goal. Which was why——.

“Think another repetition draw’ll pop up now? Like hell it will. Tsubasa knows that Small Fry will reject the next one. She knows the ace up the sleeve is already there.”

——Oh! I get it now! That’s why the repetition draw happened so fast!

Mio was taken aback by these top Women’s League Player’s insight.

——They don’t just read the Shogi. They read their opponents That’s why they’re strong!

“Quite the statement from the Archangel. An interesting take. I shall be taking the liberty of uploading that comment directly.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

Ryou snapped back to her.

“Still, looks like Trash’s Small Fry can’t measure up to Tsubasa after all. Sending her in there without a plan like that after everything he went through to get info out of us, I kinda feel sorry for her. Looks like I’ve got to be the one

to put the nail in Tsubasa's coffin

"I, too, feel it would also be most difficult for us to fight against her. Successfully confronting an opponent willing to endure attacks to this extent is no easy task. Especially considering Gakumeki-san's superior late game skill."

—Even Machi the Tormentor?! Ai is fighting against someone that strong

Mio was stunned.

If things kept going as they were—Ai would surely lose.

The moment of truth arrived soon after the match started up once again.

"! Again?!"

Ai's hands, which had been a constant blur up to this point, suddenly hovered in place.

Because, Tsubasa's central Silver had started moving back and forth as if climbing up and down a ladder once again.

—Is she inviting me to attack?! In that case!

The young girl had no intention of allowing her opponent to have her way.

Greatly strengthening her King's defenses, Ai built up an offensive staging area And made small, pestering jabs to convince Tsubasa to come out and face her.

On the board, Ai Hinatsuru was the very definition of greed.

Even so, Tsubasa's Silver kept climbing up and down the ladder without missing a beat.

"Okay, then!!"

Ai had already rejected a repetition draw. Having imposed her will on her

opponent to this extent, she decided that it was time to go in to claim victory based on formations alone.

Mio, watching it all unfold from the board-side table, opened her mouth as if to say something But quickly dropped her gaze and input to the last move.

There was no turning back now.

“That’s what I was a wait’en for.”

In that instant, Tsubasa’s all-out onslaught began.

All her previous hesitation and indecision felt like a passing dream as Tsubasa used her worldly senses to completely transform the right half of the board into a deadly spear and drove it directly toward Ai’s King with no concern for what pieces she had to sacrifice in the process.

She had wasted so many moves and lost so many of her pieces, but she didn’t waver once her trap had been sprung.

“?!”

Ai felt as though she had been struck by lightning.

Tsubasa never used a single second of waiting time! Not only that, defeat was closing in right before her eyes.

Though, it wasn’t the speed that shook Ai to her core.

“Th-This Shogi It’s just like a Professional’s!”

It’s impossible to find the “correct” move at this stage of the early mid game without using any waiting time.

Simply put, only research was applicable here.

Though the average level of Women’s League Players was on the rise, the early game was always tranquil.

Rather than search for the “best move” as the Professional Players did, Women’s Players tended to “build their best formation.” That’s why Ai, who

had a glaring early game weakness, could find a way to turn the tide in the late game.

However, for Tsubasa who had spent years on the front line of innovation that is the Kanto Sub League, research was imperative in order to contend with prodigies wielding their favorite latest sequences.

“..... Win'en with knowledge is so much easier.”

Seizing the lead in the blink of an eye, Tsubasa mumbled under her breath to no one in particular.

This was the pattern Tsubasa's victories tended to follow.

Endure the humiliation of repetition draws in order to win.

However, the technique was only attainable through countless hours of research and Herculean levels of effort. That's how she came to be able to endure the humiliation in the first place.

The board was now overwhelmingly in Tsubasa's favor. She also possessed more than double Ai's waiting time.

And, in the unlikely event the young girl mounted a counterattack, Tsubasa still had the option to *nyugyoku* as a last resort.

“Looks like I won't be a die'en today.”

“Khh!!”

Meanwhile, Ai realized she had no options left.

Those who could read the board faster than anyone else could see their defeat before anyone else.

—Mio is at the board-side table! I can't lose like this!

Could the presence of others provide her with strength?

—Even Master is watching! Everyone in my class, too!

Would their expectations give her the power she needed?

No.

——..... This isn't for Mio, or even for Master

“I I don't want to lose!!”

Ai had lost many matches here in Osaka.

She lost to Ginko. She lost to Ai Yashajin.

And, more than all of that, she had lost to herself. Even now, her spirit was close to breaking.

The anger she harbored towards her own inadequacy——became the fuel she needed to press on!

“I *am* a Women's League Player! I'm never running away from my own battles again!!”

It was her instincts as a Shogi Player.

No matter how much it hurt, no matter how intense the pain.

Taking hold of a feeling she just now discovered, Ai chose to keep fighting until the very, very end.

“Kaaaahhhhhhhh!!”

Sounding very much like her master, Ai howled to psych herself up before charging back onto the board!

However.

“.....!! Grgh?! *Cough!* *Gasp!* Haaahaaahaahaa!!”

——Deep!!

The utter depth of Tsubasa's research stood head and shoulders above any

opponent Ai had ever faced.

Unlike Shogi puzzles, there might not be an answer in the late game of an actual Shogi match.

Brain firing on all cylinders in the face of such a quandary—she burnt out.

Whenever the pain triggered a series of nauseating dry heaves, Ai left her seat to catch her breath in the hallway.

But now, she couldn't even do that.

"?! My eyes?!"

The hair-thin vain connecting her eyes to her sinuses ruptured, dying her vision red as blood dripped from her nose onto the *tatami* mat below.

Ai's brain could work at speeds that would make adult Professional Shogi Players jealous.

Unfortunately, she only possesses the physical endurance of a 10-year-old girl.

The stark disparity between the two now pained Ai Hinatsuru to no end.

"*Cough*! Haaa! Gah, ahhhh"

Beaten to a pulp.

Though she had only been sitting at a Shogi board, the girl's young frame had taken so much damage that it seemed as though she had been engaged in a fist fight. She couldn't even stand up to breathe fresh air anymore.

—..... Is this, as far as I go

Robbed of sight.

Short of breath.

Writhing in pain and still searching for a path to victory sitting on the *tatami*, Ai's hand—brushed against something.

“.....?”

It was a fan.

The one she always placed next to her cushion before each match, the fan that bore her master’s handwriting.

“.....!”

Ai relied solely on her sense of touch to open it.

Brushstrokes made by the master that she loved and admired so much should be right in front of her face.

They spelled out the biggest weapon that he had ever given her.

An ability to get back up no matter how close her heart was to breaking
The ultimate revival magic.

“Courage.”

Snap! Closing the fan with enough force to make a small echo cut through the air, Ai shifted it to her left hand.

Once she had wiped the blood away with her right, the girl grabbed hold of her knee and squeezed with all her might.

Then, she turned to face the board once again.

“*Inhale*————.....”

She breathed in as deeply as her lungs would allow.

It didn’t matter if she couldn’t see. Together with her 11 mental Shogi boards, she would simply have to climb to extraordinary heights.

Tsubasa wasn’t sure how to feel the moment she had the enemy King on a check path.

——I won. But, I’ve still gotta keep play’en

It almost felt like a curse.

Why did she keep playing Shogi, why did she still have a desire to win? Tsubasa couldn't understand, even now.

Watching this girl suffer right before her eyes Part of her felt it would've been better to just let the little girl win.

“.....!?!!!!!”

This elementary school girl named Ai Hinatsuru seemed to resign herself to defeat for a fleeting moment, but Decided to continue the fight and search for a victory sequence that shouldn't exist all while groaning, wincing, and writhing in agony.

That girl working as the match recorder must be a friend of hers.

She hadn't taken her eyes off Ai since the match began.

—That must be nice Perhaps Shogi would have been more enjoyable if I had had a friend like that.

Tsubasa had never fully adjusted to the Sub League dominated by men.

She had connections from doing practice sessions, but no friends to speak of.

Most of those connections, however, had already been forced into retirement. There was no longer any reason to contact them. By choosing the Shogi path, Tsubasa had lost everything else.

Then.

“Hm?”

After staring at sheer despair on the board, Ai Hinatsuru's mouth started to move and Tsubasa was sure she heard something.

The girl sitting on the opposite side of the board said in the tiniest voice at the end of a long sigh—.

“..... Here.”

Yes, she was saying something.

“Here Here Here Here”

Ai Hinatsuru then began rocking back and forth, sometimes leaning down so far that her forehead might crash into the board itself and said that word over and over like a broken record.

Though she had already won Tsubasa felt the chill run up her spine.

“Here Here Here, here, here, here,
herehereherehereherehereherehere... hereherehereherehere...
hereherehereherehereherehere—.”

“Hinatsuru-*sensei*! O-One-minute Shogi rules are now in effect!”

“Here!!”

Snaaaap! Almost as if answering Mio, Ai snapped a piece down with authority.

However, it was a surprisingly bad move.

——..... Was I imagine’en things?

The elementary school girl sitting before her moved her own King back, in effect choosing to weaken her own defenses. It went against all late game philosophy. Almost like setting the scene for her own defeat

Tsubasa adhered to late game theory and pursued the enemy King along the check path.

“Now, I’ve ‘a got you in *hisshi* to lead to checkmate!”

The little girl’s chances of a comeback now weren’t even one in 10,000.

——Noth’en short of fly’en ‘ll get you outta this.”

Pieces jumping over ones they couldn’t, moving to spaces outside of the board Very childish ways to break the rules, but Tsubasa often entertained those absurd fantasies when she was on losing streaks in the Sub League.

Now that Ai’s King couldn’t be defended any longer——.



“Here!!!”

She started it all out rush on Tsubasa’s King.

The ex-Sub League Player did not fret, however. The only position stronger than *hisshi* was “checkmate.” Which is why she anticipated Ai would attempt to put her in check on the very next move.

What she didn’t anticipate was how Ai would go about doing it.

“?! From below?!”

Sacrificing the Promoted Silver that had served as her staging area, Ai used the now vacated space behind Tsubasa’s defensive formation to deploy a Bishop and pressure the King from behind.

That went against the principle of “Cut off the King’s escape.”

Not to mention that for Tsubasa, who was an expert when it came to *nyugyoku* strategies, the opportunity to advance her King into the middle of the board was a welcome turn of events. That made two bad moves in a row. Unable to discern Ai’s true intention, Tsubasa was starting to get anxious.

Then, she figured it out.

“*Aki oute?! An open check?! This isn’t a Shogi puzzle!*”

Ai’s plan was to use her Bishop’s range like a laser beam from behind to lead Tsubasa’s King into an instant death trap.

—Scary, scary Can’t let ma guard down ‘round this one, can I?

Taken aback by Ai’s series of acrobatic moves around the board, Tsubasa centered herself on her cushion and stopped to read the sequences as thoroughly as possible.

That is until she heard Mio’s voice.

“Gakumeki-sensei. You have five minutes left!”

“Huh?!”

Suddenly, that overwhelming advantage she had in waiting time had all but disappeared.

—I got pressured into think’em too hard?! But, I couldn’t’ve made a mistake!

Indeed. Nothing could have gone wrong.

She already understood Ai’s intention. And, she already had the enemy King chained down and helpless.

So long as there was no way for it to take flight Her victory was assured!

However————.



“Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehere——here!!”

That one move that Ai played turned Tsubasa’s world upside down.

7 Six Knight.

As soon as that apparently sacrificial Knight appeared on the board

“She took, flight?”

Tsubasa realized that there was a way to reach the sky in Shogi.

In that instant, she saw with her own eyes.

Sprouting from the back of the little girl sitting across from her—a pair of white wings.

■ ECCLUSION

Just before the big moment, I was busy explaining to the grade school kids what *hisshi* is.

“No matter how the receiving Player defends, there is no way for them to avoid being put in checkmate on the next turn.”

“In other words, they can’t defend.”

“If you are put in *hisshi*, you are going to lose no matter how hard you try.”

Meaning Ai’s situation is hopeless.

Her classmates are all visibly disappointed.

One of the girls looks like she’s about to cry.

But, after losing a Bishop on the 110th move and realizing she had no way to defend her King, Ai switched into doing an all-out rush on Tsubasa’s.

Both are down to one-minute Shogi. Ai will lose the moment she fails to put Tsubasa in check.

Which is why she’s relying on her late game prowess to continuously bombard the enemy King, but——.

““*Nyugyoku?!*””

Seemingly immortal, Tsubasa’s King endures all of Ai’s attacks as it drifts into the middle of the board.

In that moment, Ai plays a move that makes absolutely no sense.

———7 Six Knight.

It’s like she deployed it from her piece stand to just throw it away.

It turns out that Ai set a trap for Tsubasa 30 plus moves later.

And then, something truly unbelievable happens when Tsubasa takes that Knight.

Suddenly, Ai's King couldn't be checkmated anymore.

Keika, who was doing big board analysis along with me, absentmindedly drops the Knight piece she had in her hand and whispers in amazement.

"She broke out of *hisshi*?"

"Excuse me, Kiyotaki-*sensei*."

As if a model student in a grade school class, Kanegasaka-*sensei* politely raises her hand and asks a question.

"Does *hisshi* go away on its own?"

It doesn't.

The name itself is an abbreviation of the phrase that means "in the grip of death." Sometimes, it's even written using the Chinese character for death.

"..... As long as Shogi rules are followed, *hisshi* will not just disappear. It's also impossible for Ai to break out of it on her own. Therefore, Ms. Gakumeki must have made a mistake. But"

Keika's doesn't know what words to use.

Naturally.

It's impossible to explain something that no one has ever seen before.

If I had to put what Ai just did into words, it would be——.

"*She took flight.*"

Unsure if she heard me correctly, Kanegasaka-*sensei* repeats what I said.

"Took flight?"

"Exactly! Ai's Shogi has 'height!' Do you understand?!"

I shout, unable to hold in my excitement.

I knew Ai could do it. I believed in her.

But, as the Ryuo, seeing a 5th grade girl do something that I can't, and the awe-inspiring Shogi unfolding right before my eyes, how am I supposed to keep my adrenaline down?

“This isn't some worldly masterpiece! It's completely different from conventional late game skill in two dimensions It's the power to envision the two-dimensional game of Shogi in three! That is Ai's talent, her wings!!”

