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16

THE RYUO'S WORK  IS
NEVER DONE!



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THE RYUO'S WORK IS
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Battles for
Women's
Titles Have
Begun!

RINA SHAKANDO
Women's Legend

AI HINATSRU
Women's 1-dan

Hearts
Burning
Bright,
Young
Women
Step
Toward the
Future.

AI YASHAJIN
Women's 2-dan

KAREN NOBORYOH
Sub League 3-dan





Women's King

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka

"GET
MOVING,
TRASH.
AND
STICK
OUT
YOUR
ARM."

©shirabii

Yamashiro Ouka

Machi Kugui

"ESCORT
ME, WILL
YOU
NOT?
YAICHI."

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MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

The youngest Dual Title Holder in history: Dragon King Ryuo and Crown. Often, recently, watches videos of massive beehives being removed, which has caused him to hear the buzz of their wings during matches.



GINKO SORA

Yaichi's older sister apprentice and the first female professional Shogi player in history. Though she herself has ignored the recent trend of posting videos online, the most viral Shogi videos are tagged "Where is Ginko Sora now?"

AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice and Women's Legend challenger, she often appears in videos posted by her roommate and senior Woman's League player. The contributions on a livestream video the day she became the challenger exceeded the prize money for winning the title.



AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice who started a new business that posts videos on social media. A subordinate suggested creating a site that caters to elementary school students. The proposal garnered enough attention to get flagged by law enforcement.



RINA SHAKANDO

Women's Legend. Queen of four Women's Titles. After stubbornly holding out for years, she has upgraded to a smartphone at long last. A video of her dancing alongside her elementary school-aged apprentice went viral.



JIN NATAGIRI

Meijin challenger. He keeps close tabs on the social media accounts of every professional Shogi player. Despite leaving a "like" and commenting on every post, he is feared by his peers for some reason.

AYUMU KANNABE

A league professional Shogi player and Rina's apprentice. Posts videos of himself modeling fashionable items from his favorite foreign brands. As a result, brand designers have contacted him directly.



RYOU TSUKIYOMIZAKA

Women's King. She mainly posts videos of her motorcycle travels and gained more of a following as a biker girl than as a Shogi player. All her fans are assumed to be rebels of some sort.





THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 16

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Shirabii

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SCROLL

“Dad Are you really going to send that?”

The *tatami* mats are covered with long sheets of Japanese-style paper.

My father finishes the final stroke of “Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*” by writing his name with his ink-slathered brush, looks up at me and answers, “Course I am.”

This used to be a common sight. I used to even help out back when I was still in elementary school. Dad’s two live-in apprentices took over that job once they moved in.

Recently, though, he only does autographs. No one wants these big scrolls anymore.

The fact that the number of homes with a Japanese-style room has gone way down probably has something to do with it.

“Yaichi’s a feckless Master. So it’s up to me, his Master, to show those girls the right mindset fer title matches.”

“You’re right about Yaichi being feckless, but”

His older sister apprentice, his first apprentice, his second apprentice and even his childhood Shogi friend Four girls he’s got in limbo, and that’s just off the top of my head.

Nobody’d have to get hurt if he had just made up his mind a long time ago.

Well, not that he can help it.

Just like him my heart already has a first love and it’s not going anywhere.

So all those girls are fighting over the number two spot. It’s the fate all Shogi players face.

“It’s fine if you want to send one, but how about writing something that has a little more to do with Shogi? That’s your original, isn’t it, Dad?”

“What’s wrong with it?” My father says and puts down the brush with a satisfied grin. “All right! Now jus’ need to stamp my name on it once it’s dry an’ get it framed. Lemme think, I’ve got the shop’s number ‘round here

somewhere——”

“I’ll take care of it. You’ve got a lot to do now that you’ll be working as an observer, right?”

“Keika Thanks. Helpin’ me even when yar busy”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find the cheapest place online and have them do it.”

“Keika?!”

My father has been on edge ever since his two granddaughter apprentices qualified to challenge for titles.

So I didn’t notice until after the fact.

Realize what he’s been *too embarrassed* to say.

The person he really wanted to see this scroll was actually——

THE SHOGI MARTIAN AND THE VISITOR FROM THE FUTURE

“The player I want to be? Ginko Sora 4—dan, of course.”

That’s the answer that I gave in an interview before the title match Well, more like two five-match series—*Women’s Throne and Queen*—to determine who gets to take over the vacated titles.

It happened only two days after I promoted to 3-dan.

I saw myself as the second strongest female Shogi player in the world At that time I did, anyway.

“It’s my goal to follow in Sora—sensei’s footsteps and become the second woman in professional Shogi. You could say that’s the reason why I decided to participate in a Women’s League tournament. Yes, that’s right. I’m doing exactly what she did. I think the fastest way to catch up to her is to follow the path she forged herself so that I can become a professional.”

Ginko Sora-sensei.

She’s younger than me, but I’ve made it a point to always call her Sensei.

Saying I emulate her doesn’t even scratch the surface.

To me, she is No, to every woman and girl who aspires to play Shogi, she is a beacon of hope and dreams who shines as bright as the sun over the Shogi world!

Just thinking about everything she’s endured makes my heart ache

“It’s true that Sora—sensei is taking a leave of absence right now. But I believe that’s only because she’s been fighting alone in a man’s world up until now. Another woman joining her as a professional player would cut her burden in half. That’s why my goal is to become a professional No, becoming a professional Shogi player is my duty.”

I was there that day. I saw it happen with my own eyes.

Empress Ika Sainokami tearing Sora-sensei to shreds with some obscure

Ranging Rook ambush.

That's the day I came to hate Women's League players.

So nothing will stop me from getting her titles!

"I will take over Women's Throne and Queen, the titles that Sora—sensei held I, Karen Noboryou 3-dan, will follow in her footsteps."

Today is my first day on that stage.

A picture of Sora-sensei is tucked into the folds of my kimono right over my heart, to be exact.

My scarlet *hakama* trousers are surprisingly comfortable even though I haven't had a chance to break them in yet.

I'm not nervous at all. This was my first trip to a Japanese-style inn as a player, but I still got a full night's sleep. Maybe it's because I've been to this inn so many times before as a match recorder and I feel so at home that I can relax.

Making a beeline for the arena, I fling open the sliding door.

"I'm coming inside."

Waiting for me in that room is—a grade school girl.

“I saved a seat for you.”

My opponent for the next two title match series is sitting on her ankles in the lower seat. If I hadn't known better, I would've thought some Practice League member got lost and wandered in here.

Ai Yashajin Women's 2-*dan*.

She's 11, only moving up to sixth grade this spring.

“I realize you're only in the Sub League, but 3-*dan* is just one step away from turning professional. And you'll have plenty of chances to do so because you're only 19, right? Not to mention that, in terms of ranking, you have 3-*dan* and I'm 2-*dan*. So I'll let you have the upper seat this time.”

Since Sub League members are considered to be in training, a member of the Women's League is entitled to have the upper seat.

The thing is, though, this little girl has taunted me this way before.

I fell for it and was utterly defeated.

Back then, I was still in the lower ranks of the Sub League. It's practically ancient history.

“..... Do you know the sports where the difference between amateurs and professionals is the steepest?” I ask.

“Can't say I do. Baseball, maybe?”

“Sumo wrestling and Shogi,” I declare as I straddle my floor cushion like one of those massive wrestlers finding their stance before lowering myself onto it. “Let me show you how the *Yokozuna* wrestlers fight.”



The piece flip gives me the first move, and I take a deep breath.

Then, still in a low stance——

“*Hakkeyoi!!*”

I thrust the Pawn forward in front of my Rook with the same vigorous power of a champion sumo wrestler.

Ai Yashajin takes one look at it and snorts through her nose. Almost like she’s relieved.

“Heh.”

Then she ties back the sleeves of her kimono with cords to lock them in place. I guess she must’ve learned the hard way when one of them knocked her Lance off the board in her title match against Sora-*sensei*.

A little competitor who constantly cracks jokes to get her opponents’ guard down while never giving them an opening: that’s who this tiny girl is, and I know all too well.

“I was wondering what strategy you had prepared, coming into the arena like you’re ready to take on the world. But you use a plain and simple frontal attack. Planning to draw out the match with a *yagura* castle, are you?” says that preteen as she sticks out her right hand and goes with a rapid attack strategy I haven’t seen much before.

Yes. That’s good enough for you. It’s the only way you could ever hope to beat me

“Oh, come on now! If you won’t come to me, then I’ll go to you!”

Ai Yashajin moves her big pieces dynamically around the board to keep me contained. Her formation is filled with holes, but I get the feeling that striking one of them will only trigger a trap.

“..... You’re strong. Smart, too. And have a good amount of grit.” I praise my opponent as I finalize a strong, solid *yagura* around my King now that I’m on the defensive.

Honestly, I find her unique style and early-game sense very impressive.

Amateur Shogi players use all sorts of strategies just like this, and some of

those pop up in the pros every now and then.

Only a true prodigy could actually use them effectively at only 11 years old.

“But compared to the Shogi Martians in the Sub League—you’re a bottom feeder!!”

“!? Aghhh!!”

I push my fully loaded wrecking ball of a defensive front into the Swiss cheese modern and sophisticated formation she’s trying to pass off. It’s a sumo wrestling match between a champion and a grade-school aged amateur.

Sumo and Shogi.

What sets them apart from everything else? I have my own thoughts and give my own answer.

“Physique.”

That’s what it all comes down to in the end.

“Can a scrawny stick of a wrestler ever become *Yokozuna*? Heck no! Without a mind strong enough to calculate, no one can become a professional Shogi player! You have to have the brains for the effort to mean anything! Then there’s endurance! It’s been scientifically proven that fatigue saps mental



energy!!”

Shogi always comes back to the classic strategies.

Yagura Castle. Snow Roof. Bishop Exchange. Double Wing Attack. Side Pawn Capture. And there is also Central Rook, Third File Rook and Fourth File Rook.

“Take a look at the *yagura* you scoffed at for being old! See how all the pieces fit together like a glove?!”

“Hmph This is what you Sub League members call beautiful, is it?”

“Not at all.”

“Huh?”

I look over at the wide-eyed girl and say, “I get just as bored playing this way as everyone else! But that’s the way the world works! *That’s what it means to be in training!!*”

Just as sumo wrestlers continuously stomp the ground, crouch down into their stances and strike the wooden pole, we drill the strategies that have stood the test of time over and over again.

That’s how we get the stamina and the brainpower to carry on: the biggest difference between pros and amateurs.

Strategy and formation couldn’t matter less. They’re just training methods.

Calculation is everything!

“Now I’ve got you.”

“Ngh!”

Ambushes aren’t scary at all when you’re in gridlock. That’s when it’s time for the mental prowess I’ve built up to shine. Strength in the mid-game is what really, truly separates the pros from the amateurs.

The difference between real matches and Shogi puzzles is the number of pieces that are in use. One is a fabricated problem where using fewer pieces is seen as artistic, whereas 40 pieces constantly exist in an actual game. It’s obvious which one requires better calculation skills.

Interlock and drive all the way to the edge of the ring——

“HAVE A NICE FAAAAAALLLLLLLLLLL——!!”

That little girl is nothing but flimsy tissue paper compared to the muscle I’ve built up in the Sub League.

Then, just as I go to force checkmate ...

“?!”

Ai Yashajin starts doing something strange.

Her moves that little hand of hers is moving around the board like she’s putting together a puzzle. She’s already been thrown from the ring, but somehow she managed to defy gravity and flips her way back into it. Worse, there’s not a scratch on her——

“Wh- What was that sequence?”

“..... I’ll let you in on a little secret, Miss Shogi Martian.”

That grade school girl leans over the board to whisper into my ear.

“The truth is, I’m from the future.”

That makes absolutely no sense.

“..... Huh?”

“Probably still only five years from now, I think? It’ll be ten years from now by our next match.”

“F-Five years? Ten? What are you talking about——?”

“Don’t worry. I’m still not so sure how to play the Shogi I only just saw. So this series is going to be a full set. Including the Queen Title Match, we will be playing ten times.”

She sounds so confident, like prophesying the future

“With that much time, I’ll show you exactly what Shogi will look like 100 years from now.”

I found out how right she was ten matches later.

This little girl sitting in front of me really had seen Shogi from 100 years in the future.

POSTER

RECORD 1

KAREN NOBORYOU

- Occupation: Sub League (3-dan)
- Hometown: Tokyo (Hachijo Island)
- Favorite Things: Ginko Sora-sensei, dried mackerel
- Weakness: Airplanes



MISSION: MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

“Once I become Meijin———please accept my hand in marriage.”

Time comes to a screeching halt.

The person who said that, Ayumu Kannabe, is kneeling in front of a woman and holding up a small velvet box.

Inside that box is a ring with a huge diamond.

All of this is unfolding at the same table where I’m sitting, but it feels like it’s a world away.

“Oh? Is he?”

“Is that what I think it is?”

Other customers at the restaurant start noticing something is up. Lots of heads start turning our way as whispers crisscross the dining hall.

They build into waves of excited chatter that fill this high-class restaurant in Shibuya from corner to corner

Since they don’t know any specifics, I bet it probably looks like a stylish couple got dressed up to have some fun making some once-in-a-lifetime memories.

I mean, there’s a handsome young man wearing a white cape kneeling in front of a woman who looks straight out of Victorian England. Considering where we are, if someone told me they were taking themed pictures before their wedding, I just might buy it.

For those of us who know the details, however, it’s just as shocking as getting hit by a meteorite.

I mean——those two are Shogi Master and apprentice!

And she’s old enough to be his mother!

“.....”

This is so out of the blue that even the brash Aggressive Archangel, a.k.a. Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka is frozen in silence.

The first one of the three of us to make a move is Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui.

That move being opening her bag, taking out her camera and snapping as many pictures as she can!

“Dah! Machi?! Why are you taking pictures?!”

“The Future Meijin has made a marriage proposal!! What’s more, to his own Master, the Eternal Queen! This very moment could become pivotal in the history of Shogi! Any writer who would lead to this moment would have to be lost to the sands of time and would not be worth their clout!!”

She’s right about it being an important moment. *Assuming she accepts his proposal.*

“God Cauldron”

The woman on the receiving end—Women’s Legend Rina Shakando—gazes lovingly upon her dear apprentice and calmly answers, “Enough jesting. The poor young Dragon King is at a loss for words.”

“I am not speaking in jest!”

Ayumu is suddenly hot under the collar, but Shakando-*sensei just smiles at him.*

“What age were you when you first proposed to me, I wonder? Already in the Sub League, yes?”

“..... On the very day I promoted to 5-*kyu*. That was the first proposal.”

Say what?!

The first? That means this is already happened multiple times before, doesn’t it?

If he was 5-*kyu* back then, that means he would have been 11 years old. He probably got so excited about getting promoted that he proposed at the same time.

But That changes things.

Kids in kindergarten and grade school admire their teachers, and lots of them pop the question at some point or another. Even my apprentice’s friend

Charlette Isoir was giddy when I said, “Instead of my apprentice, you can be my bride!” back when she was six.

It goes without saying that I have no intention of marrying Charlette at all. Some people still seem to think I was serious, but I have a girlfriend.

Circumstances won’t let me see her, my older sister apprentice But I will never give up on Ginko. I don’t know where she is right now, but I will find her and marry her.

Hm? What would I do if multiple wives were allowed?

That would completely change how things play out (Shogi commentary-esque).

“Oh my, you’ve even prepared a ring? Promoting into A League does not make wasting your money acceptable. Return it for a full refund, understood?” says Shakando-*sensei* as if soothing a little kid as she glances toward the back room.

“Knowing you, you have instructed the staff to prepare cake and flowers for me, have you not? I shall cover those expenses——.”

“Please do not treat me as a mere child!”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard Ayumu raise his voice to his beloved Master like that.

“I admit that marriage may have been an unattainable goal in the past, that my proposals may have seemed in jest. Now that I have taken a position in A League, the title of Meijin is within my grasp! All that remains is to take hold! I wish for you to see me as a Shogi player worthy of your hand once I have become the Meijin!!”

“Once you have become Meijin is it?”

Shakando-*sensei* had been smiling up to that point. She closes her eyes.

“The word Meijin is not to be taken so lightly.”

Then, a frigid glare the likes of which we’ve never seen before greets us when the Eternal Queen opens them again.

“A condition for marriage? You could not have seriously believed that doing so

would delight me. It seems that I erred at some point during your tutelage.”

“.....”

Ayumu’s face turns pale with shock.

To him, Shakando-*sensei* is pretty much a goddess. He worships the ground she walks on.

Being rejected by her has to be his biggest fear.

Though that would mean the proposal was doomed to fail from the start

Even so, Ayumu desperately clings to any last shred of hope and keeps holding out the ring.

The next words that accompany his Master’s Arctic gaze take us all by surprise.

“Are you aware of why my title is not the Women’s Meijin but is instead the *Women’s Legend*?”

“.....?”

The four of us exchange confused glances.

Actually I don’t think I’ve ever thought about that before. Other women’s titles like King and Empress are taken directly from their pro counterparts.

“Tsukiyomizaka-*Women’s King*. Do you know the reason?”

“Don’t tack on the title, c’mon”

If a current Women’s Title holder doesn’t know, then there’s no way I’d have a clue.

“Upon its founding, the title was intended to be Women’s Meijin. However——” Shakando-*sensei* sighs under her breath. “A handful of board members claimed that the title of Meijin would be wasted on a Women’s League player. A counterproposal of Meijin Apparent was made, but it was ultimately rejected at a Players Meeting. That is the true weight behind the word Meijin.”

“A Players Meeting?,” I echo unconsciously.

The Shogi Association of Japan is a society made up of professional Shogi

players. Achieving the rank of 4-*dan* is required to become an official member.

And official members are the only ones who have a say in determining which direction the association goes at Players Meetings.

Women's League players with 4-*dan* are allowed to participate nowadays, but I've heard that wasn't always the case.

In other words, a group of men decided that the title of Meijin was too valuable to give to a woman back then.

"..... Those fools!" Ayumu spits through gritted teeth.

Neither of us sees the title of Meijin as sacred. It's more like our way to refer to the godly person who currently has it, along with three other titles. The title of Dragon King Ryuo, which outranks Meijin, already existed when we were born.

"..... But I can picture the ones who'd say things like that"

My Master Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, for one.

Having challenged for the title of Meijin twice, it's obvious he has a special attachment to it.

That's not because it's the only title he challenged for, though.

I'm sure that those feelings were the norm for his generation.

I don't want to think he'd oppose a Meijin title for the Women's League, and I believe he wouldn't. It's just I know how sacred it is to him.

The title of Meijin.

"It is true that having a Meijin emerge from his family line was my Master, Sadatoshi Ashigara's ultimate goal and his last request of me before his death. It was for that purpose that I, a woman, took on a male apprentice and committed myself to grooming him to do just that."

There are Women's League players who have Women's League players as Masters.

But as far as pro male players go, Ayumu is the only one to have a Women's League player as his Master.

Making that a reality couldn't have been easy.

That shows just how much Ayumu's talent caught *Shakando-sensei's* eye, but——

"Nevertheless, the thought of becoming that apprentice's wife has never once crossed my mind. I want to be the Meijin's Master."

"....."

Ayumu collapses, breaking his fall with his hand at the last moment. He probably just realized how shallow he has been.

Not to mention that getting to the top of A League isn't easy in the first place.

Even if you do pull it off, a seven-match series against that godly last boss is waiting at the end. Anyone, not just *Shakando-sensei*, would get the urge to tell him to say that once you beat him after hearing what he said.

"I have lost my appetite."

Sensei sounds bored as she looks away from Ayumu.

"Though it pains me to do so after all of you have gathered to celebrate my apprentice's promotion to A League, I have my own title match to attend to. I shall excuse myself."

"! Master, allow me to escort——."

"That won't be necessary."

"Master"

Ayumu, ignored like an abandoned puppy, can only watch as Sensei takes hold of her cane and climbs to her feet by herself.

Machi then stands up and says, "*Shakando-sensei*. Allow me to take you back to your abode."

"Thank you, Machi."

Shakando-sensei takes Machi's outstretched arm without complaint.

"It may be rude of me to say, but would you also wed my apprentice while you're at it? In my opinion, a handsome couple such as yourselves would make a wonderful pair"

“I decline. Unlike you, I would rather not be betrothed to a man better looking than myself.”

“I see: the everyman is more your taste He-he-he.”

For some reason, the two of them smirking at me sends a cold chill down my spine.

“W-Wait, Master! Please! I still——”

Ayumu reaches out for the frilly hem of Shakando-sensei’s dress only to be stopped by Ryou grabbing the collar of his shirt from behind.

“You’ve made enough of a scene already. Pathetic.”

“Ngh! Release me, Gabriel!!”

“Not happening. Hey, Trash. Grab his legs.”

“Got it!”

Ryou’s got Ayumu in a headlock, using every bit of her upper body strength to hold him back. I rush in to help. Who knows what’ll happen if it gets out that the Women’s League Title Holder had a lover’s spat with an A League Shogi player?

Worse, my apprentice is about to challenge for her title, Women’s Legend! I won’t let the media have a field day. Sorry Ayumu, but you’ve done enough for one night!

Now.

All that’s left is how to explain this to our audience——.

“May I have your attention please?”

Before we can figure out what to do, some of the staff step up for us.

“What you’ve just witnessed is one of our restaurant’s special services! A man just surprised a woman with a marriage proposal right at this very table!”

“As you can see, we are here to help even when things don’t go as planned!”

