

9

STORY ■
SHIROW
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SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!





Naniwa's Snow White
GINKO SORA

Kobe's Cinderella
AI YASHAJIN

THE BEST-OF-FIVE QUEEN

TITLE MATCH IS UNDERWAY!

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RYUO
Yaichi Kuzuryu

"DID YOU
FORGET
WHO'S
SITTING
ACROSS
FROM
YOU?"

**WORLDLY
MAESTRO**
Mitsuru Oishi

".....!!"

MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. Regrets saying that his favorite fairy tale is *Thumbelina*, as it caused many people to think he has a Lolita complex.



AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice. Women's League player. Able to read *The Tale of Genji* at the age of 10, which is extraordinary. Her Japanese class grades are naturally very high.



AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice. Though she is known as Kobe's Cinderella, she once played the evil stepmother in her kindergarten's rendition of *Cinderella*.



GINKO SORA

Yaichi's elder sister apprentice. Naniwa's Snow White. She used to force her younger brother apprentice to taste her food *for poison* before eating it herself during their time together as live-in apprentices.



AKIRA IKEDA

Ai Yashajin's bodyguard. She wears sunglasses into the movie theater to hide the fact that simply seeing previews for movies featuring animals makes her cry.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI

Daughter of Yaichi's Master. Women's Shogi player. She absentmindedly bought the wedding magazine *Zexy* at a convenience store to ease her pain after losing a match, but it only poured salt on the wound.



MITSURU OISHI

King. A Ranging Rook-style player with the nickname Worldly Maestro. He wrote a strategy book that was mostly a guide to jazz music and *onsen* hot spring spas, but it still sold.



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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 9

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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PROLOGUE

..... What's this? Back again?

I am quite busy, so showing up out of the blue like this puts me in a difficult spot

No, that's not what I meant.

I have things to say to them as well, so I shall join you.

Though I must say, how many times have we gone there together now?

Rumors have spread within the manor. They say I often leave the estate in another's company.

You see They believe I found a partner of the romantic sort.

D-D-Don't be foolish!! I don't feel that way either!!

T-Teenagers should not tease adults!!

..... Of course, I have taken measures to keep my lady in the dark. There is no need to worry.

Well, here we are. I've always liked the breeze out here.

I'm going to take a few moments to clean the area and, you're not listening, are you?

Good grief. The way you go into your own world while concentrating is the splitting image of my lady. Today may take hours.

..... Finished?

Yes. Leave it as it is. I shall take care of it later.

If I may ask, what did you talk about? Today was much longer than usual.

Me? I asked for the same thing I always do. Surely, you're aware.

Oh? You asked for personal guidance?

That's rare.

Although Yes. I believe I can relate.

It's much easier to discuss sensitive topics with those two than with other people.

Venting grievances that you would prefer others not hear or, on the other hand, speaking of the far-off dreams that would make others laugh if they heard

So, how did it go? Did they give you an answer?

What?

A new strategy to develop?

Heh You never fail to surprise.

Why am I smirking? Because, well, I've never heard of that before.

A graveyard visit inspiring a new Shogi strategy.

THE LITTLE MERMAID

I hate fairy tales.

I hate fiction for the most part. They're not productive. It's hard to see them as anything but a waste of time because of how little I get out of reading them.

But for some reason, adults seem to think girls like fairy tales and try to give them lots and lots of picture books.

Thin books, decorated with stories as sweet as cake and sparkly illustrations.

It's always the same. There's a princess who falls in love with a prince, but some evil witch gets in their way and they have to overcome it to get married in the end.

These books get crammed full of too many things adults think girls like.

Like castles, chariots, rings and glass slippers and poison apples, dwarves and wolves, weddings and kisses.

None of these interests me at all.

Actually, I find them revolting.

I hate being treated like a child in the first place. I'm not a child anymore.

Although, there was one story I did like.

The Little Mermaid.

I'm sure you already know, but the story goes like this.

A mermaid princess falls in love with a human prince and goes to a sorceress for help in hopes that her feelings may someday reach him.

However, the sorceress demands a high price for turning the mermaid princess into a human.

That price

It was her *voice*.

Although the mermaid princess becomes human, she can't convey her feelings to the prince without it.

Then, well, there is a big fuss.

As for the ending The original ended on a sad note, but the animated movie had a happy ending.

Even the first version I read, one written for children, was changed to have a happy ending.

Adults must think children can't handle a mournful conclusion. Not only does the princess have her heart broken, she turns into nothing but bubbles in the original. Very depressing. Out of all the fairy tales in the world, it might be one of the heaviest emotionally.

But the ending doesn't matter.

What matters is what the story teaches us. It has so much more meaning than the ending.

Something must be sacrificed in order to gain something else.

I think this is a very realistic moral.

The mermaid princess gave up her voice to become human.

Marrying the prince would be impossible without becoming human (admittedly not impossible but highly unlikely without the prince having a condition far worse than a Lolita complex), so her actions were necessary.

Unfortunately, she couldn't complete what she set out to do because she lost the only means she had of telling him how she felt.

It's similar to Shogi in that you can protect your King by deploying pieces from your piece stand, but you lose your best weapon at the same time. In the end, it

could cost you the match.

Then what should the mermaid princess have done?

I have no idea, nor have I given it any thought.

Why should I? I'll never fall in love with a prince.

I only have Shogi. So, my story from here on out will be about Shogi.

No sparkly illustrations like in the picture books. It will be a story of guts and grit, a clash of resilience. A tragic, bloody story of Snow White and Cinderella trying to kill each other with their bare hands.

I wish for you to stay with it to the end.

And see——what is gained and what is lost for yourself.

RECORD 1



神戸

Kobes
Cinderella

の
シン
デレ
ラ

Ai Yashajin 夜叉神天衣

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■ SPRING AND CARNAGE

“..... That should be enough,” said Mitsuru Oishi, mumbling with his gaze low.

“Agreed,” Crown Yo Okito answers bluntly.

In that moment—the fifth match in the King Title Match ended with *a second stalemate*.

Now 2 a.m., the two-day title match format had extended into *day three*, and the players’ exhaustion was palpable.

“.....”

Overwhelmed by the intensity emanating from the two titleholders, the observer and match recorder could only sit and stare at them from the boardside table after making the stalemate official.

Unkempt stubble dotted the players’ ghostly faces. Only their eyes blazed with life.

Both Kings had been firmly entrenched deep in their opponent’s territory and a truly bizarre number of Promoted Pawns covered the board in a match that went well beyond 300 moves.

Telltale signs of a stalemate, distinctive formations of the lengthy matches that exceeded the standard and broke into chaos.

“..... Another draw,” association staff uneasily whispered amongst themselves as they entered the arena.

“It’s hard to believe both matches lasted nearly 400 moves and there still isn’t a clear winner That’s nearly 1,000 moves for one victory star. Can you believe it?”

“How long is this title match going to take?”

“The aura coming out of Mr. Oishi is incredible. The Worldly Maestro’s second face was out right at the start, the one called *Tenacious Maestro*.....”

“I’ve gotta say that his tenacity was something else, coming back after everyone thought Okito would take the title in a sweep after three straight wins. But——.”

“Yeah, even more than that——.”

The staff was in agreement.

Something else was sending waves through the Shogi world.

“*That* Mitsuru Oishi The Worldly Maestro started playing Static Rook!!”

Yes.

Facing the moment of truth in the fourth match after three losses, Mitsuru resorted to the unthinkable and used a Static Rook strategy.

Blindsided by the sudden change to a Double Static Rook Shogi match, Yo was overwhelmed by Mitsuru’s onslaught from start to finish.

The fourth match became Mitsuru’s first victory.

“We weren’t the only ones in shock. I’ve never seen Okito-*sensei* look so surprised

“It’s still hard to believe the Crown, a guy who plays like a machine, got so far behind that he surrendered before lunch on the second day

“You think that was because he used Static Rook in the first fifth match stalemate and in the rematch held the day after Has Mr. Oishi given up on Ranging Rook?”

“No way! But maybe he’s thinking Ranging Rook doesn’t stand a chance

against Mr. Okito

“Don’t you mean against Shogi software”?

“I can’t deny that”

“Those opening formations look like something straight off the computer screen”

“Yaichi Kuzuryu said something like *the yagura is dead*, didn’t he? Could Mr. Oishi be thinking along those lines for Ranging Rook”?

“The real irony is his winning percentage went up in other matches once he stopped using Ranging Rook

The writing might be on the wall”

“Really, the guy that’s got so much pride he turns down practice sessions with real people left and right”?

“I bet he’s willing to throw that pride away to protect his title”

“But Mr. Oishi’s holding strong. Don’t forget, Mr. Okito’s winning percentage in other matches has fallen off. He even missed his chance to challenge the Meijin”

“Doesn’t that show that Mr. Okito’s willing to sacrifice everything else to claim the King title”?

“He’s stubborn like that.”

Today’s arena was originally intended for the seventh and final match, but instead it was used for *the rematch of the fifth match’s rematch*.

This was unknown territory.

The staff member in charge of scheduling had his head in his hands as he communicated with the Shogi Association. Meanwhile, Mitsuru and Yo stayed completely silent, sitting at the board without conducting any sort of review session whatsoever——.

Another match was about to make history in the shadow of that do-or-die grudge match.

“I concede.”

A young beauty adorned in a kimono lowered her head. Members of the media came pouring into the Kanto Shogi Association’s special arena located in Sendagaya, Tokyo a moment later.

Then, every single camera lens was directed *at the lower seat*.

The Mynavi Women’s Open Finals, the match to determine the Challenger was over.

Victory had been claimed in the most formal match in all of Women’s Shogi by the one sitting in the lower seat, by a girl so small she was too young to be considered an adolescent.

A mere 10-year-old.

The soon-to-be fifth-grader sat up straight, her chin raised ever so slightly in triumph as she looked down upon Machi Kugui-*Queen Yamashiro Ouka’s* surrender.

It was such a shock to behold that the avalanche of journalists stopped to hold their collective breath.

“The one who was just crowned an Eternal Queen, the top of the Women’s Shogi world, defeated by a child!”

Machi played the match wearing a kimono, simultaneously showing her determination and putting her pride as a title holder on the line. She had not taken her opponent lightly, that much was certain.

People whispered among themselves, trying to process what had just happened.

“That girl, she was an amateur four months ago, right?!”

“The Yamashiro Ouka Title Match was just a few days ago, so maybe Ms. Kugui was still feeling the effects?”

“Even so, that girl will be the youngest challenger ever!! What’s more, being the challenger is an instant promotion to Women’s League 2-*dan*——.”

“Women’s 2-*dan* at only 10 years old It’s Cinderella come to life!”

“So, the youngest female title holder ever, Ginko Sora, will face the youngest challenger in history What a story!”

“Kobe’s Cinderella and Naniwa’s Snow White will play against each other after all”

“Sounds like a fairy tale It doesn’t feel real at all”

Camera flashes went off in a vigorous rush.

Player interviews began once the match journalist made it through the throng of reporters and sat down at the boardside table.

When the girl who was just promoted all the way to 2-*dan* by default, Ai Yashajin was asked how she felt during the match, she responded, “..... Never once did I think I wouldn’t win.”

She answered, her voice understandably weak.

But she grew steadier by the moment and took the journalist by surprise yet again with answers far beyond what the average elementary school girl would say.

She hadn’t been told how to respond.

They were all her words, her own thoughts.

As proof, an association staff member was filling in as her guardian instead of her Master, Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu.

Yaichi had been unable to make the trip to Tokyo because of his own league

match, but Ai preferred it this way. Having a source of support that close would be comforting, which would in turn leave an opening for her opponent. Even at 10 years old, she understood that.

“Ms. Kugui! Ms. Yamashiro Ouka! Questions please!!”

Drawn in by the magnitude of this developing story, a female reporter from a local news station with a high-pitched voice unbefitting of a Shogi press conference pressed Machi for an interview as if trying to build up the drama.

“If I may be frank, were you overconfident sitting across from such a young opponent?!”

“..... I committed myself fully to each move as to prevent that from occurring.”

“But, she’s 10!! Do you think you’d normally lose to a 10-year-old?!”

“Yashajin 2-*dan* already possesses skill worthy of a top-class Women’s League player. A simple glance at the match record will prove her as such. This result was a product of said skill.”

“Oh, I see. Then——.”

Realizing that Machi wouldn’t take the bait no matter how hard she prodded, the reporter changed her angle.

“You have faced Queen Ginko Sora in the past, Ms. Kugui. What do you think Ms. Yashajin’s chances are against her, plain and simple?!”

“Her chances?”

Machi flicked her fan open and covered her mouth as she spoke.

“Sora-*Dual Title* has risen to the rank of Sub League 3-*dan*. A vast divide of unfathomable depth separates her from the likes of us Women’s League players. The unfathomable cannot be explained in such terms Wouldn’t you agree?”

Words cannot properly portray the flash that came from Machi's eyes with those last words.

"Gasp"

It finally dawned on the reporter that she was trying to pry answers out of the woman known as Machi the Tormentor, which was the equivalent of stepping on a carnivore's tail. Head down, she slid back into the media cluster.

Machi Kugui acted as though she had already put the loss behind her, but there was no way being defeated by a 10-year-old in elementary school wasn't tearing her apart on the inside.

Keep this orderly. Otherwise, I'll slay you where you stand.

The aura emanating from her eyes made that message all too clear.

"I'm here for the *Kobe Sannomiya Newspaper*. If I may ask you a few things, Miss Yashajin——."

As the chaotic mob of media fell silent, a man sent from Ai Yashajin's hometown of Kobe posed the press conference's final question.

"The stage is set for you to play against *Sora-Queen*, who also happens to be your Master, Yaichi Kuzuryu's elder sister apprentice. Will it be difficult to face her, as both of you are members of the Kiyotaki Shogi family?"

"That doesn't matter at all. I've never thought about it."

Her response was instantaneous.

"Besides, even if I did feel uncomfortable, all I'd have to do is take a different Master."

".....!!"

The very idea of *changing Master* was so close to taboo in the Shogi world that it sent chills up the spines of every adult in the room. The girl who said it, however, couldn't have been calmer. She was completely serious.

Kobe's Cinderella kept that same tone as she continued.

"I don't care what methods I have to use, what sacrifices I have to make, that title will be mine. That's all there is to it."

🏠 GRANDFATHER AND GRANDDAUGHTER

My apprentice is now officially the Queen Challenger.

Right after receiving that announcement, I —Yaichi Kuzuryu got an even more unbelievable message.

“Akira!”

Kobe, Nada Ward.

Racing toward a manor built like a fortress at the base of Mount Rokkou, I call out to a woman dressed in a sharp, black suit.

That woman—Akira Ikeda lowers her head in a remorseful bow and says, “..... My apologies, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Summoning you here when you have matches to attend to——.”

“That’s not a big deal! What I want to know is why you didn’t tell me before!!”

“..... By his request.”

Akira leads me inside I follow her toward the back of the building where the lord of the manor surely awaits.

A few steps behind her, I whisper in a quiet voice, “So What’s his condition?”

“Dire.”

“.....!!”

A cold chill runs through my veins. I came here prepared for the worst, but it’s so much harder to keep it together now that I’m here.

“..... Have you told Ai?”

“How could I possibly inform my lady?!!”

Almost screaming, I see a look of *Oh no!* pass across her face before she clamps both hands down over her mouth.

She and I look up and down the hall in a panic, but luckily Ai Yashajin isn't here. I guess she's not back from Tokyo yet.

Akira lowers her voice and says, "..... My lady is still very young. To make matters worse, she must prepare for a very important title match. The world is watching her every move. I cannot allow the burden she bears to increase any further."

"I'm sorry. Yes, you're right."

That was pathetic of me. I may be the Dragon King Ryuo, I may be talented or whatever, but Shogi is powerless at times like this. The feeling of absolute control I have in front of a board is nothing but an illusion. That's painfully obvious right now

"Are you ready? You must act as if nothing is amiss, understood?"

"Yes."

Standing in front of the lord's room, Akira issues a warning. I nod, fully prepared.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei* has come to see you."

Then, once she slides the door open——.

"K-Kuzuryu *Sensei*"

..... There's a bedridden old man with tubes sticking out all over his body and one foot in the grave lying there.

With his eyes sunken in and face deathly pale, there isn't a trace of the killer instinct that radiated out of the man I first met at S&M author Dan Onizawa's house last year.

He's as good as

“Forgive me for my long absence.”

I suppress my emotions exactly the same way I do before a match, force a smile and give the old man a proper greeting.

Honestly, I didn’t think I could pull off a smile.

“My most sincere apologies for this sight

Ai Yashajin’s grandfather struggles to get words out between labored breaths and then points to the room next door.

“A-Akira T-T-That

“At once.”

Akira kneels on the *tatami* mat in front of another sliding door and opens it.

It slides away to reveal——.

“.....!! A-Ai?!”

What’s Ai doing here?! Wouldn’t seeing her grandfather like this be a real shock to her system?!

I’m on the verge of a heart attack, but Akira says in a calm voice.

“Relax, *Sensei*. It’s a doll.”

“O-Ohh A doll. A doll?”

For a doll, it’s surprisingly detailed. The skin texture alone is so realistic it’s scary. Soft and squishy, just like the real thing. What is it made out of? Silicone?

Poking the cheeks and getting more and more impressed by the moment, Akira says, “*Sensei*. It’s not what’s beneath the clothing but the dress itself I wish for you to see.”

“The dress? This white one?”

Ai Yashajin always dresses in black clothes fit for a funeral, so even though this is a doll, it feels strange to see her in white But, there’s one thing I can

tell at first glance.

The dress was made by a Master seamstress with the best fabric available. It's truly a work of art.

Ai's grandfather props himself up on his elbow and explains with a trembling voice, "I was hoping for Ai to wear one like this once she had grown up a bit more, but *Cough! Cough!* It seems I will not live to see that day"

Making it that far, he breaks out into a coughing fit.

"Doctor! Call the doctor in here!!"

Akira yells with desperation in her voice. Moments later, a man dressed in white with a large bag in his arms accompanied by a young woman in nurse's clothing burst in from the other room and rush to the old man's side, forcing him back down.

I watch it all happen from the side, powerless to do anything—.

"Se"

"Se?"

Mr. Yashajin looks at me and tries to get something across to me with all his might. I lean down to put my ear right next to him.

"I want to see"

"See what?! What is it you want to see?! If you want to see Ai with the title of her own, I swear I'll—."

"A-Ai, in that dress with *Kuzuryu-sensei* the altar I want to see"

"The altar?"

Is that a title I don't know about?

"The church's altar, *Sensei*. A wedding ceremony."

Wedding? Me and Ai?!

Mr. Yashajin's not looking at me anymore, more like up at nothingness as he wheezes out more words between shallow breaths.

"A-Ai Isn't this wonderful With Kuzuryu-*sensei* at your side I know There'll be nothing to worry about"

"He's hallucinating," says the doctor urgently. Biting her lip, Akira rushes up to me.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*!! There's no time!!"

"I-I understand! What do you want me to do?!"

"There is a white tuxedo in the other room! Put it on and get back in here!!"

"Right away!!"

I stumble over my own feet getting my shirt and pants off, but I find the white suit and change in the blink of an eye before standing next to the Ai doll.

Amazingly, the suit fits me like a glove. I know this is just a coincidence, but I'm thankful to whatever god is up there for making this happen.

"Ahh! Ahhhhh!!"

The tiniest of sparks pops up in Mr. Yashajin's eyes as they fill with tears.

What a relief This could be what he needs to pull through, and even if he doesn't then he can pass on with no regrets!

"And now we shall unite the bride and groom in holy matrimony."

Reading the situation, the doctor takes on the role of the priest.

I gotta say, the man can make calm decisions under intense pressure!! Even better, his white clothes aren't too different from what a priest would wear!

"Yaichi Kuzuryu. Do you take Ai Yashajin to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love and cherish her for as long as you both shall live?"

“I-I do!”

“Please, sign the certificate.”

Then, the nurse comes up to me holding what she’s pretending is a Certificate of Intent (actually Mr. Yashajin’s medical papers) and a pen.

Without so much as a second thought, I take the pen and write my name where she tells me.

Akira asks me, “*Sensei*. Do you have your official seal with you?”

“Ohh I’m sorry. I saw that you wanted me to bring it in your message, but I came straight here from the association. It’s still at home.”

“Tsk! Fine then. What about your professional stamp? You have that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

Since Shogi players never know when someone will ask for an autograph, we always carry our stamps. Taking it out of my second bag, I make sure there’s plenty of ink on it before lining it up over the certificate——.

Wait, hold up.

I was caught up in the moment, but Something about this seems off.

I take a closer look at the certificate (?) ... medical paper (?) one more time.

Certificate of Intent

I, Yaichi Kuzuryu, solemnly swear to wed Miss Ai Yashajin once she has come of age on her 18th birthday. Until such time, I vow to treasure her above all others, never cheat or become distracted by other young girls. My life shall be forfeited should I violate any of these terms. Come hell or high water, I will never utter a single complaint.

..... Hm? Hmmm?

What is this?

Surprisingly detailed for a fake wedding

“Hurry up, *Sensei*. Stamp it before it’s too late.”

“H-hold on a second, Akira! This is just an act, right? We’re not performing an actual wedding right now, are we? In that case, I can just act like I’ve stamped it

“Yes, this is just pretend. Which means you could stamp it with your official seal. Yes?” says Akira as she takes hold of my arm with both hands and pulls it closer to the certificate.

With quite a bit of strength.

“T-That’s true, but Something isn’t right about this. I know that a good act is in the details, but don’t you think actually stamping a certificate is too far——?”

“Make him stamp it, Akiraaaaaaaaaa!!”

Clatter! Snap, snap, snap, snap!!

Mr. Yashajin bursts out of the bed, breaking free of all the tubes connected to his body at once.

“Say whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

He’s just fine!!

“Wha?! Huuh?! You were dying, I saw you?!”

“Akira! Why do you hesitate?! Force that stamp down!!”

“At once, sir!!”

Issuing orders, Mr. Yashajin turns his back on me and gets a boost from the bed springs to pull off a somersault wrestling move!

Old man, flying through the air with his arms wide like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Then——.

“Gwah!!”

Coming down hard on my shoulders, I collapse under his weight.

The doctor and nurse, now out of their costumes, pile on. I don’t know what’s going on anymore.

“Seriously?! The nurse and the doctor too?! So, all of you are in on this?!”

All four of them are trying to get me to stamp that certificate!

I resist with all my might, but I’m only human.

Face down on the *tatami* mat, my inked-up stamp makes contact with the certificate and gets pressed down hard against my will.

“Agh! Damn! I stamped it”

“Yessss!!”

“So now I can Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Nooooo——!!”

Letting them think they accomplished their mission made the four conspirators ease up for just a moment, and I use that opportunity to tear the certificate to shreds! Now this thing is void. I found the Reverse Check Path.

Then, I turn to Mr. Yashajin and Akira and scream, “You were pulling a fast one, weren’t you?!”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! I can still contend with the youth.”

“I was in charge of the makeup! Good, no?”

Sparkle! I ignore Akira triumphantly posing like a superhero with a makeup kit pinned between her fingers and instead ask a question to the person laughing so powerfully that it's hard to believe he's the same old man who was bedridden just moments ago.

"Why put on this stupid act in the first place?!"

"Because I will die one day, leaving my granddaughter completely alone."

"....."

He said those heavy words with that smile still on his face. I don't know what to say.

"I may be in good health for now, but that may not be the case next year. I am old. A sudden ailment could take me to the other side tomorrow and it wouldn't be all that out of place. What will Ai do should that come to pass? Would you not take pity on her? Would you not welcome the girl who has no one else in the world into your family?"

"I would take care of her even without you going through these antics. I'm her Master."

"..... Her Master, you say?"

"..... Sigh"

Both Mr. Yashajin and Akira are obviously not satisfied by that answer. What's worse, even the people posing as a doctor and a nurse are giving me the same look

"..... Listen to me, okay?"

I take a deep breath and start explaining.

"Bonds between Master and apprentice in the Shogi world, especially in my Kiyotaki Shogi Family lineage, are considered stronger than bonds between actual siblings! I understand where you're coming from when you say you're worried, Mr. Yashajin, but Ai can support herself as a Women's League player

already and I'll be there to support her even after she's made a name for herself until the day I die. Even after I'm gone, my first apprentice Ai Hinatsuru will be there to support her more than a real sister would. Knowing that, are you still worried?!" Getting all that out in one breath, I quickly added, "And... Ai wouldn't agree to it anyway. Marry me? Yeah right."

"Are you certain? Surely, that's impossible to know without asking her yourself."

"Huuuh? You can't be serious"

Maybe Ai says good things about me when she's here at home? Because whenever she's with me it's *moron* or *trash* or whatever name she wants to call me that day.

I hate you! You piece of trash! You stupid Master! I hate, hate, hate Love you! Marry me!!

Could that actually happen? I've heard of having a warm heart beneath a cold shell, but damn

"It matters not. Asking her directly will solve this."

Now that I know Mr. Yashajin is just fine, I don't have to tread lightly anymore.

Taking off the white suit, I give him a piece of my mind.

"Yeesh! I get a message saying *Ai's grandfather is terminally ill* not five minutes after my match finishes up and race over here from Osaka all for a bad comedy routine"

"Which reminds me, I haven't congratulated you on today's victory," says Akira out of the blue.

"Kuzuryu-sensei, a most heartfelt congratulations on your four consecutive victories in the Crown League White Conference! I cannot wait to see you claim your second title!!"

“In that case, please don’t distract me! I’ll be helping Ai in her own title match any way that I can, but I’m extremely busy because I have my own matches to worry about, too!”

It’s hard enough thinking about *who my next opponent is*

Getting all that off my chest, I ask Akira, “So? What’s Ai doing right now?”

“Informing her parents of the upcoming title match.”

That was all I needed to hear.

I know exactly where she is and what she’s doing.

▲ A GRAVESTONE THAT SINGS

A black stone sits enshrined at the top of a hill that overlooks the sea.

At this holy place where only those with permission may enter, I—Ai Yashajin, feel the ocean breeze on my back.

“Father and mother. I’ve made it to the title match,” I say to the black stone in front of me.

It’s my parents’ gravestone.

They should be resting right beneath it.

I say *should be* because I never saw their remains being lowered into the earth with my own two eyes.

I was still quite young and didn’t fully understand the meaning of a funeral I didn’t fully comprehend that my parents had died.

All I knew was that the three of us would never sit around a Shogi board again.

When that finally clicked, only then did I start the process after what had happened. It was pure sorrow.

I sat down at a Shogi board by myself and started playing through father’s match records each day. Every time, I was hoping to hear his voice come from them as if he were still alive

“Father, I’m using your pieces.”

My Master, Yaichi, had a full set of Shogi pieces made at Shumai Honinbou’s workshop as a present to celebrate my becoming a Woman’s League player.

Those pieces were engraved with my deceased father’s handwriting taken from match records he wrote himself.

This was possible because Sub League member Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan* collected match records from when father was still alive.

I use those pieces for research now.

“It’s so easy to read your pieces, father My eyes never get tired no matter how long I play. I get so many ideas when I use them that it’s like you’re there watching me! *If father were here, he would move this piece.* It happens all the time!”

Then, I start explaining yesterday’s match as clearly as I can.

The Mynavi Women’s Open Challenger Match.

Because I want father to know about the Shogi I played.

“Machi Kugui was the most difficult opponent I have ever faced. The Bishop Head Pawn strategy I used against Ryou Tsukiyomizaka wouldn’t work on Machi the Tormentor But, surely you knew that, father? You know my Bishop Head Pawn’s weakness. Unfortunately, I haven’t found a way to fix it yet The same is true for my struggles with Move-Loss Bishop Exchange. But! I should be able to use the Normal Bishop Exchange standards you taught me just fine! Plus, I have all the new variations that came to me when using your pieces, so——.”

There was so much to say that an hour passes before I knew it.

Not again. This always happens when I come here.

“Mother. I’m sorry for only talking to Father. There was just so much I wanted to tell him about Shogi that I kept going on and on”

I give her a polite bow in my mind.

She was so gentle, kind and beautiful But also a little aloof, a woman who was always a little girl at heart.

“You always read me those picture books, remember? And I noticed how you always got a little grumpy whenever Father and I would start talking about

Shogi.”

My parents met at a Shogi club at a university in Tokyo.

But honestly, mother was never all that strong of a player. I think it was because she didn't love Shogi all that much.

I never had a chance to ask her when she was alive, but I'm almost certain she learned how to play Shogi so she could get close to father.

This is why she surrounded me with things girls are supposed to like when she had a daughter.

Picture books, pretty clothes, dolls to play house with.

I think she wanted me to be like one of the princesses from the fairy tales.

But it was Shogi that interested me.

Trapped between mother and father, it was Shogi that gave me an idea how to bridge the gap.

10 years ago A Women's Title was set in place the same year I was born.

The first Women's League player to ever claim that title wore jewelry worth millions of yen and a gorgeous dress when she was bestowed her title at the ceremony. The whole scene looked like it belonged in the pages of a fairy tale.

That title was—— Queen.

Reading about it in a Shogi magazine when I was little, I told my parents loud and clear, *“I will be the Queen of Shogi!”*

Father was overjoyed. Mother seemed to have mixed feelings at first, but we eventually came together as a family, smiling. My being bestowed the Queen title became our dream, all three of us.

How ironic!

The title within my reach is——.

“Did you know? People call me Kobe’s Cinderella now. Funny, don’t you think? Me, Cinderella Does it make you happy, Mother?” I ask the black stone.

I get the feeling Mother is smiling right now. Just like she did back then.

“But, I’m still not interested in those picture book worlds. A princess meeting a prince, falling in love That world doesn’t matter to me.”

More to the point, I don’t understand how someone comes to *love* someone else.

Everyone else is my enemy.

That’s the world of competition and I love how cut-and-dried it is.

That’s why the *romance* thing escapes me.

There’s no point in learning about it.

“It’s not because I’m in elementary school. Moving on to junior high and high school I don’t see myself changing at all. Sorry”

I’ll probably get married eventually to carry on the family bloodline.

That’s my duty as a Yashajin.

I’ll follow through with it with the same determination as I do when I set out to win the match in front of me. I’ll have a husband someday and then a child as well.

But I just can’t see how that household would play out.

“..... Would I be able to live happily with a family if I were teaching Shogi?”

I wonder.

If I were asked if the Shogi world is a happy one, I think I would answer *no*.

If I were asked if it’s interesting, I would say *yes* in no time.

“Well, I’d better be on my way.”

It’s very relaxing here.

So much so that night can fall without me noticing.

That’s happened more than a few times in the past. I’d sneak out of the manor and come here by myself. Akira and the others then show up, frantically looking for me

But I don’t have time for that anymore.

“I’m sorry. I won’t be coming back for a while. It might be a little lonely until then, but please forgive me.”

I stand up and bow my head low.

I’m determined.

Until the Queen Title Match is over, I won’t be coming here. Without that level of commitment, I won’t be able to accomplish this daunting task.

I came here today to show my parents just how determined I am.

“The next time you see me, I will I will be the Queen. Our dream will come true.”

With that, I go back down the hill.

Never once looking back.

The breeze that gave me a push going up the hill is now blowing hard against me.

SECRET GARDEN

Now, the day after Ai Yashajin became the Queen Challenger.

I'm waiting for a certain person to show up.

"Oh Hi there. It's been a while"

"....."

Popping up without a sound right behind where I'm sitting at the counter, she stares down at me with those ash-colored eyes without saying a word.

Queen Ginko Sora.

The opponent Ai is about to face.

"We can go to the table in the corner if you want?"

"Here is fine."

Big Sis sits down next to me at the counter but never once looks me in the eyes.

She is wearing street clothes.

Having graduated on March 1st, Big Sis stopped wearing her sailor-style school uniform wherever she goes (though she's still technically treated like a junior high school student in the Shogi world until March 31th).

Recently, with all the attention she's been getting, Big Sis has started wearing a baseball cap as a disguise quite a bit.

Also sometimes *gulp* sometimes She cosplays for me. I do feel guilty about that

She and I were getting together for practice sessions with King Mitsuru Oishi, but with the King Title Match heating up and all sorts of scheduling conflicts, those three-person practice sessions naturally got put on hold.

As a result, I haven't seen Big Sis all that much these days.

We are siblings bound by Shogi.

There's no doubt in my mind that we have the strongest sister/brother apprentice bond in the entire Shogi world.

But, on the flipside, that also means that we barely have any relationship at all without Shogi.

—Which is why I needed a reason to invite her out like this

That reason was a phone call.

I was busy playing my own match when Ai Yashajin was fighting to become the Queen challenger, but the Shogi Association offices received *two* phone calls as soon as my match was over, like they'd been waiting just for that. One of the calls was Akira.

The second was from Keika.

After Mr. Mine, one of the association staff members, told me my apprentice was going to be playing in a title match I assumed that Keika was calling to talk about that. I picked up the phone, excited when

"Ah! Hi there, Keika!! Listen to this! Ai is going to be in the Queen Title Match! Did you already know?! How should we celebrate——?"

"Yaichi. Talk with Ginko in person, right now."

"Huh? Why? Wouldn't it be better to wait until the title match is over? I mean, my apprentice is the challenger, so wouldn't that be awkward——?"

"That doesn't matter. Just listen to me. You need to speak with Ginko face-to-face as soon as you possibly can. Also, give her present. It needs to be something special, something you wouldn't give anyone else."

"A present???"

I had no clue what she meant, but following her advice about Big Sis has

never come back to bite me. So I decided to go along with it.

—I just happened to have something I wanted to give her anyway

I reach into my pocket to make sure *it's* still there.

Keika also said, *“Are you listening, Yaichi? There’s one more important thing you should do.”*

But I’ll talk about that later.

So, that’s why I invited Big Sis to meet me at the Kansai Shogi Association’s first floor restaurant, “Twelve.”

“.....”

The ever-silent chef puts a menu down in front of Big Sis. That’s his way of saying to hurry up and order.

Neither of us bothered to open it as we say what we want.

“I’ll have the Extraordinary Pork Beauty A set. What about you, Big Sis?”

“Dynamite C Set.”

The two of us first came to this restaurant 11 years ago, so we have their whole menu memorized at this point. Big Sis has always gotten the Dynamite C Set. She never changes

Since the lunch rush is already over, the chef whips up our food in no time at all.

Putting our hands together in silence, we dig in.

“.....”

“.....”

A good amount of time goes by where the two of us concentrate solely on getting the food into our mouths. When the heck am I supposed to start talking?

It turns out that we finish eating and the chef takes our dishes back into the kitchen before I find the right timing.

“Big Sis. Um

“What is it?”

“Well You see

“Well what? I haven’t got all day.”

“H Here!!”

I take her *present* out of my pocket and put it down on the counter.

It’s——a spare key to my apartment.

The same one that she hurled at me in a rage during the middle of the Ryuo Title Match and I haven’t been able to get back to her until right now.

“Isn’t it a lot harder to meet at the Gokigen Bath House with our practice sessions with Mr. Oishi being put off? Also, now that Master’s place is being used for the Kiyotaki Classroom, there’s always a lot of people there. I think my apartment would be the most convenient place for practice sessions don’t you?”

My words trail off toward the end.

Because, well, I can’t read her face at all

“So, I Um, I’d like you to have this key, Big Sis,” I say with the key sitting on the counter. Hoping and hoping.

Big Sis says——.

“I don’t need it.”

“.....!”

In a cold, flat refusal.

Sharp pain slices through my heart. She doesn’t want to have practice

sessions with me anymore That feels like she's saying she's fine with cutting our bond once and for all.

—Should've figured Her opponent for the title match is my apprentice

But that wasn't the case.

Rather than the key, Big Sis takes my hand and says, "Forget about that and follow me."

"Huh?"

Big Sis leads me out to—.

"Is this it? This apartment building?"

A newly built apartment complex along the riverside about a 15-minute walk away from the association.

"Big Sis? What are we doing here? Do you know someone who lives here?"

Ignoring my confusion, Big Sis goes inside the building without me. She then takes a key out of her pocket to open the inner auto-locking doors.

"Hurry up. Want to get locked out?"

"Wait for me!"

I trip over my feet in a rush and end up sliding through the doors just as they close behind me. From there, it was into the elevator and up to the eighth floor.

Starting to get a bit nervous, I follow Big Sis all the way down the hallway to—.

"Room 801"

Stopping in front of the door, Big Sis uses her key to open it.

"Get inside. Hurry up."

“S-Sure

She ushers me through the door.

It's a simple, one-room floor plan.

There's almost nothing in here. All I see is a wireless LAN router and a tablet plugged into the wall to charge. Oh, and there's a really beat-up book, too.

“So What is this place?”

“I bought it. For research.”

“You did?”

“With my saved-up prize money.”

She flat-out bought her own apartment at 15 years old

What's more, a great location like this all for research Hm? Research?

“Research Big Sis, does that mean you're not going to high school?” I ask, looking around the barren room.

The whole country wants to know whether or not Naniwa's Snow White will enroll in high school but even I, her younger brother apprentice, haven't been told of the answer.

“Yaichi. Here.”

“?!”

Rather than answering my question, she throws something at me. Surprised, I grab for it a few times before finally catching it.

“This is the spare key. It's your job to clean this room when I'm not around.”

Whaaat?

“Well?”

“O-khay.”

She didn't take my key because she already had this room Seeing the

Silver Shogi piece keychain attached to the one that she tossed me both surprises me and lifts my spirits at the same time.

This proves that I'm not just *anyone* to her. Even if she thinks of me as a janitor.

"But, I've got to say There's really nothing in here, is there?"

"I just bought it. And I don't want there to be any distractions while I'm doing Shogi research."

"I understand that, but wouldn't having a table and some chairs be a good idea?"

"....."

Without answering me, Big Sis takes off her baseball cap and tosses it across the floor.

"Then, be my chair."

"Huh?"

"Just sit down already."

"Owwwch?!"

Big Sis nails me a low kick right to the shins!!

Everything below my knees is taken out by that scythe-like strike. I collapse to the floor and watch as Big Sis's little bottom comes down on top of my lap.

She then leans into me like I'm some kind of floor cushion.

So, this is what she meant when she said to be her chair.

"..... Too bumpy. Get softer."

"Get softer? The human body doesn't have that feature"

Maybe she's mistaking her younger brother apprentice for slime?

Shifting her bottom around to find a comfortable spot, Big Sis puts her knees

together and sets her tablet on her lap before turning it on and opening Shogi software.

“See? We only need to use one tablet this way. Now, what move would you make with the formation like this?”

“Hmmm If it were me——.”

I reach out toward the screen but freeze with my hand in midair.

The tablet is resting on her thighs, so reaching out for it is kind of like, um
.....



I'm embracing her from behind ish?

"Touch my breast and I'll kill you."

"Can't touch what isn't there"

"What was that?"

"I won't. I won't touch anything."

Strong words coming from a member of the itty-bitty titty committee

The thing is, I'm powerless to stand up to her. Big Sis is right up against me. Her hair and skin smell so good that I can't think straight, which is what's keeping me from resisting whatever she says.

I don't get it. Back when we were little, we used to bathe together all the time and it wasn't a big deal But now, it's like she's become a completely different species.

I can't see her face from this angle, but I can tell she's not feeling anything by the sound of her voice. My heart is the only one that's racing, so I force myself to calm down and focus on Shogi research before Big Sis catches on.

"Well Moving this piece here in this situation is trending right now."

"Isn't this the valid move?"

"I agree, that one does feel right. But, if you move that other piece forward——."

Hmmm

Sitting like this is kind of nice

Seeing analysis from the same side of the board gives an angle you can't get from researching on opposite sides. It's easy to get on the same page, I guess.