“H-Height?! Yaichi, are you hearing yourself right now?! Such a thing doesn't exist in Shogi!! The board is flat——.”

“Oh, but there is, Keika. Shogi has always had that potential. We simply didn't use it.”

Yes. There is height.

There has always been something in Shogi with the power to seemingly fly over other pieces as if it had wings.

Surprisingly, it was the total Shogi novice Kanegasaka-*sensei* who found the answer first.

“Are you talking about the Knight?”

Exactly.

“Yes. With the ability to jump over other pieces, the Knight is the only one that has ‘height.’”

I pick up the Knight piece that Keika dropped on the floor and explain.

“A different piece, the Bishop, can only move diagonally but it appears to slide past other pieces. By thoroughly understanding the irregular movement patterns of the Bishop and Knight, Ai was able to break free from Tsubasa's *hisshi*.”

The kids, and even Kanegasaka-*sensei*, are giving me blank stares.

Only Keika gets shocked once she comprehends the series of movements.

“B-But I’ve never seen anything like this. It never happens in the Professional leagues Where in the world did Ai come up that kind of sense?”

“Shogi puzzles, probably.”

“Shogi puzzles?”

“Ai learned how to play Shogi by solving the ‘Shogi Zukou’ and ‘Shogi Musou’ puzzle collections. Since many of those puzzles make use of the Bishop or Knight’s unique movements in some way——.”

“Long-sequence Shogi puzzles have no connection to actual matches! It’s common sense!! Even the people who make the puzzles say so!”

“Yes. It’s true that puzzle scenarios have never showed up in matches. *Until now.*”

So long as everyone is convinced the puzzles are useless.

“If Ai can re-create those puzzles on the board, no one will ever be able to checkmate her King.”

“Th-That’s That’s imposs——.”

Keika stops herself right in the middle of saying the word “impossible.”

Because, well, she just saw it happen with her own eyes.

“To Ai, Shogi puzzles aren’t a weapon to take down her opponents. They’re wings to take her to a place she can never be captured To formations no one has ever seen before.”

But, it’s nowhere near complete. This is only the beginning.

For her, Shogi puzzles are a particularly large pair of wings.

However, the core of her true talent lies somewhere completely different.

Unlike all the other prodigies out there, Ai's talent is——.

“Ai Yashajin has early game talent. But at the same time, that talent also holds her back. She can't forget what she did in the early game.”

“.....? Yaichi, you're not making any sense”

Just like how Adam and Eve could never return to the Garden of Eden after eating the “fruit” of knowledge, there are things you lose forever once you have a thorough understanding.

“On the other hand, Ai Hinatsuru is a blank slate. And, that is *her greatest talent of all.*”

“..... Slow down the second. Are you saying that you——?”

It seems like Keika finally caught on.

Realized just how much of a miracle Ai is.

“In order to get late game skills, to learn the techniques necessary to turn the tables on an opponent, *you have to be in hopeless situations.* You must fight for your life when there are no options left. That would mean you *can't take the lead in the early game.*”

In that case, it's necessary to gain Shogi skills without acquiring Shogi knowledge.

That kind of self-contradicting miracle could never happen.

I thought so, too. Until last year.

“I decided that if I was going to raise Ai Hinatsuru, I'd do it by teaching her as little as possible.”

That miracle showed up on my doorstep one day a year ago.

Like an angel falling out of the sky, just out of the blue.

“I taught her the sequences for handicapped matches, and I had Mr. Oishi teacher the basics of Ranging Rook so that she could survive being down a piece in the Practice League when her opponent would have the handicap advantage, but other than that

Whenever possible, I kept her away from situations where she could pick up Shogi knowledge.

“That’s why I had her do practice sessions with amateurs rather than Pro Players, and kids her own age who wouldn’t feel guilty about playing at their full strength all the time.”

I also had Ai get used to doing *nyugyoku* by making her play at a disadvantage in handicapped matches. *Nyugyoku* is the only realistic chance you have to win when your opponent has more pieces.

Ai’s combination of *nyugyoku* sense and Shogi puzzle know-how were just enough to surpass Ms. Gakumeki’s Shogi knowledge by a hair.

Raising Ai this way required me not to give her any information on Ms. Gakumeki at all.

Everything——was to force her into a hopeless situation.

“S- Since, when? When was it that you decided to do this?”

“The night that I played against her for the first time, that very moment.”

The plan seemed absurd at first.

I’ve thought it over thousands of times. I’ve asked myself hundreds of thousands of questions. Would it be better to tap Ai’s straightforward and serious personality traits and teach her all the standards from square one?

But——today, I know I was right.

“Ai has a strong heart and fighting spirit that won’t break. This is the best way to teach her.”

“So You’ve made her kill with talent alone? You sent a 10-year-old girl with a single year of Shogi experience to face the woman who battled in the Sub League until the age of 21 A child with barely any idea how to play the early game?!!”

Keika seethes.

Of course, she’s angry. There’s no way anyone wouldn’t empathize with Ms. Gakumeki after learning what she’s been through, Ai’s opponent or not.

And, I used her, pretty much fed to her to Ai like vitamins to help her wings grow.

I’m fully aware of how cruel that is.

Ms. Gakumeki isn’t the only one that will be hurt in the process.

“..... Me too That’s all I was to Ai, wasn’t I?”

Keika also fell to Ai when they were both in the Practice League.

That Shogi followed this same pattern. Ai was way behind in the early game only to find a way to win in the end.

There may be Women’s League Players who decide to retire after seeing today’s match.

Even if it’s not today, there could be tens, possibly hundreds of Players who see their own limits by sitting across the board from Ai and choose to end their own careers. Prodigies who could do no wrong have their hearts broken, choosing death in the face of that level of talent.

But, I also believe something else.

That there will be many, many more people who see Ai’s Shogi———and feel inspired.

“..... Yaichi.”

Restraining her emotions out of sheer will, Keika asks.

“How far are you planning to take her? No, let me rephrase that.”

Shaking her head, she rewords her question.

“How far do you think *that girl can go?*”

“.....”

“Don’t tell me Don’t tell me, Ai *too*?!”

“That’s for her to decide.”

Simultaneously terrified and satisfied after seeing my apprentice completely shut down “Undying Wings” offensive onslaught, I answer Keika in a shaky voice.

You can teach an angel how to use her wings.

But where she’ll go using those wings—only the angel herself knows that.

PLEASE, GIVE ME WINGS

Honestly, I don't remember much after 7 Six Knight.

The only image I can recall in stark detail is that of the little girl on the other side of the board sprouting two wings from her back.

I didn't want to see that.

—My name, Tsubasa, means “wings” but They're the one thing I never could have.

So, I erased them.

I even pulled back the Gold I used to corner the enemy King.

—But I lost do'en that.

Even so, I held out as long as I could during one-minute Shogi. I couldn't give up all the way until the very last move. It's an ugly after effect of the 10 years I squandered sputtering in the Sub League.

Despite my best efforts, the angel looked down on me from on high and effortlessly checkmated my King.

“..... Aghh”

—I'da been play'en free, if only I had wings like those.

A mix of envy and regret fills my heart.

In the end, I admit defeat more than 30 moves after 7 Six Knight.

“Thank you for the match.”

—It's over now

At long last, I can face true death. The death I've yearned for more than anything.

The review session is surprisingly lively.

The large group of children who came to observe (apparently classmates of Miss Hinatsuru and the Practice League girl who worked as the match recorder) surround us in a big group and ask me questions about not just the late game transformation, but also about being a Women's League Player.

"Why did you start playing Shogi?" "What's the reason you became a Pro?" "What does it feel like when you lose?" "What kind of Shogi do you want to play?"

Questions that would have gouged out my heart if asked by an adult strangely enough are easy to answer when asked by children.

Once the questions were done, the children see me off with applause.

Their teacher, not too much older than myself, catches up to me right in front of the elevator and bows from the waist right before my eyes.

"Thank you for taking the time to speak with my students after such a long match! They have yet to learn the meaning of restraint, so I sincerely apologize for all those rude questions But, I truly believe today was a valuable experience for all of them. A few have even told me they want to be Shogi Players just like you and Miss Hinatsuru"

"No, 's all right Was a good experience for me, too."

If my Shogi was useful to anyone, I'm satisfied with that.

Those thoughts in my head, I step inside the elevator and go down to the first floor.

There, a reunion is waiting for me.

"Huh?"

People who shouldn't be at the Kansai Shogi Association are here.

People who did practice sessions with my older brother apprentice and I, people who fought, lost, and left Sub League like me.

People who I used to research with but haven't heard from once since then are here.

"E-E- Everyone? Why are?"

I stutter, unable to organize my thoughts when one of them vaguely answers.

"Why? Just because?"

"We didn't plan this. It just naturally happened."

"Win and you'd be in the Women's Legend League, right? I was curious and ended up coming all the way to Kansai beside myself!"

It wasn't just my former research partners.

"Hatomachi-sensei, too?!"

A Kanto Sub League Director.

The very person who guided me into the Women's League says that he requested his own match take place in Kansai so he would have an opportunity to see me play.

What's more, today wasn't his first time doing so.

"You've been avoiding talking to anyone at the Kanto Association these days. I thought I'd get a chance to say hello if I just waited until the match finished up, but a repetition draw into an intense match like that? You were so, so close!"

"Sorry I'm so sorry!"

Not moving from the spot, I clench my eyes closed as hard as I can.

"I-I"

I put the realization that had been slowly coming to me since the middle of the match into words.

“I, I don’t want to quit playing Shogi!!”

Hitting the Sub League’s age limit. Transferring to the Women’s League, where only women can play.

At first, I thought the system was cruel beyond words.

Why didn’t they just sever lingering attachments with one clean cut? If they’re going to kill us off anyway, I thought a quick death would have been merciful.

I could never look the people who had left the Sub League in the face again I was too ashamed, felt too guilty.

That’s why I know I should never, ever say this, but!

“But, today I finally realized it. Realized just how much I love Shogi What kind of Shogi I wanted to play”

—I started playing Shogi because I loved it.

“I saw, I felt, incredible Shogi today And, I want to play that way, too.”

—The reason I wanted to become a Professional was because I love Shogi.

“When I was in Sub League, I played to survive even one day longer, but If there is a different kind of Shogi I want to play that way!”

—Losing is heart-wrenching.

“It might not be possible, but I don’t want to give up before trying So”

—And, my fingertips remember the Shogi I want to play.

“So I don’t, want to quit”

I know it’s selfish of me.

I realize how rude and harsh it is to say that in front of these people who were forced off the Shogi path.

Of course, they’ll be angry and yell at me.

I close my eyes and brace myself for what they're about to say—.

“All of us already knew that.”

Huh?

“Just looking at your Shogi, Tsubasa, it's obvious. No one in the Sub League, heck, no one in the world plays Shogi that practically yells ‘I don't want to lose!’ ‘I don't want to quit’ like yours does.”

Stunned, I watch as all of them nod.

And They start adding shyly.

“It's all because you kept playing that I don't hate Shogi right now.”

“Same here. I kept an eye on the blog because I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I get to brag all because you're still going strong, Tsubasa. I can point at the paper and say, ‘That Tsubasa Gakumeki there? I beat her back in the day!’ That way, it feels like I got *something* out of my time in the Sub League.”

All these kind words are just too unbelievable, and I open my mouth to protest.

“B-But! But Everyone who came here today might say so, but My older brother apprentice I just know He has a grudge against me”

“A grudge? Not even close! He's the one that's been worried about you the most.”

Worr ied?

“You should've seen him when he found out you were going to be doing an event. ‘Will she be able to keep up the Tokyo accent?’ ‘Has she done an

instructional match before?’ You name it. I tried to stop him, telling him that he’d only get in the way, but the guy went anyway. He even used one of his precious vacation days in the middle of getting adjusted to his new company.”

Once I hear those words——a world that had been closed off to me starts to crack.

Blinding light bursts through that crack.

It’s just so strong My eyes tear up.

“Even took a half-day today to come all the way to Osaka. What an idiot Not that I can say anything, haha!”

“Looking back on it, life was easier in the Sub League because Shogi was all I had to think about. My 9-to-5 desk job takes so much out of me that playing Shogi is out of the question.”

“Who’s got time for standards or research? ‘Why do I have to spend my days off playing Shogi with someone else’s knowledge?!’ Sounds silly now, doesn’t it?”

“Pro matches are pretty boring, don’t you think?”

Hatomachi-*sensei* frowns, interjecting “Hey now, that’s not something to say in front of a Pro!” before clutching his ribs with laughter.

Just as the chuckling dies down.

“Oh? Speaking of you know who, he’s here.”

“! B- Big!”

Tears flow out of my eyes and show no signs of stopping.

That’s why I can only just recognize him.

My older brother apprentice, holding his suit jacket over his shoulder and soaked with sweat running into the Kansai Shogi Association.

▲ PARTING SONG

“Today was truly an eye-opening experience! I had no idea that Shogi matches had such a majestic element to them It just goes to show that it’s impossible to know without seeing for yourself!! I am thoroughly impressed!”

After dropping by the Association’s office to thank the staff, Kanegasaka-*sensei* catches up to me on the third-floor hallway and can’t contain her excitement.

On a side note, Mio has joined the rest of the students to listen to Keika talk about being a Women’s League Player. Meanwhile, Ai is in another room talking to Shogi journalists about today’s match.

“Miss Hinatsuru is now officially part of the Women’s Legend League, correct?! In the event she claims the title, we must have an award ceremony at the school No, no! That scale simply won’t do, will it?! To think, a prodigy at that level is in my class I’m still shivering!”

“See? What did I tell you?”

I have to admit that anyone and their mother would be moved by watching today’s Shogi. Now, the reaction would be just the opposite if it were just a run-of-the-mill match.

In that way, Ai has literally cut her own path.

“So, um Will you permit Ai and I to live together?”

She might just say yes if I asked her when she’s in this kind of mood, so I give it a try, but

“..... Honestly, today made me even less certain.”

“Huh?”

“Watching you teaching in the classroom, Mr. Kuzuryu, I saw no problem

entrusting you with a child at such an impressionable age. But today, after learning of your training methods firsthand At the very least, they don't resemble anything like 'education' as I was trained to understand it."