The tension clears immediately.

Since this is a high-class establishment, there aren’t any rubberneckers around with their phones out to take pictures Machi took tons, but her camera

looks professional enough that everyone probably assumed she was working as a camera person anyway. Whew, that was lucky.

Since the staff managed to pass off what happened as a failed surprise and to get the restaurant back to business as usual, all I can say to them is “good job.”

As the two of us are taking Ayumu out the door like a fallen log, I say to Ryou, “Just what you’d expect from a fancy restaurant, right?”

“Yeah. And this bonehead is the reason we’ll never get to come back.”

She’s absolutely right.

STRATEGY MEETING

“Thanks for having us!!”

It’s been a long time since I stepped through that small curtain into this shop, but it hasn’t changed at all over the years.

Kannabe Tofu is on the first floor of Ayumu’s parents’ house.

After Ryou and I muscled Ayumu into a taxi, the three of us traveled all the way here to his family’s tofu shop in Fukagawa.

Ayumu still lives in the room on the second floor where he grew up. I don’t know why, but I have to stop myself from giggling whenever I picture him putting on that white cape of his in here and going to play a match. By the way, Ryou also lives with her parents in Chofu, Tokyo. There’s no merit in paying high rent and living on your own in Tokyo when your parents have a house there already. A lot of unmarried Shogi players do just that.

Machi shows up not long after we arrive. All of us sit in a circle and start the meeting.

“Being in this room in this company brings about a wave of nostalgia.”

This nine by nine, four-and-a-half tatami-mat room is just as barren as it was back in grade school. He only has a Shogi board and a computer in here. The only difference is that there are more clothes now.

Players in our generation usually have a videogame system or some manga in their room, but not Ayumu. Maybe he wants to always feel like he’s in an arena? He doesn’t even keep Shogi books in here. He never has.

“When was the last time the four of us were here?”

“Probably the day Trash went pro, yeah? You crashed here that night.”

“Oh yeah. I remember now.”

Sub League members are broke. Travel expenses for the 3-*dan* division are covered by the association, but I always stayed with Ayumu to save money rather than pay for a hotel.

He'd also stay at Master Kiyotaki's place when he had matches in Kansai, and Machi used to host all of us at her place in Kyoto for practice sessions

Empty as it is, I sure have a lot of memories in this room.

"Aren't you the one who made that scratch in the wall, Ryou? That time you tackled Ayumu?"

"Ahhh, yeah. He was gripin' that my release was sloppy in the middle of a match and that ticked me off so much I jumped him. Sloppy release, huh? I'll show ya up close and personal! Had him pinned down with my fist cocked an' ready to go, too."

I'm amazed they're still on talking terms, let alone friends.

"You had a really short fuse back then, Ryou I lost count how many times you punched me"

"Kids are kids, don't go blaming me," Ryou snaps back.

Machi adds, "I was not prone to rush to violence, if you remember?"

"..... I remember you pushing me down the stairs in the middle of the night when I was on my way to the bathroom, and locking me inside once I was there"

"Ohhhh? ≡ It could have been a wily spirit playing tricks on you!"

"So, you admit to being a demon? At last, you show your tail, wicked fox!"

Wow. We never run out of things to talk about when the four of us get together. Fun times.

Well, I suppose it's just three of us because Ayumu hasn't said a word. Then again, he was always the quiet one. Even in his own house, all the guy ever talks about is Shogi.

Yeah, we're Ayumu's best friends and he still doesn't tell us about himself.

That's why we're always surprised when he does something crazy.

"So? Why did you propose out of the blue like that?"

"....."

This is Ayumu's room, but he's just sitting there hugging his knees. Completely

silent, he looks tiny over there.

“You were serious Yeah? The three of us know you don’t joke around like that.”

“And that you’ve adored that ha- *Shakando-sensei* since way back.”

Ryou is terrible at picking up on these things, but even she knows how Ayumu feels. Everyone does.

But I thought it was more admiration than anything else.

To think he’d actually propose to her

“That being said, there’s a time and a place, right? *Shakando-sensei*’s title match is about to start and romance is the last thing you should be thinking about right before your first A League match.”

“And that ha- Sensei has a rough time playing on her own, yeah? Having someone there to help out gives her a big leg up, but you put a freakin’ wrecking ball through your relationship right before the series starts? Are ya brain dead?”

“Despite her coarse words, O-Ryou speaks the truth. Should news of this incident become known, images of you assisting *Shakando-sensei* during the Women’s Legend Title Match would draw the media in like shark bait,” says Machi, completely ignoring the fact that she’s the one who prepped the bait with all the pictures she took.

“Speaking of which, she entrusted me with a message for you. You need not accompany me during this title match series. Focus on your own Shogi.”

“.....”

Getting rebuked by his Master via Machi after our interrogation makes Ayumu shrink smaller still.

This is the worst possible outcome for his longshot proposal.

I’m starting to feel bad for him. Right when I am trying to figure out a way to compliment him, Ayumu finally says something quietly under his breath.

“..... I wanted you to be witnesses.”

“Witnesses?”

In other words to be there when he proposed?

Shakando-*sensei* did try to play it off as a childish joke. Since he seems to have tried many times before, I can understand the logic behind getting other people involved to show that he's serious.

Still

"It's not uncommon for pros to marry Women's League players, but Has a Master ever married an apprentice before?"

"It has happened, in the 1980s to be precise," answers Machi. "Though the male Master was older in that instance. In fact, men in a variety of fields, not just in Shogi, have been betrothed to female apprentices they took under their wing plenty of times before. It's a common pattern."

"Which means that when it turns out you end up married to that kid apprentice of yours someday it's normal. Ain't that nice, Trash?"

"How about that? The Master-apprentice hurdle isn't that high after all not that I care!! W-W-W-We aren't talking about me right now!!"

"What's with the stutter storm? Seriously, Trash, you aren't really?"

"No, no, 100 times no! My apprentices and I aren't like that one little bit!!"

But there have been close calls.

Ai Yashajin has made her feelings about me very clear, and we live together.

Not to mention the reason that Ai Hinatsuru, the one about to play against Shakando-*sensei* in a title match series, moved out after being my live-in apprentice was *Cough, cough, cough!*

If either of these facts gets out, the Shogi world is as good as dead. Panicking, I change the subject.

"Hypothetically! Just hypothetically! Even if Masters and apprentices have gotten married before There are other problems!"

"Aaagh? Like what?"

"Think of all the female fans that Ayumu finally has. What do you think will happen once it gets out that he proposed to his Master the instant he got into A League? The association's image would take a big hit, right? With Ayumu's

handsome player with spotless record reputation to protect.”

“Spotless reputation. Not a single rumor Hah!” Ryou snorts through her nose.

“Don’cha think his following would skyrocket if he had a rep for liking cougars?”

“Do not be so rude, O-Ryou. Besides, it is not older women that strike Ayumu’s fancy, but Shakando-*sensei* only Though it would prove a difficult blow for the Shogi world to endure”

An experienced writer and editor for Shogi magazines herself, Machi holds her head while she thinks.

I understand a lot more than I used to after everything I saw her go through to get my book published.

“Young, handsome players answering the question What is your type? has become the backbone of many an interview. Access to that knowledge convinces many to buy magazines.”

“A lot of Ayumu’s fans want to marry him, seriously. There are even quite a few mothers who are trying to set him up with their daughters. It’s bizarre how many mother-daughter pairs come up to him”

It’s completely different from the usual parents accompanying their grade-school aged child at Shogi events.

Mothers are accompanying daughters who are clearly old enough to get married. They get dressed up and come to get Ayumu’s autograph or take instructional lessons from him. Sitting side by side in kimonos across from him like that, it looks like an arranged marriage is being set up

“One such as I has returned!”

Just then, an overly energetic voice echoes up the first floor.

“What is today’s snack, mother? *Dorayaki* bean pastries? Oh, and there were many shoes by the front door. Do we have guests?”

Step, step, step Someone’s coming upstairs. Based on the sounds, I’d say—

“..... A sixth grader.”

“Gross!”

I was only joking, but Ryou sounds genuinely shocked. I mean, that voice is impossible to mistake.

Sliding the door open with vigor is—the grade school girl who wears her hair up like cat ears, Maria Kannabe.

“Ugh?! Wh-What are the likes of you doing here?!”

“Hello.”

Ayumu’s little sister is giving us the evil eye as we wave back to her.

That’s when Ryou’s inner bully makes its move.

“Sub League members ain’t supposed to have tasty stuff like that. Distracts from training, yeah? Fork half of ’em over.”

“Quiet you! One such as I will not be ordered around by the weed who was demoted from the Sub League and scurried away with her tail between her legs! And in my own house, no less!”

“You’re the one who should start scurrying! I’ve been in and out of this room since before you were born, half-pint!”

No, Maria had already been born. It’s just that we were so focused on Shogi that we never noticed anything else. For kids who daydream about Shogi, a person who can’t play may as well be empty air

Ryou deals with Maria by swatting back at her, swiping a handful of *dorayaki* as she complains, “One such as I never!” and then escorted her to a seat on the floor.

“Oh, hey,” said Ryou while wolfing down pastries, “I’m starving. You?”

“I forgot about it after everything that happened, but we didn’t eat anything at the restaurant, did we?”

Fancy food is great, but I could go for something else right now Something simple, like what you’d find at a small restaurant off the main street. Something I can really sink my teeth into. Man, I’m hungry

Machi puts a finger to her cheek and elegantly says.

“I would like to indulge in that dish. It has been far too long.”

“By that do you mean what the shop downstairs is known for? Right?!”

“What else? Whip some up.”

“What?! What is this dish?!”

It’s called Fukagawa Tofu.

“I shall be borrowing both your kitchen and a block of firm tofu.”

Fukagawa Tofu is a local dish that came from an old Tokyo suburb. It’s just tofu with the clams this area is known for. Simple, right?

Even though Machi is from Kyoto, she’s really good at making it.

“This dish shares much in common with Kyoto’s cuisine. Its simplicity brings out the best flavors of quality ingredients directly.”

“As they say, Kyoto’s flavor and Naniwa’s appetite!”

Master taught me that one when he was drunk.

It was on the same day that he beat Ayumu in a placement match, now that I think about it. Master was demoted and Ayumu got promoted anyway, but you’d have never guessed it if you saw their faces right after the match.

Ayumu built up a huge lead after taking Master’s Bishop in the early game, but completely fell apart after that. He never collapses to that degree, and my memories of it are still crystal clear

He obviously wasn’t himself, and today I found out why.

Placement matches were just that important to him and having his promotion come down to one match must have put tons of pressure on his shoulders.

Not getting promoted would push back becoming Meijin by one year which also meant getting married to *Shakando-sensei* would be delayed by at least that long ... In his mind, anyway.

Memories pass through my head one after another and the tofu is ready before I know it. That was fast.

“So good!!”

Clams and parsley are both in season in the spring.

That means that right now is the best time to have Fukagawa Tofu!

“Yum, yum, yum~. ≡ One such as I had grown tired of clams, but pairing them like this makes for one fancy cheeseburger~. ≡”

Maria is thoroughly impressed with Machi’s cooking. Ayumu eats in silence. At least he has an appetite. That’s a good sign.

“Fukagawa’s clams are delicious indeed. Generally speaking, the flavor of Kyoto’s cuisine has an air of refinement not found in Tokyo. When it comes to seafood, however, that is not the case.”

Machi casually glances in my direction.

“Not to mention that I am quite skilled with tofu. Yaichi can surely attest to that. Hee-hee. ≡”

“.....!! Y-Yeah

Memories of the boiled tofu I had at Nanzenji Temple come flooding back and my cheeks get hot.

I didn’t find out until after the fact, but the Okazaki area around Nanzenji in Kyoto has lots of love hotels. I had no idea how much danger I was in This must be what a piece of fried tofu feels like being stuck between a fox’s teeth

“..... Anyway, I understand how you’re feeling, Ayumu.”

Now that I’ve got a belly full of hot Fukagawa tofu, it’s time to get back to the matter at hand.

Tofu shops open bright and early, and there’s lots to do to get ready. So Ayumu’s parents are already in bed. We can’t stay here much longer. It’s time to wrap it up.

“We will act as witnesses. None of us will pretend your proposal didn’t happen.”

“.....!”

Ayumu's chopsticks freeze. He looks up from his tofu and locks eyes with me.

"But would you leave the rest up to us? We'll look into how Shakando-sensei feels I can't guarantee it will be the one you want, but I promise we'll get an answer."

My friend listens closely and says——

"..... It is in your hands."

He then lowers his head in a bow.

That's how I came to assist in the love life of my apprentice's opponent in an upcoming title match. Talk about a precarious position.

..... Is this the kind of work the Ryuo is supposed to do?

REUNION

“Ayano! Charlette, too!”

I’m at the hotel in Hakone that’s hosting the first Women’s Legend Title Match.

Waiting for me just outside the front door are two faces I haven’t seen in a long time.

“Ai-*taaan!*”

“Whoa?! Charlette, have you grown?”

The one with the squeaky voice who just ran in for a hug is Charlette Isoir. I try to catch her but fall backwards instead. I-It’s a good thing there’s grass here.

“Ai I’m so glad,” says Ayano Sadatou as she rushes up to help. I nod with a smile, but——

“.....! Ayano?”

I don’t know what to say.

Ayano is crying her eyes out. Tears are rolling down her cheeks.

“So glad that you’re challenging for a title R-Really glad!!”

“Thanks And, sorry, Ayano. For not saying anything when I left”

I didn’t talk to them when I decided to transfer to Kanto.

Not even when I moved or got a new phone number They must’ve thought I cut them out of my life. Just like the way I cut off most of my hair.

But if I hadn’t

“You two are just so important to me I didn’t think I could go through with it if I saw you or heard your voices. So I——”

“We understand. We know that you went to Tokyo to get stronger.”

Ayano takes off her glasses so she can wipe her eyes.

“I still remember your Practice League Entrance Exam as if it were yesterday

.....”

“You were my first opponent, weren’t you, Ayano?”

“I lost in every sense of the word I could feel the difference in our talent and ability that day, but also in determination. You came to Osaka all by yourself and fought Sora-sensei all the way to the end without giving up——”

I had to promise to go back home if I lost any of the matches in the exam, but I did lose the last one.

“Even so, you refused to give up and prostrated yourself in *dogeza* before your parents. It was enough to convince them to change their conditions: instead of returning home, you would be earning a title before graduating junior high school as the new condition. They let you keep playing Shogi. Now here you are, one step away from fulfilling it! Congratulations!!”

“Yep! Thanks, Ayano! Charlette!”

And the person who did *dogeza* right next me is——

“Umm Are you the only ones who came from Kansai?”

“Ai-tan. Masta, not here.”

“.....!!”

My face turns bright red. W-Was I hoping to see Master that much?

“..... We haven’t spoken with Kuzuryu-sensei since you left, either. Charlette has been meaning to ask him to become her Master so she can join the Practice League, but”

The rules say that you need to have a Master when you join the Practice League if you’re planning to become a Women’s League player.

But the Practice League also works as a classroom. Some girls join it just for fun and then think I want to join the Women’s League after all! and get a Master later.

“My Master tells me that Kuzuryu-sensei wrote a book. Now he is busy doing promotion work at individual bookstores I don’t think that is more important than this title match, though”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about me! More importantly——” I look at the big

notebook in Ayano's arms and add, "You get to be a journalist today, don't you? Good luck!"

"Yes! I don't know if I'll be able to write a masterful piece like you did for Ten-chan during her title match, but I will do my utmost!"

This is why the two of them came from Osaka.

Ayano's Master is editor-in-chief of the Shogi Association's official magazine.

She almost never makes selfish requests, but her saying, I will never ask for anything again! convinced him to let her work as a journalist for my title match.

I was touched. Encouraged, too.

"Cha, too! Cha's da phwotaggwafa!!"

"Great! Take lots of good pictures, Charlette!"

She wants to get into the Women's League, and Ayano wants to become a Shogi journalist.

Both of them are doing work for my title match.

It's their way of telling me—we're in this fight together.

—The Grade Schooler Practice Group is still connected! Even when we're apart

I also have one more precious friend.

She left on her own to get stronger before I did. I've made up my mind to contact her so I can tell her myself after I win.

"If I may, I would like to begin gathering material for my article—," Ayano says as she looks all over the place.

Of course, she's looking for the other person in the title match.

Once she spots her a little ways away, "?! Shakando-sensei is alone? I thought that Kannabe 8-dan was always by her side"

"He usually is. It was a real surprise when I didn't see him with her when we all met up in Shinjuku station."

"Hmm. That's interesting"

Ayano opens her notebook.

“Hakone is in fact the hometown of Ashigara 9-*dan*, Shakando-*sensei*’s Master. In other words, Hakone may be a hometown second only to where she was born in Kamakura in Shakando-*sensei*’s eyes. Perhaps she feels comfortable enough here to travel by herself.”

Which means that she has the advantage of playing at home.

But as a competitor, knowing that my opponent has connections to the venue also makes me want to try that much harder to win.

“This opening match might be extra difficult for you”

“Yes, but——”

““But?””

“If I can win here, that means I can win anywhere, doesn’t it?”

“.....! Y-Yes! That’s the mindset to have!”

That’s why I can’t afford to lose this match no matter what!

I’m more determined than ever now.

Ayano asks me casually, “By the way, you’re so fashionable today, Ai! You have always been cute but living in Tokyo seems to have brought you out of your shell!!”

“Ai-tan, da dwess Yew’re shwoulders are sticking owut.”

“Ahaha This is, well, um”

I’m not used to wearing dresses that don’t cover my shoulders, and it’s embarrassing having them pointed out. I cover them with my hands and am surprised by how cold my skin is. The cherry blossoms are out for spring, but it’s still chilly up in the mountains of Hakone.

——Maybe I should’ve worn something else

While I love reuniting with my friends, I can’t help but think of another *sister in arms* who was originally going to be here——

It was only three days after I became the Women’s Legend Challenger.

“I’m sorry. For real, I am,” says my roommate, Tamayo Rokuroba Women’s 2-*dan*, as she bows her head to me.

And keeps going all the way to *dogeza*.

“I mean, who would’ve thought Jin-Jin would become the Meijin Challenger?! After a heartbreaking loss like that one, you’d think he’d be inconsolable for a while, right?! That’s why I went out and signed up as a commentator for your title matches and booked a whole bunch of instructional matches, but Well, um With Jin-Jin in the Meijin Title Match, I’d um rather do those instead So

“Ohhh? Hmmmph?”

I give her a bright smile and nod, but there’s one thing I want to check.

“Who was it that said, If you’re too scared to go alone, I’ll tag along as moral support. I’ve got plenty of room on my schedule since I opened it up for a title match I’m not in! to me when I was crying my heart out after becoming the challenger?”

“Yes, that was me, but! I was being a good senior to you, you know? I was the one who made the mistake, so I didn’t want you to be feeling guilty——”

“My title match was confirmed before Natagiri-*sensei*’s, wasn’t it?”

“Y-Yes, that’s true, but just by one day! Not even 24 hours!!”

“Well, I think it’s only right to prioritize the one that came first, even if it was just one day. Don’t you think that canceling all those bookings puts the scheduling staff in a tough spot? Should Women’s League players be acting that self-centered in the first place? I guess that when push comes to shove, you’re the type of person who puts love in front of work and your friends, Rokuroba-*sensei*.”

“Aaagh

“Then again, I guess that’s why you get called the Practice Session Crusher, isn’t it?”

“Forgive me already, will you?! I’m sorry for patronizing you, oooooookay?!!”

Since Rokuroba-*sensei* is showing some remorse for things she said to me in

the past, I switch things up and give her kind encouragement.

“Just kidding! Of course, go root for Natagiri-*sensei*!”

“Are Are you sure?”

“That’s where you want to be, isn’t it? Leaving me all by myself”

“You just said you wanted me to go!!”

Rokuroba-*sensei* knows I’m not really angry at her, of course. She’s just shy because she’s close to making a breakthrough with her special someone and is trying to make an excuse to be with him! That does irk me a little bit, though
.....

“Oh, I’m not worried about you at all. After beating Machi like that, winning the title on your own will be a cinch.”

“It will?”

“Going against Shakando-*sensei* in her golden years is one thing, but she’s hands down the weakest of the Women’s Title Holders nowadays. Even I beat her in a league match.”

“..... What was it like playing against her?”

After starting out in the Women’s Legend League with three straight losses, I had almost given up all hope of ever being the challenger.

Since I would never play against Shakando-*sensei* in a league match, I didn’t start studying her match records until I knew I would be going against her for the title.

Not only is there nowhere near enough time to prepare anyway, but the Eternal Queen has over 900 Women’s League match records to her name. That doesn’t even count the nearly 200 matches against professional players. I can’t go through every single one.

So talking with someone who has experience playing against her is my chance to get valuable information!

“I used Ranging Rook and, yeah, she did a Static Rook *anaguma* And I ended up winning after some struggling, I guess? That happens a lot when two styles go against each other.”

That's no help at all

"Hey, what's with that no help at all look on your face, hm?"

"I wasn't thinking that."

"Besides ..."

Rokuroba-sensei stops sitting on her ankles and crosses her legs instead while talking.

"It'll be harder for Kuzuryu-sensei to say hello if I'm there."

".....!"

"Don't you think this is the perfect chance to make up? You are Master and apprentice, too."

I deliberately disobeyed Master's wishes and came to Tokyo. I haven't even heard his voice since our last match in Osaka.

So I have no idea how he feels about me being in a title match.