This is a new discovery. I should try it out at the next Grade Schooler Practice Group session Is how far my train of thought gets before Big Sis slams the

back of her head into my chin. Owch!

“What was that for?!”

“You were thinking about little girls just now, weren’t you?”

S-she’s sharp!

I did my best not to think about the grade schoolers from then on, but it wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. Because, Shogi is here to distract me. Shogi and my younger *older* sister.

Once our research got to a good stopping point, Big Sis stretches out her arms and legs with a long “Nghhh!” before saying.

“I’m hungry.”

“I see.”

“I’m hungry!”

Big Sis starts kicking her legs up and down. What is she, a kid?

I thought we just had lunch a little bit ago, but glancing at the clock tells me that was actually more than a few hours ago.

Strange All I was doing was being Big Sis’s chair in an empty room, so why did time go by so fast? Shogi can really eat up time when you’re not paying attention.

“Don’t look at me. There aren’t any pots or pans in the kitchen, so we can’t cook anything. How about going out to eat?”

“Simple. Delivery.”

“Oh, that makes sense. How about pizza?”

“No. I want sushi.”

“O-khay, o-khay.”

Just as Snow White desires, I start ordering sushi on my smartphone. I do this

all the time for the Grade Schooler Practice Group, so all the info is saved already.

I go downstairs to pick up the delivery once it arrives (I made the order, so of course I went) and bring everything up to Big Sis.

“We research while we eat. I won’t be wasting time.”

She’s telling me to be her chair again. I have no choice but to obey.

“All right, so we grab one whenever we feel like it?”

“Fingers will get dirty.”

“Just use chopsticks.”

“Feed me.”

Well, she’s right about fingers getting dirty, which will make the tablet’s touchscreen get sticky I convince myself as I grab Big Sis’s favorites and bring them to her lips one after another.

“Yaichi. Put them all the way inside my mouth.”

“That’s hard, like one of those two-person *helping hands* comedy routines”

“Then get better at it. That way, it’ll go smoother next time.”

Next time? She’s going to make me do this again?

Does that mean all my practice sessions with Big Sis from here on out are going to be this style?

“Yaichi, you may eat some too.”

“..... Thank you.”

I’m so happy I could cry. Getting to eat the sushi that I paid for myself? This must be heaven!

And so, we get back to researching while snacking on sushi.

The nice thing about sushi or pizza is you can grab a piece or a slice whenever you want. The problem is you get so caught up in a sequence that the half-eaten piece stays in your hand for a long time and can get messy.

My hands and lips were sticky by the time our research got to a good stopping point.

“Whew I think that’s as good a conclusion as we’re going to get. Let’s move on to another subject.”

“Yaichi, you’ve got rice on your cheek.”

“I do? Where?”

“..... Your moronic face.”

Big Sis rotates her body to face me, plucks the piece of rice off my cheek, and eats it.

“.....!!”

Squeeeeeeze!! My whole chest tightens up and a feeling I can’t put into words washes over me.

This kind of thing used to happen all the time, but Now it’s seriously embarrassing. It’s hard to sit still

“L-look at the time! Staying out too late would be, you know, so shouldn’t we be heading home?”

“.....”

Big Sis kind of mumbles for a few seconds before saying this in a feeble voice.

“I don’t have any more plans for today We can keep going, if you want? Or do something else”

Something else?

D-does she mean?!!

“You want to work on Ranging Rook, too? You’re really bound and determined.”

“Drop dead, trash.”

“What are you grilling me for?!”

Now, Big Sis is angrily puffing out her cheeks for some reason.

What else would there be to research? Ranging Rook versus Ranging Rook?

She moves away from me, pouting as she sits down with her knees together in front of her chest and says without looking at me.

“..... And? What are we going to research next?” she asks, stretching out her toes while running her fingers between them.

“Yaichi, you don’t have anyone to research with now that our practice sessions with Oishi-*sensei* are on hold, right? You’re the one in a pinch, so I guess I could help you out if you want. But, I’ll be extremely busy with the 3-*dan* division starting in April.”

“The 3-*dan* division That’s right. It’s about to start”

Hearing those words is like taking a bucket of ice water to the face.

It’s like a big tournament that takes place over six months for every 3-*dan* ranking member of the Sub League. The top two at the end get promoted to 4-*dan* They can turn pro.

So, what kind of Shogi do you think gets played under those conditions?

Not a single match record produced in there could be called pretty. Everyone is so focused on not losing and making their opponents dread facing them again that they hit each and every weakness they can find without mercy.

Even the winner walks away with their heart in pieces and losing kills it all together.

The nail in the coffin is the age limit. It’s said that some people couldn’t take

the pressure and took their own lives.

While I didn't suffer that much, just thinking about my time in the 3-*dan* division makes me depressed.

The one thing that all Shogi pros agree on is we don't want to go back there again. It's hell on earth.

And Big Sis is about to take her first step into it.

A 15-year-old girl ... in that hellhole.

I was really happy about this arrangement at first, but thinking about it rationally, now is not the time for her to be having laid-back practice sessions with me.

"I'll be very, very busy, but I'll make time for you if you say you absolutely need it, Yaichi. It won't be easy, but as your elder sister apprentice, if you absolutely insist——."

"About that. Let's stay away from each other for the time being."

".....?"

She freezes like a statue, a look of shock on her face with her mouth wide open.

I'm sure it hurts, being told this after going out of her way to help me, but I can't go along with her kindness right now.

I want Big Sis to focus on herself right now. Only on herself

With that in mind, I put it to her like this.

"Well At least until the Queen Title Match is over, I think we should stop doing these practice sessions. We're not exactly facing off, but you bringing me, the Master of your opponent in a series of matches for a title, into your apartment for practice sessions will cause a lot of misunderstandings."

"..... Well, obviously."

“I thought so. I’m expected to do a lot as Ai Yashajin’s Master as she tries to claim her first title, so having practice sessions with her opponent would leave a bad taste.”

“Of course it would. That much is common sense. You don’t have to tell me. Are you brain-dead? Why would you actually say it? Would you die already?”

“I-I apologize

This level of outrage is absurd, but yes, me telling that to someone of Big Sis’s standing point-blank was rude. Even I’d get angry at someone telling me something so basic.

But, if I don’t put it out there right now, Big Sis is so kind that she’ll end up wasting what little precious time she has on me.

“Anyway, I suggest we continue these practice sessions after the Queen Title Match is over.”

“Makes sense.”

She gives me a short nod. I thought that would be the end of it, but——.

“But, are you okay with that, Yaichi?”

“Come again?”

“The Queen Title Match typically ends in June. The placement matches will have started by then, so aren’t you worried about not having a partner for practice sessions?”

“I’ve gotten pretty good at researching by myself with software, so I’ll be fine.”

If I’m being totally honest, I want practice sessions. As many as possible.

Playing against software and playing as a person are totally different, having a place like this to do research would be perfect, and not seeing Big Sis for that long hurts for a different reason, but

I can’t be selfish right now.

Just as Big Sis said, having both the Queen Title Match and the 3-*dan* division going at the same time will be rough.

If she tries doing practice sessions with me on top of that, she won't be able to pull out all the stops because there's a chance that info might make it to Ai Yashajin. No one can do worthwhile research when they're trying to hide exactly how much they know.

—It's better we don't see each other right now. For both of our sakes.

I put on a happy face when I turn her down so she won't feel guilty.

"Thank you for worrying about me! But I'll be all right! I can wait until after the Queen Title Match to see you again, no problem!!"

"....."

Big Sis stares at the floor in silence then raises her head with a snap.

"Leave."

"Huh?"

"I have plans."

"Huh? But you just said you didn't—."

"I just remembered."

"What kind of plans?"

"An extremely important secret errand."

Big Sis pulls me to my feet and pushes me all the way out the front door and says as she's closing it, "I'll speak with the association about the upcoming schedule."

THE TWO YOUNG ONES OF THE DRAGON KING

“Who Who came up with this crazy schedule?!”

The moment the Queen Title Match schedule is presented to us in the Kansai Association’s third floor office meeting room, the little girl dressed in black jumps to her feet and lashes out.

Ai Hinatsuru, sitting next to her, says, “T-Ten-chan Calm down,” in an attempt to keep the situation under control. But, Ai Yashajin ignores her and presses for answers.

“Three matches are within only 10 days of each other The fourth and fifth matches aren’t even set! Is this some kind of joke?!”

“..... One does wish to apologize.”

The person sitting across from us, association employee Sasari Oga, bites her lip and lowers her head.

She has enough influence to be called the Shadow Don, but her usual look of being in total control is gone.

“Many unexpected happenings have occurred in quick succession Though it pains me to admit, the situation has exceeded the association’s ability to manage,” Ms. Oga explains with a hint of exhaustion showing on her face.

I can hear Chairman Tsukimitsu talking on the phone on the other side of the door in the next room. They must be using every second of every minute to negotiate with everyone involved.

It’s true that the overlapping of title matches has completely destroyed the association’s schedule. Me becoming the big board analyst for the whole Queen Title Match series is proof enough of that.

Regular league matches can be moved around based on when the players and

the match recorder have time, but it's not that easy for title matches.

There are Shogi journalists, people managing the online coverage, a high-ranking observer, association publicists, the big board commentator and analyst So many more people are involved.

“At the same time two consecutive King Title Matches end in stalemates and the Meijin's 100th title season is upon us, the amount of attention the Queen Title Match and 3-*dan* division are receiving is far beyond yearly norms which has resulted in next to no scheduling flexibility at this time.”

“I understand the situation, but this is my precious young apprentice's first title match. As her Master, I want her to have the opportunity to be in peak condition.”

Ai Yashajin makes a small *humph* sound when I say *precious apprentice*. Meanwhile, Ai Hinatsuru puffs out her cheeks with an angry *mmph*! Kids are so hard to understand

“It is just as you say, Dragon King Ryuo,” Ms. Oga bows her head to me before turning to face the still standing Ai Yashajin. “Under normal circumstances, each match in the series for a title match would have been scheduled and announced far in advance. Though the situation prevented that this time, one truly wishes to apologize to you, Ms. Yashajin.”

“.....”

“That being said, we believe this schedule is best for all parties involved. Great measures have been taken in order to assure that the matches will take place in the best possible environment.”

Ms. Oga sounds sincere.

Of the three matches that are scheduled, one is in Osaka and another in Kobe. And one *home* match for both Big Sis and Ai Yashajin will help keep transportation issues to a minimum.

That's especially true for the first match, which will happen in a place that *is actually more of a home for Ai than Big Sis* right here in Osaka.

The second match is a little far away, but we can trust the hosts for that one.

“.....”

Still on her feet, Ai Yashajin closes her eyes and tries with all her might to get her anger under control without saying a word.

Ai Hinatsuru watches from her chair, looking worried.

“This is just my opinion, not based on anything in particular——.”

Hiding the fact that I just talked with Big Sis the other day, I address my second apprentice.

“As far as Big Sis is concerned, she is about to become the first female member of the 3-*dan* division. I'm sure she wants to finish the Queen Title Match as soon as possible so she can prepare for that. Women's League Titles just aren't all that important to her.”

I glance over at Ms. Oga.

“I'm also sure that the association would like to use her battle against Ai in the Queen Title Match for publicity and then have that carry over right into the 3-*dan* division, right? There are other story lines going on as well, like the first 3-*dan* grade schooler and the businessman who got into the 3-*dan* division through the Admission Exam.”

“While the association is hoping for a publicity boost in that regard, the main concern is Sora-Queen's health. Therefore, her request was given priority in this matter,” Ms. Oga says flatly.

It's only natural that title holders have priority when setting the schedule for title matches. If you have a problem with it, just claim the title for yourself.

It's just If Big Sis specifically asked for this schedule, there must be a strong meaning or message behind it.

Closing her eyes, Ai Yashajin says with a tone so cold the room almost freezes over, “..... I see how it is. Basically, she thinks she’ll defeat me three times in a row.”

“.....”

Ms. Oga’s and my silence confirm what she said.

There’s really no point in denying it, and this girl is so smart that she sees right through adults lying to her.

“I’ll win the first three matches anyway, so just schedule them I want this over and done with before the 3-dan division starts.”

I can just see her asking for the schedule.

When suddenly, “Ah!” Ai Hinatsuru looks up at me like she’s just realized something important. “So, that’s why the fourth and fifth matches will be at the Kansai Association!!”

“The last two matches are always at the association”

The Women’s League doesn’t have the budget to play anywhere else

“While money was indeed an issue, scheduling arenas also presented a significant challenge. Back to the matter at hand”

Ms. Oga brings us back to the start of the conversation.

In the end, it’s a timing problem and there’s no way to fix it.

“What is your answer, Ms. Yashajin? Should you refuse the current schedule, we will of course look into alternatives. In the worst-case scenario, this would result in all matches being played at the Kanto and Kansai Associations, but”

“This is fine. I’ll accept the schedule,” says Ai Yashajin with her usual arrogant confidence and determination, flipping her silky hair over her shoulder with the palm of her hand like a black wing at the same time.

Then, she makes a declaration of her own.

“She will have to deal with the short preparation time as well. Actually, she’ll be more focused on the 3-*dan* division, yes? I won’t be in her line of sight, which gives me the chance to land a punch from her blind spot.”

Ai punches her own palm, making a sound like a firecracker as she spoke.

“If I can get her reeling from the start, all I have to do is keep up the pressure so she never has a chance to get up. I’ll make her regret asking for this schedule!”

“Yes. That’s the spirit.”

As her Master, it’s reassuring to hear her competitiveness coming through.

Ai is in a good spot mentally.

Big Sis is obviously the stronger of the two, but Ai Yashajin doesn’t know how scary she is just yet. That gives her a chance to win.

I’m in a strange position though I don’t want Big Sis to be under too much pressure, but I also don’t want Ai to lose

“Thank you for your understanding.” Once Ms. Oga makes a deep bow, she turns to me and says, “Moving on ... about your request concerning Ms. Hinatsuru——.”

“.....!!”

Even before me, I can tell my first apprentice freezes up on the spot.

Glancing at her, I listen to what Ms. Oga has to say as she dons a very professional tone.

“The board concluded that it would be best to not move forward with it.”

“I see

Dejected, I let out a long sigh.

“I was thinking that Ai seeing the title match from the boardside table as the match recorder would be a valuable experience for her, but

Working as a match recorder has been called *the perfect training method* for a long, long time because they get to watch the match closer than anyone else.

Though some people dispute just how much someone's Shogi skill can increase by being the match recorder because of how easy it is to follow matches over the Internet ...

That being said, there are tons of people who say they want to record a title match at least *once in their lifetime*.

Keika gave me one extra piece of advice the day that Ai Yashajin became the Queen Challenger. Which was——.

"Make sure that Ai is involved in the title match. Get her as close to it as you can."

That's it.

She suggested making her the match recorder, and I couldn't have agreed more. Even Ai Hinatsuru said, "I want to do it!" the moment I asked her about.

I'm sure she wanted to help her younger sister apprentice in some way during the title match and there's probably some excitement left over from seeing the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match the other day.

Unfortunately, the association's answer was *no*.

"U-umm Does that mean that I'm not good enough yet?!" says Ai, desperately looking to Ms. Oga for answers. "If I don't have enough experience, I'll go record matches every single day! I know there isn't much time left, but but I'll work very hard! Please Please!!"

"That is not the issue here." The young Women's League player's straightforward enthusiasm washes over Ms. Oga like an intense spotlight, so she takes a moment to compose herself before saying, "The association has high expectations for you, Ms. Hinatsuru, and we would be more than happy to have your name attached to a title match record. Were this any other title

match, your proposal would be accepted with open arms. However

That's when it all clicks for me.

"Then, the real problem is——."

"Yes. *The Family Ties Regulation*."

The observer and match recorder have to be from outside the Shogi family trees of both players to make sure everything stays fair. That's why this rule is known as *The Family Ties Regulation*.

Of course, Ai Hinatsuru and I know about it.

However, there is one exception.

"In the case that *both players belong to the same family, the match recorder may as well* Sora-Queen is Kiyotaki 9-dan's apprentice while Ai Yashajin and Ai Hinatsuru are both his granddaughter apprentices. Therefore, it should be possible to treat them as members of the same family tree. That was your reasoning, Ryuo, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Unfortunately, we cannot make such an exception."

"..... Not that the match recorder can do much to help a player during a match."

"Yes, but rules are rules. The board has made the decision that *Shogi family tree* only pertains to a Master and their apprentices in this situation."

"Isn't there anything you can"

"No. Not in this instance."

The Shogi Association tends to approve special circumstances, to let customary things just disappear and to be flexible depending on the situation quite a bit.

Just, not this time.

“I do have a proposal on this matter.” Ms. Oga finally smiles like usual and says, “In order for Ms. Hinatsuru to observe the title match as closely as possible, the association has come up with a different offer. Specifically——.”

“Huh?”

Both Ai Hinatsuru and I tilted our heads at Ms. Oga’s suggestion.

“Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh——?!”

The shock is just too much to contain. Come again?!

BREMEN TOWN MUSICIANS

“Jawana list?”

Charlette’s voice filled the room, but her tongue couldn’t keep up with the vowels.

Four elementary school-aged girls had gathered at the apartment Yaichi Kuzuryu and Ai Hinatsuru call home.

Getting together these last few precious days of their spring break, the Grade Schooler Practice Group was in the middle of a Shogi sleepover and pajama party.

With the first match of the Queen Title Match a mere two days away, Yaichi was currently in Kobe to give Ai Yashajin a last-minute Shogi lesson.

“Jawana Nope. Journalist, as in one of those people? Writers for newspapers and Shogi magazines who do articles about the matches?” Momentarily picking up a bit of Charlette’s accent, Mio asks for confirmation.

“That’s right. Master and I, we were pretty surprised,” Ai responded with a mixture of concern and happiness on her face. “I asked them to let me work as the match recorder, but they said no That’s why they offered to let me be a journalist.”

“Which match are you going to do?”

“They said I could choose any to write about.”

“Really? Is that how it works?”

“It’s not for a newspaper or anything. They’ll post what I write on the association homepage and in a magazine. Ms. Oga also told me I could write about the whole series at once if I wanted. So I decided to go watch the first and third matches myself. They’re both in Kansai, too.”

“Woow~ Getting all this special treatment, the Shogi Association really must have high hopes for you, Ai!” said Mio, thoroughly impressed as she nodded her head.

“And the journalist gets to sit right next to the match recorder, yeah? But, you won’t have to make tea or anything and you can leave your spot whenever you want! That’s so much easier!”

“Ahaha. But Master said: *Being a match recorder would be better for training.* He looked really sad, too.”

“Cha, too! Cha wants to wecord matches!”

“That’s great, Charlette. But you’d better learn proper posture first.”

The moment Mio said that, Charlotte immediately blurted, “I twain!” and tried to sit on her ankles. However, her balance was off, and she tumbled to the floor.

“Ahahahaha!”

“Charlette, that was so cute!”

“Weally?”

Right beside this lighthearted banter, one girl’s eyes were alight with admiration.

“Truly amazing! I’m so jealous of you!!” said Ayano Sadatou with a blinding flash from her glasses.

“Not only a Women’s League player, but a Shogi journalist as well! You are just like Big Sister Machi! I wish to become just like that!”

“D-do you really think so? I don’t think I can write as good as Kugui-sensei, but I’ll look to her as an example and do my best!”

“My oh my So then, the fastest way to join the Women’s League is to write articles? In that case, I’ll set my sights on the league and But ... but ...

my skills are Awhhhh~!"

"Ayano? What wong? Pat pat?"

Worried about Ayano as the girl goes deep into thought, Charlette goes over to her and gently pats her head with her tiny hand in a show of support.

"Well, don't forget, you've got really pretty handwriting and get good grades in Japanese class, so you might be perfect for this journalist thing."

"Thank you, Mio!"

Since Ai's typing skills were still a work in progress, she was told to write on the same lined paper she used in elementary school and submit her article that way.

"Hey, hey," said Charlette as she tugged on Mio and Ai's clothes. "Cha, Cha wants to wite an atwicle, too."

"You do? But, Charlette, can you write Japanese characters? You'll have to write the Chinese *kanji* characters, too."

Ayano, who had recovered from her momentary breakdown, answers Mio.

"Charlette has a lot of confidence in her writing because a short essay she wrote at school was published in the local paper."

"Woow?! That's amazing!!"

"Take a wook!"

Charlette reached into her pocket and pulled out a neatly folded newspaper clipping, which she then held out for Ai and Mio to see.

Lub

Cha lubs Shwogi.

But Cha lubs Masta eben more.

Masta twold Cha.

“You can bwe my bwide.”

“We’ll hwoneymoon in Hawaii.”

“I’ll bwuy you an apawtment.”

Cha lubs Masta, too.

How much?

Vewy much!

Mio was so shocked by what she read that she asked Charlette one more time just to make sure.

“This was in the newspaper? This right here?”

“Oui!” she responded with a proud grin.

Ai showered the young girl with praise.

“Of course something this well-written was chosen! You’re really good at writing, Charlette! It must be nice.”

“Oui!”

“So, tell me, have you written anything else? Has Master said anything else to you, Charlette? I’d love to hear more! Would you tell me?”

“Oui!”

“Oh, no no no”

One look at Charlette’s sparkling grin next to Ai’s dazzling smile made the

color drain from Mio and Ayano's faces.

"Ch-Charlette! Save that for later! Actually, never ever tell Ai that you like Kuzuryu-sensei, okay?!!"

"Oui?"

Charlette tilts her head, confused. Ai doesn't say another word but the smile is still plastered to her face. That visage was much, much scarier than words can describe.

Mio changes the subject in an attempt to clear the sour air.

"B-But, yeah! Kuzuryu-sensei making you write an article about Ten-chan, that's really mean of him!"

"Huh?"

Ai couldn't follow Mio's thinking.

So, Mio spells it out for her.

"Ten-chan is your rival, right? Doesn't having a front row seat for your rival's title match sting quite a bit?"

"N-No, not at all! Master is coming up with all sorts of ways to help me grow. It's not painful at all."

Ai denied Mio's words with everything she had.

"Besides, I still haven't won a single match against Ten-chan, so rather than hurt I mean, Ten-chan started playing Shogi years before I did and her record in the Women's League is so much better than mine Thinking of her as a rival would be ridiculous."

"Are you sure? As I see it, the two of you both became Women's League players very quickly, so I think you have the same amount of talent that she does. Also, people still talk about how you cried after the day you lost to Ten-chan in the Practice League. I believe you are perfect rivals."

Once Ayano was finished speaking, Ai meekly shook her head from side to side.

“That day in the Practice League, I was just upset with myself because I didn’t see the check path and let the win get away But,” added Ai as she forced a smile, “she isn’t my rival. I’m her sister apprentice. That’s why I want to write something for her!”

“Is that right,?”

Mio knew the pain of losing to Ai despite having a handicap advantage in the Practice League and shed tears of her own at the time. Despite her complicated feelings on the matter, she eventually nodded and took Ai at her word.

“Well, if you say so!”

“As you are sister apprentices, it is better to be on good terms. Though Ten-chan is not the easiest to get along with, she takes Shogi very seriously and I respect her a great deal for it. I wish her well in this match,” said Ayano.

“Cha, too! Cha wants to woot for Ten-chan!”

Though Ai Yashajin kept a very clear line between herself and the other members of the Grade Schooler Practice Group, that didn’t change the fact that she was a friend who would research right along with them.

“I’ve got it!! Think we can go and cheer for her at the match?! Can we?! The first one’s in Osaka, right?”

“*That* isn’t too far away and it’s a tourist area like Kyoto, so we should be able to go together.”

The schedule for the Queen Title Match had finally been announced and had become a trending topic.

Preparations for crowd control were already in the works and all tickets for the commentary hall with big board analysis were being sold by lottery rather than first-come first-serve, making this Shogi event feel more like an idol

concert. However——.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s students get VIP seats, right? They said so at the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match.”

“I’m not sure. I’ll ask Master about it, but

In this instance, VIP stood for *Very Important Prepubescent*. Association staff has come to believe that Yaichi Kuzuryu-*sensei* has a Lolita complex, and therefore makes sure that there are seats available for his tiny entourage whenever he participates in events.

This means that little girls actually sitting in those seats all but confirms Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s preferences to the Shogi world at large

As these four girls are still in elementary school, they have yet to catch on to this fact. The long-term outlook on Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s reputation is concerning.

However Ai was more concerned with something else.

“But, you know what Ten-chan is like. She’ll be angry with us if we make a scene cheering for her. Not to mention that Aunti- the way Sora-*sensei* acts rubs her the wrong way.”

“I know, I know! That’s why we go there and root for her really quietly! It shouldn’t be a problem just listening to the commentary, right?”

“Kwietly!” squealed Charlette with glee, happily waving her arms in the air. Not the least bit quiet at all.

“I shall make sure that Charlette behaves herself,” said Ayano, clamping down on Charlette with a bear hug from behind.

“I too wish to see what a Shogi journalist does with my own eyes! So please, let me come with you!!” she adds, her eyes glistening with desire.

At this point, Ai knew the three girls would go anyway even if she refused.

“..... Why not? We can all go and support Ten-chan together. Yes! I’ll ask Master!”

Ai nodded with a smile. Her younger sister apprentice Ai Yashajin was easily misunderstood, but she was happy to have someone she could relate to.

Mio got to her feet and started waving her arms about.

“Yaaay! So, our group is now officially Ten-chan’s cheerleaders!”

“Yess!”

And so it was that the cutest little support squad was born.

With the Queen Title Match’s first match on the horizon, no one could’ve expected its shocking conclusion At this point, not a single person would’ve seen it coming.

RECORD 2

ボディガード

B o d y g u a r d

Akira Ikeda 池田晶

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THE CRAB AND THE MONKEY

“I never would’ve thought Ai’s first title match would be taking place here.”

First match of the Queen Title Match.

Here to inspect the arena for tomorrow’s match, I take a long, sentimental look at the building towering overhead.

——“Tsutenkaku.”

Without a doubt, it’s one of Osaka’s most recognizable landmarks.

Even with Osaka’s tallest building, Abeno Harukas, around, I’d still have to say Tsutenkaku Tower is the symbol of Osaka.

The area known as *Shin Sekai* or *New World* is right at its feet. It’s a place where tourists and some of Osaka’s shadier, one-step-away-from-being-homeless residents gather every single day to feast on fried kebabs and buy some of the gaudiest clothes you’ve ever seen.

The first place I took Ai Yashajin after agreeing to give her private lessons was a Shogi parlor right here in New World

“Quite nostalgic, wouldn’t you say? Kuzuryu-sensei?” says Akira, who was granted permission to come along with us as Ai’s guardian because she’s underage, as if she’s strolling down memory lane and lines up her camera.

“Not even a full year has passed, and yet My lady has become such a mature woman

Of course, she’s pointing the lens at Ai.

Both players are standing in front of the Oushouhi King Piece Monument at the base of Tsutenkaku Tower for a pre-match photo session.

This kind of thing happens before every title match.

“Both of you, could you look this way please?!”

“Smile! Can I ask you to smile, please?!”

“Just like that, just like that!!”

Cameras are lined up in ranks surrounding the 10-year-old challenger and the 15-year-old Queen.

Ai is wearing her usual black dress.

Big Sis is in her old sailor-style school uniform from junior high.

“Over here, please!”

“This way! Look this way, please!”

“May I ask for a different pose?! Like this As if you’re about to step on the readers on the other side of the camera! Yes, just like that! Perfect!!”

Ai and Big Sis keep their cool as they respond to the avalanche of requests coming from the photographers.

Even so, I have a feeling at least one of them is taking pictures for something other than the title match

“..... Seems like some of these media people don’t know what this event is for.”

“Ngh Disgraceful!”

Furious, Akira bullies her way into the throng of cameras.

“Move it, ingrates! How dare you ask my lady to make such a pose!!”

“Wh-Who do you think you are?!”

“I’ll only say this once!! Asking my lady to pose is unnecessary! Because her domineering personality naturally shines through no matter what she does, can you not seeeeeeeeeeee?!!”

“Hey?! Th-The heck’r ya doin’ on the ground, lady?!”

“Pant Pant Pant!”

Pointing her camera up at Ai at such a low angle seems to have gotten Akira really excited.

Ai can’t lash out at Akira like she normally would because of all the journalists around, so all she can do is glare at her. Unfortunately, that look seems to be doing something for Akira because her breathing is getting even more ragged as Ai’s frown keeps getting more intense. The cycle is complete. Me? Of course, I’m pretending I’ve never met her before in my life.

Locals and tourists in the area have noticed that something’s going on and are showing up with their cameras and smartphones at the ready.

“Wass goin’ on over ’ere?”

“They been sayin’ Naniwa’s Snow White is here!”

“Then ’at girl in black next to ’er must be that Kobe’s Cinderella ever’body’s been talkin’ ’bout. Tiny li’l thing.”

“Ohhh! Fantastic!!”

TV crews from around Osaka and all over the country have been running stories about Big Sis and Ai Yashajin day and night. This is the kind of treatment idols get when they’re in town.

“I raised that young’en with my own two hands, I did. She’s a strong one.”

When suddenly, a voice lathered in cigarettes and alcohol comes from the crowd.

“The Bishop Head Pawn strategy I taught ’er can take down the likes of Ginko Sora and Yaichi Kuzuryu, ya mark my words! Snow White’s perfect record ends tomorrow, ya hear!”

I-I know that voice!

So gruff you can't tell if it's an old man or woman, that has to be——!!

"Panther! Is that, Panther?!" says Akira, looking up with one cheek still planted on the ground and sounding like a happy dog owner reunited with their long lost furry friend.

——Panther.

The perplexing Shogi player who became Ai's first roadblock at a Shogi parlor right here in New World called *Twin Kings Club* History and gender a mystery (later identified as female), her trademark was the leopard-patterned clothing she always wore. Every single thing on her body was pink the last time I saw her, like a living, breathing Pink Panther

Recovering from the shock, I point out.

"She's gone purple From head to toe"

"Elder women seem to have a desire to dye their hair purple nowadays."

Observing from a distance, I can tell that the Purple Panther is decked out with glitter. Ai seems to have noticed her as well and I don't blame her for being a little on edge.

Looking closer, Panther isn't alone. Quite a few of the skilled geezers who are more than willing to put money on the table to face Ai Yashajin in *shinken*-style matches at New World's Shogi parlors are looking at her like they're reminiscing right now.

They're not rooting for her or even saying hello.

Just They're interested enough in Ai to come and see for themselves.

That kind of vibe will definitely be a plus for her.

"But, yeah, I highly doubt she'll be using Bishop Head Pawn tomorrow."

"Why is that? Are you saying she'll use Pincushion instead?"

"Did you mean to say *Pac-Man* by chance?"

“That’s totally what I said!” Akira says defiantly, sounding more girly than usual.

“I hate to say it, but Bishop Head Pawn and Pac-Man are B-rank strategies. Using one of them in the title match is a great way to get other players to turn their backs on you. Think about it, no matter how good the french fries may be, you wouldn’t order them at a five-star restaurant, would you?”

“Is that how it is?”

“Well, pretty much anything goes in modern Shogi. Win and people aren’t going to say much at all. On the other hand, lose and the damage is huge. Players have their individual reputations to worry about. Let a match end in a Repetition Draw when you start out with the advantage of being on offense, and people treat you like you lost”

Trust is big in the Shogi world.

This one is strong.

I could accept it if they took a title.

Once players start thinking about you that way, they stop trying to hold out at the moment of truth. Then it’s easier to win tournament-style and series matches, which ups your winning percentage.

That’s what trust is in this world.

Taking part in a title match is a chance for a player to boost their trust, but it’s also at the risk of going down.

A player becomes one Lance stronger being in a title match. However, they become a Lance weaker should they lose three matches in a row.

Trust is so important that that saying exists.

The Shogi world is testing Ai right now. Whether she wins against Big Sis or not, her career as a Women’s League player will be greatly affected by how she tries to pass it.

“..... Besides, Bishop Head Pawn won’t work on Big Sis anyway. Reason being, Ai’s version of it has a glaring weakness”

“A weakness?! Kuzuryu-sensei, what could that possibly——?”

Right in the middle of Akira’s question.

“It’s time to do the arena inspection. Would both players, the observer and all staff with clearance please follow me inside,” someone on the management staff announces over the crowd.

The observer for this match is the man who retired right after playing against me in last year’s final placement match, the Don of Naniwa, Tatsuo Zaou 9-dan.

Despite all of the joint pain and using a cane to walk, he agreed to take on this important role.

“Excuse me, Kuzuryu-sensei Don’t you find this concerning? That fossil working as the observer? What will happen if he croaks during the match?”

“Shhh! Please don’t jinx it, Akira Zaou-sensei was the strongest player when Tsutenkaku Tower was thought of as a holy site in the Shogi world. You could even say that having a match here without him would be impossible.”

“Hmm, I see”

As for Zaou-sensei himself, he’s been quietly watching the photo session off to the side while leaning on my Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan, for support, but——.

“Comin’ all the way ta New World fer an inspection without a single nip from the bottle? Nonsense, I say! Kousuke! Oi, Kousuke!”

“Yes, yes, Sensei. Did you call?”

“We’re goin’ out fer a round. Now come on.”

“B-But, Sensei Doesn’t the observer need to be present for the inspection——?”

“Ya can let yer apprentice take care o’ a Women’s League match inspection, yah? The boy ain’t old enough to drink nothin’ yet, so ’at works out juss fine.”

Zaou-*sensei* twirls his cane over his head for a moment before pointing it in my direction.

“Ryuo! Countin’ on ya.”

“All right

Using my Master to keep his balance, Zaou-*sensei* really does head off in the direction of the nearest bar. Watching them go, it was hard enough getting out any response at all. Seriously, Shogi players back in the day were something else

Akira asked with concern in her voice, “Is this acceptable, *Sensei*? You said a match would not be possible at Tsutenkaku without the fossil.”

“..... Well, things will work out, right? It’s the first day, so surely Big Sis and Ai will behave themselves

Ai Yashajin crushes that hope right off the bat.

“So dark! Can’t you get a more acceptable amount of light in here?”

The moment we step inside the room that will be the arena on the third floor of Tsutenkaku Tower, she demands more lighting.

Another problem pops up with choosing what piece set to use.

Two different sets are available, but Big Sis takes one look and says, “The patterns used for this set of pieces are rather dark and will tire my eyes. I would prefer to use the white——.”

“What’s this? Are your eyes getting old?”

The very same girl who just said that it’s too dark in here completely ignores that fact and takes a swipe at Big Sis for saying *her eyes would get tired*. It’s a

jab at her age, for sure.

The whole staff freezes, unsure how to handle a 10-year-old treating a 15-year-old like an old lady.

Amid that silence, Ai lets out a long, loud, “Haaaaaa,” before piling on, “You know what, fine then. Let’s use that one. It’s worthless from an artistic standpoint and completely unfit for a title match, but what choice do we have if your eyes will get tired?”

“.....”

“And another thing, the color white is just so awful to begin with. The same people that say it means purity are the same ones that talk about how pure they are in the first place. People like Snow White. I, for one, would give up playing Shogi altogether if I had such an embarrassing nickname.”

“.....”

The hue of Big Sis’s eyes shifts after that obvious taunt.

Her eyes change colors whenever she’s excited or has an intense urge to murder something. That color is dangerous!!

“Okay, okay, okay! Th-That set will be fine for the match, yes? But the board! Would someone please tell me about it?!” I say louder than necessary to grab everyone’s attention away from the pieces.

It worked.

The management staff member says with a hint of *thank you for noticing* in his voice, “It was prepared specifically for this Queen Title Match. The association borrowed it from a very famous *banshi* board Master.”

“Who would that be?”

“Shumai Honinbou-sensei!”

..... Oh, her.

A Go title holder, Shumai Honinbou is the strongest female Go player in history.

Combined with the Shogi world, she is without a doubt the strongest woman to ever set pieces on a board who has ever lived.

Also renowned for her ability to make those boards and pieces, she lends Big Sis a hand so often that it seems like she has a lot of sympathy for another girl trying to follow in her footsteps. She was also the one who made the set of Shogi pieces for Ai Yashajin.

There's just one catch She's a bad drunk, plain and simple.

"It came with a message saying, As I have been barred from the Shogi world due to an unfortunate misunderstanding, I wish for my work, at the very least, to be part of this historic match."

"No, there was no misunderstanding. She deserves everything she is getting"

I make that clear here and now.

"Anyway, what's that board's width?"

"Seven *sun* is what I've been told."

"Oh, no no. I can tell it's thicker than that."

Seven *sun* would be roughly 21 cm, but the board sitting here looks like it's almost 30.

"Speaking conservatively, I'd say this is at least eight *sun*. Knowing Shumai-sensei, she had a really good, thick piece of plum-yew *kaya* wood and just couldn't bring herself to cut it"

Considering that two girls who have a special place in her heart are facing off in a title match, she was probably so determined to make the perfect board that she overlooked an important detail.

The fact that both of these girls are teenagers, well almost.

“Even adult men would get tired playing on this board Don’t forget that Ai, no, the challenger is still pretty short. Wouldn’t a slightly thinner board be better?”

“Agreed.”

The one who takes my side with a nod isn’t Ai — it’s Big Sis.

Big Sis, who’s usually so on the ball it drives me crazy, has matured quite a bit now that she’s one season away from being crowned Queen of Queens, a lifetime title similar to the *Eternal* designation for pro title holders I regret thinking that barely a second after it crossed my mind.

“She’s been complaining about pieces as well, so why not make everything for little kids? *Animal Shogi* would be perfect for her.”

What a scathing comeback. She didn’t try to hide that taunt at all.

Ai stands up as if to say: *the inspection is over*, but glares at Big Sis instead and declares, “This board is fine.”

“Hold on a second, Ai——.”

“I’m saying it’s fine how it is. Didn’t you hear me? Are you just plain stupid? Should you die?”

Oooph

A thicker board will put the shorter player at a disadvantage, namely Ai Yashajin.

She’s smart enough to know that without me telling her, but she’s being extremely defiant right before the match so that she doesn’t look weak in any way. Though she could just be pissed off right now.

“I-In that case, I would like thick floor cushions to be available tomorrow,” I say to the staff, trying to bring an end to this standoff, but unfortunately Big

Sis makes it all for naught again.

“If she’s going to use a thick floor cushion, why not just give her a high chair? Or perhaps she could sit on her nice Master’s lap during the match? I wouldn’t care.”

“What makes you think you’re so grown up? I’ve heard you’re still smooth down there.”

“Want to be torn apart and fed to the animals at Tennouji Zoo?”

“Ohh, I’m so scared! Save me, *Sensei*!”

Ai hides behind me. Leave me out of this!!

“C-Calligraphy! I need both of you to write some calligraphy as presents for tonight’s guests at the opening night party. Now, if you please!” I announce as the observer representative while I try to endure the holes Big Sis is glaring through my chest the media people’s cue to get their cameras out so they could capture the moment the girls put brush to paper.

Big Sis and Ai look away from each other with a loud *humph*! before lathering up their brushes with a ton of ink, slamming them down onto the fancy pieces of paper and all but slicing out characters.

EXTERMINATION Queen Ginko Sora ***PLUNDER*** Women’s League 2-dan Ai Yashajin

..... Well, they’ve got great handwriting. There’s not much else I can say.

Who would be happy getting that kind of present?

But Shogi fans showed a lot more love for the beautiful young prodigies than I ever expected.

“50,000!”

“Then I bid 70,000 yen!!”

“Mwha ha ha ha! Is that all your love for my lady is worth?! I bid 80,000! I challenge anyone willing to bet more to prove me wrong!!”

The opening night party is being hosted at Spa World, only a five-minute walk from Tsutenkaku Tower.