"....."

"The young man who explained that manners are important to becoming stronger and that you must prioritize becoming a good human being over the Shogi path and Yaichi Kuzuryu the Shogi Player I met today seem like completely different people. That's why I can't make a decision at the moment."

"..... I understand."

Our original agreement was going to be based on the results of the King of Naniwa Tournament, so I can't blame her for not being able to answer right now.

But, I get the feeling it's going to be bad news.

From Kanegasaka-sensei's point of view, what I'm trying to do probably looks crazy.

Pressure my apprentice all the way to the brink of death and then have her trample on her opponents' dignity.

What I'm doing all boils down to that in the end.

All for the sake of Shogi.

"By the way Concerning Miss Mizukoshi."

"Mio? I thought she did all right, considering it was her first time being a match recorder. The tea she made wasn't half bad, either."

I'd say she just barely made the grade.

"I think that recording Ai's match today will become good motivation for her. Sure, it probably stung to call her classmate 'Sensei' and serve her tea, but that

could be just the spark she needs to make a big leap I think she's already strong enough to win a tournament. It's just, a particularly strong girl will be in this——."

"That's not what I was referring to."

Kanegasaka-*sensei* cuts me off and tells me about the last thing I expected to hear.

"Miss Mizukoshi's father works for a pharmaceutical company based here in Osaka, but Said company has recently acquired a large company overseas."

".....?"

This topic came from so far out of nowhere, all I can do is just stand and listen.

The pharmaceutical company thing has been on the news, so I've heard about it. But, I have no idea how it's connected to the world we live in.

"Miss Mizukoshi spoke with me herself on the day of the opening ceremony. It seems there is a high probability that her father will be transferred to Europe at the beginning of the second semester And that her family is seriously considering going there with him."

"Huh?"

The whole family moving abroad?

So, in other words——.

"Mio would be transferring schools?"

And, to a different country?

In Japan, she could still take part in the Practice League. There are branches all around the country.

Commuting from a different country, however, is impossible.

So long as there isn't a system in place that would allow Pros and Women's

League Players to be active and live abroad at the same time, there's no point in continuing to participate in the Practice League, the system that trains those Players in the first place.

Basically, she'd be quitting the Practice League.

Which would mean She would have to give up on playing Shogi as a profession.

The same girl who told me she wanted to be a Woman's League Player and is even now following my advice by playing in a tournament

"Wh-Who else, knows about this?"

"Miss Mizukoshi is a leader amongst her classmates Her absence will surely have an immeasurable impact on the class as a whole. I have therefore decided to proceed with caution and haven't told anyone as of yet."

"Including Ai?"

"Of course."

"..... Do you think she's trying to use the King of Naniwa Tournament results as a way to convince her parents to allow her to stay in Japan to continue her Shogi training?"

"Well I'm not aware of her exact reasonings for wanting to participate in that tournament, but——."

Kanegasaka-*sensei* calls me "Sensei" and says.

"No matter how frightening of a human being you may be When it comes to Shogi, you are the only one to which I can turn, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Please see her through all the way to the end."

She finishes with a deep, deep bow.

MIO'S DETERMINATION

“..... Yep, Ai is amazing.”

I line up and play through the match as soon as I get home.

My first time as a match recorder, the first official record I ever wrote.

“Mio Mizukoshi” is written in the space for the match recorder’s name. And, “Ai Hinatsuru” is written in the Player’s spot.

A precious memory of today that I’ll keep forever.

But, to be honest I really have no idea what happened. How and why did *hisshi* go away? Is Ai really human?

“I can’t. This way of winning will never work for me”

I don’t have the talent.

Not only that, I haven’t been working as hard as Ai does. Not even close.

I mean, I thought I was, but Seeing her today showed me that what I’ve been doing can’t even be called “effort.”

The idea of transferring schools all to practice Shogi has never crossed my mind.

I just ended up joining the Practice League because the Shogi Association is right down the street from my house. I never seriously committed myself to playing.

I’d already figured that out by the time Ai wiped the floor with me even though I had the handicap advantage when she was in the Practice League.

I haven’t achieved anything or even tried to.

And, that’ll probably never change

“..... Maybe I was just full of myself, thinking I could win a big tournament
.....”

Suddenly, my phone buzzes.

“Oh! Another match invite from ‘Black Cat!’”

I’ve played against them a lot recently on my Shogi app.

They’re ranked at the top, 9-*dan*. Quite a bit higher than me, Black Cat is a monster of an opponent.

In amateur Shogi terms, they could fight on the national level.

“Taking them up on all their invitations has really hurt my own rating. Did I make them angry or something?”

Watching the rating that I spent so much time building up go back down really stings.

But after that fight with Ai, I don’t have anyone to play against anymore. So, I’ve taken them up on the invite whenever I could.

“And, Black Cat gives such good advice during the review sessions! They’re kind of blunt, but they lay out all the sequences for me step-by-step.”

I learn so much every time we play.

Kuzunyu-*sensei* said it in class, but it looks like the only way to get good at Shogi is to play against lots and lots of strong opponents. Having a strong opponent like this asking *me* for matches when I should be on my knees begging *them* is *unbelievably* lucky!

“Heeere we go!”

Smacking my cheeks a few times, I kick all the little thoughts out of my head.

“Just a little bit more I’ve gotta just go and do it!”



ELEMENTARY

MEIJIN

Maria Kannabe

神鍋馬莉愛

THE KING OF NANIWA TOURNAMENT

“Look at aaaa—all those Shogi boards!!”

Ai yells at the top of her lungs as we step inside of the gym, her eyes open wide.

There aren't any people here yet, but nearly a thousand boards are lined up and waiting.

Grade school kids from all around the Kansai area will gather here at the Osaka City Gymnasium, 1,630 to be exact. Add in the parents and family members joining them, and over 3,000 people will be in here soon.

“You never took part in an actual amateur tournament before joining the Women's League, did you Ai?”

I say while pinning a name tag to my chest that identifies me as a Pro Player.

“A bigger one takes place at Tokyo Big Sight, where 3,200 grade schoolers once showed up and played 1,600 matches at the same time. It set a Guinness World Record if I remember right.”

“Uwhee It'd take a whole day just to get the boards set up!”

There's also a name tag on my genuinely surprised apprentice's chest that says she is a Women's League Player as well.

Printed on it are letters that spell out “Women's League 1-*dan*.”

Qualifying for the Women's Legend League got her promoted. Right behind Ai Yashajin, she's the second youngest ever to reach that ranking.

The same is true for Ai Yashajin, but amateurs turning Pro without playing in an amateur tournament at some point is completely unheard of.

“The winner will get decided today, right? How does it work?”

“Well, all the participants will be divided into blocks first.”

Once everyone’s been sorted into blocks, only the kids who win all three matches in a row can advance into the bracketed tournament.

“They’re sorted into upper and lower grades, right?”

“Yes. So, there’s no need to worry about Charlette playing against other members of the Grade Schooler Practice Group. I really hope that Mio and Ayano end up in separate blocks

“Will Everyone do okay?”

“Honestly, I think a good goal for Charlette is to win one match.”

Even in the lower grades, nowadays *dan*-ranking amateurs show up. Charlette is barely *dan* herself, so I’m not sure if she can win

“But, Mio and Ayano are in the Practice League. Lose now and they’ll get criticized by people saying their ‘level is too low for girls trying to get into the Women’s League.’ They’re under a lot of pressure right now.”

“.....”

Ai goes quiet and stares at her feet.

Pros and Women’s League Players don’t even have time to grab a snack when working at tournaments this large.

There’s no way we’ll be able to keep an eye on their matches. Now, if they make it into the tournament stage

“Ai. About Mio——.”

“Yes?”

“..... No. Never mind.”

Just then, a staff member calls out to us.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Hinatsuru-*sensei*. Participants are about to arrive so please

move into position to greet them and take pictures.”

““Coming!””

Time thunders by from that moment on.

“Good morning! Good luck to all of you today!”

“G-Good morning!”

Swarms of kids and parents flow through the doors like an endless tsunami. Ai and I are lined up with the staff to greet every single one of them.

It’s at times like this you can tell how popular a Player is by how many people say hello.

“That’s Hinatsuru-*sensei*!” “Hinatsuru-*sensei*, you’re so cute!!” “Ai-*sensei*, can I have a picture with you?!” “Wasn’t Hinatsuru the first wife?” “Congratulations on your promotion!!” “The Loli-King next to her is getting in the way.”

Ai’s popularity is off the charts.

The line of people wanting pictures with her gets so long that it sends the entrance lobby into chaos. Reporters and journalists trying to get a good picture of Ai force their way in Gahhh, this place is a mess!

No matter how good I am at handling grade schoolers, working my way through 1,600 of them is impossible. Ai and I shake hands, talk, and smile our way through the crowd all before getting our bearings.

Ms. Shakando, the judge for the tournament, is busy overseeing everything and Ayumu never leaves his master’s side, so all the fan service duties fall squarely on our shoulders.

After a full hour of meet and greet We head over to the instructional match booth and finally get a breather.

“Haaa Haaa Haaa Ai, did you see everyone?”

“N-No But, I saw Kanegasaka-*sensei* in the crowd Haahaa”

Our voices and bodies are already failing.

“Ai, we’ll be starting instructional matches after this The kids who don’t make it to the tournament round will be coming nonstop.”

What’s worse, the Sub League has their regular activities today, so the sub League members who would normally help out are not here. Basically, we’re extremely shorthanded.

“..... So, rest up now while you can. It’s hell from here on out”

“..... Testing, one, two, testing”

Just as we’re talking, the MC’s voice comes over the loudspeaker.

“Before the matches get underway, today’s lead judge and Women’s Legend Rina Shakando would like to say a few words to all of you!”

Compared to our sweating, beet-red faces, Ms. Shakando elegantly appears on stage with a cool, calm, and collected expression.

Her beloved apprentice Ayumu is right by her side, step for step.

All those grade school kids look dumbfounded as the two of them show up like a queen and her knight stepping out of the picture book. All the chattering disappears in an instant as silence envelops the gym.

“I am Women’s Legend Rina Shakando.”

Enunciating her name in a way to ensnare all the hearts of the grade schoolers at once,

“Under normal circumstances, it would be disrespectful for a Professional to be usurped as lead judge by a Women’s League Player such as myself. However, my own apprentice and his rival will be making appearances today. I ask for your consent and understanding.”

Ms. Shakando continues after making that sincere request.

“When I was young, Shogi tournaments were only for adults. Children who played Shogi were few and far between And as for girls, I was the only one for many years.”

She’s right. Even when Big Sis and I were little, girls almost never came to tournaments like this.

I imagine that when Ms. Shakando was that age, she had to make do with playing against geezers at smoky Shogi classrooms and parlors.

Then again, that’s the very reason that people say her Shogi hasn’t lost a step despite her age.

“Now, a great wave of youth has come onto the Shogi scene despite the declining birthrate in recent years. Especially here in Osaka where Ginko Sora leads the charge in the Sub League at 3-*dan*, the youngest Women’s League Players in history, Ai Yashajin 2-*dan*, as well as Ai Hinatsuru 1-*dan*, who is with us today, are performing very well in their respective areas. Looking out and seeing all the girls participating today fills me with great joy. Oh, and yes——.”

Ms. Shakando then drops a bomb of unprecedented magnitude onto the audience.

“This year’s Elementary Meijin is a young girl as well. What’s more, I hear that she will play here today. Emerge victorious today and that victory will mean that much more.”

Chatter!

The silent gymnasium suddenly comes alive again.

“..... She’s talking about Maria, right?”

“Yeah. Either she’s bringing it up to give the participants an extra spark of motivation or she’s trying to put more pressure on Maria”

Probably both, now that I think about it.

Nodding with satisfaction that she has whipped the crowd into a frenzy, Ms. Shakando kicks off the King of Naniwa Tournament with a majestic declaration.

“And now——the time for battle is at hand!”

ELEMENTARY MEIJIN

—One more Just one more win and I'm in the tournament round! I WILL win!!

Listening to the chess clock count down the seconds at her side, Mio Mizukoshi slapped her cheeks to psyche herself up.

Block round of the Upper Grades Division, third match.

Mio's heart boomed in her chest as she looked over the board in the late game and realized that both she and her opponent were on check paths to the enemy King.

However, her mind was crystal clear.

—Wow! The formations are showing up just like Kuzunyu-*sensei* taught me!

The same was true with her previous two matches.

Though the board looked complicated, knowing the formations allowed her to easily find the correct answer.

“This is Knight zero This is Knight zero”

She silently mouthed in order to remind herself that her “King could never be checkmated without giving up a Knight.”

Just like hers, the enemy King was vulnerable to a Knight. With one, she could checkmate it in one turn, but could try for 100 moves and still fail without a Knight

Said opponent had yet to realize it.

Mio captured a Knight that had strayed from the formation on the side of the board.

“.....?”

Unable to see the meaning behind that move, Mio's opponent incorrectly surmised that she was building up pieces to prepare for a long war of attrition. He took a Silver to counter it because Silvers were more valuable than Knights.

However, in this instance, the most valuable piece on the board was—a Knight.

“Yesss!!”

“..... Ahh?!”

All the dots connected once he saw Mio deploy that Knight right off the piece stand on her next move.

He surrendered immediately.

“I lost”

“Thank you so much for the match!”

Barely able to stop herself from jumping for joy, Mio bowed as deep as her head would go.

She climbed to her feet once the review session concluded and pressed a cold water bottle against her piping hot cheeks as she went to watch other matches still taking place.

“Whew And that's three wins. I thought it'd be harder than that!”

Though she wasn't fully aware of it herself, Mio had always possessed talent.

Most of her wins had occurred because she “kinda felt like” making a specific move just as most of her losses happened because she “kinda felt like” she didn't have a chance to win anymore, shattering her fighting spirit. It all came from this superior sense for the game.

However, now that Yaichi forced her to recognize and react to specific formations, her mood played a much smaller part in her Shogi strategy and she made incredible strides in an extremely short amount of time.

Though, someone else had made even larger strides—.

“Oh! You won three in a row, too, Ayanon?”