Is he happy for me?

Or is he angry at me?

Kugui-sensei said things that made it sound like they'd spent a lot of time together during our match on the final day of the Women's Legend League. Since beating her is what made me the challenger in the first place, Master might be angry with me after all

"..... Master, are you going to come?"

"Oh, he'll come all right. I guarantee it," Rokuroba-sensei casually declares.

"With this being your first title match, you'll have this wide-eyed air about you that'll make him putty in your hands. He'll get some annoying lolicon-esque sense of duty to *be the one who has to protect you* and hop a train out from Osaka. You'll see."

"But"

"Look, there's something in the air during title matches. Kind of like a festival, yeah? I've heard tons of stories about professional players and Women's League players ending up together after working side by side."

“!! Please tell me all the details.”

People with experience are so much more convincing. Amazed, I hang on to every word.

“Oh, and you want to pick your clothes carefully. You only have to wear a kimono when you’re actually playing. Since the rest is all up to you, that’s when you get to make your case. Show him that living in Tokyo has brought you out of your shell, and he won’t stand a chance.”

Rokuroba-*sensei* pulls out her smartphone and opens a shopping app.

“No lolicon could resist this little number right here. See? A sleek dress like this with open shoulders? You’re almost in junior high, so why not show off?!”

“That?! It’s so revealing that Master would love it”

“Right?! Since it’s warm out now, you could also show a little tummy——”

From there, we talked about what clothes our special guys like for hours.

It felt like a reward for all my hard work getting all the way to the title match I enjoyed it a lot.

A SPECIAL MORNING

“That isn’t too tight to breathe, is it, Ai?” said the mother in a shaky voice as she finished tying the *obi* sash on her daughter’s kimono.

“It’s fine, Mom! Actually, tighter might be better. I’ll be standing up and sitting down a lot during the match.”

“..... Oh, this is no good. I shouldn’t be anywhere near this nervous,” Akina Hinatsuru sighed while staring at her shaky fingers.

In addition to her responsibilities as owner, Akina also ran a hair salon within the inn that specialized in wedding and formal hairstyles. Years of training at beauty school had made her one of the best in the business.

Today, however, her hands were not on the same page——

“I’m sorry, Mom, for asking you to come do this when you’re really busy,” said Ai, recognizing that her mother wasn’t her usual self today. “But, this is for Shogi I wanted you to be the one to help me get dressed for my first match in my first title match series.”

“Ai Yes, that was our promise,” Akina answered with a nod while running her fingers through her daughter’s short hair.

It happened right after Ai came to Tokyo. She lived at her mother’s inn, the HinaTsuru, for a short time before coming to share a room with Tamayo Rokuroba.

Confronted with the harsh reality of a three-match losing streak in the Women’s Legend League, the still long-haired and depressed Ai Hinatsuru had spent a great deal of time wandering around Sendagaya and Shinjuku stations.

——I thought there was a chance Master might find me if I was there.

It was her mother who cut those long locks.

And they shared a promise.

Someday, when Ai became a title challenger, Akina would be the one to set her hair.

Although her promise was now fulfilled Akina voiced her one regret.

“I would prefer to have hosted your first title match at the HinaTsuru

“There’s nothing you could have done. Even I didn’t think I would be playing in the title match after I lost the first three matches in a row!”

Akina continued to decorate her daughter’s hair while saying everything she would have done differently given the chance.

Ai responded as light and cheerful as possible.

“And besides, *Shakando-sensei* has had the Women’s Legend titles for 29 years in a row. The first match has been played in Hakone for over 20 years now. It’s tradition and everyone wants to keep it going.”

“

Akina was left speechless by her daughter’s clear-cut explanation.

Ai continued.

“But I want to play a title match at the HinaTsuru next year.”

“!!”

It was a declaration.

A declaration that she would win the title and be in the Women’s Legend Title Match again the following season. At that time, however, it would be her first as a title holder.



“So, Mom! Keep the schedule open, please!”

“..... Ai You’ve become so strong”

Akina pressed a handkerchief to the corners of her eyes.

—Mom is crying?! I-Is she feeling okay

Ai pretended not to notice the glistening in her mother’s eyes. If she hadn’t she would have broken down in tears herself before her battle had even started.

“Oh, and Mom, I’m surprised to see you wearing Western clothes.”

“What kind of a mother steals the spotlight from her own daughter?”

The pair shared a giggle.

“She’s here!”

Fully dressed in traditional Japanese style and perfectly adorned, Ai made her way down the long hallway to the arena and was met halfway by event staff and journalists all raising their cameras in unison.

“Good morning!”

Ai set her feet and answered them with a proper bow. Taking Tamayo Rokuroba’s lessons to heart allowed her to receive passing marks for conduct during her first time on the big stage.

“She’s pretty bold for one so small.”

“Agreed. She doesn’t look intimidated at all.”

“That’s the Ryuo’s first apprentice for you.”

“This reminds me of when Naniwa’s Snow White challenged for her first title way back when.”

Whispers reached her ears.

Had this taken place when she first arrived in Tokyo, her head would have surely been on a swivel as she searched for support.

However, the lessons that Tayamo’s words and conduct had taught her

became Ai's shield.

—Thank you so much, Tamayon-*sensei*!

Ai silently thanked her roommate who was attending a Meijin Title Match with Jin Natagiri. Even though she wasn't in the room, her words still gave Ai an encouraging push.

Lifting her head, Ai strode down the middle of the rest of the hallway to the arena.

At the end of it—.

“? Is that?”

A woman with a wobbly gait was using the wall to keep her balance. Ai couldn't believe her eyes.

—Shakando-*sensei*? Alone without a cane?!

Reflexes took over.

“..... *Sensei*!”

Forgetting that she was dressed in an ornate kimono, Ai sprinted down the hall to offer her arm to Rina Shakando. Her parents, owners of a Japanese inn, had taught her to always assist people with disabilities. Those lessons were being put to use.

“*Sensei*. Allow me.”

“Hm?”

Confused by Ai's offer, Rina paused for a moment.

She smiled a moment later and took Ai's outstretched hand.

“Thank you. What a kind child you are.”

The two proceeded to the arena walking shoulder to shoulder. Had any title match ever begun like this? Not likely, because a challenger being friendly and offering assistance to the title holder would be thought of as a flatterer and would surely be met with harsh criticism.

However.

“Whoa!”

“What a beautiful sight.”

“What better way to start a battle between generations could there be than this?!”

The staff and journalists present who witnessed their entrance were deeply touched.

Ai in a kimono and Rina in a fancy, Western-style dress. They crossed the threshold into the arena at the same moment.

The match recorder then slowly guided Rina to the upper seat. Sitting down, the Women’s Legend helped herself to a cup of tea waiting for her beside the board.

“Maria has told me so much about you,” said Rina kindly as she looked over at Ai, sitting attentively across from her.

“Had today not been a weekday, I would have wished for her to accompany me But education takes priority before entering high school these days, does it not? A Shogi field trip was considered to be of the utmost importance in my school days. How I long for them”

The Women’s Legend struck up a conversation while taking in the view out the window.

“Such sweet nostalgia I commuted from here in Hakone to the Women’s League Training Association when I first became an apprentice. Once I became a proper member of the Women’s League and got busy with matches, Master proposed that he and I, along with his family, should move to Tokyo. All so that my bum leg would not cause me unnecessary hardship during transit”

“.....”

“Master had a saying. *No romance or makeup until you have a title.* I was a live-in apprentice to him and scolded for doing my homework when discovered. If I had the time for it, he’d yell that I should be playing Shogi Did the young Ryuo ever say such things to you?”

“Ah umm, well”

“My apologies. You have not come here to listen to the ramblings of someone over the hill like me, yes?”

“N-Not at all! That was, um very enlightening!”

“Heh heh. A kind child indeed.”

Rina repeated herself once more in saying that Ai was kind. This time, however, with a much sharper gaze.

Battle was drawing near.

The living legend known as the Eternal Queen placed both her hands on the piece box in the middle of the board between them. Opening it, she whispered to her young challenger, “Now——let us begin the Shogi match.”

CLINGING

“Piece flip.”

Ayano watched with the rest of the media from the corner of the arena as the match recorder stood up at the boardside table.

Would the title be held for an unprecedented 30 years?

Or would they witness the birth of an 11-year-old Women’s Legend?

All eyes were focused on this match. The journalists had turned out in droves, local reporters in particular.

—Which means the majority of these people are here to see *Shakando-sensei*

A few of them were whispering among themselves while glancing in Ai’s direction.

“Check it out. That kid’s shaking”

“I don’t blame her. It’s her first title match, and against the Queen-*quadruple title* no less.”

“She’s the Demon King of the West’s apprentice, isn’t she? That means she’s got a shot, right?”

“Haven’t you heard the rumors? She got kicked out, or maybe she did the kicking out. Kuzuryu’s not even here.”

—She was not *kicked out*!

Ayano would have loved to set the record straight with these journalists, but it was true that Yaichi Kuzuryu was not present, and Ai was shaking just enough to be noticeable.

—But It’s not because she’s nervous or afraid.

Ayano thought back to the conversation she had had with Ai in the waiting room after she put on her kimono.

“Ai? Are you shivering?”

Kimono cloth was much thicker than the fabric used in Western garments. In fact, some Women's League players changed out of their kimono in mid-match in order to cool off.

Therefore, Ayano reasoned that the chilly air wasn't the problem.

She hadn't caught a cold from exposing her shoulders yesterday, had she?

Ayano became concerned for her friend's health, but Ai offered this explanation as she shivered.

"..... I'm hot"

"Huh?"

"Ayano, I I!"

Ai had to force the words out as she trembled from head to toe.

"Thinking about trying out everything I've learned up until today I'm excited. So excited that I could explode at any second. I have been ever since Mom finished setting my hair I-I can't stop shaking!"

With that, Ai held out her hand. Ayano cautiously took it.

"..... Very hot."

It was as if her skin were on fire.

Ayano had never felt human skin at such a high temperature before. She pondered exactly how to convey that heat in writing. Even now, she was trying to find the right words——

"Four Pawns face down."

Brought back into the moment by the match recorder's announcement, she found out that Ai had made the first move.

Then instantaneously.

".....!"

The expression on Ai's face flipped like a switch.

Perhaps the heat had become too much for her to handle because Ai opened her fan and began vigorously fanning herself. Ayano was expecting to see the word courage written on it, as she had always used that one in Osaka.

—That's not Kuzuryu-sensei's fan!!

She was stunned. Squinting, Ayano tried to read it The following letters were spelled out in Ai's own handwriting.

Azure Sky Beyond the Clouds.

Those few words spoke volumes about the half year that had passed since Ai left Osaka, or so Ayano felt.

"Ai has passed through the clouds Does that mean she has found a direction to follow? Or maybe?"

Determined to reach that answer, the budding Shogi journalist tightened her grip on her pen.

Cling is a word that comes up in professional Shogi.

It's used to describe when the journalist remains seated at the boardside table throughout the match. There have been many cases of players describing their presence as *distracting*. Therefore, most journalists don't stay in the arena for long periods of time.

However, Ayano had already decided to cling.

It was, after all, her right as a journalist.

Other members of the media were required to leave the arena after each player had made their opening move. Even Charlette wasn't allowed to stay and left alongside the rest of the reporters and photographers with a sad look over her shoulder.

Watching them leave, the plain-looking elementary school girl who had been sitting in the corner until that point strode up to the boardside table and sat down with her notebook at the ready.

The local media looked on in surprise at the aura of superiority emanating from Ayano. She felt as though she were Cinderella after being picked up by the prince.

At the same time, she was brimming with confidence.

—Nothing will escape my eyes! I'll watch Ai and Shakando-sensei so closely,

they won't be able to blink without me noticing!

There were things that only she, someone who had once trained with Ai Hinatsuru, could write.

That confidence was her rock. She could write anything because she knew everything about Ai. Therefore, the quality of her article could only improve the more time she spent in the arena.

Ayano had visions of a masterpiece in the making in her head when she first sat down.

Then, only 30 minutes later——

“.....”

Ghostly pale, she left the arena.

The Ai Hinatsuru sitting at the board was unrecognizable.

Residing in Tokyo these past six months had changed her to an incredible degree. The intensity in her eyes, her short hair, posture and subtle movements too

However, all of them paled in comparison to——

“T- Too fast What is going on?”

Both players had been making moves without using any waiting time since the match began. The formation was a Double Wing Attack, but that was the only piece of information that Ayano could ascertain

She left the arena with the same desperation as a student leaving their classroom in the middle of a test that proved too difficult. Her still-blank notebook was clutched in her arms.

Staying would only make her become a distraction.

Spirit broken, she returned to the break room, which players were using for their own match analysis and wasted no time taking a seat in the back corner.

“..... I it's too much”

The gap between her and Ai had become too great for her to ever close

The shock of that realization left her listless

“..... What am I supposed to write——?”

“At this point, there have been seven matches similar to this one in the past. The offensive player has won three, and the defensive four. So, having the second move may be advantageous in this instance.”

Ayano looked up at the speaker with wide eyes.

“Big Sister Machi?”

“You gave it your best shot, Ayano.”

Machi Kugui had donned her Shogi journalist persona in both mind and dress. Placing a laptop computer in front of her younger sister apprentice, she continued.

“It’s possible to search the formation using the association’s database. Only players and staff are typically allowed to use it, but I applied for you to receive special access.”

“Th-Thank you so much!”

“Next time, make sure you do it on your own, understood? Also——

Machi guided Ayano outside the room.

“I brought a player to help you analyze the match. Despite wanting to be here with every fiber of his being, our arrival was delayed because he kept saying he wouldn’t come.”

“Huuh? Someone who wanted to come but wouldn’t?”

Who could that be?

Ayano tilted her head, confused, when she saw the awkward entrance of——

“H-Hey”

“KGUH?!”

“Quiet.”

Machi stifled Ayano’s outburst of surprise by placing her hand over her mouth. Thus, she couldn’t get any words out.

Instead tears welled up beneath her glasses and overflowed within moments.

“..... zu ryu *sensei*!”

“..... It’s been a while, Ayano.”

The girl stood in awe of the youngest dual title holder in history standing before her.

His clothing was much darker than the last time they had spoken, and his facial features seemed more mature than she remembered.

The very first question she asked was, “Have you come to see Ai?!”

“No, I actually need to talk with Shakando-*sensei*. That’s why I’m here

Yaichi mumbled a few excuses and looked away.

“And I don’t think Ai wants to see me yet, either.”

“.....”

Ayano wanted to say much more, but she held her tongue. There were other priorities right now.

Wiping away her tears, the budding journalist did her best to look professional and began asking questions.

“..... Before the match, Ai was visibly trembling with excitement. Since the Double Wing Attack is one of her specialties, I think she wanted the match to play out like this——”

“So do I.”

Relieved that the topic had changed to Shogi, Yaichi began his analysis.

“I think the fast-paced early-game happened because both players expected this. Since the Double Wing only happens when both players agree to play it, Shakando-*sensei* probably has her own strategy in mind. Why don’t we look back at the match record?”

So saying, Yaichi replayed the first moves using his smartphone but paused it before too long.

“Hm? Ai got rid of the Pawn in front of her Rook?”

“Is that strange? The formation looks normal to me

“More players are hanging on to it these days. They move the third file Pawn

forward instead. Doing that to get the Silver out onto the board is the current favored strategy.”

“Just as Machi said, moving that Pawn forward also lets you use the Knight. It’s a powerful, aggressive sequence, but——”

“It appears that Shakando-*sensei* is utilizing the more recent style of Double Wing. Miss Hinatsuru’s formation more closely resembles a Bishop Exchange. Her side of the board appears more congested, doesn’t it?”

After listening to Machi, Ayano took another look at the match record and sure enough...

“Y-Yes, Ai’s formation doesn’t look like a Double Wing! In fact, with both Knights forward, Shakando-*sensei*’s Central House formation looks extremely aggressive If their names were hidden, I would’ve thought Ai was playing it! Now I see, that’s why I”

The unease that Ayano felt in the arena had finally been identified. Her pen started racing across her notebook.

“But don’t players normally want to use their specialties? I can’t think of any merit in avoiding that.”

“What’s more, Miss Hinatsuru is on the losing side according to past records. Why would she choose that Shogi for such an important match as this? An interesting take, Ayano. That is sure to stoke the readers’ interest.”

Machi praised her younger sister apprentice. Then, Yaichi gave his thoughts on what his apprentice had in mind.

“The reason Ai didn’t use the latest form of Double Wing Attack is probably because she found it to be a particularly scary sequence during her research. I think so, anyway.”

“?! S-So, that means——”

Ayano looked up at the young challenger’s Master in amazement, but he just grinned and nodded.

“Ai has set a trap. If Shakando-*sensei* doesn’t realize it and attacks anyway this match will end early. Surprisingly early.”

Meanwhile, in the arena the match recorder announced that it was time for lunch.

LUNCH BREAK

“..... Phew”

I come back to my room to eat lunch and only just now realize how stiff I was in the arena.

Breathing hurts.

It feels like a cage in there. I unconsciously picked up on every little sound, from Shakando-*sensei*'s breathing to every soft rustle of fabric.

Obviously, I was trying too hard to look tough, and I'm seeing stars. I don't have to look in the mirror now that my eyes are bloodshot from all the excitement.

“H-Huuuh? I can't grab them?!”

The *obi* band cords tying my sleeves back around my tummy keep slipping through my fingers no matter how hard I try to loosen them.

I give up on it and sit down in the chair with my sleeves still tied.

Just being in a chair feels so much better

“I thought I was used to wearing kimonos, but I had no idea that wearing one during a match would make me tense up so much”

Ten-chan changed from her kimono into western clothes in the middle of one of her title matches, and now I understand why that was a good move on a different level.

I'm okay for now.

My muscles are still in great shape, and I'm full of fighting spirit. So much so that sequences are playing out in my head nonstop.

“But I don't know how long I can keep this up. Too hot”

Every part of me feels like it's on fire. And it's my head that's right in the middle of it. My brain is powering forward, reading deep into sequences without me telling it to.

My lunch came with a cold damp napkin. I put it over my eyes and let the chill pass over me. Ah, I needed this

“..... What should I do about lunch?”

The problem is This is a really fancy boxed lunch.

Whether to eat the food on the table or not is a really important decision.

Eating during a match is usually a no-brainer.

But——

“If both of us use all our waiting time, the match won’t end until around 5 o’clock this evening. But if *that move* works It’ll be over as soon as we get back. Then, would it be better not to eat?”

There’s a sequence I’m trying to set up. If I get it just right, the match is mine

Shakando-*sensei* probably hasn’t noticed yet.

——Then again what if it doesn’t work and the match drags on?

Then I’d definitely run out of energy.

I didn’t know until recently, but my stamina is horrible.

“I have a little endurance now since I’ve been joining Natagiri-*sensei* and Rokuroba-*sensei* on their morning runs, but I can’t focus when I’m hungry Ahhh What should I do?”

Eating makes it hard to concentrate for a little while. The formations don’t play out as cleanly in my head. If I’m going to try to win right away, I’d better skip lunch.

If only I could get some advice.

I wish I had someone to talk to. They wouldn’t have to say anything, just listen to me get all these things off my chest. Just nodding along would be enough!

“That way I could just focus on Shogi!!”

I’ve never faced a problem like this before, and I’m a mess trying to figure it out.

This isolation. I never realized just how alone players are during title matches.

It's like being locked out of the outside world.

"Master This is what he was feeling during those matches"

So, so far away.

I always watched from right by his side, but it turns out I didn't understand a thing. The weight of these problems, the loneliness.

"There's so much I should've asked him. There's still so much I wanted to ask him"

Regrets don't start until you can't do something anymore.

It's the same as Shogi. I always mess up at the same place. Something always convinces me to go in a different direction — I have to be as direct as possible

Just when I started hating myself for never learning, from the next room,
"Woooooow! Wook at dis lwunch!"

"It looks right out of a fairy tale! The perk of being a journalist is being served the same food as the players!"

"Ayanyo, Ayanyo! Eat!"

"N-Not yet, Charlette! You have to take pictures first!"

Everything was happening so fast last night that I didn't even notice Ayano and Charlette are staying in the room next door.

—Maybe I'll go say hi? They're right there

I don't think it would break the rules.

If I chat with them for a little bit and eat my lunch with them, I'm sure I could relax.

—Maybe it would be better for me to completely forget about Shogi and take a break?

Letting go of that vision of victory just a few moves away, I'm on the verge of choosing a longer match as I grab my lunch and start getting out of my chair.

Then, just before I step out into the hallway.

"No lunch has been prepared for you, Sensei. I'll call one of the staff to—"

I hear it.

“It’s okay. No one was expecting me, and the staff won’t be able to ignore it if they find out a title holder has showed up unannounced, right? Could you keep this a secret, please?”

Uwhaaa?!

“M- Master?”

I drop my lunch on the floor in shock.

“!!”

I press my ear to the wall, almost hugging it

“Breaks during title matches are short enough already. Go on, you two better eat up!”

That’s his voice.

I know it! I know it’s him!

—He really came!!

I thought there was a chance.

But I also didn’t think he would say anything even if he did come. I’ve given up on seeing him or even hearing his voice.

Except now, just like this.

“Master”

He’s on the other side of the wall, but right next to me.

The very person I wanted to talk to!

“..... Master What do you think I should do about lunch? I think I’ll skip it so I can focus and end the match quickly. There’s a sequence I’ve been preparing since the start Do you think that’s okay, Master?”