Along with being able to enjoy baths and spas from all across the globe, they have a hotel and rooms designed for parties like this. That may sound impressive, but this place isn’t so much different from other public bath and spa chains. This may be Women’s League, but I doubt they’ve ever hosted anything like this Shogi opening night party before.

Thanks to everything that happened during the inspection, the players were already one wrong word away from tearing into each other when the party started. Both decided to go back to their own rooms barely 10 minutes into it. That’s another thing that’s never happened before——. (Because...)

“Spring has most certainly sprung. Since little flies have started coming out of the woodwork, exterminating them is my first priority.” (Big Sis)

“If I’m the fly, that makes you the garbage that attracts them.” (Ai Yashajin)

Since the players’ speeches got off on that note, they’d be more likely to kill each other than play Shogi if they stayed in the same room So, yeah

Which is why their calligraphy went up for auction right away.

On a side note, a title holder’s calligraphy typically goes for about 5,000 yen, but——.

“85,000!”

“90,000!”

“93,000!!”

“Enough of this! 100,000 yen! I don’t care if I have to walk back to Kobe!!”

I restrain Akira from behind as she literally empties her wallet.

“Please, calm down! You can get Ai’s autograph anytime you want!!”

“Don’t get in my way, *Sensei*! My lady outright refuses to sign autographs for anyone she knows personally! Which is why the lord of the manor and I have been buying up as many as possible at Shogi events without her knowledge just like this!!”

“That by itself isn’t all that unusual in the Shogi world, but please, show some self-restraint this time!!”

Parents and siblings of Shogi players coming to these opening night parties or participating in the *next move* quizzes during commentary events in order to get prizes signed by a member of their own family happens all the time. Many of them who actually do get said prize end up returning it.

When all was said and done, Ai’s calligraphy went for 100,000 yen (to Akira).

Which in turn made all Big Sis’s fans drive up the price of her calligraphy because *they couldn’t let the Queen’s go for less than the challenger’s!*

Rather than stop all the fuss, the observer Zaou 9-*dan* took the initiative by changing into a *yukata* and downing bottle after bottle of beer. The man’s in a great mood.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! Ain’t this great? Ain’t this inter’stin’? Yea, Kousuke?”

“Yes, yes, *Sensei*. Though, tomorrow’s gonna be a rough day if you don’t turn in soon

“Ya thinkin’ my liver’s so weak ’hundred beers’ll get me drunk, are ya?!”

The Don of Naniwa whacks my Master upside the head with an open palm before saying in a really sad voice, “..... An’ ya know, I’m retired now. There ain’t no reason fer me to watch my health no more. Gettin’ drunk is the only fun thin’ I’ve got left. Shogi’s already gone, don’ take beer away from me, too.”

“*Sensei*,” says Master weakly before ... “Understood! I, Kousuke Kiyotaki,

will drink right along with you until you're satisfied! Yaichi! Off with those clothes, we're dancin'!!"

"Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh?!"

You're dragging me into this too?!

"Quit yar bellyachin'! Our Shogi family's starrin' in this match!! If we don't liven up the party, then who the heck will?! Come on, the floor needs hittin'!!"

Master, stripping out of his suit and yelling at the top of his lungs.

Akira, still beaming from her victory at the auction, says with a smile, "Have no fear! I shall record your courage on my camera for all to see, Kuzuryu-sensei!"

"No one needs that, dammit!!" I yell, ripping off my necktie.

Master's orders are absolute. The Queen Title Match opening night party filled with alcohol, wads of money flying around and men dancing around in their underwear lasts all the way until the morning of

THE RABBIT VERSUS THE WOLF

“Good morning, Master!”

My apprentice Ai greets me first thing when I step in the arena. Of course, not Ai Yashajin.

“Aghhh Ai. Mornin’”

“? Are you tired?”

“Well The opening night party just wouldn’t end”

Zaou-sensei wouldn’t go home and my Master was completely plastered. I had to take care of them until the sun came up. Seriously, I felt like I was working at an old folks’ home.

“..... Ah, you brought your writing supplies. Good girl.”

Ai Hinatsuru is sitting on her ankles with her notebook and Mr. Cat pen case on her lap. Looking down at her, I take a seat next to my apprentice before glancing around the room.

“So, where’s Keika? She came with you this morning, right?”

I had Keika look after Ai at Master’s place last night because both he and I were here at the party.

Naturally, I thought Keika would come with her, but——.

“Keika stayed home.”

“She stayed behind? Why?”

“I don’t know the specific reason, but Maybe someone needs to keep an eye on the classroom?”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

Being exhausted and running on no sleep is messing with my mind.

I'm sure she really wants to come, but somebody has to do that. After all she's done to care for Ai and Big Sis, the Kiyotaki Shogi family is still standing all thanks to her. I swear, she's a saint, a holy mother.

"Mornin' y'all. Workin' hard, I see."

Observer Zaou 9-*dan* makes his entrance exactly 20 minutes before the match is going to start.

He looks so much younger in a kimono. His spine is straight as an arrow and he's not using a cane. I wouldn't expect anything less.

My Master is right behind him, sleep-deprived face pale as a ghost and so hung over he can barely walk. He's not going to be any help today at all

Now all that's left is to wait for the players. A natural stillness fills the arena as tension starts building.

The first to arrive is—— challenger, Ai Yashajin Women's League 2-*dan*.



“Good morning.”

The rules for the Queen Title Match state that the players must be dressed in kimono at the start of the match.

The one my apprentice is wearing as she greets every person in the arena in a loud and clear voice is black with a red motif. It's paired with dark red *hakama* trousers.

“Whoaaa”

The media people had their positions staked out and their cameras at the ready but were so overwhelmed by the 10-year-old's aura when she came in that they were all a second or two late taking her picture. This is a completely different Ai Yashajin from the one they saw yesterday.

A beautiful flame flickering in the blackest darkness, and here she is in person.

“So pretty,” whispers Ai Hinatsuru next to me, breathless.

Testing out the thick cushion with her hands, Ai Yashajin finds a comfortable spot and sits down in front of the board.

..... I knew that thing was 8-*sun*.

Big Sis sat next to it yesterday during the inspection as well, but comparing the board to Ai right now It's way too big. I don't think that will directly impact the outcome, but

— She's still only 10 years old

My chest clamps down as a strange feeling washes over me.

Unlike my first apprentice, Ai Yashajin got stronger without me having to do a single thing. She already had more than enough knowledge and talent the day we first met.

—Even so Seeing how far she's come really pulls on the heartstrings

I know it had nothing to do with me, but that doesn't stop the corners of my

eyes from heating up.

“Pardon me.”

Then, 10 minutes to the second before the match is going to start, Queen Ginko Sora makes her entrance.

Big Sis is wearing her usual title match kimono, a dark blue one. Taking a seat, she pulls a small fan out of her drawstring purse and places a pocket watch on the *tatami* mat.

Then, she takes lip balm, eye drops, a hand towel and all sorts of little things out of the purse and puts them in their proper places around her.

After that, when she is ready, she starts lining up the pieces. Ai follows suit, but her hands are not as steady.

Big Sis has played in over 20 title matches already.

She has the ability to make any arena into her own turf. In terms of title match experience, Big Sis is way ahead of me.

—That’s the difference experience makes The Meijin had it, too. This aura of complete control.

Title matches are obviously different from regular league matches.

It’s easy to get distracted by how heavy and hot a kimono is, and of course nerves can build up with so much more on the line.

Even more than that, it’s hard to play your best when you’re playing Shogi in a completely new environment.

Big matches don’t produce memorable ones.

So much so that that proverb exists.

That’s how hard it is to play at your full potential in a title match.

—However, the challenger has a wave of momentum on her side after emerging from the tournament victorious

Nothing is certain in any match. Just like how I became the Ryuo.

“I’ll conduct the piece flip,” says the match recorder, a current Sub League member, as he prepares to determine who will go first.

..... On a side note, I wanted Mr. Kagamizu to be the match recorder for this one.

Since he played against Ai’s father, a highly decorated amateur player, so much that it’s safe to say that the late Mr. Yashajin taught Mr. Kagamizu everything he knows, I thought it would be fitting for him to have a front row seat for this match.

But.

“I’m going to say no. I doubt I could keep a cool head just sitting there. And——.”

Mr. Kagamizu declined my invitation and added something that sounded like he’d been thinking about for a while.

“There’s a chance I’ll have to play against Ginko in the 3-dan division. I’d like to focus on myself right now.”

In the end, he chose to work as the match recorder for the second match in the Meijin Title Match series in Aichi Prefecture. He said experiencing such a high-level match that way would help renew his determination to go pro.

Seeing his desire to prioritize his own training reminded me just how passionate he is about this upcoming 3-*dan* division season

“..... If only everyone could win.”

“?”

Ai Hinatsuru glances up at me, confused.

Just then, match recorder flips the pieces into the air. *Clack, clack, clack* They fall like raindrops.

“Five Pawns face up.”

“Ooahh” Sounds that didn’t quite become words fill the arena.

“Five Pawns. First move to”

Ai Hinatsuru is already taking notes.

Big Sis will be going first.

“.....”

After receiving the first move from the piece flip, Big Sis takes out a water bottle and fills her cup. That’s exactly the same thing she does in her room for practice sessions and researching.

Meanwhile, Ai has her eyes closed and isn’t moving a muscle.

Even after the piece flip, she’s not letting an ounce of emotion show. Her strategy is probably to prevent her opponent from getting the slightest read on her.

But Those tightly closed eyelids are trembling just a little bit.

Zaou-sensei looks over at the digital clock on the match recorder’s tablet and breaks the uneasy tranquility.

“Yea, it’s time. Go on now, start on up.”

The players exchange wordless greetings. An endless string of camera flashes surrounds them.

Then, once Big Sis opens her Bishop Path, she takes a drink from her cup to moisten her throat.

THE PIED PIPER

“O-Oh, wow! This is the very same title match staff break room that I’ve seen in my dreams!!” squeals Ayano, her glasses flashing along with her eyes. “The Shogi board fills the entire monitor screen! Awhhh! I’m in the lofty noble atmosphere I’ve only seen on Internet blogs. Right now, I’m standing on the same floor, breathing the same air! Haauuuu~!!”

The break room for association staff and media people is on the second floor of Tsutenkaku Tower.

Every member of the Grade Schooler Practice Group came in this morning to observe.

Of the four of them, Ayano’s excitement is off the charts. She usually acts so grown up, but even she’s still in grade school

By the way, the big board analysis is going to take place in the reception hall underground and the match itself is on the third floor of the tower.

The players might hear us if things get too loud in here. Ayano’s seemingly endless supply of energy has me worried, but Ai Hinatsuru comes up to me and says, “Th-Thank you, Master, for arranging for all of us to be allowed in the staff break room

“It’s no big deal. They’re your usual practicing partners, plus Mio and Ayano are Practice League members who will most likely join the Women’s League themselves one day. I couldn’t ask for better guests to invite in here.”

I’m used to seeing Sub League members inside the staff break room during title matches to do research all the time.

Not to mention the fact that the staff waiting room has got to be the most boring place on earth in the morning. We’re more than happy to have guests. Now that there are kids here, my hungover and very groggy Master is doing his

best to look dignified as well.

“Thank you so much! Thank you so very, very much!!”

Ayano is on her knees, bowing down to the floor and thanking me like a broken record.

“You you have made my dream come true, Kuzuryu-*sensei*! Not that being allowed to stay at your apartment overnight isn’t already a dream come true every time For you, Kuzuryu-*sensei*, I would do anything, anything at all! If you asked me to get naked and dance for you right now, I would be more than happy to do so!!”

“A-A-A-Ayano?! This room is full of media people and association staff, okay?! Journalists are here too, so be careful what you say, okay?! Okay?!”

I desperately try to stop Ayano from saying anything too outrageous. Seriously, all the adrenaline has gone to her head.

Unfortunately, it’s already too late.

“..... Just now, that little girl said she would do *anything*, didn’t she?”

“Just when I was wonderin’ what Mr. Kuzuryu was thinkin’ by bringin’ a big group of grade school girls in here first thing in the mornin’, he’s askin’ them to strip naked?”

“Word is he’s got little girls staying at his place every night Should’ve known he was a loli-con”

“Is that how he raised Kobe’s Cinderella, too?”

“Since there’s nothing going on yet this morning, might as well get an article going.”

But that info’s not right——!!!

“Mast- No.”

Putting on fake glasses that I didn’t know she had, Ai points a voice recorder

in my direction and says, “A-hem. Um Kuzuryu-*sensei*? What is your take on this match’s early game?”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Ai? You’re not acting like yourself.”

“I’m a Shogi journalist today. This is an official interview, so Mast Pardon me, Kuzuryu-*sensei*? What are your thoughts on the early game?”

Oh, now I get it.

“Whoa! Ai, you look like a real journalist!”

“The way you handle the voice recorder so adeptly I can hardly believe we are both in the same grade! Ai, you’re almost scary!!”

“Ehehe≡”

Journalist Hinatsuru looks satisfied with everyone’s reaction.

That voice recorder sticks out to me, too. She must’ve used it plenty of times before, which would mean Is everything I say being recorded Every day?

“I wanna try being a journalist, too! Kuzuryu-*sensei*, who do you think’ll win?!” Mio pipes up.

“Please, allow me to practice as well!” Now Ayano joins in.

“Cha, too! Cha wants to interview Masta!”

Pulling a lollipop out of her pocket and pointing it at me like a microphone, even Charlette is getting into this journalist thing.

Surrounded by the Grade Schooler Practice Group for an interview. This is new.

“Well Miss Yashajin is following a Normal Bishop Exchange standard, which is unusual for her. The defender must find a way to go on offense at some point, so I think Miss Yashajin has a secret strategy up her sleeve. If it works, then she might be on even footing.”

“Why do you think she decided against using Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, her best strategy?”

“Probably because trying to use it now would be too difficult to pull off. I don’t want to get too technical, but with how far her Normal Bishop Exchange has come along, there’s no merit to using a Move-Loss strategy anymore.”

“Yes, I see! Thank you!!”

With Ai done, Ayano steps forward to ask me a question.

“What were your impressions of the players this morning?”

“Big *Sora-Queen* was just as calm as she always is. Today was the first time I’ve seen Challenger Yashajin in a kimono, and I thought it suited her well.”

“Yes, yes, yes! So then, which do you think looks cuter in a kimono?!”

“Huh? I-I can’t just”

Mio jumps in, her face beaming. I have no idea what to say.

Which one? Good question

“Come on, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Just between us.”

“Well I’m used to seeing Big Sis in a kimono. I’d never seen Ai wearing one before, so in the sense of something new, I’d say the challenger wins?”

“Ten-chan’s the wiiiiinner!!”

“Kuzuryu-*sensei* declares the defender is in position to win!!”

“Oh So, Master does prefer newer things Newer In other words, younger”

Is it just me, or did the topic take a strange turn?

“No doubt about it, the Ryuo’s a loli-con”

“*Sora-Queen* is only 15, but he’s moved on from her already”

“The guy changes little girls like upgrading to the latest smartphone, that’s

Yaichi Kuzuryu

“There’s no news going on, might as well get an article written.”

Mass media is making a move?!

“Hey Please stop joking around! People will think it’s true if that stuff shows up in an article! I’m not like that——.”

“Hey, hey.”

“Hm? What is it, Charlette?”

She tugs my arm until I lean down to her eye level, where she was waiting with the worst possible question at the worst possible time.

“So, Masta? When are you gonna mawwy Cha?”

Chatter

The air in here just took a major turn. A turn for the much, much worse.

“Ch-Charlette? Now’s not the best time to talk about that

“Masta, you pwomised to take Cha as your bwide. When will you? When?”

Journalists start moving en masse, racing for their equipment as if a player were about to throw in the towel.

All to write an article detailing my Lolita complex.

“Just when I thought he’d moved on from *Sora-Queen* to Miss Yashajin, who would’ve thought he was already engaged to that little tyke!”

“She’s just a li’l thing!”

“Ryuo, Engaged to Blonde Loli Now, that’s a scoop!”

“This is breaking news! We’re printing extras!!”

Delete them aaaaaaaaall! Rewrite eveeeeeeeeverything!!

“Truly amazing! This is it, the genuine break room atmosphere So intense!!”

Ayano, this is no time to be impressed!

“O-Oh, that’s right, everyone! I’m not the one you should be getting information about right now! Focus on Tsutenkaku Tower and New World!! I-I’ll fund you! Here!!”

I take money out of my own wallet and give it to the Grade Schooler Practice Group members while making my suggestion. This probably looks pretty bad from the journalists’ standpoint, but I can’t worry about that right now.

“Why not have lunch while you’re out? You need to mention the food, too!”

“Huh?! Do I need to talk about food and buildings when I’m supposed to be writing about Shogi?”

Ai looks surprised, so I explain it to her.

“Shogi journalists need to set the scene, and that includes the area around the arena. It’s especially true for title matches.”

“Uwhee? Why is that?”

“I’m sure you’ve seen all the preparation that goes into hosting a title match because your family owns a Japanese-style inn. The reason they go through all the effort is so that Shogi fans might become future customers. Of course, the *love of Shogi* is the most important part though.”

Which is exactly why the Shogi world must rise to meet their passion and commitment.

“The quality of the match is also important, but fans are interested in more than just the match itself. That’s where the journalists and Internet blogs come in to follow up.”

Mio points her finger and shouts.

“Now I get it! That’s why the writers always jam the name of the building into their articles, right?!”

“Yes. The written word lasts forever. It’s through that repetition that the names of tons of inns and hotels around the country have become linked with *memorable matches*.”

Kanagawa Prefecture’s Jinya, Tendou’s Taki no Yu, Niigata Prefecture’s Ryugon, Yamanashi Prefecture’s Tokiwa Hotel, Aichi Prefecture’s Ginpasou which is where Mr. Kagamizu is working as a match recorder right now The list goes on and on.

Title matches can only happen because those places work so hard to prepare the perfect arenas.

It’s up to the journalists to pick up that information.

“It’s not every day that Tsutenkaku Tower hosts a match, so fans who’ve been following Shogi for a long time will feel a real blast from the past. Trust me, you need to get as much info about the area around the arena as you can.”

“But The match”

Ai’s line of sight jumps back and forth between me and the monitor showing the board upstairs.

She was doing the same thing even while interviewing me earlier. I bet she’s afraid to miss anything.

“Ya got nothin’ to worry ’bout, young lass,” says Zaou-sensei from behind the sports section of the newspaper he’s reading in the middle of the room. There’s an analysis board in front of him but the pieces aren’t even lined up yet.

“The thing ’bout the first title match is yer more figurin’ out *how to use time* rather ’an how to play. This Shogi’s gotta long way to go. Ain’t ’at right, Kousuke?”

“Very true I remember my first title match, it felt more like a dream. Had eight hours o’ waitin’ time but ended up usin’ seven of them to calm myself down. The only thought in my head was tryin’ not to mess up too bad on day

one,” says Master Kiyotaki, reminiscing about the first time he was the Meijin Challenger in a two-day style format.

It feels like such a long time ago, but it hasn’t even been 10 years.

“Yes, it was the same for me. I couldn’t play fast at all during the first match in the Ryuo Title match. Actually, now is about the only time you will be able to get info about the area. You’ll need to be ready to go to the arena at any time once it gets into the late game.”

“..... Okay! I’ll be back in a little while!”

The situation finally making sense to her, Ai leads the other girls out to explore Tsutenkaku and New World.

RICE BALLS ROLLING

“The players’ lunch orders have arrived!”

About an hour after the Grade Schooler Practice Group members left to get writing material.

Management staff brings in the exact same food that the players are eating for lunch and journalists swoop in with their cameras flashing. This happens all the time during title matches.

“The challenger ordered a mixed *shokadon* lunch set. The Queen’s order was stew udon with *kayaku* rice.”

“Stew udon?”

The journalists who’ve never heard of it tilt their heads.

“It’s an unusual dish that’s been around in New World for a long time.”

Having eaten it before, I tell them all about it.

“It’s not so much of a *stew* as a *pot-au-feu*, but basically it’s simmered meat and vegetables in a salt-based soup with udon noodles. Kind of like Western chicken noodle soup without the chicken.”

“Ohh.”

“Back when we were kids, Big Sis and I used to eat it all the time when we came to Shogi parlors in New World. That sure takes me back The first time she ordered it, Big Sis was sure it was some kind of cream stew and started crying when this showed up

“Interesting, interesting.”

The journalists jot down my anecdote from the past and one makes a request.

“Kuzuryu-sensei. Since you’re here, why not add your own comments on their

orders?”

“Nice idea!”

“Tell us about the food, *Sensei*!”

Come again?!

“Y-You want me to comment on their food?! Well The challenger’s *shokadon* is the usual combination of meat and vegetables you’d expect, and the Queen’s stew udon is——.”

Ever since that manga called *Shogi Meshi* got made into a TV show, media people have been asking for a lot of information that has nothing to do with the match itself these days.

It’s probably easier for people who don’t know about Shogi to get interested in this stuff. I’m sure there will be an article in the sports section that says *Stew Udon Key to Snow White’s Victory!* or something like it in the newspaper tomorrow.

The lunch break comes to a close while we are talking and the match gets back underway.

Coming back into the arena first for extra thinking time, Ai makes her move at the exact moment the match recorder says, “It’s time.”

Big Sis, who came back at the last possible second, thinks for a moment before gracefully moving a piece to intercept.

Ai goes into high speed mode once again, making moves in quick succession.

One of the journalists approaches me with another request.

“Can I ask for a comment on the match as well?”

“The defender is being very aggressive.” I answer after checking the blog on my smartphone because the monitor is on the other side of the room.

Ai is on defense, but she seems to be playing with the mindset that she has to

take control of the flow.

“Advancing the edge Pawn so early like that, she must be setting up something for later. It does feel like she’s stretching out a little too far, but

Even though the overall balance of her formation feels off, she probably has a specific pattern in mind

That’s what I thought at the time.

Since the journalists from all sorts of media outlets need a short phrase to sum up as much as possible, they press me for conclusions.

“How about the formations right now?”

“They’re still even. Although, the offender is more at risk of falling behind if she makes a mistake. That’s only natural because the defender has control right now.”

“In other words, the elementary school girl Ai Yashajin has *Sora-Queen* on the ropes?”

“I-I would say it’s more like

The Queen is defending too much. Maybe she thinks letting her opponent have control will work to her advantage

Big Sis is the type of player who maintains a good balance of offense and defense, that is, until the late game when she slices her way to victory.

Ai Yashajin is the opposite, a defensive prodigy who excels in the early game.

But right now, each of them is abandoning their strong points in an attempt to finish each other off. This Shogi is turning into a basic match which is pretty common in big matches like this. Big matches sure don’t create memorable ones.

Nothing is ever set in stone in competition.

There are always so many variables in battle that upsets can happen at any time.

And there’s one extremely important variable in the first match of the Queen

Title Match.

The fact that this is *the first time* these players have played against each other in a league match.

—Maybe Big Sis is watching her closely because this is the first match, or could it be?

“This match ain’t gonna be endin’ anytime soon,” says Zaou-sensei, wiping his fingers on a napkin after finishing a plate of sushi that was delivered to the room.

“Sure looks like it. Plenty of moves have been made, but——.”

Finally over his hangover now that it’s the afternoon, Master Kiyotaki agrees with him.

Just then, a message pops up on my smartphone.

It’s from Ai.

“We’re coming back to the break room now!”

“Master and I are about to go do commentary at the big board.”

“Okay, we’ll go there!”

Pop, pop, pop. Ai sends pictures along with her messages at a quick tempo. There is one with her with the other girls at the Oushouhi King Piece Monument in front of Tsutenkaku Tower and another next to a massive Billiken Statue outside a *kushikatsu* kebab restaurant.

Yeah. They’re adorable.

“..... The best dessert out there, pics of happy grade schoolers”

My heart warms as if I just had the sweetest piece of grade schooler cake after dinner.

“Akira.”

I get out of my chair and address the woman who's been quietly sitting in the corner since early this morning.

"We're going to go do commentary in the reception hall, but what would you like to do? You're welcome to come with us."

"....."

Akira is so focused on Lady Ai's match that I can't get her attention no matter how hard I try. It's like she doesn't even hear me.

Compared to the wild side that came out at the opening night party last night, she's been reserved today.

Camera nowhere to be found and never setting foot in the arena, she's had her eyes glued on the monitor displaying a live feed of Ai at the board and hasn't said a word.

Nothing more than a statue in every sense of the word, nonstop.

Right now, she's the only one in the room looking at a monitor.

What's more, Akira doesn't have a strong enough Shogi sense to see the meaning behind each move so she's looking at the player-cam rather than the ceiling-mounted camera feed.

—That's got to be like watching a screensaver this early on

Even if it weren't, there's not much movement in the sport of Shogi.

Her ability to continue watching that feed all this time just goes to show that Akira is truly worried about Ai's well-being from the bottom of her heart.

Trying to explain what's happening in the match to someone like that would just be insensitive. Because Akira isn't curious about *who's going to win*. The only thing in her head right now is: *I hope Ai wins*.

So, I was going to leave her to it and go downstairs, but—.

"Kuzuryu-sensei."

Without taking her eyes off the screen, Akira says something for the first time all day.

“May I ask you a question? There’s something that’s bothering me

“What’s wrong, Akira?”

“The match recorder seems to be obsessed with his sleeve.”

“Sleeve?”

Looking at the monitor, it’s true. The match recorder keeps raising the right sleeve of his kimono up to eye level and staring for a few seconds as if trying to figure something out.

I’m sure that the players have noticed by now.

“What’s that match recorder’s deal? Gotta have a word with ‘im,” Master says while getting ready to go down to the reception hall, sounding grumpy as he puts on his necktie.

But——.

“.....?”

Something feels weird to me A bit ominous, actually. Something’s been a little off about Ai’s play all day Like a piece of the puzzle is missing.

——..... Sleeve

The right sleeve. Right

With that in mind, the dots all connect when I see the analysis board.

“Agh!! It-it couldn’t be?!”

I couldn’t process the discovery right away even after noticing because that’s just how unthinkable it was.

I glance over at the ceiling camera feed.

Comparing what’s on that screen to what’s on the analysis board—I finally

understand what the match recorder is trying to convey.

“That’s it!!”

“Wh-What’s it, Yaichi?!”

“The Lance!”

I point at the top left corner of the screen To where the defender’s piece stand is displayed and yell.

“The right Lance fell off the board and onto her piece stand!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

Everyone in the room shouts in surprise.

A moment later, every single person makes a mad dash for the ceiling camera monitor.

“It-It’s true! The right Lance is missing!”

“How could she not notice that?!”

“Probably concentrating too hard It’s her first title match, and don’t forget how young she is”

The Lance that should be on the board, isn’t.

And the Lance that shouldn’t be on Ai’s piece stand is.

“But, why?!” yells Master, turning blue in the face.

“This is just a guess, but I think her kimono’s sleeve knocked it off the board and onto her piece stand Because, she’s too small”

With so many strong emotions coursing through my veins, I couldn’t keep myself from trembling.

“If it’d just fell on the floor, it’d been fine! ’At piece just had to fall on the

stand!” says Master, grinding his molars.

This was a mistake, and I regret it so much right now.

“During the inspection, I knew that board was too big, I knew it but!”

If I knew this is what was going to happen, I should’ve put my foot down and *made* them change the board!!

“What ’bout Ginko?! Has she noticed it?!”

—Of course.

There is no way Big Sis hasn’t seen the abnormality right in front of her.

Wait, more than just noticed The way she’s been playing——!!

I finally understand the real meaning behind her moves.

—Big Sis isn’t playing defensively. She’s *controlling how Ai attacks*!!

“Please, Ai, see it! You have to notice!!”

I turn and yell at the monitor before I could stop myself.

She can’t hear me, and it would break the rules if she could because it would be like her getting outside help.

Still, I couldn’t help it.

“M-My lady,” Akira collapses to the floor, hands shaking as she prays with all her might.

“.....”

The observer, *Zaou-sensei* starts getting ready. Getting ready for the end of the match.

Shogi is a solitary battle.

I can’t just drop into the arena and say: *Your Lance fell off the board*. What the match recorder did barely toes the line.

Of course, prayers in the break room aren’t going to affect what happens in

the arena.

The moves keep coming at a breakneck speed.

Big Sis defends attack after attack while Ai keeps the pressure coming.

Pressing *Right into a formation where deploying a Lance would be the perfect move.*

“Please, notice!”

Everyone in the room prays with everything they have.

Then.

Ai reaches toward her piece stand—————.

THE CRICKET'S DREAM

—I can do this!!

The moment I pick that Lance up off my piece stand and snap it down onto the board, I could see the tables turn completely in my direction.

I realized that I was actually in a better position than I thought when I came back during the lunch break and decided right then and there to take advantage of the formations.

And now—I've delivered the decisive blow.

I glance up from the board and have a look at Ginko Sora sitting across from me.

—Well, what do you think?! You must be in all sorts of pain right now, no?

The girl who hadn't shown a single speck of emotion no matter what move I made all match is now—.

“.....”

A completely blank slate who's staring at the board.

Tsk! No fun at all.

But, no matter how Ginko Sora feels about it, I'm in a position to win. It's an undeniable fact.

— I've done it I can win! I can beat the undefeated Queen!

My heart is beating so hard that it might jump right out of my chest. That beating almost made me miss the mark when I put the Lance down. It's just barely inside the lines.

I take a deep breath to make sure *she* doesn't know about it.

“Heeee Haaaa——”

Letting go of the Lance, I look up toward the heavens.

The match isn't over yet, but I can feel hot tears building up in my eyes.

Because, I'm one big step closer to making my dream come true.

— Father, mother Now I've won the first match. The title will be mine!

But, now's not the time to celebrate. Calm down!

Stepping away for a moment to compose myself would be a good idea. Just as I was about to stand up.

The *fusuma* sliding door opens and the observer steps inside in a full kimono.

“.....?”

What's this about?

Did he come to check on the match?

But Why now of all times?

I was about to ask him just that, but Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan* speaks at almost exactly the same time.

The observer says.

“Callin' it there. Victory goes to Sora-*Queen* with 'at move.”

..... What?

“Thank you.”

Acting like it's the obvious conclusion, Ginko Sora says calmly and coldly.

I am confused.

“Huh? Wh-Why?”

People at the boardside table completely ignore me and start packing up as if the match is truly over. I can hardly believe this.

So, I ask again. Much louder this time.

“Tell me why?! Why did I lose just now?!”

More people start pouring into the arena behind the observer. I jump up, desperately trying to keep them back even though the dam is broken.

“The match is still going on! You’re not allowed in here so get out!!”

“It’s over,” Master answers me.

Coming inside the arena after the swarm of reporters, my Master has a sour look on his face as he points to a spot on the board and says.

“Ai. That Lance wasn’t on your piece stand.”

“Huh? What are you talking about!!”

I can feel the blood draining from my face.

All the blood that had been coursing through my brain sinks into my feet in a single heartbeat And I plop back down onto my cushion.

Though, I wouldn’t realize it for a while yet.

“..... Your sleeve knocked it off the board when you reached onto the other side. It fell onto your piece stand I’m sorry.”

There’s anguish in my Master’s voice.

But it’s only him and Grand Master who seem to feel that way All the reporters and staff are staring at me like *how could you not notice something like that?* as they file into the arena to take pictures of the victorious Ginko Sora.

Yes. It’s my fault for not noticing.

It’s the fact that I didn’t notice that I can’t believe.

Me, of all people Losing like a complete amateur would

“Why?”

—Why, didn’t I notice?

—Am I really that weak?

The corners of my eyes tighten as the pain keeps building and building. No matter how hard I try to hold them back, the hot tears won’t stop.

They’re completely different from the tears that were forming just a few minutes ago.

“A battle of two prodigies ending like this, who would’ve guessed?”

“Breakin’ a rule like that in the Queen Title Match?! Does that actually happen?!”

“It’s happened once before as far as I know About 10 years ago.”

The reporters are excitedly discussing the events as if they found a good story, and Grand Master is trying to explain it as delicately as possible.

It’s like watching a parent apologizing for all the trouble their child has caused, and every second of it feels like a knife twisting in my heart.

—Losing this way What should I say to father and mother?

I know of a match where the player lost because they used a piece that fell off the board.

It was in an old Women’s League match that was at such a low level of play I could barely put up with looking at it.

But, even that match lasted to a climactic finish in the late game. This one only made it to mid-game posturing A mistake even worse than the one I laughed at, a rule violation so embarrassing I want to curl up and die

“Sora-Queen That was an interesting match.”

A reporter apologetically sits down next to the board and begins interviewing today's victor.

"If I may ask a rather difficult question Did you know that Miss Yashajin's Lance had fallen onto her piece stand?"

"Yes, I knew."

"Did you ever consider pointing it out to her?"

"This is competition. Though I did not purposely try to make her deploy it. That's just how the match unfolded."

——..... You liar!!

I manage to keep those words back by clenching my jaw so tight my molars creak.

Ginko Sora knew everything. She knew that the piece fell, that I didn't notice, which is why she knew I would use it She even knew I thought I *won* the moment I set it down.

In so many ways, Ginko Sora outplayed me.

I planned to match her point for point before the match, but she read me like a book and used it against me.

The opening that I saw, the advantage I had, they were all illusions separate from reality.

My *desire to win* turned into thinking that I *should win*, which gave me the illusion that I had *already won*. So much so that I didn't even question why there was a Lance on my piece stand.

In other words, what I saw was nothing more than a dream.

And that dream turned into a nightmare in the blink of an eye.

But, there's no waking up from this. I already know that.

I know that whenever something you never, ever want to have happen,

happens It never goes away.

Because my reality is the worst possible nightmare.

RECORD 3

茨姫

T h o r n P r i n c e s s

Azami Hanadachi 花立薊

THE FOX'S BRIDE

“And? Is Miss Yashajin feeling depressed?” pics already taken, the beautiful young woman asks me while dipping a long spoon into her parfait.

“She’s fine. On the surface anyway.” I answer with my eyes on my green tea latte. The barista made a heart in the froth.

This thing would be perfect for Instagram. I feel kinda bad about drinking it, but that’s the only thing left to do once the pictures are done Like taking the pieces off the board once a Shogi match is over.

“But, I can tell she took a lot of damage.”

“Oh?”

“For the first time ever, she asked me, *What did you see in me that convinced you to take me as your apprentice?* Point-blank.”

“..... That sounds serious.”

I understand where that question is coming from. Basically, her confidence is shaken and she’s looking for someone else to validate her talent.

But that’s something the normally arrogant Ai Yashajin would never say. That alone proves that her heart is in pieces right now.

“With the way that match ended, Ai Hinatsuru couldn’t finish her article. She missed the deciding moment, too”

“Which match will Miss Hinatsuru ultimately be in charge of covering?”

“The third, I think. Zaou-sensei’s explanation about the first pretty much summed everything up and that’s what the papers are using.”

“Not to mention the third match is in Miss Yashajin’s hometown of Kobe.”

“True. But, at this rate”

It looks like the third match will be the last one. It's just as Big Sis predicted.

Sure, a lot of people will come out to support her at her *home* arena, but having all those people there rooting for you when you're against the ropes actually piles on a lot of extra pressure.

If she'd like to avoid playing the last match in front of her home crowd, that puts more pressure on the second match and could make her drop two matches in a row if she can't mentally recover in time.

Long spoon deep in her parfait, the beautiful woman says, "I feel sorry for Miss Hinatsuru, her first assignment as a journalist ending like that. There's not much time remaining before the third match, the one that counts, is upon us. If you would like, I would be willing to give her a few tips of the trade."

"That would be great."

"I'm in charge of blog coverage for an upcoming match, so that would be a perfect opportunity to take her on as an assistant." With that, she puts on a somewhat sadistic smile and says, "Well, you have nothing to worry about. There are ways to make good articles out of even the most ordinary matches."

"I'd really prefer it not be an ordinary match, but"

"It's her first title match, and I wouldn't blame her for being in a bad place mentally after losing the first match to that kind of rule violation. Actually, I'm relieved."

"Huh?"

"Kobe's Cinderella is really just a 10-year-old girl."

The beautiful woman sitting across from me—the journalist Ms. Mato—finally takes a bite of her parfait after saying that.

"Mmnn~≡" Sure sounds like she's in a happy place.

We're sitting in a café in Kyoto.

One of the local magazines hired her to do a *parfaits and lattes fit for Instagram* café series, so Ms. Mato has been going to tons of up-and-coming new cafés all around the city to get material.

I'm here to help her out with that.

She needs me to sell the *perfect for dates* angle, so we've been taking pictures of us drinking from the same glass using heart-shaped crazy straws, scooping parfaits into each other's mouths and pretty much anything that young couples who don't care about public displays of affection would do.

Normally, a professional model would step in and do these things, but—.

"Are you sure you want me of all people for this?"

"Yes, you, Ryuo."

And that's how it is. Maybe they want someone with *normal guy* looks to make it more relatable for the readers?

But to be honest, this is just an excuse to talk with her.

I'm keeping a promise that I made during the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match a little while ago This is the premise, but I have a question to ask her.

"What do you think I should do? There's almost no time before the second match and I have no idea what pointers to give At the very least, I'd like to help her mentally recover enough to put up a fight."

"Are you asking me how to contend with Ginko Sora?"

Ms. Mato's spoon comes to a sudden stop.

"If only I could acquire that information myself."

Looking away and voice trailing off, she lets her hair down and stares out the window before continuing.

"..... All women's players who've played against Ginko have collided with that wall."

“Wall?”

“That wasn’t in reference to her bustline.”

Sure, her chest is basically a wall, but even I can tell she’s not talking about that

Machi Kugui drops her *Mato* journalist persona right before my eyes as she pokes at her own well-endowed chest with an amused grin on her face before taking a serious tone.

“Talent. Effort. Environment. And a natural affinity for the spotlight. Ginko is beyond the standards for Women’s League players in so many facets. The moment you compare yourself to one as extraordinary as her, maintaining a calm mind during battle becomes an impossibility. Balance inevitably crumbles.”

“But you can’t fight without comparing, right? You have to figure out where your opponent has an advantage and how to deal with it to have a chance That goes for single matches and especially full series.”

“Logic of a prodigy, that is.”

“Ai Yashajin is a prodigy in her own right. Her talent level isn’t all that different from Big Sis. Actually, I’d say that Ai is better in the early game.”

“Hmm~ We seem not to be reading from the same hymn sheets,” says Machi with a forced smile. “Ryuo, you’re too close to Ginko to fully comprehend her greatness.”

“I certainly don’t think so

“Well, when two who know each other so well square off in a series of matches, surely maintaining calm composure will be beyond your ability... no, Ryuo?”

“I’m aware. That’s why, even though I really want to help, I can’t think of anything to do for Ai no matter how hard I try to come up with something on

my own

“And that was your reason for coming straight to me as I have fought both Ginko and Ai in the past?”

“No, you’re the third person I’ve asked.”

“Heeh?”

Machi’s eyes curl into half-moons like a sly fox.

“To think you would seek the advice of two others before mine Seems I can’t leave you to your own devices, Ryuo,” says Machi as she runs her tongue all the way down the long spoon.

It looks like she’s smiling, but This is kind of scary.

“Well then? What advice did these two individuals impart?”

“Nothing really. I always just have them listen as I ramble on.”

“?”

Machi looks confused, like she’s trying to figure out exactly who I was talking to I guess she stopped caring at some point because she starts scooping the last bites out of her parfait.

“I must say, Ryuo, you are a cruel one.”

“Come again?”

“Coming to one such as I for advice concerning Ai. Truly harsh.”

“I am sorry about this. I know it’s a bit rude

Machi lost to Ai in the match to decide the challenger. Those wounds are deep and still very fresh.

She might be secretly enjoying the fact that Ai lost.