“I did! Once I fought using the strategies that Kuzuryu-*sensei* taught me, my opponents started giving up This is the first time I’ve ever won three in a row!”

Said Ayano Sadatou, puffing out her chest with pride.

The girl was always timid, but today she positively glowed with confidence. That confidence had translated the board, checkmating all her opponents with swift and deadly efficiency.

“You’re on a roll! I really hope I don’t have to play you today, Ayanon!”

“Hehehe Actually, I had help from a secret advisor in addition to Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

“Whaaa?! No fair, Ayanon! Who?! You gotta tell me!!”

“Defeat me and I will♪”

Both officially in the tournament’s bracket round, the two girls were giddy with excitement.

However, this happiness disappeared as quickly as it came.

“Look over there, Ayanon! There! What a crowd!”

“!! That’s”

The two girls made their way toward a match still in progress.

What greeted their eyes once they arrived—could no longer be simply called “Shogi.”

One of the players was a girl dressed in a particularly bizarre outfit. The other, a boy collapsed in a heap next to the board, had tears rolling down his face.

The girl, with what appeared to be cat ears hidden beneath her bulbous hair,

spoke as if performing on stage.

“Heh heh heh What happened to the vigor you possessed mere moments ago? Has losing to a girl such as I robbed you of it completely? Crying even before the match is over, which is more girly I wonder?”

Mio had heard the rumors.

About how this year’s Elementary Meijin was a girl with a bold personality and also Professional Player Ayumu Kannabe’s younger sister.

—That’s her! I just know that’s her!!

Her unique word choices including “such as I” and her otherworldly fashion sense eliminated all trace of the doubt that this person was related to Kannabe 6-*dan*.

An even greater surprise was waiting for Mio once she approached the board.

“Gahh?! E-Every single piece?!”

The most sinister and merciless way to claim victory, depriving the opponent of all their pieces. That was exactly what Maria did to the boy.

As a result, he had broken down in tears

Unable to admit defeat, his time ran out and the buzzer consigned him to his fate.

“Man, that was a massacre” “She sure is the ‘Future Meijin’s’ little sister” “That boy was a prefecture rep in the Elementary Meijin Tournament, wasn’t he?” “She’s headin’ to the Sub League for sure.” “Why would she bother playing in tournaments like this anymore?”

Maria sat comfortably on her floor cushion, everything the crowd was saying music to her ears.

Mio stared at the final formation as words unconsciously slipped from her lips.

“Gghhh She’s good!”

Mio and Ayano’s improved Shogi skill also allowed them to understand just how strong Maria truly was.

To realize just how big the gap was between them and her

The tournament matchups were announced once all the blocks had concluded.

Elementary school students flocked to the large bracket chart pinned to the wall.

“You’re In that bracket, Ayanon. I’m in this one, so we won’t see each other until the finals! Isn’t that great!”

Said Mio, putting her hand to her chest in relief.

However, Ayano was pale as a ghost standing beside her. The reason——.

“My bracket Miss Kannabe is in, my bracket”

“Agh”

Their names were far apart so Mio hadn’t noticed at first, but it was true that Ayano and Maria were in the same bracket.

Should they meet, it would be in the semifinals.

The boy unfortunate enough to be matched up against Maria in the first round had a look of sheer despair on his face. Maria, who had absolute confidence she could defeat anyone at the tournament, didn’t even bother looking at the chart.

Eyes still glued to the tournament bracket, Ayano softly whispered.

“..... I shall be the one to stop her.”

“Ayanon?!”

“No matter how strong Miss Kannabe may be, I do not believe she could be stronger than Ai or Ten-chan. So, I’m not afraid of her Not one bit!”

Once Ayano had finished giving herself a pep talk, she grabbed Mio’s hand and told her.

“So please, Mio, I want you to wait for me in the finals. If I know you’re there, I’m sure I’m sure I can win”

“You got it! I’ll wait for you, promise!!”

■ CHARLETTE'S WISH

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Please begin preparations for your match."

"Ah, I'm on my way!"

Doing instructional matches for tons and tons of grade schoolers at the booth with my apprentice, I finish up my current matches in record time once the staff comes to get me.

Once the kids who lost in the block round started showing up, the instructional match booth had officially turned into a war zone. Abandoning my post now really hurts, but I have work to do so I don't have a choice.

"Ai. The rest of the matches are yours."

"Yes, Master! I'll see you on stage!"

The tournament's final match will take place on stage and the Pro match will happen right after it.

Ai is scheduled to work on that stage, too.

If Mio and Ayano make it all the way to the finals, Ai will be able to watch the match closer than anyone else I'm rooting for you, girls.

Following the staff member away, I ask.

"How is tournament going so far?"

"It's on schedule. Both the Lower Grade and Upper Grade Divisions have finished the first round of their brackets Huh? It looks like there's still one going on. That's a Lower Grade Division match."

The staff member explains that the late game can get messy in the lower grades because they often miss opportunities to checkmate their opponents—but I didn't let him finish.

“Sorry! Could you wait just a minute?!”

“What?! R-Ryuo?! Where are you go——?”

I race towards that last match like I got shot out of a cannon.

Because I could see one of the kids leaning over the board and fighting her heart out has long blonde hair.

“!! Charlette”

She actually made it through to the tournament round?!

She is so focused on the board that she doesn’t even notice that I’m at the front of the crowd. Her breathing is shallow, and her eyes were bright red. Playing so many matches in a row has really taken a toll on her.

The formations show Charlette at a disadvantage.

The boy she’s playing against probably has a *dan* ranking based on the stronghold he’s built for his King. Even his offensive push has depth.

The difference is that Charlette still has waiting time.

“..... She’s doing what I told her to do”

Play with the good tempo so you never run out of time. I can’t count how many times I’ve told her to do that.

It’s easy when you have a strong lead but saving up time when you’re behind is very difficult.

“Nhh!!”

Charlette plays her next move with gusto! Even a Pro would look at that and know it was the best move to make, a very comfortable decision.

Then, I feel something wrong in my veins.

——She forgot to press the button on the chess clock!

Charlette is in the zone right now. So far in, in fact, that she forgot to think

about the time for one moment.

She only realizes it when the clock's mechanical voice started counting down the seconds.

“Whaa? Agh!”

Charlette nearly jumps out of her chair and hits that clock button.

But, all that time she worked so hard to keep is gone.

Even worse, her opponent used that waiting time to read the board and figure out his next moves. This late in the match, that's a fatal blow. Charlette was already at a disadvantage in the first place.

She's lost her final weapon, time.

I wouldn't blame her for throwing the towel right now, but—.

“That blonde girl She's something special!” “A sneeze could knock her over right now, so where's all that strength coming from?!” “She's got a strong heart, that one!”

Charlette keeps playing.

The longer she holds out against the incoming attacks, the more the onlookers start cheering for her. That tiny, gentle, and sweet Charlette is getting praised for being a “strong-hearted girl.”

I I think I'm going to cry.

“Hang in there Hang in there!”

I'm the Ryuo, the strongest there is, but that's all I can say on a loop as I hold back tears.

But, this battle is just cruel.

Closing in, closing in, closing in But, when she realized she'd never get there.

“..... I wose.”

Charlette gives up and gives her opponent a clear bow.

The crowd gives her a round of applause for the ages. Even though he won, the boy she was playing against turns bright red and stares into his lap as if he lost. I bet he’s embarrassed about the time situation.

No point in holding that against him. He was fighting for his life, too.

Even so, Charlette smiles her usual smile despite losing and says.

“Let’s pway Shogi again!”

She reaches out to the boy to offer handshake.

When——she collapses sideways.

“!! Charlette?!”

But, a woman beats me to Charlette’s side to catch her before she falls out of the chair.

She’s wearing sunglasses, but I can tell it’s——.

“Machi?!”

“This never reaches Ayano’s ears, please.”

Says Machi Kugui-*Yamashiro Ouka* in disguise.

“I shall take her to the infirmary.”

“The girl is just exhausted. She’ll be just fine with some rest.”

That’s what the doctor said as Charlette slept on the bed beside him.

I explained everything to her mother, who had come to watch the tournament, and now she’s on the phone with Charlette’s father outside the infirmary.

But, I’ve got to say Machi’s reflexes were a little too good.

It was almost like *she knew that Charlette was going to collapse from*

exhaustion—.

“So, um, Machi? Why did you come out here today? It doesn’t seem like you’re here just to cheer on your younger sister apprentice.”

“But, of course, I wish Ayano only the best, though today it’s Charlette I wanted to see.”

Charlette?

“I was unsure of how long her endurance would hold out. Simply advancing past the blocks is a miracle. Such a tiny girl trying so hard”

“Why are you so worried about her in the first place?”

“Charlette Has been visiting my abode to train for some time now. Once training with you had concluded, Ryuo-san, she came to me on those two delicate legs of hers.”

“Say what?!”

“This little one, she seems airy and aloof but is actually quite stubborn. So much so that no matter how many times I told her to return home as her parents would worry, she always came back. There were times I gave into her enthusiasm and played host for days on end.”

“Why would she go that far?”

“..... To become an apprentice, I believe. Yours, Ryuo-san.”

Apprentice? Mine?

“She asked once, nearly a year ago, but was turned down. Charlette seemed to believe that the answer would be different if she were a strong Player akin to Ai Hinatsuru and devoted herself wholly to that cause. You said you would grant a wish, Ryuo-san, with a good result at this tournament, did you not?”

“B- But, I told Charlette she could be my bride. She even told me a bride is better than an apprentice, and that settled it”

“Ryuo-san’s bride, you say? How envious!”

But——Machi adds while stroking Charlette’s hair.

“No matter how loved she is, it is the Shogi connection that she longs for. A common affliction for girls who have fallen for Shogi Players, perhaps? Especially for young Charlette for the day she must return to France is an inevitably on the horizon.”

“.....!”

Man I’m an idiot.

I thought Charlette would always be in Japan. After I found out about Mio transferring, I’ve been so focused on that The idea that Charlette might have to leave Japan someday never crossed my mind.

But, she knew we would have to say goodbye from the first day we met!

Just then, there’s a tug on my shirt.

“..... Masta

“Charlette?! You’re awake?! Hold on a second, okay? I’ll go get your mother——.”

But, she tightens her grip.

“You see, Cha? Can Cha be Masta’s apwentice?”

She asked the same thing she did back on that day.

“.....!!”

Back then, I told her no.

It was because I thought Charlette’s talent and my teaching ability weren’t enough.

That's why I changed the subject, saying I would "make her my bride."

Charlette was still really young and couldn't be all that serious about Shogi And I was relieved when she went along with the distraction.

But, I was wrong.

I was the one that was distracting myself!

"..... Charlette"

I kneel and take the hand still grasping my shirt in both of mine.

Then, I tell her.

My answer?

Obviously.

"Charlette You have always, always been my apprentice"

If this girl should ever want to join the Practice League, I would gladly write my name as her master on the paperwork.

It wouldn't matter if she went back to France. In today's world, you can play Shogi with anyone, anywhere, anytime over the Internet.

What about talent?

The Shogi world would make her life miserable, would it?

Those were all things I told myself, pushing my own shortcomings onto her!

I won't let her be miserable.

I'll turn her into the strongest girl to play Shogi the world has ever seen!



“Charlette, you’re my apprentice, my bride We’ll always be together! No matter where you are, I will always be with you!!”

“Wahhh”

My newest apprentice wraps her arms around her master’s body and——.

“Waahhh waaaaaaahhhhhh!! Nghaaaaaahhh!!”

Start bawling her eyes out.

Tears so hot they just might melt her face keep rolling down those cheeks.

But for her, those cries are marking her rebirth.

They’re the first ones I’ve ever seen her shed after losing a match.

“Ch-Cha you see? Cha, really wanted to win! Cha wanted to be stwonger!!”

“..... You will be. For sure.”

I tell her as she cries for real for the first time.

You’ll become very strong.

After all, you’ve already done this strong in a single day.

AYANO'S PRIDE

Once Charlette falls asleep again after all that crying, I leave her in Machi's care at the infirmary and quickly change into my kimono before racing back to the arena.

"!! The semifinals have started already"

The Upper Grade Division's top four are battling it out.

A horde of people have gathered around the two boards. With nearly a thousand grade schoolers taking part in the Upper Grade Division, I'm not surprised these matches would draw a crowd.

And, among the top four——.

"Mio and Ayano?! Both of them made it this far!"

I knew those practice sessions had a big impact on the group from seeing how much Charlette improved with my own eyes, but it looks like focusing on tournament preparation really helped.

"..... Luckily, they were split up very nicely. They really could meet in the finals——."

But, a jolt goes up my spine when I see who Ayano is playing.

Even at this distance, that silhouette is——.

"The princess loli?! So, she's really here!"

The Elementary Meijin and Ayumu's little sister——Maria Kannabe.

While I haven't seen any of her match records, Ms. Shakando's attachment to her is enough to know that she's no average player. Is Ayano's Shogi strong enough to work against the Elementary Meijin?

"Get too close and I might end up distracting her"

Staying at the back of the crowd, I keep a close eye on the match happening between Ayano and Maria.

Everyone is so focused on the Elementary Meijin from Tokyo that not a single person realizes that the Ryuo is right here I'm not being ignored because I'm unpopular. Maria's fashion sense is just so out there that my kimono is getting overlooked. That's all

As for the match itself, Ayano's playing Ranging Rook, her specialty, and she had the first move.

Maria seems to be playing Static Rook just like her brother, but——.

“Behold and grovel. This is the Elementary Meijin's Shogi!”

She declares for all to hear and then follows through on the promise.

I'm a Pro, and even I'd have to agree all her moves feel right.

—— Actually They look *a bit too good to be human*.

I feel like I'm watching Shogi software.

Many people are afraid that kids using software from a young age will distort their Shogi.

But, it looks like Maria's young, malleable brain managed to incorporate the software into her own playing style and everything feels even more natural than when Pros or *dan*-ranking Sub League members try to do it.

No wonder she calls herself the best of the computer-native generation.

——If she's done that without realizing it She's one heck of a prodigy.

Using those sharp senses to the fullest extent, Maria drives Ayano into a corner at no time at all.

“..... She's strong!!”

