

THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

6

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI







The first in history versus the youngest!
The big match to determine which will advance to 3-dan!

MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU:
Ryuo. A superstitious competitor, he's the type of person who will keep drawing fortunes until he gets *Best Luck*.



AI HINATSURU:
Yaichi's first apprentice and Women's League 2-*kyu*. She's a fourth grader who is very particular about shrine etiquette.



GINKO SORA:
Yaichi's elder sister apprentice. Possessing two Women's Titles, she ranks 2-dan in the Sub League and has a habit of praying at shrines whenever she happens to see one.



AI YASHAJIN:
Yaichi's second apprentice and Women's League 2-*kyu*. Stoutly refuses to take any type of fortune telling seriously but thinks aliens do exist.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI:
Daughter of Yaichi's Master and Women's League 3-*kyu*. The *mother* in the Kiyotaki Shogi family, she's at the age where she's more interested in *marriage prospects* than her overall fortune.



MIO MIZUKOSHI
Ai Hinatsuru's Shogi friend and member of the Practice League. Currently in the fourth grade, she's only drawn *Best Luck* fortunes since she was born. Extraordinarily lucky.



MACHI KUGUI:
A Women's League member and Shogi journalist from Kansai who holds the Women's League Title *Yamashiro Ouka* while going by the pen name *Mato*. Recites traditional Japanese poems on New Year's Day with her family.

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VOLUME 6

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork and all illustrations

Shirabii

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THE SHOGI GODS

“Gods?”

“At’s right.”

I’m pretty sure it was just after I became Master’s apprentice.

I was six years old and Ginko was four (I didn’t call her Big Sis yet) when he took the two of us out on a day trip.

Part of it was because I’d just left Yamaoka in Fukui Prefecture for the first time, so I remember everything flying past the windows being so new and exciting as I sat next to Ginko in the back seat while Master drove.

..... But, being from Kansai in the first place, Ginko wasn’t interested in the scenery at all. Instead, she demanded that I play Shogi with her.

She became Master’s apprentice two weeks before me, meaning I had to do whatever she said. I wanted to play Shogi too, so I followed her orders right away.

In the end, we played on that collapsible magnetic Shogi board that Ginko always carried around with her in the back seat the whole way. We just use our mental Shogi boards nowadays, but we couldn’t play a game without an actual board and pieces back then.

I think it was at about the time we finished our fifth match that the car came to a stop and Master said, “Here we are.”

As for where we were It smelled strange. A girl a bit older than us was waiting to show us around. She was strange too, always swinging a toy sword around.

That’s when Master told us something even stranger yet.

About the Shogi gods.

“In this world, ya ain’t goin’ any higher if the Shogi gods don’t like ya.”

“We can’t get strong?”

“Nah, ya can get plenty strong. But if the Shogi gods got somethin’ against ya, ya never gonna turn pro. Certainly never be the Meijin.”

“We can get really strong, but never be a pro?”

Hearing that made me shiver in fear.

Because, I mean, I wanted to be just like Master.

I came to Osaka because I wanted to be a pro Shogi player.

Which is why, when I heard that these mystifying Shogi “gods” could stop me, it was scary.

I knew how to get better, how to get stronger.

Play lots of Shogi and try really hard.

But

“What do I need to do to make the Shogi gods like me?!”

I desperately pleaded, pulling on Master’s pant leg and begging for an answer.

He gently patted me on my head as I shook and told me several ways that I could gain the Shogi gods’ favor.

Listening to him, all the anxiety and worry started to melt away.

But, Ginko had other ideas.

“..... There are no gods.”

Ginko was (and pretty much still is) the type of person who won’t accept what someone says as is.

She seriously looked like an angel. I didn’t think she was human the first time I saw her, more like a fairy or spirit right out of a storybook. Whatever she was, I believed she was something beyond human with all my heart. (The fact that she

would always watch me from a distance without saying a word only made it seem even more likely.)

—Pros have Shogi fairies living in their houses!

Seeing Ginko for the first time only made my respect for pro Shogi players grow even more. *Wow! Pros are amazing—!* That kind of thing.

So, it was very easy for me to believe in the existence of Shogi gods. Ginko on the other hand, despite looking like a being from another plane herself, rejected them outright.

She was pretty much a crystallized miracle, but she didn't even try to believe in gods or miracles herself. As a result, zombies and ghosts scared her more than most people (and still do).

"No gods at all." Ginko said defiantly.

Master didn't get mad at her. Instead, he said, "They're 'round. Gods are here all right. They're lookin' after ya and Yaichi right now."

"Then, where are the Shogi gods?" Ginko said, getting even more insistent. *"I'll never believe you if you don't tell me!"*

She looked up at Master, silently challenging him with a look in her eyes as she clutched that plastic Shogi board to her chest.

I hadn't known her long, but I had already figured out that pose meant Ginko would never change her mind.

So I was anxious to see what would happen next—.

Master flashed a big grin and put his hand down.

"They're here."

Showing her exactly where the Shogi gods lived.

"And here."

It was after that, in that strange place, that we saw one in real life.

We saw a Shogi god appear right before our eyes.

Ginko and I believed from that day on.

Believed that the Shogi gods are real.

RECORD 1

AI
HINATSURU

WOMEN'S LEAGUE
REGISTRATION
NUMBER:

62

DATE OF BIRTH:

10/7/2007 (10 YEARS OLD)

HOMETOWN:

NANAO CITY,
ISHIKAWA PREFECTURE

MASTER:

YAICHI KUZURYU RYUO



PHYSICAL EXAM

“Mr. Yaichi Kuzuryu Yes? What did you come in for today?”

Taking a seat in the exam room, the doctor is an extremely intelligent-looking woman wearing glasses.

I sit up in my chair and tell her everything.

“..... It won’t go away.”

“What won’t?”

“..... The board”

“The what?”

She looks at me like she has no idea what I’m talking about.

“..... My mental Shogi board won’t go away!” I hold my head in my hands and say as clearly as I can, “Uh-huh.”

The doctor looks down at the clipboard in her arms.

“It says here you’re a professional Shogi player, yes? I see, I see.”

She nods a few times before following up with a question.

“So, in that case, you always think about Shogi?”

“More than the average guy Probably. But, not all the time. I’ve always been able to easily go back and forth like flipping a switch and the board would go away But now, it’s like the switch flips on by itself And I can’t turn it off whenever it does”

“I see. And you’re constantly anxious.”

“I wouldn’t go that far!”

“And by that you mean ...?”

“..... Time flies.”

“???”

“Once Shogi crosses my mind, the next thing I know, the sun is going down
.....”

“Okay

“It’s been like that for a while now I can’t tell if the board I’m seeing is real
or in my head anymore I haven’t slept at all

“Well, thinking itself is work for a professional Shogi player. Perhaps all this
thinking has made you nervous——.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not like that! I’m not making a conscious decision to
think! My sense of time is completely gone Help me, would you?!!”

“That is troubling

The doctor goes silent, thinking to herself for a few moments before asking
me this. “Do you like little girls?”

“Say what?”

“Little girls. Do you like them?”

“Huh? W-Well No more than anyone else

“Do you have many opportunities to interact with little girls in your daily life?”

“Well Um, actually, my apprentice lives with me Not in a weird way,
okay? It’s a bit unusual the Shogi world, but not unheard of.”

“An elementary school student?”

“A fourth grader.”

“That apprentice? You have just the one?”

“One live-in apprentice I live with one, but I have one more apprentice.
She’s also a fourth grader. Oh, and my apprentice’s friends come to my

apartment every now and then They're fourth-graders, too, but one is in first grade. Listen, I didn't take her as my apprentice because I like girls that age. It's just that that's the age she happened to be, and her friends are around the same age, too."

"I think I understand Yes. I see, I see."

She nods as if she got where I'm coming from and starts writing something down on the clipboard. Then, she looks me square in the eyes.

"You have a Lolita complex."

"..... Come again?"

"The name of the disease. You have a Stage 5 Lolita complex. I'll have you hospitalized immediately."

"Huh? HUUUUUH?!"

You can be hospitalized for a Lolita complex?! Is that a thing?! Is it a disease?!

Wait a sec——.

"I'm not like that!!"

"Unaware of own condition Recorded."

The doctor's pen races across her clipboard. This looks serious?!

I'm not sure why but Being told I have a Lolita complex by a doctor like this makes me think I really might have one and that it's a serious illness!

"Is there a cure, Doc?! Will I ever be normal again?!"

"It's a stubborn disease, to be sure. A full recovery is impossible, and it will stay with you as long as you live."

"S-So it's a *only death fixes stupid* kind of thing?"

"Because it is in fact an incurable disease. That being said, it is possible to suppress the symptoms."

“Like group therapy? Something like they do to help alcoholics?”

“Absolutely not. Gathering a group of inflicted people into one place would cause more problems than it would solve.”

That sounded like something the producer of some Loli Manga magazine would say.

“Okay, what kind of treatment?”

“Surgery.”

“Sur-?!”

Accused of having a Lolita complex and faced with the prospect of going under the knife for it, I stare at the doctor’s face in total disbelief.

Only then did I notice.

This doctor She’s really young.

I’m not saying young doctors are bad. It’s just this one isn’t really *young*, more like *adolescent*. No matter how you look at her, she’s got to be in grade school—.

Huh?

This doctor, she’s

“..... Ai?”

“Keep your hands off me, got it? That disease will spread.”

That sharp tongue. There’s no doubt about it, that’s Ai.

Dressed in a white lab coat and a tight pencil skirt is my second apprentice—Ai Yashajin. She crosses and re-crosses her arms and unleashes a storm of harsh words on her Master like it was what she was born to do and then looks at a nurse standing behind me and gives orders.

“Prepare to operate.”

“Right away.”

I look at the nurse and nearly jump out of my skin.

“A-Ayano?!”

She’s dressed in white, but that is definitely Ayano. A grade schooler. My apprentice’s good friend who wears glasses.

She looks great in that nurse outfit. Really cute≡

“Hold up, hold up! This is no time to get distracted?! Think about it Th-this isn’t right?! What’re two kids doing working in a hospital?! This game of doctor you’re playing has gone way too far——.”

“Strap him down so he won’t struggle. People infected by a Lolita complex become incredibly strong when they see little girls.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

More girls’ voices chime in.

Cuffs and straps come up from behind me. The ones taking away my freedom of movement are——.

“Sorry, Kujuryu-*sensei*. Stay real still, okay?”

“Masta? Dwon’t move! Stay?”

“Mio?! Charlette?! S-Stop this right now!!”

Crap I’m tied to the chair! I can’t move!

“Lolita complexes infect the brain and the groin, so I’ll remove them both,” says Ai, dressed as a doctor and looking up and down at me like a filthy pile of trash.

“Still, it may be too late already.”

“If it’s too late, then you don’t have to do anything!! This is fine, so just let me be!!”

“You’re okay with having a Lolita complex?”

“Just fine!! I’m fine like this!! Let me live with a Lolita complex!!”

“So, you admit it. I knew you had one. Now, we operate.”

Then Charlette says the scariest thing ever with a grin on her face.

“You know? Cha, Cha can do swergency!”

“No, you can’t! You can’t do surgery, Charlette!!”

“Wes, Cha can.”

“And those aren’t surgeons’ clothes That’s what lunch ladies wear?!”

“Scwalppel.”

“Here you are! One scalpel!!”

“What are you giving a first grader a blade for?! Mio, stop looking at me like you’re enjoying this!”

Mio puts the cutting tool in Charlette’s tiny hand.

The blade isn’t all that big But it’s shining in my eyes!

“Hey, hey Charlette. Wouldn’t it be fun to see his appendix?”

“Appwendiss?”

“See, right about here The bottom part of the stomach. Explaining it all would be boring, so let’s just cut and see what we can see.”

“Cwut!”

Two grade school girls wearing lunch lady clothes lean over my lap and point scalpels at my vulnerable midsection like they’re playing a game!

“Stop, please, I’m begging you! Just up, pleeease!!”

“That voice is annoying. Hurry up and castrate the pervert.”

“S-Sorry about this But, Lolita complexes are a serious disease and must

be treated

"I'll cut the stomach, so Charlette, the head is all yours."

“Cha want to swee a kadabba.”

"S-St STOOOOOOOOOPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!"

My voice echoes around the operation room.

No one'll come to help me. Actually, the louder I yell the more fun Mio and Charlette seem to be having. Ayano looks sorry for me behind her glinting glasses.

Then the grade schoolers descend on me—.

"DAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH?!"

GASP!!

Once I see the bed covers flying off my body, everything clicks.

“..... That was, a dream?”

A terrifying dream about a group of grade school girls dressed in white clothes about to operate on me.

It all felt like a simple game of doctor Even a cat with nine lives couldn't survive that

“Kh! Why’d I have a dream like that?!”

I don't have a Lolita complex and I've never played doctor with grade school girls before.

That's not to say Ai Yashajin didn't look good in that lab coat, and Ayano in a nurse's outfit was divine. Seeing Mio and Charlette swing those blades around so innocently scared me half to death, but I don't think I could say *no* if someone asked me if I enjoyed the thrill just a little bit. That *being naughty* feeling is what makes grade school girl so great

“H-Hold up?! No!! I went to the doctor’s office for the first time in forever yesterday That’s why I had that dream?!”

I explain to no one as I scratch my sweaty hair.

“..... Just when I thought those sleep aids I got would help me get some shut eye, this happens”

I slept for seven hours but still feel totally drained.

Ever since the Ryuo Title Match ended, I’ve been dealing with something I’ve never gone through before.

The Shogi board in my head won’t go away.

My reading skills went through the roof in my battle against the Meijin, but now that mental Shogi board keeps showing up in random places in my day-to-day life.

“I kept it mostly under control during the matches but Without that pressure to keep it down, I can’t turn it off”

Not only has it been keeping me awake, the other day I ended up standing at a crosswalk for nearly an hour as a sequence played out in my head I know there are plenty of weird people in the Shogi world, but this is ridiculous.

“..... My brain sure seems raring to go, but my body can’t get any rest The new year has already started, and I’m going to be playing matches left and right in no time”

Then my bedroom door flings open.

“Master?! I heard a big scream! Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, I’m all right. Was just a night mare?”

My ten-year-old apprentice is standing in the doorway.

Holding—a small cutting instrument just like the one I saw in my dream in her tiny hand.

“AHH!!”

Screaming at the top of my lungs, I fall to the floor.

■ BRAND NEW BOARD

“Ohh? So that’s the dream you had, Master.”

“A real nightmare

Sitting at the low table in the *tatami* room, I tell Ai about the dream with a dejected look on my face.

Of course I left out the part about the Lolita complex exam and just told her, “The Grade School Practice Group was about to do surgery on me before I knew it was happening. It was terrifying.” That’s the gist of it.

Oh, and Ai had a kitchen knife in her hand.

She uses a smaller one because it’s easier for her to control with her tiny hands. But, it being so small is why I thought it was a scalpel at first.

Ai is sitting next to me wearing an apron with a cute cat’s face on the front. She looks worried about me and says, “I was halfway through making breakfast when I heard you yell

“Scary, yes but I wonder what that being my first dream this year means

“What?! It’s already January 5th! You hadn’t had a dream until last night?”

“Hmm Well, I don’t dream that much anyway

That’s the best excuse I could come up with.

Actually, I haven’t been able to sleep much at all. That’s why I went to see the doctor yesterday I guess those memories were still fresh. It could be why I had that dream. And the first dream you have each year is supposed to be a *forecast* for the rest of the year, too.

Great My mind's going all over the place, so I can't think at all

"Hey, hey Master."

"Hm?"

"Do you want to know what my first dream was?"

"Oh sure. What was it?"

"Try to guess!"

"All right Knowing you, Shogi puzzles?"

"Nooooope! Try again."

"Really? Can I have a hint?"

"A hint? A very, very happy dream!"

"Happy? A first dream that brings happiness Maybe ... climbing Mount Fuji?"

"Not even close! Something even more happy than that!"

"More than that? Watching the sunrise from the top of Mount Fuji is supposed to be the happiest first dream there is, isn't it?"

"You'll never get it like this, Master. I'll go ahead and tell you, okay?"

She can't wait to say it, I can see it on her face. So, let's see what this *very happy first dream* she had was.

"The dream I had was playing Shogi with you!"

Then she happily smiles with a "Uhee ≡"

Sigh So cute

It's only been a week since I successfully defended my title against the Meijin in a full seven-match series. My spirit nearly broke many times during my battle against the best pro Shogi player in history.

But whenever that happened, it was Ai being here that kept me going.

—This girl saved me

Feeling that tidal wave of gratitude once again, the pit of my chest starts burning.

For the first time, I'm truly grateful that this girl and I had a good New Year's Day together That I defended my title. Only now does it feel real.

I'm the Dragon King, the Ryuo, and Ai has joined the Women's League

So many things happened last year, but it was the most intense, rough and happiest year I've ever been alive.

So much so that I don't think it's possible for things to get any better than this

"Ah! *Ozoni*, *ozoni*~."

Ai jumps to her feet once bubbling sounds start coming from a pot in the kitchen.

She comes back with a bowl on a tray in her hands, thick steam rising from it.

"Master! I made this *ozoni* myself! I had my parents send the ingredients from home, so please try it!"

"Hm? Looks pretty ordinary to me."

She holds out the *Wajimanuri* bowl that she brought from her parent's place. It's filled to the top with broth. Round *mochi* rice cakes and *aona* green leaves are floating inside. Along with the sleepless nights, I haven't had much of an appetite recently either but

One whiff of that broth makes my mouth water. I suppose taking a small sip wouldn't hurt.

"?! W-What is this stuff?!"

Holy cow, this is good?!

Snatching a pair of chopsticks off the table, I down the whole bowl in no time

flat.

“It’s just plain *ozoni* with *mochi* and leaves but This is hands down the best *ozoni* I’ve ever tasted!! It’s the broth, right?! That’s the secret, yeah?!”

“Eheehee≡ This is how it always tastes at home.”

“What broth is it? I know it’s made from fish, but beyond that”

“It’s *ago*.”

“..... *Ago*?”

“What you call flying fish.”

“Flying fish The ones that hop out of the water?”

“I put some dried ones in water last night and then used that water to make the broth.”

“Oh? I didn’t know flying fish were this good.”

My tongue had been on vacation since the Ryuo Title Match ended but came back to life with a *savory* explosion of flavor, the likes of which I’ve never tasted before. My head is clearing up for the first time in ages.

“Seconds!”

“Eheehee. Okay, how about a different flavor this time?”

Ai disappears back into the kitchen and brings out another bowl a few minutes later.

It’s just that there are different things inside it this time.

“Isn’t that *iwanori* seaweed?”

“Yes! It’s a must-have for Noto-style *ozoni*! Everyone calls it *botanori* where I’m from!”

“Interesting!”

Ai is from the Wakura area, a small town full of hot springs off the Noto Sea

coastline. The *iwanori* seaweed sprinkled on top of the *ozoni*, a staple food for Japanese people on New Year's, makes quite an impact. It's a regional tradition over there. This regional *ozoni* just turned everything I thought I knew about regular *ozoni* upside down.

But That rough shoreline aroma really makes the flying fish broth soar off the tongue!

"This is amazing! Another bowl!"

"Sure≡ Two *mochi* is enough, right?"

Ai goes back to the kitchen, the adorable pitter-patter of her feet echoing behind her.

Watching her go, I bring up something pretty nostalgic.

"Now that I think about it, you boiled seaweed in a frying pan when you first came here."

"You remember that?!"

"Of course I do. I couldn't get over the fact that a grade school girl could make it."

It was ten months ago, the first morning Ai was here with me.

I remember every detail about that morning like it was yesterday—.

"*It'd be so nice to eat like this every day for the rest of my life*—that was the first thing I thought."

".....!!"

Ai was halfway back into the room with a bowl of *ozoni* on the tray in her arms when she suddenly freezes and turns bright red.

"T-That, sounded like a proposal ≡"

"Hm? Did you say something?"

“Nope! I’m just really happy you like it ≡” says Ai, still red as a tomato.

“I want you to eat my cooking, Master. You took me as your apprentice and doing things around the house is the only way I can thank you”

“Thanks. You are a real lifesaver.”

“Eheehee≡”

Her whole face melts into a smile.

“A-And I want you to get used to what my family’s food tastes like as quickly as possible ≡≡≡”

“Huh?”

“Nothing!” she mumbles, hiding her face behind the tray.

I’ve got no clue what she said, but that’s adorable. Haaa, this is nice~.

“Oh, speaking of nice things”

I slide out from under the heated *kotatsu* table and crawl to the corner of the room to pick up a legged Shogi board. Cradling it in my arms, I rub my cheek against the playing surface.

A brand new 7-*sun*, 8.35 inch, Shogi board that just arrived yesterday.

“He-he-he. So nice Nothing beats a fresh Shogi board≡ Ahhhh≡≡≡”

“You sure seem to like it a lot, Master.”

“A *hyuga torreya* tree made in Ayacho, Miyazaki Prefecture, and a *tenchimasa* 7-*sun* to boot. It’s not easy to get boards like this nowadays. I picked it out as soon as the maker said they had one.”

“Aya? *Tenchi* *masa*?”

“It means it’s extremely rare and has the best wood grain out there.”

“Now I get it. You bought a treat for yourself after the Ryuo Title Match!”

“Well, it is a treat.”

I look down at the wood's reddish tinge and follow the grain around the board with my eyes and nod.

Just thinking about the sound the pieces will make on this beauty makes my heart skip a beat

"It certainly wasn't cheap, but it's a necessary investment for any player. Whenever the top players back in the day were asked, *What can I do to get better at Shogi?* Their advice would always be, *Acquire a high-quality board and pieces.*"

"Really?! Do the board and pieces really matter that much?!"

"Once you get a really good board and expensive pieces, you wouldn't want to waste them by skipping out on practice, now would you?"

"Oh, so that's what they meant."

I thought I'd get more of her reaction than that. Then again, Ai practices every single day with or without a nice board and pieces. So maybe she thinks it doesn't apply to her.

"But Master? How could you get any stronger than you already are? You beat the Meijin, best player around."

"There's no limit to how good you can get."

It's true that I've been on a winning streak since the fourth match of the Ryuo Title Match and I feel like I've improved, but that doesn't mean I think I'm the best Shogi player in the world. Under no uncertain terms do I consider myself to be better than the Meijin.

What's more.

People aren't the only opponents I have to deal with in modern Shogi—.

"Whoa! That late already Ai, shouldn't you be getting ready for your appointment at the salon?"

“Yes. I should, but Are you sure it’s okay to be splurging like this?”

“Of course! Reporters and journalists will be all over the place today, so *not* going the extra mile would be worse. You have to look your cutest today to help promote the Kansai Shogi world!”

Today is January 5th.

It’s the first day of *work* on the Shogi calendar And it all starts with an important ceremony.

FIRST MOVE CEREMONY

“My sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, apprentices one and all. May ya have a wonderful new year.”

The one greeting all the Kansai players and media people assembled in the Shogi association’s *Black Corridor* on the fifth floor is a frail, eighty-year-old man.

Kansai Shogi Association Director——Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan*.

Probably the highest authority in the Kansai Shogi world, he’s been nicknamed the *Don of Naniwa*.

Not only was he once a titleholder and a member of the A League, he is also famous for making Shogi puzzles, as well as for his singing career and stints as a pro wrestling commentator in his younger days. This man has done pretty much everything under the sun.

In fact, the position of *Director* was created specifically for Zaou-sensei, which should make it obvious just how important he is to the Kansai Shogi world.

“..... Master. That man up there, is he a really high-ranking person?”

“..... That’s right. You haven’t met Zaou-sensei before, have you Ai?”

Ai taps me on the shoulder from behind and I quietly explain.

“..... He’s my Master’s Master’s elder brother. So, that makes him my great uncle and your great-great uncle, I think.”

“..... Master’s Master’s Master’s Big brother? Oh, woow!”

“Yeah. He’s the top of our Shogi family tree and also the oldest active pro. Talk about an amazing person.”

Not to mention, my Master’s Master already passed away.

It's extraordinary enough that he's still alive and playing Shogi, but he's also in my league, C-2. All of humanity is surprised at this point.

"..... Though, at his age, his Shogi skills and physical endurance can't keep up. He announced that he'll retire after this season's Placement Matches."

"He will? It's sad to see him go"

"..... Yeah"

To tell the truth, there's a reason I can't feel sorry to see him retire but Telling Ai would just complicate things, so I'll keep my mouth shut for now.

Zaou-sensei's upcoming retirement seems to be hanging over the whole room even though the new year is just getting started. The older players look so depressed that it's almost painful.

The elderly Don looks across the room and flashes a grin.

"What are all ya'll in mournin' fer? It's New Year's, so let's 'ave some fun."

Those words turned into the ceremony's opening bell.

For today is January 5th, *First Move Ceremony* day.

It's exactly what it sounds like, a ceremony where pro Shogi players make their first moves of the year.

"I'm looking forward to our matches this year."

"As am I. How about one to start us off"

People start pairing up, saying hello and then going to one of the many Shogi boards lined up around the room.

Now then, who should I go against? Just as I was looking around, Zaou-sensei waves me over and says, "Ryuo. Take this upper seat."

"What?! But, Sensei, that's your seat"

"I ain't playin'. Ma' knees and ankles can' take sittin' down much no more."

He sticks up a thin arm that would look more at home as a tree branch in an ancient forest and shakes it back and forth before making for the exit.

When it comes to *Go*, they can play in chairs for league matches. Those players can stay active into their nineties but the Shogi Association has insisted that all league matches take place on *tatami* mats, so it's nearly impossible to last that long in the Shogi world.

"I'm 'eadin' downstairs to getta jump on things. Kousuke, join me."

"Yah, yah. I'd be glad to keep ya company."

Master Kiyotaki follows the Don out of the room with a big grin on his face. Both of them love Shogi, but they love beer even more.

"If only Seiichi were 'ere."

"Mr. Tsukimitsu is the chairman, ya know. Probably didn't have a way to get outta bein' at the Kanto First Move Ceremony."

"At boy ain't suited fer 'at kind a work. Can' see nothin', poor guy And all he's got fer company are ya spiritless whippersnappers."

"Yes, yes, *Sensei*. Let's talk over a few beers, yeah?"

"Now ya speakin' my language"

My Master helps Zaou-*sensei* go down the stairs to the fourth floor, his steps weak and feeble. I know they're prepping the New Year's party downstairs, so there are plenty of beer and snacks down there already.

"Zaou-*sensei* is really getting up there in years"

"I hate to see him go, but retiring is probably the best thing for him"

Small conversations break out around the room as people watch the Don make his exit. Then, they start sitting around the boards.

On a side note, the First Move Ceremony in Kanto has a lot more structure. They use only one board and the players change out one move at a time to play

a single match of Shogi. In Kansai, we always just put a bunch of boards out and play against whoever we want.

Basically, we wing it. That's Kansai.

"All right, who's going to be my opponent?"

I, the Ryuo, plop down in the upper seat of the board in the middle of the room and wait for someone to sit across from me.

Normally, people line up for a chance to play against a titleholder. Oh, great. The year just started and I'm going to be exhausted right off the bat. It's tough being the popular one, real tough.

..... At least, I thought it would be.

"..... You're not going to?"

"No, man. I mean, come on"

"It's just You know?"

And other conversations just like those are going on all around me. Lots of eye contact, but no one's coming.

What is it? What is this *you know* they're talking about?

It seems like all the players in their twenties that used to like making life hard on me are taking a step back, almost like they're trying to keep their distance.

Are they intimidated by my title? But I was Ryuo all last year too, and I had opponents coming at me one after another saying things to each other like, "Let's go see how the Ryuo does it!" I got hit with all the latest trends in a single day right at the start of the year and took a lot of damage, which ended up kickstarting my muddy eleven-match losing streak Something's weird this year.

"What about Big Sis and Keika"

I crane my neck and see both of them playing against amateurs on the lower

floor in the *Ongedan no Ma*. Each is surrounded by a crowd, so they seem to be pretty popular over there.

—Am I *that* unpopular?!

Just as I was getting worried.

“Um! One match, please!!”

“Oh, sure!! Of course, I’d be happy to——.”

My spirits leap, grateful to have an opponent at last. But ... they come crashing back to earth once I see who’s sitting there.

“What? Ai, really?”

“Yes! Because you don’t look like you have an opponent.”

“Well, not yet, but Hmm”

“What’s wrong? Am I not good enough for you?”

“It’s not that at all I just want to play against someone I don’t normally get a chance to go against.”

“Yeah, yeah. There are better opponents out there for you, Ai. Like a Ranging Rook party member, perhaps,” says a newcomer as he plops his hand down on Ai’s head.

Worldly Maestro—King Mitsuru Oishi.

“Hop along, kiddo. I’ll step in for you.”

“You, Maestro? Right off the bat?!”

“Happy-go-lucky, don’t you think?” Mr. Oishi says he kneels on the *tatami*.

“Whoa! Looks like the King is going against the Ryuo!”

“Kansai’s top two facing off so soon? This year’s going to be something special!”

..... Good grief. I know we attract attention, but this is ridiculous.

I wanted to take things slow and ease into this year, but my opponent is who he is. Might as well sit up straight and dive right in!

Just as I was getting into the spirit——.

“..... Ai? I’m going to play against Mr. Oishi, so please let him sit down”

“No, I won’t! I refuse to get up!!”

Ai puts her arms around the Shogi board, crouching down real low and yells at the top of her lungs.

“You’ve been so cold recently, Master! You don’t pay any attention to me at home anymore, At first, I thought you were just tired from the Ryuo Title Match, But back when I was nine, you’d always tell me how cute I am and teach me something new every night no matter how tired you were. Have you lost interest in me now that I’m ten?!”

Murmur murmur

“Welp”

“So, the rumors were true”

“Better stay away from that guy!”

People at the First Move Ceremony take yet another step back. Exactly what have people been saying?!

“Oh, come on, Ai! This year just got started, and people are going to get the wrong idea if you say things like that!!”

“That’s not my problem! *Darabuchi!!*”

A journalist comes up behind Ai as she was calling me a foul word from her hometown and gets her attention.

“Miss Hinatsuru. Would you be willing to play a match against Miss Ai Yashajin?”

“Huuuh?! M-Me, against Ten-chan”

“Yes, please! I want to write a story about the two new elementary school-aged members of the Women’s League for this year’s first front page! Fresh faces to go along with a fresh year!”

“That’s okay with me but”

Ai cautiously glances at the girl sitting in the corner of the room, Ai Yashajin a.k.a. *Ten-chan* because the *kanji* she uses for her name—天—can also be read that way.

“No.”

She shoots down the proposition right away. Ai Yashajin has always hated big crowds, and the only reason she came to the ceremony was because it’s part of her *job* as a Women’s League member But that doesn’t mean she’ll pretend to like being here. I let out a long sigh and try to convince her.

“You already came all this way, so why not? You’ll be interviewed and get a few nice pictures out of it, too.”

“I-I want to play Shogi with you, too, Ten-chan It’ll be fun,” Ai Hinatsuru chimes in, almost jokingly.

The journalist, who has a really kind air about him, practically throws himself into a deep bow.

“My paper is based in Kobe. Nothing would make me happier than to feature a local rising star like you, Miss Yashajin!”

“.....”

Ai glances around the room looking for someone to take her side, but unfortunately her caretaker and *bodyguard* Akira, who almost always comes to the association with her, is currently engaged in a fierce battle with grade school kids at the Shogi boards. I don’t think she’ll have time to come to her lady’s rescue. Apparently, she’s developed a new strategy: *Hold captured pieces as not to let your opponent see them!* Now who’s the kid?

Seeing my apprentice growing more irritated by the second, I do my best *Master* voice.

“Ai. This is work.”

“..... Understood, *Sensei*.”

Saying *sensei* with a strong hint of sarcasm, Ai Yashajin gets up and walks to an open board. Ai Hinatsuru jumps up with a start and rushes to catch up to her.

Cameras engulf them as soon as the two girls sit down at the board.

Since Ai Yashajin has made it into the best eight at the Mynavi Finals and had already been promoted to C-1 in the Practice League, she joined the Women’s League with a 2-*kyu* ranking once her registration was complete at the end of last year.

She set a new record that day: youngest ever to join at ten years and zero months old.

That erased Ai Hinatsuru’s record of ten years and one month that was set when she joined the Women’s League back in November. Both ascended to the ranks at blinding speed, but it will be Ai Yashajin’s name in the history books just because she happened to be born two months later.

Age is the best way to measure talent in the Shogi world.

Of course, the article will focus mainly on Ai Yashajin.

“You continue to trample your way through the Mynavi Women’s Open, Miss Yashajin. At this rate, you could very well achieve the *Mynavi Dream*. Do you believe you can do it?”

“As long as I can play to my full potential.”

“So, you’re confident you can win as long as you play your best?”

“I intend to hold nothing back.”

She didn't so much as stutter through the whole thing, cool as a cucumber as she answered the questions.

Perfect, textbook answers But I can tell it's all an act. It feels like she's just going through the motions.

This journalist, who's interviewing Ai for the first time, luckily took it the best way possible.

"I see Well, I must say that *Kobe's Cinderella* is just as fiery during Shogi matches as she is during interviews!"

"Huuu?! Wh-who is this *Kobe's Cinderella*?! Are you talking about me?!"

So much for being calm, cool and collected. She's a fireball now.

Ai Hinatsuru had been waiting patiently on the other side of the board but sounds jealous when she speaks up.

"Awww! You've got a great nickname, Ten-chan, and I don't have one! No fair!!"

"Great?! What's so great about a nickname that sounds like some washed-up *enka* singer who can't sell a single record?!"

"Excuse me. Please write this in your article: *Shogi's magic has turned me into Cinderella. I want to find the glass slippers before the spell breaks Ones that belong to the queen, my slippers.*"

"Have you lost your mind, *Sensei*?! Don't barge into my interview and create some gross Lolita poem!! You, journalist, **do not** print that! Is that clear?!"

"You're so lucky, Ten-chan!! Master is making poems about you! I'm so jealous!!"

"There's nothing to be jealous about!!"

The air is suddenly filled with a kiddie argument and rounds of laughter from the adults nearby.

The ceremony started out all gloomy and depressing, but now it's starting to feel more like Kansai.

■ PEOPLE OF KANSAI

Once the First Move Ceremony finished up on the fifth floor, it was time to go to the New Year's party on the fourth.

My Master and Zaou-*sensei* had downed several rounds by the time I got there. To be blunt, Master Kiyotaki is plastered.

"What say ya, Kousuke? Had enough, eh?!"

"Nah, nahhh Op-p-p-pen da nex oooooooooowwhhhhhhh!"

There's my Master, spewing all over the floor.

"Sad, 'at. Just 'ad to drink Seiichi's rounds, too, didn' ya?"

Even at eighty, Zaou-*sensei* hadn't had his fill. Now he's moved on to sake, downing it like shots whenever his cup gets filled.

"That's the Don of Naniwa for you Drinking my fifty-something-year-old Master under the table"

"G-Grandpa-*sensei*!"

My Master falls face first onto the floor and Ai rushes out to help him. Keika, sighing to herself, follows her.

"..... That's the head of our Shogi family, " says Ai Yashajin with a cold look on her face. Although she orders Akira to pitch in. How nice of her.

Since the leaders and mainstays of the Kansai area are already beyond tipsy themselves, all the New Year's party formalities are going out the window.

So, it falls to underage players like myself who can't drink alcohol to talk with the media people.

The one drawing a lot of attention at the moment is Naniwa's Snow White.

"Sora-*dual title*! You've been assigned to serve as an examiner for

tomorrow's Sub League 3-*dan* admission exam. Are you feeling any pressure?!"

"The examinee, Shouji Karako Amateur 3-*dan*, was once a member of the Sub League himself who advanced all the way to 3-*dan* but was expelled due to his age, correct?! What are your chances?!"

"Miss Sora, one more victory and you will be promoted to 3-*dan* yourself! Will we see the first woman in history to achieve that rank tomorrow?!"

"A message for your fans across the country, Snow White!"

Big Sis systematically works around the circle of journalists, saying: "yes," "no" and "I will play the best I can" in quick succession. She's a natural at this

The first female to achieve 3-*dan* is historic as it is and reaching that rank at fifteen years old means her chances of turning pro are pretty high.

The first female pro in Shogi history—Ginko Sora 4-*dan* on the scene.

If that happens, she'll get more press than either the Meijin or I did as junior high school pros.

Because, I mean, junior high school students making it to the pros isn't all that impressive anymore—.

"Yaichi, happy new year."

"Oh, Sota. Same to you."

A grade school boy says hello with a big smile. Those legs sticking out of his shorts are so thin it's almost distracting.

"People mistake me for a girl all the time when I dress normally."

And there's a good reason for it. That baby face of his looks almost feminine.

This boy, who could pull off the *beautiful young girl* look on the same level as my apprentices if he ever decided to wear a skirt, often works my matches as the match recorder.

I haven't seen him much outside of the association since Ai moved in with me, but he used to stay overnight at my apartment all the time. We'd play Shogi until the sun came up.

"Yaichi, you're like a real big brother."

"It'd be so much fun to live with you, Yaichi."

"I love your Shogi Yaichi."

Just thinking about it brings back so many memories. Talk about a cute protégé But he's gone beyond what I can call *cute* in the Shogi world.

"Kunugi 2-dan! Do you have a moment?!"

"You have an opportunity to become the first ever professional Shogi player in elementary school in history this year. Can you do it?!"

"Would you please stand next to Sora—dual title for a few pictures?!"

A group of media people spot Sota and swoop in.

"..... Yaichi, sorry. I want to stay and chat more but"

"Yeah. Go do your thing."

I send him off with an understanding smile. He puts on his *interview* face and goes to talk to them. Cameras surround him in the blink of an eye.

Either he's got nerves of steel or he's used to this much attention.

Almost as if taking his place, Ai Hinatsuru shows up with a plate full of food in her arms alongside Ai Yashajin with just a drink in her hand. They must be finished taking care of the drunks.

"Master? Who is that boy"?

"Sota Kunugi 2-dan. He's eleven, so probably one grade above the two of you."

"And already 2-dan in the Sub League?! W-What a monster"

Even the arrogant Lady Ai Yashajin calls him a *monster*.

That's just how extraordinarily talented he is, reaching Sub League 2-*dan* as a fifth-grader.

Both of the Ai's possess extraordinary talent as far as the Women's League is concerned. Maybe the best ever.

But take away the difference between men and women And they're still good, but not extraordinary.

Of course, Ai Hinatsuru's late game abilities and Ai Yashajin's visualization skills would be viable weapons in the Sub League. However, there are monsters lurking in there with talent that goes way beyond theirs.

Those Sub League members' abilities are in no way inferior to the players who made it through to the pros.

In that case, why?

Why do people who have enough skill and talent to be pro players not make it that far?

The reason roles off my tongue.

"..... The Shogi gods."

"Fwhee? Gods?"

Ai Hinatsuru tilts her head with a confused look in her eyes, but Ai Yashajin looks annoyed.

Just as I start to explain—.

"What's this? Are you talking about the Shogi gods leaving me out to dry?" a man dressed in a suit says in a cheerful voice.

I respond with the same enthusiasm. "Actually, I would say the Shogi gods really like you, Mr. Kagamizu. Otherwise you'd have been gone a long time ago."

“Hahaha. That’s still not the easiest thing to hear.”

Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan*.

He’s the oldest Sub League member in both Kanto and Kansai at *twenty-nine*.

The rules say that the age limit for Sub League members is twenty-six, but there is a condition where someone could stay until they’re thirty: a *winning extension*.

That’s how Mr. Kagamizu has managed to stay in the Sub League this long. The fact that I can say the Shogi gods love him shows what good friends we are and that there’s no doubt in my mind he’ll be a pro someday.

I introduce him to my apprentices.