My upper body is pressed up against the wall as I keep talking.

That’s all it took to make all the pressure go away.

“..... Thank you so much, Master”

I whispered with my cheek pressed up against the wall.

I don't need lunch anymore. My heart is so full that I don't think anything will fit in my stomach.

"Okay! I'll go for it!!"

I take a moment to readjust the *obi* band I was trying to loosen earlier and psych myself up. I'll end this match and take the victory right now.

"It's so nice to know that Ayano and Charlette are enjoying the title match! I was worried because I couldn't do anything for them?"

It sounds like they're enjoying themselves on the other side of the wall.

And They start saying some things I can't just pretend I didn't hear.

"Masta, yew can hab Cha's lwunch!"

"Kuzuryu-sensei, help yourself to whatever you wish! Please tell me if there is a type of meat or piece you want to taste!"

"Yay! So much to snack on, thanks!♪"

"Masta, hab Cha's too?"

"This is great! So tender!"

"P-Please help yourself to my breast meat!"

"Mmmm! This one's delicious, too! Thick and juicy, the flavor really hits the spot!"

..... Is it just me, or do those things sound dirty?

They're just having lunch, right? Master isn't helping himself to anything but that fancy lunch, is he?!

Besides, why's he in a room where girls are staying in the first place? What kind of break is that?! Master, *dara!! Darabuchi!!*

"Masta. Wice on yewr cheek."

"Huh? Where?"

"Here!≡" Chomp

"Ch-Charlette!! You're supposed to use your fingers at times like this, not your mouth!!"

D-Did she?

Don't tell me It's!!

“Smooch——”

A smooch lunch!!

ODDLY THIN WALLS

Helping myself to grade school girls' have to take off my belt before having a seat on the sofa and leaning all the way back.

Not like that, though. I put on some weight while I was cooped up writing my book.

"Masta!"

"Ooof!!"

And Charlette jumps on top of me like I'm some kind of trampoline!

"Masta, Masta, Masta! Hug Cha?"

"I-Is something wrong, Charlette? I don't remember you being this lovey."

“Mngh!”

Wrapping her hands around my neck, Charlette shoots me an angry glare through teary eyes.

Then she yells, “Masta, yew meanie! Cha wanted to see yew a wong wong time ago!!”

“..... Sorry for being such an irresponsible Master.”

Once I saw how serious Charlette was about getting stronger, I promised to take her as my apprentice.

I had offered *to take her as my bride* before to distract her from asking me about that before, but I had a change of heart after she went all out at the King of Naniwa Tournament.

Those hot tears were just too convincing

But I was so focused on doing my own thing that I completely ignored this girl.

Now she’s telling me off for being irresponsible, and I wouldn’t blame her for thinking she’d been abandoned

And yet, she still yearns for me.

It’s up to me to answer those feelings.

“As a man, I take full responsibility! Be my wife!!”

Thud!!

The incredible timing of that impact in the room next door made me realize I said the wrong thing.



“Oops. I was taking you as my apprentice, wasn’t I?”

“Bwoth!!”

Charlette is such a hard worker, she wants to have me as both her Master and her husband.

Yeesh Only one piece can be moved at a time in Shogi, so Charlette’s going to have to choose one or the other at some point. It looks like I still have to teach her some of the basics.

“But as they say, *Don’t run from a fork in the road — take both if there are two!* If you are absolutely serious about this, Charlette, then I will step up to the plate and——”

Thud! Thud thud thud!!

More noises from the room next door. I wonder if a repair man is busy over there right now?

“K-Kuzuryu-sensei! Uh Um”

It’s Ayano this time. It looks like she’s trying to muster up the courage to say something.

“Since Ai and Mio don’t live in Osaka anymore, Charlette and I are the only two left. But, well you see”

“What is it, Ayano?”

“I-If it’s all right with you, *Sensei!* Could we continue the Grade Schooler Practice Group?!”

Almost yelling, Ayano plunges her head down into a deep bow.

Oh. So that’s what this is about.

“Of course it’s alright! Our group will last forever!”

“*S-Sensei*”

Tears start streaming down Ayano’s face.

Now I feel even more guilty.

Here are these pure-hearted students who only long for my teaching, but I

was too wrapped up doing my own thing to give them the time of day

“I’m so glad Everyone... everyone went away My Master was always in Tokyo, too Charlette and I were all alone with no idea how to improve. It was so bleak!”

“And I’m sorry about that. But you don’t have to worry anymore.”

The most important thing right now is to reassure these girls that everything is okay.

I gently pat Ayano’s head and say, “I found a sequence of moves that’s perfect for you even though Ai would have a hard time pulling them off.”

“Whaaa?! J-Just for me? A dual title holder’s strategy?”

I can almost see the fireworks going off in her eyes.

Unfortunately, those anxious clouds come back just as quickly.

“But Ai is a prodigy. How could a Practice League member who can’t seem to promote like me ever hope to use a strategy that she can’t? Does one exist?”

“It’s true that Ai can make split-second decisions on sight, so I don’t blame people for thinking kids like



her are prodigies.”

“They’re not?”

“What I’m saying is that there are different types of talent. That is Ai’s, but you have plenty of your own kind of talent, Ayano. For example, you like reading books, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes. I enjoy reading about how strategies work in Shogi books more than playing them in matches. Lining up match records is fun, too

“Big Sis was the same way.”

“Sora-sensei was?!Wh-What a surprise

My older sister apprentice was sickly growing up. If she tried to play a lot of matches in a row, she’d end up bedridden with exhaustion.

She wound up reading a lot more books than most kids her age, which I think worked out as a plus for her in the end.

“It’s like school, if you think about it. You know how some kids can just understand something by reading it in the textbook? Shogi is a game that lets those kinds of kids show off their talent!”

“I have the same talent as Sora-sensei?”

“There’s no set number of matches you need to play to get a thorough understanding of the strategy or sequence, but if you can get that knowledge efficiently from a book? Don’t get me wrong, not just any book will do. The important thing is to find a good one and read it over and over again, understand?”

“Kuzuryu-sensei! I don’t know why, but I feel like I could beat Ai right now!”

“That’s the spirit! And, I’ll even give you my book, *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*, to help you get started! Autograph included!”

“W-Wow! I’ve never received a book directly from the author before

“Everything you’ll ever need to know is written right here in *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*.”

“I understand! I’ll take your word for it and only use it to study! I’ll read it cover to cover many times, too!”

“Posting a good review online would help me out a lot, if you have the time.”

“I’ll give it five stars! I’ll write a whole essay!!”

Language arts have always been Ayano’s strong suit. Knowing her, she’ll write something that will convince people to buy my book on the spot. Sweet.

Brainwashing? No, no. It actually is a great book.

“Everyone has a weakness. Ai can see the best moves in the late-game, but she depends on that ability so much that she just goes with the flow in the early-game. Though it looks like she’s gotten better at it during her time in Tokyo.”

“Yes, I remember almost always having the advantage in the early-game when I played against Ai in our practice matches. The strategies I read about in my books always seem to work against her.”

“Ai also tends to get jealous, so she’s quick to strike, right?”

“A-ha-ha. Mio was always worried that she would pull a knife on you someday, Kuzuryu-sensei.”

“That was the only thing I was worried about back when we lived together. Moves are only meant to be made on the Shogi board ha-ha.”

Ker-thud!! WHAM!!

“..... Whoever is next door sure is making a lot of noise.”

“For being such a fancy hotel, the walls are oddly thin.”

Ayano could be right about that.

Even though most of this floor was rented out by the association, there are still some regular customers staying in rooms here and there. There’s a chance the person staying next door doesn’t like Shogi at all. We should probably keep the strategy talk to a minimum.

“Cha, too! Cha wants to wear some moobes!”

“Hah hah hah! Of course, I’ve got some special moves to show you, too, Charlette! Now join me in bed!!”

We can’t play Shogi on the hard floor, so I sit down on my ankles in the bed

and get ready to teach them some tricks until the lunch break ends.

Everything I said was out of goodwill but——

Riiing, riiing, riiing. The room phone goes off.

“I’m sorry to disturb you. This is the front desk.”

“Can I help you?”

“Um We received a call from the room next to yours saying——”

“Oh, a complaint? I’m sorry. We might’ve been a little loud.”

“Not a complaint so much as”

The person on the other end pauses like they’re trying to choose their words very carefully.

“They said that a grown man has been putting moves on two underage girls in bed in your room since noon today.....”

“Shogi! We are playing Shogi!!”

“But the guest claims that they heard a belt being unbuckled——”

Lunch break is over by the time I clear up the misunderstanding. Who in the world made that call?!

THE FIRST BATTLE

I see Charlette and Ayano off after an extremely eventful lunch break. Now that they're back in the break room, I fix my clothes and head to the hotel's garden.

Finding a lawn chair with an extra-long leg rest in the shade, I have a seat and take out my phone to watch the broadcast.

"The challenger came back to the arena in the middle of the lunch break. I doubt that was enough time for her to eat much of anything. Word is, she ran back."

"I can vouch for that. Her footsteps echoed all the way into the break room."

There are still a few minutes left before the match will start up again.

Ai is already dialed in for a fight. She's swaying back and forth so fast, I'm afraid she's going to end up head-butting the board by accident. The players working as commentator and analyst are just as floored as I am.

Then, just as the match recorder gets up to make an announcement, *"The lunch break has ended, so please begin——"*

"Yes!!"

Ai is so eager to get started that she cuts off the match recorder and plays her move right away. It's so dynamic that she reaches all the way into enemy territory.

2 One Bishop. Her mind is set.

"You're going to finish this quickly, aren't you? Ai."

The words roll off my tongue before I notice.

She's trying to force checkmate. Playing that Bishop shows that she wants to make her opponent surrender early and is saving nothing for later.

Compared to Shakando-sensei, who is sipping a cup of fresh tea after getting back to the arena mere seconds before the match was scheduled to restart, the two players couldn't be more different.

“The challenger almost looks angry. Her aura is astounding! What could’ve happened during the lunch break?”

“She was shivering this morning. It’s almost like someone else is sitting at the board!”

“To have this much competitive juice flowing when pitted against Women’s Legend Rina Shakando, I suppose we can chalk it up to youth. She’s proven that this stage isn’t too big for her. Perhaps she has read all the way to the end?”

“The rating doesn’t seem to be that far in her favor,” says the Women’s League player working as commentator as she points to the software rating. She’s questioning Ai’s decision and could be a little jealous of her, as well.

But that opinion is too shallow.

“Ryuo. What do you make of the formations?” says Machi Kugui carrying a camera equipped with a zoom lens as she walks up to me.

“..... How did you know I was here?”

“Journalists and photographers identify the spots where the arena is visible from outside long before the match begins,” she answers like it was obvious, and then adds one extra reason. “Not to mention that this is a blind spot for the players themselves. A father who lacks the courage to speak with his runaway daughter would set up camp here, don’t you agree?”

Harsh.

Not that I say anything back because she’s right.

“The match itself is more important. Has Miss Hinatsuru seen something?”

“There are some formations where software has difficulty identifying check paths in the late-game. I told you that before, remember?” Once I confirm that, “Plus, the software isn’t set to read too deep into the sequences, so it still thinks it’s *anyone’s match*. But I’m pretty sure that Ai used the lunch break to read deep into the board and found something. She decided to hit Shakando-*sensei* with it directly.”

“..... Miss Hinatsuru has surpassed A.I.?”

“It’s about strengths and weaknesses. Software may be far stronger than

people, but it has a long way to go to master Shogi theory. If it were a supercomputer, that would be different.”

Something similar happened to me the first time I played against Ai. She already knew *how to win* before I taught her anything about Shogi.

A natural born competitor.

That’s who the girl named Ai Hinatsuru really is.

“Interesting This will make waves, you know? The girl who can outplay artificial intelligence.”

That kind of news getting around would do more harm than good. I’d better nip it in the bud.

“It’s just competitive tactics. I’d do the same thing in her shoes. Even if this move turns out to be a mistake, there’s plenty of time to come back because it’s just the first match. On the other hand, it’ll stay in the back of the opponent’s head during the next match if it works.”

“Using break time to find a check path Yes? Sounds similar to a certain Ryuo, doesn’t it?”

“.....”

“Has she read *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*?”

“*It’s all instinct.*”

It’s actually Ai who taught me to think like that. Machi knows, but she asked anyway. After all, we wrote that book together.

“*Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here Here!!*” Ai’s voice comes out from my smartphone speakers.

The voice she makes and she reads deep, deep into the board.

“*HERE!!*”

Whipping her fingers forward, she plants a piece down with a snap so loud I hear it outside the arena. She has plenty of waiting time left, but she’s charging forward at a breakneck speed.

“*Here!!*”

HERE!!

Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereheeeereeeee!!

Then she slams a piece down with the force of an axe.

1 Two Silver.

“O- 1 Two Silver?!” Machi and I say in stunned unison before checking our screens one more time.

Just to make sure that that jaw-dropping move, putting a Silver directly in front of her opponent’s Lance, actually happened!

“Strong

Even I didn’t see that move When did she find it?

“..... Hmm.”

The Eternal Queen looks at it, places her hand in her cheek and nods a few times.

Then, wetting her lips with the last of her tea, she sits up straight with her elegance intact.

“Shakando-sensei is fixing her posture

“A photo op.”

Ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak Machi points the lens of her camera at the arena and takes a quick series of pictures.

She did so because she knows what’s coming.

“Strong.”

Shakando-sensei’s remark in the arena comes out of my smartphone as clear as day.

Surprisingly, the same word I used——

“I have lost. And to this extent Hm.”

Placing her right hand over the piece stand, the Women’s Legend admits defeat.

Thus the defender surrenders after 73 moves.

“Thank you for the match.”

The challenger answers calmly. She's already looking into the future.

"Th-That's the end! The Women's Legend surrendered!!"

People are moving around all over the place on the broadcast.

"1 Two Silver? Is that a viable move?! The software hasn't even listed it as Huh?! I-It just identified it as the best move——"

The observer and journalists are tripping over themselves trying to get down the hallway that leads to the arena. They had relied so much on the software to tell them what was going on that no one saw that move either.

Ai's first title match.

Usually, the first match in a series is the most difficult, but Ai pushed forward to victory with sequences so complex that even A.I. couldn't read them.

It's a big, big win.

"Kuzuryu-Ryuo, how do you feel after watching your apprentice's first title match?"

"My apprentice is so strong, it's scary."

"That would make a good title for a light novel, if I do say so myself."

Machi looks dumbfounded, but I can tell she agrees with me 100 percent. She is a victim of Ai's late game prowess, after all

"It was a complete win. She managed to get the match to a pivotal point before lunch and then use that break time to map out a path directly to victory. She probably went over it a few times and decided to pull the trigger. I doubt she had anything to eat."

If this were sumo wrestling, it be a *railroad* victory.

In other words, colliding at full speed and then driving the opponent out of the ring in a straight line. All without the other guy being able to do a thing.

It's a victory claimed on power and momentum alone.

And it's worth a lot.

In a series winning like that might just have given her the whole victory.

"Did you do something?"

“No. I haven’t even seen her. Not that there’s anything I could do if I had

“On a side note, my younger sister apprentice and Charlette bragged about being shown *special moves from Kuzuryu-sensei in bed during the lunch hour* when they returned to the break room.”

“That doesn’t mean I did anything!!”

Ayano is really going to have to work on her choice of words if she’s going to be a journalist!!

“..... She’s gotten stronger in Tokyo, plain and simple. Now she’s strong enough to fight head-to-head with a title holder.”

Acknowledging that in my own words wasn’t easy ...

Because that meant acknowledging that she doesn’t need me around

“You sound like a man suffering, watching his ex-girlfriend become prettier by the day after breaking up.”

“Would you quit reading my mind?”

Machi surely has a way with words. Being a journalist, she knows how to be a little too on the nose.

Though, using *father* and *ex-girlfriend* pushed it a bit

That probably means my connection with Ai Hinatsuru has grown beyond the realm of Master and apprentice

“Do you not believe so as well?”

“Yeah, yeah. All the time.”

“Mngh.” Machi pouts, puffing out her cheeks before putting her *Mato Shogi journalist* face back on. “I will be returning to the arena to assist my younger sister apprentice. What are your plans, Ryuo?”

“I’ll kill some more time here and go home by myself.”

“No backbone to speak of. Well, I knew that already!”

And then, I’m alone.

There are some words I want to say even though no one is around to hear them.

“Congrats, Ai.”

They disperse on the breeze like cherry blossom petals and drift toward the arena.

Ai is completely focused on the review session that just started. Dialed in, there isn't a hint of a smile on her face.

She gets a perfect score for her conduct after the match, too.

Watching her, something else occurs to me.

“Shakando-sensei It looks like what happened with Ayumu is weighing on her after all.”

That's the only logical conclusion no matter what angle you take after looking back on how she played this match.

I decide to ask her about the proposal some other time and leave.



“Here, here, hereherehereherehereherehere——”

It’s match number two, a week after the first.

Kamakura, Shakando-*sensei*’s hometown, is hosting it. Speed is what I’m going for in this match, too.

The formation is Double Wing Attack.

It’s just that *Sensei* is using an old Twisting Rook style rather than the trending software version. It was popular long before I was born.

——Is she trying to confuse me? But!!

We’ve exchanged a few pieces, but she’s not letting me engage in a full sequence.

But I’m trying to use sheer amount of reading to crush this small difference in Shogi style at a full-throttle from the beginning!

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere——

It’s Shakando-*sensei*’s turn, but she’s been thinking for almost an hour now.

I think I have a small advantage on the board.

And I’m way ahead in waiting time.

It helps that I haven’t wasted a second of it and I’ve been using her time to do reading of my own. If I can keep my formation advantage and add the waiting time on top of that, I’ll have everything I need to win in the late-game, which is my specialty. That’s my game plan.

The Double Wing is unique because you can get into that late-game with far fewer moves than with other strategies. We are right on the cusp of it right now.

Sensei using this much time must mean

——My attack must’ve gotten through!

My reading and my opponents’ body language.

They give reassurance to me that I'm right. Then.

"....."

Shakando-*sensei* looks at the clock with her arms still crossed.

She then puts them at her sides and says flatly, almost like she's telling herself, "..... Yes, there is nothing."

"What?!"

I'm so focused on reading the board that I can't believe my ears. The match recorder Rin Koji Women's 4-*dan*, also known as Rinrin-*sensei*, is shocked, too.

Huh?

It's over?

—Did I just win? She's not going to play a move?

".....?"

I look up at Shakando-*sensei* in disbelief.

She looks back at me and answers slowly, like explaining something to a child while lowering her head, "I have lost."

Rinrin-*sensei* picks up her tablet with a start and turns off the clock. Then she writes the time of the last move into the match record sheet and draws a long line to the box where she'd normally write the move.

A letdown stick.

That's what it's called in the Shogi world.

Seeing it shows that the player refused to accept their own mistakes and was so desperate to keep playing that they couldn't give up. It's a sign of regret.

"Ah Oh! Thank you for the match!!"

I bow as quickly as I can.

But I can't bring my head back up right away. If I did I don't know if I could hide my grin.

—Two wins in a row? Really? Me, against Shakando-*sensei*?

It feels like Christmas and my birthday came early this year.

I look over at the match record out of the corner of my eye and look for the letdown stick.

—My rush didn't just get through.

I thought it had broken through that thick armor of hers, but it turns out I pierced her heart as well. From there, it was sudden death.

A lucky punch?

Nope, she still has moves. I would've kept fighting.

The fact that she didn't has to mean

—Shakando-sensei thinks she's even further behind than I do.

Either she's still feeling the loss from last week, or something else is distracting her. I don't know what it could be, though.

Basically, she didn't think she could stop my charge and gave up!

—Could I win the series in the next match?

Ba-dump! I break out in a cold sweat.

My heart beats so hard it hurts.

“.....!!”

I grab hold of the collar of my kimono and try to pin down my ribs so that my chest doesn't burst. But I can't let anyone else know, so I snatch my fan and shake it as hard as I can to cool off

“Azure Sky Beyond the Clouds.”

The words I wrote before this title match catch my eyes.

—Will I get to see the blue sky when I get there?

Next.

The third match.

It's going to happen in the most advantageous spot for me since the series began.

I'd made up my mind that even if I lost every other match, that was going to be the one I would win

Since it's going to happen there.

Where my Shogi training started.

RECORD 2

清
滝
桂
香

KEIKA
KIYOTAKI

MY LADY, AT

池
田
晶

AKIRA
IKEDA

RETURNING HOME

“I’m back,” I say while taking my shoes off as I step inside my apartment in Nishinomiya.

A dark aura wafts from further inside just before a maid sticks her head around the corner.

“Oh. Welcome home, Sensei.”

“Th-Thanks, Akira. I brought back some *yumochi* and *gongoro chikaramochi* rice cake souvenirs.”

“Only rice cakes? Where did you buy them?”

“The *yumochi* is from Hakone and the *gongoro chikaramochi* is from Kamakura But why does it matter? Rice cakes are good wherever they’re from.”

“Valid point.”

Akira has got the housework perfectionist vibe going on with that maid outfit, but she can’t cook whatsoever.

I’m pretty sure that Ai Yashajin just accepted that detail from the start, so most of our meals at home get delivered. We eat what we want when we want. It feels more like I’ve got roommates rather than living with family.

So my eating habits have reverted to what they were when I lived by myself. I used to look for candy a grade school girl would like when I was buying souvenirs, but now my criteria have changed to something that would work as a meal.

“Whew Coming back to a clean room really does cut the strain of a long trip in half.”