Early game, mid game, late game. There aren't any holes!

I'm sorry to say it, but Ayano can't measure up. Not against this level of skill!

—Maria'd be just fine joining the Sub League tomorrow!!

At the very least, she's too good to be in kids' tournaments.

Ayano, the person who understands that better than anyone else right now has completely lost the will to keep fighting.

"Agh Arrrgh"

While Ayano has always had a good amount of technical skill, she's not the toughest mentally.

Even back when she played against Ai in the Practice League for the first time, my apprentice's determination overwhelmed her, and she gave up surprisingly quickly.

I knew she had this problem, but

—There wasn't time to build up mental strength If only I were a better teacher

I could've at least given her a pep talk before the match to help her keep going!

Instead, the regrets just keep piling up.

"Th- There There a-aren't——."

"There aren't any moves left."

Ayano is about to throw in the towel with those words.

Before she can.

"YEESSSAHHH——!!! I WINNNNNN——!!"

Mio jumps up onto the desk next to them and bellows at the top of her lungs.

Her sudden outburst has the arena an uproar.

“The match is MIIIIINNNEEE——!! I’m I’m in the FIIIIINNNNNAAAALLLLLLSSSSSSSSSS!!!!”

“Y-You there!! The other match is still in session! Be quiet!”

A staff member rushes in and drags Mio away in the blink of an eye.

“Celebrating like that, where are your manners?! Put yourself in the shoes of the person who just lost! My word The Practice League isn’t doing enough to teach its members how to behave during matches these days!!”

Plenty of people in the crowd are criticizing what Mio did too.

She gets forcibly led out of the arena and to a waiting room someplace else, but It dawns on me right away what she had in mind.

“I won! Now you’ve gotta win, too, Ayanon! We’re playing in the finals, right?!”

Yes, she wanted Ayano to know.

Shogi Players are alone at the board A sport always played in isolation.

Mio and Ayano were playing in different spots and playing completely different Shogi.

But their hearts were fighting as one.

“Hmph Making it to the finals is not worth such a fuss.”

Maria snorts through her nose.

“I cannot allow for this match to be delayed and be a thorn in my Master’s side. One such as I shall settle this now.”

“..... finals.”

“Uhm? Did you say something, spectacles? If you’re surrendering, speak up!”

“I’m the one who will play Mio, in the finals!!”

Ayano had been reaching for her piece stand to show that she was giving up. Instead, she clinches that hand into a fist, grits her teeth, and chooses to fight by snapping down a piece so hard it echoes through the gym.

She’s come back from the brink.

Mio’s yelling——lit a flame in her heart!

“I might not be able to win against you, Miss Kannabe”

Says Ayano as she removes her glasses and wipes her eyes at the back of her fist.

Then, putting them back on.

“But! I will not lose mentally!!”

Sounding so passionate I can hardly believe it’s the same person, Ayano leans over the board.

Then, she shows some real guts fending off Maria’s attacks.

“Stubborn Aren’t you?!!”

Maria growls with frustration as Ayano pulls out one trick after another to fiercely resist everything thrown at her.

——The very content of Ayano’s Shogi is changing!

More solid. Bending but not breaking.

Each move she makes is more tenacious than the last. Sometimes, almost shamelessly so.

——Her technique hasn’t improved! It’s her heart Her heart has decided to fight!

“I don’t want to lose!”

“I don’t want to stop! I want to keep playing Shogi!”

That persistence comes through loud and clear with each move. I feel like I've seen this Shogi somewhere, recently too.

This play style is like——.

“..... Ms. Gakumeki? No, couldn't be”

I immediately reject the name that popped up out of nowhere.

I just can't see Ayano studying from Ms. Gakumeki's playing style.

But, this late game she's putting together looks like something right out of the Sub League. I just can't get the image out of my head

——It's amazing she fought back this far from the edge of defeat

Sure, her formation is a mess and it wouldn't take much to knock it down.

Even so, Ayano successfully managed to get her King all the way to the corner of the board and protect it with an incomplete *anaguma*.

One look at her defense and——.

“You've become arrogant, spectacles. Perhaps you think hiding behind an *anaguma* will stop one such as I?”

“Huh?”

The Elementary Meijin reaches for her piece stand.

“Prepare to burn at the stake. Spectacles, you shall die by these hands.”

A declaration of victory!

And, just as she said——.

“..... Aghh?!”

Maria used that moment Ayano's heart wavered to crack open the incomplete *anaguma* with a well-read sequence and checkmates her King in no time flat.

This picture-perfect ending has the crowd buzzing.

“Maria Kannabe won!” “That’s the Elementary Meijin for you Checkmating her from that far away!” “The Sub League will be a breeze for her” “Welp, guess there’s no point in watching the final because she’s got it in the bag”

Each and every one of them are praising Maria’s strength.

No one brings up the defeated Ayano.

“Congratulations, Miss Kannabe! The stage needs to be prepared for the final match, so would you please come with me to the break room?”

“I shall.”

Maria calmly stands up and makes her exit right behind a staff member.

“And if I may make a request for the next match Would you please remove the cat ears you’re wearing?”

“That is my hair.”

Ayano, staring at the board, is now all by herself as the crowd disperses one by one.

All alone, she’s not even trying to get up from her spot in front of the board.

Until The last of the crowd disappears and I go up to her.

“Well done.”

She looks up at me and her cheeks are dry. Ayano isn’t crying.

Casting her eyes back down on the board with the pieces still in place——.

“..... I have been jealous of Ai all this time.”

Words start coming out bit by bit.

I stay quiet and listen.

“Mio and I were the closest of friends before Ai came along. The first day we played at Shogi Association, we bonded right away I’m not athletic and

I've always been a quiet person, so having a friend with that much energy was a new experience for me

Ayano's life changed that day.

I know without even asking her.

Every kid who plays Shogi knows what she's talking about. It's just like how my life changed the day that I met Big Sis and Ayumu.

"The only reason I joined the Practice League in the first place was because Mio said she was going to join. I wasn't too serious about Shogi at first. I just, wanted to be with Mio I didn't want to be left behind"

Then, Ai showed up.

Mio became so focused on chasing after her that Ayano got left out in the cold at some point. I bet that's how she feels, anyway.

That's why——.

"I wanted to face Mio in the final round."

Her motivation for participating in this tournament wasn't to win her way into the history books or even be praised for her skills.

It was just because she wanted to play against her best friend.

"This, this is probably the last chance I'll ever"

Reaching that point, Ayano couldn't bring herself to say another word.

I get a pretty good idea of what's going on just by the look on her face.

——Now I get it She knew about Mio's transfer.

Mio must have told Ayano and Charlette about her situation. And, she never told Ai.

This whole thing had to have been hard on Ayano as well.

"..... This hurts"

Ayano manages to squeeze those words out of her throat.

“This hurts! My heart hurts!!”

Tears and words start flowing with no end in sight.

Fists clenched on her knees and biting down on her lip, Ayano breaks down right then and there.

“It hurts.” “It hurts.” “It hurts.” She whispers over and over again on a loop as if carving this pain into her heart.

I simply stay right next to her, listening.

This girl doesn’t need words right now.

She doesn’t need consoling. She doesn’t need criticism.

Because, she already knows what needs to be done.

THE FINAL ROUND

“At last! The climax of the Upper Grades Division is upon us!!”

Says lead judge Ms. Shakando with vigor.

“The Lower Grades Division final match was a valiant battle I am certain that this impending bout will be even more invigorating.”

Seated in a chair next to the big board as if it were a throne, the Eternal Queen uses her cane like a pointing stick as she analyzes different formations for the audience. It’s a style fit for an Empress.

But, there’s a good reason for it.

Commentators aren’t allowed to talk about specific moves when talking about a match taking place right in front of them. The players will hear.

It’s not that much of an issue for Pro Players because we get so focused on the match that we don’t hear anything, but Predictions made by Pro Players doing commentary can affect the outcome of a match between kids.

“The piece flip has already taken place. Miss Mio Mizukoshi was granted to the opening move.”

Ms. Shakando starts introducing the two participants who aren’t out on stage yet.

“And the defender, Maria Kannabe Whom I did call ‘Miss’ because he is my own student.”

Student, not apprentice.

“She is this year's Elementary Meijin and younger sister to Kannabe 6-dan, who will be playing in the Top Earners Match immediately following this one. Will she succeed in being his opening act?”

That gets laughs and applause from the crowd.

“Next, rather than I introducing Miss Mizukoshi I believe there is one more suited to the task present.”

Ms. Shakando turns to face someone else on stage with her.

The one responsible for announcing moves and keeping track of time from her spot at the board-side table—Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*dan*.

She takes the mic and opens her heart to the audience.

“Mio is always bright, cheerful, kind to everyone, and the first friend I ever made playing Shogi I’ve admired her ever since that day and I wanted to be just like her ever since.”

“Thank you for that valuable insight. Now, without further ado——.”

Rina Shakando-*Women’s Legend* takes a deep breath and says.

“Enter your arena! Young knights!!”

Spotlights illuminate two girls walking toward the board at the center of the stage.

““Whooooaaa!!””

Mio gets cheers from all over the crowd.

“A *haori* jacket and *hakama* trousers!” “She’s a girl, right?” “Wow, she looks so dignified!”

The King of Naniwa Tournament committee provides kimonos for the finalists.

Girls typically choose to wear long-sleeved *furisode* kimono, but Mio seems to have gone with what the boys wear. She looks great in it though.

Meanwhile, Maria is in her usual get up.

“That’s the Elementary Meijin?!” “W-Well, she certainly takes after Rina Shakando” “The whole Kannabe family sure is talented!”

Different cheers start up for her when suddenly—.

“Your attention, weeds of Kansai!!”

Maria looks down on the audience from on top of the stage and announces.

“You are about to witness masterful Shogi from one such as I! Ingrain each move I make into your memories And you may tell of my legend forevermore!!”

1,600 kids are revved up. Her unique characteristics seem to have hit the right notes.



I watch them both from just offstage.

Ayano is by my side. I wanted to give her a chance to watch this match as closely as possible, so I explained the situation to the staff and got her clearance.

On a side note, the person I'll be facing in a match right after this one ends, Ayumu should be watching on the other side of the stage.

"Both Players have 15 minutes of waiting time. 30-second Shogi rules will go into effect once waiting time expires."

Ai explains from the board-side table.

Their positions miraculously switched from the Women's Legend qualifier when Mio was doing the recording, Ai looks at Mio and says.

"It's time—Miss Mizukoshi, please begin the match!"

"When you're ready!!"

"Huph Come, weed."

Mio lowers her head in a deep bow, but Maria just arrogantly puffs up her chest as the sparks start flying the final match.

The strategy both of them go with is—.

"Ohh? Side Pawn Capture, is it?" whispers a clearly impressed Ms. Shakando.

It's a strategy that requires a ton of research.

It also allows the defender to aggressively attack.

"Just try to hold fast! Then, you will know once and for all! Know the strongest elementary school student's early game mastery!!"

Maria does a Bishop Exchange even though she's on defense! Then, she puts a Pawn down right in enemy territory, a surprising move to say the least.

"?!!!"

Mio blinks like mad as she stares down at the board and tries to figure out an attack she's not used to dealing with.

This sequence It's the fiercest one used in the Pros and still being researched right now!

The ambush throwing her for a loop, Mio makes several small mistakes and ends up on the wrong end of a few exchanges in battle.

Switching things up, Maria extends her edge Pawn and starts a slow advance into Mio's territory.

The defender is focusing on two things: keeping their King well defended and taking stronger pieces than they lose.

It looks like Maria has decided the board will naturally tilt in her favor without being aggressive if she plays like this.

"She's changing her tempo. To think, a grade schooler could use Side Pawn Capture this well She really is Ayumu's little sister!"

"M-Mio!!"

Ayano claps her hands together as if



offering up a prayer. I doubt she's hearing a word I say.

"Formations are favoring the defender. It appears the Elementary Meijin's early game makes the grade."

Ms. Shakando praises her student's early game strategy.

Meanwhile, Mio will just get eaten away bit by bit if she keeps playing normally.

She's at a fork in the road where she has to commit to going on offense or defend—.

"Arrr—ghhh!!"

Mio, believing in her own playing style, has chosen to attack.

Despite being behind in pieces, Mio pours a great deal of her precious waiting time into an all-out assault on Maria's defenses.

Then—her Rook takes off like a rocket! It goes all the way to Maria's back line and promotes into a Dragon!

But.

"Shallow."

Maria had lured the Rook that far into her territory so she could seal it away with as few pieces as possible.

Next, she sent forth her own major pieces and creates a Dragon and Horse in Mio's territory in the blink of an eye She's good!!

"Hghh?! T- Too strong!"

Mio groans with her head in her hands.

The Rook rocket that she was banking on got blocked by a single Pawn that Maria deployed behind a Gold.

Her forced attack shot down, Mio is now way behind in pieces.

Whether on offense or defense, the difference in strength it is obvious

“Hmph. For such a powerful attack, it sure didn’t amount to much.”

“Khh!”

“I considered one aiming to become another Ai Hinatsuru to possess a great deal of talent, but in terms of the Elementary Meijin Tournament, you are prefectural class at best. Consider yourself fortunate to sit across the board from one such as I!”

“.....”

Mio bites her lip to endure the pain.

Picking up steam, Maria keeps on talking.

“Spectacles, my previous opponent, also failed in that regard. Being done in by a feeble attack like that The Kansai Practice League is pathetically weak!”

A painful moan comes from Ayano at my side.

No matter how much I’d like to console her right now Doing so would just pour salt on the wounds.

Maria’s voice is getting louder and louder.

“It appears that amateurs are no longer a match for one such as I. I must strike you down before Master this day to gain her approval in undergoing the Sub League entrance exam even a moment sooner! It is for this you must be exterminated! Die, weed!!”

“..... Oh, so you’re going to join the Sub League?”

“Obviously. As for yourself? Will you continue in the Practice League and attempt to join the Women’s League ranks?”

A Women’s League Player.

That’s exactly what Mio wanted to be.

Except, Mio has a surprisingly cheerful look on her face as she says.

“I’ll be transferring schools. Actually, I won’t be in Japan anymore.”

“.....”