“This is Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin, both are my apprentices and now members of the Women’s League. They’ll probably be working with you at some point, so please show them the ropes.”

“N-Nice to meet you!”

“..... Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Ai Hinatsuru is so nervous she’s shaking in her shoes. Meanwhile Ai Yashajin keeps her introduction cut and dried with a quick nod.

“The pleasure is mine, *Senseis*.”

Mr. Kagamizu stands at attention before giving them a deep bow from the waist.

The fact that they’re grade schoolers doesn’t matter. He has no choice but to call Women’s League members *Sensei* in public. That’s his standing as a Sub League member.

“Mr. Kagamizu helped me out more than anyone when I joined the Sub League. He taught me everything from how to write match records to making tea and all about the association rules. Of course, Shogi too,” I say to my two

apprentices, still stunned to be called *Sensei* by a grown man. “Women’s League members often work alongside Sub League members as match recorders for league matches. Both of you, take whatever he says to heart, understand?”

“You learned Shogi? From him? This man here?”

Ai Yashajin glances back and forth between the two of us.

“That I did. He was already 3-*dan* when I joined, so why wouldn’t I?”

“Although, you passed me up in no time at all,” he says, sounding humble. But to be honest, there’s not much difference between the two of us when it comes to ability and skill.

There’s a newcomer’s tournament that Sub League members and new pros can participate in, and Mr. Kagamizu has won the whole thing before. I joined the tournament once, but got completely destroyed in the first round

A Sub League member winning the newcomer’s tournament is unheard of. It’s also humiliating for the pros who were involved.

In other words, Mr. Kagamizu has what it takes to survive as a Shogi pro.

But, even so He can’t get out of the Sub League.

Shogi strength is everything in this world, but some other force being at work is the only way to explain what happens in the Sub League.

“By the way, Yaichi. I got a hold of the thing you wanted.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah. A friend of a friend happened to have saved a copy.” Glancing at my apprentices, Mr. Kagamizu drops his voice and says, “I gave a digital copy to Miss Kugui already but Actually, I haven’t seen her around. Have you?”

“Oh, her? Her family is actual nobility, so apparently she’s off at a shrine for a big ceremony today.”

I pull out my smartphone and show him.

Imperial Palace now~.

Hard as it was to believe, I'd gotten a message from her with a picture attached to prove it. There was Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui dressed in a full kimono and standing right in front of a big shrine with a sly, foxy grin on her face.

"I tell you, that girl She's cute, but scary at the same time."

"For sure. I can never tell what she's thinking"

"You'd better watch your back, okay?"

"Come again? About what?"

Mr. Kagamizu reassuringly pats me on the shoulder even as I give him a confused stare. He then leaves the room to go get some more beer.

Sub League members like Mr. Kagamizu are always there to help the association staff prepare for events like the First Move Ceremony and parties like this one. He's a natural born leader with a good heart who anyone can count on for help.

I'm always going to him for one thing or another—.

"..... It's because he's so friendly that he spends so much time helping other people He has less time to focus on Shogi because of it and falls behind other Sub League members who don't help out as much. That's what's holding him back"

If there are gods, he's one of the people I want them to make a pro.

The problem is that the Shogi gods get jealous very easily and try to get back at the people who spend time on other things. That's why idiots like me who only think about Shogi get put on a fast track. The better someone is as a person, the more they suffer in the Shogi world.

In that case How do I want my two apprentices to turn out?

Not just as Women's League players.

But as people

"Um Master? What data was that man talking about?" Ai Hinatsuru asks me as she tugs on my sleeve. A surprisingly strong tug, I might add.

"Him? Nah, it's nothing that the two of you need to know."

"..... Dirty movies?"

"Shogi pieces! Material for Shogi pieces! Mr. Kagamizu found the character design data I was looking for!"

"Do you seriously expect us to believe you would go through all that trouble for some writing to put on Shogi pieces?" Ai Yashajin says, glaring at me like I'm a steaming pile of garbage. Great, she thinks I asked him to find me adult stuff, too.

"..... Not just any writing, these are special. Since I'm going to order an expensive set, I wanted to make them one-of-a-kind."

"One-of-a-kind Shogi pieces? You can make those?"

"Of course you can. You just have to know who to ask."

I point out a group of people having a lively conversation a little ways away. Each of them has colorful short-sleeved jackets on with the words *Kansai Board and Piece Committee* written on the back. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were on their way to a festival.

"All of them are *banshi* and *komashi*."

"*Banshi? Komashi?*"

"They're craftsmen who make boards and pieces. Isn't it obvious?"

Ai Hinatsuru tilts her head, thinking as hard as she can.

Ai Yashajin makes a verbal jab, sort of like: *how can you not know something so simple?*

“Everyone thinks of Tendou City in Yamagata Prefecture when it comes to Shogi pieces, but there are actually some skilled craftsmen here in Kansai who’ve kept the traditional style alive. No matter how good your Shogi skills are, you’re not carrying on the tradition as it should be without a good set of pieces and a high quality board to go with them.”

“Oh, wow~! I didn’t know people could have that kind of job!”

Ai Hinatsuru looks genuinely interested, her eyes lighting up.

Ai Yashajin, on the other hand, says with an ice-cold smirk, “Not for long, they won’t. Playing Shogi on the Internet is getting even more popular and it’s more fun to play on a tablet because the timer is built in. Real Shogi boards will be gone sooner rather than later.”

“..... Well, that’s one way to look at it, but——.”

I was coming up with the best way to counter Ai’s sharp tongue when suddenly.

—KKKKKKKKKKKK!!

—OOOCCCCCKKKKKKK!!

“Ock?”

A really strange yell echoes in from outside the room.

Neither of the Ai’s have a clue—but I knew immediately *what* is coming.

“Oh crap!! Keika!”

“Y-Yes?!”

“Take the kids and run away! Now!!”

“Run away from who?! Where am I supposed to take them?!”

“Anywhere is better than here! The girls need to be as far away from this building as possible! Every second matters!!”

Overwhelmed by my desperation, Keika stutters, “O-Okay!” as she grabs the two girls by their hands.

Clearly not understanding the severity of the situation, Ai and Ai say, “Hey?! Just what is going on?!”

“Master?! Who who is coming?! Master!”

The girls’ voices reach my ears as they evacuate, but I’m more focused on preparing myself for the one who’s about to come through that door!

SHUMAI SENSEI

“C*****CCCCCCCCCCCCCKKKKKKKK!!”

A yell bizarre enough to make you question the yeller’s sanity blasts through the room.

It came from—the one who walked in just as my apprentices were going out, a bombshell of a woman in a kimono.

“Ginko! Where’s Ginko?! Bring’er out here!!”

She takes a long swig out of the sake bottle in her right hand while swinging around a *katana* sword in her left. She may be looking for Big Sis with bloodshot eyes, but she’s not just some crazed female fan.



She’s the first female title holder in history—Shumai Honinbou.

That’s not a *Women’s* title.

She’s the first woman to claim one of the seven professional *Go* titles, and she did it competing against men.

What’s more, she claimed the *Honinbou* title in her twenties, which is on the same level as Shogi’s *Meijin*. She’s an honest-to-goodness prodigy!

Her real name is something else, but she’s been going by *Shumai Honinbou* ever since she took the title. Pretty much everyone calls her *Shumai-sensei* at this point.

Since people don’t have as many hurdles to jump through to become a pro *Go* player compared to Shogi, female pros aren’t all that rare.

That being said, those men and women compete for the same seven titles, and she’s the first one and only woman in history to claim one for herself.

She’s also pretty popular in China, Korea and European countries where *Go* has caught on as a sport and even become an empowering symbol for women everywhere. Some people have gone so far as to call her a modern-day Joan of Arc.

Go and Shogi are like siblings, so players have a lot of chances to interact with each other. Big Sis and I have known *Shumai-sensei* for a long time, since we were kids.

She’s a strong player, one who we deeply respect.

Shumai-sensei seems to have taken a liking to Big Sis, another girl who’s facing a thick wall like the one she had to break. She’s even come to parties like this one as well as Opening Night parties for Big Sis’s title matches every now and then—.

“C*ck! C*****CCCCCCCCCCCCCKKKKKKKKKKKK!!”

Just like her playing style, Shumai-sensei's personality can be unpredictable.

Case in point: when she's drunk like right now. She'll get hung up on some four-letter word and keep shouting it to the point that no one can bring her back down to earth. And Shumai-sensei is almost always drunk. I could probably count the number of days each year she's sober on my fingers. She's even showed up to televised matches completely hammered.

Okay, yes, she's crazed.

"Ginkoooo! It's meeee! Shuuuuuumai!!"

"S-Sensei! I'm here"

"Ahhh, Ginko! There's where you've been, Ginko! Could'a sworn you were out playin' some c*ck somewhere!"

"I-I don't do that kind of thing!"

"You dooon't?"

Shumai-sensei looks at her in surprise.

"Today's the day everyone plays c*ck, ain't it? Puttin' the moves on ceremony"

"First Move Ceremony!!"

"See, wha'd I tell you?! The day everybody plays c*ck, yah?! That's why I skipped out on Go's First Hit Ceremony just so I could be here! Now, let's get some moves on!"

"This is Shogi! Go uses the word *hit* for each move, but Shogi says *move*!"

"No way?! Are you tellin' me Shogi players *move* while matches are going on?!"

"No, absolutely not!!"

Big Sis turns bright red, denying everything.

If it were anyone else, she'd just kick them clear into next week and be done with it. But Big Sis has a great deal of respect for Shumai-sensei, so all she can do is blush and act like a normal fifteen-year-old girl for a change.

She's so embarrassed that she's trying to hide behind me just because I happen to be close by.

"Huuuh?! B-Big Sis, I'm not some human shield, okay?!"

"It's fine!"

"No, it's not! Hey?! Stop pushing, would you?!"

".....!!!!" (*Shove, shove.*)

She's doing everything she can to get behind me while I'm doing everything I can to stop her.

Other people in the room must've thought we were fooling around, pushing back and forth like this.

Shumai-sensei looks down on both of us and stomps her foot in frustration.

"Damn it!! It's new year's and you've got Yaichi's c*ck all to yourself?! I'm so frickin' jealous right now!! Got that ragin' teenaged c*ck goin' in high and low, do you?! Ain't that so, Ginko?!"

"Absolutely not!!" Big Sis and I scream at the same time.

Shumai-sensei is one thing, but now the other players and Kansai Association staff members are looking at us with "those two so, it's true" written all over their faces. I can't take it! I'd give anything to be anywhere other than here!!

"You dooon't?! Never played once?!"

For some reason, now she's furious!

"That talent wall ain't gonna break without popping the cherry!! Listen here, Ginko. Lettin' the temptation build up'll only get in the way! You'll never break

into the pros without breakin' the virgin wall first!!"

"....."

Big Sis is speechless. Come on, she'll keep pushing the envelope if you don't cut her off right now

"You can't keep getting on the usual way! You gotta give extreme effort!!"

".....!"

— Extreme effort.

That's Shumai-*sensei*'s motto.

As a person, she's pretty extreme (obviously) but Shumai Honinbou is even moreso, cutting everything deemed *unnecessary* out of her life, all to become the best player she can be. That's the effort.

It's all the effort that she's put in that allows her to be stubborn and get so muddy in matches that average pros can't do anything against her skills. Each one of her hits on a *Go* board are so beautiful they leave everyone transfixed.

That's exactly why a woman this wild and unpredictable has not only been accepted into the community but become a highly revered player.

Striking a serious expression, Shumai Honinbou points the tip of her *katana* directly at the silver-haired girl trying to follow in her footsteps as the first woman to clear the highest wall in *Go*, but this time in the Shogi world.

"Ears up, Ginko. Women are weaker than men. Physically, for sure, but it really shows in long matches. Women tire faster, making it harder to think. Men are stronger, simple as that. The only way to close the gap is extreme effort."

For her, *Go* is a way of life, basically life itself. She says you can tell how a person has lived their life by the hits they make on the board.

That's completely the opposite of modern Shogi theory, which says that skill

“..... Why the heck does she even *have* a sword?”

“I heard she asked the Chinese head of state what the word for c*ck was in Chinese when she was over there, and their military nearly executed her for it”

“Too bad they didn’t finish the job”

Man, they’re railing on her. Not that I disagree.

“H-Hey, um Big Sis?”

“.....”

“You don’t have to take her seriously, you know? All that about c cks, and vi rginity. They’ve got nothing to do with Shogi at all. She’s just messed up in the head. There are plenty of very strong players who don’t have that kind of experience.”

“.....”

“Y-You’ve got an important match coming up tomorrow, so just forget all this! It’ll be a distraction, so there’s no point, right? Your match is going to get a lot of attention, so you can’t afford to play half-hearted Shogi Ah! Well, um! Just don’t let that weird stuff she said get to you! Play the way you always play, that’s what I’m trying to say!”

“.....”

I tried everything in the book to calm her down, but Big Sis won’t answer. Heck, she won’t even look up from the floor. Not that I blame her, no one would know what to think after getting that kind of “advice” so early on in the year

And so, the Kansai New Year’s Party ended on a chaotic note——.

The incident known as *Shumai-sensei’s New Years’ Attack* would lead to the

unthinkable happening between Big Sis and I.

▲ ADMISSION EXAM

“Sora-*dual title* is here!”

The day following the New Year’s Party.

A small army of reporters lined up outside the association spot me and move in all at once.

—I knew I should’ve gone in the back door

Surrounded by cameras in the blink of an eye, I partially regret my decision.

I knew there’d be coverage ahead of time.

Because, today’s—.

“This is the first Admission Exam the Sub League has held in forty-two years. You, as an examiner, will face off against Shouji Karako. What’s your state of mind?!”

“Mr. Karako will return to the Sub League should he defeat you in today’s match, Ms. Sora. Should he lose, his dream will be crushed for a second time. Do the stakes make this match feel any different from the others?!”

“Are you confident you can defeat a former Sub League 3-*dan* member who has been dominating amateur Shogi?!”

Their questions take many forms, but there’s only one answer I should give them.

“I want to play a match that current Sub League members can be proud of.”

With that, I lower my head just a bit in a short bow before finding a seam in the crowd of reporters and work my way into the building.

“..... Ice cold, per usual.”

“Well, she’s that way with everyone, yeah?”

“Chilled to the bone already. The poor guy doesn’t stand a chance.”

I hear everything they say, but I don’t care. I’m used to this.

I wave to the security guard and buy a sports drink from the vending machine.

Taking the elevator up to the third floor, I stop by the Player’s Room to put all my electronics in a locker: all part of my pre-match routine.

“Oh, Sora 2-*dan*. Good morning.”

Coming out of the Player’s Room, I run into Machi. She’s got her hair tied back today and is wearing a full suit. Must be in journalist mode.

She glances over my shoulder into the Player’s Room and says with a smirk, “Looks like the Ryuo won’t be coming today. Word is, he’s off to visit a shrine with his apprentices.”

“..... I know.”

Of course, I knew. I’m the one that told Yaichi, point-blank, not to come here today. The idea he would come in never crossed my mind. So irritating

Getting angry, I ignore everything else Machi says and go up to the arena alone.

A full-grown man is already waiting for me in the lower seat when I step inside.

Today’s opponent—Shouji Karako amateur 3-*dan*.

Moto—shou.

Basically, he is an ex-Sub League member.

He was already gone by the time I got in, so I’ve got no idea how he plays but I know he joined when he was only fourteen and got all the way up to the highest Sub League ranking, 3-*dan*.

He was in the same year in school as the King: Mitsuru Oishi. Of course, they were in the Sub League together, too.

Even more surprising, he reached 3-*dan* before Oishi-sensei did, so I've got some idea of the kind of talent he has. He used to be one of the Shogi world's rising stars

"Ah! Good morning!!"

Mr. Karako greets me with a big smile once he sees me. But that voice, this is a Shogi arena, not a sports bar. Keep it down.

"..... Please excuse me."

I sit in the upper seat, not wasting a moment.

I'm a Sub League member. At the same time, while Mr. Karako used to be a 3-*dan* Sub League member and is more than twenty years older than me, he is an amateur right now. I outrank him for this match.

I was mentally prepared to sit here, but just in case he decided to sit in the upper seat to get under my skin, I was also prepared to sit in the lower seat if necessary.

The swarm of reporters that ambushed me outside come into the arena and Machi sits down in the journalist's spot at the board side table to do her job.

The Admission Exam was created to give people who became too old for the Sub League a special chance to join the Sub League's 3-*dan* Division.

They must have a certain winning percentage in amateur tournaments and defeat an examiner currently in the Sub League to qualify.

Although it's an exam, it's treated like a league match. The examiner's record is affected by the results.

The two of us finish match preparations with more reporters watching us than show up at Women's League title matches. All that's left is to line up the pieces.

As I outrank him, I start reaching for the piece box sitting on the board.

“Oh, yes! Can I ask you something?”

Mr. Karako almost yells as if he only just remembered.

“.....?”

I stop my hand just in front of the piece box.

He reaches for a bag sitting beside the board and says with an apologetic look on his face.

“Sorry about this, Ms. Sora. I’ve got a favor to ask you.”

“That being?”

“Would you mind using these pieces?”

Once I saw the small piece pouch Mr. Karako took out—my blood runs cold.

—*Taikai goma*: Parting Pieces.

“.....!”

My spirit shakes for the first time at the sight of them. The shock was like taking a slap to the cheek, my head wavering back and forth.

The Sub League used to have a tradition They’d give pieces to people who dropped out of the league as consolation.

They stopped doing it by the time I joined though.

No one knows why it disappeared.

Some say the Sub League grew too big and couldn’t afford making pieces for everyone who dropped out.

But, was there ever anyone who was happy to get them?

Some ex-members refused the pieces outright, some threw them across the arena and still others would burn them along with all their old notebooks and match records. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.

And at some point, that tradition disappeared altogether

When did it happen? The weird thing is: nobody knows.

Just like so many Sub League members who had their dreams crushed and dropped out of the league, it quietly disappeared without anyone noticing.

But this man here has those pieces.

“What’d you think? They’re not that bad of a set if I do say so myself.”

The pieces fall out of the pouch and scatter across the board.

One look at all those pieces, each one so worn that the corners have been ground down to smooth nubs, and I was immediately overwhelmed by Mr. Karako’s obsessive persistence.

—A friendly looking middle-aged man.

—One who once gave up on his dream of becoming a professional but is now on a tear through the amateur ranks.

—He couldn’t give up on the dream entirely and is now fighting to reclaim it.
A beacon of hope

That image of him disappeared like the morning fog.

Right now, the man I’m sitting with across the board *is a current Sub League member.*

A man who’s been suffering in the hell known as the Sub League all these years even after being forced out—a Shogi Martian.

“What’d you say? Can we use these pieces?”

In front of a *higher ranking member*, all I can do is nod.

“..... Go ahead.”

“Thanks a bunch!”

Mr. Karako flashes a grin and pushes a King toward me.

“.....”

It's surprisingly cold to the touch

Just as my fighting spirit was starting to catch fire, it fizzles out in a cold chill.

Once the match got underway, my fingers felt frostbitten every time I touched those pieces, getting numb

And slowly came to a stop.

That chill worked its way through me like poison.

Once the poison completely engulfed me—I threw a piece in defeat.

“I'm so happy! Really, overjoyed! I never thought I'd be back here, in this arena I'm sorry, words are failing me!”

Right in front of me, Mr. Karako presses a handkerchief against his face.

The reporters burst into the arena like an avalanche mere seconds after I gave up and lit up the place with camera flashes.

But rather than taking pictures of him, the cameras are aimed at me in the upper seat

“I really must say, that was quite the contest I didn't think I had a chance until the very, very end. I truly believe lucky fingers won me the match This still doesn't feel real”

He shakes like tears are coming.

There's Machi's voice. She must be doing the interview, “Mr. Karako, I've been informed that you worked as a businessman while also playing amateur Shogi after you left the Sub League Do you intend to continue doing both now that you've returned?”

“I've already resigned from my position. I know better than anyone that the Shogi world is an unforgiving place to people who try to do two things at once.”

Those words roll off his tongue without missing a beat.

It was like the dagger of defeat that had already pierced my heart was getting twisted deeper and deeper with each word.

Almost like he was calling me naïve because I'm doing both school and Shogi at the same time.

"Ms. Sora, thank you for the match! Let's meet again in the 3-*dan* Division!"

"..... Yes."

The reporters start pleading with us to shake hands because they want to get a picture. So I reach across the board and take Mr. Karako's outstretched hand.

It's bone dry, and cold.

—— He wasn't nervous about playing against me at all, was he?

I didn't think I had a chance until the very, very end.

Liar.

He knew he'd win long ago and was planning what to say during the interview this whole time.

How he'd try to cheer me up: the loser.

"It was just one match, but I can tell Ms. Sora has real talent! She's much stronger than the people I faced my first time around in the 3-*dan* Division! With skills like hers, it's just a matter of time before she becomes the first woman to join it. The fact that she's only fifteen makes me wholeheartedly believe her becoming the first female professional Shogi player isn't just some dream!"

Karako 3-*dan* plays to the cameras, pouring it on like Kansai people do, saying meaningless words while smiling from ear to ear.

"Then again, what do I know? I got into that division at fourteen and ended up dropping out!"

Ha ha! That got a laugh out of the reporters.

He knows that the more he talks me up, the more people are going to like him. He beat Ginko Sora to get back into the Sub League, and then becomes a pro. That story will sell He knows it will build up his image as a pro.

His sights aren't set on the 3-*dan* Division, but after he makes it through to the pros.

He and I aren't looking at the same thing.

Victory was all he thought about before our match. He saw that I was mentally weak, found his window and won just as he planned.

—Because my opponent was ex-3-*d*

I wanted to kill the part of me that thought of that even for a second.

RECORD 2

QUEEN, WOMEN'S THRONE,
SUB LEAGUE 2-DAN

GINKO
SORA

DATE OF BIRTH: SEPTEMBER 9TH, 2002 (15)

HOMETOWN: OSAKA-FU

MASTER: KOUSUKE KIYOTAKI 9-DAN

NEW YEAR'S SHRINE VISIT

“Masta≡”

I open my arms and catch the fluffy golden angel running up to me.

“Ha ha ha! You look nice in a kimono, Charlette.”

“You know, Cha lubs kwimono!!”

“And you look great. Very, very cute, too.”

“Masta, hug!”

“Sure! Ha ha, look how high you are!”

“Squeeee≡≡≡”

I pick up Charlette, kimono and all, and spin her around like a merry-go-round as she happily laughs and squeals the whole time. Those long sleeves flap around behind her like angel wings.

It's the day after the First Move Ceremony. I'm meeting up with the Grade School Practice Group members to visit a shrine during the New Year's season, a Japanese tradition called *hatsumoude*.

“Charlette, have you ever been to a Japanese shrine around New Year's?”

“Nwope. It's Cha's fwirst hwasumoodie.”

Then she blushes and starts twiddling her thumbs.

“You know? This is Cha's fwirst time Cha's gwad it's with you, Masta!”

“Me too! It's great to be with you, Charlette≡”

“Whaa≡” she smiles like a bundle of joy with that answer.

I knew she was cute but wow

Starting the year off with a big smile from Charlette like this, life is good. So

good, it's almost scary.

"Isn't that nice, Master. You got to be Charlette's first."

Ai Hinatsuru smiles with approval. Though, she did just step on my foot
With wooden *geta* sandals.

"Oh, by the way, Master. Did you know? This is our first *hatsumoude*, too."

T-too good Terrifying

"Kuzuryu-sensei, happy new year to you."

"Ah Same to you, Ayano."

Walking up just behind Charlette, Ayano Sadatou appears in her own kimono and politely says hello.

"You looked great in nurse's clothes, but a kimono isn't half bad."

"? What do you mean by nurse's clothes?"

"Uhhh, just talking to myself"

I've got to be more careful. Again, I'm getting dreams mixed up with reality
.....

Wanting to change the subject, I turn to talk with the girl standing next to Ayano.

"Hello there, Mio. Happy New Year."

"Ha-p-p-y New Yeeear!"

Huh? She sounds pretty tongue-tied.

It's like her tongue isn't rolling like it should. I haven't seen her this uptight since the day we first met. Fun times, but

"Kuzuryu-sensei, what shrine are we visiting today?" Ayano asks, her voice bubbling with excitement. I adjust Charlette in my arms and think for a moment.

“Good question. Most people think of *Sumiyoshi*—*taisha* and *Ebessan* for *hatsumoude* in Osaka, but

“Ebwee saa?”

Charlette’s head tilts from side to side like a little seesaw. Adorable≡

“It’s actually called *Toka Ebisu*. Stores and shops set up booths along the street and call out to people passing by saying things like, *We’re wheeling and dealing, come get your bamboo!* and stuff like that. They hand out all sorts of lucky things for free like bamboo, old-style coins and fish like red snapper. So, you bring *luck* home.”

“Sounds like fun!” Ayano, from Kyoto, and Ai, from Ishikawa, say in unison as their eyes light up.

When push comes to shove, Osaka is a merchant’s town.

It’s a place where there are profit to be made when lots of people get together in the same place. *Wheeling and dealing*, as they say. Sumiyoshi and Ebisu are both gods of fortune and commerce. Hundreds of thousands of people come to pay their respects.

“It might be a bit too dangerous to go when it’s so crowded, though. Let’s go to one of the smaller shrines in the neighborhood.”

“Okay!”

I put Charlette down and take her hand as we set off for the closest shrine.

“.....!”

Ai immediately grabs my other hand and holds on tight.

My first apprentice seems worried that her Master might get taken away by another student. As her Master, knowing she’s this possessive of me is a great feeling.

However.

—She’s already a bona fide member of the Women’s League She’s got to start striking off on her own real soon

Ayano, walking up at the front of our group, turns around and says, “The shrine next to the Shogi Association in Tokyo is so convenient.”

“For sure. Pro players and Women’s League members visited *Shogidou* yesterday for the First Move Ceremony just like you did last summer.”

Pictures from both the Kanto and Kansai ceremonies are already up on the association’s homepage.

Right smack in the middle of this very *Japanese-y* ceremony are Ayumu and Ms. Shakando, sticking out like sore thumbs with their bizarre fashion sense. Seriously, it’s like they time-hopped in from medieval Europe to say *hello*

On a side note, Ms. Shakando will be fighting to defend her *Women’s Legend* title later this month.

Which is why the journalist casually asked Ayumu, “Did you pray for your Master’s victory?”

“Humph! For us, gods are not meant to be trifled with by offering prayers! Prayers themselves are nothing but goals to be reached! Besides, Master’s victory is assured by destiny. A single prayer would be meaningless Though, I did put coins in the collection box at the shrine just for the amusement! Just for fun!”

The first lame quote of the year. After all that, you went and prayed, huh?

“Ah! There’s the shrine!!”

Hardly anyone is ever around this small shrine, but it’s jam-packed today. It’s new year’s, so I shouldn’t be that surprised.

Once we’d lined up with everyone else and prayed at the shrine, I turned to the girls and clapped my hands together.

“All right! Shall we head over to do *omikuji* fortune-telling? My treat!!”

“Yaaay!!”

Drawing fortunes has to be the highlight of these shrine visits for kids.

Big Sis and I always pestered Master until we got to draw our own whenever we went to shrines with him at New Year’s.

Master is very competitive as well as superstitious, so he’ll keep drawing fortunes until he gets *Best Luck*. Plenty of players are like that.


The thing is that Big Sis always took mine by force whenever I got better luck than she did. A real demon, that one.

“Yay! Master, I got Best Luck!”

“Cha, Wucky?”

The grade school girls celebrate and complain about the fortunes they drew. They seem to be particularly interested in the *Competition* and *Love* categories. The fact that Ai is paying so much attention to the *Fertility* ranking is a little concerning

“Now then, what’s my luck looking like?”

Omikuji		Finance: Could be worse.
Fortune		Work: Not bad. Travel: Follow the road. Marriage: The younger the better. Love: One quarrel or two. Health: Going to be a long haul.

“Is that supposed to be 吉? Maybe?”

吉 or *Kichi*, average, everyday luck, would make sense, but a line is missing. Maybe their printer was having issues? What does that mean for my luck this year?

Ai came over to show me her Best Luck fortune but sticks her head under my arm to get a look at the paper in my hand as I absentmindedly stare at it.

“Master? What’s wrong?”

“Ah. Just a printing error, I think but——.”

“Huh?!”

Hm?! W-What’s got her bent out of shape?!

“S-Sorry It’s just, looking at that sideways is spells out ㇿ in *katakana*”

“Holy crap Y-You’re right! It does say *loli*, doesn’t it?!!”

Take one vertical stroke out of that Chinese character and it turns into something eerily close to Lolita. That’s the first big discovery of the year.

Don’t tell me Even the gods are saying I have a Lolita complex now?! All the category details are pretty general, so why is the *Marriage* category specific enough to say: *the younger the better*?!

“Lollie? Masta, wha’s that?”

You! No matter what happened, I’d never say it.

Ayano does her best to hide the fact that she’s keeping her distance from me and works up the courage to ask, “U-Umm Kuzuryu-*sensei*? Would you like to draw another one?”

“..... I’ll pass.”

I’d hate to draw something just as weird, so I’ll just leave this one here and go

draw another fortune at a different shrine in a day or two

“I-I’ve got it! That’s enough *omikuji* for today. Let’s write some *ema* plates!”

I buy enough of the pentagon-shaped wooden plates for everyone as a way to change the subject and borrow a handful of permanent markers.

The girls were even happier to get these than their fortunes. They’re already writing.

Now, I’m the one who’s stuck.

“Hmmmmmm? What should I write?”

I could just write “Defend my title!” if the Ryuo Title Match hadn’t happened yet and call it good. Unfortunately, they just ended.

My next goal would be to get promoted into a higher rank but Wanting to promote out of C-2 this year is a real boring goal for the Ryuo

Recently, it feels like there’s a hole in my chest, like a piece just popped out.

Thinking about it is just making me drowsy, so I just write down, “May my Shogi family stay healthy this year.” No one will have complaints about that.

Ai wrote, “May I always be together with Master≡”

As for Ayano, she wrote, “To get promoted in the Practice League.”

Charlette wrote, “Wear more kwimono!” She really seems to like wearing kimonos.

“Masta, whadda we do with *ema*?”

“We hang them up at the shrine. See all of them over there?”

“..... Masta, Cha can’t weach.”

“..... Okay, want me to pick you up?”

“Yaay≡”

I pick her up and hold her in my arms, so she can hang the plate herself.

That's the thing about *ema*, they don't work unless you hang them with your own hands! She needed help!

"Oh, oh, oh! Master! I can't reach, either!"

"Come again? Ayano's not much taller than you, and she——."

"I can't reach!!"

"..... Okay then."

I lift my ten-year-old apprentice into the air. She's not all that heavy, so it's no big deal, but

"What did you write on the board, Mio?"

"M-Mine It's a secret! A secret, okay?!"

Ayano goes up to talk with a surprisingly fidgety Mio a little way from us, but Mio hides the plate behind her back.

"Y-You know how it is! What you write won't come true if you tell someone?! Ah, ha ha."

Usually, Mio is the type who'd be peeking over shoulders saying, "What'd you write, huh, huh? Show me! Me? Oh, this is mine~" and almost forcing other kids to tell her what they wrote

I lean over and whisper into Ayano's ear, "..... Did, something happen to Mio?"

"..... She's been restless since this morning and acting strange all day"

In the end, Mio hung her *ema* far away from everyone else so that no one could see it.

■ FIRSTS OF THE YEAR

Hatsumoude all done, it was time for this year's first Grade Schooler Practice Session at my apartment.

"Thanks for having us!!"

"Eheehee≡ Welcome!"

Ai rushes inside the moment I unlock the door and greets everyone by sitting on her ankles and putting three fingers on each hand to the floor.

Before Ai showed up last year, this room hosted many Sub League members and young pro players for long, grungy all-nighters. People like Mr. Kagamizu and Sota would come over and we'd play Shogi and talk for hours and hours Big Sis was the only girl who'd ever step inside. Now, it's budding with grade school girls.

"..... Lots can change in a year."

Sure, I've gotten a lot of lip from the neighbors, but I couldn't care less when I see these girls running around and having a great time. If that's a Lolita complex, then fine, fine, I have one.

"Hey, everybody! I've got pictures from the trip to Hawaii and my hometown during the Ryuo Title Match Wanna see?"

"Yes, yes!!"

Everyone gathers around Ai as she opens the photos on her tablet and the girls start talking nonstop. The buds are blooming.

This isn't a Shogi practice session anymore. It's a girls' party.

What's more, the average age of the group is in single digits. It's a *little* girls' party.

“Well, I suppose it’s fine for today.”

I force a smile and head to the kitchen to get drinks and snacks for them. There are bound to be some cookies left over from Hawaii in there somewhere.

“This Hawaiian dress: it’s so cute!”

“Ehehe≡ It’s called a *muumuu*! Ayano, do you want to try it on?”

“May I?!”

That must be the dress that Master Kiyotaki bought for her with his spending money I knew that making his *granddaughter* and her friends happy was what Master wanted all along. It’s much more worthwhile than buying things in some mobile game on his phone.

“And that kimono is so beautiful!”

“That’s the one I wore at the Opening Night Party at my parent’s house!”

“It looks more suitable for a wedding reception than an Opening Night Party Dazzling ≡”

“Aweee~≡ Ayano, that’s too much≡≡≡”

She has a point, it *felt* like a wedding reception. Just thinking about it makes me break out in a cold sweat

“You know? Cha, Cha’s gowing to wear kwimono to get marrwied with Masta!”

“Sounds great! Where should we have the ceremony?” I come back into the *tatami* room and ask while picking up my future bride and spinning her around.

After refusing to take Charlette as my apprentice, I promised to take her as my wife.

Now that both of my apprentices are officially in the Women’s League, it’s about time I started preparing to keep my word!

“There was a chapel at the hotel we stayed at in Hawaii. It’d be easy to have a

ceremony there for just the two of us——.”

“Master? There isn’t a chapel in the world that would let you marry a six-year-old.”

“Ah, true.”

Ai is smiling, but she’s not. Scary.

In the middle of this lively girls’ party,

“.....”

Mio is standing off by herself and silently staring at the floor.

“Is there something wrong, Mio?”

Of course, I’m concerned. So I go sit next to her.

“You’ve been so quiet all day. Are you feeling all right? Or is there something on your mind?”

“..... Uhm The truth is”

I can tell there’s an argument going on in her head, her mouth opening and closing as she debates whether or not to say it. A few moments pass before she looks me square in the eyes.

“I I want to join the Women’s League!!” she blurts out like she’s been holding that in for far too long.

“Um! I I saw the Ryuo Title Matches on the Internet, saw how you and the Meijin play, Kujuryu-*sensei* What if, what if I could be in a big match like that! I know I’ll never be *that* good at Shogi, but ...! But, I’m burning up inside I want to join! I want to be in the Women’s League!!”

“..... So, that’s what’s been going on”

Praying so hard at the shrine, not letting anyone see what she wrote on her *ema* plate. This is why

The other girls had different reactions to Mio's sudden confession.

Ai looks genuinely surprised.

I knew it is written all over Ayano's face. Charlette looks a bit stunned, but maybe a bit more like the kid who wants to eat the last cookie in the cookie jar. Adorable.

As for me I'm fighting back tears of joy.

How could I not after hearing that my Shogi inspired her?

"So, I, um I wanted to ask you what I should do to join the Women's League really fast What I should do to get much, much stronger"

"Mio, you're still in grade school. I think already having a *dan* ranking in the Practice League shows you already have what it takes to join."

"B-But! I'll be a fifth-grader real soon And"

"And?"

"..... Ai and Ten-chan are already in the Women's League"

Both Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin joined the Practice League after Mio.

My first apprentice only started playing Shogi a little more than a year ago.

Unfortunately, Mio isn't grown up enough to realize that their talent is different from hers. Only seeing things objectively, she gets jealous of people who are much stronger than she is. Catching up would seem impossible, but she challenges them anyway.

Reckless? Maybe.

But that fire is exactly why I think Mio has a real chance of joining the Women's League if she takes it seriously. So——.

"..... Alright. Mio, I understand how you feel."

I sit up straight and turn to face her.

“However, the first thing I want you to know is that an early debut isn’t everything. I want you to understand that diving in headfirst doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll get stronger.”

“.....?”

“There were special circumstances in Ai’s case. To be honest, I wanted to delay her Women’s League debut a little longer if there was more leeway, but that wasn’t an option.”

“Whaaat?! W-Why? Isn’t it better to get in as soon as you can?”

Mio is stunned. Ai looks at me with a start, too.

I can’t deny that *youth* is the best way to measure talent in the Shogi world.

Knowing her, the reason that Ai Yashajin didn’t want to apply to join the Women’s League right away was the fact that she’d become the youngest Women’s League player in history and she had a ton of attention——.

“It’s the same for pros and Women’s League members, they have to retire if their winning percentage dips below a certain level. You know that, right?”

“Of course I know.”

“Do you know about Ms. Oga?”

“The lady in glasses? The chairman’s secretary.”

“That’s her. Now she works for the association, but she used to be in the Women’s League.”

Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*dan*.

As to why she retired——.

“She made her debut as a first-year junior high school student, which is fine, but she clearly wasn’t ready. Since she was going to school as well, she didn’t have enough time for Shogi research The association offered her a job, so she decided to retire.”

She could've kept playing a little while longer because her record was still good enough to qualify at the time.

But Ms. Oga joined the Women's League in the first place because she admired Chairman Tsukimitsu. If she could work alongside him at the association, she didn't have to be a Women's League player. Ms. Oga was out of the competitive scene in the blink of an eye.

She retired after six years in the league with an 1-*kyu* ranking, but a special rule allowed her to promote to 1-*dan* when she left.

"What makes life in the Women's League difficult is that there aren't as many matches as in the pros. Without as many league matches, there aren't as many chances to improve your record. Above all, there are fewer opportunities to get stronger. That's why you need to *be as strong as you can be when you join the Women's League* to survive."

Pros only have so many chances.

For competitors, taking advantage of those chances is everything.

I've got to be the best example. I became a titleholder because all of my victory stars built up in the Ryuo League. If I had the same number of stars spread out across the different leagues, I'd be nothing more than the Shogi world's doormat. But I'm the doormat that took advantage of an opportunity and became one of the Shogi world's top players.

That quality is called *Competitive Strength* in this world.

Since we only care about results here, getting good results shows your strength.

Even if we are at the mercy of the Shogi gods

"If you're going to commit yourself to joining the Women's League, I'm going to say something that might be hard to hear. Can you take it?"

"..... Yes! Please, let me hear it!!"

Sitting up straight as a board, Mio eggs me on.

“I I’ll take you to heart, Kujuryu-*sensei*!!”

Alright.

Now that I know for sure she’s 100 percent serious, I give her my opinion.

“Become the best in Japan.”

“The best in Japan?”

“I’m sure you know about the Elementary Meijin, right?”

“Y-Yes”

“Even if you can’t do it in grade school, you have chances in junior high and high school, too. Just become the best female amateur in Japan while you’re still in school. If you can get strong enough to win a tournament now, those skills will come in handy in the Women’s League.”

The main route for kids trying to become pros is joining the Sub League in grade school.

That’s why, except for the Elementary Meijin, their winning records as students don’t amount to anything.

On the other hand, plenty of Women’s League members did very well in the amateur ranks as students before joining. Since Practice League members are still classified as amateurs, they can hone their skills in that league as well as participate in amateur Shogi tournaments.

“This is just my opinion, but I think you have a real chance of becoming the best female amateur Shogi player in Japan if you start working at it as hard as you can right now, Mio.”

“Kujuryu-*sense*!”

“It should go without saying, but make sure you talk with your Master about this. If you’re going to become a pro, what your Master says becomes law.

Actually, you should've talked with Kuresaka-*sensei* first, but——."

"S *Sensei!*"

"Yeah?"