I pour coffee for both of us. Sitting down at the table, I dig into the rice cakes and look around the room. Seriously, it’s as spic-and-span as a five-star hotel.

“Is that so? Well, it’s a skill I use for work.”

She can’t cook worth a dang, but her cleaning skills are astronomical.

I asked her what her secret was a while back, and she started taking out products that break down all types of proteins and chemicals that only melt bones one after another. I wouldn't say she cleans our room so much as she purifies it. Complete and utter decontamination

"Huh? Ai isn't home yet?"

"My Lady is busy with matches as well as involved in a new project with the family business. Staff on that end is currently accompanying her."

"She also has classes to go to at school"

All I have to worry about is Shogi. Ai Yashajin is so much busier.

"Does that mean You've been in the apartment the entire time Ai has been away? Or do you have another side job you're working on?"

"More importantly, Sensei. Teach me Shogi."

"Shogi? Sure, that's fine, but"

Wow, she changed the subject really quick.

Oh! I've got it. This is the perfect opportunity to show Akira the light.

"If you're serious about getting stronger, reading Kuzuryu's Notebook is the way to do it!"

"That won't work."

That stoic face of hers softens for a second as she instantly shoots down my suggestion.

"I took a peek at it because My Lady spent hours poring through its pages, but I gave up halfway through the prologue. Too many letters crammed into the pages for my liking."

"I, um, I see"

"Reduce the words to a few sentences here and there and add more pictures in their place. And lead with the conclusion, would you please? Nothing makes me want to hurl a book through a window more than getting excited reading about some super, all-powerful sequence only to find out it's hard to tell which one wins in the end. Why do so many Shogi books follow this trope? All it does is kill my willingness to learn. You should seriously consider other, more

efficient tools to teach strategies. And another thing——”

Listening to Akira point out every flaw in excruciatingly specific detail, all I do is nod.

What if my book doesn't sell at all?

TRIUMPHANT RETURN

Women's Legend, Third Title Match.

I reunite with a certain girl when she comes down from Tokyo for the pre-match inspection in Osaka.

"Keika!"

She spots me from her place among staff and reporters and rushes toward me as if she were blazing a path through the ocean.

I smile, put out both hands, and greet that tiny girl with open arms.

Greet her with the words I'd already picked out.

"Welcome home, Ai."

"..... I'm back, Keika."

The tiniest of shy smiles appears on that little challenger's face.

Ai Hinatsuru Women's 2-*dan* clings to me like a puppy for a few moments before awkwardly stepping back. Her face is as red as can be.

Her youthful mannerisms are exactly like they were the day she left Osaka

"E-he-he. This is embarrassing Coming back to Kansai so soon after everything that happened when I left"

"Oh, not at all."

"Huh?"

Ai hasn't changed one little bit.

With one exception.

"You must've been through a lot. Standing so tall So bold"

She had such long, flowing hair when she left Osaka.

After taking care of her dark locks so well for so long, Ai cut them all off.

I still remember the shock when I first saw her profile picture during a broadcast of one of her matches.

—Ahhh, it's no good

I came here bound and determined to smile the entire time, but my eyes are watering so much it's hard to keep this girl in focus.

"..... I'm so sorry, Ai"

Seeing her in person like this the tears just won't stay back

I do the best I can between sniffles to beg for her forgiveness.

"Sorry I'm so sorry If only I'd been a stronger Women's League player If I'd joined the league sooner, if I had more connections in Tokyo I wouldn't have had to send you off all by yourself like that"

"Keika! Ummm Please don't cry, Keika"

Ai takes both my hands.

"*Tamayon-sensei* *Rokuroba-sensei* has looked out for me the whole time! *Natagiri-sensei* has had title matches, but he also found time in his busy schedule to train me up! It's all because you and *Grandpa-sensei* asked them!"

Ai tells me all about her experiences in Tokyo.

Even all the Women's League players who gave her the cold shoulder in the beginning have warmed up to her.

She's even made two new friends, Tsubasa Gakumeki Women's 1-*kyu* and Rin Koiji Women's 4-*dan*.

And how she has Tamayo Rokuroba Women's 2-*dan* to thank for all of it.

"That's great It seems like leaving you with her was the right decision after all."

Ms. Rokuroba's reputation is split.

In Kansai she's been called the Practice Session Crusher or ridiculed as the Pro Women's League Player. To be blunt, I thought so, too. Ginko doesn't like her much, either, but I think there's a separate, bigger reason in her case.

Even so, *Natagiri-sensei* couldn't have given her a stronger vote of confidence, and he's devoted his life to Shogi.

“There is so much more she can learn from Tamayo than me, I assure you. By all means, have her live in the same room here in Tokyo.”

What he meant went over my father’s professional Shogi player head, but those words were all it took to convince me to entrust him with Ai.

Because it sounded to me like he understood *the reality of being a Women’s Shogi player*

The move turned out to be perfect.

Though the last thing I expected was for Ai’s skill level to explode through the roof.

She didn’t just win the first and second matches, she dominated them.

And now, here she is within reach of claiming a title in Osaka, which would almost perfectly re-create how Ginko took her first Women’s Title of Queen.

—She claimed the Queen Title in the sixth grade, too It’s too perfect to be a coincidence.

This is even the same arena. It seems like I’m not the only one who thinks destiny is at work here. The usual crowd of Shogi journalists and reporters are having to fight for space with crews dispatched by local news stations.

All are here hoping to witness the second coming of Naniwa’s Snow White.

“Oh, that’s right.”

I smile and wipe the tears away.

“I had a little something prepared for you to mark your first title series.”

“Huh?! A present?!” she asks with glee, her eyes sparkling. “What is it?! Keika, what did you get for me?!”

“He-he-he. You’ll find out At the opening night party, okay?”

“Ah! Could it be one of *those*? The things that go in the arena alcove——”

“Oh, heavens, no. Something much better I hope that one wasn’t too much of a bother.”

“No, not at all! Looking at it during a match makes me gig- Helps me feel refreshed!”

“..... Go ahead and burn it if it’s in the way. I’m serious.”

The right mindset? Rather than motivating his granddaughter apprentice, now she’s having to be nice! That old beard, I swear!

I’ll go give him a piece of my mind right now.

Scanning the room, I spot him greeting the other player involved in this title match at the other end.

“Kousuke.”

“Rina”

The two of them exchange bashful looks.

“..... Strange turn of events, don’ ya think? My granddaughter apprentice facin’ ya in a title match”

“He-he. We are getting on in years, yes?”

“Ya haven’ changed at all, Rina. Yer just like ya were back then Nah! Ya’ve only gotten more beautiful!”

“And you, too, Kousuke——”

“More manly, am I?”

“Why, no. You’ve become much more adept at flattery!”

Just looking at Shakando-*sensei* laugh like a little girl, I have a hard time believing she’s a title holder with her back against the wall after losing two straight matches.

——She’ll be titleless with one more loss. Isn’t she scared?

Is she putting on a brave face to hide her nerves from the rest of us?

Or Has she gotten bored of having a title?

Does someone like that even exist? For me personally, I would die happy if I ever made it into a title match——

“Keika! Hey, Keika!”

“Wha? Wh-What is it, Father?”

“Help Rina Shakando-*Women’s Legend* over to the arena. Be careful, ya

hear? Also, call me *Master* out in public, got it? *Master*.”

I silently nod. After one more glance in Ai’s direction, I walk over to her opponent.

The one alone at the top.

“It’s been an age since we’ve exchanged pleasantries, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. I apologize for my long absence.”

Defeating this person right here is what allowed me to pass through the sliver of a window I had left to join the Women’s League.

It was the match of my life.

I doubt I’ll ever be able to play better than I did that day. Unlike Ai, I can’t picture myself ever defeating this person one more time.

“Pardon me, *Sensei*. May I assist?”

“Why, yes. Thank you.”

I take the outstretched hand that I once fought with all my might and slowly guide her forward. That’s when it finally hits me: what’s wrong with this picture.

—Where has Ayumu gone off to?

Her beloved apprentice was at her side, even during our match.

But he’s nowhere to be seen now.

—A league match perhaps? I can’t think of any other reason why he wouldn’t be here

“You will be recording the match tomorrow, yes Keika?”

“Ah Y-Yes! As it will be my first time working as a match recorder for a title match, I will be doing my utmost to prevent any mistakes——”

“No, no, my dear. The pressure is all mine.”

“What? How do you mean? At your title match? *Shakando-sensei*, you must be joking

Does this woman feel any pressure when her back is against the wall?

“I can ill afford any slip-ups on my part.”

She doesn't want to look bad? For whom?

The fans who have supported her all this time? For Ai?

—Couldn't be me, could it? Or maybe

The inspection lasts all of five minutes.

The opening night party turns out to exceed everyone's expectations.

Once both players have said a few words and my father, the observer, made a speech, I'm scheduled to get up and speak as the match recorder.

"This will be my first experience recording a title match. I understand how valuable this opportunity is for me and I intend to learn as much as I can."

The air in here is casual, as parties usually are.

People are chatting away at their tables and barely anyone is looking in my direction. Ai and Shakando-*sensei* are seated in opposite corners and look fairly relaxed.

Just then some voices make it through the din.

"..... Who signed off on Kiyotaki 9-*dan* as the observer? That's gotta cause problems"

"..... What happened to maintaining a line between work and private matters, hm"

"..... Before the inspection, too Talking"

I can't ignore them no matter how I try. So I take two envelopes out of my handbag with enough force to drown them all out.

"And—"

It's time for the present I had in my sleeve for the players.

"I have messages from Sora 4-*dan*. Please allow me to read them in her place."

"D-Did she say Sora 4-*dan*?!"

My bombshell shakes the whole venue.

“Naniwa’s Snow White hasn’t made any public statements!”

“This is her first one since taking a leave of absence, isn’t it?!”

“Now this is what I call a scoop!!”

All the media people who were chitchatting suddenly give me their full attention. Cameras and notepads at the ready, it’s quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Everyone’s waiting with baited breath for my next words.

Same goes for the players.

“Ginko?”

Shakando-sensei whispers under her breath and urges me on with her eyes.

I take a breath and start reading.

“Shakando-sensei has been kind enough to hone my skills with practice sessions ever since I claimed my titles. Although I have defeated her in league matches, I believe that she won far more during those practice sessions.”

“.....”

Sensei quietly listens to me read Ginko’s message aloud.

“So I believe that I understand Shakando-sensei’s strength better than anyone. And I also believe I know how tomorrow’s match is going to play out. I will be watching the match closely to see if my prediction comes true.”

I give Shakando-sensei a short bow to let her know the message is over.

She doesn’t say anything.

Instead, she closes her eyes and mulls over Ginko’s words.

“I have played one meaningful match against the challenger, Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 2-dan. It was during her Practice League Entrance Exam.”

I turn to face the other player and start reading.

“It was a handicap match, and I won. I also played her in a practice match with a six-piece handicap and won that one as well. In both league matches and in practice sessions, I have never once lost to Miss Hinatsuru.”

Murmur, murmur, murmur

The difference in tone between the two messages is staggering, but it seems like everyone else is more intimidated than Ai.

“Watching Miss Hinatsuru in the Women’s League, I’m surprised how little her style has changed since those days. Nothing but a straightforward rampage like a bull in a china shop. Frankly, I’m astounded she made it to the title match playing like that. So——”

I pause there for a moment.

Then, doing the best Ginko impression I can muster, I read the last line.

“So I’m a little interested to see how far Ai Hinatsuru’s straightforward style of Shogi from back then can grow with my own eyes.”

“.....!!”

Ai’s pupils light up with fiery determination.

But it’s not directed at Shakando-sensei.

“..... Grow straightforward My Shogi”

That fire crackles with so much intensity, it’s like she’s trying to melt a glacier.

That’s the moment that I knew.

This girl’s true opponent isn’t Shakando-sensei, but——.

VISITOR

“It’s a Double Wing Attack Shakando-*sensei* didn’t avoid it.”

The third Women’s Legend Title Match starts with my apprentice taking the first move.

This makes three Double Wing matches in a row, but there’s something very different about this one.

“Now it’s Ai who’s using the latest style. Maybe she felt the time was right The way she’s playing just screams *I’m going to win this right now!*”

While I know I shouldn’t be looking at my phone while walking, curiosity gets the better of me as I stare at the screen and mumble on my way to the venue.

The match is taking place at a high class hotel in Tenmabashi, Osaka. It normally doesn’t host regular women’s Title Matches, but one very big title match did take place here before.

I remember it like it was yesterday. I doubt I’ll ever forget it.

“That day, Mr. Kagamizu was the match recorder It was my job to move the pieces on the big board for the commentator And she won her first title”

“You there, shady guy.”

I haven’t been on the premises even five minutes, but I’ve already been spotted.

Worse, by the Worldly Maestro.

“M-Mr. Oishi?! You came?”

“How could I miss this? It’s Ai’s first title match, and the Kiyotakis are workin’ as observer and match recorder. Stuff this interesting doesn’t pop up every day.”

He’s the type of guy who holes up in the bathhouse/Shogi classroom he runs except for his own matches. I guess even he couldn’t resist coming to watch Ai’s match in person.

Mr. Oishi gave Ai and I a crash course in Ranging Rook while we worked part-time for him at his bathhouse way back when.

Now that former student of his has become a challenger and is one win away from claiming her own title. The climactic battle is happening in Osaka. It makes me happy to know that he's willing to close the bathhouse to come watch.

"I'd have brought Asuka with me if it weren't a weekday."

"She became a college student this spring, right?"

"She found a university with a strong Shogi club and passed the entrance exam on her own. Shogi's the only thing she's ever needed help with."

"Asuka is in college What about the Practice League?"

"With Practice League Director Kuruno bein' a Ranging Rooker and all, he's been treating her well."

Kuruno-*sensei* did a ton for Ai, too, though she doesn't play Ranging Rook. The thing is that it feels like I'd lose something if I point that out.

"Right after high school is the same time Keika joined the Practice League, too. I've heard they've been dropping by each other's places, getting trained up in Shogi and some advice while they're at it."

"Then there's nothing to worry about," I say, meaning it on two levels.

Since the Kiyotaki Shogi family lost members almost overnight, the fact that Asuka has been dropping by is huge.

"But I gotta say, the Kuzuryu line is sure high hoggin' the spotlight. The Master is the youngest dual title holder ever, this Ai is playing for her first title and the other apprentice of yours is in the running for two titles, isn't she?"

"Ai Yashajin's matches aren't technically title matches. They're more like two winner-take-all series."

"Looks like those titles'll be staying with your line even after Ginko gave 'em up."

"It's too early to say for sure. Her opponent is in the 3-*dan* division, after all."

"Aren't you going to watch her matches?"

“She’s made it unmistakably clear that she doesn’t want me there She even forbade me to look at the match records until the series are over. Seriously, now that we’re finally living toge——”

“Hm?”

“L-Living up to our full potential as Master and apprentice!”

“Heh. Just as the saying goes, no kid knows how dear she is to her parents. Reminds me a lot of Asuka, to tell the truth.”

Whew! That was too close!

I’m hiding the fact that Ai Yashajin and I are living together. Not that there’s anything going on, but I just can’t find the right way to say it

“There’s him, too. Sota Kunugi.”

Mr. Oishi doesn’t seem to pick up on the fact that I’m sweating bullets and keeps talking.

“That grade schooler Nah, junior high schooler now, eh? He hasn’t lost since his debut in the Ryuo Tournament at the beginning of the year. He’s right on the verge of being a big deal.”

“I’d be more surprised if he weren’t winning so much.”

Sota is good enough that he could hold his ground just fine if he got thrown into A League right now.

What’s more is that there aren’t anywhere near as many players in Kansai as there are in Kanto. That means that you play against the same people all the time in the qualifiers. We all know everyone’s style so well that upsets are hard to pull off.

Sota could very well go undefeated until he runs into Kansai’s big three: Chairman Tsukimitsu, Mr. Oishi and I. A winning streak of about 20 matches is well within the realm of expectation.

“If he keeps winning, he’ll end up playin’ against Ika Sainokami in Group 6 of the Ryuo Tournament. The Grade School Pro versus a Women’s Leaguer. The media will have a field day no matter who wins.”

“It’s a clash of the demons if you ask me.”

“I get that Sainokami rubs you the wrong way ’cause of stuff that happened in the past, but personally I’m rooting for her. That tomahawk strategy of hers is pretty darn effective.”

“.....”

Just hearing that name sends a bitter chill down my spine.

It’s the strategy that tore out Big Sis’s spirit. Ika swore to destroy her with it.

But I keep talking like nothing is wrong.

“..... Not that long ago, nobody would’ve expected Normal 3rd-File Rook to surge back into popularity like this.”

“You can say that again. I’m also working on my own variation for somethin’ up my sleeve as a change-up from my ace Gokigen Central Rook strategy.”

“You do?! What kind of variation?”

“Moron. If I told you that, it wouldn’t be *up my sleeve* anymore, would it? You’ll just have to wait for me to bring it out in a match.”

Mr. Oishi lightly bonks me on the head before leaning in close to whisper.

“Enough about that. How are you so off the grid in Kansai? Where the heck are you living right now, anyway? Keika darn near had a heart attack when you moved out of your apartment and disappeared. Asuka was already reeling from what happened with Ginko, and I had to stop her from filing a missing persons report with the police.”

“Yeah I was in a cramming session, writing my book from the beginning of the year Now that it’s published, I’ve been going around different bookstores in Kanto to help with sales. There’s been no time to come home”

I don’t actually start helping with sales until tomorrow, but I’m not exactly lying, either.

“Sales?” Mr. Oishi says like it’s the last thing he expected to hear. “You’re doing that stuff? I’ve done next to nothing for the book I wrote five years ago, and it’s already gotten several reprints.”

“Amateurs sure do love Ranging Rook”

That's the Maestro for you. Compared to the onslaught of complaints that Akira unleashed onto *Kuzuryu's Notebook*, he's on a different level. Maybe I should have written a book aimed at grade schooler kids after all

We arrive at the door in front of the break room while catching up.

Compared to the arena, the air is so relaxed that I can hear people chatting away inside already. That's typical for title match mornings.

"It sounds like there's a guest. Do you think they're a sponsor? Well, I don't really want to draw attention, so that's fine by me——"

Mr. Oishi gets to the door first, but he doesn't reach for the handle.

"Huh? Aren't you going in?"

"..... That's the chairman's voice."

Displeasure is written all over the Maestro's face.

He's been running away from Chairman Tsukimitsu because whenever they meet, the chairman says something like: *It's about time you took a position on the Association Board of Directors*, and puts pressure on him to be more involved.

"Busy as he is, he'll be gone soon enough. I'll go have a smoke somewhere til then."

"I don't think you have to avoid him so much."

"A League players don't like sharing the same space. It leaves a bad taste."

"Really?"

"Hurry on up here. Then you'll get it."

A 14-year member of the A League, the Worldly Maestro casually waves his hand as he sets off in search of a smoking area.

"..... A League."

Hearing about it reminds me of Ayumu, who's already up there.

As I only just promoted to B-2, it'll be at least another two years before I can climb that high.

But after two years, when we're both in A League what'll happen to our

friendship?

And what if Ayumu is already the Meijin by that point?

“Ayumu, Ryou, Machi and I It looks like the days when the four of us can hang out and laugh, like we’ve been doing since the Elementary Meijin Tournament, are numbered”

Do I want the way things are to last forever?

Or do I want to get to the top as soon as possible so we can fight it out for real?

Pursuing the two options could mean that I’ve got a lot of growing left to do as a Shogi player. Still questioning myself, I open the door and walk into the break room.

VIP

The first thing I notice inside the break room is the strangely large crowd of people around an analysis board. Since I already made sure that Master is in the main hall with the commentators, I know for a fact he isn't here. Running into him now would make things complicated

"Who's here? Somebody famous?"

People from outside the Shogi world come in and out of the arena and the break room we use for analysis all the time in the morning during title matches. We don't have time to spend on them once the match heats up, but it's no problem to show them around during the early-game—

"C-Chairman Tsukimitsu is working with them personally, in a kimono?! What kind of VIP is?!"

Whoever she is, she's tall.

Young and pretty, too. But there's a sketchy air about her. Like she knows a thing or two about the black market. Just when I was getting impressed that, considering she looks about 20, she doesn't look intimidated by being in this break room before a title match or speaking with the chairman one-on-one

"President Ikeda. This seat has the best view. Please, sit down."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Chairman Tsukimitsu. Sharing an analysis board with a member of the A League As a Shogi fan, this truly is the best seat in the house."

It's someone I know very well.

Know her? *I live with her!*

"A-Akira?! What the heck are you doing here?!"

I'd been trying to keep a low profile, but I can't help screaming in front of all these people. Something is definitely, definitely wrong about this picture!

Akira Ikeda puts on the fakest look of surprise I've ever seen and says, "Oh my, if it isn't Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu! What a surprise! To think I'd be able to speak

with the youngest dual title holder in history! I'm so glad I decided to drop in on today's title match!!"

"Huh? I taught you some Shogi tricks while having rice cakes at home just yesterday Oh, um."

I can't talk about living arrangements in front of a crowd like this. Changing gears, I quickly adjust to match her story.

"Y-Yeah. It has been a while What a coincidence!"

The chairman's explanation comes from even further out in left field.

"The association has decided to entrust President Ikeda's company with tearing down and constructing new Shogi Association Buildings."

"President?"

Akira is a company president?

"Which reminds me, you started a videogame company in Kobe and had the association contact me to help you develop a game, didn't you?"