With that from out of nowhere, even Maria falls silent.

“Until now I thought there was still loads of time. Kinda like how summer break feels like it will never end, that there’s still lots and lots of time left. So I didn’t think about what I wanted to do at all, putting off trying to figure it out even if I found something I wanted”

“Hm Hmph! Mere excuses for weaklings!”

Irritated, Maria yells.

“Just get stronger if the pain is too much! Commit more effort! You may use this loss as inspiration to become like me!!”

“Um, no.”

“Whaaat?!”

“The strongest girl at Shogi in my grade I know isn’t you, Miss Kannabe.”

Mio snaps back.

And then—she smiles.

“The one I want to be like Is always really cute, but a little out there and clumsy sometimes. And when it comes to the boy she likes, she gets a little stalker-ish But, she’s the best friend anyone could ever want, has more Shogi talent than anyone, tries harder than anyone——.”

Mio’s keeps rattling off her list.

Explaining her ideals. Going on and on about her emotions that are just as

complicated as the board in front of her.

“Even with all her strength and talent, she goes through more pain than anybody during matches She squirms and clenches, hurting so bad that she can barely sit up straight Watching her up close, it hurts to admit it I know in my heart I wanna be just like her!”

Mio wipes the tears forming in the corners of her eyes away with the back of her hand.

“I wanna be just like her—She is my inspiration!!”

Once she yells.

Mio puts her hands down on either side of her cushion and leans over the board.

“..... Here.”

Slowly Mio start rocking back and forth as she reads the board.

Searching for that one move that will turn the tide.

“Here, here, here, here”

Looking like someone completely different.

“Here, here, here, here, hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—!!”

“!! M-Mio!!”

Tears build up in Ai Hinatsuru’s eyes.

So much so that she’s having trouble reading off the seconds.

“Fool! Do you claim that one such as I, the Elementary Meijin in my rightful place at the peak, am beneath some simple Women’s League

Player!!!?”

Maria is livid as she launches of fiery assault to checkmate Mio’s King.

Snapping a Silver down beneath the King, she uses a Promoted Lance to put it in check —.

Mio’s defensive formation wasn’t in good shape to begin with, but now it’s on the verge of completely breaking down.

“Heh! Imitating Ai Hinatsuru shall get you nowhere!!”

“Hereherehereherehereherehere———Here!!”

“Mgh?! I-Impudent move!!!!”

Maria’s hands stop in midair.

Because Mio *broke her own formation apart*.

Her King emerges from the rubble and start marching across the board.

This is——!!

““Nyugyoku?!””

“Now I get it! Mio wasn’t attacking it all She was clearing an escape path for her King!!”

This changes the board completely.

Her Rook rocket didn’t fail! It served its purpose just fine!

Those wispy defenses were in place so that her King would get away!

“Even the Dragon and Horse in Mio’s territory are nothing but useless decorations now that her King isn’t there anymore! Mio will have the advantage if that King can make it all the way across!”

“Mio!!”

Ayano is starting to sound alive again.

It's almost like a rags to riches revolution.

All those little mistakes Mio has made so far have suddenly become advantageous. Even Shogi rules seem to be on her side!

"Weed! I'll trample you asunder!!"

The Elementary Meijin deploys piece after piece from her stand in an attempt to lock down the King in the middle of the board with an aerial assault.

It's like she's got a treasure chest filled with an unlimited supply of every weapon imaginable to use to rein in the enemy King.

"Sing your delirious swansong, weed!"

"Herehereherehereherehere yes!!"

But, Mio finds a way to get past it all!

"Seems there was a piece stand bargain sale."

Ms. Shakando calmly comments, and she's right. The overwhelming stock of pieces that Maria had built up is suddenly gone.

Mio had won the reading battle.

That fact staring her in the face only serves to rob Maria of whatever composure she had left.

"Dastard—ingrate, insolent, disdainful, pompous, minuscule weeeeeeeed!!"

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher
toooooo here!!"

109th move—Mio's King makes it to the goal, the deepest row in Maria's territory.

But, the path her King forged to *nyugyoku* is now a barren, singed wasteland.

That means that *nyugyoku* is now an option for Maria as well.

As a result

““Double *nyugyoku*?!””

On the 126th move, Maria’s King also makes it to the goal line.

Even so, the battle isn’t over yet. Actually, it’s impossible to tell who will come out on top.

“1-160 moves”

After another fierce back-and-forth for yet another 30 moves using no time whatsoever, people in the crowd can hardly believe their eyes.

Then——.

“Burn - in - hellfire——Weeeeeeed!!”

“!? ——Here!!”

After being put in check by a *Rook in her own territory*, Mio blocks it with an even stranger move.

“Silver?! Why wouldn’t she use a cheaper piece to block? There’s plenty on her stand, so why use the Silver?”

“Are ya brain-dead? The offensive Player deployin’ a piece that can’t go backwards in the first row breaks the rules!”

“Besides, Golds and Pawns are basically worth the same at this point in the match!”

“Gaahhhh?! She figured all that out in a second?!”

A rule prevents Mio from using Pawns, Knights, and Lances to defend.

And, the point system used to break the stalemate.

Those two things just made it this Shogi much more difficult. Saying it’s a completely different game wouldn’t be an exaggeration.

Just watching it is making my brain burn up.

Standards don't mean anything anymore. Late game theory is out the window.

They're on the leading edge with only their reflexes and gut instincts to rely on, but that doesn't stop these two from tearing into each other at a breakneck speed.

170th move, the eighth major piece exchange this match happens.

180th move, less than half the pieces remain on the board.

Then, after the 190th——.

“..... I”

Mio pauses after playing her moves using no time up to that point and uses the last of her waiting time here.

Lifting her head as if coming up for air, she takes a long, deep breath.

She's not using this time to read.

She's using it clear her head instead.

“It's true I haven't tried nearly as hard as you have, Miss Kannabe. I haven't become the Elementary Meijin like you or accomplished anything all that great. About the only thing worth bragging about that I've ever done is bike a lap around Lake Biwa during summer vacation in the third grade——.”

That's one very surprising admission. Lake Biwa is huge!!

“Come again?! She really did that?!”

“I gave up after making it to Nagahama”

Ayano shivers as if reliving those memories. Though, Nagahama is about the halfway point, so that's nothing to sneeze at

“But!!”

Mio puts her fists back down on the mat and leans over the board once again.

“The past doesn’t decide the future!”

Then, she plays it.

A decisive move powerful enough to turn her whole life on its head.

“It’s the future!! What I do decides what I’ll have done!!!”

In that moment—I’m sure I saw tiny little wings sprout from Mio’s back.

“Sh- She slid a major piece?!”

“Not just one, but two?!”

Mio sacrificed two major pieces in order to drag Maria’s King *up and out of the back row*.

A decisive move that took real guts.

“B-But, the points”

Ayano says with despair, so I tell her.

“It won’t matter. She’s going for the checkmate.”

“In this situation?! But—I!”

“Take a look over there.”

Rather than the big board, I point right at where Mio is sitting.

Mio and one more person just behind her from our point of view.

““Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—.””

Mio at the board and Ai at the board-side table.

Both of them are focused on one spot and completely absorbed in reading the board.

“Ai never lets a checkmate get away. Never.”

She'd use that wing-ly talent of hers to find a check path that no one's seen before.

Therefore.

"Mio is trying to catch up to Ai, meaning she'd never even consider trying to win without checkmating her opponent."

The board is utter chaos.

In order to grasp hold of the single beam of light leading to victory she has to stay zeroed in on the target without getting side-tracked, just like the light!

"..... This match no longer needs words. Any move appraisals would only take away from its grandeur."

Ms. Shakando quietly says with her eyes closed.

"The one thing I will say is that this Shogi is one for the ages and shall be remembered throughout our lifetimes. That goes for the players, and every person who comes upon it from this day onward."

Even though victory is slipping through her student's fingers, Ms. Shakando seems oddly content.

Someone in the crowd shouts.

"Th-That's 200 moves!!"

The match is still going on, but a natural round of applause erupts throughout the arena.

"What's going on?! Who's got the points?!" "Wait! But Could she be?!"
"C-Can she really checkmate her?"

Pulled out of its safe place and now running for its life every which way, Maria's King is running out of options fast.

"You You! Insolence little YOUUUUUUU!!"

Tears are starting to build in the champion's eyes as she struggles with all her

might.

It's almost over.

The applause disappear as everyone holds their breath. Seriously, it's so quiet in this arena you could hear a pin drop.

Except for one person.

""

One little girl watching on from the shadows as the board basks in a massive spotlight Passions are running high, but she has been left behind.

So, I tell that lonely little girl.

"Mio would never have won this match by herself."

"Huh?"

"It unfolded like this because you held out as long as you did, Ayano. Sure, it tired her out a bit, but Your match against her made Maria anxious about her opponent 'holding out.' That's why she was late in her decision to try to *nyugyoku*."

Stubborn, gritty Kansai Shogi.

Determination that conjures up images of Ms. Gakumeki.

It's exactly because Ayano showed Maria how hard it is to defeat that style that Maria pushed too hard trying to checkmate Mio's King in the middle of the board.

"Maria is fighting on her own, but Mio had you next to her the whole time. You're in that spotlight, Ayano. That's why Mio"

I let my voice trail off before I said "won."

I stop myself entirely from saying "don't get down on yourself."

"..... Thank you very much"

Whispering under her breath, Ayano removes her glasses and wipes the tears away with the back of her hand.

All so that she could see her best friend claim victory.

Then——.

“..... But This is still, painful”

She says the word she’s been repeating this whole time once more.

It’s a word she’ll probably say tens of thousands of times after today, too.

“..... It sure is. Now’s the time to get stronger.”

I put my arm around Ayano’s shoulder and pull her in close.

On stage, the long final match is coming to a close. Not by a stalemate or repetition draw, but a full-fledged checkmate.

King of Naniwa Tournament, Upper Grades Division.

Claiming victory after an epic 217-move battle is——

WARM TEARS

“The victor, Mio Mizukoshi.”

Judge Rina Shakando reads off the victory certificate from the podium right in front of Mio, who looks even more nervous now than she did during the match.

“You were stronger than all participants of the 25th King of Naniwa Tournament, Upper Grades Division. Thus, I endow you with this certificate and hereby etch your name into the annals of history.”

Usually there’s a standard template for making victory certificates like this one and all they do is switch out the names, but Ms. Shakando took the time to come up with an original message by herself and write it out by hand for this one.

An original victory certificate from the *Queen-Quadruple Title*. I can’t imagine how much that must be worth.

“Congratulations. Your final approach was most impressive. I hear tell that you are in the Practice League May I ask who your Master is?”

“K-Kuresaka-*sensei*!”

“I see. Do you have your sights set on the Women’s League?”

“! I, well”

Mio’s not sure what to say. Picking up on her discomfort, Ms. Shakando simply smiles and congratulates her again before giving her the certificate.

“Thank you so much!!”

A round of thunderous applause fell the gym as Mio starts to get off the podium.

Ms. Shakando stops her.

“There is still the matter of the trophy. Now Would you bring it forward?”

Mio stopped in her tracks while Ms. Shakando signals someone just off stage.

Osakans love flashy, over-the-top things and this trophy is certainly no exception. It’s so big that I can’t even see the person carrying it.

“.....?”

Mio tilts her head, confused.

From a distance, it looks like the trophy itself sprouted legs and is now waddling its way over to her.

The one carrying this behemoth of a trophy is—a tiny Women’s League Player.

“! Ai Is that you?”

Stunned, Mio can only stand there.

Careful not to lose her balance, Ai slowly but surely brings the trophy to its new owner and offers up celebratory words.

“Congratulations, Mio.”

Then, still holding the massive trophy in her hands, Ai bows as low as she can.

“And I’m so sorry! Saying all those mean things——.”

“No, no! I know what you were trying to do! I get it, so everything’s okay!!”

Mio rushes over to Ai.

“Actually, I’m the one that needs to be thanking you! You had all this stuff to worry about, but you still were willing to be the bad guy all for me.”

“Mio

A hint of relief passes over Ai’s face now that she knows her best friend

understood everything.

I was certain that that's what she was trying to do back on that day in the school gym.

I'm a terrible master, but there's one thing even I can tell. Ai always prioritizes other people before herself no matter what else she has on her plate.

That's a wonderful trait to have as a person but can be a major flaw for a Shogi Player.

This time, it's Mio who asks.

"But That's gotta be it. You knew, didn't you? Since when?"

"The day of the opening ceremony I heard you talking with Kanegasaka-*sensei* in the teacher's office"

Her voice trailing off, Ai does her best to explain.

"That day, Kanegasaka-*sensei* was going to do a home visit I went there to check with her about the time, but you got there first I knew it wouldn't be right to listen in, but just when I was about to go I heard 'transfer' And And"

"Then that means this was yours after all."

With that, Mio reaches into her pocket and pulls out—a Shogi piece keychain.

That was the first reward I ever bought for Ai at the Association gift shop.

"!! Where was it?! That's the first thing Master ever gave me, so I've been looking everywhere! So, you had it, Mio Thank goodness"

"It was on the floor outside the teacher's office. I was pretty sure it was yours, but"

She probably couldn't find the right time to give it back.

I mean, once Mio did give it back to her, Ai wouldn't be able to hide the fact

she eaves dropped on the conversation.

“I should’ve given it back to you sooner, yeah? And it would’ve been so much easier on both of us if I just told you about my transferring from the start. I really am sorry. All I’ve ever done is hold you back——.”

“That’s not true at all!!”

“Huh?”

“You are the first one to ever invite me to play Shogi!! Don’t tell me you forgot?!”

That was the on first day I took Ai to the Association classroom.

Even now, I can remember it like it was yesterday, right down to how warm Mio’s hands were after she played a match against Ai and wanted to shake my hand.

“Shogi is fun for me all because you played with me, Mio! You gave me the courage to stay here in Osaka by being my friend. If it hadn’t been for you, school would’ve been scary and I wouldn’t have made so many friends You You’ve given me so, so much But I’ve never given you anything in return I just never knew what to do!”

Winner takes all. That’s the way the world of competition works.

It’s probably true that Mio would’ve won a lot more matches in the Practice League if Ai weren’t around. That’s a fact that can’t be denied.