"I love you!!"

"Say what?!"

The grade school girl I was giving advice to just said she loves me?!

"Alllllright now! Everyone, let's play Shogi!!"

Completely ignoring the fact that I'm frozen in shock on the floor, Mio rolls up her kimono sleeves and pulls out a Shogi board.

The new one that just got here.

"I'll get real strong!! After all, I've got to become the strongest in Japan!!"

"Yes, Mio! That's the spirit!!"

"Cha, Cha's gonna be the bwest in Frawnce!"

"I can see it now, Charlette! The two of us standing on top of France and Japan! Yeah!!"

"Yay≡"

Now that Mio has a goal, the internal debate is gone.

Nothing's changed about her from a moment ago. She's not any stronger than she was.

But the difference between this committed Mio and her former self will be much easier to see in a week, in a month and certainly in a year from now.

People glow when they know exactly what they want to achieve.

"..... Grade schoolers are blinding," I whisper to myself now that Mio has her sparkle back and a big smile on her face.

She's found her goal.

—Great, but what's mine?

I defeated the Meijin and defended my title as Ryuo. What should I aim for next

In all my years playing Shogi, this is the first time I felt this vague anxiousness. Ai seems to be feeling some vague anxiousness next to me, too.

“..... Mio How dare you use that as an excuse to tell Master you love him I should've known that you, too Now I've got another one to deal with Master, you *darabuchi*!”

..... What's she hating on me for?

“W-Well, come on, everybody! It's about time we played some Shogi! This is a practice session, isn't it?! Yeah?! Yeah?!”

“Grrrr~!!”

Ai puffs out her cheeks like an angry puffer fish. All she needs are the spines.

“Mio!”

“Yep!”

“I won't lose!!”

“Yep?!”

Making that bizarre declaration, Ai sits down on the other side of the board from Mio, picks up a King, brings it down with a lot more force than she usually does—

Snap!!

Slams it down on the board like issuing a challenge. That's when.

Crreee—— kkk!

“Wha!”

That new sound spooked Mio so bad that she jumped clear into the air while

still sitting on her ankles.

Then, she pointed at the board and screamed, “A-Ai You broke the board——!!”

“Huuuh——?!”

I lean in for closer look and there’s a craaack!

She put a lot more oomph in that snap than she needed to, but I never thought the board would break

“I I’m so very soooo——rry!!” Ai apologizes, tears flowing like waterfalls as she stays low to the floor but flips herself around to face me while maintaining the fully prostrated *dogeza* position.

“I-I I’ve done the unforgivable! That board was brand-new”

“Hrmm~~”

I run my finger down the crack to check the damage.

“..... Well, can’t use it like this, that’s for sure.”

“*Hic!*”

That sounded like Ai caught a hiccup halfway out her throat.

“M Master? This, this board Wasn’t it Really expensive?”

“Hm? Yeah, because it’s a *7-sun tenchimasa* made of *hyuga torrey* wood. Even the cheapest ones go for 5 million yen”

“Faa-mi-mi Faa-mi-mi-mi-mi!!”

“Now, what to do? First things first, I should take a few pictures and let *them* have a look Send it to the shop”

“I’m sorry! There’s no excuse for what I’ve done! I was too rough with it and ruined a very expensive Shogi board!!”

“Huh? Nah, it’s not——.”

“T-There’s only one thing I can do Use my body to repay you!”

Slide.

Ai cuts me off and undoes the sash keeping her kimono on!

Then, in the splitting image of what she had just done.

“T-Then me, too! I offer myself as a thank you!!”

Slide!

“This is partially my fault, too And you gave me great advice, Kujuryu-sensei!!”

Mio springs to her feet, gives her *obi* sash a hard yank and spins like a top, more fabric coming loose every second.

It must’ve looked like fun because.

“Cha, too! Kwimono spin!”

“Huuu?! T-Then I as well”

Slide, slide. Charlette and Ayano start undressing. What’s going on?!

“Wa-wait, everyone! Stop! Stop! Once kimonos come off, they don’t go back on, so keep them ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!”

Hatsumoude, first practice session and now first disrobing

The New Year’s Grade Schooler Practice Session ended on that strange note and I have no idea why.

THE LADY'S NEW YEAR

“..... is what happened this afternoon~. What am I supposed to do?”

“Bragging about your Lolita fever dream? You’ll rot my ears off, so spare me,” Ai Yashajin quips as I tell her about the Grade Schooler Practice Group incident during our review session after playing an instructional match.

Today is the first lesson of the year.

Since I wanted to wish Ai’s grandfather and my employer, Kouten Yashajin, a happy new year I thought it be a good time to visit the Yashajin Manor in Rokkousanroku, Kobe.

I saw her at the First Move Ceremony, so it hasn’t been all that long since I talked to her.

But, before that I didn’t see her much at all, if any, during the Ryuo Title Match. We went to register her for the Women’s League once it wrapped up, but she just said, “You won? Good for you,” when I saw her then.

Best case scenario, she might’ve been giving her Master some space because I was busy.

Then again, meeting up could’ve been so much of a hassle that she didn’t bother

“..... I’m worried about Ai clinging to me for too long, but I’m more worried about you not being close enough. Why don’t you drop this tough girl act and let me treat you every once in a while?”

“Because that will never happen!”

“Oh

“I’m sure I’ve said this before, but I have no intention of playing nice with my rivals. I’ll do what’s absolutely necessary as a member of the Women’s League.

However, the rest of my time is my own.”

“That’s cold. I fought off the chairman to make you a member of this family, didn’t I?”

“I have no interest in playing house,” she snaps. “I got a pretty good idea of that during the First Move Ceremony. The players here in Kansai feel much more like a family than Kanto players do. But, at the end of the day, everyone’s competing against each other, no? Helping each other out, being all buddy-buddy. That’s just an act. They’re just trying not to feel guilty every time they beat someone else.”

“Playing house, you say

As her Master, that attitude makes me nervous.

I’ll admit that stubbornness is perfect for a competitor. It would’ve been fine back in the day.

But practice groups with other players are part of modern Shogi. Lone wolves are destined to be left out in the cold.

“..... Although, things are changing bit by bit these days

“What’s changed?”

“Huh? Nothing ...,” mumbling, I reflect a bit more on Ai’s proudly independent personality.

The reason she has such a reaction to the word *family* might be related to the fact that she lost her parents.

“I meant to ask. Did you tell your parents you joined the Women’s League?”

“I visited their graves, yes.”

“Good

“Nothing at all. Ghosts don’t exist, either.” She shrugs and continues. “All that I have is what they left behind

“Do you still have the equipment your parents used? Boards or pieces?”

“Grandfather disposed of them. He said I looked sad whenever they were used.”

“So, the ones you have now——.”

“He bought a new set. It feels just the same.”

“I see

“Grandfather disposed of more than just the board and pieces. He put every single one of their notebooks and old match records into their caskets to be burned along with them. I don’t remember much before or after the funeral, but if you’re curious then Akira——.”

“Ah, no! Sorry I asked.”

Apologizing for making her relive painful memories, I change the subject.

“I’ve got it! Now that you’re a Women’s League member, I need to get you a gift——.”

“I don’t need anything, so don’t bother.”

“Really? How about some customized pieces to mark the occasion?”

“High-quality boards and pieces have no connection to Shogi level.”

“Well, having high-quality boards and pieces will make you want to practice more so they don’t go to waste. What do you think about that?”

“Doesn’t matter. I practice every day regardless.”

She does

“I want to be very strong. Talent and skill aren’t something someone can just give you. So, I don’t need anything.”

“Is that so? Then, you want to get stronger, yeah?”

I nod as I put away the pieces.

“In that case, it’s about time you made your debut. You’re qualified enough as it is.”

“? If you’re talking about my first Women’s League match, it’s not for quite a while yet.”

“I’m not talking about a match.” Grinning, I say, “There’s a special place where only pros and Sub League members are allowed inside—I’ll take you to the Kansai Association’s Player’s Room.”

■ THE CROWN ARRIVES IN OSAKA

“Well, hello there, Ginko. Good morning.”

I climb the stairs to the association’s third floor where an older gentleman greets me.

“Mr. Mine Good morning.”

He’s the most experienced staff member at the Kansai Shogi Association.

He’s watched over Yaichi and I since we were little with a friendly grin. We call him *Principal Mine* behind his back.

“You’re early today. Recording?”

“A placement match. The A rank one.”

“Ahh, that one’ll last into the night for sure.”

He feels sorry for me.

Of course, he knows I played pitiful Shogi during the admission exam the other day, but I appreciate that he’s letting it be.

The most important job for any Sub League member is being a match recorder.

Professional and Women’s League matches are always recorded. The one who does it is the match recorder.

It’s boring, watching other people play from right next to the board. As a player, it can be humiliating. But it’s been considered to be the best training for a long, long time now.

Thinking right along with the players, close enough to hear them breath.

There’s a lot to gain from the experience, the stronger the players are, and the match recorder is allowed to join in the analysis during the review session

once the match is over.

Compared to Kanto, where there are tons of matches going on, Sub League members in Kansai have to fight for the position. We can't afford to turn down these opportunities just because recording is boring.

The recorder does a lot more than just write down each move. They're in charge of tracking waiting time, reading the countdown, as well as prep before the match and clean-up after it. It's a busy job. Recently, match recorders use tablets as well, so they need to be technologically literate on top of everything else

It's been two days since I lost to Mr. Karako.

I've come back to the association to be a match recorder. To get stronger.

"I wanted to be the recorder for this match no matter what. Everyone wanted it, so we had to settle it with a piece flip"

"Oishi-sensei is playing, yes? The Worldly Maestro has a big following. His King Title Defense Match will be starting soon, but all those match recorder shifts filled up right away. Got your eye on Oishi-sensei, do you, Ginko?"

"..... Yes."

Looking away, I nod.

"Who's he playing against? I've forgotten."

"The Crown."

"Ahh him."

Mr. Mine looks like he doesn't know what to say.

"Yes, that's sure to be an interesting match. The Crown I don't mean any ill will against him, but it's very difficult to tell what he's thinking."

"..... I will be extra polite."

"Though, I'm glad you're the match recorder for that one. Your tea is superb."

“Thank you very much.”

They just make a big batch of tea in Kanto and share because there are so many people. But since the match recorders prepare tea for the players here in Kansai, the quality depends a lot on who makes it. Mess up and the players will demand you make a new pot or, if they get really frustrated, the players will sometimes do it themselves.

It’s just I have mixed feelings about being complimented on my tea.

The faster a Sub League member rises, the less time they have to be a match recorder. They get to the pros without having any real idea how to make good tea. Exhibit A: Yaichi.

“By the way. It’s a weekday, so shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s the school’s Foundation Day.”

“Is that right? Your school sure has a lot of Foundation Days, Ginko.”

“..... Today is the real one.”

One thing about *the Principal* is he always knows when I’m lying.

He only lets me get away with it because he likes my enthusiasm for Shogi.

I’ve heard this kind of thing won’t fly in Kanto anymore, but Kansai still values the grit and determination it takes to get muddy.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“Yes. Have a good day.”

I lower my head before going to the fifth floor.

First, I line up a board and floor cushions in the middle of the *Onjyoudan no Ma* and then set up a long desk where I’ll sit to do the recording. Quite the task when you aren’t that strong to begin with like me.

“Whew That should do it.”

Next, I get the recording paper, waiting time tracking chart, tablet and everything else I'll need ready.

The only thing left now is the pieces.

I start pulling out pieces one at a time and wiping them down with a bone-dry cloth.

First up, the King for the upper seat. Then the other King There's a specific order already set in place. No one's going to get mad at me for not following it, though.

"But the Shogi gods are watching."

Saying that myself without thinking about it, I make sure every surface of each piece is spotless, not just the top and bottom.

Once that was done, I move onto the board.

Never sit in the upper seat to wipe it down, always the lower seat. Because the Shogi gods are watching.

The board clean, I set the piece box in the center. That's when I realize someone's behind me.

"Ah! Good morning."

In a bit of a panic, I get off the spot and give a deep bow.

A tall, lanky man looks down at me the whole time.

"....."

He acknowledges I'm in the room with a slight dip of his head, not even a word. A moment later, it was like he forgot I even existed, sitting down where I was just a moment ago in the lower seat.

The Crown——Yo Okito.

He's a Kanto player, so our paths hardly ever cross.

But, of course I know his face. I knew about him by the time I could crawl.

There are seven major titles in the Shogi world. He has one of them, Crown, and currently holds an A rank. He is among the elite pros.

Considered to be one of the S rank players because of his title and ranking, people think of him as next in line to the Meijin when it comes to Shogi world dominance. A prodigy among prodigies.

But this person fell from that spot once before.

He lost his title, his A rank, his pride and reputation as a player, everything Nearly his life, too.

And now, he has returned.

More than just returned, he's much stronger than before. But at the same time, *he seems to have lost a lot more* than he did on his first rise to A.

There's still more than thirty minutes before the match. Feeling awkward, I come up with an excuse to leave my seat.

"..... I'll prepare tea."

No response.

—— Sure lives up to his quiet reputation.

On my way to the supply room, I take a quick glance through the sliding door. He's sitting there with his back to me.

Totally silent, I feel like I'm watching a machine boot up as he starts thinking through his strategy.

It's not Oishi-sensei's Shogi.

Today, I'm here because I wanted to see this man's Shogi up close and

personal.

There has to be a way to get stronger *How he went beyond human limits* has to be hidden in his Shogi somewhere.

PLAYER ROOM DEBUT

There's something called a *park debut*.

It's just parents taking their kid to the park for the first time, but the kid can have all sorts of social problems later on if things go south that day. It's an important event for all mothers raising kids.

Today is just as important, and I've got to face it head on.

"A-Almost time Is it really okay?"

I've been arguing with myself, going back and forth since around the time elementary school lets out while pacing around the Shogi Association entrance. Turning back around, a woman coming down the stairs says hello.

"Is something the matter, Kuzuryu-*sensei*? You seem a lot more restless than usual."

"M-Ms. Mato"

It's the Shogi journalist, *Mato*.

She's actually a Women's League title holder known as *Machi the Tormentor*, Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui.

Normally, she'd greet me with, "Salutations," or some strange word in the Kyoto dialect. On the days she's in work mode, on the other hand, she wears a nice suit and makes a conscious effort to use words everyone is used to. To be blunt, I wish she were always like this. Plus, those massive boobs fighting back against that constrictive suit is always a sight to see Mouthwatering.

H-Hold up! Now's not the time for that.

"T-The truth is I'm going to take my apprentices to the Player's Room for the first time today"

“Ahh, it’s their Player’s Room debut. A big day indeed.”

Ms. Mato nods with understanding.

The Player’s Room itself is a long, rectangular room on the association’s third floor.

It’s basically a room only for pros, Women’s League members, Sub League members, and Shogi journalists.

While it’s a battleground where the next generation of Shogi players collide from dawn until dusk, it’s also one of the few places where we can socialize.

“Those apprentices of yours are Women’s League members now. They qualify to go inside but Simply going in the room is pointless if you don’t have an opponent.”

“Yes! That’s exactly it!”

Joining the Women’s League means they can come and go as they wish.

But that doesn’t mean they’ll always have a place there.

Just like a park, going won’t make any difference if the people there don’t accept you. What I’d like to have happen is the two of them get to the point where they can go whenever they want and always have someone to practice with but

“What was your debut like, Ms. Mato? Did everything go well?”

“I fit right in because I had already met many of the Sub League members when they taught at children’s classrooms or hosted practice sessions that I went to when I was younger.”

Strictly speaking, Sub League members can’t have part-time jobs.

The exception would be work they get through the association, jobs that involve Shogi.

Whether it’s children’s classes, helping out at Shogi events, going to the

association's Shogi classroom, buying something at the gift shop, or even doing things for the Practice League, there are plenty of chances to interact with Sub League members if you play Shogi at the association.

Unfortunately the Ai's don't have that advantage.

"Miss Hinatsuru and Miss Yashajin each became Women's League members less than a year after first coming to the association. That's a very short amount of time. I doubt they've had much chance to speak with members of the Sub League."

"Yes, yes! That's it exactly!"

"And then there's the fact that you're so protective of them, Ryuo. They may have difficulty forging their own paths."

"D-Does it look that way?"

"Indeed, it does."

She nods a very definitive yes.

"In fact, you spend so much time lording over them that there are quite a few Sub League members who are concerned they'll face the Master's wrath should they even try to talk with one of your apprentices, let alone challenge them to a game of Shogi."

"J-Just me being around could ruin their debut?"

"With your lol No. They believe you are taking extra special care of your apprentices."

"You were about to say Lolita complex, weren't you?! Don't tell me the Sub League members all think of me that way?!"

"So, what was your debut like, Ryuo?"

Well, someone sure wants to change the subject.

"Me? It went well because Mr. Kagamizu was there to help me out but"

“Do you know someone who had a bad debut?”

“..... Big Sis”

“Oh yes That’s right”

Big Sis first came to the Player’s Room when she was about four, more than ten years ago.

The vibe in there was a lot more relaxed back then, closer to a break room than a Shogi training ground. Of course, there were always matches going on, but people would be chatting right next to the boards or watching a baseball game on TV So, Master took Big Sis and I there like it was a field trip to observe. I still remember being extremely excited to go.

Being a boy might’ve helped, but I found an opponent right away and he agreed to a handicapped match. We played the Sub League’s calling card, ten-second Shogi. It goes without saying that I got completely destroyed, but I had a blast.

On the other hand, Big Sis is a girl and a very shy one at that. She didn’t fit in at all.

She hid behind Master the whole time, glaring at other people like a cat on high alert. That day happened to be one of the few that Oishi-*sensei* was at the association. She sought him out and said, “You Oishi?” before going in for the, “Leave my Master alone!! Ranging Rook players should all just disappear!!” attack. That incident was her debut.

Though, it was the best she could’ve asked for in terms of being remembered

“..... It’s bad enough to stick out, but she made an enemy out of the entire Ranging Rook party and the Crush Ginko Sora Group got created all because of that debut”

“Yes, that was around for a while.”

“I don’t want my apprentices to go through the same thing! Think about it. Lady Ai Yashajin’s arrogance is just like Big Sis and Ai Hinatsuru is just as hard-headed

“..... Same goes for their affection for the Ryuo.”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. I was speaking quietly so you wouldn’t hear.”

Ms. Mato’s lips curl into a grin.

“If you’re so concerned, why not wait for another day? You can do more preparation

“Oh, I’ve prepared, all right! Thoroughly! This is as perfect as it’s going to get!”

“How so?”

“I chose today because Big Sis is busy working as a match recorder, so I know for a fact she won’t come to the Player’s Room! Their debut has to be today!”

“Yes, I see. Today is the only day.”

Putting my apprentices in the same narrow room as Big Sis would be the same as putting two poisonous insects in the same box. One of them will die. Possibly everyone, if things get bad enough.

That’s why I want to get their debut out of the way while the silver-haired troll is busy

“Wait, I’ve got it! Would you take my apprentices to make their Player’s Room debut, Ms. Mato?!”

“You’re asking me?”

“Look, you and Ryou Tsukiyomizaka spend so much time in there, you practically own the place?! With you on their side, my apprentices will be

accepted right off the bat!”

“What do you think I am, a prison guard?”

“Same difference?! Please, do this for me! I promise I’ll find a way to pay you back double!!”

I clamp my hands together and lower my head, begging for help.

But.

“I refuse.”

“Why?!”

“Can you blame me——?”

She takes off her glasses and leans in right next to my ear to say, “..... You’re putting more priority on those girls than yours truly.”

After feeling her lips brush against my ear, she gives me a captivating smile before buying two bottles of tea from the vending machine and going back upstairs.

I space out, completely lost in her provocative aura. A jolt from inside my pocket brings me back to reality.

“Met Ten-chan at Fukushima Station!”

A message from Ai

Only the snap of Shogi pieces and the electric hum of chess clocks can be heard in the Player’s Room, but they go on forever.

“Hello there.”

I casually say, stepping inside.

Three pairs of Sub League members are doing practice matches but not a single one acknowledges me, the Ryuo. This is a space where that kind of thing

is allowed.

A room where Shogi is even more respected than the people who play it—the Kansai Shogi Association Player’s Room.

“Hey. Living up to your status as a titleholder by being fashionably late, I see.”

“Yaichi≡”

The only Sub League members to return my greeting were sitting on opposite sides of an analysis board at the far end of the long table.

Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan* and Sota Kunugi 2-*dan*. There’s nearly twenty years between them, but they’re good friends.

I wave my restless apprentices to come inside.

“Come on. Stop sputtering in the hallway and say hello.”

“M May I come inside?”

“..... Pardon the intrusion.”

The Sub League members in the middle of matches glance up for a moment when the two grade school girls step through the doorway but look back at their boards just as quickly. Shogi gets more respect in this room than grade schoolers, probably one of the only rooms like it in the world

“Well, well. Who have we here? Come on over, you two.”

Picking up on the situation, Mr. Kagamizu smiles and waves at them.

As their Master, I put my hands on the backs of their heads and force Ai and Ai to bow.

“Today is their Player’s Room debut”

“N-Nice to meet you!”

“Watch it! I can bow on my own, thank you very much! I’m not a child!”

Ai Hinatsuru goes along with it and then takes my hand with a tight squeeze

once I let her head back up, but Ai Yashajin swats my hand away. Well, their personalities are coming through loud and clear.

Mr. Kagamizu and Sota say with a hint of nostalgia, “Ha ha ha. Well, everyone gets a bit edgy on their Player’s Room debut.”

“Very true. I was so nervous on my first day.”

“No, Sota, you were completely relaxed.”

“Was I? I don’t remember.”

Sota giggles. He is so easy-going it’s hard to believe he’s only eleven.

“Your timing couldn’t be better. Sota and I were analyzing today’s match, but it’s slowed to a crawl. Today being your debut and all, I suppose I could fill in as your opponent.”

Mr. Kagamizu turns to face Ai Yashajin.

“Miss Yashajin. How about a match?”

He reaches out like asking her to dance.

Sota tilts his head like something doesn’t make sense.

“Why would you ask her?”

“Hm? Oh, well She’s perked my interest.”

Hearing that, Ai Yashajin locks eyes with him and says, point-blank, “Do you have a Lolita complex?”

“Why would you jump to that conclusion?!”

“It’s not that much of a stretch. You and my Master are close friends, yes? That means you would have similar interests”

Hold on, is she saying that I like little girls?!

“D-Don’t be so rude, Ai! You just got invited to play against a Sub League 3-dan! Be respectful and learn what he’s willing to teach!”

“.....”

She looks back at him, her eyes scanning Mr. Kagamizu from head to toe.

“How old are you, exactly? Somewhere in your late twenties, yes?”

Out of everything she could say, why’d she have to go there?! Come oooooon!!

“Being 3-*dan* means nothing if you’ve been stuck in the Sub League for that long. Clearly, your Shogi has flaws and I don’t want to pick them up. If there were someone here with something to teach me, it’d be him. Kunugi 2-*dan* was it?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

Sota nods right away.

Mr. Kagamizu forces a grin and lets Ai Yashajin sit down in his seat. I lower my head to him and give her a sharp glare, but the Master’s fury is nothing but a summer’s breeze to the Lady. Yeesh

Sota looks up at me and asks, “How shall we play this match?”

“Piece flip,” says Ai before I can respond. Ooph

She’s saying that she’s on the same level as a Sub League 2-*dan*. Most people would think she’s let all her victories against Women’s League members go to her head but That’s not it. That arrogance is Lady Ai Yashajin in a nutshell.

“..... She went against Kanto Sub League member Karen Noboryou 2-*kyu* in the Mynavi Finals and played a perfect match. I don’t think she’ll embarrass herself playing without a handicap.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.”

Sota smiles as I explain.

Even Ai wasn’t about to take the upper King for herself or do the piece flip, so at least she’s showing a bit of respect. Ending up on defense, Ai starts the match by pressing the chess clock switch. She’s going into this match ready to

play. Not only is the girl confident she can hold her ground against a 2-*dan*, she's gunning for the win. The air is so thick it stings. Ai Hinatsuru tightens her grip on my hand.

The chess clock counting down, Sota looks up to say something before making the first move.

"Miss Yashajin."

"What?"

"What would you consider to be a *meaningless move* to open a match?"

"Huh?"

"A move that wastes the advantage of going first, like passing."

"Why are you asking now? 3 Eight Gold, maybe?"

"Okay then. Any others?"

"How should I know? Something like 7 Eight Gold?"

Snap.

Sota makes his first move. Ai's eyes snap open like a cat.

"Wha!?"

His opening move——3 Eight Gold.

"Do you think you're being funny?"

The corner of Sota's mouth curls into a grin. Even Ai's pupils are flared all the way open. This kid is fearless.

"....."

Ai then moves the Pawn in front of her Rook, bent on making him regret that taunt by hitting hard and fast.

Now, what's Sota going to play for his second move——?

"What?!"

That wasn't just Ai Yashajin.

In addition to Mr. Kagamizu, Ai and myself watching the match, the other Sub League members playing Shogi next to them stop in the middle of their match to gawk.

—7 Eight Gold.

Sota opened with the two moves that Ai said were a waste. In other words, he passed on his first two moves.

“..... You will die”

That wasn't one of her sharp quips.

Her voice dropped so low it sent chills down my spine. Her eyes are locked on the board, but that voice is hell-bent on murder. She then moves her Pawn one space further forward as if thrusting a blade toward her opponent's chest.

Meanwhile, Ai Hinatsuru blinks a few times looking at the early game formation.

“Fuwawa! It looks like his side of the board is saying \(\^o^\)/ hurray!”

“Yes It sure does”

3 Eight Gold doesn't exist as an opening move in pro league matches. The Golds are the key to defense, so moving both of them away from the King at the very beginning is so pointless that no one would actually do it.

Yes No one would play Shogi like that. *No person would anyway.*

Ai set out to punish those moves for violating the standards and Shogi theory itself.

But.

“H-How?!”

She ran out of attack options at around the 70th move.

Kangire. It means her attack has failed and she's out of offensive options.

Sota saw the all-out assault coming and easily dodged everything she threw at him before neutralizing the threat.

This would normally be where you'd throw in the towel, but——.

“..... I won't let it end like this!!”

Ai grits her teeth and shifts her Rook to the center of the board in a defensive shift. She's going back to what she does best, defense, and plans on waiting until Sota makes a mistake

“.....”

Sota picks up a piece from his piece stand and starts twirling it his fingers.

It's almost like he's playing with it to get a reaction out of her.

“Here, here, here”

My other apprentice starts rocking back and forth next to me. She must've picked up a checkmate's scent.

“Here, here, herehereherehereherehere——.”

Snap!!

Sota stops playing with a piece and smacks it down the board while Ai Hinatsuru was still swaying.

“?!”

My first apprentice and I stare at the board in disbelief.

——Before Ai could finish reading?!

Every move Sota made from then on happened without a single second coming off the chess clock

Ai's King didn't stand a chance.

Yeah, he read through all the way to the end faster than anyone else, including me.

Her King backed all the way into the corner, Ai ground her teeth and threw a piece in frustration.

“Khh!! There’s nothing left.”

“Hm? What’s not left?”

“I’m saying I lost, okay?!!”

“Haha. Thank you.”

The corner of his mouth curling up again, Sota bows and says, “Just to let you in on the secret, I was *planning to open with 3 Eight Gold from the start.*”

From the start?

“Opening with 3 Eight Gold makes people suspicious But bring it up like that, and the first thing most people come up with is 3 Eight Gold or 7 Eight Gold.”

A simple trick once you know how it works.

Ai thought she came up with 3 Eight Gold on her own, but actually Sota *made* her say it. Then she jumped right into the trap that he set for her

“I get it. You riled up my apprentice so that you could control her moves.”

“Yes. Seeing her look down on Mr. Kagamizu like that didn’t sit well with me and I can’t let her think all of us are weak just because she defeated a Kanto Sub League 2-*kyu*.

“.....!!”

Sota has a cute baby face but is roasting her alive. Ai Yashajin bites her lip to endure the pain.

However, the real pain was about to hit. He looks at her with all seriousness.

“Although, I personally think that 3 Eight Gold and 7 Eight Gold are *the best opening moves.*”

“3 Eight Gold, the best move?”

Of course, hearing that is surprising for me. But for Ai after losing like that, it was like he was calling her dumb right to her face. The girl’s eyes get sharper with each passing second. This could be very bad.

“Ahh Well, yeah.”

Caught in an extremely awkward silence, I try to wrap this up by force.

“I think both of you have a better idea how good the Sub League is, as well as how deep Shogi theory can go! You can play against strong players just by coming in here, so it’s up to you to take advantage of this opportunity——.”

“Master.”

“Hm? What is it, Ai?”

“Do professional *Senseis* come here a lot, too?”

“Yes, they do. Most of them are younger players like me, so I think it will be easy for you to play against them once you get used to coming here.”

Ai’s face lights up as she takes my hand.

“That means you come here a lot, right, Master?!”

“? Well, yeah, I guess.”

“Okay, okay. Then I want to play practice matches against you!”

“Come again? Me?”

“Master is the Ryuo, so Master is the strongest, right? In that case, I want you to be the one to teach me! I can learn more from you than from anyone else! I want you to be my Player’s Room debut opponent, Master!!”

“Ohh? Huh? Say what now?”

I brought her here to encourage her to strike out on her own But now, I’ve promised to play against her. How’d it turn out like this?

I only came here to make sure my apprentices' Player's Room debuts went well—.

“..... He will die I'll see to that”

Rather than make some friends, Ai Yashajin is fuming.

“From now on, we can play at the association, too! Not just at home! More, we can play so much more! Master, let's play Shogi≡≡≡”

Ai Hinatsuru is even more clingy than she was before.

Disaster!

Their Player's Room debut was a total disaster!!

“Ummm Hmm Well”

With everything I've planned backfiring, what's the right thing to say to my apprentices? I'm completely lost and can't see which way to go anymore.

And, there's a second important debut I want these two to have today

Think!

There has to be a way to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat—!!

“O-Oh! I almost forgot! You can watch the league matches happening on the fourth and fifth floors in real time right here in the Player's Room!”

“So? I can see updates on my phone anytime I want.”

“Hold up! That's just data posted to the live blog!! Here, you can watch a feed from the ceiling camera in the arena! It's live!”

Desperate to spark Ai Yashajin's interest after she shot down my first attempt, I go to the monitor in the back of the room and show her how to use it.

“It's an IP camera, so everything's hooked up to a local network. You can see every match going on in Tokyo, too, not just Osaka. And see? If there isn't a match going on, it just shows the *tatami* mat.”

“Well That is interesting.”

“I know, right?! The Player’s Room is awesome, yeah?! Yeah!!”

I talk up the Player’s Room in a last-ditch effort to make her like this place.

But, it turns out I didn’t have to because both the Ai’s are completely entranced by what’s on the screen.

There’s only one match going on in Kansai today.

Since it has the most waiting time out of all league matches, this match will probably go late into the night. It’s early evening, and only now on the twenty-fourth move, are pieces beginning to collide. Talk about a snail’s pace.

Both players are being cautious But, there’s a good reason for it.

Best of Seven A Rank Placement Match—King Mitsuru Oishi vs. Crown Yo Okito.

“It-it’s a match between titleholders!”

“The preliminaries for the King League are right around the corner. He can’t afford to lose this match”

Looking at the information on the screen, both my apprentices sound like they’re on the edge of their seats.

This Shogi is unusual, as well.

“Opposing Rook In a match like this?” says Ai Yashajin as she leans in close to the screen.

“..... The strategy the old lady used against the Women’s Legend.”

Old lady = Keika.

“That’s right. Even for Ranging Rook, chaos can break out at any time. Mr. Oishi likes power struggles where a bit of worldly intuition can tip the match in his favor but What do you think, Mr. Kagamizu? How’s his Opposing Rook?”

“Unique, for sure.”

As a fellow member of the Ranging Rook party, Mr. Kagamizu is an avid follower of the *Worldly Maestro*. He comes to the association for every single one of Mr. Oishi’s matches. I’m sure that he and Sota were analyzing this match before we came in.

“It’s not unheard of to start with Goki-Central and transition into Opposing Rook, but Oishi-*sensei* almost never plays that way.”

Ai Yashajin looks up at me and asks, “Is he trying to throw off his opponent?”

“That’s part of it, but this time——.”

The match progresses and my mind speeds up.

My brain goes from a sleep-deprived haze to firing on all cylinders.

Mr. Oishi’s creativity has sparked my Shogi sense.

There’s nothing I can do about it, but this spark from the outside flips the switch and all sorts of ideas start running through my head—all the possible future paths this could take hit me all at once.

Shogi won’t stop!

“..... Let’s keep talking about it downstairs.”

“Downstairs?” the girls say at the same time.

The truth is that I set up another debut for them, not just the Player’s Room.

“Master? What’s downstairs?”

“Stop acting all high and mighty and say it already.”

My apprentices want to know, and I give them the answer.

“A very important job for Women’s League members—providing *commentary* at a Shogi big board.”

■ FIRST TIME AT THE BIG BOARD

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Best of Seven A Rank Placement Match analysis session. I am your host, Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan*, and it is my pleasure to bring you thorough coverage of the match between King Mitsuru Oishi and Crown Yo Okito.”

Microphone in hand, Mr. Kagamizu looks right at home in front of the crowd gathered in the second-floor classroom.

Meanwhile, Ai Yashajin is giving me a piece of her mind in the stairwell that connects the classroom to an emergency exit downstairs.

“..... I haven’t heard a thing about this!!”

“Of course not. I didn’t tell you.”

“And why didn’t you?!”

“You would’ve found a way out of it if I told you in advance, right?”

There’s a saying: *Lions throw their cubs into the abyss.*

That’s exactly how I feel right now. The only way to get good at public speaking is to go out there over and over to get used to it. Providing commentary is an unavoidable part of being in the Women’s League. The earlier my apprentices start, the better.

“Unnnn~ I-I’m so nervous!”

Ai Hinatsuru is straightening her hair with her hands, fidgeting like a scared puppy.

At the same time, Ai Yashajin is lashing out at me with all her anger and frustration.

“You piece of trash! Only the lowest piece of filth would spring this on

someone out of the blue!”

“Thanks. What a compliment

I peek outside the emergency exit door to get a look at the classroom.

The usual tables and Shogi boards are gone. Rows of folding chairs have been set up in their place. Mr. Kagamizu, Sota and other Sub League members have set up the big board. There’s already a crowd of people sitting down.

Mr. Kagamizu glances in my direction before starting the introductions.

“Today’s analysis will be provided by Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu. And, our first commentator—.”

That’s our cue.

I take Ai Hinatsuru’s hand, open the door all the way and pull her out of the stairwell landing that is serving as our green room.

Mr. Kagamizu’s amplified voice echoes throughout the classroom.

“Our first commentator is one of the Women’s League’s newest additions, Ms. Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 2-*kyu*!”

Clap, clap, clap—!!

“Fuwawa T-Thank you for having me!!”

Greeted by a warm round of applause, Ai throws herself into a bow so fast her forehead hits her knees. Flexible and adorable.

“While I’m sure she doesn’t need any introduction for everyone in the audience today, Hinatsuru Women’s 2-*kyu* is the Ryuo’s first apprentice. It just so happens that she’s making her commentary debut today! You chose a time to come to the association, folks! Sit back and enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime moment.”

“Yes, she’s new to this, so please go easy on her.”

I pick up right after Mr. Kagamizu’s announcement and start the analysis.

Ai takes her spot on the left side of the big board and I'm on the right, the usual arrangement for the commentator and analyst.

Except Ai is so nervous that her eyes are locked firmly on me rather than the audience. I swear, she looks like a frightened puppy begging for help.

—This'll get awkward if the audience picks up on how nervous she is

Breaking the ice with a bit of friendly banter and calming her nerves is my job as her Master.

"Well, Ai Oh, wait, I should call you *Miss Hinatsuru* up here, shouldn't I? Otherwise, it'll be like the two of us are just talking at home."

Ahahahaha

That got a few chuckles from the crowd. Progress. Just need another push!

"Miss Hinatsuru, it's only been a little more than a year since you started playing Shogi and here you are making your big board commentator debut. Already Women's League 2-*kyu*, you must be amazingly talented!"

"Fwhee?! I I um I still don't believe I became a Women's League player so quickly"

"I see. So, what you're saying is, your Master is a great teacher."

Hah!!

That one hit home! The audience is all warmed up!

"Tell me, Miss Hinatsuru, have you had much of a chance to watch big board analysis? Your rise was so fast I'm not sure you've had much of a chance to see one live."

"A-Actually N-Not much"

Ai looks at the floor, unsure of herself.

"But, I have seen you do it before, Master."

“Oh? Where?”

“At the Tokyo Shogi Association.”

Crap.

I knew right then and there I’d stepped into forbidden territory and it blew up in my face like a landmine.

Ai had been drowning in stage fright, but now some strange power is flooding through her voice.

“I observed you commentating on the Emperor Title Match with a Women’s League player on *Niko Live*. Yes, you were having a great time with Rokuroba-*sensei*.”

“Ah, yes, I remember that. Anyway, let’s shift our attention to the first move in this match—.”

“You stared at her breasts the whole time, Master.”

“Huuh?! N-No, I didn’t!”

“You stared and stared, didn’t you?”

“..... They might’ve crossed my line of sight once or twice, but that’s all

“You were so absorbed in them that comments like *Ryuo’s watching the bounce, lol* went across the screen, remember?”

“.....”

“And it’s not just Rokuroba-*sensei*, is it? Whether it’s Keika or Kugui-*sensei* or whoever, Master likes women with big breasts, right?”

“W-Well~ Hahaha. You sure have a sharp tongue! Now, about the first move——.”

“Don’t change the subject. We’re discussing whether or not you like women with big breasts right now.”

“Um, we’re here to analyze Shogi

“We are! What could be more interesting than analyzing the Ryuo, the one at the top of the Shogi world! I’m sure the audience would love to know, am I right?!”

“Damn straight!”

“Don’t chicken out, Ryuo!”

“What? You’re not into little girls?!”

Audiences in Kanto are usually very quiet and attentive, but Kansai people love to talk and join in the analysis all the time. It’s what makes doing commentary here special.

Usually, having audience participation is great but But, for the love of the Shogi gods, keep your mouths shut today!!

“N-Next move! Let’s do the Next Move Quiz!”

“Huh? Right now?!” Mr. Kagamizu says, shocked by my sudden suggestion.

I don’t blame him. Not a single piece has moved on the big board. Basically, it’s still showing the starting formation. There’s nothing to predict here. One look at the match record and everybody will know the answer.

But, I didn’t have any other choice!

“N-Now, it’s time for the Next Move Quiz What move will Oishi-*King* make to open the match Or, what he made? To start? What do you think, folks? Put on your thinking caps

This is why people come to these analysis sessions!

It’s a game where they guess what move the players will make next.

Guess right, and they can win all sorts of Shogi goods, usually player autographs, folding fans and match records, just to name a few. It’d be a waste to let this chance slip by.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Would you please announce three choices?”

“I’d be happy to. First——.”

“Guess which type of woman Master will choose!”

“Say what?!”

“There are three choices!”

A: Elementary School Girl

B: Women’s League Player with Large Breasts

C: Other

“*Those* are the choices?! Was *Next Move* always that kind of quiz?!”

I found out later that pretty much everyone in the audience chose “A.”

“And we’re back. Please direct your attention to the big board. There were some ... circumstances ... to attend to and we have a new commentator. Thank you for your understanding.”

After a lengthier break than usual.

“..... Ai, are you ready?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you? You’re the one soaked with sweat.”

“..... *I’m just fine*”

..... I was going to have the commentator switched out at some point anyway, but I never thought it’d be only fifteen minutes into the session. We didn’t even get to analyze the first move. I’m pretty sure that’s never happened before.