I’ve felt the same way about people who have beaten me many times before. I can relate to what she’s going through.

I get it, but

“Is she that precious to you? That girl.”

“Yes, she’s my apprentice.”

“.....”

Her gaze falling to the table, Machi wolfs down the rest of her parfait.

—I should’ve known it was too rude to ask

It’s just, she’s older than me and we go way back, so I tend to go to her for help.

Then—.

“Thorn Princess.”

“Huh?”

Now it’s my turn to be confused.

“The first to face Ginko in battle and the first to collide with that wall. As such, she may possess insight.”

“Ahhh!”

I’m almost standing before I realize it.

—How could I have forgotten about her?

If it’s the Thorn Princess Not the way she was back then, but the *Thorn Princess* she is now, she just might be willing to give Ai some pointers.

“Thank you so much, Machi!”

“You are most welcome, Ryuo.”

She then pokes at my lips with her long spoon and says.

“You can show your gratitude by joining me for another date. Except this time, not for work≡”

THORN PRINCESS

“Is there any point to this?”

That’s become Ai Yashajin’s favorite phrase over the past couple of days and she says it yet again.

Ai Hinatsuru, walking by her side, tries to reason with her.

“T-Ten-chan Master already set this up for you, so”

“Then he should’ve been looking for someone I could practice with! I have the first move in the next match, which gives me an advantage I can’t afford to lose this one!”

“Cramming in tons of practice matches at this point wouldn’t make much difference.”

Walking ahead of them, I look over my shoulder and say, “How many matches do you think you can squeeze in before the second match? Surely you know your skills won’t get all that much better so quickly just playing matches.”

“..... Then what am I supposed to do? Are you saying there’s a way to improve without playing?”

“Yes.”

“.....?!”

“Probably.”

“What?! Are you trying to tease me?!”

“I’m not sure myself, okay? That’s why we’re going to ask.”

People try to recover lost confidence by sharpening their skills, researching day and night, playing practice matches and so on.

But they’re just running away.

I learned that firsthand during my Ryuo Title Match against the Meijin.

When facing an opponent you think you could *never defeat*, the first thing you have to do is get to the point mentally where you realize there is *no such thing as never*.

“So, um Master? The person we’re going to meet today, was she the most recent Women’s Throne challenger?”

Sensing things are getting awkward, Ai Hinatsuru jumps into the conversation.

“Yes. She’s the most recent Women’s League player to face off against Big Sis. What’s more, she’s such a strong player that she had her on the ropes, too.”

“Then, does she know Sora-sensei’s weaknesses?”

“No. What makes her truly impressive is that she got to a title match right after giving birth and taking care of her oldest kid at the same time. She’s actually better now than she was before she had kids despite losing all that research time to take care of them. That’s what’s amazing. Sure, her husband is a pro Shogi player, too, but——.”

“They’re husband and wife, and both Shogi players?! She’ll know all sorts of things!!”

“Y-Yeah Don’t you think? You can learn a lot from her.”

“Yes! I’ll ask everything I can think of!!”

S-She’s gung-ho Ai Hinatsuru’s really determined to become a better Shogi player!

But Ai Yashajin is not taking the bait. This could be a problem.

“Big Sis is getting stronger, too. Her getting into the 3-*dan* division proves it. But I can tell just by watching that the gap separating her and Big Sis is much smaller than before.”

“Humph,” says Ai Yashajin, swishing her black hair over her shoulder before

flatly saying, “She still lost.”

“That she did. Along with every other Women’s League player that Big Sis has ever faced.”

Ever since appearing on the Women’s Shogi scene at the age of 11, Big Sis has never lost to a member of the Women’s League.

Five years undefeated: 55 matches and 55 victories. Not a single stalemate or Repetition Draw either.

Yeah, Big Sis is truly a monster.

The very first title holder that that monster tore to shreds is the one who we’re about to see today.

“She was the first person to be bestowed Queen the year the Queen Title Match was created. After that, she claimed the Women’s Throne title and was well on her way to taking the top spot in Women’s Shogi away from Rina Shakando only to have a grade school girl take both titles away from her.”

In other words, you can call her Big Sis’s first *victim*.

“Her playing style back then was based on getting rid of wasted moves and personifying efficiency. I doubt she ever did a single review session. Everything had to have some positive effect on her Shogi, going as far as isolating herself from other people as much as possible in her daily life. The nickname people gave her was——.”

“Thorn Princess,” Ai Yashajin answers.

Sounding surprised, Ai Hinatsuru asks, “Do you know her, Ten-chan?”

“..... More or less.”

My second apprentice seems to be implying something as she continues with a nod.

“Actually, I’m shocked that you’ve never heard of her.”

“Don’t be too hard on her. Ai has only been a part of the Shogi world for a year now. After two pregnancies and taking care of those kids, the Thorn Princess has taken a lot of time off over the past few years. She hasn’t been around long enough to know about her.”

Honestly, it’s more surprising to me that Ai Yashajin knows about the Thorn Princess.

Her nickname used to show up in Shogi magazines all the time way back when... but almost no one calls her that anymore.

And why is that?

Because more than just her playing style and personality, her overall look has changed quite a bit.

The *Thorn Princess* who looked like actual royalty when she was bestowed the first Queen title has become——.



A whole lot less prickly. Heart and body.

“Oh, and who have we here?! What cute apprentices!! Oh my, oh my, oh my!!”

Northern Osaka. At an apartment complex in front of a spacious park just a few minutes’ walk from Senri-Chuo Station.

I ring the doorbell outside of a room, and a slightly chubby beauty of woman flies out of the front door with a baby in her arms.

“It has been a long time, Ms. Hanadachi. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule today to——.”

“Hey now, Yaichi. There’s no need for all the formalities. I’ve been so busy with my little ones that I’m dying for some real conversation. Guests are always welcome, always!”

Azami Hanadachi Women’s League 5-*dan*.

She was originally called the Thorn Princess because her home prefecture, Ibaraki, has *ibara*, which means *thorn*, in its name, but she moved to Osaka after her first daughter was born to be closer to her husband’s family in Kansai. She transferred her registration to the Kansai Shogi Association as well.

She took a long leave of absence to take care of her baby, but suddenly returned to the Shogi world while pregnant with her second.

What really shocked everyone was that she went on a tear and got all the way to a title match her first season back.

No matter how much she explained that she was in a stable stage of her pregnancy, one look at her bulging baby bump put everyone on edge, thinking she might go into labor in the middle of the match.

“I still can’t believe that that little Yaichi is already at the age to be taking apprentices And already making them both into Women’s League members. I must really be getting old.”



“You’re in your twenties, Ms. Hanadachi. You’re still very young.”

“Oh, wow! You even know how to flatter a lady!”

“Argh?!”

Smack! She hits my back so hard I tumble forward.

Maybe it’s because she’s put on a bit of weight, but how in the world is she that strong? She used to be so skinny and not care about other people at all, but now she’s downright chatty and has become an Osakan mom through and through. I guess having kids changes everything

We follow her into the living room and find a little girl who must be about two years old sitting on the floor.

“Sakura. Big brother Yaichi is here.”

The toddler tosses the toy she was holding to the side, climbs to her feet, and waddles her way over to me.

“Yaachi≡ Yaachi≡”

“Nice to see you again, Sakura.

You're bigger than I remember."

I haven't seen Ms. Hanadachi's oldest daughter Sakura since she was in the break room during the last Women's Throne Title Match.

Looking just like her mother, she's a beautiful little girl.

"It's been quite a while, but it looks like she remembers me."

"I always have your matches hooked up to the TV through the Internet, Yaichi. She can watch you for a long, long time happily squealing *Yaachi*≡ without getting bored. You have no idea how much that helps."

"Oh, I gotcha. When kids grow up in a house where both parents are pro Shogi players, they get hooked on match coverage before kids shows"

"She doesn't understand the rules yet, though. Now then——."

Setting the baby down in a crib, Ms. Hanadachi turns to face us before sitting on her ankles and properly introducing herself to my apprentices.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Women's League player Azami Hanadachi of the Hiroshi Muroga Shogi family."

The one who plops down on her ankles and introduces herself right away is——.

"Kuzuryu Shogi family, first apprentice Ai Hinatsuru! I was told you have many important things to teach me and I can't wait!"

"What's this? Won't you get bored listening to an old lady like me?"

"No, not at all! I would love to hear how you and your husband met, how he proposed and what it's like living as a professional Shogi couple!!"

"Are you sure? Yaichi told me that you wanted some tips on doing Shogi research"

"Keep it to Shogi, please. Just Shogi Ai, introduce yourself."

While my first apprentice's sudden enthusiasm throws me for a loop, I

instruct my second apprentice to greet our host.

“..... Ai. Ai Yashajin.”

“How nice to meet you! Teeheehee.”

Ms. Hanadachi seems to find Ai Yashajin’s grumbled greeting to be entertaining.

“Cwass fwowew bud, Sakuwa Hanadachi”

The vibe was getting pretty tense until Sakura imitates their self-introductions by adding her preschool class instead of a Master: *flower bud* by the sound of it.

Sakura clings to me as her mother asks.

“Yaichi, you like kids, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

Ai Hinatsuru interrupts in a slightly cold tone before I can say anything, “As far as Master is concerned, the smaller the better. Isn’t that right, Ten-chan?”

“Yes. They’re his favorites.”

Oh, come on

“Y-You’re going to give her the wrong impression! Actually, I’m into older girls, so don’t make her think toddlers do anything for——.”

“..... Yaachi, yew don’t like Saa?”

“No, no, no! Of course I like you, Sakura——Sure do!” I say to the little girl on the verge of tears and give her a hug.

“Saa woves Yaachi≡.”

Then, she pats her hands against my cheeks. Now, that’s cute≡.

But.

“..... Master? I’ll call the police on you for being a loli-con if you keep ogling at the baby”

“..... Is she the real reason you wanted to come here in the first place?”

My two apprentices are glaring ice daggers at me Ouch!!

On the other hand, the Thorn Princess says, without any prickle at all, “Why don’t you take her out to the park and play? We’ll have our own Women’s League players—only teatime, okay?”

With that, I get chased out of the room.

🏠 ALICE, THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

“All right! All the distractions have been taken care of.”

Once Yaichi had been ushered out of the apartment, Azami turned to face Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin once again.

“How much do you know about me?”

“That you’re the first Queen and a Women’s League player who lost her titles to Ginko Sora,” said Ai Yashajin with a sneer.

But Azami simply smiled and nodded.

“All true. How about my match records?”

“I I’m sorry. There wasn’t much time, so I only looked through the most recent Women’s Throne Title Match. I thought they were all interesting matches, though!” Ai Hinatsuru answered honestly.

“How nice of you to say! How about my older records?”

“The ones where you claimed the Queen title were good,” said Ai Yashajin as she looked away. “However, the records after that aren’t worth the time to line up. The ones after you lost the titles to Ginko Sora are trash, not worth the paper they’re written on.”

“You say exactly what you mean, don’t you? Well, that makes things a lot easier.”

Ai Hinatsuru looked back and forth at them, completely lost as she studied their expressions.

Azami stood back up and started making tea.

“There are pictures of me from back then. Back when I was called the Thorn Princess Though, they’re still painful for me to look at.”

Along with the tea and pieces of cake, Azami brought out two Shogi magazines from a few years ago for the girls to see.

The first one had a picture of Ginko Sora right after she first entered junior high school on the cover. Ai Hinatsuru casually glanced over it before turning the page.

When suddenly, her eyes shot wide open.

“.....!! Y-You’re”

What she found——was an Azami Hanadachi with absolutely no resemblance to the woman in front of her right now.

Ai Yashajin was equally stunned.

“Y-You You look, just just like!”

“Gin ko Sora.”

The young Yashajin swallowed hard as she struggled to say the name.

“..... Only recently have I been able to look at these pictures without getting angry.”

The magazines contained pictures from two eras of her life: when she first became Queen and after she lost to Ginko.

Comparing her to very different selves, Azami continued, “You see, I thought I wanted to be Ginko. So young and pretty, and her Shogi was incredibly strong and stoic Who wouldn’t want to be exactly like her?”

“B-But That doesn’t mean you should change how you look, too”

Flabbergasted, Ai Hinatsuru couldn’t comprehend why Azami went to such lengths.

“At first, I just wanted to know what kind of environment she was in and copy her research methods. But, that alone wasn’t anywhere near enough to win.”

The Azami Hanadachi staring back at them in the magazine became thinner

and thinner with each turn of the page.

Azami Hanadachi, losing color to the point where she almost looked sick.

Seeing her hair turn pale, changing the color of her eyes with colored contacts and even wearing a sailor-style school uniform was utterly bizarre.

Then they found a picture from an opening night party before the title match.

Two Who Look Like Sisters.

That was the magazine's caption.

The lack of any other explanation drove home just how outlandish the situation was.

"..... Disgusting."

Ai Yashajin spat as she took her eyes off the photo.

"....."

Even Ai Hinatsuru was too shaken to say anything at all.

"The shock of losing both of my titles to an opponent much younger than myself, Ginko merely 12 at the time, sent my life into a tailspin," said the woman who at one point tried to become Ginko Sora.

"The moment I heard that she was doing practice sessions with Kansai professionals, I went to Kansai professionals to ask for practice sessions. I shut everyone and everything out of my life, to the extent that I wouldn't eat or drink anything in order to do Shogi research 24/7 once I heard that she was a live-in apprentice who was constantly in that environment."

Azami also attempted to follow Ginko into the Sub League, but that was where her Master drew the line and stepped in to stop her.

If her intention had been to become a member of the professional ranks, her Master would have given her his blessing. However, she *literally wanted to be* Ginko Sora.

“But it was no use. I couldn’t become Ginko no matter how hard I tried. Burning the candle at both ends for so long took its toll, my body couldn’t keep up and my spirit was completely broken She kept pulling further and further ahead of me.”

Opening one of the magazines to a specific page for her guests, Azami showed the girls a picture of the Thorn Princess who was little more than skin and bone.

The person in that photograph was not Ginko Sora nor even Azami Hanadachi

Looking at the skinny ogre she had once been with pity, Azami continued in a hushed voice, “The one who stopped me from falling apart was one of the Kansai professionals I was practicing with and who is now my husband.”

It was the man who had been watching her more closely than any other who reawakened the Thorn Princess.

“Do you know what he said? He said he loved me, the broken me. The me that had forgotten who I was and couldn’t become Ginko Sora. But more than that, he said this...”

Azami’s eyes lit up as if she were remembering the exact moment.

“Even if you didn’t play Shogi, I know I would’ve fallen for you.....”

Ai Yashajin quietly listened to those words.

“Beautiful”

Tears built up in Ai Hinatsuru’s eyes as that word escaped her lips.

“Shogi was all I had. I was certain that without it, I would be nothing. If I got weaker If I lost my titles, I was certain I would lose my worth as a human being.”

Azami didn’t stop there.

“But he said he would still love me without Shogi. That’s why I married him. I

didn't think twice. After that instantaneous yes, I was finally free from the curse The curse of wanting to be Ginko Sora." Eyes sparkling and a small quiver in her voice, the Thorn Princess added, "That was the first time in my life I'd ever cried for anything other than losing a Shogi match"

That's when the baby in the crib started crying out for her mother, and Azami donned a motherly smile as she held her youngest child.

Waiting until the infant had calmed down, Ai Yashajin posed the question.

"..... And? You got pregnant and ran away from Shogi as soon as you could?"

"Why, no. I may not have been able to become Ginko, but I still needed to win against her. Just this time not for myself, but for the man who loves me. That has become what drives me as a Women's League player," said Azami with vigor as she held the baby in her arms. "However, I didn't want having children to be the reason my skills declined. I don't want them to grow up only to find out that they're the reason my career came to an end. That's why I wanted to be stronger. I wanted others to think of me and say, *She's better now, as a mother, than she was before.*"

The two girls watched as Azami's face transformed from a loving mother into a Shogi player right before their eyes.

"I was desperate to find the answer. Doing what Ginko does would never work. Even if I did copy her methods, I would never catch up and I didn't have the time anyway."

"Then How did you do it?" asked Ai Yashajin, showing genuine interest for the first time.

"Efficiently using time was a must. Even while breastfeeding, I was mentally running through sequences one after another. So long as you have a smartphone and a head that can think, you can do Shogi research absolutely anywhere these days. The other thing I did was start relearning standards from square one. I revamped everything from how I practiced all the way to how I

chose my offensive formations.”

“.....”

Falling silent, Ai Yashajin folded her arms across her chest.

“I noticed a considerable drop off in thinking and recognition speed while I was pregnant. Then again, that could’ve just been me losing my edge because I wasn’t playing in nearly as many matches as I used to I don’t know for sure. But, one thing I do know is that my first instincts didn’t miss a beat.”

Azami chose her words carefully as she went on.

“That’s why I focused heavily on playing quickly and taking control of the flow during the Women’s Throne Title Match. I’m usually more of a defensive player, but I decided not to play that style while I was pregnant.”

“You played with your gut feeling? Is that right?” asked a curious Ai Hinatsuru.

“Yes, Ai, that’s right. Though I wish I could do what you do in the late game.”

Take control of the match, play quickly and pressure the opponent into making mistakes to save waiting time.

Azami’s strategy was to build a lead while avoiding major confrontations to overwhelm her opponent.

“Th-That’s amazing! The picture-perfect way to win!”

“Would you stop being impressed by every little thing?”

Ai Hinatsuru’s eyes were sparkling with admiration, but Ai Yashajin balked at the idea.

“Besides, what use would I have for advice during pregnancy in the first place?”

“Very useful, Ten-chan! Babies are a blessing!! We must always be ready to have one just in case.”

“Huuuh? I’m still 10 years old.”

“Exactly.”

Ai Hinatsuru’s face had *and?* written all over it. She wasn’t understanding the point. The look in her eyes made it seem like she thought she could be a mother any day now.

It was that look that sent a jolt up the Thorn Princess’s spine.

“A-Ai? I thought you were a normal little girl, but It seems the rumors are true”

“Uwhee?”

Ai tilted her head, confused.

Ai Yashajin mumbled, “She’s always like this,” with a nod.

Forcing herself to smile, Azami said, “N-Now I get it This is Ai Hinatsuru, the genius”

Still confused, Ai Hinatsuru tilts her head the other way.

“Anyway”

Getting the conversation back on topic, Ai Yashajin clears her throat.

“I understand how you fought against Ginko Sora. I’m sure it was a hard fight. However, you lost in the end, didn’t you? Sorry, but I’m going to win my own way.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve always wondered whether relying on instincts when you play leads to improving or not. The way to win right now is not necessarily the way to become a stronger player. Trust me, I would’ve loved to do my own thorough research if I had had the time.”

Azami glanced in Ai Hinatsuru's direction.

"Miss Hinatsuru might be able to, but I don't think you'll get any stronger by relying on your intuition, Ai."

"!! Are you saying she's more talented than me?"

Ai Yashajin demanded an explanation as she pointed at her older sister apprentice, but Azami just smiled at her. Her silence was as good as affirmation.

Blood boiling, Ai Yashajin's hair stood on end as she yelled, "If you're so good, why don't you tell me a way to beat Ginko Sora right here and now!"

"Love."

"What?"

"Loving someone else. Falling in love. That's the way I found to win."

"....."

The young Yashajin's face went blank as Azami went into further detail.

"Love has no limits. It won't weigh you down and it doesn't take up any room. Yet the more you have, the stronger you become. That's especially true for girls. Girls in love become much stronger." Then, almost teasingly, she adds, "The reason why Ginko is stronger than you might just be that Ginko is in love."

"H-Hardly! A girl with that much ice in her veins Besides, I'm not the least bit interested in romance! It has nothing to do with Shogi!!"

"I see. You're still too young to understand."

"..... Look at you, up on your pedestal"

Ai Yashajin ground her molars in frustration, being told that she wouldn't understand.

Looking down at the Shogi magazines open on the table, the Thorn Princess commented, "As far as Ginko was concerned, I wouldn't have been much of a challenge for her before I got married. I mean, I was using the same strategies

but couldn't read the board as far as she could."

".....!!"

"Once I got married, however, I thought through everything myself. Coming up with things from my own experiences that she'd never think of herself became my best weapon. Sitting across the board from her, I could tell I could see hesitation in her moves, panic in her eyes. That was a first."

Strategies fade in and out within the Shogi world very quickly. When someone has success with a particular style, everyone else starts using it overnight.

By the same token, top players' research methods spread like wildfire.

After all, a player's Shogi skills are bound to improve if they use the same strategies and methods the best players are using.

At the end of the day, however, *they never compare to the original.*

"....."

Heart-wrenching! Ai Yashajin bit down on her lips to endure the pain.

Unable to come up with a logical counter to Azami's claim... she settled on this: "..... But you lost."

"I did. I lost," the mother once known as *Thorn Princess* said with a sincere nod. "But you know what? I'm playing better Shogi now than I was before!"

A radiant, healthy smile graced her lips.

Then, the Thorn Princess imparted a kind word of advice to the lost Cinderella.

"Find your way. Find a way to win that is uniquely yours."

With that, Azami Hanadachi reworded her message and said it again.

"A love that is uniquely yours."

■ ALICE IN WONDERLAND

“Who does she think she is, anyway?!!”

I leave the Thorn Princess’s apartment to go find my Master, but all the built-up frustration bursts out as soon as I leave the room.

This is beyond irritating!!

“She’s nothing more than some old lady who got married, had children and her brain magically turned into a happy little flower garden! That was a total waste of time! Talking on forever like she knows everything only to have her say that *love* and *romance* are the key Just thinking about it makes me angry!!”

I kick the concrete wall a few times for good measure. Kicked the thing hard enough to indent the toe of my shoe, too.

How was there a time I actually admired that flowers-for-brains woman!

“Shogi is an all or nothing battle!! Obviously, both sides are going to leave with scars! Wasting time licking another loser’s wounds is ridiculous! How could that ever help me get stronger?!!”

What infuriates me beyond all else is that, for one fleeting moment, I thought I might get some useful advice from the Thorn Princess.

That was naïve. My heart was weak.

“What it all comes down to is that I’m the only one I can count on! Just as she said, I’m going to believe in my own research. I’ll hit Ginko Sora with all the advancements I’ve made using my father’s pieces My latest Bishop Exchange strategy!”

“..... I”

She’d been quiet up to this point, but Ai Hinatsuru hesitantly starts speaking.

“I think I can relate to what Hanadachi-*sensei* said, at least a little bit.”

“Huuh?! Like what?”

“Well, I started playing Shogi because I wanted to be like Master And, as I entered the Practice League and then the Women’s League, I became a little stronger every time I admired someone new or made an important friend

“.....”

“I play my best when I want to be with someone special to me or when I want to do something for them.”

If I remember right, she wanted to be Yaichi’s live-in apprentice so bad that she showed ferocious potential when she fought against Ginko Sora during the Practice League Entrance Test.

And, her getting through the Mynavi Preliminaries was all to let Yaichi concentrate on the defending his title as the Ryuo.

“Ten-chan, don’t you have any special people in your heart? People you want to win for, or get stronger just for them?”

“..... No. No one.”

“I see You don’t have anyone like that Ehehe≡”

“..... Excuse me. What are you so happy about?”

I just can’t figure it out, and that’s starting to irritate me, too

“B-But Ten-chan If you liked him I wouldn’t stand a chance

Tearing up, Ai Hinatsuru opens her heart to me.

“Your family is so rich that you live just like a real princess, and you’re so cute now that you’re going to be truly beautiful once you grow up and you have so much more Shogi talent than I do Any boy would obviously choose you over me *Sniffle*

“You know something

I’m so done with this. Besides, what is she even worried about?

“I don’t know what you’re so worked up about, nor do I care

But this I can guarantee: I will never fall in love with anyone. I have no interest in challenging you or that tiny blonde doofus to become that idiot’s *favorite*. Romance is just pointless.”

“I-I never said anything about Master!!”

“Neither did I.”

“!! Ten-chan, you meanie

She’s turning red and twiddling her thumbs.

Finally calm, I straighten out my hair and say, “Though.....”

Then, pointing to the sandbox in the park.

“You certainly have strange tastes. What is so good about *that*? Other than his strong Shogi, that is.”

“Uwheee?”

In that sandbox—is Yaichi, only wearing underwear, and the Thorn Princess’s daughter buried all the way up to her neck pouring buckets of dry sand over their heads.

“M-Master?! This is a public park! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“This? Well, Sakura said she wanted to play bath time, so we made a sand bath

“Saa, Yaachi, bath time≡”

“I’ve never heard of something so far-fetched as a *sand bath*!! Why do you always do whatever little girls ask you to without thinking, Master?!”

Watching the fireworks from a distance, I whispered under my breath.

“..... Not happening. Ever.”

THE GRATEFUL CRANE

Standing in front of the doorway, so many emotions pass through my voice as I whisper, “I never thought I’d be coming back here like this.”

The second Queen Title Match is on the north coast.

I had a historic battle of my own right here just six months ago.

Just like back then, I rode the Thunderbird Express train from Osaka all the way up here only to be greeted by the woman who runs this inn.

“We have been waiting for you.”

A voice I’ve heard many times before, courteous and yet full of overwhelming pride, says hello.

That’s right.

The second match will take place at one of the top *onsen* hot spring spa inns in Japan—the Hinatsuru.

Since I have the strongest connection to this place out of our group, I take it on myself to speak for everyone and say.

“It is nice to see you again. Thank you so much for agreeing to accommodate our demanding schedule.”

“It’s what anyone would have done.”

The owner—Ai Hinatsuru’s mother—answers with pride.

“The Kuzuryu Shogi family has graciously accepted my daughter, making us as good as in-laws. Therefore, there is no more fitting location for this title match than the Hinatsuru Inn. Please, do make yourselves at home and play to the best of your Shogi abilities.”

Mrs. Hinatsuru turns to face the stars of the match, Ai Yashajin and Big Sis,

and politely lowers her head.

“.....”

Both of them bow but don't say a word. Neither side feels like trying to be friendly, so they keep smiling but don't bother thanking Mrs. Hinatsuru themselves.

Picking up on the awkward vibes, I push the conversation along.

“Thank you. Unfortunately, Ai couldn't make the trip with us”

“That is no problem at all. We came to a family decision that the only time Ai will spend a night within these walls will be for her own title matches. Her father and I have decided to wait patiently until then to see her in person.”

“You did? But, Mr. Hinatsuru was in Osaka just a few weeks ago and saw her”

“Yes. My husband is presently in the basement, reflecting on his broken promise. He will therefore be unable to meet you at this time. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

..... Basement?

I'm beyond curious but thinking about what could be down there scares me too much to ask. Maybe a gaming arcade? (Playing stupid.)

“Everyone. I know you're tired after your long journey, but if you would please accompany me for the inspection and a press conference before you retire. Many media outlets have already sent representatives and are waiting to conduct a photo session,” says Mrs. Hinatsuru as she guides our group into the building.

“..... She's a pro at this.”

“..... Our Shogi family 'n the association got a valuable friend in her. Countin' on ya, Yaichi. All jokin' aside, the future of Shogi as a whole is restin' on yar shoulders,” says Master Kiyotaki with all seriousness. He's along with us

because he was chosen to do analysis for the match.

That's just his way of telling me to make Ai Hinatsuru into women's title holder, for sure.

"..... Of course. I'm already putting pieces in place to make that happen."

"..... Uhh, I don' know 'bout puttin' piece in place, but too soon'd be a crime, yeah? Wait on that 'Kay?"

".....?"

Master and I go back and forth in hushed voices as we follow Mrs. Hinatsuru down the hall.

"We have arrived."

What is this, like an auditorium? I take one step inside and see——.

"Whoa?! Wh-What is this place?!"

A room that goes beyond my wildest dreams opens up before me.

Mrs. Hinatsuru starts explaining as I stand there with my mouth wide open in pure amazement.

"This here? But of course, our Shogi Museum."

Hold on just a second.

"This isn't Shogi so much as"

An Ai Hinatsuru museum.

Pictures of her right after she was born all the way up to now, the Shogi puzzles she secretly worked on while helping out around the inn, the original Women's League entrance certificate that she and I signed, even the pens themselves are in their own custom glass cases. That certificate is supposed to be on file at the association, so what's it doing out here

"....."

All the media people who've joined us look like they were just ushered into some foreign country's art museum and are huddling together for safety.

But it's a display in the middle of the room that really draws attention with its overwhelming presence.

"Women's League Certification Ceremony."

It's a photo of Ai in a white kimono and me wearing a family crest blown up to a massive scale and hanging on the wall.

And, put up like an afterthought right next to it, is a picture of me playing against the Meijin as well as the pieces we used for that match.

"..... Just what were you doing during that pivotal match in the Ryuo Title defense? You're so"

The only member of the Kiyotaki Shogi family tree not to be there that day, Ai Yashajin sounds completely revolted. Yeah, I bet she is

Which reminds me, the other person not on that trip, Akira, is also absent for this one.

As was the case with the Mynavi Preliminaries, Ai Yashajin doesn't like having people she knows well around during big matches.

Akira sent me a short message saying *kintsuba*, and I responded with *K*. I'm sure she wants me to get her some of those bean pastries Kanazawa is known for. The inn's gift shop has them, no doubt.

As for Big Sis, she does a quick loop through the displays before looking me square in the eyes.

"..... Tsk."

Did she just snap her tongue at me?

The group of Kanto journalists come after that, so it's time for the press

conference and photo session.

It's underway but, um

"..... How are we supposed to do interviews like this?"

"..... No kidding. Can't even get a *yes* or *no* out of them no matter what we ask"

"..... It's like their faces are glued in place"

The players are so uptight that even the journalists and cameramen are whispering among themselves.

After letting her guard down and losing due to a rule violation in the first match, I can understand why Ai Yashajin is sitting straight up and keeping her face as serious as possible: so she doesn't show any weakness.

What I don't get is why Big Sis, who always smiles and interacts with journalists as is expected of her as a title holder during these press conferences, looks like she's about to rip someone's head off. This never happens.

"Has she recognized Ai Yashajin's talent?"

However, this level of hostility is a nightmare from a public relations standpoint.

Looking for something, anything to break the ice, one cameraman makes a request.

"Excuse me, miss You're the match recorder, correct? Would you join them in the photograph? Please!"

"No. I'm still in training, so——."

The girl looking to find an excuse to turn down the journalist is also wearing a school uniform like Big Sis.

Except hers is a high school uniform.

If I remember right Karen Noboryou Sub League 1-*kyu*.

Her tanned skin gives her this beautiful, healthy aura.

She's currently a second-year high school student where she lives in Hachijyo Jima Island. I don't know her that well at all because she is registered with the Kanto Association, but Ai Yashajin defeated her in the Mynavi Finals.

She was ranked at 2-*kyu* at the time, but beating her is still really impressive.

"Ohhh, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. You only get to wear a school uniform for so long, so it'd be a waste not to show it off," says a very bubbly woman as Ms. Noboryou froze up at the idea of participating in the photo shoot.

It's the big board commentator for the second Queen Title Match, Tamayo Rokuroba women's 2-*dan*.

"R-Rokuroba-*sensei* I couldn't!"

"Let's get everyone together for one big group picture☆"

The whole press conference brightens with Ms. Rokuroba and Ms. Noboryou up there as well.

Both participants in this match live in Kansai.

Since it's pretty rare for a match like this to take place on the north coast, the association expected there to be tons of fans at the opening night party and to come watch the big board commentary.

Therefore, the association deployed their full arsenal for this battle.

Asking an up-and-coming female Sub League member to work as the match recorder and calling in one of the most popular Women's League players over here from Tokyo to do the commentary is proof enough of that.

And, the person they got to be the observer for this highly anticipated match is——.

"Hi, hi! It's me!!"

Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*.

The Switch Hitter, who recently secured his position in the A League, bursts into the press conference and looks to be in an extremely good mood.

The choice makes sense, considering this guy is more neutral than the Swiss. He'd never show favoritism among Women's League players. Men, on the other hand, are a different story.

"So sorry I'm late, Yaichi. It's been forever since I put on traditional clothes and it took more time than I thought. Sorry."

"That's nice."

"But, they're great because you can slip out of them in a jiffy!"

"That's nice."

I respond the instant he stopped talking and avoid making eye contact at all costs.

Only recently have I figured out how to interact with this guy.

He loves getting reactions out of people, so it's best to just ignore whatever he says. Do the verbal equivalent of scrolling by something on social media.

"Ahhh, Jin! Thanks fer comin'!"

Unfortunately, Master Kiyotaki doesn't understand that and walks right into the trap.

"Agreein' to help out at the last minute I'm too grateful fer words. Not only have ya helped out as an instructor at the Kiyotaki Classroom, now yar workin' as the observer for a match between my apprentice and granddaughter apprentice"

"My, my There's no need for all this fuss. We're friends, aren't we, Kiyotaki-sensei?" says Mr. Natagiri with a big, friendly smile. "Why, I consider myself a pea in the Kiyotaki Shogi family pod. No matter how abnormal the

request, I'd come with bells on!"

"Oh Ohhh? Never heard it put like 'at before, but I'm happy ya think so."

The press conference keeps going as the three of us don't really pick up on what the others are saying.

It started off dead silent, but now some of the media people are laughing and having a good time.

The one who has made their job substantially easier and brought the whole place to life is Ms. Rokuroba.

Understanding the role that has been thrust upon her, she's executing it to perfection.

"Tamayo has become so dependable," remarks Mr. Natagiri, who trained Ms. Rokuroba as his own apprentice. Watching his precious student (?) lighten up the event by wedging her way between the two players giving off nothing but hostile vibes with gentle warmth in his eyes, he adds, "Back when she first came out of Numazu, she would've been just as uptight as young Noboryou right about now."

"I can't even imagine that now."

A younger, unsophisticated Ms. Rokuroba Actually, I could see it.

Just picturing her not knowing what to do with those glorious boobs that she now wields like weapons during matches, wow

"This is the first time for me to meet one Miss Ai Yashajin, and from what I've heard, her Shogi skill is only matched by her overwhelming popularity. Is that so?"

"Yes, that's true. She had record numbers of private sponsors during the preliminaries, so I'd say she has quite a few fans already."

"You should hear what Tamayo says about that when she's tipsy. *Losing to some little girl in popularity, too? That settles it, I'm an old lady, so would*

someone please put me out of my misery? It's a sorry sight."

"M-Ms. Rokuroba Is she holding a grudge?"

She used to be the unquestioned number one star of the Women's League.

Then, when Big Sis showed up on the scene, she became the unquestioned *number two*.

On the other hand, Big Sis went into the Sub League so she almost never shows up for Shogi events. Ms. Rokuroba still held an overwhelming popularity edge over everyone else until Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin's appearance knocked her out of the top three overnight.

Her professionalism keeps her smiling and bubbly as ever, but I'm sure she's got more than a few things she'd love to say.

After all, she doesn't want to lose at anything, not just Shogi.

That's just how pro Shogi players are.

"Perk up now, you two☆ Smile, smile! You're cute already, so play to all those cameras, okay?"

"....."

Ai stays completely silent while Big Sis glares at her with contempt, but Ms. Rokuroba isn't fazed at all.

—She's a true pro

Ms. Rokuroba's voice could be heard throughout the opening night party that followed the press conference.

■ BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

The next day.

The second Queen Title Match began with Ai Yashajin making the first move.

“Hello everyone on the north coast! I’m baaaack——!!”

Now after lunch, Ms. Rokuroba has the stage to herself as she starts doing commentary at the big board.

She’s wearing a knit dress with no shoulders and an extremely low neckline, which is making all the Shogi fans who made the trip out here very happy. Me? Of course I’m happy. too.

“Tamayon!”

“I love you!! Marry me!!”

“Why, thank you everyone☆ But, sorry. I’m already married to Shogi, so marrying anyone of you ain’t gonna happen!!”

Boom! The whole place explodes with laughter. Only Ms. Rokuroba, with her sharp tongue and no-holds-barred commentary, can get away with teasing the crowd like this.

Both her outfit and comments have been at full throttle since the start of match, reason being——

The match, *which everyone came here to see*, ended so quickly.

Ai used her best Bishop Exchange strategy and went in for a decisive blow right out of the gate, but the sequence she prepared for today completely caved. It’s been all Big Sis since then.

From a pro standpoint, the match was already over by the time lunch came around.

The only interesting thing left now is figuring out when Ai will surrender.

Which is why Ms. Rokuroba is so desperate to keep the crowd entertained.

Dropping the Shogi analysis completely, she's been bringing the observer, Mr. Natagiri, the analyst for the match, Master Kiyotaki and myself up onto the stage for rapid-fire talk sessions and comedy bits. What's more, she's been doing this the whole time without leaving the stage.

Signing autographs left and right, I've lost count of how many rounds of rock-paper-scissors she's played with the audience to decide who gets them—the match is moving so slowly we can't do a *Next Move Quiz*.

Shaking hands and telling stories about the inner workings of the Women's League all with a smile on her face, she's not letting any fans get bored for a moment. She won't let them regret making the trip out here.

Even male pros can't get a big board analysis session this revved up. Actually, it might be something only a Women's League member could pull off because they know how important events like this are. I can tell Ms. Rokuroba got this popular not just because of her Shogi skill and good looks, but also her willingness to please and her strong sense of responsibility. They're shining through right now.

Seeing her professionalism and willpower with my own eyes, I'm seriously impressed.

When I mention that to her as we stand next to the big board, she says: "No, no, this is the usual."

Like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"Doing big board commentary for one of Ginko's title matches like this one is a sure-fire snooze fest unless you liven it up yourself."

“?”

What is she talking about?

Sure, today’s match didn’t turn out so well, but Big Sis is so popular that her being in the match alone brings people in droves

Whoops, I’ve got to keep the conversation going. So, I change the topic.

“You have faced Sora-*Queen* before haven’t you, Ms. Rokuroba? As someone with firsthand experience, what is your impression of the Queen?”

“Hmmm~ What’s the best way to put this? If I had to put it into words, it’d be——.”

“An expression works too.”

“The video game boss whose HP never goes down.”

“..... Huuh?”

“You know, the hit points never go down... the ones that pop up in RPGs? In role-playing games... The boss where you try everything under the sun but can’t beat it? That battle where you think you’re doing damage but the HP bar doesn’t shrink at all?”

“I guess so?”

Pro Shogi players tend to love games.

Not just board games, but even regular video games, too. We have a lot of free time, so there’s plenty of time to get really hooked on one. Since we love discovering new things in trial-and-error strategy-type games, there’s a good chance Shogi players will make it into the finals whenever there are public tournaments.

Pros have made appearances on TV networks that broadcast video game content, including Ms. Rokuroba if I remember right.

I was sure that’s where this conversation was heading, but ... it goes a heck of

a lot deeper than I thought.

“For me? If I’m playing against a Women’s League player, even if she has a title, I’m confident I could get in a few good hits. If it’s a three-match series, I know I can get one off her. That’s what the game of Shogi is, right?”

“Yes, I agree with that.”

“But Ginko is different. No hits connect. It doesn’t even look like she’s taking damage at all. No matter how many special attacks I dish out, they amount to zero damage. What’s worse, all her regular attacks hit for 9,999. She nullifies defensive magic by default. She’s one of those *How am I supposed to beat this?*—type bosses. The totally broken ones that destroy the game’s balance. That’s what it’s like playing against her.”

“Well, but What about Empress Ika Sainokami or”

“Ika plays with a hair trigger and I’d say she has talent to contend with the best of them, but a lot more goes into winning than that. Why else do you think her winning percentage isn’t that high? She has zero defense and her HP is low, a glass cannon. Her speed and attack power are through the roof, though.”

“So you’re saying that B- Sora-Queen has high defense and HP as well?”