Which is why——Mio answers.

“You know, after I met you? I cry so much more than I used to.”

“.....!”

Ai looks at the floor and bites her lip. She’s bracing herself for pain.

Except, Mio is smiling at Ai as she stares at the floor.

“But, those tears? They’re warm!”

“Huh..... ?”

“I always thought that tears were cold! That losing Shogi was a sad thing and there was nothing good about it.”

Losing a match is truly painful.

The more serious you are about it, the more your heart hurts when your fighting spirit breaks.

“But, you know? All those tears since I met you, Ai, they’ve all been warm! No matter how bad things got, no matter how much it hurt, watching you never break no matter what right next to me and playing against you I guess your burning passion rubbed off on me.”

True to her playing style, Ai takes on her problems head-on in life as well.

Mio was always right next to that fireball of a girl.

“If you hadn’t been around, I’ve never been able to keep it together with my transfer coming up. You coming to Osaka all by yourself made me feel like I can go anywhere, too! I I wanna be strong just like you!!”

“Mi- o!!”

That proved to be too much for Ai and tears begin pouring down her cheeks.

With the trophy requiring both hands to carry, Ai can’t wipe them away by herself.

Mio reaches out and wipes those pearly drops from her cheeks.

“See? They’re warm, aren’t they?”

“Uh-huh hot. They’re very hot!”

Then, Mio takes hold of Ai’s hand as the two hoist the trophy together.

The scene that just unfolded on stage gets a standing ovation from the crowd.

Even though they couldn’t hear the words that were exchanged on the

podium, I'm sure Mio wiping Ai's tears away was all they needed to see to understand.

I know this because Shogi has helped all the kids and their families who gathered here today overcome struggles before.

"Mio and Ai the two of them have grown up so much and it's only been a year"

Holding my own tears back out of sheer will, I clap my heart out for the two of them.

I thought they'd always be kids.

I thought I had to teach them everything.

Honestly, there were times I got irritated because they couldn't do the things that I taught them right away.

But, I was wrong.

I'm not sure when it started, but I'm the one that's been learning.

"Let's take a picture together and send it to Black Cat! I won because of them. You asked them to, right Ai? Found someone to teach me in your place?"

"M-Mio?! How did you"

"Of course, I figured it out! (haha)"

Mio says that it was pretty obvious as both girls turn their backs to the crowd and Mio snaps a selfie of the two of them hold the trophy with a compact digital camera.

Mio saying "Blaaaack Caaaaat" instead of something like "cheese" seemed just a little bit off to me, but Apparently, all of us know this person was been helping Mio in matches over the Internet. Just who could this Cinderella of a "Black Cat" be?

"Now, the time has come for us to meet in battle, Drakin."

Says Ayumu, suddenly at my side and clapping as he continues.

“My sibling was too arrogant to see the trap that swept her off her feet, and yet the same blood runs in our veins She shall be avenged this day!”

I’d bet that this is a match Ayumu can’t afford to lose.

Despite coming here all the way from Tokyo, he could only watch on as his rival’s student defeated his own sister. What’s worse, it happened right in front of his precious Master.

At this point, the shame will be too great to look his master in the eye if he doesn’t at least win this match before the day is through. I understand that feeling so well it hurts.

That’s why I give him this answer.

“Sorry, Ayumu.”

“What?”

“This match today I can’t afford to lose either!!”

FROM NOW

“Thank you so much for coming today!”

I say yet again as I shake hands at a breakneck speed like an idol at a fan meet-and-greet event. I’ve forgotten the actual number of people I’ve shaken hands with so far. I stopped counting after hitting 300.

The winner of Top Earners Matches shakes hands with everyone in attendance to show fan appreciation. That’s how it’s done nowadays.

In other words, every kid and parent that came to a tournament today, somewhere around 3,000 people

The muscles in my face are stuck in a permanent smile and my right hand is sore and throbbing towards the end. Kimono soaked with sweat, it’s even hard to walk. I’ll be surprised if I can pick up pieces tomorrow. Then again, being dead-tired after a win doesn’t hurt at all!

“Thank you for your hard work, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. The last guests for today are coming.”

“Ah Okay.”

That staff member’s voice brings me out of my daze. So, human beings can smile and shake hands while being on the brink of passing out

Then, jumping right into my weary arms are——.

“Master!” “Kujuryu-*sensei*!” “Masta≡!” “You’ve worked so hard!”

My four angels.

One look at their faces and suddenly I’m not tired anymore.

“Charlette, are you sure you should be up already?! I can pick you up if——.”

“Master? You have work to do, shaking hands. Please do it, okay?”

“Gh-owwwwch!! Ai, that hurts!! And that’s not a handshake, you’re just clamping down on my hand!!”

“All right, then I’m going to leave a handprint on your back, Kujiyuru-sensei! Hiiya!!” *Thwack!* Mio wasn’t kidding

“Th-Then, I’ll touch his stomach It’s a special day It’s a special day” *Press.* Ayano’s hands softly push against my shirt.

With me completely enveloped by grade school girls, who should show up but—.

“Hehehe. Popular, aren’t you? Young Ryuo.”

“Agh! Ms. Shakando How embarrassing.”

“Actually, I would say refreshing. I have only witnessed your terrifying strength on the Shogi board up to this point. Seeing you frolic with these young maidens, you have so much more life in you.”

Saying things that are sure to spark misunderstandings, Ms. Shakando pushes the still-crying Elementary Meijin out from under Ayumu’s cape.

“My student has received so much from you. Therefore, I believe some words of gratitude are in order and for the small braves as well.”

“Whaaa?! F-For me to? A thank-you?!”

Says Mio, who can hardly believe she got brought into the conversation.

“Miss Mio Mizukoshi. Miss Ayano Sadatou and Miss Charlette Isoir. All of you have performed admirably. Though there may be outstanding circumstances, I wish for you all to continue playing Shogi.”

““Yes!!””

Mio is so nervous she’s practically frozen solid. Ayano can’t believe who’s speaking to her right now and is starting to tear up. Yet, both girls still respond loud and clear. Ms. Shakando must be something close to a god for these two

Practice League members. No matter what happens in the rest of their lives, I doubt they'll ever forget this day. Even Charlette chimes in with a "wei!"

Looking at Mio, Ms. Shakando's eyes narrow as she says.

"Maria. Do you comprehend the meaning of what this person said to you?"

"..... Mgh Anngh"

"No matter how many victories you compile, lose once and you will forever be remembered as the defeated. The victor is not allowed a single loss or draw, only the next victory. One only becomes the true victor after achieving an endless string of victories. Continuously flaunting a single victory is utter folly."

"M-Maaasteeer"

Ms. Shakando doesn't pull any verbal punches even as Maria cries like a fountain.

In this world, one win is nothing more than the opening act to the next battle. Understanding that fact is the reason that Ms. Shakando and even *that* Meijin don't show any interest in the records they've set.

For someone that's always in battle, they don't mean anything.

"For today, you are among the defeated. Shall you continue to dwell within their ranks, or will you stand to fight once again? Your decision, now."

"Ungh *Sniffle* I I'll f-fight"

"So be it."

Rina Shakando-*Women's Legend* nods her head all the way down and solemnly declares.

"On this day, you have tasted the agony of defeat. Victory is the only salvation from this pain. Thus, I shall allow you to undergo the Sub League entrance regulations as a member of my lineage. Henceforth, you shall be known as Theotokos Priestess of Shogi, St. Maria."

“!! I I humbly accept!!”

“Grace this world with Shogi yet unseen, St. Maria. My apprentice.”

Says the Eternal Queen with her gaze overflowing with emotion.

Ayumu, Maria now officially his little sister in the real and Shogi worlds, wipes Maria’s hot tears from her cheeks.

Ms. Shakando truly sees Maria as her own daughter.

Sending someone that important to them into the Sub League Would I be able to do it?

..... Nah. I don’t have to think about that. Not right now anyway.

“Ai Hinatsuru Ultimately ‘Ryuo’s Chicklet,’ yes?”

Next, Ms. Shakando congratulates Ai, not just Mio.

“Allow me to congratulate you on becoming the youngest Women’s League Player ever to qualify for the Women’s Legend League. Your performance in the late phase of that match was superb.”

“..... Thank you very much.”

Says Ai with a bow, completely monotone. She’s not jumping for joy like Mio did. Because, Ms. Shakando is an opponent after all.

The Women’s Legend glances in my direction.

“Though, I must say, the Kuzuryu lineage seems very fond of ‘the youngest.’”

“Would you please word that differently!! People will get the wrong idea!!”

These girls’ parents and their homeroom teacher are close by!!

Ms. Shakando grins as if enjoying herself and then turns back to Ai.

“Ryuo’s Chicklet, your master once came to me seeking council.”

“About what?”

“He said to me that his apprentice would soon join the Women’s League and

would be within reach of the title not long thereafter. Said apprentice was developing at such a fast rate, he was struggling to keep up and was unsure of what to do

“.....!!”

Surprised, Ai looks right up in me.

It’s true that I did talk to Ms. Shakando about that. It was right before Ai took part in the Mynavi Preliminaries.

And, everything I said back then has come true.

“Chicklet. As you can see, my leg is disabled. It is most difficult for me to walk over to where you are.”

Pointing to her bum left leg, Rina Shakando-*Women’s Legend* says while grinning from ear to ear.

“So, would you please come up to where I am? That way I can knock you back down with my own two hands.”

““!!””

It finally hits me.

The Eternal Queen didn’t come here to offer congratulations.

She’s here to declare war on the Women’s League Player Ai Hinatsuru—as well as the girls I’ve had a hand in raising.

“I will!”

Ai clinches her fists and yells.

“I will meet you there! The shortest way possible!!”

Now, Ai Hinatsuru is—taking on a legend.

After the Shakando Shogi family makes their exit like a procession of the royal

court, a certain voice speaks up as if she were waiting for just that moment.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

It’s Kanegasaka-*sensei* along with the parents of the Grade Schooler Practice Group members.

Spotting one of them, Mio shouts.

“Huuuh?! Papa?! What about work?!”

“This was my daughter’s time in the spotlight. I told my boss I’d quit if he didn’t let me take time off to come and see Besides, it’s a Sunday.”

Mio’s father works for a massive pharmaceutical company and it’s easy to tell he’s been working too hard because he’s unhealthily thin. He continues.

“More importantly There was something I’ve had to tell you for a long time now.”

“Hmmm? What?”

“About my being transferred to Europe. You have nothing to worry about. You can stay here in Osaka with your mother and keep living like you always——.”

“Without you, Papa, it won’t be like always, will it?”

“.....”

“Of course, I want to stay with all my friends here. Not having to move away would be great, but That means you’d be all by yourself overseas, right?”

“Yes, it would, but You just won a major tournament. Why, you could be a Women’s League Player one day if you stay in Japan and work for it. That’s what you wanted to prove by working so hard, is it not?”

“Huuuh?”

Mio’s face goes blank for a moment.

Then, the words roll right off her tongue.

“I didn’t win the tournament because I wanted to stay in Japan and keep going to the Practice League.”

“You didn’t?”

“I wanted to thank you and Mama for letting me keep playing Shogi for all these years! I wanted to show you how strong I’ve gotten before leaving Japan I mean, I couldn’t have kept going if it weren’t for both of you!”

““!!””

Mio’s parents are both completely lost for words.

They thought their little girl would always be a kid, but Now she’s the one rooting them on. That’s got to be the most surprising and simultaneously happy moment a parent could ever have.

Her mother is wiping her eyes with a handkerchief while her father looks up at the ceiling so gravity can help keep his tears back. Other parents who still happen to be around with their kids, however, already are crying.

Turning to face her parents like a sunflower shifting towards the sun, Mio says.

“I’m pretty strong, aren’t I? So, I’ll be fine. Let’s all go as a family.”

“B-But Won’t you be lonely? This means leaving your friends behind.”

“I won’t be lonely at all! I mean right?”

Mio flashes a mischievous smile as she looks at all the Grade Schooler Practice Group members in turn.

Ai, Ayano, and Charlette giggle right back.

All the adults watching them are confused and can’t figure out exactly what the kids are talking about.

So, as the leader of the group, Mio steps up to explain.

“Mama, Papa, you might not get it, but No matter how far apart we are, even on the other side of the planet, we won’t get lonely.”

“Cha, too! Cha won’t be wonwy, even back in Fwance!”

“I also will not feel lonely. I won’t have enough time to feel it.”

“I Might be a little sad. But, no matter where we are or how much time goes by, I’ll always feel closer to Mio than anyone. Because——.”

Ai chimes in as the four magical angels take hold of each other’s hands and say with glee.

All of them together connected by their magic spell.

“Because we have Shogi!”



..... I walk over to where Kanegasaka-sensei is standing to ask her something that's been bugging me for a while.

"You knew from the start, didn't you, Sensei? About Shogi, Ai and I and the Grade Schooler Practice Group? Which is why you wanted to broaden that circle as much as possible in your class. All so that Mio wouldn't be lonely. Am I wrong?"

"You may believe what you will."

She answers without changing her expression at all.

Yep, she's a genuine teacher. Her brain works differently than mine.

"Kuzuryu-sensei, as promised, I shall acknowledge you as Miss Hinatsuru's legal guardian."

"Thank you."

"To be honest, there are still things about Miss Hinatsuru that concern me."

"....."

"However, it would be impossible for anyone without the same level of talent or greater to raise that girl properly. Watching her during this tournament made it all too clear. She is different from other children her age on a fundamental level."

Says Kanegasaka-sensei with a hint of fear in her voice as she watches Ai busily laugh and cry together with Mio and the other girls from afar.

An unprecedented monster is lurking among those four angels.

The monster called "talent."

It'll only keep growing from here, consuming all who stand against it and may even bite the hand of its own master one day.

"Miss Hinatsuru has a special power. Please make sure that power doesn't go

astray.”

“I promise. That’s my job as her master.”

“Your darling apprentice? I thought the practice of live-in apprentices was outdated, but it may, in fact, be the perfect environment for talented children like her.”

She tells me with a smile before suddenly switching to a serious tone.

“But, be sure never to forget one thing.”

“And that is?”