Ai Hinatsuru was having a bit of a tantrum, so I asked Keika to take her back to Master’s place. The way she looked at Keika’s chest was slightly terrifying.

“The next commentator is making her debut today, as well.”

Taking our cue from Mr. Kagamizu's announcement, I guide Ai Yashajin to the front of the classroom.

"The Ryuo's second apprentice and the youngest Women's League player in history, she has reached the Mynavi Finals in her first tournament appearance and is making waves in the Shogi world—Ai Yashajin Women's 2-*kyu*!"

CLAP, CLAP, CLAP—!!

The crowd might be more enthusiastic this time because Ai Yashajin is from the Kansai area.

Or maybe—.

"Kobe has great expectations for its hometown star, so much so that she's been dubbed *Kobe's Cinderella*. What a wonderful nickname it is."

"Excuse me! I made it very clear that you weren't supposed to say that, didn't I?! Do you *want* to die?!"

Mr. Kagamizu winks at her as Ai starts freaking out on stage.

This is payback for what she said in the Player's Room. No matter how tiny the jab, competitors aren't going to just walk away. That's a good lesson for Lady Ai to learn.

After taking that verbal punch in the face, Ai got hit with a haymaker.

"My Lady! This way! Please look over in this direction!!"

A lady wearing a black suit and sunglasses has a digital camera pointed directly at my apprentice and is waving her arm back and forth over her head.

It's Ai's bodyguard, Akira Ikeda (Shogi is her pastime, sniping is her specialty).

What's more, she's not alone.

"I went to all the Shogi parlors to round up the geezers and punks you've gotten to know and brought them here as your own cheering squad! Alright you ingrates, don't tell me you think the Lady is satisfied with that piss-poor round

of applause?! Keep going strong until I give the signal!!”

“..... Akira After this, you’re dead”

Another chill rolls down my spine. Akira You’ve gone too far

I send up a quick prayer for her before switching gears to Shogi analysis.

“As the Worldly Maestro is on offense, it goes without saying that he opened with Ranging Rook.”

“It’s Ranging Rook But, something seems different about his strategy.”

Ai takes on a more grown-up tone and follows my lead. Nicely done.

“Oishi-sensei advanced his central Pawn on the third turn. That by itself shows he’s using Ranging Rook, or at least I thought so——.”

“Oishi-King’s strategy of choice is to line up his own Rook with his opponent’s and set up a head-on collision, Opposing Rook! Since you play both Static Rook and Ranging Rook, Miss Yashajin, what do you think about his decision?”

“This isn’t a league match or the Practice League. I haven’t done enough research

“Ah, good point. Opposing Rook tends to become a free-for-all once the battle starts. That’s why most players are hesitant to use it in important matches.”

“This is an A Rank Placement Match, and these two will meet again in the King League. So, today’s match is like a preliminary round, yes? What do you think Oishi-King is planning, Sensei?”

“Let’s advance a few rounds and I’ll show you.”

Ai fully understands her role as a commentator, not only answering the questions I ask her but asking me questions in return. Wow, she’s easy to talk to. Nicely done. She is taking the big board pieces from me like a well-oiled machine. I guess she’s looking really good at it because Ai Hinatsuru didn’t

move any at all during her time up here.

“Ah, here’s the spot.”

We arrive at the point in the match we saw in the Player’s Room, around the 20th move.

“Pay close attention to the offense’s left Silver. Can you see what it’s trying to accomplish?”

“What it’s trying to Oh!”

Ai takes a few steps back to look at the whole board and read.

“Could it be Reverse Climbing Silver?!”

“Nicely spotted. Reverse Climbing Silver as a strategy that uses the left Silver and a Rook to break a defensive formation. Climbing Silver strategies are known for pairing with *yagura* castles and Bishop Exchanges, but Ranging Rook strategies can use them as well.”

“Yes. Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook Wait!”

Ai’s already wide eyes opening even wider.

“Is he using Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook standards with an Opposing Rook strategy?!”

“That he is! That’s Oishi-*sensei*’s creativity at its finest,” I explain as I move the left Silver across the big board.

“Reverse Climbing Silver can inflict a great deal of damage if it hits home. However, it’s a simple strategy that’s easy to counter, even moreso with elements of Fourth File Rook in play. That being said——.”

“I see All research on how to deal with Fourth File Rook is useless against Opposing Rook. That’s an amazing idea!”

Ai’s formal tone disappears as she gets excited, but that lets the audience know just how incredible Oishi-*sensei* is, so it’s all good. I can tell just by looking

that the whole crowd is on the edge of their seats.

“Miss Yashajin, you have some experience with Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook, don’t you? How do you see the offense shaping up?”

“..... It’s hard to tell at first glance. What about you, *Sensei*?”

“Realistically, his chances of success are up in the air. It’s fun to think about, but if the defense should deploy a Bishop at 7 Six——.”

This.

This is what I wanted!

Smooth, easy small talk with a commentator who makes focusing on the match analysis a breeze.

Ai Yashajin I thought that sharp tongue of hers would make commentating nearly impossible, but it turns out she’s good at it?!

“Let’s take a moment to talk about Crown Yo Okito. This may be a Kansai analysis session, but people will think we’re playing favorites if we spend the whole time talking about Mr. Oishi.”

“Not that that gives Oishi-*King* any sort of advantage.”

That got belly laughs out of the crowd. Keep it up, Ai!

Unfortunately, the mood got completely destroyed with the next question.

“Miss Yashajin, do you know Okito-*Crown*?”

“Of course, I do. He’s the first professional to lose to a computer, yes?”

Murmur!

The warmed-up crowd freezes over in the blink of an eye.

And I can feel the blood draining from my veins.

“Back then, people called him all sorts of names like *Humanity’s Shame* and *The Traitor Who Ended Shogi*. I think those are fair assessments, though,

because, despite using his best strategy, he failed to put the machine in check even once in that horrible match.”

“Uhh, hold on there Miss Yashajin, you might want to avoid——.”

“What’s wrong with talking about it? It’s common knowledge that software has gone beyond what people can do. Even the Meijin would lose more often than not. Isn’t that right, everyone?” Ai yells to the crowd.

“Ya bet he would!”

“Well said!”

“No! I believe in the Meijin!”

And more. There’s energy building in the crowd again, but it’s not what it used to be.

The difference between software and people Pros and Sub League members typically want to avoid talking about Mr. Okito, a top-tier pro, losing to a machine at all costs.

Now, Ai is breaking that taboo without a second thought.

“And speaking of that Okito guy, he stopped talking to people and going to practice sessions so that he could study exclusively with software, didn’t he? Lots of young players have their eye on him because of his fast turnaround. Therefore, didn’t losing turn out better for him in the end?”

“S-Seriously, Ai! That’s too far——.”

“Though I do feel sorry for him. No matter what new strategy he might come up with, people just say: *The software taught him how to do that*. He could claim all the titles and it still wouldn’t be enough But opinions will change once working with software becomes a normal part of Shogi.”

This conversation jam-packed with taboos seems to have lit a fire in the audience.

“You’re right! You think he’s happy, resorting to software just to win?!”

“Nah, as long as I get to see interesting Shogi matches, I’m good!”

“Shouldn’t pros win with their own ideas?!”

“If you’re gonna bring that up, what about practice sessions——?!”

No one cares about the match anymore. The analysis session has turned into a philosophical debate about *whether people are stronger than computers* and how the Shogi world will change

Having completely lost control, I say, “It’s about time for grade schoolers to get to bed,” as an excuse to end the session early.

Disaster!

Their commentator debuts were a total disaster too!!

🏠 LETDOWN STICK

At about the time the grade schoolers are getting home, Mr. Oishi lights up a cigarette and slides his Gold forward.

“What do you think, Ryuo?”

“He’s got a check path But I don’t see the defending King getting trapped by it.”

Mr. Kagamizu and I are sitting in front of the monitor in the Player’s Room with an analysis board between us.

Seeing Mr. Oishi’s check path, Mr. Okito deploys a Bishop onto the board to put him in check. Here it is, the final battle.

“Now where’s he going to move his King——?”

Mr. Kagamizu leans in close to the monitor as the screen shows Mr. Oishi move his King diagonally upward with a quick flick of the wrist and a lit cigarette sandwiched between his fingers. That’s not particularly good manners for a title holder to have, but it’s exhilarating to see the Worldly Maestro do it with style.

But his fingers are shaking just a little bit.

“3 Six King? Wouldn’t 4 Six have been better to get his King to safety?”

“If he moved it to 4 Six, all the defender would need to do is drop a Silver at 5 Five and he’d control the middle of the board.”

I play out what would happen on the analysis board as I answer.

“Moving to 3 Six is pretty much the same as a king deserting his castle right before the fall, but not a bad move in this situation.”

“Playing like this, it looks like he’s afraid of something.”

I have a good idea about the *something* Mr. Kagamizu is talking about.

“So, what do you think?”

“I think the Maestro still has a few good options.”

I’ve lost count how many times I’ve been asked *what I think* today, but I offer my opinion on the formations just the same. Everything is clear as a whistle to me at this point.

“The defender advanced his edge Pawn and secured an escape route for his King. All this puts a bit of pressure on the offense’s King, it’s only pressure, nothing more. Judging from the offensive point of view, I’d say he should deploy a Gold at 4 Six or 6 Six to take control of the central area. That will make it more difficult to put him in check.”

“For sure. Doing that would put them neck and neck——.”

Mr. Kagamizu picks up a Gold from the offensive piece stand and starts to reach for 6 Six on the board.

Just before it got there.

“Huh?!” the two of us say in disbelief after Mr. Oishi, on offense, makes his move.

“5 Seven Paaawn?! Not 6 Six Gold?!”

The Gold Mr. Kagamizu had in his hand falls onto the board with a few dull clicks.

“What was he seeing?”

“An illusion? That’s all it could be.”

I arrange the pieces on our analysis board to show what I think was going through Mr. Oishi’s mind.

“Probably, he was thinking that Mr. Okito’s Dragon at 4 Nine would come to take his defensive Gold. In that case, deploying a Rook at 3 Two in enemy territory would put the defending King in checkmate.”

“But, move the Dragon to 5 Six and the offensive King would have nowhere to go.”

“I know. I think Mr. Oishi didn’t see it.”

“Oishi-sensei, overlooking something that simple?!”

“I don’t believe it either, but that’s the only explanation. Ahhh Yeah, an apology.”

Mr. Oishi takes the defender’s Dragon with the Gold he thought was going to get taken. That opened the door to the Gold and Silver defensive wall, making that move pointless.

I bet he saw the defender’s 5 Six Dragon would get him as soon as he made that move.

That’s why he tried to go in a totally different direction. In Shogi, we call this an *apology*, sort of like accepting a mistake and trying to move on from it.

But the situation is already too bleak for an apology to make much difference.

“..... He built up that much of a lead in the early game”

Mr. Kagamizu bites his lip to endure the pain.

“Maybe that strategy was a little too new? So much so that even Mr. Oishi couldn’t pull it off.”

“That’s part of it.”

I nod, but have a different idea.

“I agree with you, but I think he lost for a different reason. Mr. Oishi was too worried about his opponent. That’s why he ran out of gas when the attacks came to a head.”

I’ve seen this type of loss before. It happens quite a bit when players go against particularly strong opponents.

Build a lead in the early game.

Extend that lead in the mid-game.

But Lose the match on a mistake in the late game.

—That’s what happens when people lose to computers.

“Looks like he just can’t surrender,” mutters Mr. Kagamizu.

I didn’t even nod, just kept my eyes on the monitor. It’s so obvious, I didn’t need to agree with him.

Three minutes later, Mr. Oishi silently lowers his head.

“..... The letdown stick.”

“Yeah

Waiting time ran out on Mr. Oishi’s turn without making a move, resulting in a loss. The match recorder has to write each move on the match record, but also the waiting time. Whenever a player runs out of time, they don’t have a move to record.

So, what they do is write “——” through the square on the sheet.

That’s where the term *letdown stick* comes from. If the player gives up right away, then there is no stick.

When the player knows that they’re defeated, they can mentally prepare themselves so the actual act of throwing in the towel happens almost right away.

It’s what we call *setting the scene*.

But there’s no time to prepare when your own mistake results in a near instant death. Not wanting to go out on that note, they think as hard as they can but end up running out of time and throwing a piece.

That's what the stick in the match record means.

The agony of defeat will live on in that match record forever.

There's nothing more humiliating for a pro to go through. That's especially true for someone who prides themselves on aesthetics, like Mr. Oishi.

"..... This loss might stick with him for a while."

Wondering why Mr. Kagamizu is starting to collect his things as he spoke, I ask, "Aren't you going to stay for the review session?"

"I'd like to, but I don't want to see Oishi-*sensei* like this. It hurts too much."

As a fellow member of the Ranging Rook party, I'm sure he has great respect for Mr. Oishi. Much more than I do, anyway. That's probably why he can feel Mr. Oishi's pain right now.

"You're going there yourself, right?"

"Yeah."

"Be sure you do. I can't imagine Ginko is comfortable in there."

With that, Hiuma Kagamizu puts on his coat and leaves the room.

Now that I look around, the Player's Room that was so full just a little while ago is now completely empty.

■ AFTER THE BATTLE

Walking up to the arena, it felt like the air itself was pushing me away.

“.....”

Mr. Oishi seems upset after throwing in the towel, which is very unusual for him. He's just sitting there without saying a word and staring daggers at the board.

The pile of cigarette butts in his ashtray have been chewed to pieces. Nothing could show how much pain Mr. Oishi is in right now better than that.

“..... Excuse me,” I say in a hushed voice as I take a seat a good distance away from the board. Big Sis and Ms. Mato looked up at me when I come in, but both players kept their eyes squarely on the board.

Mr. Oishi and Mr. Okito aren't making eye contact, at all.

King and Crown.



These two titleholders aren't looking at today's Shogi.

Their eyes are zeroed in on the King League, which is about to start.

".....!"

At last, Mr. Oishi starts angrily shifting pieces around in a new sequence.

"....."

Mr. Okito didn't say anything but goes along with it.

Review sessions can get so heated that sometimes it feels like they should be called the *second round*.

Each piece that Mr. Oishi snaps down sounds harsh, like kindling crackling under a fire.

On the complete opposite side of the spectrum, Mr. Okito's moves are unnaturally quiet.

The review session goes on without a word.

Usually, the victor will let the defeated win these proposed sequences during review sessions so that they don't make the agony of defeat any worse.

But Mr. Okito is crushing every single sequence that Mr. Oishi tries out.

It's almost like He's an emotionless computer, mercilessly efficient and precise.

The review session came to an end an hour later.

Neither player said a word the whole time.

"Okito-sensei. A later date will be fine, but may I ask you a few questions about today's match?"

"I would prefer you not."

Standing up along with the victor once he was finished putting the pieces

away, Ms. Mato asks him for an interview. Mr. Okito politely but instantly refuses.

For a second, Ms. Mato froze like she'd been slapped in the face.

"Sensei! Please, just a few minutes——!"

Unable to take no for an answer, she follows Mr. Okito out the door.

Mr. Oishi is still sitting at the board, alone.

"....."

After watching the review session, Big Sis, who had been working as the match recorder, and I watch with baited breath to see what the still-silent Mr. Oishi will do next.

In the big picture this loss doesn't hurt that much.

Mr. Oishi has already won four of his placement matches, so I doubt he'll have to drop down. He's in a perfect position to defend his title without having to worry about other match results.

But his promising new strategy has just been crushed into a million pieces.

Mr. Oishi's research has reached a dead-end.

Meanwhile, Mr. Okito walked away with the victory and new avenues for his research to explore.

That difference is huge right before a big match. Mr. Oishi has to change up his strategy before the first match starts and he's been mentally pushed into a corner.

How far has Mr. Okito's research progressed?

Was that strategy specifically for this match in the first place?

And if it was research, preparing for a strategy so far removed from the standards like that is

“..... Guess there’s no point in sitting here,” Mr. Oishi mutters to himself and slaps his knees as he gets to his feet.

He then starts talking to us while getting ready to leave.

“Yaichi. Ginko. Got time tomorrow?”

“I don’t have anything going on but Big Sis? You’ve got school, right?”

“The evening is fine.”

Mr. Oishi nods at her answer, but he’s zoned out like his head is somewhere else.

The Worldly Maestro slides his arms through his jacket and tells us what he has in mind.

“I’d like to do a practice session. Please bring what you’d need to spend the night.”

RYUO

RECORD 3

 CROWN

YO
OKITO

REGISTRATION NUMBER:	210
DATE OF BIRTH:	FEBRUARY 13TH
HOMETOWN:	WAKKANAI CITY, HOKKAIDO
MASTER:	THE HONORARY SUSUMU ITAJIKI 9-DAN
RYUO LEAGUE:	GROUP 1
PLACEMENT MATCHES:	A RANK



🏠 TENSION IN THE AIR

“..... Nghhh~~, man, I’m nervous”

I got to Kyoubashi Station quite a bit earlier than the time we agreed to meet, and I’ve been checking the time on my phone over and over again while running through the plan in my head since I got here.

“First off I need to apologize for what happened that day. Yes. An apology is the best opening move. Just keep apologizing until she forgives me”

If I’ve got to get down on all fours to do the *dogeza* position, I’m fully prepared physically and mentally. I wore these pants specifically because I don’t care if the knees get dirty.

Right now, Big Sis and I are fighting.

“..... Well, *fighting* isn’t the right word because it’s all my fault.”

Right after I lost the third Ryuo Title Match ... I said some horrible things to Big Sis when she came to my apartment to check on me.

“What could a lowly Sub League member actually do?”

Specifically, that horrible thing.

“..... Although, she did punch me in the face not long after that. Kicked me in the ribs a couple times while I fell to the floor, too, but”

That was all my fault as well.

“..... Strength is everything in the Shogi world. That’s why the strong can say pretty much whatever they want, and other people just let it slide But that’s exactly why people have to protect what they think is important”

A high-ranking player once said this: *Sub League members are lower than human.*

Enraged by his comments, a veteran 3-*dan* countered with this: *We may be lower than human, but anyone who says so isn't human at all!*

I agree.

Pros, Sub League members, heck, even the Meijin, Women's League members and amateurs, we're all human beings just the same. Our Shogi skill has nothing to do with it. Besides, Shogi strength and skill have never been used to determine someone's worth as a human being.

But, at the same time——.

"..... We all play Shogi like our lives depend on it. I've moved pieces around the board until my fingers bled, shed enough tears in the Sub League to last a lifetime And turned pro because of it."

No human being has ever turned pro without losing sweat, blood and tears.

That's why I think the ones who've gone through that pain deserve respect, and the skills they obtained in the process make them, in my opinion, beyond human because they sacrificed their chance to live as normal people to reach that level.

So Yeah.

That's why we pros think people who've thrown away their human lives and continue to win in battles against pros who've done the same, people who are better at Shogi than we are, as something special, something beyond human. It's like a mirage.

A mirage strong enough to make the Meijin look like a god.

"..... Anyway, I just need to make sure to apologize."

I switch my train of thought back to what needs to happen.

This will actually be the first time since the Ryuo Title Match that the two of us will be alone together like this.

“..... There have been a lot of events and interviews to do, so we’ve both been busy But I can’t shake the feeling that Big Sis has been trying to avoid being with me one-on-one”

Big Sis successfully defended her Women’s Throne title and wrote an article about it, but there had to be time to talk with her in there somewhere. It’s been two months since we’ve had a proper conversation. That’s the record for the longest she’s ever ignored me.

“In other words She’s still pissed This is going to be rough”

Then again, there *is* hope.

On the morning of the Fourth Ryuo Title Match, Day 2 ... When I asked Big Sis if I could have some time to talk with her when the match was over, she answered that she’d *think about it*. She wasn’t looking at me though.

But she *should* forgive me.

“..... Back when Shumai-sensei crashed at the First Move Ceremony, she seemed fine around me and she didn’t try to move away or anything during the review session yesterday At least, I don’t think she did. Probably”

And now it’s almost time for her to get here.

Early evening outside Kyoubashi Station’s north exit, just in front of all the shops.

Students and office workers start flooding out of the turnstiles, but that black sailor-style school uniform isn’t anywhere among them.

“She’s late Don’t tell me she left me here and went on over by herself?”

She should already be here——.

“Yaichi.”

“Holy?!”

Hit with a voice out of thin air, I nearly jump out of my skin.

I didn't see who it was until she was standing right in front of me Wait.

"Huh?! Big Sis? Is that you?"

"....."

Only when I saw her staring at me out of the corner of her eye did I know for sure it was her.



She's in regular street clothes.

Big Sis is all business, even going to practice sessions and versus matches in her school uniform on her days off.

What's more, she wears the winter uniform in summer because her skin burns so easily.

But right now, Big Sis is dressed up in casual clothes like the models in fashion magazines and wearing a hat as a disguise. It's like what famous people do when they want to go out in public.

—Whoa. Damn cute

So cute that my head is going blank, just like when an opponent's preemptive strike hits home right before a match and you forget all the research you did to prepare for it. This level of cuteness borders on abuse.

"..... Well, let's go."

"Ah! Right."

I take off to catch up with her.

With the sun going down and neon lights glowing in the shopping arcade—not that this place gets much sunlight during the day or the neon lights ever go off—it's not a safe place for a girl to walk by herself.

"Big Sis! Please, wait for me!"

That's especially true for a girl as cute as her. I get right up next to her, walking shoulder to shoulder to ward off the creepy-looking men swarming in like wasps on a beautiful flower.

The Gokigen Bathhouse isn't far. We'll get there in a few minutes at this pace.

There are two things I need to do in those few minutes.

1. Apologize to Big Sis

2. Think about today's practice session

Two things.

However, something completely different is going on in my head right now.

— It'd be bad if I, held her hand Wouldn't it?

Close enough to brush shoulders, I quickly take a glance at her face in profile out of the corner of my eye so that she won't notice.

“

She is silently marching straightforward like I'm not even here.

What does that mean?

She was the one who took my hand in Hawaii, and we went on from there.

—In Harajuku Who was it?

Ms. Shakando had her dressed up in really frilly clothes, and I helped her walk because she could've tripped at any moment So, was I the one that took her hand? Or did she reach out for me?

—Should I pretend to touch her hand by accident and judge her reaction? Something casual, like sticking out a Pawn to test the waters I mean, the fact that she's letting me walk this close to her means she's not angry anymore, right? Wait, wait. There's a good possibility she's just putting up with me for Mr. Oishi ... as a favor for all he's done for us. Her face is stone cold and she hasn't said a word, so she still might be pissed at me Trying to hold her hand now could end up with me getting slapped in the face, which would be one heck of a jolt and pretty much destroy my chances of getting her to forgive me Ungghh

With all that going on in my head, we hadn't said a single word to each other by the time we arrived at the bathhouse, let alone held hands.

▲ GOKIGEN PRACTICE SESSION

“I’m not really the type to go over losing matches like this,” Mr. Oishi says first thing. “Especially not before big matches ’cause it sucks all the life out of me. Personally, I’d rather go through a win so I can hit the first match riding high.”

Kyoubashi’s Gokigen Bathhouse had closed the baths and the Shogi classroom for the time being because the Best of Seven King Title Match is right around the corner.

Mr. Oishi is sitting on the other side of the board from us in the starkly empty classroom looking much worse than he did yesterday. He probably didn’t get any sleep at all last night.

Having just finished title matches of my own, I look at him and say, “That’s fine, but seven matches take a long time It’ll be at least four. Winning enough matches won’t be easy if there’s a hole in your strategy. It sure doesn’t help that your opponent is one of the best researchers around.”

“Oh, I’ve got a full course of Central Rook, Fourth File Rook, Third File Rook and Opposing Rook planned for Okito, believe me.”

Mr. Oishi reaches for the pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket but stops halfway and drifts down to pick up a piece and make a move.

He must be holding back because Big Sis is here, and he knows her lungs are sensitive.

He’d go through a pack or two if it were just the two of us here, but I suppose having a daughter of his own triggers some self-restraint.

..... Then again, Big Sis was the match recorder yesterday and that didn’t stop him from smoking. I guess those fatherly instincts go out the window when he’s in the zone.

“Anyway, let’s start digging into yesterday’s match. It’d be worse for my nerves, leaving it like this.”

“Sure.” My heart skips a beat, Big Sis and I saying the same thing at the same time like that. Huuh!?

Completely ignoring me getting butterflies over something so simple as some little kid with a crush, Mr. Oishi and Big Sis start analyzing the match.

“Where did things turn south?”

“At this point, aren’t things starting to go in his favor?”

“So, the whole plan went up in smoke I was sure this sequence would work.”

“Perhaps the Reclining Silver was too predictable——.”

Big Sis and Mr. Oishi are shifting through the match record at a blistering pace, trying to find the point where it *failed* but, “No.” I jumped in before I could stop myself.

Getting the sense that Big Sis tensed up next to me, I kept going.

“Mr. Oishi.”

“Yeah, Yaichi?”

“I tried making a few adjustments to your opening in yesterday’s match.”

Moving the pieces back a few turns, my brain feels like it’s stepping on the gas.

The Shogi board that’s been in front of my eyes every day for a while now becomes crystal clear and the rest of my thoughts start getting cloudy.

My body’s heating up, but my mind is sinking into a world of cold calculations——.

“Try stopping this.”

I remember everything up until I said that.

The next thing I knew, Mr. Oishi's shoulders sink as he says.

"..... You got me. You got me damn good."

Three hours have gone by and I had no idea.

The water bottle in front of me is pretty much empty. I seriously doubt Big Sis drank it, so that would mean I did

—— It's the same as back then.

During the rematch of the fourth Ryuo Title Match against the Meijin.

I couldn't keep my reading speed under control and totally lost track of time. It's exactly the same.

Big Sis is looking at me like some kind of monster.

".....!"

Pale face going even paler, her long eyelashes are trembling. Her mouth is hanging open, but nothing is coming out. Not even a groan.

Mr. Oishi sounds like he's searching for the right words.

"That wasn't a sequence you've been working on for a while, was it?"

"No. Seeing the review session last night gave me a few ideas."

I couldn't sleep again, per usual, so I had the whole night to think. Even ran some tests of my own, too.

Mr. Oishi pulls out a cigarette and says like trying to get a bad taste out of his mouth, "..... All that in one night? Seriously You're the King."

King? I'm the Dragon King, Ryuo. Is that what he meant?

Oh well, doesn't matter.

"I think your idea might work, like this here. Even if you don't think it's ready for the first match, it might be worth trying out later on."

“Yeah, but

“It might be hard to go back to it after a loss, but that’s the last thing your opponent would expect. That’s why I think it’s worth a shot.”

“Hmm

“Using software can cut down on research time quite a bit. It’ll give you pretty accurate results no matter what strategy you hit it with.”

“Software, huh

“Here———See?”

I open up my bag and take out my tablet.

Turning it on, the tablet links up with my computer at home and I open the data from my research last night.

Numbers pop up on the screen.

Prospect 1 Depth 38/47 Nodes: 12007630879 Value -32 Sequence: ♠ 7 Eight Gold (69), ♢ 8 Seven Bishop Promotes (76), ♠ Taken by Gold (78), ♢ 5 Three Silver (62), ♠ 7 Five Silver (66), ♢ 3 Three Silver (22), ♠ 8 Eight Gold (87), ♢ 4 Four Pawn (43), ♠ 5 Nine Gold (49), ♢ 1 Four Pawn (13), ♠ 5 Seven Bishop (46), ♢ 4 Five Pawn (44), ♠ 7 Eight Gold (88), ♢ 1 Five Pawn (14), ♠ 7 Six Bishop Hit ♢ 2 Two King (32), ♠ 8 Five Pawn (86), ♢ 4 Four Silver (53), ♠ 6 Four Silver (75), ♢ 7 Two Rook (82) ♠ 7 Seven Pawn Hit, ♢ 7 Six Rook (72), ♠ Taken by Pawn (77), ♢ 8 Six Rook Hit, ♠ 7 One Rook Hit, ♢ 4 Two Gold (52), ♠ 7 Nine Gold (78), ♢ 8 Seven Rook Promotes (86), ♠ 8 One Rook Promotes (71), ♢ 6 Seven Dragon (87), ♠ 7 Five Bishop (57), ♢ 7 Four Pawn Hit, ♠ 8 Six Bishop (75), ♢ 5 Six Dragon (67), ♠ 9 One Dragon (81), ♢ 7 Six Dragon (56), ♠ 7 Seven Bishop (86), ♢ Six Pawn Hit, ♠ 6 Eight Pawn Hit, ♢ 3 Two Gold (41), ♠ 8 Four Pawn (85)

“..... The heck is this?”

“The rating for yesterday’s match at the 30th move. This here shows that the

next move is 7 Eight Gold and it reads through the next moves as well.”

“Don’t you think this match record is a bit weird? What’s with the few random *hits* in there? And what are the numbers in the parentheses for?”

“Those numbers show where the piece was before it was moved. That’s how the computer understands the board. So pieces that get deployed from the piece stand didn’t exist as far as the computer is concerned, so it gets recorded as a *hit*.”

“Ah-huh Hm?”

It doesn’t seem to click for Mr. Oishi. *Why’d you go through all this trouble?* is written all over his face as he stares at my tablet.

Unlike people with mental Shogi boards, the match record must be like this because computers have to rely on numbers and symbols

“I had it run 12 billion simulations, and the rating came out at almost 50-50. Yesterday’s match got off to a rough start, but it wasn’t half-bad from there.”

“It’s the *almost* that bothers me. Offense needs to pick up points early, otherwise you’ll get beat by a strategy rather than the other guy’s skill.”

“The software rates Ranging Rook pretty low. While it’s difficult to tell you like this, Mr. Oishi, getting close to a 50-50 rating from it means the strategy has a lot of potential.”

“You sure got a mouth on you

Crap. I got carried away and went too far.

The Worldly Maestro has so much pride in forging his own path that he’s refused practice sessions with other players no matter how strong the winds of change were blowing against Ranging Rook.

Is he angry that I put his strategy through software without asking?!

“N-No disrespect! I mean, I only just started using software for my own

research a little while ago during the Ryuo Title Match——.”

“.....”

Big Sis freezes solid next to me. Sure felt like it anyway.

Crap, I’m in for it Now that I think about it, I basically told Big Sis that *using software would be better than practicing with her* back on that day Yep, she’s going to kill me later

“B-But, it’s not like you can just do what the computer says is the best move!”

“That so?” asks Mr. Oishi, curious. Okay, he’s not angry Whew

“Software Shogi and Shogi played by people are just too different. Computers can read more moves than a person ever could, so software doesn’t hesitate to go on the attack with a defenseless King. Computer Shogi is all based on calculations and ratios, that’s why it works.”

On the other hand, Shogi players have built up enough experience playing modern Shogi to be creative and improvise.

“People make mistakes in the late game. That’s why players always try to make sure their King has better protection than their opponent’s, so one mistake or two won’t cost them the match. That’s what modern Shogi is built on. Since they’re based on two different things, you can’t just play what the computer says is the best move.”

Big Sis joins the conversation.

“Software rates advancing the Pawn in front of the Rook as a *loss*, doesn’t it? Oh, and it doesn’t place much value on the Bishop, so it will sacrifice it without hesitation.”

“It rates Knights pretty low, too. But I think it just looks that way because of how highly it rates Pawns.”

“That’s what’s making the Knight Loss strategies sweeping through the pros and Sub League so popular.”

“Yes, yes! That’s exactly it!”

Having a normal conversation with Big Sis again makes me so happy I shift in my chair just to face her.

“From what I’ve heard, more and more players are holding practice sessions just to talk about different sequences created by software over in Kanto.”

“And not as many people come to the Player’s Room here in Kansai anymore, do they?”

“It’s more efficient to use software for research and matches rather than other people. The fact that it’s so easy to set up is big, too. You don’t need to change your schedule with software and you don’t have to waste time traveling.”

“Strategies that were thought to be too aggressive turn out to be usable, and the veteran *Senseis* have a hard time. Their Shogi senses don’t line up.”

“I totally agree that software rates pieces differently than people do. Take Sota for example. He’s been using software since he learned how to play Shogi and saying *3 Eight Gold and 7 Eight Gold are the best opening moves* rolled right off his tongue.”

On a side note, Keika lost to a 7 Eight Gold opening move strategy in the Mynavi Preliminaries.

Looking at that opening from a human perspective, it’s basically an ambush combined with a taunt like: *Think you can play Ranging Rook? Prove it.*

If that opening is the best move, the user would be jumping for joy if their opponent actually uses Ranging Rook. *Today is my lucky day!* In other words, it rejects Ranging Rook outright.

“That being said, I just saw him crush my apprentice by opening with 3 Eight Gold yesterday. Sota may be onto something.”

“Ah, I get it. The whiz kid’s real Master is a computer. Gotcha.”

It seems that Mr. Oishi knows about Sota, the grade school boy with a shot at turning pro.

“Well, even if there is time to test things out later I doubt I can get the most out of software right off the bat. Sorry, but stick with me until my Defense Matches are over.”

“Of course.” Big Sis’s voice overlaps with mine.

For us, there’s no downside to having intensive practice sessions with one of the top top-tier pros heralded as the Ranging Rook party president.

And there’s another reason I want to have these practice sessions.

That’s——.

“Uh, umm”

Someone speaks up as if she’s been waiting for our conversation to come to a natural stopping point.

Mr. Oishi’s one and only daughter, Asuka.

“What’s this? Asuka, you’re not wearing gym clothes?”

“T-The baths are closed today”

“Oh yeah. But that’s a good look for you. Very cute!”

“?! I-I, ahh wa waa!”

It’s been a while, but Asuka is the same as ever, turning bright red and shyly fidgeting like that. I’ve never seen her wear anything else, so she looks stunning right now.

Complimenting her just makes the fidgeting worse and she starts tugging at her long bangs.

“..... Hey, Yaichi. You got some real guts there, kid, talking up a girl in front of her old man,” Mr. Oishi says without a shred of humor.

“No, no, no! I’m not talking her up! I just said what I thought when I saw her——.”

“Hghhh!”

Asuka’s whole face looks like it caught fire as she makes an odd sound.

Crick! Another strange sound, this time from right next to me. I turn to look.

“.....”

Big Sis is playing with an empty plastic bottle, crushing it with her fingers. What a weird game.

Crossing his arms, Mr. Oishi says with all seriousness, “..... But I’m not some stubborn old coot. Tell you what. Become the Eternal Ryuo, then I’ll come around to the idea of you dating Asuka.”

“I’d have to defend my title for another three straight years to do that!”

Becoming Eternal Ryuo requires five consecutive seasons as Ryuo, or seven seasons combined.

Even the Meijin hasn’t pulled that off, so it’s pretty much impossible.

“And, I don’t have those kinds of feelings for Asuka, all right?!”

“What’s not to like about my daughter?!!”

“Dealing with her father, that’s what!!”

He’s usually cool as a cucumber, but the Worldly Maestro tends to get worked up when his cute daughter is involved. Human beings are incomplete as a species. It’d be so nice to install some software.

Speaking of that cute Asuka, she finally tells us why she’s here in the first place.

“Ah, umm D Dinner, is ready, so”

“Thanks, Asuka!”

My eyes light up once I see what that quiet girl whipped up.

“Ah! That’s *tonpeiyaki*! I love this stuff♪”

“Y-Yes You said you liked it last time So, I made it again, but”

Asuka made this Osaka original, a lot like the *grill-what-you-like* pancake called *okonomiyaki* for Ai and I after our shifts when we were working part-time here at the Gokigen Bathhouse as an *included* dinner. It’s best when it’s still hot and I’m already reaching for it.

“So good! Asuka, this is even better than last time!”

“T-Thank you Ehehehe ≡”

Asuka shyly but happily smiles.

Her shoulders and arms curl inward as she starts fidgeting again

For such a quiet girl, her arms are putting a lot of pressure on her already impressive boobs, pushing them up and up Hot!!

“Um, everyone Please help yourself”

Big Sis and Mr. Oishi take some *tonpeiyaki* once Asuka asks them to try it.

“Yeah. Yaichi’s right, this batch has more flavor than your usual.”

“D-Do you really think so Father?”

“..... You’re not testing the theory that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, are you?”

“N- No, I’m not!!”

It might look like an entertaining father/daughter comedy routine, but this is serious.

As for Big Sis, “..... (Humph!)”

If the word *discontent* were to come to life as a person, that’s Big Sis right now.

Oh, come on.

They're feeding us for free, so please pretend you like it.

"I've got to tell you, Asuka. Your *tonpeiyaki* is the best! Isn't it delicious, Big Sis? Yeah?"

"..... Yes."

I've never heard a more sarcastic *yes* in my life. She sounded like she was spitting out dirt.

Shivering and shaking, Asuka turns to ask Big Sis.

"Um, uh Y-You don't like it?"

"..... It's fine."

Again, Big Sis sounds like she's trying to get dirt out of her mouth. That doesn't stop her from taking a second *tonpeiyaki*, though.

Since she looks really worried, I lean over and whisper to Asuka. "(It's all good, Asuka. The thing about her is that all her favorite foods have a lot of sauce. Actually, she'll eat almost anything as long as it's smothered in the stuff.)"

"(I, I didn't know Thank goodness)"

That seemed to put her fears to rest because she breathed a sigh of relief and put a hand to her big chest. Jiggle

"(Y-You see I-I admire Sora-*sensei* so much and it makes me so happy that she's eating my cooking)"

The corners of her eyes start tearing up as she speaks.

Asuka must have a lot of respect for the Shogi player Ginko Sora, calling her *sensei* like that even though she's older.

As another girl who loves Shogi and has devoted a lot of time and energy to it, Asuka understands just how amazing Big Sis is from the bottom of her heart.

And Big Sis, not picking up on any of that, “..... (Humph!)”

She was in a horrible mood until the very end.

Sigh We'll be coming here quite a bit over the next few weeks, so please try to get along

SAKURANOMIYA

“Hey, Big Sis! Wait up!”

Just as soon as the practice session ended.

“Help yourselves to the bath,” Mr. Oishi was nice enough to offer, but Big Sis turned him down and booked it out of the Gokigen Bathhouse.

“Come on, please wait! Big Sis! Hold up, will you?!”

“.....”

“Okay! You don’t have to wait, just don’t run away from me!”

Big Sis leaving like that caught me off guard because I was sure we’d be spending the night once the practice session ended.

Now I’m trying to catch up to her, but she speeds up every time I get close.

This time I grab hold of her arm before she slips away again.

“Hey What are you sulking for? A young girl like you shouldn’t be walking around out here alone at this time of night, don’t you think? If I’m the one that ticked you off, I’ll apologize for anything, just please stay next to me!”

“.....!!”

Big Sis slaps my hand away. Rather violently. I have no idea why, but I know for sure that she’s pissed at something.

“Are you angry because I complimented Asuka on her cooking? I admit that complimenting her that much while I’ve never said anything nice about the food you make might’ve been out of line”

I try testing my first theory.

“But, you see, Asuka did a lot for Ai and I back when we wor- trained at the bathhouse, like cooking for us and teaching us how to clean the baths. Not

only that, she's Mr. Oishi's daughter. I have to be a good guest"

Ignored.

"Also, Asuka loves Shogi. She secretly studied how to play all on her own even though Mr. Oishi was against it the whole time. He only changed his mind because she struck a deal with him, to teach her directly if she could beat Ai. Asuka won convincingly and now he teaches her whenever he can. Doesn't that story make you feel good? That's a cute story, don't you think, Big Sis?"

Ignored.

"Oh, you know what else? She really admires you. You eating her food made her so happy she was tearing up. See? Isn't that cu ... ghhh!"

As soon as an elbow slams deep into my gut, Big Sis leaves me hunched over in front of the station and races through the turnstiles.

T-That was the solar plexus

"W wait up"

Stumbling over my own feet, I make it to the train just before the doors close.

Even after getting on the Kanjou Line, Big Sis wouldn't say a word or even look at me. Rage seems to be building up something fierce.