“Even a 15-year-old boy being 3-*dan* in the Sub League would be thought of as, like, the next powerhouse in the pro ranks, right? That’s why *all* of us in the Women’s League have given up. Ginko isn’t the same species as us. We lose, but what else do we expect? She should just hurry up and get to the pros.”

Ms. Rokuroba sounds calm, cool and collected.

She’s not trying to get a laugh out of the audience.

It’s more like she’s finally getting something off her chest that’s been there for far too long.

“Watching Ginko play is painful, plain and simple. You get sick of it: sick of how this girl is going to be looking down on us for the rest of our lives. What’s

the point of researching anyway? I mean, to devote yourself heart and soul to something and then not be able to leave a scratch? It hurts really bad.”

“.....”

“Look, I’ll be honest here. The Women’s League is stagnant right now. There’s nothing more boring than a match where you know who’s going to win before it starts and no matter how good you play, people are always going to say, *But you’re not as good as Ginko Sora, right?* The Women’s Shogi world right now is just a game where Ginko Sora wins in the end. That must be boring to watch, am I right?”

Ms. Rokuroba yells to the crowd.

“W-Wait, Ms. Rokuroba! Don’t you think *boring* is too strong of a——.”

More than half the people here have to be Big Sis’s fans. We’ll have to face their wrath if we say anything bad about Naniwa’s Snow White.....!!

But, it turns out my expectations were completely wrong.

They’re applauding.

“.....”

Words fail me. I have to laugh this off. I have to keep the conversation going, but no words are coming out.

I can’t believe it. Aren’t most of these people rooting for Big Sis?

Well, then again

It’s true that today’s match was decided by the mid-game. Fans who came here expecting to see a battle for the ages probably would call it *boring*.

Big Sis made her Women’s Shogi debut back when she was in grade school and has never lost to a Women’s League Player. Even the Meijin’s winning

percentage is around 70. His best season ever barely cracked 80. In other words, he was losing once in every five matches. While he has claimed and defended titles in straight runs before, it doesn't happen very often.

Big Sis—is 55-0. Not a single loss.

What's more, almost all of them are perfect wins from start to finish.

Today wasn't the first time the Shogi match itself was boring. It wasn't the first time the audience wasn't entertained by big board analysis alone.

It's always like this.

Even Big Sis's most devoted fans are getting tired of watching her win

Hold up, hold up! Now's not the time to be thinking about this. I've got to keep the conversation going!

"W-Well, then how about the Queen challenger?! You've played against Ai, yes? What do you think of her playing style? What impression do you get from her?"

"Miss Yashajin How should I put it? It's, I don't know Interesting?"

"Interesting? Her playing style?"

"She's cheeky, but her Shogi and her personality aren't childish at all. Honestly, I hate having such a young girl like her in this league. Still, I end up wanting to know more about her. Her Shogi *has something*, an *it* factor. I want to know what it is, which makes me want to play against her as much as I can from here on out."

Once Ms. Rokuroba finishes that sentence, she brings up someone else who I never considered.

"I'm sure that today's match recorder, Miss Noboryou, feels the same way."

"Ms. Noboryou, too?"

"I heard that when she lost to Miss Yashajin back in the finals, she turned pale

as a ghost and literally couldn't stand up. But, yeah, a female player in the Sub League losing to a Practice League member would be quite a shock."

"..... Yes, it would."

"But, that very same Miss Noboryou asked to work as the match recorder for this Women's Title Match. I don't think she's only here to see Ginko."

"She asked to work this match?"

"That's what I've heard."

What a surprise.

Working as a match recorder is pretty much an obligation for Sub League members and 3-*dan* players get first choice. Which means that *kyu* ranking members have to take whatever is left over More often than not, they have to work extremely long matches or the women's matches that won't benefit their own research. That's the way it is in Kansai anyway. I wonder if Kanto is different.

Speaking of which I remember and ask her.

"Which reminds me, Ms. Rokuroba, you worked as the match recorder for the quarterfinals, didn't you? What was your motivation?"

"I thought it was a good chance to learn something. The lucky thing was that so many reporters were there that I got lots of attention just by sitting in the match recorder's spot. Now *that* Shogi match was fun to watch. Miss Yashajin, on defense against *that* Miss Tsukiyomizaka, using Bishop Head Pawn. I had a front row seat and couldn't wait for the next move the whole match."

I agree that that match record is Ai's magnum opus.

She concentrated so hard that she conked out with a fever on the bullet train on the way home Watching her that day, that's when I first took the possibility of her becoming the Queen challenger seriously.

No.

Even the possibility of her beating Big Sis——.

“That Shogi was so much fun that time flew by, even working as the match recorder. But, it would’ve been a real struggle if it turned out like today’s Ah! She made a move.”

Keeping an eye on the monitor at her feet while talking, Ms. Rokuroba is the first to notice that Ai has finally moved a piece.

Her King had been in starting position for the entire match, but now it moved for the first time.

But it wasn’t so she could hold out.

“She’s setting the scene.”

Just as Ms. Rokuroba said, Ai threw in the towel just a few moves later.

SPITE

I lost the second match. That Shogi was awful.

All the research I did, the sequence I developed using my father's pieces, nothing worked against Ginko Sora. Didn't work, heh! They led to my defeat.

"....."

I've come back to the break room after the match to change out of my kimono.

Since a clothing shop is taking care of it for me, they said all I needed to do was roll it up and put it in the box to mail it back to them.

Except, all the pain and anger welling up inside me won't let my fingers stay still and I can't get this *obi* sash to come loose—.

"Grrgh! Fine then!!"

Just as I was about to pull it off with all my might.

"You mustn't do that."

I hear a voice at the door and stop pulling.

The owner of this inn is standing in the doorway—Ai Hinatsuru's mother.

"Being rough with it will only worsen the situation. Allow me to assist you."

"....."

Honestly, I want to be alone. I don't want anyone's help.

But at this rate, I don't think I'll ever get this thing off me.

Taking my silence as permission, the owner kneels down next to me and starts loosening the kimono with precision.

"Breathing must've been so difficult. You'll be right as rain in a moment."

“It wasn’t that big a deal

I’m putting on a brave face. Playing in traditional clothing, each breath is a challenge because of how tight the sash closes around my chest. And I always have to know exactly where my sleeves are at all times. Trying to focus on the match with all that going on is extremely demanding.

..... Not that it excuses the loss

“My daughter has told me so much about you.”

“..... Complaints, I’m sure.”

“Not at all. She told me you’re *such a strong girl*.”

“..... But, I lost.”

“Yes.”

Rather than trying to comfort me, the inn’s owner simply nods as her hands move all about.

“However, that’s not the kind of strength my daughter was referring to.”

“.....?”

“She told me there is another girl her age named Ai Yashajin. She said that despite sharing the name *Ai* and the same master, this Ai always fights alone rather than letting others help her with every little thing like she does. That she was jealous of that strength

“So? Did you come in here to take pity on an orphan like me?”

“You’re exactly the way she described you,” says the owner, smiling at me.

But her tone, it was a lot more like a *mother* than a business owner and for a moment, one fleeting second, I felt like bursting into tears like a child.

It’s irritating, being treated the same way a child would be, but I stay still long enough for her to take the kimono off completely.

“You have been working very hard. Leave the rest to me and go join the after-party.”

Ai Hinatsuru’s mother back in business mode, she offers to finish cleaning up and gives me a polite bow.

“..... Thank you.”

With that, I put on my own clothes.

——..... A mother, huh.

She’s very different from mine. But If mother were alive today, would she have been the one helping me take off the kimono just like this?

Stop.

——Letting thoughts like that happen proves my heart is weak after losing

The series isn’t over yet. I have to look perfectly normal at this party. I can’t show any weakness, ever.

Washing my face at the sink, I reset myself mentally and physically.

Then, once I step out of the break room——there’s a girl wearing a school uniform standing outside.

“.....?!”

Thinking it’s Ginko Sora, I brace myself.

But I was wrong. This girl has dark hair and vibrant, tanned skin. She doesn’t look anything like the pasty Snow White.

It’s the other Sub League member, but she’s already changed into her school uniform.

“You

Appearing out of the blue like this, her name escapes me.

Today’s match recorder.

I defeated her in the finals as well. She's Yes. Karen Noboryou.

"I have great respect for Sora-sensei," the high school girl says without warning.

"She may be younger than I am, but I still hold her in the highest regard. As another female member of the Sub League, I wholeheartedly believe that what she's accomplished so far and what she's trying to achieve are grand feats that go beyond what words can express. Also, I don't want to see a *dan*-ranking member of the Sub League lose to a Women's League player and I don't think that should ever happen. Seeing that match transpire without handicap didn't sit well with me as it is. Therefore, I couldn't care less if you lose three matches in a row. However——."

Suppressing her emotions, Karen starts talking in a flat, monotone voice.

"Allow me to say one thing. How long are you going to keep using such terrible standard sequences?"

".....!!"

"Today was like watching an amateur play. I realize that Women's League players are almost amateurs themselves, so that can't be helped to some extent. However, we Sub League members are dispatched to record those matches. The reason I wanted to work this match was to sear the pain of losing to an amateur elementary school girl into my heart, but having to sit through a useless match is just a waste of my time."

Those words sting worse than any I've ever heard in my life.

Not only because they were a direct attack on me, but also on father who loved Shogi with all his heart. Above all else I'm angry at myself for being too powerless to say anything back.

"I've said my peace." The Sub League member with a backpack over her shoulder then says, "Please get some rest. Goodbye," with a deep bow and walks down the hallway without so much as a glance over her shoulder.

Pain and humiliation gripping my trembling body, I just stand there.

“What, what? Going home already, Karen? By yourself?” Someone asks down the hall.

“I have a boat to catch. Thank you for all your hard work today, Rokuroba-sensei.”

“Boat You’re not trying to get all the way back to Hachiyo Jima by yourself, are you?! Right now?!”

“If I catch the boat from Tokyo Harbor tonight, I can make it to the island by tomorrow morning. It’ll work out perfectly for me.”

“A girl shouldn’t be going out by herself at this time of night! Just wait a minute, I’ll get Jin Jin to take you to Tokyo!”

Their voices echo from somewhere further down the hall.

“.....”

All alone, I bite my lip to endure the pain coursing through my veins. It takes all the willpower I have to endure the emotional tsunami crashing against my heart.

Then, once the wave receded, I open my mouth as if coming up for air and a few words spill out.

“..... What would you have me do?”

For the first time I can remember, I don’t know the answer.

It’s not that I don’t understand how to win.

I don’t know what kind of Shogi I should play anymore.

RECORD 4

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Worldly
Maestro
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Mitsuru Oishi 生石 充

© shirabii

▲ GOLDEN KEY

The vibes at breakfast these days are always really heavy.

“.....”

“.....”

Ai Hinatsuru and I sit in silence and just eat.

Normally, we turn off the TV while we're eating but the silence is just too deafening. So I turn it on

“It's time for this morning's Shogi Update! Ishikawa Prefecture played host to the second Queen Title Match where Osaka's own Naniwa's Snow White, Ginko Sora-Queen, emerged victorious and is now one victory away from defending her title. Should she do so, Miss Sora will become the first ever Queen of Queens——.”

Click.

And turn it off again.

Who knew two members of your Shogi family playing for a title hurt this much

Ai, who hasn't said a word all morning, stops munching away on her cereal and cautiously tries to break the silence.

“Um, Master?”

“What is it?”

“Ten-chan's Shogi in the second match wasn't very good right from the beginning”

“Yeah. It was a complete and total loss.”

“She's on defense for the next one right? Since the early game will be

even more important, I think she should use the best strategy she has

“The best she has? What would that be?”

“Like her Bishop Head Pawn!”

Oh, I get it.

Bishop Head Pawn was originally a ploy in offensive strategy, but Ai Yashajin figured out a way to play it on defense and has used it in Practice League and Women’s League matches. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that that strategy fueled her rise to become the Queen Challenger.

She hasn’t tried it against Big Sis yet, so I can understand why Ai thinks it could be a ray of hope.

Unfortunately——.

“..... Her Bishop Head Pawn can be very effective, but it also has a fatal flaw. I doubt it will work against Big Sis at all.”

“A flaw? What could it be?”

“Time.”

“Ah!!”

The spoon she was holding falls to the table.

“Bishop Head Pawn is a strategy where you deliberately make an opening in your defense right in front of the Bishop. The idea is to get your opponent to try to take advantage of it. You’re controlling how your opponent attacks and you beat them by thoroughly researching their limited options. But——.”

“If they don’t attack and just play normally”

“Exactly. If the opponent doesn’t take the bait, all your research goes out the window.”

That’s the thing about ambush strategies: you end up at a disadvantage if your opponent doesn’t get surprised by every move you horn into your

sequence in order to lay the traps.

All *ambushes* face that destiny.

“If the opponent decides to draw out the match instead, trying to do Bishop Head Pawn just ends in move loss. Modern Shogi doesn’t care about move loss much at all, but it’s really hard to catch up against Big Sis when you’ve wasted several turns. And Big Sis isn’t the type to fall for a taunt. Ai Yashajin understands that much herself, which is exactly why she won’t use it No, she can’t use it.”

Using her defensive Bishop Head Pawn against Ryou in the quarterfinal worked because the Aggressive Archangel has a short temper and charged right into it.

But that wasn’t the case in the next match, the one to determine the Queen Challenger.

Machi the Tormentor has no problem drawing out matches whatsoever, which is why Ai didn’t use it.

She wasn’t saving it for the title match. It simply wouldn’t work.

There’s no way Big Sis would have missed that.

Since Ai didn’t use Bishop Head Pawn when she was on defense in the first match, it probably confirmed her suspicions.

“Ai Yashajin’s defensive Bishop Head Pawn cannot handle long matches yet.”

If you understand how to respond to strategies you’ve never seen before, it’s as good as a successful defense. When it comes to basic standards and research, members of the 3-*dan* division are even more advanced than pros.

“Rushing into an unperfected scheme because her back is against the wall is just what Big Sis wants her to do. Not to mention that using an ambush strategy in a title match puts the trust you’ve built up as a player at risk.”

“

Picking up the spoon she dropped, Ai says, “..... Being you.”

“Hm?”

“Being you, couldn’t you just teach Ten-chan some amazing sequence?! You’re stronger than the Queen and even the Meijin, Master You’re the strongest in the world, the Ryuo! Surely you could figure out a way to perfect the Head Bishop Pawn for her?! Your sequences make other *pro-senseis* stop and stare——.”

“That’s something she has to figure out on her own.”

“But!!”

“It’s not as simple as *I teach her and she wins*. I know you understand that much.”

“B-But The way things are now, Ten-chan”

“You really think Ai would use any sequence I taught her anyway? Stubborn as she is, she’d go out of her way never to use it and you know it.”

“Ah”

“Also, I have my own big match to worry about. Pros always have to prioritize their own matches. I don’t have time to think up strategies for an apprentice.”

“.....”

Slump. Ai hunches over, looking defeated.

Then she silently starts shoveling food into her mouth as if she’s given up entirely. I go back to eating as well.

While putting dishes away, Ai asks.

“..... Are you going to be researching at home all day?”

“No. I have someone to meet.”

Finished with breakfast, I tell her as I pick up a paper bag in the corner of the

room, “I need to deliver some north coast souvenirs.”

TEARFUL OGRE

“..... Lady. My lady.”

.....

“My lady. May I speak with you?”

Ah.

“Akira? What?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you when you’re tired. If I may suggest that if you wish to retire that you please go to your bed instead.”

It seems that I’d fallen asleep with my head down on my desk.

I remember coming back to my room after the title match yesterday and analyzing the loss right away I must’ve dozed off at some point.

—How embarrassing, being seen like this

Pulling the strands of hair that are stuck to my cheek back behind my ear, I make my voice sound as irritated as possible and tell Akira.

“..... I’m not tired at all. Actually, I was just about to start researching.”

“My apologies.”

“And? What did you want to talk about?”

“An acquaintance of mine is close by, so may I have time to show them around? I shall return in two hours.”

My first thought is “again?”

Akira has been meeting someone on her own recently.

Apparently, she’s been secretly meeting them while I have been at school, so this may have started long before I realized what was going on.

Who could it be? Is it always the same person?

It comes to me in a flash.

—A lover?

Akira is already over 20 years old and certainly looks pretty enough to be called beautiful.

I thought I had a pretty good idea what her private life is like because she's almost always hovering around me, but there'd be nothing strange about her having a lover.

“.....”

Here I am in all this pain while she's off somewhere, romancing with her head in the clouds I realize it's a groundless assumption, but it still makes me angry.

Combine this with what the “Thorn Princess” told me, and it's downright infuriating.

—Treating me like some child!

“You wouldn't understand because you're too young.”

Getting looked down on like that made me so angry.

“My Lady? If two hours is too long, one No, 30 minutes will be——.”

Misinterpreting my silence for something else, I interrupt Akira midsentence.

“I thought I told you you're free to do whatever you want while I'm researching so that I can focus.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“I want to study all day today. I don't care if you come back or not.”

“Understood, My Lady. I will excuse myself.”

Akira politely bows before closing the door behind her without making a

sound.

“.....”

Maybe I could’ve phrased that a little softer?

But, I’m irritated at myself for worrying about it a few seconds later.

“Tsk!”

Snapping my tongue, I look at the computer screen in front of me.

The computer continued analyzing yesterday’s loss even while I was asleep.

I was already behind from a formation standpoint at the beginning of the mid game.

“My one opportunity on offense and I as good as threw it in the garbage”

There’s no time before the next match.

I have to focus on my research.

Except, every mistake I made in the first and second matches keep replaying in my head no matter how hard I try to drown them out.

—Maybe Akira was right, and I should lay down for a while

Retreating to my bedroom and putting my head down on my pillow does nothing to stop the constant first and second match flashbacks.

Overpowered.

Total failure.

Ginko Sora’s psychological attacks are no excuse. Even when it comes to preparation, there are no obvious holes in her Shogi

“So, that’s Sub League 3-*dan*”

Strong.

Even the way her Shogi is built is completely different from the Women’s League players I’ve faced so far.

Sub League members—they live in a different world from amateurs. Playing against them is like staring at the impenetrable wall built on top of a reinforced foundation.

Karen Noboryou should look down on Women's League players and amateurs' Shogi alike. They wouldn't stand a chance against Sub League members like her

“..... How am I supposed to win against the monster like that?”

I smoosh my pillow up against my face to drown out my whining as I lay face up on the bed.

After losing twice in a row, all the adults at the party last night had lots to say to me.

“You're still only 10, so now's the time to build up experience.”

“Here you are, in your first title match at 10 years old. Even if you lose this one, it's just a matter of time before you win it.”

“Losing is a good experience to have.”

I bet every single one of them thought they were being nice. Are they brain-dead? What could I get out of losing?

I got so irritated, so fed up with all of them that I caught the last train home rather than spend the night at that inn because I didn't want to breathe the same air a single second longer than I had to.

“..... They don't know anything, but they still run their mouths off!!”

Grabbing my pillow, I slam it against the wall.

Who cares if someone hears me? I don't care anymore.

I just want to scream my lungs out.

“Just how much do you think playing Shogi means to me?! Do you think I'm fine with losing?!”

I yell, smacking my pillow into the wall again and again.

The cover rips open, but I couldn't care less about the cloud of feathers swirling around me as I keep bashing the barely recognizable pillow against the wall.

"So what if I'm 10?! Does that mean I'm not trying?! Does that mean I'm guaranteed a spot in the next title match?! That I'll get stronger no matter what?! Can you prove that I'll keep winning?!"

There are plenty of players who get to a title match on nothing but momentum.

There are also tons who lost that momentum and fell from the top just as quickly.

Amateurs have an advantage in Mynavi because it's a single match tournament. I used the fact that I'm an amateur in elementary school to put pressure on the professionals and came out victorious.

So, what happens when I face an opponent who doesn't feel that pressure.....? Or when the pressure is on *my* shoulders? The second match made the answer painfully obvious.

Even if I'm not playing against Ginko Sora, I doubt winning will ever be easy.

"That was my one and only chance!! The best chance I had!! And !!! I wasted it by playing Shogi that belongs in the garbage!!"

There's no excuse.

Not for me.

There's no forgiving my weakness. My pathetic excuse for skills. My laughably shallow reading.

But above all, my weak heart.

"Haaa Haaa Haa Arrrghhhhhh"

My fuming screams of anger start turning into painful cries——.

Then, changing into all-out bawling.

“Arrrrghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

Waahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Massive tears streaming down my cheeks, despair consumes me.

The weak lose, the strong win.

People die.

The end inevitably comes for everyone.

I already knew all of that. Reality is cruel and brutal no matter how much you cry and wail about it. It’ll never go the way a child wants it to.

Getting this far was no easy feat.

But, despite working very hard, there’s a limit to what I can do.

I’m the only one that can change.

Changing the way the world works is impossible.

“Arrrrggghhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Waahh Aghhh—————!!
Aghhhhh—————

I’ve pushed back against this cruel world by crying like a baby.

There’s not much time left for me.

Because——.

“..... The warmth of sitting on Father’s knee, Mother’s kind voice They’re disappearing little by little

I’m scared.

Scared of being alone.

I cling to Shogi because it’s the last way I have to feel my family’s presence.

Because these fingertips can imprint memories of my parents in match records whenever I play.

But

My memories of the three of us playing together get hazier with each passing day

“..... Why do I play Shogi?”

That’s why I want a title right now.

While I still have memories of Father and Mother. I want to make a mark on history while I can still remember the three of us together. I want proof that will last forever.

That’s what a title is to me.

I want proof that our dream came true.

That smile we all shared when I said, *“I will be the Queen of Shogi!”* For that moment to be immortalized.

But

“Ginko Sora is there So is Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, Machi Kugui, Rina Shakando, and Ika Sainokami”

Even if Ginko Sora should leave the Women’s Shogi world to become the first female professional player in history There is no guarantee I can take a title from any of them in a series of matches. Even if I win once or twice, their communitive skills are all still stronger than mine.

Then there’s the one who improves with each breath—Ai Hinatsuru.

She skipped the entire 10-year path I followed on my Shogi journey, accomplishing everything in a single year. She’s a true monster.

I can beat her now because her technique needs work and is still fairly naïve, but

“With some kind of a spark, she could change in a single day No, it wouldn’t take that long. One Shogi match would do it

Hearing myself say it out loud sends a jolt up my spine.

She’s getting stronger 10 times faster than I am. Thinking about it logically, she’ll keep getting stronger and stronger from now on. Which means, she’ll pass me up. A Women’s League player my age.

And once that happens, I’ll be in second place for all eternity.

Meaning—I’ll never claim a title.

“..... Father Mother Save me

Stumbling to my feet, I keep my hand on the wall and start wobbling out of my room.

I trip and fall so many times Even still, my feet keep crawling as I get naturally drawn forward, toward the place where I swore I wouldn’t return until the title was mine.

■ NORTHERLY WINDS AND THE SUN

A thick fog hung in the air as was typical.

The Yashajin family graveyard was normally kept under lock and key and only those with permission could enter.

However, Ai Yashajin found the gate unlocked when she arrived.

— Did someone come here before me?

Unnerved by this strange discovery, Ai stepped as lightly as she could as she made her way toward her parent's grave. She then spotted the last person she expected to see.

Akira?

Almost out of reflex, Ai hid behind a nearby tree.

—Why?! Why would Akira be here?!

Akira, the one who said she was going to *meet someone*, was standing in front of her parent's gravestone.

—Was the *someone* she was talking about father and mother?

Ai realized her misunderstanding the very instant she considered the possibility.

That's?!

There was someone else there, in that spot apart from Akira.

“..... And that's where she surrendered. Ai lost in 60 moves.”

He was standing in front of the black gravestone and reading in match record out loud.

“The result is disappointing. If she had fought with her full strength and lost,

that would be fine. But losing without being able to put up a fight As her Master, I take full responsibility.”

The breeze carried his voice to Ai’s hiding spot. She leaned closer to catch every word.

She could see him there, plain as day, and hear his voice loud and clear, but still couldn’t believe it.

She couldn’t believe *he* was here of all places.

“Ai is a smart girl. I haven’t had to teach her a single thing since the day we first met. She’s grown this much entirely on her own steam. She became strong using only what you, her parents, gave her. Actually, she has taught me so much Which is why all I can do is read Ai’s match records to you like this——.”

The young girl’s eyes widened in surprise.

——Has he Has he always been doing this?!

“Do you remember the promise I made the day I took her as my apprentice? That I would bring her into my family, and give the girl named Ai Yashajin a happy life. That I would teach her what you were trying to convey through Shogi.”

Then, he said it. The same promise he made to Ai herself.

“That I would give her a new family.”

——!!

Though she couldn’t understand why, an intense heat flooded the corners of Ai Yashajin’s eyes.

“Ai is in a great deal of pain right now. Possibly more than she’s ever experienced before. She has to find a way to get past it herself, but Knowing her, I have absolute faith that she will find a way. I believe that her Shogi won’t lose to anyone.”

—Believe

Hearing that one single word brightened her heart like a powerful ray of sunshine piercing through a storm.

On the other hand, a stubborn piece of that same heart had a different reaction.

— Believe, that's all? My Shogi won't get any stronger with the words that fit *your* needs!!

It triggered her the same way that the Thorn Princess claimed that *love* was the key.

Now the tears built up in her eyes on the verge of overflowing.

"I haven't been able to do a single thing as her Master this whole time, but I swear to both of you that I will continue to believe in my apprentices' potential and play Shogi they can all be proud of. So, please——."

Returning to his breast pocket Ai's match records, which he had placed in front of her parents' grave as an offering, Yaichi Kuzuryu had one last thing to say.

"Have faith and watch over her. Over us."



“..... *Sensei*. Have you finished?”

“Yes.”

I turn around and lower my head.

“Thank you as always, Akira, for taking time out of your schedule for my own selfish reasons”

“I don’t see it that way.” Akira then adds with a grin, “You’re not reporting four matches at once anymore like when my lady was in the Practice League. Now there’s only one at a time, so one hour is sufficient.”

“Well, these *one* matches are a lot more complex.”

Compared to when she first started out, there’s so much more to Ai’s Shogi now.

The Practice League met on the second and fourth Sunday of each month.

I would ask Akira to let me come into the graveyard the following Monday.

This was all so that I could inform her parents, resting beneath that black gravestone, how their daughter had performed that week.

And ... to ask them for advice on how I should raise Ai.

If I had a match on that Monday, I would come on Tuesday unless I was working then as well and would come on Wednesday or Thursday

I had to delay my report every once in a while, but I always came as soon as I could.

Because... if I were in her parents’ position, I would want to know how my daughter was doing even a single second sooner.

“You first came to me, requesting permission to enter right after playing against Chairman Tsukimitsu, yes?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Once I had finally made up my mind to take Ai Yashajin on as my apprentice, I

wanted her parents to be the first to know I wanted to tell them how I felt about their daughter and ask them what kind of Women's League player they wanted her to become. So I went to Akira.

She's been sacrificing what little free time she has to let me in here ever since

"Though... how long do you intend to sneak around like this?" says Akira as she takes two pieces of the *kintsuba* I brought her from the north coast out of the box.

She places them next to the gravestone.

The rest, she tells me, the manor's staff will split amongst themselves.

She'll find a way to make sure those two pieces are well hidden by the time Ai Yashajin comes to visit the grave herself, just like she always has.

"My lady also comes straight here once her matches are complete. Why not join her?"

"If I let her see her own Master revealing his insecurities in front of her parents' grave, she would kick *me* out of the Shogi family. She already thinks I'm useless as it is"

"Well, you didn't visit once while you were struggling during the Ryuo Title Match."

"..... I'm ashamed to admit it, but that's true."

Just thinking about some of the things I did and said back then, it makes me want to crawl into a hole and pull a rock over my head But, I'm putting what I learned during that time to good use.

Now I understand what it's like to be against the ropes.

Right now, I bet Ai is feeling exactly how I felt back then.

"I literally tried to push everything out of my life. Everything except Shogi

anyway. But, I realized that it wouldn't solve anything."

What brought me back from the brink was——.

"The reason that I won against the Meijin was because I had something that he didn't I won because I had apprentices. That's why I treasure Ai Yashajin."

"Ohh? You like my lady that much, do you, Kuzuryu-sensei?"

"Of course I like her. I already told her grandfather, I'm prepared to look after her for the rest of my life."

Rustle, rustle!!

The sound of something big comes from the bushes behind me.

"Hmm?! Is there something behind that tree right now?!"

I spin around with my head on a swivel, but Akira casually looks in that direction and says calmly, "A cat, most likely. They're fairly common in this area."

"Huh? I've been coming here almost a year and I've never seen a single one! Besides, that sounded too big to be a cat"

I tilt my head, looking over each and every leaf of those bushes.

"Me Meeeow≡"

That might be the cutest cry I've ever heard.

"Oh, so it is a cat."

That cry had no confidence to it at all. It must be a newborn kitten.

Come to think of it, there's a lot of greenery around here so it could have been born in the last couple of days. Are the cats after the offerings left on the gravestones? Those kitties are in for a rude awakening.

"I wonder what kind of cat it is. I'm actually a cat person. Especially black

cats——.”

“Kuzuryu-sensei.”

Akira grabs my shoulder just as I take a step toward the bushes to investigate and says, “Take a look at me. I may be an upstanding, beautiful career woman now, but I was once a delinquent.”

“.....”

“That was the part where you should laugh.”

A very serious, deadpan delivery from a blushing Akira. Wow, that’s cute

“Society treated me like dirt, though I was wholly responsible for that Even so, the Yashajin family offered me employment and the first person to ever treat me as an equal human being was the young Lady Ai Yashajin.”

Squinting as she looks out over the ocean, Akira continues.

“She interacted with me, a low-level employee and a piece of refuse that was spat out by society and was picked up by the Yashajins, on the same level as everyone else. Appearance, birth, past My lady never passed judgment on another based on petty details. She accepted me exactly as I am.”

Yes, Ai is cold to everyone, but she never plays favorites. She’s also extremely strict with herself, which makes Ai Yashajin who she is.

“After learning Shogi fundamentals from you and learning to play, I was struck with an unusual sensation. It was almost as though I had known the game for many years I, one who didn’t understand how the pieces moved, became more and more convinced as I learned about the sport of Shogi. Do you know what it shares striking similarities with?”

“Ai?”

“Exactly.”

She gives a deep, slow nod.

“My lady is a personification of Shogi itself. Comprehending the rules before words, her life has already taken on the shape of Shogi. More meticulous than any and a pure spirit That is my lady.”

Looking more earnest than I’ve ever seen her, Akira goes on.

“Do you understand, *Sensei*? Everyone at the manor, myself included, loves Lady Ai Yashajin.”

“..... Yes.”

That may sound a bit out there, but the more you think about it, the more it makes sense.

Granting happiness and fun, but also many times more pain and suffering. However, fall for the charm once and you’ll always be hooked.

Just like Shogi.

Which means that absolutely anyone would fall for her.

I know that because Shogi is the most interesting and charming game in the entire universe.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Please offer my lady your assistance,” she pleads, bowing deeply from the waist. “I’m not asking you to make it so she wins every match. I’m not asking you to give her a title on a silver platter. Not that Yes, something else entirely!”

Choosing her words carefully, Akira desperately tries to get her point across.

“Use your Shogi to reopen my lady’s closed heart! Use the intensity of your Shogi to melt the heart that has been frozen shut within her!”

With my Shogi

“You can do it, *Sensei*. No, you are the only one who can. Only the one who plays the most passionate, intense Shogi on the planet, the Ryuo—could possibly get through.”

“.....”

“Though painful to admit, it is beyond our ability. No kind words or number of gifts will ever reach the deepest part of my lady’s heart

Voice overflowing with a mixture of pain and envy, Akira explains.

“Reason being that my lady’s soul has taken the shape of Shogi.”

Whenever Shogi steals the hearts of young boys and girls alike, their souls transform into its shape.

Ai learned from father, the former amateur Meijin, but tragedy struck in the process Ever since then, she’s been learning from the match records and sequences in books that he left behind. Her only experience in matches came with a few over the Internet.

That’s obviously different from the way things normally work.

On the other hand, that’s exactly why her Shogi grew into something truly unique.

That has to be the reason everyone is so drawn to her playing style. She’s a hearty, arrogant upper-class girl, but has an incredibly pure and excited Shogi soul.

It was Keika’s Shogi that brought me out of hiding in my room back when the Meijin had me against the ropes.

Now, it’s my turn.

“..... Do you think I can get through? My Shogi

“It will,” says Akira in a strangely loud voice I’m right next to her, but it’s almost like *she’s speaking to someone someplace* else as she says, “I know it will.”

THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

On the morning of *one specific match*.

In a still empty Player's Room in the Kansai Shogi Association, two people met face-to-face.

"Miss Hinatsuru. Have you made preparations for writing your article?"

The journalist Mato, with her long black hair tied up in a bun and a camera on her shoulder, kindly asked Ai Hinatsuru as the young girl inspected her voice recorder.

A little nervous, Ai answered, "Yes, I have! Um, I've played a few practice matches with Ten-chan and researched with her for a little while, too"

"Then you have been collecting material. Excellent."

Mato nodded, giving her journalist understudy a small grin.

"Though I'm aware your Master has already informed you, please ask as many questions as you like today, no matter how insignificant they may be. This is your last training exercise before the one that counts, so clear up any insecurities you may have today."

"Thank you so much!" said Ai in a loud, clear voice before jumping into her first question. "..... Ummm, what should I call you, *Sensei*?"

"There is no need for the *Sensei* title while working as journalists. Addressing me as simply *Ms. Mato* is just fine."

"B-But"

Ai Hinatsuru is an elementary school student who just became a member of the Women's League.

By comparison, Mato held the Queen Yamashiro Ouka title in the same

league. That level of informality was a difficult hurdle for her to clear.

“You may come up with your own way to address me if you wish.”

A smile flashed over her lips as Mato reminisced about the time when she herself entered the Women’s League as an elementary school student before cutting to the chase.

“Our job today is not as journalists, but to manage the Internet coverage over a blog. However, both roles require transforming a Shogi match into text, so it is best to approach them the same way.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“It is not uncommon for professional players and Women’s League players to write articles. There are even times when a player will write an article covering their own match. Those are called self-commentary articles.”

“Self-commentary

“Exactly. Strong players are often asked to write books detailing strategy, autobiographies, their own columns in magazines or newspapers and other literary opportunities increase as well. With potential like yours, Miss Hinatsuru, it would be wise to build up that sort of skill as soon as possible.”

“Thank you very much! I will do my best!!”

“Transforming matches into the written word improves your teaching ability, gives physical form to strategies you only vaguely understand as a concept and increases your Shogi skill in many other ways. Entering and exiting the arena at your leisure and the ability to freely ask questions during the review session are both special privileges that match journalists enjoy. Be sure to take advantage of them.”

“I will!!”

“..... However, the greatest advantage a player can gain by writing articles lies elsewhere.”

“Huh?”

“Miss Hinatsuru, who do you wish to win this year’s Queen Title Match?”

“Well

Pondering whether she should say anything at all for a moment, Ai decided to answer honestly.

“Um, I think I want Ten-chan to win After all, she’s my little sister apprentice And I know she works harder than anyone because I’ve seen it with my own eyes

“..... Is that so? Then, that’s why Keika is

“Uwhee? What about her?”

“Do not worry. You will know soon enough.”

Mato donned a gentle expression.

“I apologize for speaking to you so much thus far. Do you have any concerns at this point, Miss Hinatsuru?”

“Well, um I didn’t get much of a chance to go into the arena during the first match And, after Ten-chan lost, I couldn’t ask any questions about it

“I can relate. It takes a great deal of courage to dig into a friend’s Shogi loss.”

“.....”

“Please treasure that feeling.”

“Huh?”

Certain she was about to be reprimanded for not collecting enough material, Ai tilted her ear closer to Mato as not to miss a single word of her unexpected advice.

“Understanding the subject of your article better than anyone else.... That is

the first step to becoming a Shogi journalist. If you only write what the player him-or herself tells you, self-commentary will suffice. So, why do we write articles in the first place? Try to understand what the readers want to know about featured players. The meaning behind articles.”

“An article’s *meaning*?”

“Why we Women’s League players write articles. That is to bring a new, special perspective that even the players themselves didn’t realize about their own match.”

“Something they didn’t notice?!”

“Each player has their own personality—a *playing style* if you will. There are instances in daily life where you may not notice something, but another set of eyes will pick up on it right away, yes?”

“.....!! Now I get it!!”

“However, they become nothing more than assumptions about said person without understanding exactly who they are. Which means that we cannot restrict our material to match records alone, but also must observe them both during and outside of matches.”

Making her point, Mato pushed her glasses back into place as she continued.

“I have spent many years writing about Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*, so I’m confident I understand who he is on a deeper level despite your living with him, Miss Hinatsuru.”

“?!”

“Care to test my theory?”

That obvious challenge got Ai’s blood pumping as she rose to meet it head on.

“Mrghh!” She puffed out her reddening cheeks. “Okay, then——.”

Picturing the real Kuzuryu-*sensei* in her mind, Ai posed this question.

“Are you really going to marry Charlette, Master?”

“O-Of course I’m not~. But, Charlette keeps saying she wants to be my bride, you know~? She’ll start crying if I say no~. It’s not that I actually want to~.”

“?!”

Words failed Ai in an instant. She could picture her Master saying exactly that!!

“W-Well Between Auntie, Charlette, Ten-chan and me, who’s number one?!”

“Number one? That’s obviously you, Ai~. Because you are my one and only first apprentice~.”

“Master, you *dara*!! That’s not what I’m as- *Gasp*?!”

— Just now, Ai thought Mato-*sensei* actually was Master!!

Shock coursed through her veins. This was just like talking to the real Yaichi Kuzuryu!!

From his indecisive and *try-to-please-everyone* way of answering to his tone of voice, even Mato’s facial expressions were the splitting image of Kuzuryu-*sensei*.

—That’s not just some impression It’s like Master has a twin!!

Learning that someone who had been observing Kuzuryu-*sensei* much longer and in greater detail than herself existed, Ai felt a sharp twinge of jealousy at first, however—.

—There’s So much I need to learn from her!!

Invigorated, Ai nearly shouted.

“U-Umm!”

“What is it?”

“Master Mato May I call you that?!”

“Heh. Fine by me.”

And so, a new Master-apprentice relationship was born.

■ GODFATHER OF DEATH

On the day that the last preliminary for determining the Crown Challenger is taking place in both the Kanto and Kansai Shogi Associations, I get to the association one hour before my match is scheduled to start and step inside of the Onjyoudan no Ma arena.

It's the only match happening in Kansai, and the Sub League member preparing for it is stunned to see me.

"Kuzuryu-sensei?"

"Don't mind me. Can I borrow a cloth?"

Taking one from the Sub League member, I sit down on my ankles and start wiping the board.

There are two reasons.

The first, today's opponent is worthy of that much respect.

From the standings of our titles, I have to sit in the upper seat as the Ryuo, but I wanted to pay my respects to him by cleaning the board myself.

The other reason is—I didn't want there to be any blemishes in my heart.

I heard about when Master Kiyotaki cleaned the board before his placement match against Ayumu and I want to put the same sentiment into my match today.

Because today's Shogi requires that level of commitment to play.

"..... In order to use that magic against *him*"

"Who're you using it on?"

"!! Good morning."

"Same."

Today's opponent King Mitsuru Oishi grunts a quick response before striding directly to the lower seat.

—Man, he looks tired.

It's been a month since I've seen the Worldly Maestro, but his cheeks have gotten thin and his eyes have sunken a bit, too.

But his trademark 5 o'clock shadow beard is neatly trimmed. He must have a lot of chances to focus on his appearance because he's in the middle of a title match.