My apprentice’s homeroom teacher then tells me flat out as I look at her in confusion.

“Elementary school students are out of bounds as romantic partners!”

..... I’ll take that to heart.

EPILOGUE

It was sprinkling when we left the arena, but now it's really coming down.

"All right everyone, head over to Master Kiyotaki's place. I'll catch up once I pick up a few things at my apartment to spend the night."

""See you there!!""

The happy voices of grade schoolers giving me a push out the parked van's door, I step out onto Naniwa Street.

The one most excited about Mio taking first place, Ayano winning third, and Charlette making it into the best eight in her Division wasn't the girls themselves Or even their parents.

It's Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*.

I heard that the Grade Schooler Practice Group had their practice sessions at Master's place while I was busy with placement matches. Master is even registered as "Grandpa≡" on their messaging apps. What a loli-con!

Apparently, he was glued to the Internet coverage of the tournament and started bawling his eyes out that he wanted to do something for them whether they won or lost. It also seems like he was relentlessly calling my phone while the tournament was going on.

We're not allowed to have any electronic devices on us during matches, so I got a real surprise when I turned my phone back on. Stunned by the 99 missed calls, I called Master back but could hardly understand a word he said on the other end.

"Whanna ssselibraaate, sooo wgal ever'bhdyy obar to da howwwse."

"Hm? You want me to tell everyone to come to your place for a party?"

"Nygaa! Nygaa!"

“Understood. Their parents are here, so I’ll bring the girls over once I have their permission.”

And so now we’re having a sleepover.

I’m sure all their parents want to celebrate their daughters’ achievements as a family.

But, they were nice enough to prioritize me and let the four girls spend time together.

Not only that, they knew all of us couldn’t fit in a regular taxi so Mio’s father summoned a big van for us Other Association staff members who happened to see me helping the girls into the black van saw us off with smiles.

The girls’ excited little voices came out of the van up until I close the door behind me.

“Gwandpa≡ Gwandpa≡”

“Kiyotaki-sensei said he’ll buy us presents! Whatever we want! I’m gonna ask for one of those pocket translator thingies for when I move to Europe!”

“I would like to do more Shogi research, so I would like good pieces to use for it.”

“It’s been forever since we’ve had a pajama party with Keika!”

The Grade Schooler Practice Group and Keika in pajamas?!

What kind of all-star lineup is that?! It’s a dream come true

Visions of Keika’s ero- curvy body that night after the family meeting going through my head, I have to wipe my mouth. It’s sweat! That or the rain!

“I better keep an eye on them There’s no telling what might happen if I’m not there

After all, their parents trust me to protect them!

Because Kanegasaka-sensei finally acknowledged me as Ai’s guardian!

Because I teach Shogi at a grade school!

That's why I have to grab my pajamas right when I get home and join the party!!

"There's so much to do before summer vacation! Let's do them all together!"

"Yes! Let's make memories!"

Mio and Ai had held hands the whole time in the van, making plans back and forth.

If there's anything I can do to help them out, I'll do it.

I'll be turning 18 this summer.

If I get a driver's license on August 1, my birthday, I can take the girls anywhere they want during summer vacation. Whatever happy memories they want to make, I can make it happen.

"..... Oh! The results are in."

Just as I was planning out the near future My phone vibrates in my pocket and I take it out to look at the info. Results from the important matches that take place once every two weeks.

The 3-*dan* Division results.

They had regular activities today and Big Sis played in Osaka.

She outright forbade me from going to the Association to ask in person, so I've been having the Director secretly send me the results so she doesn't find out.

"Sota is still undefeated. What else I expect? Good, Mr. Kagamizu is still sitting with just one loss and his rank hasn't changed. If he keeps this up"

Then, I get to the main event, Big Sis's result.

“Consecutive losses?! Bis Sis?!”

It’s the first time that’s happened.

After losing to Mr. Kagamizu, that one loss has suddenly became two in a row.

Losing consecutive matches makes things extremely difficult. Big Sis’s ranking is low to begin with, so now winning out is her only hope

“But, she needs to get out of this mindset. I’ll talk to Keika and see if she knows how to cheer up Big Sis without getting in her way——.”

I mumble to myself as I walk in the front door, head to the sink to grab a towel to dry off my hair and toss my wet clothes into the hamper.

Then, I hear my name as soon as I step into the kitchen.

“..... Yaichi”

Someone glowing faintly white in the darkness is standing there.

They’re grabbing something with their left hand and pushing said something against their right wrist.

“..... Big Sis?”

Despite hearing my own name and seeing her with my own eyes, I honestly can’t tell if that’s her or not.

Seriously——the Ginko Sora standing there, her eyes are darker and cloudier than I’ve ever seen before in my life.

“It’s this hand’s fault.”

Says the girl as pale as a ghost sounding as alive as a doll.

“I was in position to win, just like I should be. And then this hand made a move that went against my plan all on its own. That’s why——.”

I finally realize what it is that Big Sis is pushing against her wrist.

It's—a knife.

“That’s why it has to be severed.”

“Gah?! Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!!”

I race up to Big Sis in a panic and snatch that knife right out of her hand.

“Don’t put a blade against your skin, even as a joke! I understand the shock from losing consecutive matches hurts, but the 3-*dan* Division is still going on! You won’t be able to play Shogi ever again like this!!”

There was a time in this very kitchen that Big Sis said she was looking for a knife to cut off my head.

It was the first time she met Ai Hinatsuru.

Only a year ago.

During that year, Ai has grown so much in Shogi and as a person, right along with her friends.

But Big Sis was about to use that knife to cut off her right hand, which she needs to play Shogi.

Why did it come to this?

“I can’t anymore. I’m done with Shogi. I don’t want to be in Osaka.”

The drenched and lifeless doll in the shape of Big Sis tells me with those dark eyes as she reaches for the knife I took from her and grabs the blade *with her bare hands*.

Then, she says as she guides the tip toward her heart.



“Please—————kill me.”

FOR THE AFTERWORD: *CONGRATULATIONS*

“Shogi truly is fun. I can say that after my loss yesterday, so there’s no mistaking it.”

Masayuki Toyoshima-*Dual Title* made that statement back when he held a 6-*dan* ranking.

Toyoshima-*sensei*’s first match as a title challenger when he was 20 years old ended in crushing defeat.

He then greeted the children participating in a Junior Shogi Tournament the very next day with those words.

The Shogi world’s top three: Yoshiharu Habu, Akira Watanabe, and then Masayuki Toyoshima.

Despite his exceptional talent and being seen as the next generations’ most dominant Player, Toyoshima-*sensei* would fall just short of a title for many years to come.

As fellow Kansai Players his own age were passing him by to claim titles for themselves, he apparently dealt with a great deal of internal struggles even though on the outside he appeared to take everything at his own pace.

After claiming his first title, Kisei, Toyoshima-*sensei* opened up during an interview and said, “From 25 until now was the worst time in my life.”

“I’d loved Shogi since I was a little boy because how purely fun it was to play. There was a time I certainly didn’t think so, but I was able to persevere thanks to all the support from those around me.”

He told the interviewer with a bashful smile.

Nearly eight years had passed since that first time he challenged for a title.

Now, on a completely different note——.

Shirabii-sensei, the illustrator for “The Ryuo’s Work is Never Done!” won first place in the “Kono Raito Noberu Ga Sugoi! (This Light Novel Is Amazing!)” Illustrators’ Division in 2018!

Since Shirabii-sensei has already had an illustrious career spanning all sorts of media beyond light novels, “Ryuo” is nothing more than one line on his impressive resume.

Even so, I don’t think that I need to explain that all the passion and effort he commits to his pieces go beyond simply “working.”

Never compromising when it comes to character design, Ginko’s crystallized snowflake hairpin and Yaichi using Keika’s black hairband when he was a kid (take a look at Book 3’s cover art!) are just a few of Shirabii-sensei’s suggestions.

He even came up with season-specific designs for each character (summer clothes from Book 4!) and even redesigned the kimonos with new patterns and accessories

It also goes without saying he doesn’t compromise for his other projects, either. Always working on multiple series simultaneously, like his weekly illustrations for Yomiuri Newspaper’s weekly publication for teenagers called “*Isekai Shugaku Ryokou*”(Field Trip to Another World), I believe he is worthy of this number one ranking in terms of both projects and sheer number of pages. There are times it’s hard to believe he’s human.

Why would he take on so much work? Actually, I asked him just that a long time ago. Why are you so dedicated?

“I like light novels.”

That was his answer, along with a bashful smile.

There’s no relation at all and yet, weirdly enough, he reminded me a lot of Toyoshima-sensei.

Shirabii-sensei, congratulations.

It's truly an honor to get to work with you like this.

All the beautiful illustrations are given, but your professionalism and gentle treatment of my work has taught me so much during our time together.

I started writing "The Ryuo's Work is Never Done" during the darkest days of my life.

But, I don't think I've ever been happier than I am right now.

I was able to overcome my own struggles thanks to the characters that you brought to life, Shirabii-sensei. I'm positive that I'm not the only one whose life your work has changed for the better.

Thank you for liking light novels so much.

It's too embarrassing for me to say these words face-to-face so I decided to congratulate you like this.

**REVIEW
SESSION**

New Encounters
~Moment of Beginnings~

REVIEW SESSION

New Encounters

~Moment of Beginnings

“Oh? O-Ryou, by yourself, are you?”

Visiting the Kansai Shogi Association’s third-floor Players’ Room as she always did, Machi Kugui spotted Ryou Tsukiyomizaka sitting at a table as she almost always was.

“I’ve got a gig here in Osaka tomorrow. Figured I may as well get here early and spend Sunday night out in the city, but Can’t really go anywhere else with it raining cats and dogs outside.”

“Indeed, this rain would make it most difficult.”

Rainy season had arrived in Kansai earlier than normal just as it had last year, and the rains hadn’t let up for the past few days. Perhaps that was the reason that not only the Players’ Room, but the entire Shogi Association was nearly empty.

Setting down her bag and pulling up a chair, Machi said.

“Since we are already here, how about a match?”

“Shogi, meh Not really in the mood right now”

“Heh heh heh. Just what I thought you would say, so I——.”

With that, Machi pulled a book out from her bag.

“Behold! I have brought with me a quite dated album of photos!”

“No kidding?! Now that could be interesting! When’re they from?”

“Our first meeting, so Around spring of our sixth year in elementary school.”

Reaching for the surprisingly dense a photo album, Ryou couldn't help commenting on the title engraved in its cover, “New Encounters ~Moment of Beginnings...~.”

“What's up with that title, Machi? Seriously, that's what an old soap opera in the 80s' would've been called.”

“..... I was simply that age.”

Glancing at the floor as the pink hue of embarrassment dusted her cheeks, Machi swiftly opened the cover.

One look at the first picture and Ryou could hardly contain herself.

“Holy! I remember this! It's the classroom downstairs, when me and Trash were playing Shogi! How the heck did you get the shot without me noticing?!”

“This was when I first was developing an interest in photography. I'd come to believe that accolades as a Shogi Player were not in my future, so I'd begun to branch out into other ventures.”

“Machi, you were seriously thinking about being a Shogi journalist all the way back then?”

“More like a wordsmith in general, but yes. Even now, I submit work to town magazines as a freelance writer.”

“Hmph. Hearing that from somebody who could make it on Shogi alone kinda pisses me off.”

“Easy now. It's thanks to that——.”

Her lips curling into the grin of a sly fox, Machi turns to the next page.

“Rare photos like this these exist in the first place.”

The next page was titled——“Ryou Tsukiyomizaka ~Fleeting Moments ...

Emotions Hidden Within the Heart~.”

A full spread of photos showing Ryou as a 6th grade student and Yaichi Kuzuryu, then in 4th, playing Shogi

The earliest ones showed Ryou dressed in clothing not so different from what boys would wear. As time went on however, the series of chronologically organized photos showed her suddenly growing out her hair and dressing more like the girls her age.

It wasn't just her appearance.

Even her line of sight steadily became more focused on the boy rather than the board between them——.

“Urrraaghoooooooooooooooooooo! Stop, damn it! The hell are you doing walking around with these!! Hide them, now, now, now!! Actually, just burn the whole thing! ‘Hidden emotions,’ seriously, what the hell, id——iot!!”

“It’s all right. Not another soul is present.”

“..... Tsk”

Leaning over the table to shield the photos from view with her own body, Ryou nervously glanced toward the door and, only when she was certain that Machi was right that they were alone, sat back down in her chair.

Both girls then reaffixed their gaze to the album.

“If I may, you were the cutest at this age, *O-Ryou*. Your feminine side emerged further still with each visit you made to Kansai yes?”

“That’s me caught up in my own game. Not a crush, got that? Trash kept confusing me for a boy, so I wanted to see the shock on his face”

“Ohhh? An effort to grab his attention at any cost?”

“I said ‘shock him,’ didn’t I?! Don’t make me clobber you!!”

Face flushing as red as her ginger hair, Ryou thrust her finger onto the album

and exclaimed.

“Mind explaining to me why There’s a heck of a lot of pics of Trash in here, eh?!”

“Why, yes. I was quite fond.”

“!! ?! ?! ?!”

“Fond of Ryuo-san’s Shogi since those days. I knew beyond a shadow of the doubt he would come to hold a title one day. Meaning these photos would become quite valuable, no?”

“H-Hmph”

With Ryou’s heart suddenly even more aflutter, the two girls turned to face the Players’ Room entrance in unison.

““ ””

This was about the time when a teenage boy wearing a suit that didn’t suit him at all would normally come in and the three of them would have fun together, but

“..... Nothing to do, is there.”

“Appears not. Not a soul will be coming today.”

“..... How about a match?”

“..... I don’t see why not.”

The album safely back in Machi’s bag, the two line up pieces on a Shogi board and begin a practice much.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Ai and her friends were but 3rd grade elementary school students when the story began are now starting 5th grade.

I had originally planned to end this series in five book, so I'm still reflecting on just how lucky I am that it has reached ten.

Now that Ai is 10, how much longer will Kuzuryu-*sensei*'s love for her last? I'm not sure how many books I'll be able to write, but I'll keep going as long as I can!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Coming up with new clothing designs for Ai now that she's in 5th grade was challenging.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 10

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 10

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