I can't see her face because her hat is in the way, but the exposed nape of her neck is bright red.

—Attack warning

If I've learned one thing in the ten-plus years I've spent with her, it's not to cross her when she turns that color. That's been burned into my memory. Feeling safe because we're *in public* would be a big mistake. On a train or wherever, Big Sis raises hell when she wants to.

"..... Sigh."

Big Sis is right next to me, but I sigh so quietly there's no way she could hear

it.

Since I was planning on being out all night, Ai is at Master Kiyotaki's place. Should I keep riding this train all the way to Noda Station and pick her up? But she's probably asleep by now. Waking her just to take her home seems kind of

Just when I was taking out my phone to call Keika and see what she had to say.

Yank!

"Huh?!"

Big Sis wraps her arm around mine pulls with all her might.

"What, what?! W-We can't be there already?!"

We seem to be getting off the train, but we're only one station out from Kyoubashi.

—Next to Kyoubashi? What was it again?

A sign flashes past my eyes as I rack my brain.

"Sakuranomiya."

"Seriously?!"

The instant I saw it—my train of thought went off the rails in a panic.

It's Sakuranomiya. *That* Sakuranomiya.

One of the few hotel districts in Kansai.

Hotel might not be the best word though. They're not designed for business trips or tourists.

They're, well, basically *Those* kinds of hotels.

Leisure hotels. Couples' hotels.

People have all sorts of names for them. But they all mean the same thing.

Love hotels.

“Huuh?! Um, Big Sis? Why are we getting off here?!”

Big Sis ignores all my rushed questions.

She doesn’t even look at me, fury turning all her skin bright red as she pulls me south along the O River.

Walking through an area with almost no lights or people at all, we come out somewhere really bright.

“Huuuuh?! ”

I scream with all the neon lights jumping out at me.

“Stay up to 24 hours!”

“Quick Rest: 1590 Yen”

“All rooms, one rate——tax included. Easy on the wallet!”

Love hotels!

Very definitely love hotels!

And, Big Sis is making a beeline for one of them.

“Hotel Snow White”

“Whaaaaaaa?! ”

Out of all of them, it had to be this one?! I yell inside my head as we go inside the building designed to look like an old European castle, which is kind of rare nowadays.

There’s a panel with pictures of the rooms at the front desk rather than a person. Big Sis needed less than a second to make her selection and the next thing I knew she had me by the arm as she sped deeper into the hotel.

I get dragged all the way into the *playroom*.

“HUUUUUUH?! ”

The outside of the building looks like it belongs in a fairy tale, but it looks pretty normal inside That's what I thought until I saw the room. The bed is shaped like a heart for crying out loud!

Big Sis hurls me toward that bed before turning me around, grabbing my collar with both hands, and pulling me onto it.

“Whoa?!”

It all happened so fast, but the result looks like I threw her onto the bed. The reality is the other way around, though

“Wha! W-What are you doing?! Why did you bring me all the way to a place like this?!”

Shogi, maybe?! I doubt it.

She wanted a private room to beat the crap out of me?! Nah, she'd be just as happy doing that in the middle of the street.

—So then Why?

My mind races to come up with an answer as Big Sis grabs hold of my collar again and pulls.

Pow!

“Owch!!”

Not expecting a close-range sneak attack, I couldn't stop my head from crashing into Big Sis's at full speed. Damn, that stings!! Tears are already flowing.

—A headbutt?! So she really did bring me in here to rough me up?!

That's what I thought as I worked through the pain and opened my eyes.

“.....!!!”

Big Sis's eyes are tearing up in pain. She got hurt by her own attack.

Actually, I don't think it was an attack in the first place.

—Was she trying to kiss me just now?! How clumsy can one person be?!

It's not like I can guarantee I'd be any better because I've never done it myself, but

At the very least, it's painfully obvious that's what she was trying to do. Specifically, on my forehead

Also, there's no doubt whatsoever Big Sis has never kissed anyone.

Judging by how antsy she is, she's never been to a love hotel either.

That makes perfect sense. Her life has revolved around Shogi since she was two, and she's never showed a speck of interest in anything other than getting better at Shogi—.

That's when it hits me.

“Big Sis

Gently taking hold of her hands that are still clutching a fistful of my collar, I say, “Is what Shumai-*sensei* said the other day getting to you?”

“I”

No words.

..... But that reaction is all I need to see to know that I'm right.

So that's what's going on

Me complimenting Asuka on her clothes and on her cooking, my admiring her seriously impressive boobs for a little too long, me getting teased by Mr. Oishi for having a close relationship with her. All of that had nothing to do with what Big Sis is doing right now.

I had a feeling Big Sis was getting jealous, reached the boiling point and dragged me all the way in here, but of course, that wasn't it at all. Big Sis isn't that stupid.

—But what she’s trying to do is even more stupid than that.

She lost to Shouji Karako Amateur Triple Title.

Got totally destroyed in a high-stakes match where the winner would get promoted to 3-*dan*.

By playing Shogi that she normally would’ve considered to be embarrassingly horrible

Those events must’ve gotten linked to what Shumai-*sensei* said during the First Move Ceremony. In other words—.

—Losing her virginity would make her a stronger Shogi player. That’s what she’s thinking

In that case, she’s obsessed with Shogi even more than I thought possible.

“Big Sis I understand how you feel, the pressure you’re under.”

Looking down at her laying on the bed, I say as gently as I can, “Losing a Shogi match makes you want to reject everything you are. I mean, it feels like if you don’t make a change, if you don’t do something big You’ll never get any stronger”

I literally heard myself falling apart back when I couldn’t win against the Meijin.

That’s why I tried to reset myself back to square one to get stronger.

I wanted to change who I was, get rid of everything that made me *me* and become something else.

Taking apprentices. All those warm memories living with Master. And our sibling bond.

All because I thought doing that would make me stronger.

“But no one can change who they are overnight. Rather than trying to change, it’s *more important to stay who you are while trying to get stronger.*”

Throwing something away to get something in return, heh. If it were that easy to change reality, no one would ever put any real effort into anything.

“I figured that out in the middle of the Ryuo Title Match.”

I gently look into Big Sis’s blue eyes as they start to glisten with tears.

Finally, here’s my chance to say the thank you I haven’t had a chance to say.

“..... But I didn’t figure it out on my own. Ai, Keika and you made me see it.”

Ai always believed in me.

Keika showed me the moment that effort got rewarded during her fierce match against Ms. Shakando.

And Big Sis——.

“Do you remember that night in Hawaii?”

“.....!”

Big Sis’s whole body flinches beneath me.

“That night, when I saw you on the beach It’s embarrassing to say it out loud, but that was the first time I realized how beautiful you are. Stunning, like an angel. I understand why you get so much attention now. I should’ve seen it sooner.”

“.....”

She looks at me with surprise in her eyes.

“It’s because you’re so beautiful that the name *Naniwa’s Snow White* has gotten so famous. Shogi is all I have, but you, Big Sis. You have so much going for you If we hadn’t had the same Master, a boy like me would never have anything in common with a beautiful girl like you. So, that’s why——.”

Big Sis never abandoned me, even when I’d given into despair.

She saw the mistake I was making, punched me in the face and told me point-blank, “You’re wrong.”

So, now I have to do the same for her.

“That’s why you shouldn’t do this. Please, don’t do this kind of thing with someone you don’t love

Please stop.

That’s what I was telling her, but part of me was hoping for something else.

That Big Sis would say that she well, wanted to be with me, or something like that.

That there was a chance she has feelings for That we might be connected some way other than Shogi. But.

“..... I hate you.”

The words coming out of her mouth are the exact opposite.

“Yaichi, I hate you!!”

A knife right through my heart.

“.....!!”

I bite down on my lip to make sure how I’m feeling doesn’t turn into words.

I know, I already knew that very well. Just one look at how you treat me, Big Sis, and I know that you don’t like me in any way, shape or form. It’s obvious.

I know that Shogi is the only thing we have in common

“I’ve hated you for years! Years and years and years!”

She’s willing to interact with me because we’re sibling apprentices, but she doesn’t feel anything more than that.

“I hate your obsession with Shogi! I hate how strong you are, how Shogi is the only thing in your head! I really hate the face you make when you’re thinking about Shogi!”

We can’t have that kind of relationship because we’re siblings.

“I hate how stubborn you are! I hate your intensity! I hate how your spirit never breaks no matter how bad it hurts!”

I can think of all sorts of reasons for her to hate me after the Ryuo Title Match, but not a single reason for her to like me.

“I hate how oblivious you are, spinning your wheels while being so nice to anyone and everyone I really, really hate you!!”

Big Sis yells, tears streaming down her face.

Hate. Hate. Hate.

—I already know that without you telling me.

I know there’s no way in hell Big Sis would ever like me.

“I hate you You idiot Stupid, stupid Yaichi”

That’s why not doing *this* with Big Sis is the right decision.

It makes my heart sting, but I know this is right.

THE LINE

Shaaaaaaaaa————

The sound of running water fades away, replaced by a hairdryer and then fabric soon after.

Finally, footsteps.

“..... I’m finished with the shower.”

“Ah, okay——.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed with my back to the glass-walled shower room, I turn to answer.

Big Sis, all traces of dried tears completely gone, is standing there.

Wearing a sailor-style school uniform.

“???”

I blank for a second.

She came here in street clothes. But, right now, she’s wearing a school uniform.

But Hold up.

That uniform There’s something different about it——.



“Why in the world have you donned those clothes?!”

FYI. People use really polite words when they’re in shock.

“Because mine have stains.”

“W wasn’t there anything else?”

“No.”

She ends the conversation with a single word and flops down onto the bed with a *creak*.

People have called Big Sis *Sailor Suited for Combat* before but That one’d be horrible in a fight!

People would see all sorts of things if she showed up dressed in that! Like her stomach and a whole lot more!!

Regular hotels have bathrobes hanging up next to the tub, but this kind of hotel doesn’t?

Daaaaamn She’s cute.

Holy. Big Sis is just: wow. This isn’t the *cute, innocent heartthrob* level, but so, so much more.

“Ah, uh, um I’ll get a towel and sleep on the floor”

Rather than fight these desires, I give up before the battle even starts because there’s no chance in hell I’d win. I don’t trust myself to keep my hands off her if we slept in the same bed.

A wise man stays away from danger. As long as I keep my distance, I should make it through this.

So, I start to get up from the bed——.

Pull!

“Huh?!”

Something tugs my shirt from behind. Much stronger than necessary.

Big Sis issues an order as I try to figure out what's happening. Much stronger tone than necessary.

"Lay down."

"Come again?"

"Lay on the bed. Straight."

"L Like this?"

I do my best Egyptian mummy impression on the bed.

"But Why?"

"Because I want a pillow."

"Pillow?"

"..... A body pillow."

"Oh, ohh"

Big Sis wraps her dainty arms around me as I lie there and pulls in tight. Then, she whispers into my ear, "Pillows aren't allowed to move."

"Oh, ohh"

Breath tickling my ear, she forcefully adds, "Move one finger and I'm calling the police."

"I want to sleep on the floor"

"You may not."

Squeeze.

The selfish sailor pulls her body pillow, who she forbade to move, even closer and buries her face in his chest. The air around her is filled with that good girly smell.

Torture!

This is torture!!

“..... About earlier.”

“Yeh?”

“Do you ... really think what Shumai-sensei said truly isn’t related to strength?”

“..... Yes. I don’t think there’s any connection at all.”

If anything, there might be a slight confidence boost. But having that experience shouldn’t have any effect on Shogi strength or skill.

“You haven’t done it either, Yaichi?”

“I, uhh Well, no, but”

“Even though you’re seventeen?”

“Enough, okay? It’s not like I have a partner.”

“The pipsqueak?”

“I’d never do that?! What do you take me for?!”

“.....”

Hey, Ginko, why aren’t you saying anything?

“And besides, right now I’m not interested in finding a partner like that.”

Driving that knife even deeper into my own aching chest, I put some thought into where this pain is coming from.

Could this be what people call a broken heart?

“..... I think about it every now and then. I’m pretty sure that even if I did have *that* kind of relationship with someone, I’d still put Shogi first. After all, nothing is more important than Shogi and Shogi is the only thing that’s ever stolen my heart. I’m sure you can relate, Big Sis.”

“.....”

“I’m not exaggerating. Shogi really is what I love. I can’t imagine Shogi becoming a person. There are times when I want someone around to cheer me up, like when I lose but Shogi is the only thing I want to think about right now.”

“.....”

“I don’t think anyone else would believe me if I told them this But you’ve been with me longer than anyone, Big Sis, so I think if anyone would understand, it’d be you. So——.”

“Then why can’t I win?!!”

Big Sis screams from out of nowhere. Her fingernails are digging into my skin.

That scream rang out from the bottom of her soul.

A painful scream, one that had been building up for a long time finally broke free.

“Why can’t I win like you do?! We’ve always been together, so why?! We did exactly the same things, didn’t we?! So why can’t I be like you?!”

Why?! Why?!

She keeps asking like she’s reverted back to being a little kid.

Those fingernails of hers dig deeper as she squeezes even harder and hides her tears by pushing her face into my chest Ginko keeps on screaming.

“Tell me why?! You know, right, Yaichi?! So, tell me?!”

“Well

——You don’t have talent.

It’d be so easy to explain it like that. If Big Sis had talent like mine, she’d be just as strong as me. Since she’s not, that would mean she doesn’t have talent

But there’s no way that’s true.

Big Sis only just turned fifteen. Being one win away from promoting to 3-*dan* as a third-year junior high school student would be extremely fast even for the boys in the Sub League.

Simply put, she has talent. She's talented enough to turn pro.

Then, what's missing?

I do have a theory.

"I think you don't have enough stamina."

"..... Stamina?"

"Yeah."

That answer must've been a surprise because Big Sis stops crying and asks, "But You know there's less waiting time in the Sub League than in the Women's League, right? I admit that Women's League players aren't as strong as Sub League members, but I've been in more league matches than anyone in the Sub League——."

"The Sub League plays two matches a day, yes? That's the kind of stamina I'm talking about."

"....."

"Members of the 3-*dan* division have to travel to Tokyo. That alone will take away your stamina, Big Sis. Even if you're used to traveling for your Women's Title Matches, you've always swept your opponents, which means you've only played six matches a year"

Big Sis currently holds the Women's Titles *Queen* and *Women's Throne*.

Each is decided by a best of five series, meaning the first to win three wins the title.

With the Women's Throne Defense Matches in the fall, the Queen Defense Matches in the spring, they don't take that much time at all and aren't too

demanding schedule-wise.

However, it doesn't work like that in the 3-*dan* division.

"Eighteen league matches over six months. The cut-off line for promotion each year is around thirteen wins. Alternate wins and losses, and you'll never make it. Winning consecutive matches is a must."

In other words, you absolutely have to win two matches a day.

Taking a step further, it's important to never lose two in a row.

Even if a loss or two can't be helped, lose more than six and you're gone. There's no choice but to get back on your feet right away even if you lose the first match.

All of that is true in the Sub League as well, but——.

"Players in the 3-*dan* division play with a noose around their necks. Lose that first match, and they have to play with that rope even tighter around their throats. What's worse, that rope never lets up Not without turning pro, anyway."

".....!"

I could feel Big Sis gulp through my chest.

It's a death match carried out on the gallows. Only two will survive the ordeal.

That's the 3-*dan* division.

All the fear and uncertainty make it nearly impossible for people pushed that close to the brink to think clearly.

That's why the one who stays calm until the end wins.

Pros learn that Shogi isn't just a contest of skill but of mental fortitude as well during their time in the Sub League.

Considering that Big Sis never knows when her physical stamina will run out, what does she need to win under those conditions?

Now I tell her what I've been leading up to.

"..... I think you should use Ranging Rook."

"Ranging Rook?"

"Yes. It takes too much research to use Static Rook. There are too many options to narrow down when using Static against Static, and the early game turns into a battle of wits as each player tries to manipulate the formations to their advantage"

"....."

"What's more, they have to study exactly how to counter each individual Ranging Rook strategy. All that preparation and the early mind games take a physical toll, and you'll run out of endurance by the time it all comes down to one final battle in the late game That's fatal in the 3-*dan* division. You get that, right?"

"....."

"The Sub League has two late games."

Holding out until the very end is so important in the Sub League that people say that all the time.

In fact, the phrase *fight until the bitter end* has been used to refer to the Sub League in the Shogi world for a long time.

"For that reason, playing Ranging Rook gives you a lot of freedom. Going against someone in the Ranging Rook party means the match will become a simple power struggle. Big Sis, you built up your skills in Kansai, so I think you could hold your own in that kind of match with no problem."

By the same token, most Women's League players use Ranging Rook, which means that Big Sis would have more experience going against it than other Sub League members.

Big Sis speaks up but doesn't sound too sure.

“But Software says that moving the Rook is a bad move And, aren’t young pros changing to Static Rook all the time?”

“That’s exactly my point.”

This is the important part. I put a little extra power in my voice.

“It’s true that the pro Static Rook party is growing. But quite a few of the people who make it through the 3-*dan* division did so using Ranging Rook. People tend to think that switching to Static Rook will *make them stronger* like you, Big Sis. That makes Ranging Rook look weaker than it actually is.”

This.

The main reason I agreed to do practice sessions with Mr. Oishi was to increase my own Shogi skills.

But the second reason was because I wanted to create an opportunity for Big Sis to learn Ranging Rook from him.

“Specialists stick to their guns, which gives them a mental advantage during long league matches. If you’re going to go back and forth between strategies before a match gets started, it’s better to hone one strategy and stick with it.”

“... Wouldn’t that make it easier for the opponent to plan against them?”

“Static Rook party members are busy researching other Static Rook strategies. Ranging Rook gets put on the shelf. You did the same thing, right?”

“But, that won’t work in the pros——.”

“Please only think about getting through the 3-*dan* division.”

“.....!”

She gulps down another mouthful of air and I press even further.

“Worrying about what happens in the pros leaves you mentally open to attack. Go into the 3-*dan* division that way and you’ll never make it through. I’m sure you realize that, Big Sis.”

“.....”

“Don’t forget there are plenty of pros who switched to Static Rook and went on to reach the top ranks. There’s plenty of time to think about what you do when you turn pro after turning pro. Yeah?”

“.....”

Big Sis’s muscles have been straining this whole time, but now they finally let up a bit as she quietly murmurs.

“..... I’ll think about it.”

“I’ll work with you every step of the way, and I’m sure Mr. Oishi will help out, too. Making the switch right away might be impossible, but please start preparing to change your form to fight in the 3-*dan* division.”

“.....”

While she didn’t respond directly, she did whisper under her breath, “..... I need to, build up stamina”

“Yeeeah, that would help.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Hmm. How about swimming?”

“..... No sunlight to worry about in an indoor pool.”

“A swimming cap would hide your hair, and goggles would keep your face hidden. You stand out in a crowd and many people know your face, so going to an aerobics class at a gym would be a bit”

Plus, your body is so streamlined you’d probably be a great swimmer.

She’d kill me if I said it out loud.

“I’ll join you if you don’t want to go alone. I’ve been wanting to find a way to get some exercise recently myself.”

Maybe coming home dead tired would help me get some sleep.

It was all just a suggestion, but Big Sis seems to have taken it a completely different way.

“Perv.”

“Huh? I didn’t mean it like——.”

“Sick. Nasty.”

I’m the one being held like a body pillow and somehow I’m getting called *perverted* and *sick*. How am I supposed to take that?

“..... Yaichi, are you not sleeping?”

“Huh? How did you know?”

“The bags under your eyes.”

“Ohh I have some?”

“And a funny face.”

Enough already.

“Since my title matches against the Meijin well, the fourth one to be exact ... my mental Shogi board has never gone away. I’m not even sure if I’m awake right now”

“..... That must be nice.”

“Huh?”

“..... My board, the pieces, they’re all dark and blurry So that must be nice.”

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s actually been more of a pain.”

“Stupid Yaichi.”

“Look, I’d get rid of it if I could, all right?”

“Idiot. That’s a luxury.”

“Luxury?”

“..... It’s always like this with you Shogi Martians”

Shogi Martians? What in the world is she talking about?

“Do you think I’ve got it good because I’ve got a mental Shogi board? Ai Hinatsuru’s got eleven of them.”

“

“She said she can keep track of six of them at the same time, which makes her a Shogi puzzle monster. Back when she played blind against Mr. Oishi and I using six boards at once, she pointed out my Double Pawn——.”

Chomp!

“Gahhhhhhhhh——!! S-Stop biting! Ow-ow-ow-ouch! Fingers are off-limits, remember! My Shogi will get worse!!”

I’m not going to let this totally uncalled-for barbaric attack slide. Pulling my finger out from between her teeth, I protested with everything I’ve got.

“Seriously, Big Sis?! We had a rule, no fingers?! It’s been that way since we were kids!! My Shogi will suffer if you hurt my fingers or my brain, so would you please leave them alone?!”

“That’s not my problem, idiot. Get worse.”

“Yeesh Awh-ahh, just look at all those bite marks”

“..... Get weaker, Yaichi. Lots and lots weaker.”

Damn it. Why is she so angry? There wasn’t anything in that conversation that could’ve pissed her off, was there?

Big Sis then says something while I’m trying to figure it out.

“..... I’m quitting school.”

“You can’t quit junior high”

“I won’t go to high school. I’ll find an apartment close to the association.”

“Why would? Please don’t make decisions like that by yourself. You need to talk with your parents before——.”

“You did.”

“Ugh

There’s nothing I can say to that.

I gently stroke this spoiled brat’s head, trying to get her to relax now that she’s tensed up again, and say, “At least talk with Master and Keika. Personally, I’d feel a lot better with you living at Master’s place

“.....”

Rather than responding, Big Sis buries her face deep into my chest.

Is she agreeing with me or protesting

“Big Sis? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I ask after a few quiet moments.

“..... Zzz Zzz

She’s out like a light

“Siiiiiiiiigh And she has no idea how I feel

I let out the longest sigh of the day as I peek at Big Sis’s face. She’s sound asleep in my arms, as comfy as can be. I swear, she looks like an innocent little baby when she sleeps

“..... Ginko has always been like this. Putting me through hell and back and then conking out like nothing ever happened in the end

In the grasp of this four-year-old whose body has outgrown her brain, I close my eyes.

I’m not sure if it’s because I was just that tired, but I slept surprisingly well

that night.

GOING HOME IN THE MORNING

“..... Annnd we spent the night” I mutter under my breath.

The morning sun is brighter than I thought in Sakuranomiya.

I leave the hotel bright and early by myself before the streets get crowded and hurry to the station.

There’s a twinge of guilt that comes from going home in the morning, and I’m living it.

Not to mention my heart has been aching since last night.

Mix those feelings together, and I feel less than good right now.

“Spent the night at a love hotel with a girl in junior high Slept hard-core for hours and hours, too”

Big Sis was the first to make cute little snoozing noises and woke up later than I did this morning.

Even I, with all my problems getting to sleep recently, had several solid hours of shut-eye without taking any medicine.

My heart may be a mess thanks to last night, but my head is clear.

“..... Is it because being with her brings back memories? Hmm.”

Memories of the days when rank, fame and money didn’t mean anything.

When personal relationships and love lives didn’t get in the way.

Just playing Shogi all day was the best thing in the world. My childhood.

It very well could be that Big Sis reminds me of the best time in my life.

Maybe it’s not just me, but both of us

“Well, one thing’s for sure. That was the last time we’ll ever sleep together.”

Big Sis told me, point-blank, that she “hates” me.

The only reason she dragged me into that hotel and tried to do *that* was because she thought it would make her better at Shogi. Nothing more.

“Looks like Shogi is all I’ve got after all

Without Shogi, Big Sis and I have nothing in common.

Why would we?

We have conflicting personalities, like totally different things and weren’t even born in the same town. Our opinions never line up after watching a movie together. Actually, we end up fighting about it. And I always lose.

There’s literally nothing between us other than Shogi.

As long as that’s true, there’s nothing to spark other feelings when Shogi isn’t involved

—— At the very least, I know that Big Sis feels nothing.

I know, but I still misread the signals, got my hopes up

“Ahhhhhhh This is humiliating!”

The morning air cools my burning face as I walk alone to the station.

Big Sis and I are leaving the hotel at different times on purpose.

Since we get so much attention as it is, it would be headline news if someone saw the two of us coming out of a hotel together. Being too careful is just about right.

“At the station.”

“I’ll take the train that leaves in five minutes all the way home.”

“Please leave the hotel once I’m on the train.”

“Make sure no one sees you when you leave!”

I send Big Sis several messages while standing on the platform. They get

marked as “read” almost instantly.

She responds with one word, “Understood.”

..... I stare at the screen for a few minutes, hoping against hope that she might have more to say. But nothing ever came.

“Well It’d be good to set up an alibi before the train gets here.”

This time I pressed the call button.

After several tries, it finally goes through.

“Ah, morning, Asuka. Sorry for leaving like that last night.”

“Uh S-Sorry, too”

“No, no. Asuka, you and Mr. Oishi did nothing wrong. The problem was with us.”

“I, uh see”

“Which is why I’m calling you so early I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“?”

Asuka answers with confused silence.

This is embarrassing, but it’s better to get it over with in one go like ripping off a Band-Aid.

“Big Sis and I ended up spending the night at a hotel in Sakuranomiya, but I’d like you to say we were at your place if anyone asks, okay? Tell them the practice session lasted all night and she and I left at different times. Would you do that for me?”

That was quite the admission if I do say so myself.

But, this has to be done Asuka didn’t respond, so I push a little harder.

“Sorry to put you in this position. Oh, and if you’d tell your father what happened, it’d help me a lot.”

Saying it all in one breath, I wait for her answer.

“ .. ”

Wait.

“

..... Wait.

“ .. ”

It's been at least a minute, but she hasn't said a thing.

“Asuka? Are you there? Asuk—.”

"YEEEEKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK~~~~~~!!"

“?”

“T-Together, overnight Haaa ~~~~~!
Yeeekkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk~~~!”

"A-Asuka, what's wrong?!"

The ever-so-quiet Asuka is going off like a siren?!

A really loud one, too. Loud enough to scare the businessmen lining up around me on the train platform. Now they're all staring.

"S-Sss-Sorry! But, uh, um Yeeekkkkkkkkkk~~~~~!!"

“Well, that’s how it is!!”

I hang up, pressing the end call button in a panic.

Asuka's voice was so loud that now I'm the center of attention. Who knows what'll happen if any Shogi fans see me at Sakuranomiya Station this early in the morning.

That's when the train happens to arrive, and I scramble inside.

I breathe a big sigh of relief as soon as it leaves the station. T-That almost gave me a heart attack

“M-Maybe she’s new to volume control because she’s always so quiet

Asuka’s super scream got my heart racing and it’s not slowing down.

That father of hers would never, ever let her go out on a date Which means she wouldn’t have a chance to build up resistance Not that seeing naked men has any effect on her

“Hmm Yeah, she’s got the wrong idea.”

Although, it’s not like she’d believed me if I told her everything directly.

“After that happened last night, Big Sis and I stayed at a love hotel in Sakuranomiya where she put on a skimpy sailor-style school uniform that happened to be there, before using me as a body pillow on a huge bed. We slept there together, but nothing frisky happened. Actually, I didn’t put a finger on her and we left the hotel at different times but seriously nothing happened, just slept together, that’s all.”

“Yep! She won’t believe a word.”

That story has got an almost refreshing *what the hell are you talking about* feel to it.

“..... Yeah, I need to hide the fact that we spent the night at a hotel.”

The good news is that I only need to keep two people quiet, and neither of them are all that interested in what’s going on in other people’s lives. Rumors shouldn’t spread.

That’s the lucky part, but

“..... Considering how Asuka reacted If ... if Ai ever found out

I-I’m too scared to think about it

Compared to the frightened, jittery wreck I’ve turned into, the voice that came over the intercom to announce our arrival at Fukushima station sounded stone-cold.

■ MOTHER AND DAUGHTER CHAT

“..... I’m back”

For some reason, I whisper *I’m back* as I walk in my apartment’s front door.

“..... I’m home. Ai? Are you here?”

This is my place, I should be able to walk in as I see fit.

Should, but Part of me feels guilty.

Look, I know exactly why, okay? I told her I’d be spending the night at a practice session but ended up spending it with the girl, so

Is this how a cheating husband feels after coming home from a trip with his mistress? Could be. But if he gets this anxious, he’d be better off not cheating at all. The anxiety is killing me.

If Ai came back here from Master’s place before I did, then I need to be mentally prepared to talk to her.

I got rid of all traces of Big Sis when I left the hotel and my alibi is perfect, but Ai knows my tells. She’ll see through my lies. Ai is the last person I want to face like this.

—I need to make sure she can’t get a read on me Just like before a match!

“Those are her shoes She’s here all right.”

But there’s been no answer.

“..... Is she asleep in her room?”

If she went right to bed, that would work in my favor.

Walking as quietly as I can, I go look in the mirror above the sink. Now that I know for sure there’s no trace of Big Sis anywhere on me, it’s time to go where

my apprentice probably is, in the living room——.

“..... Yes Yes. I know, mom.”

Voices are coming from the *tatami* room. That’s Ai. It sounds like she’s talking to someone.

Careful not to make a sound, I stay out of sight.

“Hm? Is that Ai’s mother?”

She seems to be using her tablet to talk with her mother over Skype.

“..... That’s new.”

Ai has lived with me for almost a year now, but I’ve never seen her do this.

I always encouraged her to stay in touch with her family, but Ai stuck to email and regular phone calls. She must’ve thought seeing her mother’s face would weaken her motivation to train.

But now, mother and daughter are speaking face-to-face.

——Maybe she got homesick after visiting home?

My apprentice is homesick, and I left her feeling lonely. Another throb of pain tears through my chest.

Their conversation picks up as the guilt torments me.

“Ai. You have indeed stepped out in front of the rest. However, that makes you a noticeable target for them as well. Which, unfortunately, puts you at a disadvantage Now that you are one step ahead, bear in mind that you are in a more vulnerable position than before.”

“Yes That’s what I thought”

“Prepare yourself, Ai. Your enemies are strong Do not be content just because you have the advantage of living with him.”

The advantage of living with me?

Oh, I got it She can get one-on-one advice and training any time because she lives with me.

That must be what Ai's mother is talking about.

Ai's living situation is a better environment for studying compared to other Women's League players. But that alone isn't enough to get a Women's Title!

"While Naniwa's Snow White is a given, that large-breasted twenty-something has spent much more time as well. That's an undeniable fact. You must accept it and commit yourself to finding a way to surpass it."

Big Sis and Keika. Both have so much more Shogi experience than Ai.

The only way to defeat them is by trying harder than they do. Mrs. Hinatsuru, those words are solid gold.

"Of course, you will trip over your own feet if you always look up. Constantly be aware of the girls your own age."

"I am They're the ones I need to watch the most," says Ai in a stern voice. She sounds almost sad.

Girls her age——.

Of course, there's Ai Yashajin, but I think Mio's determination to join the Women's League caught her attention as well.

Ai took serious damage in the Practice League one day last year *because* she beat Mio. That's the sad truth about playing against friends.

——But that kindness can be fatal.

She may be ahead right now, but the distance will close the moment she is satisfied with her position. It's necessary to be prepared to sacrifice everything, even friendship, for Shogi.

——Is this girl prepared to start thinking of her friends as *enemies*?!

For someone as kindhearted as Ai, that's got to be rough.

But it was Ai's next words that threw me for a loop.

"One of my friends is a cute little girl named Charlette. She's Master's favorite I think she could be my biggest rival."

Charlette?!

"..... Well done, Ai," I whisper under my breath with cold sweat rolling down my back.

Even I, her Master, never thought a girl as young as Ai is would be that cautious.

I thought she'd get full of herself after joining the Women's League, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

—This girl's a born competitor!

Just as I was getting excited about what the future holds for my apprentice, her mother keeps going.

"And one other, a woman with glasses. Keep an eye on her."

"Glasses?"

"There was a journalist wearing a suit. That woman."

"Are you talking about Kugui-sensei?"

"Something felt different about her to me Yes, she has a tenacity about her the other women did not. That is actually the most dangerous type to deal with."

Yes. Mrs. Hinatsuru's eyes have been sharpened by years of salesmanship.

Everyone knows that *Yamashiro Ouka* Machi Kugui is one of the premier Women's League players, but her strength and skill on the board are so good that she earned the terrifying nickname *Machi the Tormentor*. A dangerous woman, for sure.

Her playing style is rock solid and brutal! With the exception of Big Sis, Machi is the worst kind of player for Ai to face among the current women's title holders. If her opponent likes to go in with blades flashing like the Empress, *Worldly Thunder* Ika Sainokami, then there'd be a one in ten thousand chance for Ai to find a way to win. But Machi the Tormentor won't even let her have a one in a million chance.

What's worse, Machi is registered in Kansai. Those two will go head-to-head ... a lot.

Machi is a wall that both Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin will have to face.

"..... But I never knew she was that perceptive. Spotting something that important without any Shogi knowledge is incredible"

People don't call her the Legendary *Okami* for nothing. Standing at the top of the service industry like she does must've given her the ability to see every little detail. There's so much I can learn from her

"Ai. Do you know the most important aspect of relationships between men and women?"

"Umm Feelings? Maybe?"

"Wrong."

Hm?

Just now Mrs. Hinatsuru said relationships between men and women, didn't she? This is about Shogi right?

"Mom, please tell me! What's the most important part?!"

Daughter egging her on, the legendary inn manager slowly opens her mouth.

"It's form."

"F orm?"

"Yes. Form is more important than anything."

Form

What's she talking about? Seriously, I can't tell.

"Feelings and good intentions come and go in strong waves There is no stopping them from changing. Think of them as melted chocolate. Simply being sweet is not enough. Only when it has a solid form does it take on any meaning. Do you understand?"

"I think I do"

"First, you must compose your form. Form is simultaneously the most basic aspect and the best-kept secret. That is true for Shogi as well, is it not?"

"Yep! Learning the standards and castle defenses are the basics!"

"Yes, everything begins and ends with form. Feelings can only grow with a solid form in place. However, Ai. You are still young. You must mature a while longer before your form takes shape."

"How long do you think that will take?"

"Approximately six years."

"Six whole years"

"Though you must wait until your sixteenth birthday That is far too long to sit idle. All the female wolves in your midst are watching closely for an opportune moment. If you sense it, you must make your move immediately. Every second is vital"

"W-What should I do?!" says Ai, almost clinging to the screen.

Her mother simply whispers, "..... Irrefutable facts"

"Huh?"

Huh?

Why do I feel like I heard something terrifying

“As your mother, I can say no more. It is your responsibility to ask others for advice and do your own research.”

“? Okay, I understand.”

Ai’s answer is less than convincing.

“This is a good stopping point for today I had been keeping our correspondence to a minimum because I was afraid thoughts of home would be a distraction. However, I want you to provide me with regular updates on the situation from now on. You can count on your mother for relevant advice as necessary.”

“I will! Thanks, mom!”

Ai waves her tiny hand and ends the Skype call.

She notices me just as soon as her mother disappears, and the screen goes dark.

“Ah! Master, welcome home!”

She says as she turns around and gives me a big, innocent smile.

“How long have you been here?”

“Hm? Just walked in.”

I lie without missing a beat.

Because I feel like I heard something I shouldn’t have

“When’d you get home, Ai?”

“A little bit ago. I was talking with my mother on Skype!”

“Were you? That’s great.”

“She says she feels better when she can see my face, so

“Sure. Oh, and Ai.”

“What is it?”

“What were the two of you talking about?”

“We talked all about Shogi.”

“Yeah.”

“What did you do overnight, Master?”

“An all-night practice session.”

“Yep.”

Neither of us questioning the other, we start getting breakfast ready.

Now things are back to normal like nothing ever happened.

..... Is what it felt like.

GINKO'S MORNING

“..... Blinding.”

The morning sun makes me squint after leaving the building.

Pulling my hat down as far as it would go, I get away from it as quickly as possible.

The hotel district looks completely different in sunlight than it does after dark. I follow the riverside path and taste the words still stuck in my mouth one more time.

“Stupid Yaichi

Last night was the first time in years we slept in the same bed.

I was anxious at first, but memories of the old days coming back put me into a deep sleep. Maybe I was just too tired of crying. How embarrassing

“..... Stupid

Hindsight is 20/20, but now I realize how boneheaded what I just did truly was. It's not only extremely embarrassing, but infuriating.

And at the same time That idiot's stupidity is beyond annoying. Stupid.

Honestly, I don't think his moronic suggestion to play Ranging Rook is possible. A sword fresh out of the forge won't win a single battle in the Sub League. That place is too unforgiving.

My Shogi is designed to overpower, a far cry from the worldliness playing Ranging Rook requires

“..... Which wouldn't matter if I had talent.”

Those two grade school girls Yaichi is raising at his side with the utmost care: Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin. Both are prodigies who can play Static Rook and

Ranging Rook without even trying. One has eleven mental Shogi boards at her beck and call, the other is a ten-year-old whose early game creativity knows no bounds.

Seeing those young prodigies day in and day out must be why Yaichi made that suggestion in the first place.

Being a prodigy on another level himself, he tells me to do something I couldn't possibly do.

But I just can't. I'm not a Shogi Martian.

If there is anyone who can pull that off in the Sub League right now, it's——.

“.....!!”

A cold breeze blows by as a cold chill runs through my whole body. I shiver and stay rooted to the spot.

——The next person I'll probably have to face in the Sub League is *that boy*.

My old self would've frozen with fear and anxiousness, so much so my legs wouldn't move. But now.

“The rope never lets up Not without turning pro.”

This morning, I could press forward because that voice is still in my ears.

Looking off into the January sunlight, I take another step.

RECORD 4

SHUMAI HONINBOU

OCCUPATION: GO PLAYER
HOMETOWN: NARA CITY, NARA PREFECTURE
FAVORITE THINGS: C*CKS
HATED THINGS: SHRIVELED C*CKS

■ AI, THE POPULAR ONE

“Ai! Sign this for me!”

Elementary school students tracked down Ai Hinatsuru in the Class 4-2 classroom during recess in hopes of getting her autograph.

“Sure,” she smiled, taking sheets of colored paper and notebooks from her classmates and started writing all sorts of difficult characters on them with the same calligraphy set she uses in class.

Good wife, wise mother.

Monogamy.

Young bride.

First apprentice comes first.

..... All with penmanship that made her Master’s writing look like chicken scratch.

Lastly, she withdrew what looked to be a good-sized large rock out of her *Mr. Cat* pouch.

“What’s that?! A *hanko*?!”

The elementary students were fascinated by their first glimpse at a personalized stamp that adults used for verification purposes.

Mio stood at Ai’s side with an authoritarian look in her eyes as if she were the girl’s manager.

“I know what that is! It’s called a *rakkan*!”

“*Rakkan*?”

“A what?! Come on, tell me?!”

“Weeeell Players have to use it whenever they give an autograph,” Ai politely explained so that her friends with no Shogi knowledge could understand.

“Players have to sign lots of things, like fans and stuff like that. This stamp proves *it’s not a fake*. That’s what it’s for”

“So then, this is your own original stamp, Ai?”

“Oh woooow! Did you make it yourself?! Or did someone give it to you?!” Mio interjected.

“It was a present from Kujuryu-*sensei*, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it, Ai?”

“Y-Yep≡ He said that now I’m in the Women’s League, I’d better look the part And Master gave it to me≡”

Cheeks turning a brilliant pink, Ai nodded.

Upon hearing that, a swift murmur worked its way through the students—.

“Um, hey Ai”

“I heard them say it on TV but You’re living with a man who’s not in your family aren’t you?”

“Yep! I’m a live-in apprentice, so Master has been looking after me since I moved to Osaka.”

“*Squee—≡≡≡*”

Which meant that Ai was indeed *living* with the young man!