I thought I'd been so focused on wiping the board clean that I lost track of time, but that wasn't the case. Mr. Oishi also came to the arena early. Our match doesn't start for at least another 30 minutes.

—He must win this match in order to face Mr. Okito

The Crown League is split into Red and White Conferences, and Mr. Oishi and I are at the top of the White Conference with an undefeated 4-0 record. Basically, whoever wins this match will face the winner of the Red Conference to become the Crown Challenger.

From where Mr. Oishi is standing, on the verge of losing the King title to Crown Yo Okito, I'm sure he'd love to turn the tables on him by challenging for the Crown, or

—Could it be because This is our first league match against each other?

We've never played an official league match before today.

If that's the reason he arrived so early, then I'm honored. Seriously, that would make me really happy.

But, now is really not the time to catch up on things.

Just as I'm about to get up.

"Good morning."

A young woman dressed in a suit walks into the arena with a grade-school girl close behind her. Then she explains the situation.

“We are here to do blog coverage. Today, I will have Women’s League player Ai Hinatsuru work as my assistant in preparation for her coverage of the Queen Title Match. With your permission, I would like to station her in the corner of the room to collect material for the blog.”

“Sure.”

Mr. Oishi’s face relaxes as he glances over in Ai’s direction.

“Been a while, hasn’t it, Ai? Here you are, a full-blown member of the Women’s League, and I haven’t done anything to congratulate you. Once things settle down, drop by the bathhouse and I’ll have Asuka cook you up something nice.”

“P-Please! Thank you so much!”

“Playing any Ranging Rook?”

“Yes! Um Sometimes”

“That right? I gave it up.”

“Ah”

Unsure of what to say, Ai bites her lip and stares at the floor.

Ms. Mato kindly puts her hand on Ai’s back. Relieved to see that, I aligned my breathing with Mr. Oishi and start concentrating on the match at hand.

Now that the pieces are lined up on the board, I close my eyes for the rest of the time before the match to really get in the zone.

My match against Mr. Oishi is the only one happening in the arena today. The only sounds I hear are the occasional camera flash and the footsteps of cameramen as they look for the best shot.

—Those are Ai’s footsteps. It’s so easy to tell

Just knowing she's in the arena is so calming. Not that I could ever tell anyone that. Imagine, the Ryuo soothed by the footsteps of his apprentice before a match.

All the Crown League matches have offense and defense determined beforehand. I'm the defender today.

"When you're ready," I say loud and clear once the time to begin arrives and lower my head. Mr. Oishi gives a silent, shallow bow of his own.

Mr. Oishi casually opens the Bishop path with a flick of his wrist to start the match.

Then—he advances the Pawn in front of his Rook.

"..... A Static Rook opening"

I hear Ai absentmindedly mumble in the corner by herself. Ms. Mato has already left to go to the Player's Room to upload her match record comments to the blog.

"....."

I take a moment to stop and think.

—Will *that* really work against Mr. Oishi

Because if it doesn't, *I'm not the only one that'll take damage*. The moment I start the sequence, I absolutely can't lose

Almost as if he could see right through me, Mr. Oishi says, "Something wrong, Yaichi? You look like you're chomping at the bit to slide your Rook."

".....!!"

I'm stunned that he hit the nail right on the head, but the Worldly Maestro calmly continues.

"Go ahead. Show me how worldly you can be."

What players are the best at going against Ranging Rook?

Of course———Ranking Rook party members.

The Worldly Maestro is especially good at it. Even using Static Rook, he's incredibly strong.

Static Rook party members research how to play against other Static Rook strategies quite a lot but Ranging Rook party members spend the vast majority of their time researching how to counter whatever gets used against them.

Of course, they're doing it from a Ranging Rook standpoint, but they're still looking at the same board. In other words, they've seen exponentially more formations than I have.

That makes them exponentially strong!

"....."

Making up my mind, I bite down on my lip and go for it.

I move——my central Pawn forward.

"Gokigen Central Rook, eh? So, you think you can beat me with Goki Central? Sure are a cheeky little punk Thinking you can beat me with the strategy I threw out the window."

"....."

"Let's see what happens. Bring it on, trash."

Mr. Oishi advances his Pawn one space further.

"Slide it."

That's pretty much an open invitation.

Picking up my Rook with the same casual air that the Worldly Maestro did, I slide it across the board.

In that moment——.

"Wha?!"

Mr. Oishi's eyes fly open as he leans in for a closer look.

"Huh?!"

I don't think the match recorder and Ai realize that they're hovering over their ankles, but both are stuck in that position.

It's because my Rook——went *past the central column*.

"Gokigen Third File Rook?!"

Exactly.

That's the only way to explain the sequence I've started. It goes without saying that it's never showed up in a league match before.

Why?

Because obviously no one thinks this loony strategy would actually work.

"....."

After taking a few moments to study the board, Mr. Oishi looks up at me and says, "..... Did your fingers slip and go too far?"

"....."

"Sure doesn't seem like it."

The corners of his lips curl into a grin.

"Well then——Don't underestimate Ranging Rook."

His voice is quiet—*frighteningly quiet*.

He starts moving his King to the left while barely making a sound. It's just like how a predator sets itself up to pounce.

I immediately send my Bishop to his side of the board and promote. Bishop Exchange complete.

“You call this Ranging Rook? Hah!” Mr. Oishi snorts.

It’s true that I’ve been ignoring standards no, *common sense* this whole time.

But, doing a Bishop Exchange now was necessary.

The first person to realize that is——.

“.....!! So, that’s what you’re after

The Worldly Maestro’s molars crack as he grinds them together and pounds on his knees with his fists over and over again.

He saw through it That was fast.

“I see now. Trying to set up a 4 Two Silver variant of Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook, eh? Cheeky rascal!!”

I wouldn’t expect anything less of Mr. Oishi.

Rather than falling for my smokescreen, he saw exactly what strategy I’m going for.

It might look like I *miss clicked* trying to go for Gokigen Central Rook, but it’s actually a setup for Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook or even Direct Opposing Rook if I wanted to.

There is also one more strategy I could shift into with a Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook base——.

“!! That That formation, could it be?!”

It seems like Ai notices something from her spot in the corner, but I can’t take my eyes off Mr. Oishi right now.

“Sure, that crazy-looking opening had me guessing at first, but——that doesn’t mean anything now that I know what you’re after!”

The Worldly Maestro makes his decision in a flash. Bringing his Silver up to the front line, he deploys the captured Bishop on the next turn to take aim at

my King!

“There?!”

He’s being really aggressive, attacking now of all times!

But, I can’t pull back.

Bringing a Silver forward to meet his, I deploy my own Bishop on defense.

“?! Have you lost your?” I hear him whisper.

I could have held onto the Bishop a while longer since his is already back on the board, but I decide to crouch down and wait for the moment to come.

That moment——when the worldly impact hits.

Sending my Rook back one row to make a horizontal tunnel, I slide it back to the center.

Seeing that, Mr. Oishi immediately moves his own Rook to the fifth file to line up with my own. If you slide, I’m sliding too. Like two swordsmen keeping the edges of their blades facing each other at all times, the first one to show an opening is going to get sliced down!

——Carefully I have to carefully construct my defenses or else

I strengthen my formation from a Mino Castle to a Silver Halo.

“Are you sure you want to do that? The longer this match goes, the more these captured Pawns of mine will wreak havoc.”

“.....”

I’m fully aware of that.

To be more accurate, *I want to draw out this match.*

“Then you’re going to get a chance to see it. See the nightmare we Ranging Rookers have been seeing for way too long!!”

Mr. Oishi starts changing his own formation.

It shifts into the strongest of all defenses—the *anaguma*.

With the King in the corner and enough defensive layers to border on *violent*, countless Ranging Rook party members' hearts have been torn to shreds in its wake.

“.....!! So, here it comes”

The *anaguma*'s ultimate defense is Ranging Rook's nemesis.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that most Ranging Rook strategies were born out of a need to break through Static Rook *anaguma* strategies.

So.

If I can't break it now——!!

“Then I have no right to slide my Rook!!”

The match recorder announces the time.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*, you have 10 minutes remaining. At what point would you like me to start counting down seconds?”

“Now, please!!”

My waiting time is gone before I realize it. Of course, my little apprentice disappeared from the arena a long time ago.

——I'm not used to playing Ranging Rook and I used too much time in the early game! There's no time for second thoughts anymore!!

I pick up a Gold that was floating off to the left all by itself and move it closer to the front line. It's normally used for defense, but my plan is to use it to crack open the *anaguma* on offense, but——.

“So slow! At that rate, it'll be a million years before you can play Ranging Rook!”

Mr. Oishi changes up his formation again, this time reinforcing his front line.

So, I move more pieces to the front to build up more power and keep our formations equal.

Don't rush it! It's still not *time* yet!!

Both of us build our formations into solid walls and wait for that time to come. Actually, we're lining up our pieces to roll out the red carpet for it.

The Worldly Maestro is sitting across the board from me.

Even using Static Rook doesn't change the intensity in his fingertips or the instincts he's honed for so long.

In other words, what Mr. Oishi is going for is—worldliness.

The problem is figuring out exactly when that worldliness is going to come Almost as if laughing at the fact that I've let my defenses stay stagnant and focused on setting up an attack for the past three turns, Mr. Oishi turns the match on its head!

Without warning, he sends a Bishop to directly threaten my King.

"Forcing it?!"

This sudden turn of events has my heart beating against my ribs so hard I'm afraid they'll break. Talk about a full-on assault!

"Heh. Why do you look so surprised?" Mr. Oishi sneers, shoving this gun called a Bishop right up against my temple. "Did you forget who's sitting across from you?"

If he pulls the trigger That's when it'll start.

King Mitsuru Oishi's worldliness!

"..... Kh!"

Sliding my Rook out of the defensive formation, I take Mr. Oishi's Bishop.

"Too slow!!"

Just as he planned, Mr. Oishi's worldliness starts by sacrificing that Bishop and taking my Rook with a Silver on the next turn. It's a sequence designed to completely dismantle Ranging Rook's defenses!

"So, how are you going to block this?!"

"....."

Constant defending won't lead to victory.

——..... How do you beat an ultimate technique?

I already know the answer. Leaving that Silver where my Rook used to be, I take the newly claimed Bishop off my piece stand——.

"?! The heck do you think you're doing, Yaichi?!"

"..... Giving you a taste."

Bringing that Bishop down onto the board, I say that technique out loud.

"Worldliness."



“Ghhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

“Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiid!!”

Defend into worldliness.

Use that worldliness to advance across the board.

Within that completely unpredictable sequence, I rely solely on what I read and my instincts to come up with moves that are simultaneously offensive and defensive one after another using no time at all!

Until that point, this match looked like two swordsmen simply practicing their *forms* with real blades, but of course there is no agreement not to cut flesh. Now red streaks are getting carved into arms and legs, blood splattering everywhere but stopping now isn’t an option.

Both of our once-sturdy defensive formations are in tatters.

A simple misstep now would turn a little nick from the sword into a fatal wound. The fear of getting too close and falling all the way to hell is pumping through my brain like ketchup out of a bottle.

My fingers are shaking so much out of fear it’s like they’ve gone numb.

But.

“That is what playing Ranging Rook is——yeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaahhhhh?!!”

144th move——Deploy 7 Eight Gold.

Snapping it onto the board... right into the enemy King’s gut is my finishing blow.

It turned out that the very Bishop Mr. Oishi used to pressure me into sacrificing my Rook became the key to cracking open his *anaguma*.

I *out-worldly-ed* his worldliness.

“.....”

Mr. Oishi's fingers stretch toward his King, but they couldn't move it.

"Checkmate Eh?"

That's him signaling he's throwing in the towel.

"I couldn't tell where the worldly intuition stopped and the calculated advance started. Well done."

"..... Thank you, very much, " I say between deep breaths, my shoulders reaching my ears as I lower my head.

Leaning against the elbow rest, Mr. Oishi covers his face with his right hand and lets out a long sigh as we start the review session.

"Very well done, but Losing to such a wacky strategy makes me want to just curl up and die of embarrassment. That's why I didn't surrender until my King was dead to rights."

"..... I've been looking for a new trump card because it's getting harder and harder to win with Move-Loss Bishop Exchange. I came across this in the process."

"Goki Central wasn't good enough for you?"

"In my opinion, Gokigen Central Rook doesn't have good balance overall. There are so many situations where using it on defense is difficult"

"You found it easier playing Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook? With a 4 Two Silver?"

"Yes. It has too much variation to catch on as a popular strategy, but I think it fits me pretty well."

As someone who used Move-Loss Bishop Exchange as a defensive ace in the hole, Move-Loss strategies and Bishop Exchanges feel like second nature.

Using Silvers fits my playing style, too.

I came across Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook 4 Two Silver while trying to

find a formation where I could bring out as much of my skill as possible.

After crunching the numbers, I found the most efficient way to reach this formation was the Gokigen Third File Rook. It doesn't have an official name yet.

"Sure, it fits, but How did you come up with that crazy conglomerate of a strategy in the first place?"

"Of course, doing it myself would've been impossible. I looked over some match records and"

"Software?"

"No. Amateur research gave me a few hints."

"....."

Mr. Oishi closes his eyes and looks up toward the heavens.

Pro strategies like the Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook and Central Rook *anaguma* were originally popular in the amateur scene before getting perfected.

Compared with pros, the overwhelming majority of amateurs play Ranging Rook. New strategies pop up all the time out of necessity.

The one who picked up those amateur strategies and made them usable on the pro level, becoming a bridge between amateurs and pros themselves, was the Shogi player named Mitsuru Oishi. That's exactly why he's been extremely popular with fans.

Remembering that fact, the Worldly Maestro sighs from the bottom of his lungs.

Then, he says something I never saw coming.

"..... I've had a theory ever since I was in the Sub League. If an invincible strategy exists in this game, it will be *Static Rook*."

"....."

“Formations don’t mean jack That’s what I thought. The stronger one will win in the end. The late game was all that mattered. So, I thought I’d win as long as I drew them into my world Sliding my Rook gave me the confidence to beat anyone. My flavor of Ranging Rook could even beat the Meijin.”

And Mr. Oishi made it all come true.

He faced that Meijin many times, taking two titles from him in the process. Becoming the sole member of the Ranging Rook party with the title to his name, he’s protected the King title like a fortress for years.

“But I tell you, software brought my confidence crashing back down to earth. It rejected my world completely. After losing more practice matches than I can count to a computer and losing to Okito in title matches, I wanted to find some way, any way to win. I wanted that rating to go up for once. That was all I could think about

Then, I’m sure he figured it out.

A laughably simple way at that.

“The rating doesn’t drop if that Rook doesn’t move. Actually, it keeps going up. That felt so good I even got results in matches. Before I knew it, I started playing a style just to please the software that I’d been so dead set against

“It’s true that moving the Rook will make the rating drop when software calculates the formations,” I say, commenting on Mr. Oishi’s story.

“But, if you keep playing from there Even using the unusual formation I played today, the rating will be equal to or greater than Static Rook. Ranging Rook is not at a disadvantage. Software can’t read that far ahead, so it can’t slide the Rook out of position.”

“Can’t slide

“It’s not just Ranging Rook. The same thing happens with *yagura* strategies. The formations that people have considered *good enough* to research further

also get deemed *good* by a computer when software crunches the numbers. I think that's truly amazing and it also shows how strong humans are."

"Human strength?"

"The ability to visualize, to fixate and to have their own world."

".....!!"

Mr. Oishi looks up at me with a start.

Human beings can't compete with machines when it comes to making calculations.

At the same time, human beliefs have been built up for over a thousand years.

While not the answer to Shogi as a whole, they could just be illusions based on iffy human calculations.

"Machines can't dream like people can. They can't idolize someone and want to be like them someday. Continuing to believe in the world they see despite losing and being rejected is something machines will never be able to do."

That's why—.

"I wanted to see that world in today's Shogi. Looking at it together, I wanted proof that what I had in mind was correct."

Not a software program smearing me for doing everything wrong.

I wanted to explore a yet unnamed horizon with Mr. Oishi to see what discoveries lay beyond.

Because this strategy is more important to me than anything right now.

Because, even if I lost, *I had to prove that this strategy at least has the potential to be superior to all the rest.*

Which is why I wanted to show it to Mr. Oishi first.

“The only one who could prove that it is—is the Worldly Maestro.”

“.....”

Looking uncomfortable, Mr. Oishi nods.

Then, without looking up at me, he quietly says, “..... Are you sure I’m the one you wanted to play against to prove it?”

“Because software and the Shogi Gods are busy researching Double Static Rook formations. I’m saying you’re the authority on Ranging Rook.”

“Hah!”

Mr. Oishi snorts at my pathetic excuse for a joke.

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the Worldly Maestro smile like this.

“You even sound like a bratty kid. Who do you think you are, telling *me* what Ranging Rook is?”

“I apologize.”

Quickly throwing my head into a bow, I hear an amused *heh* come from the other side of the board.

That’s when I notice I’m smiling, too.

Memories of the days when Ai and I stayed at his bathhouse, scrubbing the tubs and doing other jobs while he taught us the ins and outs of Ranging Rook, start going through my head.

The days when I’d hit a wall and frantically tried to dig my way through.

“So, what did you think of the strategy? Do you think it will catch on? Do you think it will be named after me because I was the first use it?! Then again, it’d be a bit awkward for a Static Rook player like me to have my name connected with Ranging Rook strategy first”

“Nah, this will never catch on no matter how you look at it.”

“Huuuh?! Why not? You saw how good it is.”

“How do you figure that as *good*? They’re too many quirks Besides, *Kuzuryu-style Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook* is too much of a mouthful.”

“In that case, I’m fine with calling it Gokigen Third File Rook. Let’s start a trend!”

“That right? Anyway, you can count me out.”

Even more hearty laughter. I’m glad to see Mr. Oishi is joking around again.

After we’d laughed together, Mr. Oishi says under his breath, “..... Titles are heavy, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“The one that I took from the Meijin. My desire to keep it outweighs everything Especially when I think about giving it to someone I don’t think deserves it. Not to some computer slave.”

“I understand.”

“I’ve seen enough prodigies go stagnant after not getting a title of their own. I’ve also seen tons of players’ lives go into a downward spiral after losing their titles. I never want to turn out like that I swore to myself it wouldn’t happen.”

“I see.”

“But losing to Ranging Rook is what it took to finally get it. A title protected at the cost of ditching Ranging Rook is garbage.”

Mr. Okito is strong.

Should he slide his Rook once again, Mr. Oishi very well could lose his title.

But—his mind is already set.

Software isn’t necessary. Mr. Oishi announces his conclusion from our review session.

“If there’s any single reason I lost the match today, it’s that I didn’t slide my Rook.”

“I agree.”

Sharing a grin, that became our signal to sit up straight and bow once again.

Mr. Oishi reaches for the built-in piece stand beneath the board and I reach out with both hands to round up the pieces.

Right then, just as our review session is coming to a close.

“Um!”

A tiny voice from the corner of the room speaks up.

“May I May I please ask one last question?!”

🏠 THREE WORDS

Ai Yashajin, tracking the match on her cell phone since the very beginning, had been hit with one surprise after another.

“What is this? This Shogi?”

Yaichi, a Static Rook party member, was playing Ranging Rook and the renowned Ranging Rook player Mitsuru Oishi was playing Static Rook.

That itself was bizarre enough, but——.

“Kuzuryu’s Rook went beyond the fifth file to the third. This doesn’t appear to have been a mistake.”

“He has already veered off from every single one of the 100,000 match records the association has in its database.”

Even the letters themselves that lined the comments section seemed to be in disbelief.

Yaichi once used Gokigen Central Rook against Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* in the past, and utterly dismantled his Static Rook Extreme Rapid Battle strategy.

However, doing so required Yaichi to execute three consecutive *gentei aigoma*, a situation in which there is only one correct piece to defend with, in the late game in order to win. That miraculous sequence allowed him to overcome early game shortcomings with an explosive push at the end.

On the other hand, this Shogi couldn’t have been more different.

“What are you trying to do?! What Shogi are you playing?!”

Ai Yashajin thought back to what she heard in the graveyard.

Yaichi had said he wanted to convey something to her with his Shogi.

What was the meaning behind this bizarre strategy?

Was this his way of pressuring her into finding a strategy uniquely her own during her series of matches with Ginko Sora?

“But this This is too much

Even if he got his message across, Ai doubted this new variant would be enough to defeat his opponent.

After all, the man Yaichi was trying to defeat using Ranging Rook was none other than Mitsuru Oishi.

—He threw the match? But

“Today’s match is taking place in the Kansai Association’s Onjyoudan no Ma Arena.”

“Kansai’s two titleholders are facing off. One, the Worldly Maestro. The other is the young man sliding his Rook in front of him.”

“This is their first league match.”

More comments appeared every time the board on the screen was refreshed.

“Many are questioning Kuzuryu’s concept in the Player’s Room.”

“What’s this strat even called? *Third File Messed Up?*”

As far as Ai could tell, Yaichi was already behind from a formation standpoint. All of the comments accompanying the match record supported her assessment.

“However, Oishi cannot rest on his laurels. Only after victory has been claimed can he do that.”

“Kuzuryu entered the arena an hour before the match was scheduled to begin this morning. He offered to take the place of the Sub League member charged with preparation and wiped the board himself. That shows his extraordinary commitment to this match.”

“Both players are undefeated in the White Conference. Whichever wins today

will face the Red Conference champion for the right to challenge the Crown.”

“Okito-*Crown* is on the verge of taking Oishi-*King’s* title. That title match is so competitive it has resulted in two consecutive stalemates. Oishi can ill afford to let this Crown League match slip through his fingers either.”

Though short, the comments also conveyed the atmosphere in the arena.

“Kuzuryu, leaning over the board, has removed his jacket and rolled the sleeves of his collared shirt up to his elbows.”

“His air is tense, as though the late game is close at hand. His moves are not the only sign. This is a much different Kuzuryu than usual.”

“Kuzuryu continues to endure.”

“High-ranking players offered their own comments on formations, saying *Hm? Backwards?* and *Whoa. That’s youth for you!* with a smile.”

The Yaichi in the comments was constantly suffering.

Except, as the moves went along Ai began losing confidence in her formation assessment.

Piecing together Yaichi’s true intentions as his target became clearer each turn, the young girl began to see the board in a whole new light.

—That’s what he’s trying to do?! Could he He wouldn’t!!

Her suspicions began showing up in the comments.

“Oishi has chosen now to take time to consider his options.”

“Kagamizu 3-*dan*, who has been playing a practice match in the Player’s Room, commented, *He may have turned the tables*, before adding, *No, there’s a chance the defender has had an advantage from the beginning.*”

“Oishi pulls his armrest in close and concentrates entirely on reading the board.”

“Kuzuryu now holds the waiting time advantage.”

“.....!!”

Ai's heartbeat steadily intensified, like an unruly bass drum.

She could feel it on her sternum, getting stronger with each passing moment as its heat reached all the way to her fingertips. Her pulse became so strong it shook the smartphone in her grasp, the screen shaking with each beat. *Ba-thump ba-thump!*

Every move Yaichi played, each comment that came with it, each symbol, word or line that was displayed on the phone's small screen steadily broke into Ai Yashajin's shut-off soul as it did the same to Mitsuru's heavily reinforced *anaguma*.

Almost like magic.

“Some are now starting to voice their agreement with Kuzuryu's concept. Has Kuzuryu's bold new strategy exceeded Oishi's level of perception?”

“!!”

He's come from behind! Ai's grip on her phone tightened before she knew it.

However, one-minute Shogi was now in effect. The match was anyone's for the taking. Unable to wait for the auto refresh, Ai tapped the button herself every few seconds.

“Oishi unleashes a power play with light fingertips. He is forcing his way forward despite not having enough pieces in place to support it. *There?! come* the voices of many surprised players in the Player's Room.”

“Kuzuryu calmly shifts his Rook back. However, his hand is trembling.”

“Moves advance at a furious pace.”

“Kuzuryu's decisions are lightning quick. Has he read his own victory?”

“A single voice can be heard in the Player's Room: *He's strong.*”

“Analysis boards have already been put away.”

“Though he’s in position for a safe win, Kuzuryu fearlessly advances into the fray.”

More and more comments claiming Yaichi’s imminent victory lined up on her screen. Ai’s heart beat so hard with each one that it felt as though it were about to jump out of her chest each time.

Then——.

“Oishi sees that move and surrenders.”

“.....”

Although the match was now over, Ai couldn’t look away from her screen.

Nine hours had passed since the match began. The once sunny afternoon had become night.

Ai had sat the entire time without a single drink of water, but she couldn’t care less.

There was something else on her mind.

“This This Shogi, was it?”

A thought had occurred to Ai at one point in the middle of the match.

Was Yaichi trying to test something today?

That strange early game formation, what was it for? *Who* was it created for——?

“But, he’d never Do something like”

However, Ai immediately rejected *that idea*.

Yaichi was a professional. What’s more, this match was just two away from a title match of his own. This wasn’t some throwaway match he could dedicate to someone else.

It’s true that Yaichi made several promises at the graveyard.

“I’ll play Shogi my apprentices can be proud of.”

“I will try to get through to her with Shogi.”

But even so, that meant he would display his own resolve during a match to encourage his apprentice, didn’t it

——..... Impossible. I have enough on my plate as it is.

Then, she saw it.

“.....?”

A comment corresponding to the last move.

It had been empty, but now there were words in that blank space.

The automatic refresh had added another detail to a match already in the books.

“Review Session”

“.....!!”

The girl’s eyes grew wider with each word her gaze passed over. Then, open as wide as humanly possible, they began to glisten with tears.

The person in charge of the blog had posed this question.

“Who did you want to dedicate this Shogi to?”

When asked, today’s victor——

Face worn ragged with exhaustion, his answer was uploaded.

“When I was facing a title match, a certain someone said this after playing an extremely important match of her own.”

“Today I played just for you.”

“That’s why, today, I played just for her. Just for that important person.”

“.....!!”

Tears dripped one after another onto the smartphone’s screen.

“I-I don’t believe this! How unbelievably stupid! A-A professional Th-The very best of the professionals, the Ryuo, in this important match!”

Seeing him use something an amateur would No, *use a formation so utterly unrestricted that even an amateur wouldn’t play it* against one of the best players in the Shogi world, even Ai couldn’t believe her eyes. She was certain Yaichi wouldn’t fare well, let alone come away with a win.

But, once she saw that comment Ai finally started believing.

Believing that she had been on the right track.

Understanding what Yaichi truly meant when he said *believe*.

Comprehending just how strong and deep his determination went.

That word didn’t fit his needs.

Yaichi truly *believed in Ai’s potential*.

This victory and his comments weren’t everything. The match record itself was Yaichi’s way of encouraging her. As soon as that fact clicked, Ai’s tears wouldn’t stop flowing.

She had cried after losing a match before.

But, never once had she cried after watching someone else’s Shogi.

“..... You got through Idiot”

Wiping tears away and mumbling under her breath, Ai started lining up

today's match record from the very beginning.

Again, and again. All the way until the sun came up. Nonstop.

+



浪速の白雪姫

Naniwa's
Snow White

Ginko Sora 空銀子

▲ THE LAST PEARL

“Huuuh?! Th-They’re going to play Shogi here?!”

I practically yell as I step inside the arena with everyone else for the inspection.

The third Queen Title Match will take place in Ai Yashajin’s hometown, Kobe.

The request was approved in advance. While I’ve never heard of the actual building, we should be very thankful that any place in Kobe was able to adjust to the tight schedule.

And I am, but

The problem is that the location isn’t a hotel or a traditional Japanese-style inn—but a wedding chapel.

“..... This is unprecedented.”

“At a wedding chapel And using the top floor observation deck as the arena

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t a match take place in front of the big mural at an art museum somewhere in the past?”

“Yeah, in Tokushima. This one is right up there with that

Association staff and media chat amongst themselves in disbelief.

The observation deck is encased by 360 degrees of glass, so you can see the city, the ocean and the mountains around Kobe all at once.

It’s an impressive view. This would be absolutely perfect for a wedding. A wedding, yes.

Unfortunately

What we’re planning to do here is um Shogi

“Master, Master! This is amazing! Playing a match at a wedding chapel, how romantic!!”

“You sure have a lot of energy, Ai

“We’re at a wedding chapel!! Any girl would be excited to be here!”

Ai goes around the room like a happy puppy, taking pages upon pages of notes. She’s even going to the chapel staff asking questions like: “What’s the average price for a wedding?!” and “How far in advance do customers need to make reservations?!” Probably to get material for her article. There’s no other reason to take that many notes.

Meanwhile, the stars of the main event.

“

Big Sis and Ai Yashajin are watching all of this with completely blank looks on their faces.

Actually, I’d say they’re trying to adapt to these novel surroundings by suppressing their emotions with all their might.

Saint Angelic Kobe.

Anywhere else, and people wouldn’t think it was a proper hotel. The thing is that I know how much Kobe people love fancy names, so I let my guard down.

But, a wedding chapel

“Everyone. Please calm yourselves,” Chairman Tsukimitsu says in a tranquil voice with Ms. Oga by his side.

Then he explains how this came to be.

“Finding a hotel to host a match during the peak spring tourist season in Kobe is impossible. However, since one match has already taken place in Osaka, Sora-Queen’s hometown, it would be unfair to the Queen Challenger Miss Yashajin for one match not to take place in hers. Ms. Oga was tasked with finding such a

location and discovered this: the Saint Angelic Kobe Wedding Chapel.”

“Yes. One unearthed it.”

Ms. Oga then goes into further detail.

“The Saint Angelic Kobe is equipped with lodgings for overnight stays as well as the facilities to prepare food and sweets for large numbers of people. There’s plenty of space for microphones and a projector for big board analysis as well as all necessary equipment for Internet coverage. In other words—....”

The *Shadow Don* clenches her fist for extra emphasis.

“In other words, wedding chapels are perfectly equipped to accommodate events with large numbers of people and are, in fact, better suited to host Shogi matches than hotels or inns!!”

“Whoa!!”

Her torrent of words crumbles everyone’s preconceived notions about this place. I can almost hear it happening.

“B-But how did you ever manage to book a wedding chapel at this time of year?!”

“What magic did you have up your sleeve to pull this off?!”

People around her immediately start firing questions one after another, but Ms. Oga silenced them with a few quick words.

“It is *butsumetsu*.”

“Ah!”

The Buddhist calendar points out which days of the month have the best outlook from a fortune standpoint. It also points out which ones don’t, and *butsumetsu*, Buddha’s Death, is the most unlucky. Choosing a wedding day is very important.

But that has no relation to Shogi whatsoever. The chapel owner must have

decided that it was better to host a match on their day off rather than waste it out on the town or something. How resourceful!

Chairman Tsukimitsu thanks his trusty secretary.

“Indeed, it was a fantastic idea, Ms. Oga. Thank you so much.”

“One is not worthy of your praise, chairman.”

“That certainly isn’t the case. This simple praise isn’t worthy of how much time and effort you committed to solving this dilemma. In order to bring it to fruition, you visited a great deal of chapels in Kobe yourself to conduct inspections and negotiations.”

“Huh?! You went on chapel tours yourself?!” I ask, totally stunned.

But Ms. Oga simply nods with a look that screams “but of course” written all over her face.

“Yes. In order to be certain that a chapel would be suitable for a title match, one had to confirm it with her own eyes. Along with the chairman.”

“Although, we looked very much out of place due to our ages being so far apart.”

“That isn’t so! Remember how our guide and planner went on and on about how *we make such a good couple and should get married right away?!“*

“.....”

No one said a word, but we’re all thinking the same thing.

“That’s because you went on a wedding chapel preview tour with the chairman.”

Yeah.

Ms. Oga got to do whatever she wanted so long as a match got set up in Kobe.

I thought something strange was going on from the start I mean,

seriously, the Shadow Don wouldn't have apologized that profusely to Ai Yashajin or me over a simple scheduling problem.

"..... Do you like it, Ryuo?" the chairman whispers into my ear while I'm still trying to decide how I feel about the whole thing.

"..... I'm not sure, now that I know the organizer's ulterior motives."

"..... But this is a great location, yes?"

"..... I can't deny that"

The stage is striking.

On the other hand, Ai being able to play in the city where she was born and raised will be a definite plus for her.

"The facilities and equipment are not the only reason I have taken a liking to this location. Since I could not confirm it myself, I needed Ms. Oga to tell me if it was true."

"Oh? And what's that"

"That it's possible to see the place where her parents were laid to rest from this very observation deck. Therefore, it is theoretically possible for them to observe the match themselves."

"I"

"I have visited their grave, you know."

Chairman Tsukimitsu sounds like he's enjoying himself as he whispers into my ear.

"Miss Yashajin was, originally, going to become my apprentice. I had to inform them."

—So, he saw through everything I'll never measure up to him.

And, since he can't go there alone, Ms. Oga knows the situation as well.

“..... Thank you very much, Ms. Oga. For everything.”

“..... One doesn’t mind.”

She has a rather surprising response to my saying *thank you*.

“Personally, one would much rather see Ai Yashajin emerge victorious.”

“Personally? Why?”

“Boredom. The entire Women’s League has had enough of Ginko Sora.”

“.....!”

“There is no malice toward Miss Sora herself. However, as one who used to belong to said league, one has a constant desire to find ways to retaliate against her.”

As shocking as her words are, I understand where she’s coming from.

If Big Sis keeps bulldozing her way through the Women’s League as a member of the Sub League, people are going to start saying things like: *Who needs Women’s League players? They can just train themselves up in the Sub League.*

Women’s Legend Rina Shakando, who has been a cornerstone of the Women’s League since it was founded, told me point-blank that Big Sis turning pro could bring an end to the current system.

But that’s just what Ms. Shakando thinks.

Women’s League players who are still fighting, having their hearts torn apart and suffering day in and day out will certainly have a different opinion about it.

Since Ms. Oga was pretty much forced out of that league, I’m willing to bet her feelings are more complex than I can imagine.

But, rather than get them off her chest, Ms. Oga continues with the preparations for tomorrow’s match.

With the board and pieces chosen, cameras set and lighting figured out, the only thing left is what to order for snacks.

Ms. Oga says with absolute pride, “The bestsellers here at Saint Angelic Kobe are their incredible lineup of wedding cakes and other delectable sweets. Both players may choose their favorites from a wide selection.”

“Whooooa!!”

A chef rolls out a trolley covered with a treasure trove of cakes and pastries.

She might not look like it, but Big Sis has one heck of a sweet tooth and Ai, being from Kobe, more than likely likes the sweet desserts the city is known for. Snacks are really the only thing to look forward to during a brutal title match. The girls have to be thrilled.

But....

The topic taking over the discussions during the inspection isn’t the two young female prodigies or even the sweets.

It’s—the boy who is *going to be the match recorder*.

“Kunugi 3-*dan*! Would you tell us your thoughts as the match recorder going into this Women’s League title match?!”

“Will you be wearing a kimono?!”

“Are you feeling nervous at all?!”

Sota Kunugi happily answers each and every question the swarming reporters throw at him.

“I have done pro title match records before, so I’m not nervous at all. It was the Emperor Title Match between the Meijin and Shinokubo-*sensei*. And I stayed overnight because it was summer vacation. My parents felt better about me working late into the night at a nice hotel rather than the Shogi Association, too.”

Not even flinching at the fact that there’s a bigger crowd of reporters around him than either of the players, Sota looks like he’s enjoying himself as he takes a trip down memory lane.

“I don’t get much of a chance to record matches for the top Kanto players, so it was a valuable experience for me,” says the boy who could very well be the first grade-school-aged pro in history.

Since Sota will be recording for the girl who could become the first female pro in history, Big Sis, the media people are focusing almost exclusively on that one storyline.

The association’s plan to use the Queen Title Match to draw attention to the 3-*dan* division seems to have worked like a charm.

—..... Other than the fact that it feels like the winner’s already been decided.

Face as bright as a ray of sunshine, Sota keeps fielding questions like the future star that he is.

“But I’ve never recorded a Women’s League match before. I won’t have any chance to do one once I’m a professional at 4-*dan*, so I thought I’d do it at least once before then!”

“Is there anything that a prodigy like yourself can gain by watching this match, Kunugi 3-*dan*?”

“I certainly think so. The Women’s League *Senseis* play a unique style that professionals and Sub League members can’t duplicate. They’re free from the trends Free, like amateurs are!”

Sota keeps missing what the journalists are hinting at each time.

Getting impatient, they start taking a more direct approach.

“There is a chance you will play against Sora-*Queen* in the upcoming 3-*dan* division season. Is this an opportunity to study her playing style?!”

“The matchup schedule hasn’t been announced yet. As for this match, if I’m going to work as a match recorder, I’d like the Shogi to be interesting at least.”

“But, Kunugi 3-*dan*, Sora-*Queen* is your biggest obstacle to promotion, is she

not? If you do end up facing her, isn't there a possibility you will have to play against her multiple times?"

"Ahaha! I don't need to worry about that ... because——," Sota says with the same smile on his face, "I'll win the next time we play anyway."

He doesn't sound like he's issuing a challenge or trying to talk tough.

It's more like he's stating facts, the way you would read them out of a textbook.

"....."

Big Sis is pretending she didn't hear him, but she's obviously *pretending*. Her hand is hovering in the air as she goes through the cake selection.

——Normally, she'd have chosen anything with fruit on it without needing a second of waiting time

Sota is going to be watching her play all day tomorrow. That could put a lot of pressure on Big Sis.

Meanwhile, Ai Yashajin is pointing at everything with chocolate in it next to her.

By the time the inspection and all the equipment had been checked, Kobe's beautiful night skyline sprawls out all around us.

"The opening-night party will be a small, invitation-only gathering in the chapel garden. It may be modest, but the chairman and I can personally assure you that the food is spectacular. Please relax and enjoy."

Her arm wrapped firmly around the chairman's, Ms. Oga's greeting sounds like an announcement right before a wedding reception. She's milking this for everything she can get

Since Ai Yashajin lives so close, she heads home for the night and will be back

in the morning.

Akira, who came to pick her up at the chapel by car, escorts her out as Ai Hinatsuru sees her off. Just before going out the door, my first apprentice says in a hushed voice, “Ten-chan

“Hm? Is something wrong, Ai?”

“She didn’t say a word all day.”

“Ah

I was so distracted by the inspection and everything going on today that only now that she brought it up did I realize Ai Yashajin’s demeanor has been completely different from the last two inspections.

Is it because she’s against the ropes?

Or is it

🏠 CINDERELLA

“The appointed time has arrived. Sora-*Queen*, please begin the match.”

Both the girls silently lower their heads at the same time the observer makes the announcement.

There are so many flashes enveloping them that, even through a screen, it's blinding.

I watch it all happen over the live Internet feed from my place as the analyst next to the big board set up in the main chapel hall.

There's a projector set up on the altar as well as the big board for me to use. Just, wow

“And there we go! The third match is underway!”

Completely unfazed by how unprecedented the situation is, commentator Tamayo Rokuroba women's 2-*dan* makes her entrance even more dressed up than last time.

Apparently, she asked the chapel staff to do her makeup and coordinate her dress, so she stands out even more than the players going for the title. It's the same as a bridesmaid outshining the bride at a wedding.

Ms. Rokuroba is known as the *Practice Session Crusher* in the Shogi world. It's kind of scary how well the nickname *Wedding Crusher* would fit her in everyday life.

“I really couldn't get my fill of commentating on the second match, so Tomoyon☆ is back for more! Kuzuryu-*sensei* and I will light it up on the big board ... so let's all live it up!!”

Yeah——!! Audience members are pumping their fists.

It feels like an idol rave in here. But this is supposed to be a holy place

“Well, it sure looks like we’re raring to go in here, but how about the players in the arena? Is that apprentice of yours down on herself after losing twice in a row?”