It was such a disaster that I had all but blocked it from my memory, but now it's coming back to me.

I agreed to it thinking that they were making a Shogi-based game, but instead they wanted to make a mobile app overloaded with cute girls called *Lolicon GO* or *Lolilive* or something like that. Oh those days were painful

To make a long story short, the game's financial investor, Ai Yashajin, was so infuriated by the game or should I say the *pretty girl content* we made that she pulled the plug before it ever saw the light of day

"But that company went bankrupt, right?"

"The initial cost of securing the massive server required in order to produce a game for smartphones was too great, yes. We have gone back to square one and began working in real estate this time."

"Oh, gotcha. Land sharking sounds more up your alley anyway Hold up!"

The tone made it sound like they were going to tear down a tapioca stand to build a fancy bread shop, but there was a word in there I can't let slip!!

“D-Did you say tearing down the association *buildings*?!”

There have been talks about renovating them for what feels like an eternity. I know that negotiations for constructing a brand new building in Tokyo have been going for over 20 years.

Either it's that they haven't been able to find a good company, or this, or that No progress has been made it all

“How'd your new company got the contract, Akira?”

“Because it is our specialty!”

Akira puffs her chest out with pride. I don't like where this is going

“While it's true the company has just been founded, they show tremendous potential for rapid growth moving forward.”

“I suppose that must be true if you say so, chairman, but” Unable to put my doubts to rest, I turn to Akira and ask, “So? What's the name of your company?”

“Lolihome.”

“Do you like going bankrupt that much, you idiot?!” I scream inside myself, but Akira explains it all with infallible confidence.

“We provide homes that allow young children to flourish in a safe and comfortable environment. I insisted on the name with that vision in mind. Doesn't it fit perfectly?”

“Wonderful. A name that reflects hopes and dreams of the future, truly wonderful.”

The chairman sounds all for it.

It seems like rather than convince me, he's trying to show the crowd of journalists and Shogi people here how much he trusts Akira.

“While I unfortunately do not have children myself, I have no doubt that I would consider your company's services for a house of my own if I did.”

The chairman can only say this so carelessly because he doesn't have kids himself. Yeah, see that? Ms. Oga is looking through available plots of land at breakneck speed on her tablet right next to him because he doesn't think

before he talks

Being blind, he can't see his secretary's fingers blazing across the screen and keeps going like everything is normal.

"President Ikeda shares your noble aspirations of assisting young girls in fulfilling their dreams, Kuzuryu-Ryuo. Now I understand why you get along so well."

"I'm a pic fan, after all."

"I assume you referring to the *Shogi pic fan* trend?"

She's not. The kind of *pic* Akira is referring to will never trend anytime, anywhere. They're perverted, that's why.

"The secret of our rapid growth in the real estate industry is due to the new technology we developed by utilizing those photography techniques along with the equipment know-how from our days as a video game company. Are you curious, Kuzuryu-sensei?"

"Not really"

"Virtual reality."

"Virtual Reality? As in VR? Like those thick, bricky goggles you need to play some video games?"

"Precisely. I have a working set with me right here."

"There's a title match going on. Please don't bring strange things onto hallowed ground."

Ms. Oga defends my retort in the most bizarre way.

"The association asked her to bring the goggles, because they will be useful for the upcoming press conference."

Press conference?

"Just try them already. They will change your world."

"WHOA?! Th-This is!!" I yell the instant the thick headset slides over my eyes, the image making me completely forget where I am.

Because it looks exactly like my old apartment above the shopping arcade!

“This is amazing, Akira! It feels like I’m actually there!”

“He-he-he. It does, doesn’t it?”

Man, I really underestimated what VR can do.

Everything looks so real that I swear I can feel and smell the place, too. It’s like I’m in a completely different room

“At its most basic level, *moving* is a journey to a far-off location. However, doing so requires taking time off from work to find your new domicile and the search process often lasts more than one day.”

Akira is right about that. Could this have helped me avoid the tragedy of being locked into buying a 400-million-yen apartment without ever seeing the place? Probably not, but still

“Well, guess what! VR allows you to instantly tour those prospective dwellings, no matter how far away they may be, in the most realistic way possible! Not only is it not necessary to travel in person, saving time and money, but for young and beautiful women like me, the pressure of riding along in a car with a sales person to the site will become a non-issue!”

“This technology allows us to show exactly what the inner layout of the new Shogi Association Building will look like in perfect detail. The objecting players who have held out against this project for years will be much easier to convince.”

The chairman quietly adds, “Looking to the future, this electronic realm No, I believe it’s called the *metaverse*, yes? Playing matches in it will be feasible. Travel expenses between East and West will become a thing of the past, and rule violations using software will be much easier to detect.”

Plans for a virtual reality Shogi Association Building?!

“It will also create an environment where it is possible for individuals living abroad and those with disabilities to become professional players. Thus, a certain person has been entrusted with overseeing the construction of the new association buildings Well? What does the Ryuo think of his castle-to-be?”

“Th-This is a bit over my head”

“Allow me to persuade Kuzuryu-sensei.”

I hear Akira say right before she cracks her knuckles.

“Another feature Tada! Installing little girls in your room is also possible!!”

“HOOOOOOOOLY!!”

The next thing that comes into my line of sight—the Grade Schooler Practice Group from back in the day!

“Ai, Charlette, Ayano and Mio, too?! B-But you moved overseas!! I thought the day you all came back to my room would never come!!”

All the members of the group that Akira and Ai Yashajin stole- recorded.

Ai Hinatsuru looked like this about two months after she showed up at my door, maybe? Her newly turned fourth grader self has been reconstructed in cyberspace.

“*Sniffle, hic* GAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

The next thing I know I’m bawling my eyes out inside the goggles.

The happy days that I never thought would ever come back are right here in front of me!!

This is the metaverse!!

“Hey, check that out”

“Being surrounded by digital little girls is making the Ryuo cry”

“I knew he was a lolicon all along.”

“Don’t tell me that the real purpose for today’s press conference is”

No, no, no! These are tears of joy from the good old days!!

Just when I was about to explain it, it hits me. Calling the times when grade school girls came to my room *good old days* would make this misunderstanding even worse. The best move now is to endure. Ngghhh

Grimacing, I pull off the headset as Akira says, “In addition to VR, our company has developed a system in which we purchase leftover plots of land that went unsold and continuously build the domiciles divided into the smallest dimensions allowed under the law using A.I.”

“That’s vicious!”

“Please use the word *efficient*. Also——,” adds Akira with sorrow in her eyes, “for cities with many slopes and few locations ideal for building domiciles like Kobe, it’s an extremely useful technique. Especially for recovering from earthquakes Yes?”

“Ah

Akira isn’t old enough to have memories of the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995, but that doesn’t mean she grew up completely unaffected by the scars of that calamity.

And the chairman is from Kobe. He was the one who connected me with Ai Yashajin in the first place.

Wait a minute The connections between the Yashajin family and Seiichi Tsukimitsu might run deeper than I ever thought

“At any rate, our company prides itself on efficiently building safe, reliable structures that are easy for children to access using A.I. technology. What better criteria for the company overseeing construction of the new Shogi Association Buildings?”

“I hope this is the beginning of a long, fruitful relationship, President Ikeda.”

It seems as though the chairman wholeheartedly believes Akira is an extremely capable young leader of a young company. The fact that Ms. Oga is starting to see that level of trust as a threat and eyeing Akira like an enemy is proof of that. I wonder who would win if these two fought to the death?

“Chairman, this deserves your attention. The board has taken a dynamic turn.”

“What has happened, Ms. Oga?”

The chairman’s face transforms with every piece that Ms. Oga relays to him from the analysis board, which has been laid out to reflect the current formation in the match.

“Whoa?! Well, this is certainly interesting. Very interesting indeed

“What is? It looks like the normal Double Wing Attack to me.”

“The formation has aligned with a match that I played nearly 30 years ago as

the defender. It was, however, not a league match.”

“Huh?! This here?”

Once I get over this stunning fact that Ms. Oga has every one of Chairman Tsukimitsu’s matches, including exhibitions, committed to memory, I have a look. Scanning the board, I tilt my head and say, “But this the newest formations in modern Shogi also stick out both the edge Pawns sometimes. I’ve seen younger players do it.”

“That is interesting.”

This kind of thing happens every now and *then because Double Wing Attack hasn’t been researched thoroughly enough yet to establish a standard. The ideology between now and back then is so different, so it has to be a coincidence*

“You said you were on defense, chairman. Then who were you playing against?”

“Have you no idea?”

“Well, since it wasn’t a league match, that means they weren’t necessarily a professional player But no amateur or Women’s League player played at this high level in the early game 30 years ago, so they’d have to be——”

“Rina Shakando *Women’s 2-dan.*”

“.....?!”

In other words

Right now, Ai is playing the same Shogi as Shakando-*sensei* did way back then!

“She was still in her teens. Caught off guard by her lovely charms in that school uniform, I came dangerously close to leaving the disgraceful match record though only just... my eyes could see well enough at that time.”

The prodigy who became the youngest Meijin in history vividly recalls what happened on a board almost 30 years ago.

“The match where the reigning Meijin was defeated by a Women’s League player in front of the whole world.”

THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

“Here———”

The moment Shakando-*sensei* forward.

I switch into battle mode.

“Here Here Here, here, here, hereherehereherehere———Here!!”

First, put down a Pawn right in front of the Pawn protecting her Bishop!

Force the defender to trigger a Bishop Exchange——

“Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere!!”

The second stage starts now.

Both of us are under pressure building our formations because we each have to worry about the other’s Bishop. I need to drive that pressure home.

——Cut! Cut down her waiting time!

The match is under my control, and I don’t use any of my waiting time as I push forward. But, like master negotiators bartering against each other, Shakando-*sensei* adjusts to my advances perfectly without using her waiting time either. Thick defenses!!

“He-he. I am on the verge of losing You’ll have to work harder than that to find an opening.”

“Tch! All right then!!”

I read her breathing to figure out what to do next. Once I pull my Rook all the way back, I quickly build up a different formation.

“..... Oh? 2 Nine Rook, 4 Eight Gold form, is it?” Shakando-*sensei* gently rolls her neck and says with a little surprise.

That’s because my formation——*is almost always used for Bishop Exchange strategies.*

“I had an inkling this might happen after you opted for a Bishop Exchange style of defense despite opening with a Double Wing Attack in our first match,

but this Well, well. Is that what you are after?”

Finally noticed, has she? But it’s too late now!

After 53 moves, the formation looks almost exactly like a Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver.

—Basically, *I transformed Double Wing Attack Shogi into Bishop Exchange!*

That was my true plan.

Get her to let her guard down by only playing the Double Wing and then trick her into starting a Bishop Exchange. Right in the middle of the match!!

Can you keep up with the speed of modern Shogi, Shakando-sensei? Can you?!

“It’s apparent that you study the modern forms of Double Wing Attack and Bishop Exchange quite extensively. That being the case, perhaps I shall don garments from my youth.”

“?! And that is?”

Shakando-sensei draws her right Gold in close to make a wall of Golds and Silvers in front of her king.

I don’t recognize that kind of defense.

It’s a practical, defensive stance.

“Practical But very old!”

“How rude of you, insulting the prime of one’s youth.”

My King is set right in the middle of a perfectly balanced, modern formation. Even better, my right Knight is in a forward position.

It’s an advantage I can press, for sure.

At the same time, being able to see through my opponent is huge.

—She’s not confident playing with the latest style! How could she be, after she lost the first match to me.....?!

I fought off the modern style against her in the first match.

I had the first move and kept the advantage all the way to victory in the

second.

Now, in the third match, I get to fight using the latest trend and have the first move.

—I’ve stripped her of all her weapons, and I’m the only one who’s still armed! The advantage is mine!!

It’s been mine since even before the match got started.

She should understand that, too.

—Then why is she so relaxed? Does she think she can beat me with Bishop Exchange?

The only weapon this person called the Eternal Queen has left is—experience.

I can’t take it lightly. That’s the one weapon I can’t match.

“Tell me. If it’s Bishop Exchange you wish to play then How about this?”

Sensei advances her Pawn along the 6th file to make space behind it. Space to deploy her Bishop.

So that’s what she’s aiming for.

“A repetition draw”

Defenders trying to force a repetition draw happens a lot in Bishop Exchange matches. It lets them get to the advantage of the first move when the match is restarted. A pessimistic idea. If that’s what the Women’s Legend is really thinking

—I’ll rout her first!

“..... Here”

I’ve been saving my Bishop for a moment like this. I play it first to shake her confidence, then lean in all the way up to the very edge of the board and start swaying back and forth. I’ll read all the way to victory!!

“Here, here, here, herehereherehereherehereherehere.”

“Here, is it?”

“H- Huh?!”

Rather than bide her time, Shakando-*sensei* starts an attack. Suddenly, as if out of thin air.

“With a 9 Five Pawn?!”

My King is in the 8th file, and Shakando-*sensei* isn’t trying to hide that she’s punching right for it.

On top of this strange move that looks more like a taunt, she——

“You prefer to fight it out, tit for tat, do you not? Then come. Let us collide at full force.”

Those words light a fire inside me.

“HEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHERE!!”

I’ll beat her to a pulp.

Drag her off that throne she’s had for 29 years and make her wish she’d never been born. I won’t let this be a ceremonious passing of the torch. No——this is a revolution!!

I get in position to trample her beneath the power of my youth and the might of my reading speed, my most powerful weapon But!

“I’m being pushed back?! Wh-What is this pressure?!”

“Heh heh heh. He-he-he-he! He-he-he-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Shakando-*sensei* is laughing.

Her cheeks are turning red, like a little girl!

“This Shogi harkens back to what I played in my teens. To think a player who reminded me of such a passionate era would appear not from the 3-*dan* division, but the Women’s League”

Something unbelievable happens in front of my eyes as we exchange more moves back and forth.

——Shakando-*sensei* is getting younger?!

It’s not just how she plays.

Her overall appearance, even her face, changes.

“Do not smolder.”



“?!?!!”

Even Keika, sitting at the boardside table, is rubbing her eyes. Then, she says with that astonished look on her face.

“Sh-Shakando-*sensei*! You have 10 minutes remaining! When would you like me to countdown——”

“Don’t bother,” answers the legend with the spirit of a little girl as the tiniest bead of sweat rolls down her cheek. Then she deploys a Lance aimed directly at my King.

——She doesn’t need a countdown? If she’s not going to surrender, that means!!

“Don’t patronize me!!”

The mid-game was an all-out battle, and neither of us allowed the other to poke any holes in our defenses. Through all of that, I kept something special hidden behind my back——

“Now!!”

What I deployed 40 moves ago and haven’t touched since waiting for the perfect moment: a Bishop.

Now that it’s been out of her thought process long enough to disappear, the time has come to pierce Shakando-*sensei*’s heart with it!

“HEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEREHEEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEE Ngh!!!”

“..... Check, is it?”

My Bishop, now promoted to a Horse, is planted firmly at 5 Two. Shadanko-*sensei* takes a Silver off her piece stand to block it.

But I’ve already read that sequence to the end.

My true target is——Shakando-*sensei*’s Rook!!

“..... Mine!!”

This is just the move I had in mind! Put her in check with my Horse, and then shift it diagonally back on step.

—Keep her King in my sights while taking the Rook at the same time! I I won!!

Right now, at this moment.

The title of Women's Legend is on the board, in the shape of a Rook Right within my reach.

“.....”

The titleholder is staring into her lap.

Her hand too slowly reaches for her piece stand. My giddy heart is jumping in and out of my throat Once *Sensei* puts her hand on that stand, I will become the new Women's Legend!

But—I was wrong.

Those long, white fingers of hers pluck a small piece off the stand instead.

Then, she effortlessly plops it down on the board like a drop of water.

“..... A Pawn?”

That makes no sense.

—That won't protect against my Horse, it won't help her King escape and doesn't put me in check, so why?

What a murky move.

It doesn't show up in any of the



main sequences, so I never read into it.

I can win by ignoring it and taking the Rook or starting the attack right now.

——..... No! I can't get comfortable until the very end!!

Now is the time to play it safe. So I calmly pull a Gold back and take that Pawn to guarantee that I win the title.

Doing that flipped everything upside down.

"This marks the end for you, Ai Hinatsuru," Shakando-*sensei* declares as she picks up a Knight from her piece stand and snaps it onto the board.

8 Four Knight.

"T——"

That's when I finally notice.

My head is on the chopping block right now.

"Took initiative?! Ignored the Rook and Gaaaaaaaah?!"

Deploying that Knight at 8 Four completely changed the world.

——If I take her Rook now I'll be put in checkmate?! Me?! I'll be checkmated?!

".....!!"

Rushing, I put a Gold down in my territory. I needed it for my final attack on her King, but I'll lose by instant death if I don't protect my own right now.

But it turns out that Gold is what Shakando-*sensei* wanted. She takes it with her Knight and then shifts her attention back to her own territory. The Gold I just lost gets deployed at the perfect moment to seal off my Horse!

This match is as good as over. I saw it my own defeat.

——I was out-read? Me? In the late-game?

I don't believe it.

I mean My opponent, she's even older than my mother

——That's impossible!!

I keep playing, refusing to accept what's happening on the board in front of

me. This this can't be right!

—No way! No way! Nowaynowaynowaynoway!!

“How unsightly,” Shakando-*sensei* whispers, effortlessly blocking my desperate attempts to put her in check one after another without using waiting time. She may as well have a fistful of my collar and be slapping me silly right now.

Her moves are all perfect. It's like I'm playing against an A League player.

How is she this strong?

“Leave the nest before your Master could teach you how to accept defeat with grace, did you?”

“*Gasp*

I used the very latest research.

The newest way to play Static Rook that Natagiri-*sensei* an A League member and Meijin challenger drilled into me over the course of many practice sessions.

And all the strength I built up in the late-game.

Even Master the youngest dual titleholder ever thought I'd never lose in the late-game. He said it was my strongest weapon.

Both of those weapons got crushed into dust.

In one Shogi match.

“..... I

The words *I lost* won't come out.

All I can do is comment on the situation I'm in.

“..... I have nothing

Those three words say it all.

The title that was in my grasp.

Even the weapons I thought would never fail have fallen through my fingers like sand.

“Our matches have shown me that you are particularly well-versed in the latest Double Wing Attack and Bishop Exchange. Up to date on the latest *yagura* style as well, I presume? Your study habits are impeccable.”

“.....”

Her eyes are terrifying, like they can see all the way through me. I can't meet them, no matter how hard I try.

I'm too embarrassed.

I'd happily crawl into a coffin and just die.

“So I decided to call upon what little youth I have left And what fun it was, reliving a time gone by.”

“One begs your pardon.”

Sasari Oga Women's 1-*dan* comes into the arena along with the media people and walks up to the winner to whisper in her ear.

“Shakando-*sensei*, the press conference time slot is”

“Oh, yes.”

Then, once Ms. Oga helps her to her feet, Shakando-*sensei* says this, “I hadn't anticipated the match taking this long. I do apologize, but I shall be bowing out of the review session.”

The Shakando-*sensei* dragging her leg out the door is the one I know.

The only traces of the girl I faced during the match are staring back at me from my checkmated King on the board

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I watch the press conference in the corner of the room after the match finished.

“The Shogi Association of Japan would like to announce that Lolihome Ltd. has been selected to carry out the construction of new association buildings for both Kanto and Kansai.”

Ms. Oga explains the details while handing out packets to each of the reporters in attendance. Normally, the chairman would be here too, but he isn't around.

“Although official approval will have to wait for the next Players Meeting, preparations have been made to enter a binding partnership. President Ikeda, please provide specifics.”

“I am the president of Lolihome, Akira Ikeda.”

Akira boldly takes the microphone from Ms. Oga and steps up to center stage like she owns the place.

However, her being a woman and being so young has the reporters questioning her credibility. The company name certainly doesn't help

“As a real estate company that fully supports women in the workplace, we have come to prominence only recently. Our rise was so quick, in fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you had never heard of us before.”

She must be reading the room, because Akira has dropped her usual *gangst*..... a-hem, aggressive tone.

“Furthermore, all our administrators are women. You may be curious how, despite the fact that over 90 percent of our employees are female, we have managed to ascend so quickly in the male-dominated real estate industry The answer is simpler than you might think.”

“.....?”

The reporters look back at her, confused.

“The answer? It is because Shogi is heavily incorporated in our training program!!”

“Whooooa!!”

Akira’s sheer enthusiasm draws everyone in like a magnet.

“We apply an overarching sense learned through playing Shogi to predicting the real estate market, late-game endurance to sales, and a positive mindset. A fighting spirit that never gives up on a last-second turnaround is an absolute necessity for any businessperson. Shogi contains every necessary skill to survive in the business world. We strive to become the *Meijin of Real Estate* with the lessons Shogi has taught us.”

Questions start pouring in from all over the room.

“Do you also play Shogi, President Ikeda?!”

“Whenever I have the time, yes. I frequent the Kansai Shogi Association’s classroom. As for my ability Well, not quite 1-*dan*, if I’m being honest. My best strategy is the Move Loss Bishop Exchange.”

“Very specific”

“She genuinely plays Shogi!”

The Shogi world gives people who know how to play special treatment. Despite their company name and how fishy Akira seemed at first, she’s suddenly been accepted as one of the group.

..... Her newfound good graces wouldn’t last if they ever found out she was a lolicon-esque, underhanded cheater who ranted at the grade schoolers whenever she lost, but hey

“Shogi taught me what is truly important, everything that matters”

Getting teary-eyed, Akira says that phrase before ramping up the power in her voice to declare.