This was why the students had come!! Their approach may have been asking for autographs, but they actually wanted to ask Ai about her relationship with her Master themselves!!

“Are you two really e-engaged?”

Ai immediately shook her head left and right the moment the word *engaged* came up.

“En-Engaged?! No, no not yet!”

“Does that *yet* mean you’re planning to someday?!”

“They said it on TV! He promised to marry you when you’re old enough, right?!”

“Have you kissed yet?!”

“M-Marry? No, there’s no promise like that! The whole thing was just to celebrate me joining the Women’s League, and my mother went a little overboard Of course, I haven’t kissed him yet! We haven’t, but”

“But?!”

“Umm,” Ai mumbled as she swayed back and forth, debating. “This, um, is a secret okay?”

“Yes, yes!!”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone! Never tell okay?”

“Nobody’ll say a word, so come on, out with it!”

“I promise!”

Mio had left Ai’s side to join the circle of students surrounding the girl.

“Remember how the Fourth Ryuo Title Match was at my parents’ inn? There was a short break after the Repetition Draw In Master’s room He slept with his head in my lap”

“H-He did?!”

Squee! Squee! Squee! The students were beside themselves with excitement. The *secret* was now echoing off the classroom walls as they screamed the news for all to hear.

However, Ai didn’t seem all that perturbed.

“Remember the seventh match? The one where he defended his title. I got

sleepy during the after-party Master took me all the way back to my room.
On the way

“On the way?!”

“He held me in his arms like a princess ≡”

“*Squee*———!!”

“Also, Master talked with someone when he was holding me He said that
he *won because of his apprentice*

“So then, he said he won all thanks to you?”

The swarm of students agreed with Mio’s interpretation.

“Whoa! You’re like the goddess of victory, Ai!”

“And isn’t living together basically the same as being married?!”

Now that she had an eager audience, Ai wasn’t going to stop recounting their
love-dovey moments.

“T-This happened a little while ago, but after I made breakfast for him he
said he wanted to eat it every day ≡”

“Pro-po-sal!! He was proposing to you!! You said yes, right, Ai?!”

“Uwhee?! He was asking me to marry him?!”

Ai sat there, stunned.

“Th-that couldn’t be I always cook for him, so I’d never know if he asked
like that And he says that kind of thing to other girls all the time Like
Keika’s the best cook in the world ... he always wants to eat Asuka’s food ... and
even though he says *Sora-sensei’s* food tastes horrible, he always eats every
bite Master *darabuchi*! Cheater!!”

“A-Ai? Relax, relax

Realizing her question had crossed into dark territory, Mio desperately tried

to smooth the girl.

That's when another one of the students spoke up.

"I get that you're living with him and he holds you but Ai, can you really call him your lover?"

"True. Master and apprentice are pretty much just teacher and student, right?"

"Do you have proof? I'd sure like to see some."

This is what mom was talking about! Ai snapped to attention.

"P-Proof that we're together What would that be?"

"A kiss, don't you think?"

The other students nodded along with Mio's words.

Ai's face turned red so quickly, it practically caught fire.

"Kiss Kiss Master Haaaaa~≡"

"Well? Think you can do it?"

"..... If it's on the cheek like Charlette, then"

"Oh, no, no. It's got to be on the lips, how else are you supposed to know how he feels?"

"Uhwawa!! I-I can't do that!"

"Really? Wouldn't he do it if you asked him to?"

"Well, maybe, but! I-It's too embarrassing to ask"

"Okay, so how do you want it to happen?"

Mio had had enough beating around the bush and cut right to the heart of the matter.

Fidgeting, Ai responded.

“It’d be perfect if Master, leaned in and kissed me”

“Huuuh? But, that’ll never happen because that *Sensei* couldn’t pick up on a hint if it hit him in the face.”

“Siiiigh That’s the problem”

Should a book entitled *Kuzuryu-sensei’s Thick Skull* ever be published, it would be sure to win the Shogi Pen Club’s Literary Award. Guaranteed.

“Haa All right then. I’ll help you out.”

The class’s *voice of wisdom*, Mihane, arrived on the scene.

Back when Kuzuryu-sensei was paying more attention to Ai Yashajin, it was Mihane who fanned Ai Hinatsuru’s anxiety into fear with a few words (making her cry as well).

Although their relationship has had its rocky moments, Mihane’s naturally caring personality and Ai’s calm, quiet demeanor has led to mutual respect between the two as classmates.

Since this was her area of expertise, Mihane couldn’t resist the chance to flaunt her knowledge.

“Well, my boy is in college ... and my private tutor.”

“Whooooa~! A college student, that’s older than Kujuryu-sensei! Like, a man man!”

“M-Mihane You’re amazing!”

Mio and Ai gazed at their classmate with the utmost respect and admiration.

“It’s no big deal. Men, they’re all just kids. A few flirty techniques and I had him wrapped around my finger.”

In reality, Mihane’s tutor treated her just like a child, a far cry from the *boyfriend* she said she was in the one-sided relationship with. Be that as it may, the girl’s pride prevented her from admitting the truth, which led to her

spinning this tall tale.

Ai, however, held onto every word she said as if clinging for dear life.

“Please, tell me, Mihane! Teach me how you did it! What do I need to do?!”

“This magazine taught me everything. It’s all here in black and white.”

With that, Mihane took a single magazine from her bag.

AI: LOLITA COMPLEX ASSASSIN

“..... I’m ba~ck.”

League match done for the day, I get home and yell toward the back of my apartment.

It ended early, so it’s still early evening.

“Ai? Maybe she’s not back from school yet?”

Today’s match was kind of strange.

I was going against a mid-ranking guy from Kanto.

Playing on defense, I drew him into a strength-on-strength battle after getting through a messy early game. It took forever for things to fall into place, but just when I started getting into a groove in the mid-game——.

“He just throws in the towel.”

Both Mr. Kagamizu, the match recorder, and I gasped in disbelief.

I guess the guy lost hope after looking at the formation, but

“I didn’t think he was in a bad spot. Actually, I thought I was losing. Maybe my reading was off? Then again, Mr. Kagamizu was just as surprised as I was”

Pieces are still moving around in my head because the match didn’t really *end*. Nearly got hit by a car on a crosswalk in Naniwa on my way home because I didn’t realize the light changed.

“Well, that’s seven wins in a row including the Ryuo Title Match So, I must be doing something right,” I whisper under my breath as I take my shoes off.

Then, “Welcome home≡ Master≡≡≡”

My apprentice comes up to greet me at the front door with cute little

footsteps But, um.

“Huh? Ai? What’s up with that?”

“Ehehe≡ I wanted to try a new look!”

I’d certainly say this is new.

She normally keeps her hair tied back, but now it’s got this *little devil* charm to it. What’s that style called: a twin ponytail? Her usual hairstyle is great, but this is pretty cute too.

As are her clothes. She’s got one of those really short miniskirts on and white socks that go all the way up to her thighs.

Her sleeves are so long and poufy that her fingers barely stick out. Talk about adorable.

This isn’t just some parent, or Master, bragging about how cute their kid is.

“..... So cute”

She’s pretty! So much prettier than those so-called *junior idols* popping up all over the place!

A picture of Ai like this would be one of those *miracle shots* that spreads out all over the world in seconds. She’s no *one-in-a-century beauty* in those clothes. Ai dressed like this is on a higher level. A millennium wouldn’t cover it. I’d call her a *once-in-every-one-thousand-and-three-year beauty*.

Ai looks up at me as I can’t look away, cheeks turning pink as she twiddles her thumbs.

“D-Do I look strange?”

“No, no! Very cute! Those clothes look great on you.”

I told her she had to *look her cutest to help promote the Shogi world* just before the First Move Ceremony. Ai always tries her best and must be taking initiative.

Taking it to this level is a bit concerning but I can't shoot her down knowing her heart is in the right place. My capacity as her Master is being tested. I should think of this as her taking her first step into the Women's Shogi world and praise her for it.

"Oh, yeah! Extremely cute! This is a great look for you!!"

"Ehehe≡ All right——."

Ai innocently takes hold of my arms and looks up at me at a forty-five degree angle, smiling.



“Which do you like better?”

“Come again?”

“Which look do you like better, Master? This or my usual?”

Joouoo!t~~~~~≡≡≡

A thunderbolt just zapped its way through my chest!

That devilishly charming little voice!

Those eyes could melt any man’s heart with a single glance!

My own is clenching up tight and yet feels like it’s going to burst out of my chest at the same time!!

Wh What *is* this?! Why are the butterflies in my stomach going crazy just because a grade school girl is looking at me?!

“Tell me, Master. Which one?”

“Well Huh? I, uh both”

“Both what?”

“I like both looks”

“Ehehe≡” Ai grins from ear to ear, buries her face in my chest for one quick second before she says, “Dinner is almost ready!”

“G Great. Thanks”

My ten-year-old apprentice hops back and scurries off to the kitchen.

We’ve been living under the same roof for nearly a year now, but there’s an alluring sparkle about her today.

That shock seems to have woken up my brain from the Shogi board that’s taken up all the space recently.

That doesn’t mean a Lolita complex has awakened or anything, okay? Really, okay?

“Whoa. You went all out today.”

“Yep! You must be tired from your match today, and I want you to get back to your old self, Master≡”

Just like with her clothes, everything that Ai made today is different from the usual.

Each of them looks delicious, as always. The match ended so early I couldn't grab a bite to eat at the association so I'm starving. Down the hatch!

Just as I was about to dig in.

“Master. Excuse me≡”

Plop.

Ai sits down next to me in one perfectly natural motion. She then scooches in so close that one of her twin ponytails brushes against my shoulder.

But, we always sit across the table from each other

“Huh? You're going to eat here?”

“..... I'm not allowed?”

“Well It's fine, but”

I can't say no when she's looking up at me like that. That forty-five degree angle is brutal.

I-I'm her Master, I have to be strict She has to go off on her own

“O-Okay, then Shall we eat?”

“Let's≡”

Ai rests her head on my shoulder for a moment like it's a normal, everyday thing as she puts her hands together.

Then she abruptly turns to face me and opens her mouth.

“..... Huh?”

It's like she's expecting something, looking at me with her mouth open like that.

“.....”

Her mouth is still open.

What? Are you not going to eat? What are you trying to say?

Just as I was trying to figure it out, Ai closes her mouth and glares at me like I've done something wrong.

“..... Master.”

“Yeah?”

“Who made this food?”

“You did.”

“Who made tea for after dinner?”

“That would be you, too.”

“Who washes the dishes?”

“..... You do, Ai.”

I lower my head to my apprentice.

“Sorry. I haven't been pulling my weight. From now on, you have my word that I'll do the dishes at least——.”

“That's not it!”

Come again? It's not?

“I made the food, so it's Master's job to feed me!”

“It is? Really?”

“Yes, it is!”

So it is.

“Let’s try this again. Ah~h≡”

“Uh Okay.”

“Ah~h≡”

My apprentice opens her mouth again, trying to get me to say “ah~h≡” right along with her.

“A ... ah h.”

With no idea what’s going on, I go along with it. K-Kill me now, this is so embarrassing!

Although.

Chomp!

“.....?!”

The moment she ate from my chopsticks Lightning pierced through the very bottom of my heart!

Ngh! Too darn cute!!

At this rate, I just might say who cares about common sense and what society thinks and cross that last line that I as a human being should never cross—.

“..... I don’t have a Lolita complex. I don’t have a Lolita complex. I don’t have a Lolita complex. I don’t have a Lolita complex”

Chanting over and over like a Buddhist sutra saved my sanity. So close to losing it!

Meanwhile, the apprentice who made me say *ah~h*.

“..... Gahhh! I’m too embarrassed to taste anything!”

“Haa haa W-what’s wrong Ai? Did you say something?”

“N-nothing!”

She's been all over me since I got home, but now she won't look at me. Why? Because she's grossed out? Because it looked like I was about to get into lolis? Does that kind of thing have a smell?

Desperate to break the tension in the air, I bring up the food.

"S-so, um What kind of fish is this?"

"It's *kisu*. *Kisu* tempura."

"Whiting, right? But, they're a summer fish, aren't they?"

"I had my parents send me frozen ones from home."

Apparently, Ai has mastered the air fryer I bought for her. After all, it's not safe for kids her age to be working with hot oil out in the open. But her tempura fried fish is excellent. Of course, everything else is delicious, too.

"And this is Stew? I think?"

"It's called **chu**spajs. It's a traditional dish from Slovenia made by boiling a whole bunch of potatoes together."

"Y-You sure know some unique recipes."

"I studied hard. Am I a good girl?"

"Yeah You're a good girl, Ai."

"Meooow~≡"

She makes an adorable noise as I pat her on the head. What is this? Why is she this damn cute?

I knew she was cute already, and I felt a few heartthrobs before but Today has been on another level entirely.

This cuteness she's surpassed Charlette?!

Patting her head seems to have helped Ai get past whatever was bothering her. Her eyes twinkle as she says.

“I want to try cooking *kisu* like the Chinese do next time!”

“G-Good luck

“We’re having **French** toast tomorrow for breakfast!”

“..... Can’t wait.”

Responding took everything I have.

I can’t look at her anymore. She’s so cute I can’t trust myself

“Haaa~ T-The food was great but I’m exhausted

I collapse to the floor as soon as Ai takes the dishes to the kitchen.

I don’t remember a single flavor Just that this very sweet sensation has been drilled into my head over the past hour

“Hm?”

I happen to glance into the *tatami* room—and see a magazine beside Ai’s backpack.

“That’s

Elementary 4 Reader

“Ahh I remember these!”

I couldn’t contain myself after picking it up. It’s a magazine written for grade schoolers.

Big Sis and I only read magazines like *Shogi World* and *Tsume Shogi Paradise*, but my old classmates used to read these between classes all the time back in grade school.

“Serialized manga, math puzzles and worksheets, these things have everything grade schoolers could want~!”

Shogi World has serialized lectures (“Ishida Style is On Fire! How Nimble *Shitamachi* Ishida Destroys Static *Anaguma*!”—“Advance with Climbing Silver! Rapid Battle to the King: Dissecting the Advantages of Climbing Silver”—and so on), Shogi puzzles and one-move practice problems, but nothing my classmates would’ve gotten jealous over.

“Well then. What’s popular with the grade school kids these days?”

I flip through the pages. Ah, here’s the first headline article.

“100 Ways to Land an Older Boy.”

It takes me a few seconds to process that title.

..... Huh? What is this supposed to be?

The headlines I remember were like “How to Fold the Best Paper Airplane” and things like that but

Feeling more afraid than curious, I turn the page.

“Special Edition! Loli-Con Assassin!”

There’s a picture of an innocent little girl, holding onto two arms and looking up at a forty-five-degree angle, staring right at me. It’s surrounded by a collection of other poses and instructions on exactly how to do them.

I-I’ve seen!

“These are the poses that nearly gave me a heart attack?!”

I throw open the next page.

“Be handsy! He won’t think anything of *innocent* touches, so light up his brain early and often!”

“Get him to say he likes you! Loli-cons won’t make the first move, so go on

the attack! It all starts with initiative☆”

“*Youth* is the best weapon! 4th years tend to want to look grown-up, but fight the urge and bring out your inner☆Lolita!”

“That first kiss is so hard to get Start by making him say *ahh* and think about his mouth. Clear the little hurdles before going for the gold!”

“..... Uhhh”

..... All of these just happened to me

And every single one gave me butterflies

D-Does that mean I really might have a lo——.

“Haha ha K-Kids grow up so fast these days~ (lol).” Laughing it off to keep myself sane, “O-Oh yeah, these magazines always came with a bonus insert!”

Lacking the mental stability to wipe the sweat off my face, I search for salvation in a different article.

“Ahh, those were the days! That’s what I miss about being a kid, seeing all the new toys and wanting them just because~.”

Shogi World comes with bonus inserts, too, great ones like “Solving the 3 Nine Check Path Problem,” “Breaking the Castle: *Anaguma* Edition,” “Get a Step Up On Your Rival with Ranging Rook’s Latest Twists!” and “Play it Now: Direct Opposing Rook.” Unfortunately, they aren’t the best for bragging in grade school. The old guys in Shogi classrooms, however, were so jealous!

“What inserts do magazines have these days? A seventeen-year-old like me won’t be all that surprised, but——.”

“Special Bag! Loli-Con Assassin Gear”

[illegible]

I reel backwards like getting hit by a knock-out punch and yell at the top of my lungs.

“Master?! What’s wrong?!”

My apprentice rushes in to check on me.

The clothes she's wearing that's the *Loli-Con Assassin Gear*.

Now I get it

That's what's been going on!

“..... Ai. Would you sit down please.”

“Suure≡”

“No! Not on my lap ... in front of me! Sitting there would make it look like I’m holding you or something! Sit down on your ankles like you’re supposed to!!”

“Whoops☆”

Ai sticks out her tongue and ☆ knocks herself on the head with her fist and looks up at me with a *Loli-Con Assassin* glance that would blow a man's heart clear out of his chest.

Ngh! W What power?!!

Knowing that she's just imitating what she saw in that magazine isn't helping She's so cute that my heart is squeezing in on itself!! She's killing my sanity!!

But!!

“Haaaa— Wheeeeew————”

I am the Ryuo, the man who conquered the Shogi world twice!

Once I use the same breathing techniques that help me relax before big matches, “..... Ai.”

I issue my apprentice an order with as much authority as I can muster.

“Take off those clothes.”

“Uwheee?”

She gives me a wide-eyed stare for just a second.

Then her eyes start glistening as her face turns red as a boiled crab and she nods.

“Y Yes!”

Her fingers start shaking as she grabs hold of a button!

Her hands are tiny, sure, but they’re shaking the same way the Meijin’s do when he’s sure he’s won—. They’re trembling with victorious excitement.

“S-So, today’s finally the day *Elementary 4 Reader* truly is the perfect guide Unbelievable Mihane, thank you so much Mother, father Thank you for raising me For tonight, I give myself entirely to Master!”

“Wha-?! N-no! That’s not what I’m asking Hey! Waitwait-waitwaitwait!!”

I jump up to stop my apprentice who suddenly decided to strip in front of me.

How did this happen?! Figure that out later, because right now, I have to stop her!

“Ai! Stop right now!”

“Eeek ≡”

I grab hold of my apprentice attempting to take off the *Loli-Con Assassin Gear* and push her to the floor.

It’s already a dangerous situation as it is But this *Loli-Con Assassin Gear* is

going to kill my reputation once and for all! If someone sees this, it's all over!!

Just as that thought occurred to me, I hear the front door open.

“Yaichi? Ai? I made too much stew, so I brought the ex ... tra——.”

Clang! The pot she was carrying hits the floor, her voice trembling.

“S-So, you two really are”

She's looking directly at——.

Ai, her clothes coming off, and me with a fistful of fabric pressing her to the floor

“H How long has this been going on? No, please don't tell me! I don't want to know! Nothing should ever make this acceptable, no matter what But there's a part of me that might pretend I didn't see anything if I listen!! So please, don't say a word!!”

“Wait! It's not what it looks like!! Keika, please understand that I don't have a Lolita complex!!”

“That's what all of them say!!”

“Yes, Master doesn't have a Lolita complex!! He loves me for who I am!”

“That *iiii*ss a Lolita complex!!” Keika wails, hunching over.

Ai, trying to remove the *Loli-Con Assassin Gear*.

And me, desperately trying to stop my apprentice from taking it off and clear up this misunderstanding at the same time.

It took two hours of explaining the situation to get Keika to calm down, but she didn't look entirely convinced when we were done. Even on her way out the door, she kept giving me suspicious looks

That's when I made up my mind.

A bit earlier than I planned, but——the time has come.

■ DOUGUYA SUJI SHOPPING AVENUE

“Look there, Master! Comedians! Those are Yoshimoto comedians!!”

“Yeah. They sure are.”

The weekend after the Loli-Con Assassin Gear nearly got me killed.

I brought my two apprentices to the area just outside the Nanba Grand Kagetsu Performing Arts Center.

“That’s the stage where NMB48 does their concerts! It’s so big!! This-is-so-much-fun!!”

Now that I think about it, this might be the first time I’ve ever brought Ai Hinatsuru to any of the touristy areas in Osaka. We’ve been too busy playing Shogi.

“What are you so excited about? Is this place supposed to be famous?”

Ai Yashajin sounds bored out of her mind. Genuinely surprised, I ask, “Do you seriously not know about Yoshimoto or NMB? Living in Kansai?”

“I only watch public television and CS Go and Shogi broadcasts.”

“W-Well, that explains it”

That’s the Lady. Stoic to a fault.

“Whatever the reason, you owe me an explanation. Why did you specifically say: *Come to Osaka without Akira*, and bring me to these pointless places?”

“Easy there. I’ve been so busy with the title matches and association events, don’t you think? So, I thought it’d be a good idea to have an honest-to-goodness day off with my apprentices. Think of it as a reward for getting into the Women’s League, a present.”

“Reward? This is a punishment. And are you sure you should be out here with

us at a time like this?”

“Hm? How so?”

“Ginko Sora. She might be promoted to 3-*dan* today, right?”

“I’m forbidden to set foot inside the association on days the Sub League is in session. Big Sis’s orders.”

“..... If we’re going to waste a day anyway, I’d rather be watching the match. Sota Kunugi might be getting promoted, too”

While Ai Yashajin complains at every turn, Ai Hinatsuru is bubbling with energy.

“I couldn’t be more excited! Three of us have never gone anywhere before!”

“When you put it like that yeah.”

“For sure! I couldn’t wait See?!”

My first apprentice holds up a basket stuffed full of sandwiches.

“I thought it would be fun if we ate these together, so I got up early to make them! Am I a good girl?”

“..... A very good girl.”

“Um~meow≡”

Rather than fight against my apprentice bobbing her head in front of me like a cat wanting to be petted, I gently stroke her soft hair. She happily narrows her eyes just like a real cat.

I’m supposed to be pushing her out of the nest, but it feels like I’m spoiling her more now than I was before There was the Loli-Con Assassin Gear incident, and the little things are getting worse I need to do something before it’s too late

Ai Yashajin’s eyes are as cold as ice as she watches me pet her older sister apprentice like a cat.

“Well? What are we here for?”

“I didn’t bring the two of you here today to watch comedians or idol groups. Our destination—is over there.”

I point to a road on the south side of Namba Grand Kagetsu.

It’s the entrance to the shopping arcade with a big sign overhead with *Road* in bright red paint.

“That’s where we’re going today, Sennichimae’s shopping street *Douguya Suji*.

“Douguya Suji?”

“A place where you can *buy anything under the sun*.”

My two apprentices start getting cold feet, but I usher them under the sign and start explaining the stores as we go.

“See that one there? It’s a floor cushion store.”

“Floor cushions?!”

“That place over there makes the curtains that go up in front of bars and restaurants. Right across the street from it is a store that makes red lanterns and next door to that makes signs.”

Basically, places that sell anything a bar owner would need are lined up right next to each other.

“Fuwawa! That pot is huge! That’s what restaurants use!!”

“Ohh You can design your own plastic food samples? This could be fun after all”

Ai Hinatsuru has zeroed in on the cooking equipment while Ai Yashajin looks interested in the plastic food restaurants put in the front window to advertise their menu. They try to act all grown up but they’re still kids at heart. Adorable.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but we’re not here for those either. This

way.”

Taking my reluctant apprentices’ hands, I steer them down a side street.

“Well, this street has seen better days Who exactly is waiting for us down here?”

“Shogi gods.”

“Huuuh?”

Ai Yashajin cocks her head, confused.

That’s when my other apprentice starts looking left and right as if she noticed something.

“What is that smell? It’s weird”

“! You’re right Is someone burning incense around here?”

I tell my apprentices what it is as they look around with their cute little noses twitching up and down.

“That’s what wood smells like.”

“Wood?”

The aroma hovers around the shop like a cloud.

Tentsuji Gobanten.

“Do they sell Go boards?”

“What are we doing at a Go shop? Any Shogi gods around here would be fake!”

“Board shops typically make ones for Go and Shogi.”

There’s no one out on the sales floor, but that doesn’t stop us from going inside and calling out to the back.

“Sensei? You’re around, right? Where are you?!”

..... No response. It’s like no one’s here.

Ai sounds nervous as she grabs hold of my shirt. “Maybe they went out?”

“Nah, I made an appointment. And it’s almost time to start working, so she wouldn’t be drunk——.”

“Druuunk?”

My second apprentice sounds skeptical.

The narrow store is cramped inside but has a row of majestic, legged Shogi boards lined up on display. The bigger boards they have out are for Go. Then there are the stone containers and piece stands, Go stones and Shogi pieces Nothing has a price tag.

Every single one of them is a rare gem worth more than you’d expect from a shabby little shop like this.

“Maybe in here?”

I put my hand on a sliding door that leads to the back and pull it open——.

BANSHI: BOARD MASTER

Something round, white and jiggly shows up in front of my face.

“.....?”

What is this?

I try cupping it with my fingers. Smooth.

“Ahnn!”

Huh. What a cute little sound.

“???”

I lean in closer for a good whiff. It’s got a pleasant smell.

Then, I finally figured it out.

It’s a person’s—a woman’s rear end.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!”

A butt?! What’s a butt doing in a board shop?!

In a panic, I jump past it and into the corner of the room. From further away, it’s so obvious. That’s a woman. A butt-naked bombshell of a beauty.

What’s more, the young woman is pressing a sword, no, a full-fledged *katana* onto a Shogi board. Completely in the buff.

“W-W-Why don’t you have any clothes on?!”

“Keep your voice down!”

She says like an ice-cold slap with the *katana* clenched in her hand. Totally

naked.

“Making a ruckus and being clothed in this sacred space is beyond disrespectful! Take those clothes off this instant!”

“Being naked in a sacred space seems more disrespectful if you ask me?!”

“Enough! All of you, strip down right now!!”

“Not a chance!!”

“Then get out of this room, immediately!!”

The beauty advances on us with her blade held high. Get me out of here!

Slam!

I jump out of the room with my apprentices in my arms and tumble into the hall just as the sliding door snaps shut behind me.

“W-Well, that was a surprise

Rather than feeling like a Peeping Tom who hit the jackpot, it’s more like some whacked-out woman forced me to look at her naked body. I’m the victim here. Not happy at all

“..... Master? Who was that lady just now? Is she the kind of friend who always greets you naked? And why is it that there are always so many women around you like that? If there are any more, tell me right now so I, as your first apprentice, can go introduce myself properly to each and every single one.”

Ai’s eyes have gone completely dark as she coils herself to look me square in the face, her voice completely flat. Master, trembling

Meanwhile, Ai Yashajin is trembling for another reason.

“H-Hey, um *Sensei*? Was that, was she really?”

“Yeah. I think she’s who you’re thinking.”

“The real Shumai Honinbou?! The first female title holder in Japanese Go

.....? That?"

So, she knew. I suppose she would, watching all those Go and Shogi TV shows.

"Just as you said, she holds one of the three grand titles in Go, Honinbou, Shumai Honinbou-*sensei*. Shogi and Go are different, but she's a pro player just like me."

".....!!"

Both girl's eyes go wide. The looks on their faces something close to: *That pervert*?! Kids are brutally honest.

"She's also one of the few *banshi* in the world today."

"*Ban* *shi*?"

My two apprentices tilt their heads, never having heard that word before.

While she seems completely different from the person who crashed the First Move Ceremony, and in the buff, that is Shumai-*sensei*. Her personality depends on the amount of alcohol in her system.

There are only a few days out of the whole year that the woman who *took a title completely sloshed* is sober.

But they're not for Go matches.

"..... I'd waited three whole days for the humidity and breeze to line up perfectly!"

The sliding door opens again, and Shumai-*sensei* steps out wearing a *yukata* robe.

Ai Hinatsuru works up the courage to ask.

"U-Umm! What were you doing naked with a *katana*?"

"*Tachimori*. That's what."

"*Tachi* *mori*?"

Blanking, Shumai-sensei gently explains it to her in simple terms.

“Giving a board life—a ceremony to enshrine a *god* within it, Miss Ai Hinatsuru.”

We gather out on the store’s sales floor for more in-depth conversation.

“I must apologize for my rudeness earlier. While I knew of your arrival, Yaichi, the conditions for the ceremony don’t line up that perfectly very often.”

“Oh, well I was the one who asked you to do this earlier than we’d planned”

I thank her as she serves tea.

Shumai-sensei becomes a reckless pervert with an affinity for four-letter words when she’s drunk. But she’s a well-mannered lady without alcohol in her veins. Well mannered, but totally naked at the time.

Ai Yashajin cautiously tries to break the ice.

“So You’re Shumai Honinbou, yes? The real”

“Indeed. My actual name is Uzu Tentsuji and this is my shop, Tentsuji Gobanten.”

“You’re a professional Go player strong enough to claim a title but you make boards, too?”

“I suppose you could say my surroundings rubbed off on me. The Tentsuji family have been *banshi* for generations ... although many *banshi* don’t have the slightest idea how to play either Go or Shogi despite making boards for a living,” Shumai-sensei explains with a soft smile on her lips. “Being who we are, many highly skilled players often visited my family’s home and workshop in Nara. They would play against each other to pass the time, and I must have watched them enough to memorize the rules when I was very young, too young to remember anything else.”

“You learned just by watching? And too young to remember, so you must’ve been one or two years old? Quite the monster, aren’t you?”

“Though I picked up the necessary techniques for board-making as well. That’s why I’m able to make a living as a professional player while creating and selling only the boards I deem worthy in the shop like this. It’s more of a past time.”

I mention what has been on my mind since coming inside, more than seeing her naked.

“By the way, *Sensei*. Was that board just now——.”

“It was. *The very same board* you sent to me for repairs.”

“.....! Is it the one that I cracked?” Once Shumai-*sensei* silently nods, Ai asks in a rush, “You can fix it?! Even after what happened?!”

“But of course. A piece of scotch tape is enough to take care of a crack that size.”

“That’s all?!”

“Boards have life. A *banshi*’s greatest technique is stabilizing harvested wood while still living rather than letting it die. Thus, the board retains its natural ability to heal from cracks and scrapes *because it is alive*.”

“Alive? Shogi boards?”

Seeing my apprentice thrown for a loop, I let her in on the secret.

“That’s a *namaban*. It’s raw wood, meaning it doesn’t matter if it cracks.”

That just made Ai even more confused.

“The best material to make Shogi and Go boards is nutmeg, a plum-yew called *kaya*. However, it cracks so easily that people have always called it ‘splintering *kaya*.’”

“Huh?! W-Why would you want to use a wood like that?!”

“Because it fuses so well that it is also called *adhering kaya*.”

“Adhering *kaya*?”

“Let a *namaban* made from *kaya* set, and it will adhere to itself ... So well, in fact, that scars are invisible to the naked eye. That being said, a black line will remain should any dust or debris get into the crack.”

“Now I see The tape keeps that stuff out”

“Yes. That’s far better than trying to fill it with some foreign substance yourself.”

Ai Yashajin nods in understanding as Shumai-sensei continues her explanation.

“*Kaya* is an extremely elastic wood. That suppleness allows it to gently absorb the impact of any stone or piece snapped onto its surface, no matter how great That’s why players never tire no matter how long they play on a board made from *kaya*.”

A good board is easy on the fingers and matches the player’s enthusiasm with a good sound on each move. Fingers get tired playing on any other surface, and that affects the Shogi.

“The fact that Go and Shogi can be traced back over one thousand years means that pieces and boards have a history dating back just as far. Just as strategies have been honed over that time, trial and error has led to the necessary equipment being refined as well. Compared to the old rosewood boards that have been preserved in storehouses, the shape and material used for modern boards are entirely different,” says Shumai-sensei making direct eye contact with Ai Hinatsuru. “The board I left in Yaichi’s care was in a process called *Board Lending*. It gives a *namaban* a chance to dry out while getting used in actual matches.”

“Dry out? It needs to dry?”

“That it does. In fact, the *drying process* is the most important aspect of making a board. Each individual *sun* requires around one year to dry.”

“So, a 7-*sun* board would take seven years?! That long?”

My first apprentice looks surprised. Well, finding out that one of those boards would take almost their own age to dry would surprise anybody.

“A felled tree will never dry no matter how long you wait. Warping and damage are inevitable once the tree is cut into smaller pieces and shaped. That’s why it needs to be dried as a board. Putting it in the proper environment and monitoring the damage is part of the process. That is Board Lending.”

“You need to go that far?” asks Ai Yashajin, sounding stunned.

Shumai-*sensei* nods.

“There aren’t many *banshis* left who do, but I want to be satisfied with my work, even at the cost of profit.”

There’s a meaning behind passing on the traditional *banshi* techniques to the next generation. It’s just.

“Memorable matches happen and legendary players come and go like a summer breeze. Boards, on the other hand, are works of art and yet are created with the purpose to fulfill.”

Shumai Honinbou both makes boards and plays professionally, so that way of thinking would make sense from her point of view.

Just like the *extreme effort* she’s always talking about.

That extreme effort goes into making boards that can match players’ passion.

“Once a *namaban* has completed the Board Lending stage, a carpenter’s plane is used to shave off the excess and put the finishing touches on it. Boards that have completed that process will never bend or break, ever. Authors who write books about Go and Shogi love to say a player smacked a stone or a piece down so hard it *shattered the board’s surface*, but that’s only for dramatic

effect. It's not physically possible."

Taking a sip from her teacup, Shumai-sensei adjusts her robe's collar.

"The tea's gone cold. Perhaps I should move on to explaining the *Tachimori* Ceremony."

"You were using the *katana* to mark the spaces for the grid, weren't you?"

Sensei nods at Ai Yashajin's question.

"While no one knows exactly why *katanas* are used Go and Shogi were originally nobles' games, so the people delegated to create the boards and pieces would have had deep connections to the Imperial Court and samurai families. The Minase family, their name synonymous with their calligraphic style and renowned for their skill creating Shogi pieces to this day, are a noble house."

"Calligraphy?"

"The characters written on the pieces. That's what she's talking about."

Ai Hinatsuru tilts her head, confused. Ai Yashajin explains it to her. How kind.

"They set a specific style and replicate it. *Minase* isn't the only one. *Kinki* and *Ryouko* are popular, too, but those are the main three. Simply put, they're Shogi fonts."

"They're not the only options, however. It's possible to have pieces made with your favorite player's handwriting, or even your own," Sensei adds to Ai Yashajin's explanation.

"Board making was once left to carpenters and people who worked for Buddhist temples. Specialists known as the *Gosho-ha* emerged in the Kyoto and Osaka area as the demand for boards increased. My own family, the Tentsuji, are *banshi* descended from them and the skills required to perform the *Tachimori* Ceremony are part of their tradition."

Just listening to her talk, I can feel how proud she is to be part of it.

“On the other hand, the craftsmen who went to Edo—present-day Tokyo—to serve the government are called *Oshiro Go Banshi*. Rather than using *tachimori*, they create the grid using arrow shafts and brushes.”

“Why wouldn’t they use a *katana*?”

“Edo was the samurai capital, their cultural center. For them, *katanas* were seen as warrior spirits. Somewhere along the line, they must’ve decided that warrior spirit shouldn’t be used for board making.”

Sensei then uses my question to support her own reasoning.

“I, for one, believe the techniques required to perform *tachimori*, to make the most precise adjustments with a *katana*, are the most advanced of all,” she declares with pride.

“Other styles *paint* lines on with lacquer, but *tachimori imprints* them. Therefore, we can naturally create more dignified lines. Plus, with enough experience, *tachimori* practitioners can set lines faster than any other technique.”

“..... *Banshi* and *tachimori* are starting to make sense,” says Ai Yashajin, her tea still sitting untouched in front of her.

“But, what doesn’t make sense is why you were doing it naked.”

“Yes, that! Explain that please!”

My first apprentice still seems to think there’s something more between Shumai-*sensei* and I. She’s giving her a threatening stare while maintaining a tight grip on my arm.

“It’s vital that there be no dust in the air when applying lacquer. Should any get on it before the drying process is complete, that dirt will remain forever. Beautiful as they may be, the board’s overall balance is forever lost should any line be off by a fraction of a degree. All the time and energy spent creating it will have been wasted. That’s why the clothes come off!” Shumai-*sensei* says

with vigor.

Her eyes are twinkling even though she's totally sober.

"Even a slight possibility of a loose thread makes it impossible to focus entirely on setting the lines. That is why practitioners worth their salt have always worn only a loincloth while wielding a *katana*, even in the dead of winter. My father and Master is one of them."

"Then at least put on a pair of panties, *Sensei*!"

"How could a man who's risen to the heights of Ryuo have such low aspirations? An apprentice only comes into their own by surpassing their Master! Mine wore a loincloth, so I shall wear nothing at all! You'll never convince me otherwise!!"

After Shumai-*sensei* stubbornly vows to stay in the buff, Ai Yashajin asks, "Wouldn't a swimsuit be just fine? Synthetic fabrics like nylon don't have loose threads."

".....!!"

Shumai-*sensei* gawks at my second apprentice.

"Hey, hey, why are you looking at her like she's a genius? She needs to work harder for your respect, *Sensei*."

I'd rather she'd recognize Ai Yashajin for her skill and talent.

Whether she heard me or not, I don't know. But, she locks eyes with Ai and says, "You are Miss Ai Yashajin, I presume?"

"Yes. And?"

"Hehe I see. Yaichi has quite an eye for these things."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

My second apprentice looks between the two of us, suspicious. I look away and pretend I have no idea.

“..... Ngh~.”

Meanwhile, my first apprentice doesn't seem to be happy with Shumai-sensei's reason to go stick with her birthday suit.

“.....”

My second apprentice is having trouble believing that the Shumai Honinbou, a woman who has accomplished so much in the Go world, and the sparsely dressed woman sitting in front of her are in fact the same person.

Shumai-sensei stands up before them and says, “I normally never allow others to enter my working space Consider this a present for the two of you to celebrate your Women's League membership. Allow me to demonstrate board making techniques for you.”

▲ TACHIMORI

“Why do I have to take my clothes off as well?!”

A still fully clothed Ai Yashajin yells at Ai and I as we disrobe without complaining.

“You won’t get to see the *Tachimori* Ceremony if you don’t strip down to your underwear, so what choice is there?”

“Then I don’t need to see it! I can go home by myself, thank you very much!”

“This could be your chance to learn the secret to Shumai-*sensei*’s success.”

“.....!”

She falls silent, bites her lip and begrudgingly starts unbuttoning her shirt. She’s willing to do whatever it takes to get stronger, I can see it in her eyes. Just like Big Sis.

On the other hand, Ai Hinatsuru is perfectly fine walking around the apartment in the buff after a bath, so being in underwear is no big deal for her.

And, since I don’t have a Lolita complex, I don’t feel like a lucky pervert seeing grade school kids in their underwear or have any reaction to it at all. Seriously!

“Master. What’s it like, making lines with a *katana*?”

“I got to see Shumai-*sensei*’s father do it once back when I was a little kid. He held the blade straight out in front of him and did more of a push than a slice But it was extremely impressive. For sure.”

“..... If this turns out to be boring, that *katana* will be slicing you.”

Dressed in only our skivvies, the three of us dust, sweep and vacuum the wooden floors in Shumai-*sensei*’s workspace before wiping everything down with damp cloths.

Then, we put a half-size *tatami* mat right in the middle of the still-glistening floorboards.

Just when the Shogi board was set on top of the mat—Shumai-sensei slowly opened the sliding door.

“..... I’m ready.”

The *banshi* standing there with an unsheathed *katana* at her side, Uzu Tentsuji, had taken Ai Yashajin’s advice to wear a swimsuit rather than work naked. The dark blue skintight swimwear made of nylon squeezes her curvy body like a glove. There’s something nostalgic about the design.

It’s a school swimsuit.

“Shumai-sensei That’s ... a bit much”

No matter how beautiful and ladylike Shumai-sensei is when she isn’t drunk, seeing a woman in her twenties wearing a school swimsuit can’t be good for my apprentices. She’s a role model for them, and I wish she’d take that into consideration.