“I’m sure she’s extramotivated for this match because it’s in her hometown. She hasn’t been able to show what she’s capable of so far during the title match, but I hope she doesn’t hold anything back now that she’s in a do-or-die situation.”

“We’re going to be up here providing commentary nonstop until the very last move! Now, let’s see what the very first one is!!”

The first move hers, Big Sis leans over the board with a completely blank look on her face and stares down her formation.

“.....”

She opens her Bishop Path with perfect form.

“That’s Ginko for you, the girl never changes. Even with two wins, she still opens with the usual salt-flavored seasoning. Well, now, what’s our defender gonna do about this tight spot she’s in?”

With that, Ms. Rokuroba looks right at me and brings this up.

“Though, I’ve got to say that the boardside looks a bit different for today’s match, don’t you think?”

“For sure. A grade schooler working as the match recorder happens every now and then, but I don’t think there’s ever been a time the journalist working beside them was too.”

“The challenger is in elementary school as well. Kuzuryu-sensei, wouldn’t you rather be in there breathing in the same CO₂ those kiddos breathed out than be up here by the big board?”

“Excuse me, Ms. Rokuroba Would you please not say things that would give off the wrong impression——?”

“What, what? Didn’t you say something like: *If I could be reborn, I’d want to be one the bean plants grade schoolers grow in science class* in the Shogi Association’s yearbook?”

“I said no such thing!! What lunatic would actually want to be reincarnated like that?!!”

“Then, was it: *as the seat on a little girl’s bicycle*? You know, the ones that have the streamers coming out of the handlebars.”

“Just an ordinary pediatrician!!”

Since I only do a job that doesn’t directly help anyone, playing Shogi, I wanted to at least do something to help future generations in my next life! But, despite my noble answer, people all over the place point to it and saying: *See? He’s a lolicon* and *It’s true*. Seriously, it’s been one misunderstanding after another. Even the audience doesn’t know how to react. I wonder why.

“..... All right, unlike the Ryuo’s peculiar fetishes, this match is proceeding about as orthodox as it gets. Sora-Queen has advanced the Pawn in front of her Rook, meaning she’s playing Static.”

I could just be imagining things, but

As soon as Big Sis moved that Pawn, it was like all the air got sucked out of the chapel. A *here we go again* kind of vibe.

But.

All the air comes rushing back in with Ai’s next move!

“Wha——.”

Ms. Rokuroba and I have no idea what to say. Even the crowd is watching in stunned silence.

Ai advanced it. She’s advanced *that* piece.

The Pawn in front of her Bishop.

“Bishop Head Pawn?!”

“.....”

Big Sis’s face on the screen didn’t budge at all. On the flipside, Sota’s eyes are practically sparkling from his seat at the boardside table.

“Th-There it is——!! Challenger Ai Yashajin Women’s League 2-*dan* has reached into her bag of tricks and pulled out her trump card, the defensive Bishop Head Pawn!! Now things are getting interesting!!”

Compared to Ms. Rokuroba’s flaming intensity, my back breaks out in a cold sweat that won’t be stopping anytime soon.

Just to be safe, Big Sis moves her King to build a defensive position on the left.

She’s totally calm. Sighing, I say, “..... Sora-*Queen* has chosen to draw out the match.”

“Miss Yashajin’s opponents have all chosen to use a rapid attack strategy whenever she’s used this in the past, right? You think she’s ready for it?”

“I’m sure she has a plan. She must’ve figured out how to deal with a stalling opponent”

But, it was Big Sis who put her plan into action first.

Ai attempts to throw off Big Sis’s formation by doing a Bishop Exchange knowing full well that it will set her back, but Big Sis’s response is just as astonishing.

Taking the Bishop she just claimed off her piece stand, Big Sis deploys it—at 7 Seven!!

“Huh?! Right in the middle of her own formation?!” yells Ms. Rokuroba, her eyes open as wide as her boobs are big. “She only just got that Bishop, and

she's already put it back in her own territory?! Isn't that move loss on her part?"

"No, it's not! Putting the Bishop at 7 Seven is an aggressive move that disrupts the defender's formation. She can't just let it sit there, so the defender is almost forced to deploy her own Bishop at 3 Three to compensate."

Now that that Bishop is deployed, Ai is in a position where she constantly has to do Bishop Exchanges or else she'll always be moved behind. That hurts.

"Ah, I see Ginko came with an anti-Bishop Head Pawn strategy of her own! Yes?"

I knew she would. But I never saw 7 Seven Bishop coming

Ai takes a few moments to think and ends up deploying her Bishop at 3 Three. There was nothing she could do.

Now, about what comes next.

—If Ai doesn't have a way to counter it this Shogi is as good as over.

Feeling in control now that the 7 Seven Bishop ace up her sleeve was on the board, Big Sis starts calmly, systematically building up her formation.

Ai's options are rather limited now, but everything must be going according to plan because she reaches for the board mere seconds after Big Sis makes her move. My heart keeps jumping into my throat.

Her piece of choice: Silver.

Seeing it come down and how she's lined up her pieces, I couldn't keep from yelling.

"Th-This formation is——!!"

Ai's strategy for handling a long match. It's....!

4 Two Silver style——Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook!!

That's when the arena microphone picks up Ai's voice.

"Isn't this a nice strategy?"

Her fingers still on the Silver, Ai looks straight into Big Sis's eyes and grins from ear to ear as she says, "I got it from *him*."

"....."

Big Sis's face hasn't changed since the moment Bishop Head Pawn got played against her, but it looks like her eyes are quivering ever so slightly.

Ms. Rokuroba peeks over at me and says, "Miss Yashajin said so just now, didn't she?"

"Said something?"

"By the way, Kuzuryu-sensei? I feel like I saw this formation in a match recently."

"Y-You have?"

"..... I'm pretty sure it was your match against Oishi-sensei, Kuzuryu-sensei."

"W-Well, Bishop Head Pawn on defense was originally designed to set up Opposing Rook. That way, you can actually use the Pawn that's already making its way across the board Which also lines up with what my Gokigen Third File Rook (temporary) tries to accomplish, so of course the formations would look similar"

"Okay, we'll go with that explanation for now."

The only reason I used a 4 Two Silver strategy in the first place is because it's easy for me to work out of that formation. It's not a sequence that some 10,000 people would find advantageous. Even Ranging Rook party members have their own tastes when it comes to strategy.

I admit that part of me hoped that Ai would use this formation.

I also tested it against the best Ranging Rook party member out there in a real match to prove it could work against any opponent when played correctly.

At the end of the day, Ai is the one who decides what to use. She would only use this formation if she has the confidence to pull it off.

But, choosing to use it in such an important match——

“..... Looks like we have a lot in common after all,” I whisper quietly enough that no one else can hear me.

Seriously, I’m happy enough to fly right now.

Masters pretty much have to push their apprentices out into the Shogi world by saying: *The only way to get stronger is to find your own path*. So having an apprentice who uses my style is nothing short of a miracle. Ai Yashajin is my miracle.

Attempting to stir up even more excitement out of the revved-up audience, Ms. Rokuroba says, “It took a few matches, but this series finally got interesting! The challenger’s new style of Bishop Head Pawn and Sora-Queen’s stunning decision to deploy a Bishop deep in her own territory! What’s more, this strategy was born out of a bond between Master and apprentice! Openings don’t get much more astonishing than this! Who will emerge victorious?!”

But the true surprise was set for after the lunch break.

Lunch time during title matches is also known as *photo op time*.

Since media people won’t get another chance to take pictures until after the match is over, they flood into the arena to claim their spots just like in the morning and wait for the players to make their entrance.

Except the first to come back this time wasn’t one of the players: it was the journalist.

In other words, Ai Hinatsuru.

“..... Pardon me!”

There’s no need for match journalists to come to the arena during lunch because they can come in any time they want, but Ai completely missed her chance last time and didn’t get to see the end of the match.

Making sure she doesn’t make the same mistake twice, Ai returns to the arena 20 minutes early and opens her article notebook.

The match recorder Sota is next to arrive. He sits down next to Ai.

Then Big Sis makes her entrance five minutes before the match is scheduled to restart and every camera goes off in one instantaneous flash. All the cameramen are trying to get a shot of Big Sis and Sota in the same frame.

—So, it doesn’t matter how much talent Ai shows on the board, the world wants pictures of Ginko and Sota.....

As association staff and other people with clearance dine on the full course wedding meal in the chapel’s reception hall that became our break room, I can’t help but feel empty inside.

I don’t want Big Sis to lose.

But Ai Yashajin’s parents are watching this match from heaven I want her to be at her best. I want the world to see exactly what her talent and effort can do.

—Make them notice with results!

I mentally send her away while looking at the screen that was originally installed for newlywed couples to tell their life stories via slideshows but is now displaying the arena.

I sent it, but

“..... Huh?”

My heart starts racing the instant I realize something is very very wrong.

The very person I want to have a good match is the only one who hasn't come back to the arena yet. This has never happened before. She was back in the arena before anyone else for the first and second matches

Has there been an accident?!

"Excuse me! Has anyone seen Ai? Does anyone know where the challenger is——?!"

She may be my apprentice, but I can't just go barging into her break room.

Other people sitting at different tables start looking around too, but just as they do....

"Huh?"

"Huuuh?"

People looking at the screen start making noise.

What's going on? I turned around only to see And scream.

"Say whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat——?!"

Ai is back in the arena.

Rather than a kimono, she has a white dress on instead.

Ai, who's refused to wear any color but black since her parents died is wearing white?

She's even got glass slippers on her tiny feet.



“..... The real Cinderella?” I hear Ms. Rokuroba mutter at the same table as me just before she drops her fork with a mouthful of Kobe beef on the prongs.

Ms. Rokuroba has worked as a commentator for many title matches so, in a way, she’s experienced more of them than most pro players. The only exceptions might be the Meijin and Ms. Shakando.

Yet she’s standing here totally floored by what’s displayed on that screen—by Ai, a schoolgirl in the fifth grade.

—I thought she was being too well-behaved. So, this is what she had planned!

Akira is an accomplice, no doubt about it.

That dress looks just like the one I saw at the manor, except it’s a bit shorter now. That must be to make it easier for her to sit on her ankles.

As everyone in the arena is dumbfounded by the girl dressed more like a dancer than a bride, Ai Hinatsuru cautiously breaks the silence from her seat as journalist at the boardside table.

“T-Ten-chan? That dress?”

“I changed. Traditional clothes are so heavy and distracting, it’s hard to focus on the match.”

Sliding off her glass slippers, Ai steps up onto the *tatami* mat and answers flatly.

“I chose to wear Western-style clothes because that way I play my best. The Queen Title Match rules say that kimonos are required, but they don’t say anything about changing. And—,” Ai playfully lifts her right arm to show her wrist and says, “I don’t need to worry about sleeves.”

“.....”

Big Sis is silent. She’s been staring down at the board the whole time.

Sota grins from his spot at the boardside table before saying to Ai Yashajin with unmistakable excitement, “It’s time to begin again.”

“I see.”

Her skirt-like dress flowing with every step she takes on her way to her seat, Kobe’s Cinderella flicks her black hair over her right shoulder like the flap of a bird’s wing.

“Now—first, *I’m going to take back the first move I lost in the second match.*” Almost as if she were extending an invitation to Big Sis, Ai reaches across the board and says, “Come. I’ll dance for you.”

The click of a piece hitting the board echoes through the arena like the opening bell to a ball.

Countless camera flashes follow right after it, enveloping the real Kobe’s Cinderella, who finally made her entrance in the third match of the series.

▲ ASHEN STAR

—Reclaiming the first move.

The true meaning of her declaration becomes more and more apparent as the match wears on.

“Hm? What’s this? What, what, what?”

Ms. Rokuroba and I are working through formations on the big board to make our own predictions about how the late-game would unfold when she starts making a fuss after we come across a certain sequence.

“..... Kuzuryu-*sensei*? Is this... what I think it is?”

“..... Yes. I’m seeing signs pointing to exactly *that*.”

Until *it* actually happens, no one in the Shogi world will say the name out loud.

Because, if you say it and it does happen especially during the title match, all the carefully laid plans go up in smoke.

Some people go so far as to call it *Shogi’s cancer*.

Except in modern Shogi, players will use a fatal illness that could kill the game of Shogi to claim victory. That’s how fierce the world I’m fighting in is.

“I believe the defender is trying to do *that*. The problem is whether her opponent will let her or not”

“What options does she have to take back the first move?”

“Well, let’s see It’ll be difficult, but one option is——.”

“7 Three Pawn.”

A voice suddenly bursts from the audience.

A female voice that I know extremely well belonging to someone sitting in the front row calls out what is, apart from the best move available, Ai's only choice.

To see it that quickly——.

“..... Strong as ever, I see.”

I give her the biggest compliment I know.

Looking rather lazy with her long, thin legs crossed and a black leather jacket on, the audience member shakes her head back and forth.

“That ain't me. Software seems to have come up with that one.”

“Seems?”

“Despite all-out refusing to come here, there's a certain match journalist with a heck of a twisted personality who keeps bombarding me with all these figures and ratings,” the audience member——Women's King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka——says with her smartphone raised up in her hand.

Whispers travel through the crowd.

“..... Hey, you don't think?”

“Th-The Women's King?!”

“Would that journalist she's talking about be Yamashiro Ouka?”

The sudden appearance of a very special guest has the whole chapel brimming with excitement.

“Look, I didn't *want* to come all the way to Kobe just to watch an elementary school girl playing against someone still in junior high, all right?” the Aggressive Archangel then says like she's making an excuse. “I just want to see what Ginko does against that half-pint's Bishop Head Pawn”

For Ryou, who lost using a Rapid Attack strategy against Ai's Bishop Head Pawn, the chance to see what happens when Ginko draws out the match with her own eyes must've been irresistible.

Her interest in Shogi is even greater than the pain and embarrassment she's feeling. That's why I think she really loves the game.

And, even though she helped Ai Hinatsuru prepare for her article, the wounds from losing to the challenger Ai Yashajin must've been too raw for Machi Kugui to make the trip herself.

I understand that feeling. Almost a little too much

"Sora-sensei. You have five minutes remaining. 50 seconds——."

".....!!"

Big Sis almost runs out of waiting time while our conversation in the chapel is going on.

Big Sis is facing a huge decision.

Even though she had the advantage of the first move and drew out the match, she is at a serious time disadvantage. It's an all-around bad situation.

"Sora-sensei, as your waiting time has expired, please continue under one-minute Shogi rules."

"..... Kh!!"

The seconds piling up, Big Sis waited until the last possible moment to *play the best move available* on the board.

Then, Ai also goes with her best move available.

Best on best. The same moves are being repeated.

It's almost like the pieces are dancing a rondo——.

"Th-This is!!"

"..... Yes, *it's* here."

Ms. Rokuroba yells as I say *what we've all been trying to avoid saying*.

——A Repetition Draw.

It looks like a tie, but not really.

“The defender forcing a Repetition Draw is a fantastic strategy in modern Shogi. Reason being, the players will switch offense and defense for the rematch, which gives the former defender the advantageous first move.”

Ai Yashajin took it back. She did exactly what she said she was going to do: reclaim the first move she lost in the second match.

On the other hand, it’s a strategical loss for Big Sis. One that hurts just as bad as an actual loss.

“Th-That Ginko Sora The invincible Snow White ran away into Repetition Draw!” says a totally stunned Ms. Rokuroba.

A Repetition Draw has never happened in any of Big Sis’s matches against Women’s League members.

“...Which means Cinderella gave Snow White her first gray star,” Ryou spits out, not sounding amused at all.

She’s tried to force Repetition Draws against Big Sis in past title matches. But Big Sis accepted the risks and shut them down ... on offense and defense.

It wasn’t just against Ryou Tsukiyomizaka. That’s just the kind of player Ginko Sora is. She thinks that she won’t be able to fight in the Sub League if she can’t overcome that kind of disadvantage against a Women’s League player.

The fact is that Big Sis didn’t have any choice but the Repetition Draw.

In other words——.

“Big Sis has recognized her strength. She realized that she would lose this match right now if she didn’t take the Repetition Draw. She’s also admitting that Ai Yashajin is the strongest challenger she has ever faced.”

"A Repetition Draw has occurred," I watch Sota say on my screen.

[illegible]

While a Repetition Draw is a major pain for association staff, the audience gets to enjoy one more match. What could be better fan service?

Big Sis gives the fastest, quietest bow I've ever seen before snatching the pieces off the board like a hawk and stuffing them all back into the piece box. She's not just angry, she's furious—furious at herself for not being able to stop the Repetition Draw.

Putting pieces away is part of the job for the player in the upper seat, but it almost looks like Ai forced her to do it.

However, on this day when she stands at 57 matches against women's big players and a flawless 57 victories, just once her pure white record has been stained gray.

“Outfoxing the undefeated Ginko Sora with strategy?! Unbelievable!!”

“What Shogi is she going to show us next?!”

An audience that had grown tired of watching Big Sis win is now raining

thunderous applause down on Ai Yashajin.

A grand accomplishment that no one had ever achieved had just been pulled off by a girl in grade school who hasn't been in the Women's League for a year yet. That's the truth.

In this modern Shogi era with so many strong women vying for the top of this warring age, the fact that a 10-year-old girl is dancing over them all sends waves across the country.

AI'S ANGELIC ROBE

The 30-minute intermission passed in the blink of an eye and the rematch got underway.

Yaichi Kuzuryu remained in the chapel to continue as the big board analyst. Only the commentators switched out in shifts, and now Kanto Women's League player Midori Ubaguchi 3-*dan*, who had come all the way here just to see this match in person, took the stage as a special guest.

Match analysis in the break room revolved around Seiichi Tsukimitsu.

The strategy employed by Ai Yashajin now that the first move was hers turned out to be——.

“Offense Central Rook?”

“Both players are using Ranging Rook strategies?”

The crowd of people with their eyes trained on the break room's monitor whispered amongst themselves in amazement at Ai Yashajin's *all-rounder* prowess.

Her opponent, Ginko Sora, had also elected to employ Ranging Rook.

Since there are many similarities in how mirror matchups play out, her decision to play Double Ranging Rook wasn't all that strange.

However, the concept Ai Yashajin had in mind was well beyond bizarre.

15th move———2 *Eight Rook*.

“Huh?”

“Seriously?!”

Shock and disbelief spread to the break room, the move making more of an impact than even her Bishop Head Pawn.

“She switched back to Static Rook?”

The concept was flawless.

Ai had *returned her Rook in the middle of the board back to its starting position.*

“Not a Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, but a Double Move-Loss Rook?!
Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhh?!”

Tamayo Rokuroba, who was preparing for her next shift on stage as the big board commentator, could feel the Shogi sense she had built up since her days as an elementary school student start to crumble away. Even for a Ranging Rook player like Tamayo, Ai’s concept was beyond comprehension.

“Th-This isn’t even Shogi anymore is it?”

“Hmm.”

However, once his secretary Sasari Oga finished verbally recounting the sequences thus far, Seiichi gave his opinion as if commenting on an outlandish piece of modern Impressionist artwork.

“..... Yet there is not much separating them. Quite surprising.”

“But!! B-But she’s two moves behind!! After all she went through to reclaim the first move, she goes and throws it away? The defender’s position can only get better from here——.”

“Precisely. That’s the trap.”

Tamayo seemed unable to process the formation right away, so Seiichi put his mettle as one of the Shogi world’s top competitors on display.

“If you can state the position is clearly *good*, then that’s that. However, if it *only looks good*, many will spend time to confirm it. Further still, having a

preconceived notion that the formation *should be good* will lead some to *relentlessly search until the perfect sequence is found.*"

"Oh! So, all that time goes to waste"

"Indeed. Additionally, the brain forces itself to find a move that will turn what is actually a very small margin into a gigantic lead. A *victory read.*"

Time dwindles away as any sense of the big picture is distracted by an illusion.

A situation that must be avoided at all costs when speed is of the essence.

"Though she has a move lead, Sora-Queen has been forced into using Ranging Rook, of which she has little experience. Additionally, she has no time. If Miss Yashajin has researched this type of formation, she could build a considerable advantage Or even!"

"Aha!"

Tamayo couldn't contain her laughter.

"Aha!!!"

In no way was she making fun of Ai.

Just the opposite. Seeing that bratty runt regain her annoyingly high level of confidence was reassuring.

Eyes watering from laughing so hard, Tamayo nodded in recognition.

"So, that's how it is. She *is* a prodigy. Even more than Ginko."

Not too long ago, Tamayo Rokuroba made this promise to Ai Yashajin.

"Someday years down the road, when time has worn you down, we'll play again. And I'll be stronger. I don't care if it's 30, 40 years from now Might even be longer, but I'll be right here waiting with my feet stuck in the ground."

However, Tamayo had assumed that Ai Yashajin was less talented than Ginko Sora at that time... that the girl would one day settle into place at her level.

If, by chance, Ai didn't fall from her pedestal—.

“Then the only choice I've got is to try even harder, work until I'm much, much stronger Man, this is annoying!! What a pain!”

Seiichi listened to Tamayo's griping with the slightest of grins as Sasari, who had lost her chance to become stronger, felt left out in the cold.

“This This Shogi is unbelievable!”

Tracking the match on the Internet from her home on Hachijyo Jima Island, Karen Noboryou violently shook her head back and forth.

Though she was not the only one—most of the Sub League members watching the match at this very moment were rejecting Ai's Shogi outright.

“Sora-sensei is building up a natural response. Were I in her position, I would make similar moves myself But, for some reason, the odds are tipping even more into the offense's favor That's not possible It shouldn't be happening”

Karen looked down on Women's League players.

— After all, all of them are just amateurs.

Even Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, a Women's League Title Holder, took a leave of absence from that league to try her hand in the Sub League, but utterly failed.

—As should be expected... our Shogi is built differently.

Unlike Ryou, Karen had chosen to enter the Sub League from the beginning.

She did so because someone else had gone before her: Ginko Sora. She had proven it was possible to jump headfirst into the Sub League and Karen decided to follow in her footsteps.

Now Karen was the second female ever to achieve a 1-*kyu* rank in the Sub League.

Though she never considered herself to be talented, her time in the harsh wasteland known as the Sub League had battered and churned her Shogi into a more professional shape. It was the gift effort had bestowed upon her.

Hers was the exact opposite of the amateurs—Shogi, where losing wasn't an option.

She had drilled the standards into her head as if her very life depended on it, all with the very real threat of demotion and expulsion hanging over her. Karen had rebuilt her Shogi from square one. That should be the correct way. She should be much stronger. Ai Yashajin's Shogi was the one that was wrong This deranged Shogi that even a *kyu*-ranking amateur would never dream of trying couldn't be right.

"So, why? Why won't my heart stop beating in my ears?"

Karen had yet to realize that she was observing something important in Ai's Shogi she herself had lost. To realize that she was yearning to see it.

Freedom on the board. And the joy of playing Shogi.

Now full of players, staff and the media, the break room at the match site was overrun with vibrant energy.

Despite the late hour, more and more professional and Women's League players continued to file in. Even the veteran Women's League player from the north coast well into her sixties, Suzu Kakkobayashi had traveled to Kobe fully intending to research this match overnight. All to watch an elementary school girl play against a junior high school girl.

Tamayo Rokuroba taking her place as the big board commentator, Midori Ubaguchi looked at all the Women's League players gathered in the break room and said, "This has turned into an *Ai Yashajin Victims Support Group*, hasn't it?"

"It's a *Ginko Sora Victims Support Group*, too," remarked Rei Kayunita as Ryou

Tsukiyomizaka, who had lost to both Ginko and Ai, snapped her tongue with a bitter “Tsk!”

A few amused laughs echoed through the room.

Keika Kiyotaki was also among them.

This was her first time visiting a Women’s League Title Match break room as an official Women’s League player.

“.....”

Despite belonging to the same Shogi family as both players in the match, Keika only arrived in Kobe a few minutes before the rematch was to begin. Staying quiet, she remained outside their circle and watched the match unfold on her own.

——..... How small I am, she thought to herself. How she was being careful not to cross paths with either Ai or Yaichi, and how she couldn’t convince herself to come until the late game had arrived.

Yet, Keika could feel she had grown as well.

——..... It’s a big step for me, being able to feel jealous

At one time, Keika was jealous of the two Ais who breezed past her in the blink of an eye.

However, she didn’t feel that way about everyone who entered the Practice League after her.

She never bothered to compare herself to the elites like Ginko and Machi Kugui. Therefore she never felt any jealousy toward her *younger* older sister apprentice no matter how many titles she claimed.

On the other hand, it surged through her like a raging wildfire the instant Ai Yashajin became the Queen Challenger.

It was not only because Keika made it into the Mynavi Finals, but she also

defeated the perennial contender Rina Shakando.

—There was a chance this match could have been between Ginko and I. So

At the same time, she was concerned about Ai Hinatsuru.

Not that the young girl was depressed or feeling pressure. Just the opposite.

—Because she's satisfied with the way things are now

At the end of the day, the girl named Ai Hinatsuru was playing Shogi only so that she could be at Yaichi's side. Keika had realized that Ai couldn't play to her full potential when Yaichi wasn't involved in some way.

—That girl is too kind and openhearted. But worse than that she was born with way too much talent.

As a person, it was a wonderful combination.

Unfortunately, she would never grow as a Shogi player.

Feeling jealousy and bias were an absolute necessity. Just as the stepsisters felt jealous when they saw Cinderella arrive at the ball in a beautiful dress, Keika thought that dark flame would grow within Ai Hinatsuru's heart if she had a front row seat to Ginko and Ai Yashajin's title match.

Looking at it another way, nothing short of that would spark it.

The same could be said for Yaichi and Ginko.

—None of them would realize how painful playing Shogi can be without knowing what jealousy is like.

“Whoa! Look at that!!”

Someone shouting in the break room brought Keika back into the moment.

“The defender's King is exposed!”

The board was tipping from a simple advantage for Ai Yashajin toward a likely

victory.

Seeing that her chances were next to nil with Ai's current formation, Ginko changed up her strategy but was unable to produce any results. In fact, she had fallen victim to Ai's counterattack and was now facing heavy bombardment at the top of her Mino Castle defense, the formation's weak point.

With the defensive line destroyed and the enemy King retreating from its fortress, Ai Yashajin had complete control of the match flow and pursued it with her fangs bared.

Naniwa's Snow White, after an immaculate six-year romp through the Women's League, looked to be on the verge of defeat.

—Lose? Ginko? To her?

Though Keika couldn't believe it, she had a feeling that even she would be able to put Ginko in checkmate from this position.

However, Ai decided to claim the Knight that jumped into her territory and cut off Ginko's advance. She wasn't going for checkmate; she was trying to shatter Ginko's fighting spirit. Severe. Ai's fingers trembled on the monitor.

"She's pressing?!"

"Many would give up in this situation."

"She ain't gonna. She ain't."

Players and media members who filled the break room became livelier by the moment as the observer began to prepare.

Ginko launched an all-out assault and put Ai's King in check for successive turns, but the young girl blocked each one with calm, calculated precision.

"Ginko's Shogi has been rough today."

Rei Kayunita criticized Ginko's forced attack while other players started mocking her instead.

“Oh-ho? Naniwa’s Snow White’s gonna lose this one!”

“It’s tough watching the Queen not know when to call it quits.”

“Call it a day. Go wash up and try again next time.”

That got a laugh from around the break room.

Keika could hardly believe what she was hearing.

It was as if none of them felt even a sliver of the grim reality that came with the end of this match. They were watching Ginko Sora, a Sub League member who had spent a large amount of her valuable time working extremely hard for the Women’s League, losing as if she were some rare attraction in a circus.

—Just what are these people? This isn’t normal

Jealousy, ambition, curiosity, inferiority and superiority complexes Keika finally realized it as she watched these people who had sold their souls to Shogi childishly bare their cruelest emotions.

The people gathered in here weren’t human anymore. They were monsters, Shogi monsters.

“Ughh!!”

Both hands clamped firmly over her mouth, Keika raced out of the break room. Unable to make it all the way to the ladies’ restroom, she curled up in the hallway and endured a series of nauseated dry heaves.

“G Ginko

Keika called out to the girl fighting alone in the arena at this very moment through all her pain, dizziness and flowing tears.

“Do you always play Shogi in stifling air like that?”

Her own jealousy and inferiority complex were minuscule by comparison

Simply breathing the air inside the break room was enough to make her sick to her stomach. Keika stayed in the hallway, curled up in a little ball, unable to

climb back to her feet.

Inside the arena itself was abnormally hot.

Ai Hinatsuru had come to realize that her focus was fading in and out as she watched the match from the boardside table.

“Here Here He... re Haaa ah, ahhh”

She knew that, as the match journalist, she needed to keep an eye on both players, but her own player instincts kept drawing her attention back to the board.

—I can’t concentrate I don’t feel like me anymore

Muscles tensing and loosening. Mind focusing in and out. All were against her will and coming without warning.

Ai was being influenced by the players’ immense aura the same way a tree leaf is at the mercy of the wind.

—This This is what the arena during a title match is like!

Ai Hinatsuru hadn’t left her spot since the intermission after the Repetition Draw.

Despite only sitting, she felt far more exhausted now than she ever had playing a match herself.

“..... Too hot

Her handwriting had become illegible and blotches of sweat were starting to curl the sheets of paper in her notepad.

The abnormal heat was radiating from the players themselves.

Ai Yashajin, who had changed out of the kimono and into a Western-style dress, glimmered with sweat as she rocked back and forth reading the board.

——..... Wow. I've never seen Ten-chan so focused before

Leaning that far forward with everything from her cheeks to the tips of her ears beet red, she could very well have been a flaming chariot charging headlong toward the enemy.

Without changing posture, Ai Yashajin upped the pressure on the now-defending Ginko Sora by advancing a Knight toward her King.

——It's over

Meanwhile, a completely sweatless Ginko straightened her back and looked down at the board as she stopped to think.

Those silver-blue eyes and completely motionless posture seemed devoid of any will to fight.

To Ai Hinatsuru, it looked as though Ginko had already resigned herself to defeat.

However.

“Huh”

A surprised squeak left her lips.

Right next to her, the match recorder Sota Kunugi had plugged a mobile battery into the tablet in front of him.

Without a doubt, Sota had the highest level of Shogi skill of anyone in the arena.

——Then the match is going to go even longer? But it's

The match was nearly over in her eyes. No, she thought the result was already set in stone.

Ai Yashajin felt the same way.

——I can win! Me Against Ginko Sora!! A Sub League 3-*dan*!!

Ai couldn't contain the rush of emotions flooding through her.

The young girl's heart threatened to burst from her rib cage it was beating so hard. The blood circulating through her whole body rushed through her veins like torrents of fire.

Sweat poured down her face and her breathing became ragged as if that heat had singed her nerves. Despite changing out of her kimono in favor of a dress, the heat was overwhelming.

“.....”

Without saying a word, Ginko rose to her feet and left the room.

Her opponent had completely disappeared from sight, but Ai stayed in the zone and used the time to read as deep into the board as possible, like a fireball.

But——.

“Ah”

Ai Hinatsuru's concentration, which had been hazy from the heat, reawakened with vigor. The temperature inside the arena had plummeted.

Then, it hit her.

Red flames don't burn as hot as blue ones.

The abnormally high heat in the arena didn't come from Ai Yashajin.

The only possible explanation was that Ginko had been reading deeper, more fiercely than Ai was.

——Sora-*sensei* hasn't given up! Could it be?!

One minute later.

Body on the verge of combustion cooled by the outside air, Naniwa's Snow White returned to the arena with the colossal heat of a streaking meteorite to make her vision into reality on the board.

Then, as if completely ignoring her opponent's previous move, Ginko plucked her King from the board and said, "Come."

"?!"

Snow White smiled as Cinderella gasped before her.

"I'll dance for you."

THE HEARTLESS GIANT

I fall from the peak of happiness to the deepest pit of despair the second I see that move.

—9 Two King?!

“How?! Wh-Why in the world would she?!”

I’m stunned.

Because Ginko Sora just moved her King right into the long reach of the Knight I put directly in front of her defenses.

It’s like she’s saying, *Here’s my neck, please finish me off*

—It goes against all common sense!! But BUT!!

My eyes take on a life of their own, looking up from the board to get a glimpse of the terrifying woman who played that move.

Which leads to yet another shock.

“.....!!”

The Ginko Sora looking back at me has deep blue eyes.

Her eyes are normally gray but now are bluer than the ocean outside Kobe. So blue that I can’t see how deep they go.

Th-This is——!!

This is Naniwa’s Snow White playing for real!!

“..... So, this is the real you! A monster!!”

The light that was in my grasp disappeared with just one move.

The advantage that I’d spent turn after turn building little by little got turned on its head by this monster sitting in front of me with a single move.

“No, it’s still mine!! I still I should still have the lead!!”

I just verbally responded to the voice inside my head. Calm down now!

Unlike Ginko Sora who’s restricted to one-minute Shogi, I have time on my side. Even if the formations are somewhat against me—————I’ll still have a major advantage once the battle starts!!

“H Heeeeeereeeeeee!!”

I howl... like a wild animal.

I grab a Pawn from my piece stand like a falcon snatching a fish out of a lake and snap it down on the board right in front of Ginko Sora’s King, grinding it into place for good measure!

“Would! You! Give! Up! Alreeeeeeeeaaaaaady?!!!!!”

I play each move instantaneously so that she doesn’t have time to think or react. With any luck, she’ll misread and think I’ve already read my own victory.

But Ginko Sora’s fingertips move with mechanical accuracy, blocking every piece in my all-out attack.

——Th-This woman Does she not have a heart?!



She's like a heartless giant.

No matter how I attack, I can't tell if I'm doing any damage whatsoever. Every piece I deploy on the board just gets taken, as if every punch I throw ends up hurting me instead.

—I can't see myself bringing her down Are my attacks just that futile?!

With this much anxiety, my own heart will shatter the moment my hands stop moving. The only choice I have now is to keep playing each move using no time at all! Check! Check!! Check!!!

[illegible]

Then.

All the ammunition on my piece stand spent, I looked out across the charred, barren wasteland of a board.

“Is she alive?”

Ginko Sora's King isn't in checkmate.

—I-I got too close! My defense?! Is my King still safe?!

Leaning over the board, my eyes race back to my own territory to calculate my King's chances of survival when I hear a voice from the other side of the board.

"You're looking in the wrong place. Read thoroughly."

“Huh?”

"I told you, didn't I? I'm dancing for you."

“.....?”

Following my enemy's advice, I slowly shift my gaze upward.

From my territory into hers.

“..... It’s?! Th-That’s not That’s not possible?! It couldn’t be!!”

Sitting there waiting for me is———*a Repetition Draw*.

——Is she telling me to take Repetition Draw when the first move is mine?! Like what I just did to her?!

I couldn’t believe it. If, by chance, Ginko Sora had read this far ahead and guided me into this very situation, that’s beyond what human beings can do. But

——..... If I choose Repetition Draw, everything will reset and I can have a fresh start

The only problem is I’ll be at a disadvantage on defense. What if I’m actually in the lead right now? What if Ginko Sora is using off-the-board tactics to convince me to take Repetition Draw to get herself out of a bad situation? There’s no time to read through.

Use the Repetition Draw to escape



and I'll avoid defeat.

On the other hand

"..... Thank you."

Desperate to keep my teeth from chattering, I clamp them together with all my might and make my move.

"However————I don't need it. A tie isn't good enough."

I reject the Repetition Draw.

Then I say with the biggest smile I can muster, "Come. I'll slay you."

"Trivial."

Here comes her counterattack.

Each snap of her pieces echoes through the arena as Ginko Sora charges forward. Her calculations are brutal!!

"Gnhh!!"

I endure the immense pressure and start reinforcing my crumbling formation as fast as I can.

When.

"Here I come."

Ginko Sora advances her own King to the front line along with her quiet statement.

The King itself is leading the charge like Joan of Arc. One stray bullet means instant death, but even in one-minute Shogi, her fingers are solid as a rock.

Completely unpredictable. Completely unblockable. It's that kind of advance.

"*Gasp*!!"

Fear hits me for the first time. Fear of Ginko Sora. Fear of the heartless giant.

And that fear breaks the balance that I'd fought so hard to maintain.

“! Ahhh”

My trembling heart can't even support a balanced formation, let alone come from behind.

The defender's edge grows from a lead to a clear advantage. Then that advantage transforms into an avalanche.

I stand my ground with everything I have.

But this isn't a search to find the best move available.

Actually, it's to find *the worst move*.

—Set up an ambush and force her to make a mistake! An ambush like Bishop Head Pawn!!

Best moves don't exist this far behind. That's why it's a disadvantage.

Pain hurts when it hits, and it doesn't stop.

Just as hope doesn't exist amid pain and suffering, this world is not a kind one. Someone is dying at this very moment, another is falling into misfortune from which there will be no salvation, while new winners and losers are continuously born.

A line is being drawn between Ginko Sora and myself right now.

“But I can't just give up now can I?!!!!”

Happiness won't just fall into my lap if I sit around and wait for it. The only way to get it is to be prepared to be hurt even worse than before.

I must get stronger!!

But.

“Khh!!”

The calm competitor within me is already raising the white flag.

—..... I'm checkmated, aren't I?

Ginko Sora created the ultimate offensive push by adding her King to the front line. That proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had already read her own victory at the time I rejected the Repetition Draw.

That's the moment I let the title slip through my fingers.

My dream of proving Father and Mother once lived in this world fell from my grasp.

The battle is over. I've lost.

My Cinderella story has an unhappy ending.

"But Why?"

I've already lost.

The battle is already over.

So then, why? Why am I still burning up?

Why is my heart still racing like this?

What came to mind right then—wasn't Father's or Mother's smile.

"Ohh So, that's it," I whisper beside myself.

Ai and Sota Kunugi glance up at me from the boardside table. Then they sit up straight.

Preparing for my surrender.

They probably think what I just whispered was my realizing that my King has nowhere to run.

But what I actually realized is something completely different.

It doesn't have anything to do with Shogi at all.

It might be a bit imprudent in the middle of the match, but I can't help it.

Yes I finally connected the dots.

I figured out what had always been giving me courage.

Who it was that was giving me a future.

So nothing scares me anymore.

I can say it with my head held high.

Speak up loud and clear so the whole world can hear me.

Hear the words that I refused to acknowledge for the longest time.

A declaration that I will keep rising to the next challenge so long as life burns within me.

“I lost.”

As I say those words, the tiniest feeling that had appeared in my heart without my realizing it holds onto a single name.

Now, I know.

This is the feeling that people call———, I’m sure of it.

STAR COINS

“Today’s players have arrived! Everyone, please treat them to a big round of applause!!”

The commentator Ms. Rokuroba gestures to the large, majestic doors at the entrance to the chapel as both open to the left and right at the same time to reveal Big Sis and Ai Yashajin to the crowd.

The chapel staff puts the icing on the cake by adding music to their entrance. The crowd is going wild.

Oddly enough, it’s midnight.

Watching Big Sis in her kimono and Ai in her white dress walking down the aisle is like seeing a fairy tale come to life.

Seriously, this scene belongs in the pages of a book. As long as they leave out the part where these two were fighting to the death until just a little bit ago.

“Snow White and Cinderella... moving forward

Even as I whisper under my breath, I can still feel the hostile vibes coming from both of them.

Except that Big Sis, the winner, doesn’t look satisfied by her victory at all. Other people might miss it, but for me it’s obvious. She’s angry.

...Which is surprising because she pulled off five straight Queen Title Match victories to become the first ever Queen of Queens

Meanwhile, a jumble of emotions are passing over Ai Yashajin’s face after her challenge failed.

Depression doesn’t seem to be one of them.