“Yes! Our passion for helping women succeed has led us to propose a new Women’s Title League for the Shogi Association!!”

WHOOOOAAA! The room erupts.

Reconstructing the association buildings was a big enough surprise, but even

I'm stunned by this news.

“A new Women’s Title?! There hasn’t been a story this big since the Women’s Throne Title was announced!”

“That will bring the total to seven, just like the professionals!!”

“What’s the format?! The prize money?! The name of the title?!”

“The title name has yet to be determined. However, what is set in stone is that the scope will exceed both Queen and Women’s Throne. In other words——”

Akira pauses for dramatic effect.

“Women’s Placement Matches. I promise here and now that we will make this a reality.”

WH000000000000000000000000AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!

Excitement is spreading like wildfire in here.

“We will also make our VR technology available for those who wish to use it for matches.”

“A virtual-reality arena?!”

The metaverse is trending right now, and the regular reporters latch onto that buzzword like hungry wolves on the prowl.

Akira lifts a headset and says, “(Shogi software equipped with deep learning is difficult to introduce privately, so ...) We have created an environment where players can use Shogi software equipped with deep learning available around the clock. Also, we have a Shogi Relocation Plan for those looking for affordable housing with increased amperage to allow for the latest GPU.”

“Wh-Why go to such lengths?”

“Our company philosophy at Lolihome is to inspire growth. Although we are still a young company taking baby steps in a big world we would love the opportunity to grow strong alongside the players in the Women’s League.”

With that, Akira puts down the microphone.

And the last person to take it up is—the winner of today's match.

“I have been asked to chair both the creation of Women’s Placement Matches and the renewal construction for both association buildings in the East and the West. I understand if some may feel affronted that a Women’s League player such as myself has taken this post, however

Shakando-*sensei* explains why she was chosen for the role.

“Chairman Tsukimitsu is an active player, in A League to be exact. He has a great deal of expectations on his shoulders. I, on the other hand, have but one title and free time to my name. What’s more, my grasp on said title is akin to a candle on a blustery day. The real prospect of attending this conference without it laid heavily on my mind Luckily, the flame managed to last this night, as you can see.”

That gets a good laugh out of the crowd.

The sequence of Ms. Oga, Akira and now Shakando-*sensei* has whipped them into a frenzy like a string of perfect moves.

“..... A press conference with only women, huh? Even the chairman stayed away. Well done Was it Ms. Oga’s idea? Or maybe——”

Everything lined up perfectly for the press conference. *A little too perfectly.*

There wouldn’t be anywhere near as many media people here if the Women’s Legend Title Match wasn’t getting so much publicity, and Shakando-*sensei* wouldn’t be in talking shape if she had lost her title. Not only would it leave a bad taste if the newly dethroned Women’s Legend made an appearance, but all the journalists would be too hung up on the birth of Naniwa’s Snow White 2.0 to listen to what any of them had to say.

This is the first good news to come out of the Shogi world since its most recognizable player, Ginko Sora, went missing.

There can be no mistakes.

——Did Shakando-*sensei* lose on purpose to build up hype for today’s press conference?

“No! There’s no way Right?”

Shakando-*sensei* is strong, but strong enough to pull that off against Ai as she is now? There’s no way she’s that good

I try to shut that thought down as soon as it crosses my mind. Then.

My smartphone buzzes.

“Hm? HMM?!”

Doing a double take at the name that pops up on the screen, I step outside the room and answer the call.

The voice coming out of my phone is high-pitched and a little nostalgic.

“You’re there, aren’t you?”

The mastermind makes her entrance.

“..... Sure am. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because you can’t keep a secret,” the speaker—Ai Yashajin—says in a patronizing tone. So, the usual way.

She must be watching the press conference from someplace else.

Having all the speakers be women and scheduling the press conference right after the third Women’s Legend Title Match in Osaka all had to be her idea.

—Did did she set it up this way so that I would see it?

“I know she doesn’t look it, but Akira is a brilliant manager. She’s well liked within the Yashajin Group and adapt at incorporating my ideas, as well.”

“.....”

“She will act as a direct link with the association for the foreseeable future. Lend her a hand if anything comes up. I’m too busy right now to do it myself.”

“I’m not exactly sitting on my thumbs, either.”

Her tone is the same as always, but I can tell she is running on fumes. Ai Yashajin usually mixes in a lot of quips, but there hasn’t been one yet today.

I was told not to look at her match records, so I haven’t. The thing is that I can’t avoid hearing about the results.

She lost the opening matches of both the Queen and Women’s Throne series matches, and the fact that two Repetition Draws have happened in the first three matches is big news right now.

Her opponent is the second-ever woman to make it into the 3-*dan* division. The popular opinion is that she's having an easy time against a grade school girl, but

"..... There are so many questions I want to ask you, but I'll keep it to one."

"That's fine. As long as it's just one."

"Good."

I take a deep breath and let it rip.

"Are you taking care of yourself? I know for a fact that you're strong enough to beat someone in the 3-*dan* division. So stay healthy, okay?"

"....."

"Fatigue is the biggest enemy when you've got two title matches going on at the same time. Sometimes you're better off getting some good rest than forcing yourself to come up with a second-rate strategy. If your arms feel like lead, go to bed. Understood?"

"..... That's what you wanted to ask me?"

"Yeah. Since Akira is over here doing presidential things, that means you are fighting all these battles by yourself, right? Are you taking time to relax? Do you have much energy?"

"I feel energized now."

Somehow, Ai's tone sounds a bit brighter than it did when she first called. She's also being more open and honest.

Feeling relieved, I try to get more information out of her, but——

"Oh, this is my stop. Bye-bye."

"Hey?! I narrowed it down to one question because you said I only get one, but I've got a whole mountain of things to ask you!! Call me once things settle down——"

She hung up. The call is over.

But I think I heard an announcement right before the line went dead. Something about a center over a loudspeaker? Was she riding a train just now?

It was really quiet if she was

“Yeesh! She has to have it her way whatever she does”

I put my phone back in my pocket and think about what to do next Time to go.

The press conference is still going on. Akira has pulled out the VR headset for a demonstration, but Ai Yashajin calling when she did means there’s nothing important left on the agenda.

Just like when I came in, I choose the route with the least number of people on the way out, but——

“Leaving so soon? Ryuo.”

I get spotted just like before.

Well, *spotted* might not be the right word. He can’t see, after all.

“Chairman”

Apparently, he recognized my footsteps while sitting on the sofa waiting for Ms. Oga to come back.

——A monster. Yep.

The A League Placement Matches are about to start. I bet his senses are honed to a sharp point right now. He might only be using his mental Shogi board to do research. These little moments between events could be invaluable practice time for a busy man like him.

I completely understand why he didn’t bother going to a press conference about virtual reality.

The world contained in this man’s head is so much vaster than a VR toy could ever hope to create.

——Master had a scary air about him when he was in A League, too

The air at home was always tense when Placement Matches started. That prickly vibe was a major part of my training years.

“A League players don’t like sharing the same space.”

Mr. Oishi’s words have a lot more weight now.

Yeah A battle will start if two of these monsters are in the same room even without sharing a Shogi board.

Ayumu promoted into that league, but the air doesn't crackle between us yet. Whether that's a good or a bad thing, I'm not sure.

"Aren't you going to say a few words to your apprentice?"

His voice gently slides me back into the moment, and I answer, "I think it's better to give her some space right now. Getting torn down like that The same thing happened to me against the Meijin in Hawaii."

The Shogi sense I had built up to that point got ripped out by the roots.

Ai used research and her late-game abilities, the areas she had the most confidence in, but still got crushed. Like Master, like apprentice. We even lost in the same way.

"She has to get back on her feet on her own steam. Isn't that right?"

"Quite."

It seems like that explanation convinced him. He was, after all, there at the time.

"Well then, what about your Master? I believe that Kousuke has been wanting to see you."

"..... I have some work to do in Tokyo. I won't make it in time if I don't leave right now"

"That is unfortunate."

The chairman shrugs.

Then, sounding genuinely sorry, he says.

"A growing family faces many challenges, yes? Not that I have faced them myself, but He has never been sure how to do so."

SPRING RAIN

It's drizzling outside, but I don't know when it started.

"Women's Placement Matches"

After leaving the press conference, I slowly walk over to a big window to look at the garden outside.

There's too much information to process right now.

The fact that both Shogi Association buildings are going to be rebuilt means that the scenery I know is going to change in a big way.

Especially when it comes to the Kansai Association

"If they are already looking at new sites, that means it won't be in Fukushima anymore, doesn't it? Where will the new one be? Kobe? But that seems too far away from Kanto"

The association building has always been one train stop away from my home. If it moves, my daily life as I know it will never be the same.

Even the classroom might be affected.

—Everyone else, too. They'll Oh, right. Father and I are the only ones left

Yaichi, Ginko and even Ai Hinatsuru ...

All of them moved out from under the Kansai Association Building's shadow a long time ago.

— It's just me that's left hanging.

The Shogi world is moving forward. All the physical things of the past are getting crushed in its wake. I thought the number of titles would be constant forever. So much for that. Even the buildings themselves are about to change.

Just as the younger generation is looking at these changes with hope for the future, I'm sure there are some in the older generation whose spirits have been broken trying to keep up.

—Which one am I?

“Keika. Hey, Keika!”

“Huh? Ah What is it, Father?”

“How many times do I hafta tell ya to call me Master while we’re workin’?” remarks my father, looking neat and tidy now that he’s changed out of his kimono and into a suit. He seems completely unphased. Did he already know what was going to happen at the press conference?

“At can wait though. Would ya track Ai down? There’s the dinner party I gotta get goin’ to.”

“Ai? If you call her, she’ll Oh, right, it’s still in the safe”

Father keeps all the players’ devices in a safe in his room until the match is over because that’s part of the observer’s job. He’s only just giving *Shakando-sensei* her phone back right now.

“Whad’ya think, Rina? Playin’ against Ai.”

“She is a kind and studious child. In terms of talent, I believe she may be the best Women’s League player I have ever fought. It is only a matter of time before she claims a title of her own.”

I don’t know how, but *Shakando-sensei* seems more energetic now, after that intense match and a long press conference, than she normally does.

Like the young girl I glimpsed during the match—

“It wouldn’t surprise me if she became the first to hold the new title in the works. Her, or perhaps another Ai”

“Yashajin, ya mean? She’s my granddaughter apprentice, but I gotta admit she scares me just a bit.”

They’re still talking behind me as I head into the building to look for Ai Hinatsuru.

To make a long story short, I find her almost immediately.

She doesn’t want to talk with anyone right now, no doubt.

Since she wasn't in her room or the break room that really left only one place to look.

"Ai."

She's in the garden getting drizzled on.

No one found her up until this point because they all assumed she'd stay out of the rain.

That small challenger, still in her kimono and draped in the agony of defeat, quits looking at the sky and turns to face me.

"..... Keika?"

"Sorry. My fath- that old beard wants to return your phone!" I say as brightly as I can muster.

Because that sullen face staring at me looks to be in so much pain.

"That was an amazing press conference, wasn't it? New Shogi Association buildings, and even Placement Matches for the Women's League!"

Women's League matches are all tournaments, so losing one match means your schedule gets wiped clean.

A whole year can go by without even playing ten matches. I'm living proof

"Everyone has always griped about not having Placement Matches, how they'd be so much stronger if only we had them like the pros! I might have twice as many matches each year now. Then again, if I start winning as much as you do, I'll never have any time for myself——"

Once I start talking, the words don't stop.

Yes, it's true that I want the extra pay by playing more matches.

But Women's League players don't get paid that much per match to begin with. That's why what we're really fighting over is a place to get stronger: league matches.

"Knowing that I played more actual Shogi during my time in the Practice League is just too sad."

Oh I see now.

Talking to Ai makes it easier to accept all these changes in the Shogi world.

—I’m changing, too.

“The real shocker is the sponsor, don’t you think?! Akira is the company president! That girl has to be the mastermind, though, no matter how you look at it. I understand that she’s still underage and there’d be a major conflict of interest if she took a leading role, but don’t you think she could’ve given us a heads up?”

Even I am moving forward.

So Ai can probably zoom into the future. One loss won’t even register as a speed bump for her.

Assuming that to be true, I keep talking away but.

“..... Ai? Hey, Ai? What do you think?”

“I wanted to settle it Here”

“Huh?”

“I should’ve had it! I had to show everyone how strong I’ve gotten! But I couldn’t do anything!!”

SPLASH!

Ai stomps on a puddle like a toddler having a temper tantrum. She hasn’t heard a word I’ve said.

“I couldn’t lose this match no matter what!! I I have to keep pressing forward faster and faster!! But I I!!”

“Ai”

“I had to play so well that Sora-sensei would be too jealous to send messages anymore! But I got out-read in the late-game?! Why am I so weak?! *DARA!!*”

“Ai”

Is it okay to say this is just part of growing up?

A desire for a title has bloomed from a happy-go-lucky little girl who played just for fun.

A thirst to keep winning more and more.

Then, there's the confidence she has in her own talent. Even looking at it objectively, I have to admit that her late-game skills are above and beyond the Women's League. Her knowledge of the latest formations and study habits are impressive, too.

But If she thinks she's gotten strong enough to sweep Shakando-*sensei* in a title match, then hasn't that confidence crossed the line into arrogance?

Wait.

Her eyes aren't focused on Shakando-*sensei* right now Not even close.

The letters I read at the opening night party.

Ginko's words might've triggered her more than I thought. In that sense, I share some of the blame for this situation, but—

“..... Isn't this when the Master is supposed to step up? Yaichi”

Ai, on the verge of losing her mind, continues howling into the darkening sky like a small, wounded beast.

The drizzle picks up into a full-blown spring downpour right before my eyes.

The cherry blossoms were so beautiful, but the last of their petals are being washed away.

RECORD 3

釈迦堂里奈

RINA
SHAKANDO

清滝鋼介

KOUSUKE
KIYOTAKI

THE BOOK BUSINESS

After rushing out of Osaka and getting to Tokyo, I have come to a place I rarely ever go.

“Whooooa! Look at them all, Machi! The shelves are all lined with my book!!”

“Completely full. So many copies

We’re in one of those mega bookstores in Shinjuku.

There’s a grand hall in the middle of this nine-story building where they hold events for authors like signings or meet and greets. Since the owner is also a Shogi fan, there’ve been some Shogi events in here, too.

That’s why their Shogi section is well stocked, and Kuzuryu’s Notebook is on full display.

“Thank you so much for creating this magnificent corner for my book!” I bow to a store employee.

“My pleasure! The literary debut of Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*, the youngest dual title holder in history, deserved to have an equally fitting display!”

This employee, who also happens to play Shogi in their spare time, was in charge of putting this corner together. With a foldable Shogi board right in the middle of it, the whole exhibit sticks out like a sore thumb in the middle of all these bookshelves.

The problem with the board itself is that the Rook and Bishop are in the wrong places. I guess they’re not the most avid Shogi players, but seeing all the time and effort they poured into making this area special warms my heart.

Just wow! I’m touched!

“Initial sales must not have been that successful when there are piles left over at this point, yes?” says Machi with a grim look on her face as she takes a picture to post on social media.

“Initial?”

“Books spoil. The best by date is typically two weeks after release. Sales tend

to plummet after that.”

“Huuh?! Two weeks That was a long time ago!”

And yet, here are all these books just sitting on the shelves.

The display in front of me takes on a whole new meaning than it had moments ago.

“Then my book isn’t selling? The book I worked so hard to write isn’t selling at all?”

“B-But you have an extremely passionate fan!!” says the employee without missing a beat. However, they didn’t try to deny the not selling part.

“A passionate fan?”

“Yes! They purchased five copies the very moment your book hit the shelves!”

“Really?!”

Grabbing the employee’s shoulders before I realize it, I ask, “What did they look like?! W-Was it a girl in grade school, maybe?! With short hair!!”

“Um? A little girl? In grade school?”

Crap! That came out like I’ve got a thing for grade school girls, didn’t it?!

“No,” the staff member finally says. “He was a man, probably in his 40s. He had a suave air about him Oh, yes. I remember him clutching the books close to his chest and happily whispering, Hee-hee! Looks like I have this shop’s Yaichi a-a-all to myself close to your ear in the picture on the sleeve.”

“.....”

Tokyo is a big place, but there’s only one person who would ever actually do that

And this is Shinjuku It had to be him

“I was sure your book would sell like wildfire after seeing his enthusiasm, so I ordered a few extra shipments, but Well, Shogi book sales are hard to predict”

After that, I get tasked with signing a mountain of books in the back room.

The staff was being modest, saying three is enough but Machi cut them off with, “We’ll happily sign every copy here! Isn’t that right, Ryuo?!”

She was so gung-ho about it that I couldn’t object.

Players sign books using a brush and ink before finishing them off with a personal stamp, just like with autographs. Since it takes time to do each individual book, a full three hours pass before I get to leave the store.

“Our only option now is to depend on social media influencers. Apparently, books that get talked about on TikTok have been selling recently.”

We already left the store, but all Machi is thinking about is how to sell more books.

“The ideal would be to have the Meijin or Sora 4-*dan* plug the book personally, but the Meijin Title Match and other circumstances are in the way. The timing isn’t right.”

“That’s true. I wonder if the Meijin Title Match will end early this year

“Aren’t you watching the Meijin Title Match?”

“I can’t I mean, I sent him a copy of my book, Machi. It’d be a huge letdown if he didn’t use any of the strategies I wrote about, yeah?”

I’m curious, of course.

Curious if he’s read the book, curious if he liked my ideas. One look at his Shogi is all I need to find out. The best possible review would be for him to use one of the strategies in my book on a big stage like the Meijin Title Match right after it got released.

But

“On the other hand, him using one of my strategies means he absorbed my strength. How am I supposed to fight him the next time we have a match?”

“I think you should simply take it as a compliment.”

My book not selling at all feels like the world is rejecting the life I’ve chosen, but spelling out my strategies to my rivals who read it also puts me in a bad spot.

If I had known it would turn out like this, I’d have been better off not writing

that thing in the first place.

“At any rate, our only option now is to visit as many bookstores as possible and sign as many books as possible.”

Machi slaps my back to invigorate me out of the doldrums and picks up the pace.

“Will signing copies really help sell more?”

“No. Signed copies can’t be returned to the publisher for a refund anymore, so the store itself pays for each one. At that point, sales figure aren’t our problem anymore.”

“What kind of high-pressure salesmanship is that?!”

“My head will roll if they don’t sell, that’s what!”

However, Kuzuryu’s Notebook would soon start flying off the shelves.

To think that *he* would be the reason why At this point, it wasn’t even in my wildest dreams.

THE EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

After touring bookshops all around Tokyo until sundown, Machi and I arrive at the Shogi Association.

It's a five-story building in Sendagaya.

The first floor is a shop. Second floor is the classroom. Administrative offices are on the third floor. Everyone knows that the fourth and fifth floors have arenas, sleeping quarters and a studio for doing broadcasts.

What isn't so well known is what's in the basement. I don't think people realize there even is a basement.

"This here was a cafeteria back in the day," the overlord of this dim, somewhat confined space tells me with his feet propped up on a desk absolutely covered in random books and magazines.

"Now that I think about it Master told me a long time ago. He said the food was pretty good and he always ordered lunch here whenever he had a match in Tokyo. He was sad when it closed down without warning, too."

"Ah, Kiyotaki. That guy sinks his teeth into everything like he hasn't eaten in days."

This man referring to my Master like an old buddy used to be a Kansai player just like us.

But now he sounds like he was born and raised in Tokyo.

"Chief No, Master."

Machi, who was also speaking like a Tokyoite, lets her hair down and says, "We have not come here to be regaled with stories of times gone by."

"I'm aware. You want to know about Rina, yes? Don't you know not to make the boss rush? My word."

My work in Tokyo.

Helping with book sales is part of it, but I do have another job to do.

Convincing Shakando-sensei to accept Ayumu's marriage proposal The

first thing to do is to get background information from someone who knows about her past.

What was once the association cafeteria has become its publishing headquarters.

In other words, the editorial department.

Everything from serialized magazines about Shogi to records of famous matches and books on strategy get made here. This is where my book was published, too.

Only six people work for this department full time, but freelance writers and Shogi journalists are always coming in and out. It's usually a lot livelier here, or so I'm told.

I'm not used to it since I live in Kansai, but apparently a lot of players come here to write manuscripts when they're asked for one like the Women's King is doing in the corner right now.

"What are you working on, Ryou? An apology?"

"Wanna die? It's my own match commentary, bonehead."

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka scratches her head with the tip of her pen. Other than the wanna die quip, she sounds pretty tired.

"I got told to write something if I had time to kill. This is your fault 'cuz ya rocked up so late. Damn it"

"I'm sorry about being late, but why not just say no if you don't want to write one?"

"'Cuz there's no tellin' *what'll get written 'bout me* if I refuse."

"Precisely. Being granted one of Master's peculiar nicknames, having an already disappointing loss immortalized with excessively critical match commentary Even I wish no part in that. Considering his willingness to beat a dead horse, I can scarcely believe we are both natives of Kyoto."

Maybe he does so *because* he's from Kyoto like Machi?

"The pen is mightier than the Rook, as they say," the old man boasts with his unique, cackling laugh.

“No matter how good a match may be, it’ll never reach memorable status without one of us journalists around to put it in writing.”

Taisei Kayaoku 7-*dan*.