“..... This is all I have.”

Well, she does look a bit embarrassed. Being sober wearing a school swimsuit and carrying a *katana*, I don’t blame her

“As I mentioned before, even the slightest bit of dust can ruin *tachimori*. Therefore, you will remain completely still for the duration and I ask you to refrain from coughing or sneezing until the ceremony is over. Raise dust and I’ll strike you down where you sit!”

“.....!!”

The three of us are sitting on the floorboards in our underwear without any cushions, melting in the face of her menacing glare but afraid to move a muscle. A single hair or piece of dust falling will be our doom.

“The lacquer’s condition is pivotal to *tachimori*.”

Shumai-*sensei* takes out a can of lacquer and starts mixing it with a brush.

“Lacquer’s consistency changes moment by moment. Those inconsistencies will always appear in the lines. Should the last line cut be fainter than the first, the entire board’s balance will be thrown into chaos and disrupt the players’ concentration

Carefully reading the lacquer, she assimilates with it.

What Shumai-*sensei* says is the heart of *tachimori*. Deep

“If I may ask, *Sensei*. What is that mixing brush made from? I can’t tell if it’s because it’s stained the same color as the lacquer, but it looks like human hair

“It is human hair,” she says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Say what?!

“Young girls’ hair is the best material for lacquer brushes Actually, Miss Hinatsuru and Miss Yashajin, both of you have perfect hair for making brushes.”

“.....!”

My apprentices tremble in fear and nearly shake their heads back and forth to say no, but both of them remember not to raise dust and stop themselves. Good girls.

Shumai-*sensei* applies the lacquer to her *katana* blade, but she must be nervous because her hands are shaking ever so slightly.

“Now it’s a fight against time. At most, I have twelve minutes to finish cutting each line. Any more than fifteen and I will have failed.”

That’s all the time she’s got?!

“It’s the same for hitting stones. Your first impression will show you the best move. Spending untold amounts of time thinking will just muddy your thoughts and the best move will be lost in the clutter. Remember that well.”

The trees used to make boards require hundreds of years to grow.

Drying takes a few more years. Shaping the board lasts months.

Then, after half a year of use, it's finally fit to become a board.

But this is the very last step. Turning this square piece of wood into "board" only takes around ten minutes.

It's hard to comprehend how long it took to reach this moment, but success or failure all comes down to this.

It's strikingly similar to how an incomprehensible amount of time went into preparing to make a single move that decides a match of Go or Shogi.

"..... I used *hon kaya* that spent nearly five hundred years growing in Miyazaki Prefecture to make this board. Furthermore, it's *tenchimasa*. There won't be another one like it for one hundred years. Of course, that's a great deal of pressure"

Hon kaya—raised Miyazaki is hands down the best material for boards.

Tenchimasa, literally *heaven and earth lines*, means that the wood grain on the top and bottom of the board are perfectly lined up.

Wood is judged by the grain, and vertical grain is perfect for boards.

Kaya's elasticity makes it easy on the fingers and the grain makes it easy on the eyes.

That's why it's possible to play Shogi on a board like that forever.

Which, in turn, is why *kaya* is the best material.

It's the one and only board that can keep up with passionate Shogi players who never want to stop playing.

"Days leading up to work like this make the bottom of a bottle look so enticing"

Mocking herself, Shumai-sensei smirks as she sets her feet and raises the

katana. Her grip is rock solid.

Her face shows no fear, that grin hasn't budged—.

“There it comes.”

Something seems to have taken hold of Shumai-sensei, or perhaps taken over her.

I whisper to my apprentices sitting beside me, “Watch closely and don't blink. This is the moment a god comes down to earth—through one of their chosen players.”

“.....!!”

The Ais swallow hard.

Shumai-sensei's hands move.

The lacquer-covered blade moves across the board, using its curvature to cut lines across its surface.

Easily. Simply. The process repeats again and again.

Twenty lines were made.

Not even ten minutes went by.

And in those ten minutes that piece of *kaya* became home to a Shogi god.

🏠 BOARDS AND PIECES

“What’d you think?”

“I-It it was very um”

I ask my apprentice for her thoughts on the *Tachimori* Ceremony, and Ai Hinatsuru blushes light pink as she tries to find the right words but only *umms* and *uhs* are coming out. Seems like it overwhelmed her a bit.

“.....”

Ai Yashajin looks lost in thought. She might be trying to piece together the secret to the Go world front runner’s strength after seeing her in action.

Once Shumai-sensei finished cutting the grid, she imprinted four stars on the board before covering the whole thing with another piece of wood to protect it. She then took the whole thing into a special chamber called a *urushimuro* to let the lacquer slowly dry.

“Ten years ago, Master took Big Sis and I to see how boards are made because we were pretty rough on them back then.”

Big Sis would pelt me with pieces or try to throw the whole board, legs and all, at me whenever she lost. She did whatever she felt like. Although, Big Sis still tries to throw boards at me, legs or no

“We saw Shumai-sensei’s father do *tachimori* and we’ve been very careful with boards ever since.”

The persistent passion that goes into making boards.

That mystical moment when a piece of wood becomes a board.

They defy logic, and they’re exactly what made us believe in the *Shogi* gods
.....

“You’re talking about the day I first met you and your elder sister apprentice, yes? I was only a child back then, waving around a toy sword rather than a real *katana* Sure takes me back.”

“By the way, Shumai-sensei.”

“What is it?”

“Do you think that virginity has any connection to Shogi strength?”

“What? Of course not. Where did you get such a ridiculous idea?”

From you.

Ai Hinatsuru puts her hand on her heart and says, “This is such a relief! I was so worried when I put a crack in the board Master brought to celebrate defending his Ryuo title. I had no idea what to do but I’m so glad it’s good as new!!”

“Defending the Ryuo title? Oh, no, no.”

“Uwhee?”

“That wasn’t for me. It’s for you, Ai.”

“Wha? Whaaaaaaa—?!”

“Since you, Mio and the others are getting serious, I thought you should have equipment to match. So, this is perfect. I want you to use it for practice sessions. My 7-*sun* board is a bit too big for you girls, right?”

“B-But I-I-I-I can’t accept this! It’s worth too much!”

Grimacing as I watch Ai Hinatsuru shake her head back and forth so fast she might take off like a helicopter at any second, I explain why I ordered the board for her.

“Whenever an apprentice goes pro or joins the Women’s League, their Master always marks the occasion with a gift. Big Sis and I received gifts from Master Kiyotaki, so you not accepting mine would put me in a tough position.”

“B-But

“The two of you rose so quickly that I didn’t have much time to prepare. I had to start scrambling last August and asked some Women’s League players I know for advice

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui nearly suckered me into buying kimonos, but I decided to keep it simple in the end.

“That board, you see. It’s both a reward from me now that you’ve come into your own but also my last lesson to you just as my apprentice. So please, I want you to have it.”

“A lesson for me?”

“Yes. And of course, I have something for you too, Ai Yashajin.”

“Huh? For me? Like what?”

“Pieces.” Shumai-sensei answers her for me. “I used my connections with *komashi* piece makers to order a one-of-a-kind set. Don’t forget that this is Douguya Suji, where customers can get anything under the sun.”

Sensei gets a piece box down off a shelf.

This one isn’t designed for matches. It’s a plain, flat box meant to be on display.

“Yaichi asked that these pieces be made specifically for you, Miss Yashajin. Rather than having a deity reside within them, he instead wanted them to house a *soul*.”

“Hah! How absurd,” Ai snaps back at her. “Boards and pieces, they’re just equipment. Saying there are gods or souls inside them is just superstition.”

“Is that so? You felt something when you saw Shumai-sensei’s *tachimori*, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I admit she’s honed that technique to an almost mystical level. Anyone

would feel like they're playing against a god after their opponent reads far deeper into the match to make a *miracle* move."

That's probably the reason why so many young pros see the Meijin as a *god*.

But, Ai Yashajin didn't stop there.

"So then, what do you have to say for *soulless* Shogi software? A great match is a great match whether it's played on computer or not."

"..... Yes. You have a point," I nod and say. "By the way, Shumai-*sensei*. About those pieces I ordered Is there anything you'd like us to check while we're here?"

"There is."

She nods as she opens the box. But she wasn't looking at me. She was talking to Ai Yashajin.

"They've only just gone through base carving and the *Seto* polishing process, but I'd like you to make sure the characters are correct."

"The characters?"

"Yes. Without the *daughter's approval*, I can't be sure."

"Huuuh? What are you talking about?"

Ai Yashajin takes the box from her, looking like she couldn't believe that *she* had to do something so pointless.

"It's just the characters, so it'll be Kinki or Minase anyway——."

But the moment she saw each of the pieces lined up side-by-side in the piece box, Ai was lost for words.

Then, she stares at them, trembling.

"T-This! This writing, I've seen it before!!"

"Ten-chan? What's wrong? Who wrote them?"

“..... Father”

“Wha?! But, Ten-chan, your father is”

My first apprentice is floored.

Yes. Both Ai Yashajin’s parents have passed away. But.

I explain how I set this up.

“I managed to dig up some old match records written by your father and had his handwriting used for these pieces.”

The way he wrote each character was preserved right there on the match record.

Even though most match records are kept electronically today, pretty much all of them were written by hand back when her father was playing.

“B-But how Where could you possibly have found father’s handwriting? Grandfather said he got rid of everything”

“Your father was a member of a university Shogi club in Tokyo, remember? I was certain they’d have some old records filed away somewhere. Also, I knew there’d have to be some somewhere in Kansai because he grew up here. Someone good enough to become the Amateur Meijin would’ve been in tournaments and clubs and probably going in and out of Shogi classrooms all the time. I asked everyone I could think of who might have an idea where to start looking and found someone who knew him much closer than I expected.”

“Who?! Who knew father?! Who found his match record?!”

“Mr. Kagamizu.”

“Kagamizu? That old man in the Sub League”

“It’s because Sub League members help organize amateur Shogi tournaments. Mr. Kagamizu left his hometown in Miyazaki and started living on his own in

Osaka when he was thirteen, meaning he's been part of amateur tournaments for almost seventeen years. Of course he'd know your father."

Although, he didn't just know him.

Mr. Kagamizu told me that Ai's father built him up quite a bit.

"He was Static Rook party through and through and played well enough to put professional players to shame. He was rather harsh on me, to tell the truth. His family circumstances most likely prevented him from pursuing his own professional career and he left that dream in the hands of a whiny little kid like me," he'd recounted with a twinge of loneliness in his eyes. A few phone calls to some of his old connections and he tracked down an original match record for me.

"Mr. Kagamizu isn't the only one. Players in Kansai, Kanto people involved in Shogi at every level went above and beyond for you."

"But why?" Ai asks, her tiny body shaking up a storm. The answer's obvious.

"They all wanted—you to have a chance to play Shogi with your father again."

Ai Yashajin collapsed in tears when she heard that.

"Fa Father! Fath er!!"

"Your father's soul lives on in those pieces. I know so because you remembered him as soon as you saw those characters Yeah?"

".....!!!"

My second apprentice picks up pieces and clutches them to her chest as tears roll down her cheeks. She's trying to talk while nodding up and down, but no words are coming out.

“Wonder where the Shogi gods are? This is what Master Kiyotaki told Big Sis and I ten years ago.”

Thinking back to what Master’s voice sounded like that day, I pass on the same lesson to my own apprentices.

“Shogi gods reside within those who love Shogi.”

Master gently rested his hands on our heads when he told us.

That’s why you treasure the board and pieces.

That’s why you respect your opponent.

That’s why you fully commit yourself to each and every match.

That’s why you should play Shogi with as many people as you can.

“Ai,” I look at my first apprentice.

“Yes Master?”

“It makes me happy to know that you want to be by my side. But I want you to have your own life, your own world from now on. Now that you have your own board, gather around it with as many people as possible and expand your horizons.”

“..... Yes!”

She looks up at me with a lonely, almost sad look in her eyes——.

But they’re gleaming with strong determination.

The chick that could only waddle after its parent has grown into a hardy swan in no time at all.

“Ai,” I say to my second apprentice.

Turning to look at her, she raises her tear-soaked face.

“As a player, I admire your determination to make it on your own steam.”

“.....”

“But, please remember this one thing. You’re not alone.”

“..... es Yes!”

Ai Yashajin answers with a toddler’s straightforward honesty, massive tears leaking out of her eyes.

Those tears glistening like diamonds are surely part of the beautiful soul living within her.



I wanted to hug my two apprentices like I did not so long ago, but I didn't.

Instead, I put my hands on their heads. Ai Hinatsuru looks up at me with wide eyes and Ai Yashajin is still sobbing.

Everyone is on their own when playing Shogi.

But no one can get stronger by themselves.

Even if you fight alone and feel like you're getting stronger by yourself, there are so many other souls living in your Shogi They fight alongside you. Just like how I felt everyone there with me when I fought against the Meijin.

Now that my apprentices are in the Women's League, our bond will last forever.

But at the same time, that bond is no longer a one-way street.

Shogi is deep It expands to infinity, just like the people it binds together.

We're not good with words. Awkward, too.

Fighting is the only way we can express ourselves.

But we can learn about each other using a board and pieces.

Deeper, and more intensely than any other method in the world.

"No matter how much you love something, there will be hard times when you do it for a living. You will question yourselves and shed many tears over and over again throughout your life so long as you stay on this path. There's nothing wrong with playing as an amateur, but Becoming a Women's League player means there will be no escape from those questions and tears."

With both my apprentices taking their first step down a road of no return, I gave them one last parting gift.

"That's why I want you to always remember how much you love Shogi."

Shogi will always watch over you if you have that love in your heart.

That's got to be what we call the *Shogi gods*.

"..... Let's get stronger ... together."

Not as Master and apprentices.

But as allied players aiming for new heights. That's what I tell the two girls.

Wishing for the Shogi gods to bless my two precious apprentices.



▲ SPECIAL EDITION

“Ngh *Sniffle!* Hic!”

In the end, Ai Yashajin kept crying after everything was said and done. The waterworks are still going even after we left the shop.

“F-Father Nghh”

“There there, Ten-chan. Wipe your tears with this. Okay?”

Ai Hinatsuru has been next to her this whole time, rubbing her back as we walk. She’s doing her best to cheer the girl up and gives her a fresh handkerchief now that the one she’s been using is too soaked to be any help. My first apprentice always has three freshly-ironed handkerchiefs with her. Good girl.

But I’ve got to say——.

“..... Never thought anything could make Lady Ai get off her high horse and bawl like this”

The board and pieces won’t be ready for a while yet, but I’ve got a feeling she’s going to break down just like this when those pieces arrive. Well, if that’ll help this girl change her attitude a little bit then that’s a present worth giving.

I want Ai Yashajin to clear the high wall that is the Mynavi Finals.

While I’m not sure if she’s good enough to do that as she is, a path might open up if she changes her approach to Shogi.

She’ll be the challenger if she can make it through the Semifinals and into the Qualifier.

If that happens, she’ll be the youngest challenger in history and will face the strongest Queen the Shogi world has ever known.

She is always so hostile to her opponents. I want to make her into the type of player that recognizes her opponent's strength and uses it to bring out her own Which could happen.

“..... Suppose I should thank the Shogi gods for that.”

The Shogi gods granted her a match record written by her father.

That must mean that they like her. I'll take it that way.

—But, there's one thing that has me worried.

While this whole experience could be what changes her for the better, it also showed my cold and calculating competitive side a weakness hidden inside this girl.

If that weakness were ever exposed—.

“Ex-tra!!”

My train of thought gets derailed by a booming voice just as we come out of the Douguya Suji shopping arcade.

A crowd has gathered around the Namba Grand Kagetsu Performing Arts Center.

“Special edition! We gotta special edition here!”

The voice is coming from the middle of the crowd. A man is passing out newspapers.

“Huh What do you think is going on?”

“.....?” says Ai Hinatsuru, looking over there with a curious glance. Ai Yashajin's eyes are so puffy from all that crying that she can't see a thing, but she's noticed, too.

Unlike my apprentices, red flags are going up in my gut.

“A special edition at this time of year?”

The feeling that *something* was off gradually turns into a feeling that *that* happened.

Newspapers in Osaka make special editions when the Koshien High School Baseball Tournament's Osaka team gets decided, a school from the Kansai area wins the Koshien Tournament or Osaka's Hanshin Tigers baseball team wins the pennant. It's pretty much all baseball.

But that's not what's going on now.

"Extra! Big news out of the Shogi world! History was made in spectacular fashion not one hour ago at the Shogi Association in Osaka's Fukushima District! Get ya special edition right here!"

My heart almost leaps out of my chest. My gut feeling became reality.

Weaving my way through the crowd, I snatch a copy of the special edition out of the man's outstretched hand.

The title is written in big, bold letters.

"The first ever————3-*dan* is born."

".....!!"

I swallow the air in my throat the instant I see the headline.

Those letters, the name they spell My heart clamps down ... hard.

"Master?! What happened?! Is it about the Sub League?!"

"Who got it?! Sora Ginko?! Sota Kunugi?! Or, " Ai Hinatsuru asks, grabbing a fistful of my shirt as Ai Yashajin holds her tears back to get confirmation.

The letters that spell out the name in front of 3-*dan* read————.

RECORD 5

SUB LEAGUE 2-DAN

SOTA
KUNUGI

DATE OF BIRTH: 7/19/2006 (11 YEARS OLD)

HOMETOWN: IKOMA CITY, NARA PREFECTURE

MASTER: KUNIO NARUKAWA 9-DAN

🏠 REGULAR ACTIVITIES DAY

Morning. I wavered.

“..... It might be better to go in the back door.”

That thought popped into my head when I saw the Shogi Association come into view from my seat riding the Kanjou Line train to Fukushima Station.

Most likely, I thought to myself, there'll be reporters waiting outside. Just like there were for the Admission Exam.

The day I got annihilated.

In that case, going in a different way might've worked out better. Being a competitor, I naturally came up with new things to try. Like drawing a lot of fortunes in a row.

“But”

It felt like I was *running away*.

Hiding from cameras before a match. If I stick with the mentality that spending mental and physical resources on interviews is the reason I lose, will I ever get stronger?

If I promote to the 3-*dan* division, the first and last Regular Activities will take place in Kanto.

Those reporters will be tenacious.

There's a very real possibility they'll chase me to whatever hotel I'm staying at.

There'll be no escape from them so long as I'm there.

They'll fuss when I lose and make a bigger fuss when I win.

That being the case, I'd be better off charging into it head-on. That's the

determination I need to get stronger.

—That idiot would, wouldn't he?

The very fact that I felt a strange surge of confidence when that thought occurred to me must've meant I was still groggy.

“Miss Sora! What are your chances of winning today?!”

“With a victory, you'll become the first female member of the 3-*dan* division ever! Can you do it?!”

“What did you eat for breakfast this morning?!”

“Miss Sora, you're a Scorpio, right?! Scorpio's luck is second from the bottom today, do you have anything to say about that?!”

Just as I expected, a throng of reporters were waiting outside the association. They swarmed me, cameras at the ready, the instant I came into view.

After seeing their fervor firsthand.

“.....!”

I thought I was ready, but my legs froze up on the spot.

—First female 3-*dan* ever.

Pressure clamped down on me from every angle My stoked competitive fire was blown out in an instant. I felt it.

Just like when I touched Mr. Karako's Parting Pieces.

—Don't freeze! Build up your courage!!

Despite my mind going blank, I held myself together by the slimmest of margins and managed to string a few words together.

“..... Sorry. I'll answer everything after the match.”

After a quick bow, I tried to get inside the association, but ...

“Please, wait, Miss Sora!”

“At least let us take a few pictures!!”

“You’ve got time before the match, so what’s the problem?!”

Refusing to give up, the reporters surrounded me and closed in.

That’s when they came.

“A press conference has been set up to do interviews after the match! I respectfully ask that all members of the media refrain from going beyond this point!”

Association staff members came together to create a human barricade with Mr. Mine at the front.

“Ginko! Hurry on up to the arena, now!”

“Everyone? But, why?”

“..... Sorry we didn’t do more to protect you before the Admission Exam.”

“.....!”

“Your Shogi doesn’t collapse to that degree for no reason. Shogi is a game, that’s true But the trials and tribulations of life in the Sub League are not for amusement.”

The people who’ve watched over me since I was a child.

The clerk who made my Match Card the first time I came to the association.

The publicist who came with me to interviews, helped me learn how to answer questions.

The security guard who’s always the first to greet me with a smile whenever I visit the association.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed the man who owns the restaurant on the first floor was there, too. He’s always so gruff talking to me when I sit at the

counter and doesn't know the first thing about Shogi, but he was there all the same

Every single one of these people came together to make a wall ... all for me.

"Sub League members are fighting for their very lives! Please, allow them to focus on their matches!" Mr. Mine yelled at the reporters.

In return, "Fighting for their lives? They ain't pros, now are they?! Amateurs, every single one of them!! Stop making it sound more important than it is!"

"This is why the Shogi world is failing!"

"Interviews were fine before the Admission Exam, but not today? Bullshit! You can't order us around like this!!"

The angry reporters threw the book at him.

People on the outside must think that Sub League matches are worthless because they don't generate profit. Any explanations would fall on deaf ears.

That's why the staff members could only continuously apologize.

"Sorry, but please understand!"

"Just for today, please, let her pass!! Please!! Please!!"

For the Sub League For me, they bowed their heads and pleaded with the reporters no matter how many insults and abusive comments rained down on them without a single objection. That's the only way they can protect me.

The corners of my eyes heated up watching them.

I was certain my heart wouldn't waver no matter what questions came my way, but it wavered for the first time.

—I must go. The match is the only thing I should be thinking about!

In my head, I knew that was right.

I thought my mind was made up.

I wanted nothing more than to turn back and fight alongside all of them there and then.

“..... Is this weakness?”

Blocking out the almost magnetic pull yanking on the back of my hair, I stepped into the elevator.

Finally alone in that small space, I used every moment of what little time I had to focus on the match in front of me.

“It’s time to fight Victory is the only way to end this.”

I locked a plea for help deep inside my heart and held it tight.

While I didn’t say the word, well, name, out loud It did make me feel a bit stronger.

THE YOUNGEST VERSUS THE FIRST IN HISTORY

“I lost.”

Only when my opponent lowers his head do I notice I’ve been holding my breath.

“..... Thank you for the match.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, I return the bow.

Sub League members with a *kyu* ranking play three matches during the Sub League’s Regular Activities. *Dan* members play two.

Who we play gets announced right before the match, so I don’t know exactly who I’ll be facing for my second match But, considering how few people are in the Kansai Sub League, it’s not too hard to guess.

My first match ending in victory, I stay sitting next to the board even as my first opponent walks away.

Normally, I would go relax between matches. But today, there’s no telling where reporters are lurking. I’ll be safe in the arena.

Actually, it’s the other way around. This is the only safe place for me now.

“Eight wins in a row Twelve wins, four losses Fourteen wins, five losses Sixteen wins, six losses Eighteen wins, seven losses”

I count the records needed to become 3-*dan* in my head.

The first time, I was one win away from promotion when I was eleven and four.

But that chance slipped through my fingers with the fifth loss I’ve been stuck, spinning my wheels and watching chances go by all the way up to my current seventeen and seven record.

This will be my last chance.

I hunch over next to the board, sitting there like a wounded bear trying to recuperate, and tell myself over and over again, “One more. I just need to win one more Don’t think about losing”

The 3-*dan* division has two seasons per year.

Since they start in April and October, getting promoted in May does me no good because I’ll be waiting around until October for a new season to start. I won’t be allowed to play in the Sub League in the meantime.

—If this chance gets away, the next one

“Ya hear? Kunugi won again.”

“That’s seven in a row The kid’s a beast.”

“Wins like a heartless killer, too. Just when ya think ya’ve got a check path, ya’re king’s dead.”

“I wish he’d just hurry up and go pro. We don’t stand a chance against him”

“One more win and he’s in the 3-*dan* division, right? He’s got it in the bag, so don’t worry. I mean, his next opponent’s gotta be——.”

“Quiet! She can hear you”

Other Sub League members finished with their matches are talking about me.

Right now, the record for the youngest 3-*dan* is thirteen years, eight months old.

Sota Kunugi is still eleven.

If he makes it to 3-*dan* before April, he’ll have two seasons in the 3-*dan* division before graduating from elementary school. A chance to become the unheard of *Grade School Pro* as well

“..... I could”

—I have a chance to become the first female professional ever.

Putting it into words, how much is that worth? It just means misery for me.

There's only one way to get rid of that misery.

The time for my second match has come.

"Ginko. Let's have a good match."

Still in exactly the same spot I was when the first match ended, a voice high enough to belong to a girl comes up to greet me. The voice I expected to hear.

Its owner—Sota Kunugi slowly sits down on his ankles as he talks to me.

"This will be our first time playing without a handicap, won't it?"

"..... It will."

"I can't wait."

Lining up the pieces, it's my job as the more experienced Sub League member to do the piece flip. All five of my Pawns land upside down, meaning Sota will go first.

Our last match was half a year ago. Playing without a Lance, I lost as the upper player.

Ginko Sora 2-*dan* versus Sota Kunugi 1-*kyu*.

Looking back even further, when Sota Kunugi entered the Sub League at 6-*kyu*—I was 1-*dan*.

—Stupid Shogi Martian

I can't think of this boy as a fellow earthling. He has another sense that I don't, one that allows him to have a bright mental Shogi board that moves pieces around at lightning speed and lets him feel the relationships between

every piece. He doesn't need to read, he just knows.

— So unfair. Cruel.

Yes. The Shogi gods play favorites.

Because they didn't let me be born as a Shogi Martian They give talents to one and nothing to the other. Then, they make them fight for their own entertainment. That's the only explanation.

Last time I was down a piece.

I lost the match and have been stuck at 2-*dan* while this Shogi Martian climbed all the way up to 2-*dan* without losing a single match.

That winning streak is still going.

All Naniwa's Snow White's white victory stars against Women's League players look fake. This kid chosen by the Shogi gods stole real white victory stars from other Shogi Martians and is now sitting across from me.

All to take my stars. To take my last chance away from me.

"Please begin your matches."

Battles erupt all at once at the supervisor's signal.

Sounding like he doesn't have a care in the world, Sota lowers his head and says, "Ready when you are."

"..... I'm ready."

I switch on the chess clock.

Sota is on offense.

Not wasting a moment, he opens his Bishop Path with a light flick of the wrist like he's feeling no pressure whatsoever.

I hold my breath for several seconds and clench my skirt with my right hand.

A voice echoes through my mind.

I think you should use Ranging Rook.

For a moment, I thought I just might.

Shogi isn't a trend.

For that one moment, I wanted to commit everything to what that voice had to say.

However.

“.....!!”

I reach out and grab a piece, snapping it down hard enough to cancel that voice out.

—Pawn in front of the Rook, 8 Four Pawn.

A move that announces my Static Rook intention and gives my opponent his choice of formation. It's stepping forward with my arms wide open and saying: *Come and get me.*

—I'm the stronger player. Problem?

If you've got more talent. If I'm inferior as a living being.

—I'll surpass you in spirit and tenacity!

That's Kansai Shogi. It's stubborn and muddy, but it's my Shogi.

“..... Ohh?” Sota Kunugi mumbles between his teeth, the corner of his mouth curling upward.

Then he chooses to use those itty-bitty fingers that still have that infantile flimsiness.

The strategy that this child who was already destined to walk among the Shogi world elites selected was worthy of their company.

Orthodox Shogi that remains unchanged despite the trends in modern strategy—*yagura*.

MONSTERS IN BATTLE

The Sub League.

Officially known as the *Supplementary Support League for Rising Players*, it is split between the two factions in Kanto and Kansai.

The matches that take place therein were not originally intended to be seen by those outside of its jurisdiction.

However, the Kansai Sub League has been uploading *Fierce Records* onto its home page during its Regular Activities, as well as recording highly anticipated matchups through cameras mounted on arena ceilings.

On this day of Regular Activities—it was Kunugi 2-*dan* versus Sora 2-*dan*.

“Pwfff

A man watching their match on the monitor in the Player’s Room took a long drag of his cigarette and let out a smoky sigh when he saw Ginko and Sota diverge from the Bishop Path and instead reinforce their defenses.

Mitsuru Oishi.

The man known as the *Worldly Maestro* watched the match take place through the monitor as memories of legendary matches started flooding back to him.

—There was a time when a candidacy system was used for promotion matches in the Kansai Sub League.

This was before the current 3-*dan* division existed. A long, long time ago.

A match between two individuals one win away from promotion. In other words, both of their lives depended on the outcome.

In many of these matches, a very close friend of the player who was about to

promote submitted themselves for the match.

It's said that whenever two friends went head-to-head, the one who entered the match as a stopper was more likely to win. As if a monster had come to heartlessly destroy a stone bridge built on a lifetime of victories.

A match that turns men into monsters—*Monsters in Battle*.

Even if it wasn't to turn professional, Mitsuru wholeheartedly felt that monsters were in battle at this very moment.

"..... Either way, the timing is putting all the pressure on Ginko. Overcoming it is the true mark of a 3-dan"

Mitsuru sat by himself, the only one in a normally full Player's Room, moving pieces around an analysis board until a loud *ker-tap ker-tap* announced the arrival of one more. Another man his age entered the room.

Shouji Karako, *newly appointed 3-dan*.

"Well, well, if it isn't Oishi-sensei! Coming to the association on a Sunday, I must say you title holders always have your noses to the grindstone!"

"Would you drop the act and talk normally? You're making me sick."

"Alrighty, don't have to tell me twice."

Dropping his forced polite tone, Shouji took the seat opposite Mitsuru.

The Worldly Maestro's eyes never left the board as he addressed the newcomer.

"Been a while, yeah? Say, ten years?"

"Got to be. Haven't seen you since you knocked me out of the 3-dan division. But I still think of you as a friend, Mitsuru."

"Was it ever like that?"

Said Mitsuru flatly, exhaling a stream of smoke.

These two once fought in the 3-*dan* division.

One became a professional Shogi player, the other reached the Sub League's age limit and was forced to bow out.

A common story in the Sub League.

"And? Why're you here?" Mitsuru asked his former contemporary who had made his return to the Player's Room.

Shouji answered without a moment's delay. "To root for Ginko."

"That right?"

"A loss today won't stop that boy from getting promoted, and soon. Now Ginko, she'll have a while to wait if she lets this one get away. I want her to move up today."

"Awfully kind of you to say so."

"But of course," said Shouji with a smirk as he revealed the reason behind his generosity.

"That means someone I can get a guaranteed star off of will be joining the 3-*dan* division."

Matches progressed throughout the room, pieces colliding like wildfire.

— So irritating

Ginko peered at Sota's face while plotting her next move. Their formations were entrenched in a tight gridlock.

—Maybe I should take initiative?

Many strategies effective against *yagura* on defense had been discovered in recent years.

Gone were the days when players like Ayumu Kannabe racked up victories

with an offensive *yagura* and *Kannabe Style 1 Five Lance* or its successor *Kannabe Style 3 Six Lance*. Even Ayumu Kannabe himself was using *Snow Roof* formations at a much higher rate recently.

Offensive yagura is dead.

Indeed, some younger players in Kanto had no problem saying it out loud.

No professional player, no Women's League player, or amateur brought *yagura* to its knees.

Shogi software did that.

And Ginko was well aware of that fact.

— This kid goes around saying 7 Eight Gold and 3 Eight Gold are the best opening moves.

It was plainly obvious that Sota's Shogi sense was a product of software.

Therefore, Sota's choice to employ an offensive *yagura* indicated that he had done all the research on his own.

— This could get heated Calm and cool, calm and cool

Her palms slick with sweat, Naniwa's Snow White wiped her hands on her skirt before squeezing the fabric as hard as she could.

"I gotta say, sure is noisy up on the fourth floor."

"No matter who gets promoted to 3-*dan*, special editions'll be written about this one."

Mitsuru and Shouji exchanged words sitting around the analysis board, commenting on the goings-on outside of the match.

The media throng that had occupied the association since early that morning had moved into the fourth-floor multipurpose room and were tracking the match from there. They had been granted access on the condition that they

were barred from entering the arena itself.

“Not to mention it’s Naniwa’s Snow White clashing with the prodigy schoolboy. ‘Course they’d cover it. That’ll bring in more viewers than title matches, too. They even came to me, unworthy as I am, for an interview since I’ll be facing the winner next season in the 3-*dan* division.”

“Don’cha think this much attention is a problem? Who cares how much of a ruckus the outside makes? Sub League members are still in training. That big of a spotlight can’t be a good thing. Even the 3-*dan* division was never meant for a crowd——.”

“A decision by the committee could change that.”

“You’ve lost it if you think there’s a chance in hell Mr. Tsukimitsu’ll allow that. That stage is more sacred than title matches themselves.”

“Ever the pure knight in shining armor, Mitsuru. I’m gonna need sunglasses,” said Shouji, pretending to shield his eyes.

“Tsukimitsu-*sensei* is the chairman. No refuting that. But who else is on the committee? Four from Kanto. Two from Kansai. It will come down to a vote. Numbers are gonna win.”

“.....”

“Tsukimitsu-*sensei* is the face of the Shogi Association. A rather handsome one at that. Yes, but his mind is somewhere else.”

“..... Now I get it. You’re saying the guys that turned your Admission Exam into a media field day are the real brains in the association, and you’re more than happy to wag your tail for them.”

“I grew a lot, living out in the real world. Trying to out-muscle a strong opponent head-on is just a waste of time. You just get drawn into a long fight and end up brownnosing whoever has power. People wag their tails for sponsors.”

“Grew? Sounds to me like you fell face-first into a pile of crap.”

“It’s called wisdom.”

“We don’t let dogs play Shogi,” Mitsuru snapped.

Though Shouji’s smile remained plastered to his face, the vibe in the room had turned sour.

The sharp echo of a piece shot through the heavy air.

Sota Kunugi had stuck out a Pawn, sacrificing it to initiate an attack on Ginko’s formation.

“Now?!”

Mitsuru and Shouji were blindsided by the timing of Sota’s advance.

“..... Must be that *new sense* I’ve heard so much about.”

Mitsuru groaned. He couldn’t help it.

Deploying all the Pawns from his piece stand with reckless abandon, Sota jumped his Knight forward to 1 Seven on his next move.

“He went there?!”

“..... Certainly not the first move that would come to mind.”

Under normal circumstances, moving a Knight into the first column is a misstep. Although it cut the piece’s movement range in half, it was easy to see how Sota came to that decision once he had moved the piece into position.

“So, he used forceful worldliness to break through Ginko’s line in only seven turns That kid would make a good Ranging Rooker if he ever tried it.”

“Especially if he’s getting complimented by the Worldly Maestro.”

Shouji’s fingers danced across his smartphone’s screen. He then whistled in amazement once the display popped up.

“The software recommended exactly the same move. Only took him two

minutes to come to the same conclusion as a machine that's analyzed over 2 billion matches worth of options Ha-ha. Now that's what I call a monster."

"? Are you telling me that smartphone of yours can run Shogi software?"

"Technology never was your thing, was it, Mitsuru? It's called a remote display. My computer at home is doing the calculations. I'm just controlling it from the phone," said Shouji, poking fun at his former contemporary with a twinkle in his eye.

"But, yeah. Even smartphones these days are stronger than human beings."

Ginko lost her chance to go on the offensive but, of course, she wasn't going to take the attack lying down.

Setting up to counterattack in the ninth column, she saw that Sota was gathering his forces in the fifth to defend and instead launched an all-out assault.

It was as if she were unleashing all her bottled-up strength in one brutal advance. However, Mitsuru and Shouji could see the board beginning to tip in Sota's favor as they calmly observed the events unfolding in the arena.

"That's defensive Shogi for you," said a giddy Shouji, watching a style similar to his own in action.

Mitsuru groaned a response out from between his teeth. "Forcing your way forward while taking the opponent's attacks in stride and gently crushing them out of existence. That schoolboy plays so much like an old fart it makes me sick to my stomach"

"Didn't you know, Mitsuru? Software has played more Shogi than all of humanity combined."

"..... How do you mean?"

Shogi has a rich history dating back one thousand four hundred years.

By comparison, Shogi software has only existed for a few decades. The

difference should be obvious.

“A software program called AlphaGo has been toppling top-tier pros from around the world like clockwork, yes? Since Go has quite a few more ins and outs than Shogi, people are estimating it’ll be another ten years before the software completely overtakes us. But it’s already in the lead.”

“And that is?”

“Fifty high-spec PCs backed by Google’s power and resources spent three weeks straight playing tens of millions of matches against themselves at top speed. Now the software is stronger because it’s got all that experience to draw from. Just like people do. The main difference is that a person would be hard-pressed to play just one thousand matches in three weeks even without stopping to sleep.”

“.....”

“Software has already played more matches than humans ever have. *Experience*, our ace in the hole, is long gone,” Shouji declared. “Shogi and Go both boil down to numbers. Not knowing the answer gave that mystery number a mystique, but the one who can crunch numbers faster wins in the end. Personality, etiquette, tradition, they’re only valued so professional players can throw their weight around in the Shogi world.”

“The Shogi gods won’t be happy with you for saying that.”

“Surely they hate me enough as it is having killed me off once already, remember?” Shouji remarked, as if trying to get a bad taste out of his mouth before holding out his smartphone for Mitsuru to see. “As far as I’m concerned, the only god for me is right here.”

Numbers rolled across the smartphone’s screen, Shogi software analyzing tens of millions of possible outcomes all at once.

“Even the Meijin, the man plenty of pro *Senseis* openly call a *god*, would lose ninety-eight times out of a hundred No, he wouldn’t stand a chance. It’s

about time you took a long hard look at reality.”

“Thanks for the opinion.”

One of only four people in the world to hold a professional Shogi title, *King* Mitsuru Oishi watched Sota Kunugi’s move on the monitor and copied it on the analysis board, mumbling, “Setting that Meijin versus software debate aside for the moment——.”

He gritted his teeth.

“This is one strong kid.”

“..... Strong!”

Ginko groaned as Pawns suddenly flooded the board.

——Attacking even at the cost of his own Rook Very strong!!

Ignoring the Pawn that was deployed in her King’s vicinity, Ginko moved to intercept the attack head-on.

Both combatants sacrificed defense in favor of speed. Each made their move the moment the other was finished as if the first one to flinch would be defeated.

——His has better protection But!!

Compared to the two Golds walling off Sota’s King, Ginko’s was completely exposed.

Even so, she calmly advanced promoted Pawns directly into the Golden wall.

Promoted Pawns have deceptive speed. A Shogi proverb.

Pawns are slow, but their *golden* promotion is the equivalent of exchanging a Pawn for a Gold and can dramatically shift the balance of power on the board in the blink of an eye.

For that reason, Promoted Pawns are often called *vipers*. It goes without saying that Sota would deflect the vipers Ginko was sending his way Or at least she thought so.

“Huh?!”

Ginko couldn't restrain her surprise when she saw Sota's move.

Shockingly, the boy decided to leave their fangs sunk deep into his defenses and continued his attack.

The venomous snakes devoured his left hand as Sota gripped Ginko's heart with his right. An astonishing 3 Five Silver!!

“A blind eye?! Now?!”

Sota decided against solving the Promoted Pawn problem and instead focused his attention on a completely different area of the board. Ginko hadn't considered that move, even for a second. She could feel terror start to worm its way into her heart.

—Am I checkmated?!

Judging formations is the most important aspect of playing Shogi.

How pieces come and go. How possible moves appear and disappear. The King's defenses. How pieces work in tandem.

Comparing each of these various aspects determines which player has the advantage. The ability to judge formations is vital to improving Shogi skill for both human beings and software.

However, there is something even more important for humans—a heart strong enough to believe.