She must still be feeling the aftereffects of battle because her cheeks are

flushed red. Her eyes look watery from here.

—Well, she did just hit a wall for the first time I don't blame her.

I give her an encouraging smile when our eyes meet, but—

“.....!!”

Humph!

The second we make eye contact, Ai blushes even redder and yanks her gaze off to the side. She blatantly looks away. Yeah, her heart is wounded

“What a fantastic match, Sora-*Queen* and Miss Yashajin. Now, join us up here at the altar.”

Switching the microphone off, Ms. Rokuroba says, “Ginko, go over next to Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Runt, you're on this side.” Then, into the mic.

“I'll hand the reins over to Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

“Me?! Why?!”

“Rather than me singing her praises, the Queen would much prefer that you do it, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Aren't I right?”

“.....”

Big Sis doesn't respond to Ms. Rokuroba's verbal jab.

I realize she is half teasing and half being nice, but She's wrong.

I am absolutely sure that the last thing Big Sis wants to hear me say is *congratulations*.

“..... All right. Then—.”

I reach up to the top left of the big board and snap down a piece.

—9 One Dragon.

The moment I take my hand away shocked murmurs spread through the chapel.

“Hey

“W-Wouldn’t that be?!”

“No way?!”

A shock that turned the world on its head.

Yes. It’s——.

“Ai.”

Rather than Big Sis, I direct a question at my apprentice standing on the other side of the big board.

“Why didn’t you take the Repetition Draw? I’m sure you knew it was there.”

It was there for the taking just after Big Sis’s King started the revolution.

The defender’s King leaving its position at 9 Two left an opening wide enough to get the offensive Dragon in behind the defensive formation at 9 One. Doing so would force the King to go around in circles and trigger a Repetition Draw.

In the match, Ai chose to put her Dragon at 7 One and used it to purely chase the King from behind. It’s hard to read what will happen in that situation, and there wasn’t enough time during the commentary for me to break it down on the big board, so I didn’t bring up the Repetition Draw, but——.

Big Sis hit Ai with the very same dilemma that my apprentice had given her.

Her plan was to force Ai to choose a Repetition Draw, which is the same as losing, and then crush her in the rematch.

It’s just that Ai chose a different answer I, and probably Big Sis too, want to know the reason.

Her eyes locked onto the big board, Ai slowly nods after a long moment and says, “..... Yes. I noticed it. I knew I could do a Repetition Draw.”

“Then why didn’t you take it? Did your pride not allow you to settle for a Repetition Draw because you were on offense?”

“No. It’s not that I *didn’t* choose the Repetition Draw. I *couldn’t*.”

Ai provides her reasoning.

“It’s because I——am the Queen Challenger.”

“.....!”

Big Sis and I look at her with wide eyes as Ai Yashajin enthusiastically explains.

“Title holders are expected to play matches they can’t afford to lose. However, challengers have to win. I only played respectable Shogi once I was determined to keep pressing forward no matter what.”

Ai broke so many Shogi taboos during the third match.

By continuously attacking on and off the board, the third match was the first time Ai played like a true challenger.

She’s still a way away from claiming a title, but She got her foot in the door.

Her will to proactively attack is what made that possible. If Ai threw it away and escaped using the Repetition Draw, she would have lost the right to call herself a challenger.

——So she figured it out. All on her own, too.

What I wanted her to realize wasn’t something so trivial as a new sequence for Bishop Head Pawn

“Not bad. Pisses me off, though.”

Ms. Rokuroba turned her mic off, but I can still hear her whispering under her breath.

Even the other Women’s League players inside the chapel right now are looking at Ai like she is positively glowing.

Magic doesn’t have anything to do with it.

Cinderella kicked off her glass slippers and proved to the whole Shogi world that she was worthy of being a challenger. That she deserved what players absolutely need: *trust*.

Her bare feet planted firmly on the floor, Queen Challenger Ai Yashajin speaks to the crowd.

“I knew the Repetition Draw was there. But I thought I could win without taking it. That shows that my reading abilities are not up to par with Sora-Queen’s. Most of all I didn’t have the courage to choose a Repetition Draw on offense I wasn’t brave enough to be at a disadvantage as the defender once again. I lost, plain and simple,” Ai says while lowering her head to Big Sis before continuing. “Also to everyone from Kobe.”

Next, she bows to all the fans sitting in the pews.

“Thank you for continuing to support me all the way to this late hour. I’m sorry I couldn’t win. I’m disappointed I couldn’t live up to your expectations, and that really, really hurts”

The little tremor in her voice was enough to show exactly how Ai is feeling. Seeing her courageously own up to it is making some fans’ eyes water.

“But, I learned something very important from this loss.”

Looking up, Ai’s face stays solid as a rock.

“Having pride as a title holder, and the strength to abandon that pride to win a single match—that’s what I don’t have, not yet.”

Even after her loss, there’s a bright sheen in this 10-year-old girl’s eyes that only people determined to face forward have.

A challenger’s face.

“I will strive to acquire the muddy, stubborn playing style that my Shogi family specifically the Kiyotaki line, my Master and Grand Master are known for. Also, I will go back to basics and rebuild my Shogi from scratch in order to catch

up with my aunt apprentice, Sora-Queen, even a day earlier.”

“.....!! Ai”

I’m this close to bawling right now.

Ai Yashajin has insisted on keeping so much distance between herself and the rest of the Shogi family all this time that she’s never called me *family* before. Seriously, the waterworks are on standby.

But it wasn’t just me.

Ai brought up Master Kiyotaki and Big Sis as well.

Knowing in my heart that her parents are watching this, I give them an update.

——..... It looks like I was able to give this girl a family.

I couldn’t help her win.

But this girl is willing to accept something much bigger than that.

Stepping away from the mic, Ai yells as loud as she can to everyone in the audience, “I’ll challenge as many times as it takes! I’ll become so much stronger! So, please, help motivate me to reach my full potential!”

The girl who’d outright refused to accept help from anyone else is now mustering up the courage to reach out.

Not to cling.

She’s looking to grasp.

“Keep watching my matches! I will not disappoint you!!”

The chapel swells with a warm round of applause.

Naniwa’s Snow White claimed eternal glory today.

The magic that turned Cinderella into a challenger has disappeared.

But——.

She continued to shine even after the spell was broken.

The glow she has now is stronger and more beautiful than it was before she lost.

■ WHAT'S TRULY IMPORTANT

"I have returned."

The family manor on Mount Rokkou feels unnaturally quiet as, accompanied by Akira, I step inside and go straight to the room where Grandfather awaits.

Everyone who came out to greet me looks a little surprised And slightly distant.

Thinking back, I had almost never lost a league match before this title match started.

—Professional players always said coming home after a loss is awkward. So this is what they meant

It's uncomfortable, but I have no choice but to get used to it.

After all, I'm sure I'll experience this awkwardness many times in the future.

"O-Ohh Hello, Ai. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

Grandpa greets me, but he's obviously flustered.

He knows the results, but he didn't think I would return so quickly and isn't sure what to say. That's the impression I'm getting.

"Have you already finished in the graveyard?"

"No. I'll go afterward."

".....?"

Grandpa looks at me, puzzled.

It's because I've always gone straight to my parents' grave after a league match. Grandpa understands the reason better than anyone else.

...Which is why he's probably worried to hear that I haven't gone yet despite

the title match being over.

I did a lot of thinking on my way home.

—What should I say? How should I say it?

I had everything sorted and organized at one point but Other thoughts came up and wiped out my progress like a sandcastle overtaken by ocean waves. I don't know what to say or how to start anymore.

“Grandpa I”

In the end.

I decide to say exactly what my heart is feeling.

“..... I was so, so sad when Father and Mother died. I can't even remember most of the details because of how truly sad I was And I have so many regrets.”

“.....”

“Why didn't I ask Father to teach me more Shogi? Why didn't I show more interest in the things Mother liked? Why did they both have to die before I became a Women's League player?”

“.....”

Grandpa winces for a moment as if trying to keep pain at bay.

But he doesn't say a word and waits for me to continue.

Rather than trying to say something encouraging, Grandpa looks at me with his warm eyes. Just as he's always done.

That gaze giving me courage, I keep stringing words together.

I start bringing out everything, things that have been too scary to say up until now.

“I don't want any more regrets. So So!”

I look right into Grandpa's eyes and yell.

"Father and Mother are gone, so I want to spend more time with you, Grandpa! Rather than reminisce about Father when I play Shogi, I want to focus completely on the person sitting across from me!"

The heat I felt playing against Ginko Sora transforms into words that just won't stop.

Yelling at the top of my lungs, I bare my heart.

"I love Shogi! I want to play more, to get stronger! But I don't want to do it to remember the past!! I want to play Shogi to move forward!!"

To me, Shogi was a way to reclaim what was lost.

To me, playing Shogi meant having to sacrifice something to claim victory.

But I was wrong.

By fighting in earnest, I found an opponent who showed me her true self. Not a friend Perhaps fellow warrior would be a better word? That kind of opponent.

Of course, there's no comparison to Father and Mother, but I believe she's important to have in my life.

I've lost nothing by playing Shogi. Nothing disappears with a loss.

I've gained quite a lot, actually.

Suddenly, I'm not alone anymore.

No I never was alone from the beginning. I only convinced myself that I was.

That's why——.

"That's why I will come straight to you, Grandpa, after each match. I'm sorry I couldn't claim the title."

I bow to my grandfather.

—Both as an apology and to express all my gratitude.

“Also, thank you for always looking out for me. Thank you for always letting me have my way. I promise you here and now that I will use the prize money to buy you a wonderful present as soon as I win a title. So please, live a long life and always be here to watch over me.”

“Ai Ohhhh, Ai!”

Grandpa’s calm eyes flood.

Eyes that were as quiet as the sea outside Kobe are now shaking with massive tears.

Tilting his head back to keep them from falling, Grandpa speaks to Father and Mother up in heaven.

“Are you watching? This young girl that the two of you left behind has become an upstanding Women’s League player. A *Sensei* more elegant, more admirable than any of her peers”

The tears become too much for Grandpa to bear and streak down his cheeks.

Thinking back, this is the first time I’ve ever seen him cry.

Tears that he didn’t shed when his son and daughter-in-law passed away, tears that he would never ever let me see are flowing, but Grandpa doesn’t seem to mind.

Seeing those tears makes me realize.

There is far more hope in this world than despair.

Tears shed in sadness will eventually run dry.

But happy tears will never run out.

“I I can die a happy man!”

“I just told you you’re not allowed to die Grandpa, you jerk”

I jump right into his arms and cry even harder than he is.

The pain of losing the title match, the relief of finally getting all that off my chest, so many different emotions keep the tears coming.

So much heat.

Unbearable heat.

—From my crying eyes, and deep within my heart.

Akira watches everything happen from her spot just inside the doorway.

It’s easy to tell what her expression is under those sunglasses.

I mean They do nothing to hide the tears running down her cheeks!

THE LITTLE PRINCE

“..... Finishing on the 154th move with Ai’s surrender.”

I finish recounting Ai’s match record in front of the gravestone that marks where her parents were laid to rest.

The usual routine after her matches.

Now comes the part where I would always tell them what was bothering me and sometimes ask them to help me find the answer.

But today is different.

“That Shogi was truly impressive. Strong, yes, but it was Shogi that only Ai could play,” I say with conviction.

She lost, but that isn’t a problem. She knew that she was on the right path.

“I’m sure that she can play that way because——.”

Just then, I hear footsteps behind me and swallow my words.

The person who appears out of the thick fog is exactly who I thought.

Ai Yashajin.

Dressed in her usual black clothes, she glares at me with her arms crossed and says, “This place is locked, yes?”

“..... I have permission, from Akira.”

“I know. That’s why she’s being reprimanded inside the manor today.”

“Ohhh?”

I mentally put my hands together and apologize to Akira with all my might. I’m sorry I’m so sorry

At the same time, I repent for treading on what, for this young girl in front of

me, is a hallowed flower bed.

Correcting my posture, I bow down to my apprentice.

“..... I sincerely apologize. I understand that this place is more important to you than anywhere else in the world. But, I just had to”

“Just had to what?”

“Talk with them. Tell them about your Shogi, ask them if I’m raising you the right way I wanted someone to listen to me. So——.”

“You’ve been coming here behind my back. If you feel like you have to apologize for it, you should’ve just told me from the start.”

“..... You’re not angry?”

“Why would I be?”

Ai Yashajin is so kind it’s almost anticlimactic.

Why? What kind of severe punishment is waiting for me?

“Have you been doing things that would make me angry? Dancing on my parents’ grave perhaps?”

“N-no! I would never do something like that!!”

“Then what could be the problem? You’re reporting my progress to my parents like a Master should, right?”

I’m still scared of what she might say next, but then she makes an “ughhh” sound as she blushes red and says, “..... Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“I-I said thank you! Don’t make me repeat myself, trash!!”

“O-Ohh”

First she thanks me and then scolds me? How am I supposed to react?

“I just finished speaking with Grandfather. I’ve always come here, to the

graveyard, after my matches but from now on I'm going to tell him first."

"I see"

I think that's a good thing.

She's headstrong, but I think her being able to show genuine gratitude to those important to her proves that she's grown as a person during this series of matches.

But something feels off about what she says next.

"Nothing will ever come of trying to seek out my deceased parents forever. I don't want to have any regrets. After all, I'll never find Father and Mother no matter how hard I look Because they're here, beneath this gravestone."

"You'll never find them? Your parents?"

"No. They're not alive anymore," says Ai as if gingerly touching a wound that hasn't completely healed yet. "I've never been willing to admit it, but But I knew what I was doing was wrong. In order to get stronger, I must——."

"That's not true."

"Huh"

"Both of your parents are close by. They're not gone at all."

"..... Huuuh? What are you talking about?"

"So, you really haven't noticed."

"Stop trying to be mysterious! Or are you just saying the first thing that comes to mind after all?! Because if you are, you're going to regret it!!"

Ai Yashajin, serious enough to kick me out of my own Shogi family.

Now I get it This is one of those *too close to notice* things.

"No, they're here. They're so close you just can't see them."

"Then, where?!"

“In your Shogi.”

The instant those words come out of my mouth——.

“.....!”

Ai’s big, round eyes fly open.

I calmly say to my breathless apprentice.

“You know about the Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook strategy, right?”

“? Y-Yes What about it?”

“Amateurs have been playing it for years and years, but it was thought of as a B rank strategy in the pro Shogi world. That is, until Mr. Oishi and other young players saw its true potential and made it popular among the pros.”

Just like them——.

“My Gokigen Third File Rook shift into a 4 Two Silver—style Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook came from research done by a particular top amateur player.”

“.....!! You couldn’t mean! Really Really?”

“Yes. Amateur Meijin Takahiro Yashajin——your father, Ai.”

The first things I did after taking Ai as my apprentice were to come to her parents’ grave and then to line up every single one of her father’s match records.

“They didn’t get much attention because he lost, but your father played Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook several times. Mr. Kagamizu also told me that he played it during their practice matches. Knowing that your father was a staunch member of the Static Rook party, I was curious to know why he played some Ranging Rook and decided to do some research myself And I found how good it is.”

Unfolding the match record clutched in my hand, I explain.

It's the one that ended in a Repetition Draw where Ai used the 4 Two Silver–style Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook strategy to perfection. A strategy that no one specifically taught her how to use. Yet she used it in her own way.

“You proved it yourself, didn't you? Your father's playing style has been passed down in your Shogi. Along with your mother's kindness.”

Whether it's people or computers, anyone who plays Shogi will have some distinguishing traits.

It's called their *playing style*.

Many different things go into a playing style.

For some people, it matches their personality to a T, while that's not the case for others.

But——.

“I see *admiration* and *heart* in your playing style.”

“Heart?”

“Yes. People who play like that tend to take on the personality of the one in their heart and play the same style as the one they admire.”

There's a big difference between Shogi and other sports.

Baseball is baseball, but it's impossible for a grade schooler to throw a pitch like a major leaguer.

In Shogi, on the other hand, a grade schooler can use the same sequences as the Meijin.

All from lining up match records.

“But no amount of lining up match records will guarantee they can play like the one they admire. That's what happened to the Thorn Princess's admiration for Big Sis.”

“.....”

“Personality has to affect the outcome. And, while people were born with certain personality traits, their parents and upbringing shape who they will become.”

For Shogi players whose personalities formed at the time they were learning how to play, it’s possible to say their playing style is their *soul*.

“Your father taught you how to play, and you continued to line up his match records by yourself even after he passed away, right Ai?”

“Y-Yes, I did But”

“Your personality appears in your playing style because of all the time you spent researching on your own, and your father’s playing style comes through very much intact. That’s not true for other players who got stronger by playing against many different opponents over and over again.”

So——.

“So, I could see them come out in your Shogi———a father who loved Shogi and his daughter with all his heart, and a loving mother who watched over them both.”

“.....!!”

Ai tears up more and more with each passing second.

It’s almost like the girl’s parents residing inside her were answering me with her tears.

Looking right into her watery eyes, I keep talking.

...The same way I’d been talking to the gravestone from the beginning.

“I noticed the first time we played Shogi which is why I decided not to teach you how to play right then and there. Because I knew you could only get what you were looking for by taking it yourself.”

There is a word, *ten—i muhou*.

Ai Yashajin's angelic robe is already perfect, without a single seam. That's what it means, flawless composure.

The girl in front of me right now is the personification of it.

There'd be no point to me going in with scissors and patching it up. Her talent is pure and perfect as it is.

And that talent drew me in like a magnet.

"So I knew there was no reason to waver or search for an answer. You're fine just the way you are. Because your mother and father are watching over you as close as possible."

"F-Father and Mother are inside... of me?" says Ai, her tiny little hands resting on her chest, squeezing ever so slightly.

Almost as if trying to feel the warmth within her, she asks me.

"Really?"

"It's true. I think that's exactly why everyone who plays against you can't write you off as just some little girl."

I'm sure that Ms. Rokuroba and Ms. Noboryou felt the same thing I did in Ai's Shogi. They found the honest, noble heart beating beneath this girl's arrogant shell.

I gesture out over the fog-covered graveyard.

"Now, Ai, is your chance to explore this wide-open world with them. Shogi will allow you to learn so much more about your father and mother."

Even if words won't come across, there are things Shogi can convey.

Memories disappear, but fingertips never forget.

"Let's play more Shogi, more than we ever have. We can walk down this path together, with everyone."

"..... Yes. *Sensei*"

Tears flowing, Ai nods with no reservations.

To the bottom of my heart, I truly treasure my apprentice.

“Ai.”

I kneel so I can be on her eye level and wipe away her tears with my pointer finger.

She stiffens up a bit but doesn't push me away.

“It seems I still have a long way to go as a Master.”

“Huh?”

“I was supposed to wipe your tears with my Rook, but I'm still making you cry this much.”

“..... Idiot.”

The fog starts clearing—.

A ray of sunlight bursts through the clouds and makes the ocean outside Kobe glisten.

▲ THE CHICK AND THE CAT

“That article of yours was really good.”

“Uwhee?”

It’s been a long time since the last Grade Schooler Practice Session, but I joined them on a day off.

The four girls invited me to join them at the Kansai Shogi Association’s classroom in the morning and now two of us are sitting at the counter at *Twelve*, a restaurant on the first floor, getting lunch.

The girl sitting next to me is Ai Hinatsuru.

I invited her specifically by saying, “We need to talk, in private.”

Spoonful of butter rice floating halfway between the plate and her mouth, Ai just stares at me as I sip cow tongue stew (the most expensive item on their menu) and say, “The article you wrote. The one that got published in that magazine.”

“You read it?”

“Why are you so surprised? It’s an article written about me and by my older sister apprentice. Of course I read it.”

Her descriptions of the arena during the match could use a bit of work, but My whole body felt like it was on fire after reading it.

Especially the last part. It went like this.

“This, this should have been my story”

Rematch of the third Queen Title Match. That was the only thought I had watching Ten-chan’s face from the side as she fought with all her strength

during the late game.

It wasn't because she got to play Shogi in pretty clothes or the spotlight the media had cast on her.

I became an apprentice in the Kuzuryu Shogi line before Ten-chan.

I also joined the Women's League before she did.

But Ten-chan has always been walking ahead of me. She started playing Shogi years and years before I did, and she's also stronger than me. Even her winning percentage surpassed mine before I knew it.

I have always been looking up at her from behind.

However, this time was my first opportunity to see her face from the side during a match.

Sitting at that board was a Ten-chan I didn't recognize.

It wasn't the hard-working prodigy whose moves overflowed with talent, research and unwavering confidence or the Cinderella who became the fastest player to ever become a challenger. Instead, it was the real Ai Yashajin.

What I saw was—a competitor with a clenched jaw, dripping sweat and overcoming despair time and again, always thinking of her next move. The face of a Women's League player.

This Ten-chan, fighting with grit and refusing to give up, was so many times more beautiful and cooler than the Ten-chan I knew She looked so much like the Shogi player I admire more than anyone in the world.

Which is why the entire time I've been writing this article, I've only been thinking one thing.

“This, this should have been my story!”

One year ago, when I first played against Ten-chan in the Practice League, I lost because I let a seven-step checkmate slip away.

I cried that day, saying that I had *lost to myself*.

But I was wrong. I lost to Ten-chan that day.

She's so strong because she loves Shogi more than I do.

She's so strong because she isn't afraid of challenges like me.

She's so strong because she works harder than I do.

I have avoided comparing myself to Ten-chan up until now... because it would hurt too much if I tried as hard as I could, pushed myself to my limits and still didn't make it

However, I won't be looking away ever again.

It's taken over a year, but I will start by accepting that loss.

Just like the side of that face that never looked away from the board or Sora-sensei, I will focus completely on Shogi.

Next time—I will face Ten-chan from the front and write my own story.

It was an article, a declaration of her own commitment, and her issuing a challenge all at the same time.

“You have some real guts, you know that? Turning the last line of your article into a challenge directed at me....”

Next time, she will write self-commentary articles—basically, she's saying she will take my place as the next Queen Challenger.

“..... Sorry”

Grasping her spoon just above her knee, Ai stares directly into her butter rice as she squeezes out her words.

“I know I said I was supporting you the whole time, but I'm relieved that you didn't win the title, Ten-chan”

“Naturally. I’d be angry at you if you were happy for me.”

“Wha?! Why?”

“Like I said back when we first played each other in the Practice League, I see you as my rival.”

“Rival”

“What? Are you saying I’m not yours?”

“No, no! I want to catch up to where you are! I want to surpass you!!”

Ai, smiling and crying at the same time.

I’m sure she’ll catch up in no time at all. I’m not just going to let her surpass me, though. The thought of being chased doesn’t scare me at all.

Because we can just get stronger together.

“Also, I wanted to talk to you today because I wanted to say thank you.”

“?”

“When our *Sensei* fought against King Oishi Oh, he’s not King anymore.”

The King Title Match finally finished up just a day or two ago and required me to correct my statement.

“I watched their match over the Internet. Even after it ended, I still watched Until the last comment was updated after the review session.”

“.....!”

“You’re the one who wrote it, right? Thanks to that, I played respectable Shogi in the third match.”

The most important thing I got from it wasn’t the inspiration to play 4 Two Silver–style Bishop Exchange Opposing Rook.

It was the courage to believe in myself.

“So, thanks.”

“Ten-chan

“Saved by only three lines of text, humph. I’m such a simple girl.”

Ai finally smiles back when I make the longest, most obvious sigh I can.

Now

“There is one thing, though, that I need to apologize for.”

I casually broached the topic like an afterthought and bring *that* up.

“Do you remember the last thing I said the day we met the Thorn Princess?”

“Hm? Sure I do.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“..... Uhh?”

Making a moronic face once again, Ai drops the spoon that was on its way to her mouth back onto her plate with a loud clang.

“Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh?! T-Ten-chan Are you saying——.”

“Waiter. Check please,” I say as I get out of my seat, being careful to avoid Ai’s eyes at the same time. “Both on my card.”

“We only accept cash,” the man behind the counter tells me.

“Well then, put it on a tab. You could come collect at my family’s manor if you’d like?”

“Heh! I’d need to find a glass slipper first.”

Grinning at the waiter’s joke, I tell him it was delicious and leave the association through *Twelve*’s outside door.

Then, just to make sure no one sees just how red my face is, I race down Naniwa Street.

I’m not trying to go anywhere in particular. Just, I wanted to run.

—The idiot said so. He said Father and Mother are inside of me

But, there's actually one more.

I must apologize to Father and Mother, but That person is taking up more and more space.

Now I understand what the Thorn Princess was trying to say.

This feeling blooming within me gives me strength.

"..... Too close to notice. For sure."

That person didn't notice either.

Father's match records *weren't the only ones I lined up*. Father and I always played through match records he received from Chairman Tsukimitsu of a certain Sub League member. I continued to do so after he died and after that Sub League member became a professional. That's why they've always been within me

But they never notice anything—even if I'm right beside them.

Never notice how hard my heart beats or how hot my skin gets.

Honestly, they're not my type whatsoever and they are always surrounded by women. Having Shogi on the brain means they have no fashion sense at all and don't pick up on anything that's happening.

Even so, even a single thought of them—.

"Hot."

That person's name is Yaichi Kuzuryu.

The Shogi player I admire most in the world And the first person I've ever had feelings for.

"Nrgghhh! Just why?! Why did it have to turn out like this?!"

There are six women's titles, but only one of him. All my rivals are strong and

there's not much of an opening for me because I'm late to join the arena. This battle will be much more severe than the Queen Title Match.

But! I have no intention of giving up.

I won't lose to my wicked aunt or jealous older sister. I don't care if I get smothered in ash or mud, I will hold strong until a chance comes to me. Then, I will take the Ryuo's heart for myself.

"After all I'm Cinderella!"



EPILOGUE

I stare at a mirror inside a completely empty room.

“..... Pointless.”

Looking at my reflection, I think back over my story thus far.

The frail, average girl comes to be called Snow White, a princess who then goes on to be crowned Queen of Queens, an eternal title.

The rest of the world might call that a happy ending.

However, it's all pointless to me. Winning or losing, a Repetition Draw, my story so far has been meaningless.

The Little Mermaid sacrificed her voice.

“Then, I'll sacrifice so much more.”

Throwing out old clothes, I put my head through the collar of my new uniform and list the things I can do without.

Tears for crying when I'm sad.

A voice for whining when I'm frustrated.

Even the feet I would need to run away.

“Shogi is all I need. So long as I've got a brain that thinks and fingertips that can grasp the pieces.”

In exchange, I want one thing.

That's—strength.

I'm no Queen. I'm a challenger, now and forever. I've only forgotten that and tried to protect a little status and pride by running away.

Knowing my heart is that weak is infuriating.

"I want to be strong."

I want overwhelming power.

I want a heart of ice, one that won't flinch in the face of any challenge.

I want sharp senses, able to read to victory against any opponent.

I want the strength to play Shogi no matter how deep into despair I fall.

I want a spirit that will never break.

Becoming a princess means nothing to me.

There's only one thing in this world I want to become.

"I want to be a professional Shogi player."

My name is Ginko Sora.

First Queen of Queens

Women's Throne

First-year high school student

And_____newly inducted member of the Sub League 3-*dan* division



FOR THE AFTERWORD: *AFTER WRITING FOR THE EIOU TITLE MATCH*

The Okazaki Shogi Festival talk show.

“Apparently, Mr. Masuda was asked on the bullet train if he was me,” Taichi Takami 6-*dan* says while standing in the middle of the sunlit stage and flashes a friendly grin.

This city, Okazaki, just happens to be the hometown of Mr. Takami’s master, Kazuo Ishida 9-*dan*.

Even though he operates Japan’s largest Shogi classroom in Kashiwa City, Chiba, Mr. Ishida brings his apprentices and many popular Shogi players to Okazaki once every year to hold this massive event.

After writing an article covering the first match of the Third Season *Eiou* Title Match, I visited the Okazaki Shogi Festival for the first time 20 days later. I was interested to meet many of the players in attendance.

One of them happened to be the focus of my article: Taichi Takami.

Another was the player Mr. Takami just mentioned. The two of them look so similar that many Shogi fans can’t help but give their own two cents, but——.

“Mr. Masuda told me that *he had never been mistaken before* and that was the first time it happened to him ... which is strange because people have been mistaking me for him for years.”

“Only after you made a name for yourself.”

Mr. Ishida’s comment was quite a surprise to me.

Yasuhiro Masuda was in the middle of an instruction match, so he wasn’t on stage during the talk show, but the man is so talented that even Ryuo Yoshiharu Habu himself said, “If it weren’t for Souta Fujii, that position would belong to

him.” He claimed the *Newcomer King* award two years in a row. Mr. Masuda even had a chance to be a professional in junior high school. Therefore, Mr. Takami had always been mistaken for Mr. Masuda all this time.

On the day of the festival, Mr. Takami had won two consecutive matches in the *Eiou* Title Match against Kouta Kanai. Two more wins, and he would claim his first title

Another player I had been following for a long time was sitting quietly next to Mr. Takami.

Yuki Sasaki 6-*dan*.

Also an apprentice to Mr. Ishida (and Mr. Takami’s younger brother apprentice), he probably had the highest expectations on his shoulders. Not only did he defeat Souta Fujii in an exhibition match during the Okazaki Shogi Festival last year, he was the one who stopped Mr. Fujii’s 29-match winning streak in a league match and became an instant star. Mr. Ishida thoroughly enjoyed himself recounting those stories on stage.

The last person to get the microphone turned out to be Mr. Sasaki.

Someone in the audience had asked how to recover from a slump, and each of the players took turns going down the line. Once his turn came, Mr. Sasaki prefaced his answer by saying, “Whenever I lose, the first thing I think of is

“How scary losing can be when I’ve committed so much effort. Back when I was a student, I had school to worry about as well

So, there was a time when losing was scary after I graduated and only had Shogi.”

A prodigy, talking about his fear of effort. Choosing his words carefully, Mr. Sasaki continued.

“Recently, I look at it like this

Any opponent who defeats me committed more effort overall than I did. Even if I’d pushed myself to the absolute limit, thinking there was nothing more I could possibly do, my opponent worked even harder

Then, he summed it all up with this.

“I didn’t know what the word *effort* meant at the time.”

Back when I was first collecting material in earnest to write *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done!*, I made sure to ask every single professional and journalist I talked with about *talent*. Just what is talent? What kind of child has what it takes to become a professional? Each one of them had the same answer.

“I always knew Yuki Sasaki would make it as a professional.”

Indeed, astounding levels of talent overflowed from his match records. He became the youngest Elementary School Meijin in history in the fourth grade and became a professional at the very end of his junior high school career at the age of 16 years and one month old.

Both Mr. Sasaki and Mr. Masuda became professionals before Mr. Takami.

I thought hard about what Mr. Sasaki meant by the word *effort*, about what word could mean the opposite of talent.

If effort means to *constantly place yourself in a fiercely competitive environment*, then the still titleless Mr. Sasaki was certainly committing a great deal of effort.

Plus, if any of his younger brother apprentices who came into the professional ranks after him successfully challenged for titles of their own, that would only increase his motivation to claim one for himself.

That could be the moment when he understood what *effort* truly meant

The talk show over, Mr. Ishida and Mr. Takami conducted a Master/apprentice book signing event. The two of them went to work on signing Mr. Ishida’s latest book

But I was stunned when I looked inside the copy I bought for myself. Mr. Sasaki’s autograph was there as well.

“You got the lucky one! This is the special prize.”

Mr. Ishida’s pen swiftly danced across the page before he slid down the table

to Mr. Takami.

I'm sure if I should say anything as I look at him leaning over the book, but I decide to take a chance.

"Hello there."

Mr. Takami looks up and stunned recognition overtakes his face.

"Ah! What brought you here today?"

"I came to buy this book. I heard I could get it here first," I answered shyly.

Then, Mr. Takami handed the book to me and said the very words I wanted to hear.

"That was a great article!"

The book in my hands, entitled *Kishi toiu Ikimono (The Creatures Called Shogi Players)*, had three autographs inside it.

Except that the 6-*dan* written next to Taichi Takumi's autograph now holds a special meaning for me.

Prodigies are surviving inside the modern eight-title Shogi world.

Each one of them reflects what the word *effort* truly means.

..... Sorry for just jumping in like that. Then again, I've always jumped into things in the afterword

As I stated before, I was asked to write an article for the first match of the Third Season *Eiou* Title Match.

Being able to experience a real title match from the inspection all the way to the afterparties was an extremely valuable experience for writing Book 9, which is why I chose to recount my experience in the afterword. I'm extremely grateful to everyone who made it possible.

The Ryou's Work Is Never Done and all the support it has received have given me, a simple Shogi fan, the honor of writing an article for a title match as well as turn the books into a terrific anime.

I don't have the kind of talent Shogi professional *Senseis* possess. That's why I've had to compound effort with effort ever since I made my debut. Writing itself has always been a difficult challenge, and rather than getting easier, it's only gotten harder with experience.

On the other hand, all the difficulty and hardships show me just how much I have grown. Being unsatisfied with what I have already penned is proof that I have improved as a writer since then.

I will keep writing, believing that I'm making progress little by little.

**REVIEW
SESSION**



REVIEW SESSION

One day I step inside the Player's Room and see Ryou Tsukiyomizaka wearing a blazer and Machi Kugui in the sailor-style school uniform swishing their skirts and taking pictures. Flash☆

“.....”

I've seen this before, except it was with a bunny and a maid. Just as those memories start popping up, the two girls say, like it's just an ordinary day, “Yo, trash. What're you freezing up for? Close that door or we'll smash you through it.”

“These here are the uniforms we donned during our high school days.”

Why in the world would they be wearing their old uniforms, and at the Kansai Shogi Association of all places? Apparently, they don't find it strange at all. Entering the room without saying a word, I quickly close the door behind me.

But there's something else on my mind.

“Ryou, you?”

“Hm? What's this? My blazer got your mind running wild? Hm? Hmm?”

“No. I'm just surprised you went to high school.”

“Yep, you just bought a one-way ticket six feet under.”

Ryou picks up a folding chair like she's done it thousands of times. That's what I'm talking about right there!

“N-Not like that! I'm not saying you're not smart enough, just that a lot of players only finish what's required by law and skip out on high school recently, right?! That's why I thought you did what I did and focused only on Shogi after junior high!”

“Don’t go groupin’ brainiacs like me in with idiots like you. One look at your face is enough to figure that out.”

“I concur. In fact, O-Ryou took part in the student council during her high school years.”

“Come again?! That’s even more of a surprise

“Because she just so happened to be absent the day roles were decided, student council representative was the only one left and she was shoehorned into that position.”

That explains everything.

“Actually, I wasn’t sure if I was gonna go on to high school at first.”

Ryou finally puts down the folding chair, spreads it open and takes a seat. Except she swung the chair around backwards so that her arms are resting on the back piece. I wish she wouldn’t spread her legs that wide in such a short skirt *gulp*.

“I was already in the Women’s League, and I’d even figured out Shogi was the only thing I was good at, so what good would a high school diploma be to me anyway?”

“Reaching university education was a prerequisite for my Shogi career that was implemented by my family. Therefore, there was no need for me to waver. My enrollment in private school from a young age escalated me to high school without testing, which made my journey quite easy.”

“Must be nice, being a noble lady in private school. What I went through prepping for those exams still gives me nightmares.”

Ryou looks dejected. I never took entrance exams either, so I can’t relate, but——.

“Aren’t there a lot of schools that admit students on Shogi skill alone these days? That way you wouldn’t have to study for an exam. I heard that’s what Big

Sis did.”

“Yeah, yeah. About Ginko!”

Ryou leans over the table.

“Never in a million years did I think she’d be going to high school. Machi and I were talking about it and our uniforms came up.”

“I was always required to wear a sailor-style school uniform, so I lacked the opportunity to see a blazer up close with my own eyes. Also——....”

“So, that’s why you’re both wearing the uniforms here,” I mumble.

Do that at home!

...Is what I want to say, but——.

“Hmmm I see. Ahh That makes sense”

This This is great!

Ryou has a bit of a *bad girl* vibe in that blazer, but *yeah*. To be blunt: she’s hot. That sassy cute appeal. The thing that makes teenage guys go nuts. Which I like. Problem?

On the other hand, Machi looks right at home as a noble girl.

The neat and tidy history behind the sailor-style uniform fits nobility like her perfectly Except the two things that go against her prim and proper upbringing are those lewd bulges under her blouse. Yes, those glorious boobs!

They rack up lots of points.

While a blazer would keep those missiles contained, they’re free to roam like this. Thanks to the design of the uniform, her boobs stick out enough to lift her blouse up just enough to catch a glimpse of her stomach. That kind of tease is only made possible by a school’s freedom to maintain a sailor-style school uniform tradition and a spring breeze

In conclusion, they’re both damn hot.

“By the way Which one do girls like better?”

“I’ve worn both ’cause my junior high had sailor-style, but I like the blazers,” says Ryou.

“Ho-hoo? Fresher memories are fonder?”

“Nah. I barely went to school in junior high.”

“.....”

What kind of reasoning is that?

“Since I was forced to wear sailor-style, wearing a blazer was just a distant fantasy of mine. However, I cannot deny my fondness for sailor-style uniforms.”

“Speaking of school clothes, I still wear my gym jersey when I’m kicking back at home.”

“My clothing of choice when playing for the association’s badminton club has always been my high school gym uniform. Seems well-worn clothes are well-loved because I still wear mine post-graduation.”

“Oh yeah, there’s that, too, don’t forget. What those kindergarten teachers wear Hey, trash. What are those things called again?”

“Smocks?”

“Ugghh You actually knew? Gross”

“Come on, what was that for?! You’re the one that asked me! Was that a trap or something?!”

“The swift recollection of the name was rather off-putting.”

“You too, Machi?! I hate having so much knowledge, damn it?!”

Since Charlette likes to play with crayons whenever she comes over, I thought it might be a good idea to have one at the apartment, so she doesn’t get her clothes dirty. I only know what they’re called because I looked it up online!

“Well, now that we have reaffirmed Ryuo’s Lolita complex Shall we proceed to the main event?”

“Main event?”

“Ginko. Machi and I are split on which uniform she’ll be wearin’. You already know, right?”

“No I don’t have a clue. She didn’t even tell me she was going to high school in the first place.”

“Then, I’m changin’ the question.”

With that, the two of them asked me a question straight out of a story I read somewhere before.

“Which do you wanna see, a fresh, new Ginko in a blazer?” Ryou asks, leaning in.

“Or would you prefer the tried-and-true Ginko in a sailor-style school uniform?” asks Machi, doing just the same.

“Say what?! What does what I want to see have to do with anything?!”

“Everything,” Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui declare with gusto! Then——.

“C’mon!”

“Which is it?!”

Two beautiful girls dressed in their old uniforms descend on me.

“B-Blazer or sailor?”

Ultimately Two choices!!

Very difficult But this situation comes up in Shogi as well.

All your research and preparation tell you that A is the way to go, but B is the one that looks better in the heat of battle. In most cases, the one you don’t

choose was the way to go.

But this isn't Shogi.

Right now, I should say what I really want to see——give it to them straight!!

“Ummm **bloomers?**”

For the next month, I endure the harsh reality of every single woman at Kansai Shogi Association calling me *Bloomer Ryuo* or *Mr. Smock* among other nicknames All because of bloomers.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Since Snow White and Cinderella collide in this book, I tried to mix in a few fairy tale references into the section titles.

The table of contents probably looks more like a collection of children's stories, but Rest assured, their battle is much more intense than ever before Rather, the book is riveting! Please enjoy!!!!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I drew the cover to contrast with Book One's cover art with Yaichi and Ai Hinatsuru. I hope you enjoy the subtle changes in the illustrations.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 9

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 9

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by SB Creative Corp.



SB Creative

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