For no matter how accurate their judgments were, no matter how many incredibly brilliant moves came to mind, each was pointless if the heart didn't believe in them.

— I'm okay! I should still be okay!!

Watching Sota neglect his defenses to press on with their race to victory, Ginko considered the possibility that her King was dead in the water for a moment.

However her heart was strong.

She used all of her remaining waiting time to build up her courage and fight back against the terror. Her fighting spirit made her blood boil, cleansing her body.

Heated.

Ginko judiciously prepared herself. This would be the killing blow.

As Shouji sat in the Player's Room watching the monitor, he only just now realized he'd become completely engrossed in the match.

His face right next to the screen, he uttered complaints to the monitor whenever it flickered.

"Why does it have to be so darned slow?"

"It's 'cause everyone and their mother wants to take a peek," said Mitsuru with a grin as he lit a fresh cigarette.

Simply knowing the IP address to the camera mounted on the association's ceiling would allow anyone in the world to tune in.

Kansai players must be keeping tabs on the match from the comfort of their own homes That was Mitsuru's theory. Though, being as technologically illiterate as he was, he had no choice but to come to the association.

The starkly empty Player's Room was proof enough.

—So, there are some things I *can* count on.

Mitsuru took a long, satisfying drag from his cigarette.

It would be perfectly natural for everyone to be both interested and simultaneously frightened by Sota Kunugi, the boy who could very well be the world's first *Elementary School Pro*. However, there were plenty of young professionals who got visibly irritated when asked about the boy, simply saying they *don't know much about him*, with a bad taste in their mouths. Mitsuru understood that having that kind of pride was essential for competitors.

Shouji, still completely absorbed in the match, awkwardly leaned away from the monitor and said with a hint of irony, "..... You sure got a big heart. The Worldly Maestro coming all the way to the association just to watch over Little Miss Ginko."

"You've lost your edge, Shouji."

"Meaning?"

"Pwfff"

Mitsuru hadn't come here just to watch Ginko play.

He didn't doubt the girl's ability to promote to 4-*dan*. In his mind, Ginko was talented enough to become a professional player one day.

At the same time, however, he knew that Ginko would never be a threat to him even should she join the professional ranks.

As for her current opponent——

Seconds ticked by on the chess clock.

"Haa Haa Haaaa————"

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Taking short breaths as if trying to drink the air, Ginko moved the pieces on her mental Shogi board around in time with the clock's metronomic beeps to read the sequence all the way to the end.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep————

“.....!!”

She reached her right hand to the opposite side of the board to deliver the knockout punch once the clock’s *five second alert* rang out.

——7 Six Bishop Promote!! This will end it!!

Her move, a *check path reversal*.

It’s a counterpunch, one that finishes off the opponent just before they can lend their own finishing blow. Ginko found this decisive move by withstanding the pressure to make a move quickly and kept reading and reading. Now she had a way to unleash all the heat built up in her heart in one fell swoop!!

——Did I do it?!

Ginko peered up at Sota’s face.

The child prodigy sitting across from her, “.....,” reached toward the board without a word while deftly spinning a piece between his fingers.

“.....?”

——What’s that? A Knight?

Ginko’s gaze fell on the boy’s fingertips.

While hiding pieces on standby from your opponent was bad gamesmanship, the boy didn’t appear to be doing it on purpose. Perhaps it was a habit?

——Deploying a Knight? Where?

However Sota returned the Knight to his piece stand and picked up another piece instead in order to attack Ginko’s King directly. 3 Four Silver!

“Check!!”

Goosebumps erupted down her back in an instant, but not from fear.

—— Wouldn’t have it any other way!

Out of all the options Sota had on the table, Ginko felt she could handle an all-out rush on her King. Seeing the scenario she had worked out in her head come to life before her eyes made her blood boil with anticipation.

—I can see it! Even on my mental Shogi board I can see how to win!!

Sota continued his precise bombardment, putting her in check each turn without using any waiting time whatsoever.

The Defending King was pursued all the way to the back row, but—

“Here!!”

Intent on crushing Sota’s offensive, Ginko picked up the Bishop she promoted into a Horse when she first initiated the *check path reversal* and brought it back to her King. This simultaneously offensive and defensive move allowed her King to escape by the slimmest of margins.

Or it should have.

“.....”

Sota reached for his piece stand yet again and started spinning a piece between his fingers.

— A Knight?

Ginko could sense something was amiss when she caught a glimpse of the character engraved on that piece. It happened that instant.

The boy snapped the Knight down in a place she hadn’t considered.

Reinforcing neither offense nor defense, it appeared to be a wasted move

“Knight? A Knight at 8 Five?”

Ginko was bewildered.

Deploying a piece so far out of the way would give her an opportunity to counterattack.

—Why move there? This is suddenly much easier

She leaned in for a closer look to confirm or deny her suspicions when, very quietly, the boy whispered into her ear.

“Back at you.”

“Huh?”

That’s when it hit her. The reason for that move.

—Check path reversal!!

“How?! T-That can’t be right”

Ginko froze on the spot as if solid ice filled her veins.

It was the second check path reversal in their match. Just as Ginko’s marvelous offensive and defensive move to get her Horse in position had shifted the balance of power, Sota’s superb Knight placement had turned the tide back into his favor.

However, the truly terrifying fact was

Sota Kunugi had read the sequence perfectly on the 108th turn, back when he was first twirling a Knight between his fingers.

Now, twenty moves later, Sota had successfully reversed Ginko’s check path reversal. This was no coincidence. Clearly, the boy had been executing a plan.

—From that point he read all the way up to here?!

“4 Three Bishop promotes, making the King retreat to 7 One 4 Four Horse puts the King and Rook in check?! No way?!”

An eye for an eye.

Sota Kunugi meant for that move to break Ginko’s spirit. To crush her pride

and prevent her from pointing a blade in his direction ever again.

Just winning would be too easy.

Ginko could almost hear the boy think it.

That psychological blow did enough damage to make Ginko's mental Shogi board disappear entirely.

— No! I can't read anything!!

Now panicking, each second marked by one of the chess clock's electronic beeps seemed like a hammer falling, driving the nail deeper into her coffin.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A countdown to her doom.

"Ah, agh aghhh"

Then, the five-second warning.

Ginko's quivering fingers reached for the board but still didn't know which piece to move where. The alert blared.

Beeep

Ginko gave up trying to think in that moment.

—Gods!!

She sent up a prayer and moved her Rook as far forward as it would go. Then her fingers clung to it as she flipped it over, as if holding on for dear life.

Dragon.

Just seeing that character written on her Promoted Bishop gave her a brief respite from the terror. Warmth, however small, swept through her cold, sweat-soaked body.

Naniwa's Snow White craved even the slightest heat like a poor girl selling matches in the city on a cold winter's day. That move had no relation to Shogi whatsoever. It was the story of a child crying out for comfort like in a fairy tale.

Only this tale was a tragedy.

—— It's over

Ginko couldn't look at the board. Her head hung limp between her shoulders as she didn't have the courage to look up.

However——.

“.....?!”

In contrast to Ginko's hanging head, Sota was eerily still as if a bolt of lightning had struck him where he sat.

“?!?!!!”

He then leaned forward to the point where his forehead grazed the board's surface and started analyzing everything in front of his face at top speed.

“.....?”

By this point, Ginko was beginning to wonder why her executioner's hand had yet to fall.

Slowly, cautiously, she ventured a glimpse.

“???”

——What could it be?

First and foremost, she wanted to get the Rook anywhere else so that she wouldn't lose to a King and Rook check. That was the one fate she couldn't bear. Rather than reading the board, she sent the piece as deep into enemy territory as possible.

That move, one so simple only an amateur would think of it, had left Sota in shock. Ginko couldn't understand why.

— What's happening?

After putting no thought into her last move, Ginko tried to calm herself as she looked at the board once again to get a handle on the situation.

That's when she noticed.

"..... Ah?!"

—That last move was the third check path reversal?!

"Huh? But that's Huh?"

An unbelievably lucky turn of events.

What she played under pressure as the seconds piled up was the best possible move, bringing her back from the brink and hitting Sota like the counterpunch at the same time!

Lucky fingers.

That was the only explanation. The gods stepped in to change the tale's ending

Creak!

Sota bit down so hard that his molars made an audible scream as the boy advanced his 8 Five Knight, promoting it in Ginko's territory. He was creating a path for his King to escape.

It was equivalent to admitting his own formation had collapsed.

—I can win?

Ginko realized she was in position to emerge victorious at this point. She wasn't certain her King was safe, nor had she read all the way to checkmate. Only because Sota could see his own demise written on the wall did she know it

was going to happen.

Having too many options, Sota revealed his dire situation to Ginko by his own hand.

So determined he was to close out the match with an artistic flair, Sota Kunugi made a mistake.

If he had continued his barbaric pursuit of Ginko's King, it was highly unlikely the girl could have held back the onslaught and thus she would have had to surrender. What's more, if he had simply ignored Ginko's check path reversal and countered right away, the girl would never have realized how perfect her move had been and most likely she would have given up on the spot.

The strong claim victory in Shogi.

However, too much strength can result in a loss in Shogi as well.

— Checkmate?

Finding a known sequence to checkmate is not a difficult task. Realizing one exists in a live match, on the other hand, is more difficult than anything else.

Ginko's fingers shook with such velocity that they couldn't hold a piece.

The checkmate was there.

Sota's King was most definitely going to be put in checkmate.

— Seventeen turns

She couldn't believe it. That long sequence came to her in the blink of an eye and led all the way to checkmate. Everything was playing right into her hands.

The boy probably knew the end was near just as she did. He continued to play despite this knowledge because he was hoping she would make a mistake before the very end or because he needed time to come to terms with the defeat. Ginko thought it could be a combination of the two as she put the final clamps down on Sota's King before it could squirm away.

Their Kings stared each other down.

Ginko reached for her piece stand to draw the dagger that would seal the deal.

A Silver.

She snapped the piece that shared the *gin* in her name down onto the board.

Fingers trembling, it landed awkwardly but—there was no escape for the Offensive King.

Sota put his hands on his knees and lowered his head at the sight.

“I lost.”

Hearing that high-pitched, almost feminine voice reminded Ginko that her opponent sitting across the board was still an eleven-year-old attending elementary school.

Final Result: Kunugi 2-*dan* surrendered on the 154th move.

It was the moment that the first female Sub League 3-*dan* in history was born.

▲ BEYOND HUMAN

I won.

“Ah?”

I couldn't process that at first.

My brain was still firing on all cylinders, ready for the next move even when Sota Kunugi sat up from his bow.

The enemy King on the board had nowhere to run.

Even so, I didn't believe I'd just won.

“She beat Kunugi?!”

“Damn!!”

“The first female 3-*dan*, ever That's Snow White for you”

Only when the whispers going between the other Sub League members standing around our board reach my ears does reality start to set in.

I won?

I promoted?

I'm 3-*dan*?

“Congratulations, Ginko. This means you're 3-*dan* now, right?”

“Ah yes. Thank you”

He's looking up at me with a genuine smile and wishing me well.

With nerves jolting and my heart beating fast enough to break out of my chest, there's only one thought in my head.

—— The Shogi gods answered me.

I ask him in a hoarse voice.

“..... Here”

Fingers shaking, I show him the move where I advanced my Rook in the late game. The moment I let the gods take over. The moment they answered me.

“I couldn’t read it The board in my head, it wouldn’t move——.”

“The board in your head? Ahh, are you talking about a mental Shogi board?”

Sota tilts his head just to the side.

“So, you have one of those, Ginko? I’m impressed.”

“? You’re great at solving Shogi puzzles, right? Your late game reads are always so accurate Surely, you must have more than a few mental Shogi boards?”

“Yes, I’m good at Shogi puzzles. But——.”

Sota Kunugi nods as words roll off his tongue.

They reveal a truth so shocking that it both carves a hole in my heart and shakes me to my core.

“I don’t have a Shogi board in my head. It’s all in numbers.”

..... Huh?

“Sequences play out in numbers. I don’t see a board and pieces moving around.”

Thinking in numbers?

He doesn’t have a mental Shogi board?

“Wha? But, Shogi puzzles——.”

“I see them in numbers, too. I can figure out how they’re built right away without thinking too hard, so the numbers line up in my head as long as I know where to start.”

His head still tilted to the side, the boy looks at me with curiosity in his eyes.

“I could picture a board and pieces if I wanted to, but that takes so much effort. Don’t you get tired, keeping track of all those pieces in your head?”

This.

This boy.

He wasn’t simply *affected* by software.

This boy sitting in front of me—is a living, breathing *computer*.



“I, um I see

Shogi Martians I can deal with. They’re alive just like me.

But how am I supposed to deal with an opponent that isn’t alive?

“One other thing: at about this point in the match, I could’ve been checkmated at 8 Seven. I only noticed it after deploying the Knight at 8 Five You moved your Rook after you read that sequence, right? I thought you let the checkmate slip by, but I’ve still got a lot to learn. If you’d hit the Bishop at 3 Two, I wouldn’t have stood a chance. Should I have played my Bishop at 3 One?”

Checkmate?

I didn’t see it, not even for a second——.

“Anyway, I’m so happy for you! I’ll be joining you in the 3-*dan* division real soon! Let’s have a rematch!”

“S Sure

“Thank you again. Bye now.”

Sota gives me a short little bow and waits until I finish putting the pieces away before standing up and leaving the arena with light, little steps.

I can’t get up.

My legs, my hips, my back, that shock shattered everything. I’m still hunching over the board, my eyes locked on one spot and one spot only.

—— I only won when I stopped thinking.

—— He only lost because he read his own defeat.

I’m victorious today ... because I was lucky.

But from here on out, which one of us will get stronger It’s obvious.

I won the battle. Not with skill. With luck.

But———I lost in Shogi.

My last move wasn't Shogi. It was the same as winning a game of rock paper scissors. I'll never improve winning on pure luck like that.

Sota Kunugi is stronger than me right now, and he'll only get stronger still.

Because he's always thinking.

Because when I'd given up thinking, he was still using his beyond human calculating skills to find the best move all the way up to the final second.

If.

If I have to face him again——.

"I absolutely cannot win."

Sitting alone in front of the board, the truth shook me to my core.

Wobbling my way to the supervisor, I tell him that I won and immediately go to the press conference.

"Miss Sora! This way! Look this way, please!!"

"Come on, smile! Crack a grin, flash those teeth!!"



The camera flashes are so bright that I can't open my eyes.

The chairman sitting next to me and a wall of reporters in front is all I see.

In the very same room where Shumai-sensei told me to *break the wall*, I sit here now having broken one of the walls and answering an endless stream of questions.

“Now you are officially the first female to achieve 3-*dan*. Did you come here today determined to get the promotion?!”

“Which were you happier to receive? Your women's titles or this promotion?!”

“What are your plans for high school?!”

“Do you prefer the sailor-style school uniform or the high school blazer style?!”

I don't remember anything I said.

Unsure if I was caught in a dream or not, I went down to the third-floor offices once the press conference was finished.

The staff greets me with applause.

Mr. Mine smiles at me and points to the TV.

“Everyone's talking about you, Ginko! Every station is interrupting their broadcast with breaking news and newspapers all around Osaka are printing special editions! You're going to be all over the news tonight Ahh, wouldn't it be great if this starts a Shogi boom for girls?”

A dry smile is all I could give them. It's my duty to smile at everyone in this room.

The press conference that just ended is already on the screen.

“Now you are officially the first female to achieve 3-dan. Did you come here today determined to get the promotion?!”

“Of course. I play every match intending to win,” said the resolute girl dressed in a sailor-style school uniform on the screen.

The scene then changes to the studio where the news people shower her with compliments.

“Fantastic! Typical junior high school girls can’t hold their own in interviews like that!”

“She’s an inspiration to women everywhere!”

“I’m calling it here and now. She has what it takes to become the first female pro Shogi player in history!”

—You’re wrong.

I silently refuted every word of praise coming out of the news anchors’ mouths one after the other.

You’re wrong. I’m not skilled enough to be in 3-*dan*.

Today’s win was all luck. How could I ever get through the 3-*dan* division the way I am now

The terrifying truth creeps into my mind.

I’m going to have to face the real 3-*dan* division members, the ones who claimed that position with skill.

“.....!!”

That obvious fact sends a jolt down my spine.

My playing style is totally exposed, completely naked.

Very few 3-*dan* members have played in public, so their match records are well hidden. On the other hand, anyone can see all of my records from the Women’s Title matches.

And I know what everyone in there is thinking.

I refuse to be the first 3-dan to lose to a girl.

I have no weapons, no way to hide and I'm about to be thrown naked into a cage filled with monsters.

—Hell.

That's what it feels like.

I've been wanting to get into the 3-dan division since the day I joined the Sub League.

Now that I finally achieved what I've always wanted the truth scares me.

The one place that's always been my sanctuary since I was four, where I could relax like I was at home, was the Kansai Shogi Association.

Now, it's hell on earth.

The Player's Room was always so warm and inviting, almost like my room at home, now it feels like a prison cell.

I was thankful to the Shogi gods the moment I beat Sota. They'd finally recognized everything I've done, all the effort I've spent over the years and answered my call.

The very same gods I refused to believe in when I was a kid, exist Or so I thought.

But that gratitude is long gone. I wanted to scream.

— There aren't any.

There are no gods here!!

“.....Yaichi I'm scared. Save me”

I stumbled my way out of Shogi hell like a toddler still learning to walk.

CELEBRATION

“Dad! Are you sure it’s recording?!”

Keika’s sharp voice comes blaring out of the kitchen and Master and I pull our heads down like turtles.

No, it’s not recording.

“..... Hmm, I guess this thing has seen better days.”

I’ve tried to get the TV’s recording function to work several times, but nothing’s getting saved. Maybe it’s time to get a new one?

There’s a live stream of Big Sis’s press conference on the screen.

“Now you are officially the first female to achieve 3-dan. Did you come here today determined to get the promotion?!”

“Of course. I play every match intending to win.”

We raced home as soon as we found out Big Sis got promoted.

Keika, who was waiting for us when we got here, happily declared, “We need to celebrate!” Then, she brought Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin into the kitchen to help her out and got the dead weight (Master and I) out of the way. So, we’re here in the living room.

There’s so much noise coming out of the kitchen right now.

“Well, you can’t exactly prepare for a party like this. Getting ready in advance would just pile on pressure and jinx her at the same time. Nothing we can do about it.”

“.....”

Master silently stares at the TV.

“Chairman Tsukimitsu. Does Miss Sora promoting while in junior high school

bode well for her future?"

"Of course. There's no mistaking that she has great potential," the chairman said softly from his seat next to Big Sis. "However, promoting to 4-dan requires advancing through the 3-dan division, the most competitive scene in the Shogi world. The Meijin and myself were promoted to 4-dan while still in junior high, but we did so before the 3-dan division came into existence. The only person who has made it through the modern format while still in junior high is Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu. And, he went on to claim Shogi's highest position, Dragon King Ryuo, immediately after his promotion."

"So, what you're saying is making it through the 3-dan division is as difficult as standing on top of the Shogi world?"

"Yes. The 3-dan division is unforgiving. Only two will make it through the rigors of each season So long as that holds true, talent alone will not be enough to make it through. A strong heart is imperative."

"A strong heart?"

The journalist doing the interview didn't seem to get what the chairman said, but Big Sis sat up straight at his side.

"I'm pretty sure the chairman said that for Big Sis rather than the journalist. Like a parting gift in words."

"....."

Master sent up a prayer toward the TV.

He should be the one sitting next to Big Sis at the press conference, but Master Kiyotaki had his wisdom teeth taken out yesterday. He still can't talk at all.

Even so, he had a kimono ready and was about to go to the association. That's when his irritated elder brother apprentice, Chairman Tsukimitsu, told him, "Don't bother coming if you can't speak." So, Master had no choice but to wait

at home. Of course, that's what happened.

"Seriously, Master, why did you schedule that surgery for yesterday?"

"Fphh ighhh hyaaahhee hehya."

"Yeah, you can't go to a press conference like this."

Charlette is easier to understand.

Giving up on trying to interpret Master's jumble of sounds, I focus completely on the press conference so I don't miss a word of what Big Sis has to say.

"You will officially take part in the next 3-dan division season starting in April. Should all go well, you could be a professional in six months. What do you think your chances are?"

"I'm focused on winning the match in front of me, nothing else."

"Are you aiming to promote to 4-dan by a certain age?"

"The 3-dan division is much more competitive than anything I've faced before, so my only goal at the moment is getting my first victory."

"Are you concerned about doing Women's League matches at the same time?"

"I believe that each match is a chance for improvement. The more the better."

"Your defense matches will overlap with the 3-dan division schedule. Do you foresee any problems?"

"Both are important, and I intend to fully commit myself to each of them."

"There's a possibility that someone in your Shogi lineage, Ai Yashajin, may challenge you for the Queen title. Your thoughts?"

"I play my way no matter who the opponent is."

"Are you planning to continue on to high school?"

"I'll make a decision once I have a chance to talk it over with my Master and

my parents. Personally, I would like to be in a position where I can prioritize Shogi."

"Miss Sora, that sailor-style uniform has become your trademark. Entering high school would mean wearing a blazer instead. Which do you prefer?"

"I've never worn a blazer, so I honestly don't know."

"Can I ask for your honest opinion about your nickname: Naniwa's Snow White?"

"It's easy for fans to remember, so I'm grateful to have it."

"A renowned foreign clothing brand makes designs with you specifically in mind, Miss Sora. They seem to want you to wear their designs during matches. Would you consider it?"

"I will think about it once I'm a professional."

The look on her face is an absolute *no*.

All the Shogi questions disappear after that and the reporters start asking her about her favorite foods and movie stars.

"..... I guess that means most of the journalists there think of Big Sis like a celebrity."

"Hyhhf hfaaai faya fohoo."

"Master. Would you please be quiet?"

The press conference is wrapping up.

"The next question will be the last," announces Ms. Oga, overseeing crowd control.

Each of the journalists must want to ask it because a sea of hands flies into the air——.

"Yes The young woman wearing glasses, please."

“Shogi journalist, Mato.”

The last one to be called upon announces her pen name before asking her question.

“Do you idolize any professional player?”

“.....”

For the first time, Big Sis doesn't know what to say.

“..... There's no one that I idolize, no,” she finally says after taking a minute to organize her thoughts.

Then, she looks directly into the camera and says

“But———there is one I want to play against as a pro.”

The journalists go nuts.

“Who is it?!”

“A titleholder?!”

“Or, is it your Master?!”

“It's gotta be the Meijin, right?!”

Big Sis stands up and does a deep bow.

“I'm sorry. I'll say who it is when I become a professional.”

As if that were the signal, Chairman Tsukimitsu brings the press conference to a close.

“That's all for today. Please submit any further questions in writing and they will be answered at a later date.”

But.

“Miss Sora! Please just a few more questions!”

Unable to take no for an answer, the journalists start following Big Sis out of the room.

“How many years do you think it will take to turn pro?!”

“Talent agencies seem very interested in your services, Miss Sora?!”

“Is there a man who you are currently involved with?!”

They go right up to her.

“Receiving this degree of attention is truly an honor.”

A blind Shogi player steps in front of the media horde to protect Big Sis.

Chairman Tsukimitsu turns his unseeing eyes toward them and glares.

“However, Sub League players are not professionals nor are they public figures. They are trainees who have sacrificed every other aspect of their lives to commit their futures to Shogi and Shogi alone. Reaching 3-dan is only the starting line along that path. I humbly request that you continue to quietly watch over her journey from a distance for the time being.”

“.....”

Nobody could say anything against the chairman’s elegant words. He always knows just what to say.

The feed switches back to the news studio.

It’s time for the local news to start, but it seems like Big Sis is the top story there, too.

“Look! They’re going to do another news segment right away.”

“Ffhhyai ffuuha fhaa.”

“True. True.”

While I have no idea what he said, it’s easier to just nod along with it. He’s my

Master after all!

“But I’ve got to say, if they’re making this big of a deal out of Big Sis promoting to 3-*dan*, what are they going to do when she turns pro? It’ll be national news, not just in the Shogi world. Just think, this will be rare footage ten years down the road as long as we can get it recorded!”

“..... Fhoo fhhaahhah.”

“Oh, and who do you think she wants to face when she makes it to the pros? It’s got to be the Meijin. There’s no way she was talking about you, Master.”

“Fhhnnnofhhaaahhhhfannnhyaaafuuuhaa.”

“True. True.”

Master and I go back and forth like this a few times when.

Tap tap.

I feel a finger poking my shoulder from behind.

It’s Keika. She’s got her smartphone in her other hand.

“Hm? Ah, Keika. It’s fine, really. We couldn’t get the press conference recorded onto a DVD, but Master and I have it perfectly locked away in our memories. We’ll play it back for Big Sis when she gets home——.”

“Don’t worry about that now.”

Phone tightly in her grasp, she leans in close to whisper in my ear.

“..... Yaichi. Would you go meet Ginko at the station?”

“Station? So, I need to go over to Fukushima?”

“No. Noda.”

Noda Station is practically across the street.

“Ginko just got on the train. She’ll get to Noda any minute, so go pick her up.”

“Why? Noda Station is straight down the street, barely a block away. She

doesn't need me to meet her——.”

“Just go, Yaichi!”

She shoves me toward the door and I end up going that way without any idea why.

Both my apprentices look busy in the kitchen.

——Well I'll only get in the way here.

With that in mind, I leave the house on my own.

■ DETERMINATION

I left the association almost entirely on muscle memory.

“.....Save me Saaave me”

Murmuring, I hold onto one of the train's polls for dear life.

I'm on the Kanjou Line.

Going for Master's house.

The path from the station to his house is embedded in my memory after the thousands of times I've walked it during my time as a live-in apprentice. My mind is racing so fast that the thought of taking a taxi didn't even cross it.

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Dry heaves keep coming whenever thoughts of how much the association changed pop up in my head. My sanctuary transformed into a place that devours all hope. There's nothing left now but pain and despair.

— It's hell.

No one will save me.

After all those boards and pieces I cleaned, even though I've been a good girl all this time, the Shogi gods left me out to dry.

“..... There are no gods”

Those words cursing nonexistent deities took everything out of me.

Getting off the train, I stay plastered to the wall and take my time going down the stairs one by one.

I can barely lurch forward like some boneless slug, let alone walk.

“..... They don't exist There are no gods Anywhere———.”

Then, stepping out of the station, I saw.



— Ahhh

I felt it for the first time in that moment.

Master told me when I was very young, but in all my years of playing Shogi, I've never felt it before But now, I can confirm.

Shogi gods, do exist.

Even I thought that was too simple.

I've denied them point-blank for so long.

Insulted them so many times.

That's why I'm so thankful for this little present they've given me.

"Big Sis."

"Yaichi."

I wanted to let the tears flow and run into his arms.

Instead, I will my spine to straighten up so that I can show him dignity worthy of being his elder sister apprentice and let the wind whip my sailor collar back and forth as I cross the street.

Yaichi waits for me on the other side and says with concern, "Big Sis? Are you feeling all right? You're really pale——."

"Going to throw up."

"On me?!"

My face falls square into Yaichi's chest as I land on top of him.

No more.

I'm at my limit physically, but—I just can't anymore.

I can't hold back the tears.

"..... A quick ... rest"

"Are ... are you sure you want me for that?"

"..... I'll deal."

I'm not *dealing* with it.

You're the one I want, Yaichi. You're the only one.

I'd love to stay just like this, but I know I can't.

I'll get weaker if I start depending on you And it's not like you'd ever choose me, anyway. You'd just get embarrassed if I tried to make a move.

I don't want to see that face again.

But It's okay just for right now, right?

"..... I got promoted ... to 3-*dan*"

"Yeah. I saw your press conference on TV. We couldn't get it recorded in time, but that's okay because Master and I have the whole thing burned into our memories."

"..... Sota Kunugi wasn't a big deal after all"

"That's the right mindset. You'll never make it through the 3-*dan* division if you go in thinking you'll lose. Having the confidence to know that you're the best is what's important."

Then, I'm done for.

Not realizing that your *words of encouragement* are actually twisting the dagger already deep in my heart must be because you're a Shogi Martian.

You couldn't understand how earthlings like me feel.

You're from another planet

"Getting promoted will give you some momentum. Ride that head of steam as

far as you can go!”

“I’ll get through the division in one season, promote to 4-*dan* and destroy you in a league match

“You really hate me, don’t you, Big Sis?”

“That’s right. I hate you, Yaichi. I hate hate hate you.”

—Because you’re so dense.

You can read my mind like a book when we play Shogi, but you won’t even try to figure out what I’m thinking any other time.

I hate you, Yaichi. Because you won’t look my way.

I hate you, Yaichi. Because you won’t fall for me.

But, there’s nothing I can do about that, either.

I don’t have any cute charms like Ai Hinatsuru.

I wasn’t born the daughter of a prodigy like Ai Yashajin.

I don’t have Keika’s big boobs and I can’t smother you in kindness.

A clumsy, short-tempered girl like me can’t do anything.

There’s nothing I can do for you. There’s nothing I can give you, either.

I’m just a flat-chested good-for-nothing with a feeble body that breaks in sunlight who can’t see a proper mental Shogi board.

That’s all I am.

That’s why Shogi is all I have.

Shogi is the only way you’ll ever notice me.

Even that’s not enough right now.

But, if I become a professional You’ll have to take me seriously in a league match.

You'll finally take a serious look at me.

It's only while we play Shogi, but you'll only be looking at me.

If.

If Shogi gods really do exist.

Please, let me advance to 4-*dan*.

I'm not asking for talent. I'm not asking for more Shogi skill.

Just one season.

The next 3-*dan* division Just half a year, give me strength. Give me a strong heart and a body that can last, please.

The boy I fell in love with is the Prince of Planet Shogi.

I'm just an earthling, looking up at that distant star in admiration.

Even standing in his arms like this, it feels like there are thousands of light years between us.

The Shogi Martian planet is so far away and the air they breathe is poisonous to earthlings. We'll die if we ever go to that place.

Even so I want to go.

I want to go so badly my heart could burst at any moment.

Please, gods.

Let me stand where Yaichi stands.

And just once, once is enough, let me play Shogi against him.

If you do——Dying is fine by me.

FOR THE AFTERWORD: *MY GRANDFATHER*

When I was a little boy, it was my grandfather on my mother's side who taught me how to play Shogi.

Raised by a single mother, I consider him to be the closest thing I had to a father figure growing up.

As I was his first grandchild, he spoiled me quite a bit when I was young. It was all thanks to him that my mother and I never had to worry about money in those days.

My relationship with my loving *Grandpa* only faltered when I made a certain decision.

That decision was to start writing light novels.

For a man born before World War II, light novels didn't qualify as literature. There was no way he would accept that *light novel author* was a legitimate occupation.

I changed all sorts of details in my profile when my first book was released, all to keep my identity a secret from my family.

However, the truth couldn't stay hidden forever and my grandfather told me to "get out of his house."

That's when I left home.

My grandfather died three years later.

I didn't get to be at his side when he passed away.

I came back home for the first time in a very long time when my mother sent a message saying, "Your grandfather passed away." When I walked inside, there was one major difference from the home that I remembered.

It was full of my work.

Volume 2 of *Nourin* was right next to his pillow with a bookmark peeking out from between the pages.

Several anime posters had been neatly framed and hung up on the walls and there was a box of sweets from Minokamo City, where *Nourin* was set, that had been sold at a special collaboration event sitting in the kitchen. Every volume of manga, DVD and Blu-ray based on my work was carefully lined up on his bookshelf.

This man, over eighty years old, was reading light novels, reading manga, watching anime and visiting the places within the stories. All the while he was dealing with the aftereffects of a stroke and could barely walk

“I’m sorry”

That was all I could say.

I could only sit next to his body, crying, as other family members who’d gathered came up to speak with me one after the other.

They said he bragged that I was his grandson.

Upon briefly returning to my apartment to prepare for the funeral, I stopped to grab a bundle of papers off my desk.

It was the manuscript for Volume 1 of *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done*.

I had typed up the manuscript and printed it from my computer before revising it over and over again, to the point where all of my different colored corrections looked like confetti on every page. I took that pile of pages and put them in my grandfather’s casket to be cremated along with him.

It was a hot day, not two months before the book would make its debut.

I've poured my heart and soul into *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done*.

This story was born from my decision to write what I wanted to write and create a story that I wouldn't be embarrassed about no matter who read it.

That desire came from wanting my grandfather to be proud of me.

I wanted him to recognize what light novels, my chosen profession, could be.

If I have one regret, it's that the one person I wanted to read this book never got the chance.

Because my grandfather went to a place books can't reach.

I'm sure, however, that even if he can't read it, he's watching over me on the other side.

Grandpa. Another one of my stories is being made into anime.

Let's watch this one together next time.

**REVIEW
SESSION**



REVIEW SESSION

“Whoa?! What the Kuzu, Machi! What’s up with this?!”

“Ah, Ryou, a good day to you.”

Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka steps into the Kansai Association’s Player’s Room on the third floor for the first time in a while and gasps at the sight.

“Wha Huh? How’d everything get so pretty?”

“Little Miss Ai cleaned the whole room from top to bottom,” says Machi Kugui as she rubs her cheek against the clean and sparkling tabletop.

But, it’s not just the tables.

The heavily worn and scratched up Shogi boards on top of them look good as new.

“I’ll be taking charge of the Player’s Room from now on!” Ai declared before spending the whole weekend cleaning every nook and cranny in here.

First, she used one of those foreign cleaning agents they sell on late-night infomercials to clean off the grime that’s been building up in here for decades with one clean swipe. Then, she had Shumai-sensei go to work on the boards and brought some of the flowers we’ve got growing on the apartment balcony over here to freshen up the atmosphere.

This plain and simple room that has absorbed the blood and tears of Kansai Shogi players for generations has been reborn and now looks pretty much the same as one of the fancy pancake restaurants in Umeda!

“It’s so nice in here I just might stay for the duration. As long as Little Miss Ai’s the one in charge of upkeep, this’ll never change.”

“Very true. Playing Shogi in a nice place like this would be a real shame. That’s why we’re relaxing with some tea.”

“Uh-huh Didn’t you come here to do something else?”

The room is so neat and orderly that the tomboyish Ryou must feel like a fish out of water. She’s the type of person who would build a hideout in the middle of ruins.

“This is the Player’s Room, ain’t it? It’s for playing Shogi. But here you guys are getting your priorities mixed up Aw-hh, look, just look at that. All the books of Shogi puzzles on the shelf have been replaced with cooking magazines. *How to Make Croissants* Ridiculous. What the heck’s going on in Kansai?”

“All of them Little Miss Ai’s doing. Such a good girl she is.”

“Ai Wait? Isn’t she your grade school apprentice, Kuzu?”

“That’s right. You played against her in the Mynavi Finals, my apprentice Ai Hinatsuru.”

As is the Master’s job, I say hello to one of the more experienced Women’s League players for my apprentice.

“Seems you were very strict with her. Thank you.”

“Mm I might have been a bit too harsh, though. Part of me wasn’t happy about having to play against a little girl, so yeah, my bad”

Ryou looks away like she’s ashamed of herself. Apparently, she’s aware of the fact that she picks on the weak ones.

“But yeah, that runt did all this by herself? All of this cleaning?”

“My apprentice is a Master when it comes to housework.”

“Feminine know-how at its best,” says Machi as she elegantly sips tea from her cup.

Ai even chose the tea brand as well as the kettle and cups.

Feeling a little uncomfortable, I get the conversation going again.

“Plenty of other women have used this room in the past, too.”

“Miss Ginko’s one track mind is dedicated to Shogi, so there’s no helping her lack of feminine know-how.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Ginko doesn’t know the first thing about being a lady.”

“.....”

Two Women’s Title holders completely ignore their own quirks to bash my older sister apprentice. They’re competitors, that’s for sure.

“Well The Player’s Room is going to start filling up really quick with the Placement Matches about to hit their peak. It’ll be back to how it used to look in no time.”

“This is *the longest day of the Shogi calendar* after all.”

“That’s the thing about this time of year You’ve got joy and sorrow on two sides of the same coin, which makes coming to the association a real drag”

The air inside this room filled with *feminine know-how* suddenly feels a lot heavier.

The Placement Matches are actually the Shogi world’s largest official league tournament where every pro battles for a chance to challenge the Meijin.

But at the core, it establishes the *hierarchy* in the Shogi world.

Only one person can challenge the Meijin. In other words, the one who takes the top spot in the Placement Matches claims that right.

Every player who had a hand in deciding the one to face the Meijin is assigned a rank based on their results and their Shogi skills are given a number ... Apart from the winner, anyway.

No matter how good a player’s resume, they’ll get demoted if they lose. That lower rank puts a spotlight on them as their strength declines, bright enough for the whole world to see.

Demoted players’ records get marked with *demotion points*. They’ll be forced

into retirement if they get hit with too many of those points.

Those grueling days are about to begin.

“And? What about you, Kuzu?”

“What about me? Oh, my Placement Matches? I’m undefeated right now, thank you——.”

“I ain’t asking about that. Don’t play dumb. I’ve heard the news. So, you’re engaged to a little girl?”

“Th-That’s not true! I got caught in a trap set by the chairman and a viciously aggressive inn manager!!”

“Seems like lots of little girls are getting caught in that trap to me. Lucky Loli-con bastard.”

“Watch your mouth?! You call yourself a lady?!”

You’re a Women’s Title holder, have some pride!!

“That’s not all there is to the story. I have a reliable source that says the Ryuo here was spotted holding hands with Miss Ginko and walking down the streets of Sakuranomiya——.”

“No shit?! That’s where all the love hotels are, right?!!”

“I-I-It’s not what it sounds like! We were having a secret practice session! The truth is that Mr. Oishi asked us to work with him in Kyoubashi, and someone saw us! B-But it was supposed to be a secret, so we couldn’t tell anyone——.”

“Daaaamn. I guess being Ryuo means you get lots of choices.”

“Ryuo, openly engaged to the elementary school girl living alongside him. However, unable to forget the flavor of the junior high school girl he once shared a roof with, he indulges in both Sounds perfect for a lovey-dovey afternoon soap opera.”

“What is it with guys and young girls, huh? Ginko may be flat as a board, sure, but how could some elementary school kid be better?”

“Youth is on her side, but so is the feminine know-how. The hard-working types get claimed early on.”

“So then, a girl that’ll grant your every wish is the best, eh? You really are trash, Kuzu.”

“How many times do I have to tell you it isn’t like that?! Are you listening?!!”

I scream at the girls going off on their own tangent. Give me a break!!

“I don’t know anything about this *feminine know-how*, but let me tell you something! Men don’t care about that stuff! How can we consider that if we aren’t even looking!”

“Okay, where are men looking?”

“BOOBS, OKAY! JUST BOOBS!!”

I scream from the soul, shaking the Kansai Shogi Association building at the same time.

My voice was so loud Two people who absolutely could not be allowed to hear me heard me

The Player’s Room door slides open right behind me. Then, voices I know very well——.

“Master? We need to talk, so please sit down on the floor.”

“Tsukiyomizaka-sensei. Kugui-sensei. Would you please step outside for a moment? I don’t want any blood to splatter on your clothes.”

“Go right ahead.”

“Agh! Ryou, Machi! Don’t act like you’re innocent here?! You’re the one who said Big Sis isn’t ladylike, has a flat chest and is barely better than a grade schooler! Wait, stop right there! S Stop! Please, no don’t leave

mee!!

Aghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Ah! Stop! Agh

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—!!”

That spick-and-span Player’s Room got a bit dirtier that day.

With my freshly shed blood and tears

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Decades worth of changes happened to professional Shogi during the months I wrote this book. There was the youngest professional's winning streak, a switch from seven titles to eight and even several new strategies discovered by Shogi software I was left wondering what in the world I should write but settled on this: *Intense battles*.

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Big Sis was the main focus for this book's artwork. Please enjoy them along with the story.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

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RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 6

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