This retired professional player known as the Sage didn’t do anything remarkable while he was active. Rather, as he would tell you himself, he didn’t get any accolades as a player.

However, he left his mark with journalism.

“I make your ordinary, worthless matches into interesting commentary to please the fans. You should be thanking me.”

“Can it, old fart! You dubbing me Aggressive Archangel is the reason my whole family calls me Little Angel now. Even worse, I gotta deal with people gettin’ disappointed when I don’t go for all-out offense!”

“Very much so, Master. Clean, concise victories nowadays only result in my getting bombarded with comments like where’s the torment? or I wanna see more of Machi’s harsh side on social media. Never before in history has a player been let down by the manner of their own victory.”

Aggressive Archangel and Machi the Tormentor are both nicknames that Kayaoku-*sensei* put into a Shogi magazine and they ended up sticking.

Strange as it is, people expect players to live up to their nicknames once they become popular.

Those expectations end up limiting the player in the end.

“Names are the shortest curse in this world. How many people have you cursed, oh Master of mine?”

“Not as many as you have, apprentice. That Naniwa’s Snow White of yours is worth a thousand on its own.”

Master and apprentice laugh at their exchange. It’s just, their eyes are totally serious. It’s terrifying.

Even scarier is that fact that nearly every player the Sage wrote has talent or worth keeping an eye on has gone on to do very well.

That’s why he has so much clout in the Shogi world. On a side note, it’s totally

adorable that Ryou's family calls her Little Angel

"Shakando-sensei's nickname is Eternal Queen, right? Was that also your idea, Kayaoku-sensei?"

"It was me, yes, when she achieved Queen status in all four of the Women's Titles at the time."

He answers my question without stopping for a breath.

"I was wondering where the best place to start would be But I suppose that's as good as any. There's just so much about Rina that has to stay behind closed doors. I'm not even sure I could explain all the details."

"Has to stay behind closed doors?"

Shakando-sensei has been the face of the Women's League for decades. I've never heard a bad thing about her.

She was great to both Big Sis and I.

What on earth could've happened in her past that can't be made public?

Could it be a reason why she won't accept Ayumu's proposal?

"In her case, everyone just started calling her a nickname Part of it was out of contempt, but the paralyzing fear she wrought is what really did the trick."

The Sage says the nickname like opening a time capsule to the past.

Rina Shakando, also known as——

Assassin.

THE WOMAN STRONGER THAN PROS

“Assass in?”

“Yep. That’s what we all called Ms. Shakando. Bear in mind it was ages ago Okay?” Natagiri-*sensei* tells me before getting up and walking over to his bookshelf.

This is Sensei’s study in his apartment.

We usually have practice sessions in his research room (where Rokuroba-*sensei* and I are living right now), but today I got to come in here for the first time.

—Does that mean he thinks I’m a worthy player?

His bookshelf covers the entire wall from the floor to the ceiling. It’s stuffed full of Shogi books and match record files.

Magazines, match records, strategy books, Shogi almanacs It’s overwhelming how he has everything meticulously organized like a library. But I do my best to listen to him.

By the way, Rokuroba-*sensei* is cooking next door. I offered to help her, but Well, I already knew what she was going to say. After all, you want to be the only one in the kitchen to cook for your special someone. Isn’t that cute?

“Oh, yes yes. Speaking of books——”

Natagiri-*sensei*’s fingers stop in front of the shelves.

Under a label that says “Good Men”

“You know that Yaichi published a book, yes? The Meijin read it and got quite the nice power up.”

“From Master’s book?!”

“It’s a work of art, a stunning masterpiece at that. I’ve been devouring it round-the-clock But, in all honesty, I wish it hadn’t been released until after the Meijin Title Match.”

He slips a copy of Kuzuryu’s Notebook out from under Good Men and flips

through its pages with a long sigh.

“The difference between the Meijin and I, you see, is Yaichi’s Shogi sense, which I absorbed from you. It’s just that the Meijin only needed to read Yaichi’s book to acquire it The version of Yaichi’s sense he got from the book is more diluted than what I acquired from you, but he had a stronger grasp of it when he put that sense into his empty pocket.”

Natagiri-*sensei* nearly took the Monarch title from the Meijin, but has already lost three straight at the start of the Meijin Title Match series.

One more loss and it will all be over Is this really okay? Having a practice session with me right now

“Um is it that good?”

“You mean you haven’t read it?”

“..... I haven’t. Um I never thought that I would become the challenger, so I have too much catching up to do on researching Shakando-*sensei*’s match records. So——”

“You can borrow one of mine! Whenever I find a good book, I always make sure to buy four copies: one to use, one to save, one to display and one to use. I’ve also dabbled in digital releases recently, so I’ve got five copies for myself and bought even more to help spread the word!”

I have no idea what the difference between use and display could be, and I’m too scared to find out why he has two copies to use in the first place to comment on it.

“The cover is absolutely stunning A closeup of Yaichi, dressed in a neatly pressed kimono, sitting across the board. But it’s the inner sleeve photo that takes the cake. Teehee≡. See? I made it my phone’s wallpaper≡.”

“W-Well, okay I’ll borrow a copy.”

I take it just to see for myself. Yes, it’s a great picture. It looks like a random photo on the shoreline with Master happily smiling next to the waves. It’s a treasure.

My problem with it is when and with whom was this photo taken? At the very least, it was taken behind my back

His profile information is written on the cover sleeve. There's a line that reads Photo taken on location in Amanohashidate during writing at the bottom. I've never been there

Checking the credits page—Photography, Editing, Supervision: Mato.

Ohhhh?

Heh? Is that right? Master was off vacationing with Kugui-sensei while I was fighting my heart out in Tokyo, was he? It sure looks like he had a great time

“Actually, I'll pass! Master, you *dara!*”

“Dara?”

Natagiri-sensei doesn't understand my dialect.

“I must say, though, Yaichi's power of comprehension is immense! Putting the many nuances of software Shogi into words to this extent If Shogi from 100 years in the future were to show up, I daresay that he's the only one who could decipher it.”

..... I knew that Master had written the book.

The reason why I didn't read it is Yes, I was busy, but

It would be too jarring ... no matter what's in it.

If my name never came up I'd be in a disappointed rut who knows how long.

But, if ...

If he did write about me in the book

—I might forget all about the title match and run back to him

I slide my fingers along the ends of my severed hair and change the subject.

“Would you tell me more about Shakando-sensei, please? What was she like when everyone called her the Assassin?”

“You know that my pro debut was a loss, don't you?”

“Yes. Um You lost to a Women's League player Wait?”

Two horrifying dots just connected in my head and I turn pale as a ghost.

“I-It wasn’t?!”

“Rina Shakando Women’s Quadruple Title.”

He goes to the Match Records corner of his bookshelf and pulls out a thick file. He opens it up to the very first record and hands it to me.

“Her continuous domination of the Women’s titles was well underway when she was selected to be my first opponent Women’s players with outstanding records were allowed to play against professionals in league matches. They were seen as equal to the bottom of the barrel pro players.”

“So that’s why you played against her in your first match?”

“I remember every detail of that day, even now. From the moment I woke up onward, everything.”

I look at the match record.

The date is over 20 years ago.

But the Shogi that was played——

“I-Is this really your professional debut, Sensei?! Really?!”

“I’m just as flabbergasted as you are.”

I realized it the moment I saw the record.

This is why Natagiri-*sensei* wanted a practice session with me in the middle of the Meijin Title Match.

“The very Shogi *I played in my debut showed up in a Women’s Title Match* of all places!”

“The formations at move 59 They overlap Perfectly”

It’s the same as the third Women’s Legend Title Match, the one I lost

Of course, there are some small differences here and there.

Natagiri-*sensei* and Shakando-*sensei*’s match started with a Bishop Exchange, and both of them pulled out all the stops to this point.

“In my debut match, we both bided our time to wait for the perfect opening. But against you, Ai, Ms. Shakando initiated an attacked sequence herself. Simply put——,” the Shogi world’s most dedicated researcher declares, “Ms.

Shakando isn't playing with only experience. She's *continuously researched her own matches*. That active knowledge of Shogi from the past is what makes her so strong."

"Experience and research"

"I can say with confidence that I've devoted *nearly* all my life to Shogi. But I'm fairly certain that Ms. Shakando has, quite literally, committed the entirety of hers. Her Shogi proves it."

"....."

"This wasn't the only time, either. I've been matched against Ms. Shakando in league matches a total of three times and been handed three losses. The records were a disgrace, the kind that only those directly involved would ever bother looking at."

Three?!

Wait a minute. That means she has a perfect record against Natagiri-sensei

"..... If Shakando-sensei is so strong, then why——"

"Does she only have the Women's Legend title?"

"..... Yes"

"Because, and I'm choosing my words very carefully here, Ms. Shakando researches *how to play against professional players*. Your abilities being on par with plenty of the young professionals are exactly what triggered her to play up to her full potential."

It sounds crazy, but I can't deny it. Seeing that phantom of her younger self during the third match pretty much proves it.

"Her Master, Sadatoshi Ashigara-sensei became a professional through, shall we say, an off-the-books route and was granted 6-*dan* right off the bat after his Entrance Exam. Have you heard about him?"

"I've read about some professionals who took that route before."

"It was over half a century ago, mind you. The association's rules were vague and there's no denying that there was plenty of gray area to go around."

It was a big surprise to see how often the association changed the rules when I was reading about it.

In those days, a person could become a professional just because someone with influence or a sponsor liked them. Vice versa was also true. The Sub League system changed at the drop of a hat

“Winning isn’t the most important thing for people living in society’s underbelly. It’s fattening up the target and then squeezing as much out of them as you can. They need to be able to move pieces on a completely different level. Catch my drift?”

“Do you mean losing on purpose?”

“Raise the stakes bit by bit while the other guy is none the wiser. Knowing when and how to lose would be a particularly valuable skill to have.”

It’s faint, but I’m starting to understand what Natagiri-*sensei* is trying to say.

Shakando-*sensei* wasn’t playing her best in the first and second matches. And that was to make me feel overconfident.

After everything I’ve heard so far, I was sure that’s where he was going, but——

“I’ve asked you to join me for a practice session today because I’ve noticed some similarities.”

“With who?”

“Between the Meijin in this Meijin Title Match, and Ms. Shakando.”

“?! The same as the Meijin”

“There are things you have to be at the top to see,” says Natagiri-*sensei* in a tone so harsh I get chills. “Also, only one person per era can be on top. No matter the competition, the person who can see what no one else has seen will have an advantage.”

“What did they see? Shakando-*sensei* and the Meijin”

“Beats me. I’ve never been there myself, now have I?”

Natagiri-*sensei* shrugs and looks at the corner of his bookshelf.

The corner that's labeled Gods.

It's full of books all written by Eternal Meijins, past and present.

"We have to identify what it is, as well as how to surpass it. Because if we don't our challenge is already over."

Now I finally understand.

I understand how far I've been backed into a corner.

How monumental of an opponent I've been fighting

"On one side of the board is a strength that has been constantly building over the past 40 years. An 11-year-old girl has two weeks to do something about it Hee-hee! Sometimes the Shogi world demands the impossible, yes?"

THE ASSASSIN'S ROMANCE

“Do you know what happened following the Shogi boom that took place after that Meijin claimed all seven titles?”

The Sage's one-man show in the Sendagaya Association's basement continues.

“An unprecedented recession, that's what. This Ginko Shock is nothing. It gets boring when everyone knows exactly who's on top. That's why Rina chose to share her titles with pretty young girls strong enough to catch her eye.”

I guess the Sage's tongue got cold feet considering those pretty young girls are standing right here. I'm worried how they'll react But I don't have a counterargument, either.

“So you see, Rina didn't bother with Women's League players. She constantly studied how to play against the orthodox of the orthodox. That includes Static Rook and Ranging Rook.”

I'm convinced. Especially now after watching the third Women's Legend Title Match.

“Another reason lies with the inferiority complex her Master had toward the end of his life. A monster created by deceased so-called prodigies in order to satisfy their own egos That is the Assassin, the greatest masterpiece of the Women's League known as Rina Shakando.”

“..... Hey, Trash.”

Ryou's eyes lock onto me.

“I'm getting hungry, so let's get something delivered. I've got a hunch we're in for a long story”

“..... That's not a bad idea. It's dinner time, too.”

There wasn't much of a chance to eat anything during my bookstore tour today, so I'm famished. That being said, I'd better get Kayaoku-sensei's opinion on what to order.

“What would anyone like to eat?”

“Ramen.”

Master and apprentice harmonize.

Which reminds me that Kyoto is one of the few ramen battleground areas in Kansai, and they tend to like thicker, flavorful soup. When I asked Machi why that is, she got philosophical on me, saying “..... Living in the oldest town, we have grown weary of the traditional” Kyoto sounds surprisingly dark.

Once the four of us are slurping down ramen delivered from a nearby shop, the Sage picks up where he left off.

“Back when Rina first hit the scene there was nothing more humiliating for a pro than losing to a Women’s League player. There was a thing in the Sub League where they had to shave their heads if they lost to a girl.”

“Patronizin’ us, huh?!”

Ryou, who’s already finished eating, snaps her chopsticks clean in half with one hand to vent.

As a former member of the Sub League herself, I’m sure she went through a lot of that stuff.

Oh yeah. Big Sis had to deal with the Crush Ginko Sora Group when she was there, too. I think that had more to do with her personality than with gender, though

“Then did Shakando-*sensei* have a huge winning percentage against pros? Is that why they called her the Assassin?”

“Nah, only about 30 percent.”

“30?”

That’s still pretty darned high.

But high enough to warrant being called an assassin?

“Want to know something interesting? About 30 percent of the pros back then opposed the chairman in those days.”

“.....!!”

Then that means——

“Did the lightbulb come on? Yes, she was the chairman’s personal hitwoman.”

Seiichi Tsukimitsu is the chairman now, but of course the chairman he’s talking about is someone else entirely.

The previous chairman and the chairman before him were both Kanto players and stayed in power for a long time.

Their power came from

“Professional Shogi players are all self-employed, and all are pretty much kids who never grew up. People wouldn’t listen to you unless you were strong on the board. That means that everyone on the board of directors and the chairman had to have a track record good enough to back them up. Plenty of them were active players, but sometimes that wasn’t enough to keep everyone in line.”

“Thus the Assassin was deployed?” asked Machi.

There’s no shame in losing to another pro as a pro player.

However losing to a Women’s League player?

“She needed influence to appease her senile Master and to improve the status of Women’s League players within the Shogi world. The chairman back then needed an assassin to maintain his power. It sounds ludicrous now, but there were some high-ranking players who publicly stated they would retire immediately if they lost to a woman.”

“.....”

The darkness I just got a glimpse of is so deep that I forget to breathe as Kayaoku-sensei goes on.

“The reason they created a system where Women’s League players could play against professionals was so that Rina could do her dirty work.”

It’s true that matchups could be manipulated by pulling a few strings on the board of directors. With enough influence, you could even choose who goes against who.

“Those who supported the board’s decisions were saved, and those who

opposed them were mercilessly slain. Fans ditched you if you lost to a woman, and any income you got from advisor positions and private lessons ran dry. Players didn't get paid as much per matches as they do now, so that was the same as death."

"W-Wait a second! Are you saying that Shakando-sensei lost on purpose?!"

"I don't exactly have any physical evidence to back that up. No obvious bad moves show up on any of her match records. Just——"

"Just what?"

"That was seen as a technique in those days. People we call competitors were still few and far between 30-some years ago."

"This is starting to sound real fishy if you ask me," says Ryou with a glare strong enough to kill.

I don't blame her. Who could shrug off being told that the positions they've worked for their whole life only exist because of a bunch of backroom deals with, "Oh, I see"?

"That hag fixed matches on her own? Show me some proof, why don't ya?"

"I have proof."

"That being?"

"I was allowed to win."

"....."

The loudmouthed Ryou Tsukiyomizaka doesn't know what to say.

But the apprentice is immediately convinced.

"That confirms it, right there."

"See? Well, fixed matches did exist as part of the Shogi world in the past. The same is true for sumo wrestling. Shady phone calls coming in right before matches used to be a thing."

"Calls? ... People were that direct about fixing matches?"

"No, no. They just said an account number and hung up."

“You mean a bank account?”

“Transfer money into it, and they’ll let you win. No money and the gloves come off. I tell you, it was mighty tempting when one of those calls came in and I was down for the count.”

The Sage adds that, fortunately for him, there was no way to transfer money he didn’t have He’s chuckling at his own joke, but I don’t think it’s funny at all.

“Got off topic, didn’t we? Now, where was I?”

“Elaborating on how *Shakando-sensei* was a blunt instrument for the chairman at the time. It must be difficult, having the memory span of a goldfish at your age,” Machi chimes in.

“Oh, that’s right. The chairman, being from Kanto, had been a given for decades, and the biggest pain in that chairman’s neck was——”

“Kansai

Kayaoku-*sensei* gives me a satisfied nod after I finish that sentence for him.

“There was a certain issue that Kanto and Kansai nearly came to blows over back then. Any idea what that was?”

“No clue. There always seems to be an argument going on

Kansai people see Kanto people as arrogant snobs and people in Kanto call people in Kansai annoying. So yeah, neither side likes the other. I mean, they call me the Demon King of the West. All I’m doing is playing Shogi

But the next thing out of the Sage’s mouth blows my expectations out of the water.

“Arranging for a new Shogi Association Building.”

“?! Th-They’re connected

The press conference announcing that Akira’s company is going to build new Shogi Association Buildings in Kanto and Kansai happened yesterday. *Shakando-sensei* is going to oversee the whole thing.

Everything’s all linked in an intricate web like Shogi pieces fitting together

“Nobody was against rebuilding the Kanto Association Building. No fresh coat of paint could salvage that old rust bucket. The problem was that the directors wanted to sell the relatively new Kansai Association Building to secure the funds. That plot was a hot commodity, being walking distance from Osaka Station and on the main drag. The directors wanted to auction it off to the highest bidder and buy cheaper land or rent out a few floors of a multistory building somewhere with the money left over.”

“Kansai would be up in arms.”

“Yeah, no kidding. The Don of Naniwa, Tatsuo Zaou put together a group to shoot down those plans at every turn. There was a serious proposal to split the association into two separate entities at one point.”

Knowing how much Zaou-*sensei* loves pro wrestling, I can see him doing just that. He’d found a new Japan Shogi Association in a heartbeat.

“But Kansai is only one fourth the scale of Kanto, right? How could they survive on their own?”

“The key was one person in particular: the youngest Meijin the Shogi world has ever known, Seiichi Tsukimitsu.”

“Ah!”

Oh yeah. That’s when——

“At that time, the current Meijin’s 7-title fever had already cooled. Then Tsukimitsu reclaimed the Meijin title after being titleless. That extra year as Meijin is what turned him into the 17th Eternal Meijin, and he claimed Dragon King Ryuo that same season. His second golden age had just kicked off.”

“I see With those titles in Kansai, breaking away could have been a realistic option.”

Those years could be called the Kansai Renaissance.

After Tsukimitsu-*sensei* lost his titles, Kansai plunged into the dark ages until the Worldly Maestro distinguished himself. Now, here I am!

“The Assassin’s mark was Seiichi Tsukimitsu. Should Kansai’s highly treasured Meijin Ryuo be toppled by a Women’s League player, everyone would think Kansai wasn’t up to snuff after all. No sponsor would ever sign with them, even

if they did form their own association.”

Machi doesn’t sound amused as she says, “Wouldn’t the Meijin Ryuo being bested by a Women’s League player damage the whole Shogi Association’s reputation beyond repair?”

“Guys who think that far ahead wouldn’t be stubborn enough to start this feud in the first place.”

“Wait a minute. Tsukimitsu-*sensei* and Shakando-*sensei* never played in a league match... at least I don’t think they did.”

I don’t remember coming across any match records.

I’m sure of that because I just went through the association’s entire collection of Shakando-*sensei*’s match records in the database. Why? No comment.

“That’s right. The Assassin infiltrated Kansai on her own, but she never made it to Seiichi Tsukimitsu. An ironclad wall got in her way.”

An ironclad wall?

“Rina always, always finished off her targets. Whatever name came down from above, she found and eliminated them without question Except for one.”

“That person was the ironclad wall?”

“That he was. Rina lost their first match and could never beat him after that. Seriously, those matches couldn’t even be called Shogi.”

A Kansai player who went against Shakando-*sensei* and was still young at that time?

Hmm No one comes to mind.

“But, Shakando-*sensei* beat Natagiri-*sensei* and Mr. Oishi when they were up-and-coming players. Actually, she destroyed them. How could anyone else——?”

“Love got in the way.”

That came from so far out of left field that my mind went blank.

Love? Wait——

“Then Shakando-*sensei* fell for one of her opponents?!”

“That’s right. They nearly got married, too.”

Mar——

“MAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEED?!”

Hold up, hold up! Just hang on a second Wait?

The whole reason we came here to ask about Shakando-*sensei*’s past was to help Ayumu with his marriage proposal, but

——If Shakando-*sensei* is already in love, doesn’t that mean it’s game over?

W-We just dug up one heck of a bombshell

“The Women’s players here in Kanto still like gossiping about it ... though it seems like you were in the dark, eh, Ryou?”

“..... Don’t have friends to gossip with anyway,” Ryou snaps under her breath and roughly props her feet up on the table.

Well, it’s no wonder she doesn’t have friends. Acting like this all the time scares everyone away.

Meanwhile——

“.....”

Machi isn’t saying anything. She’s got that I knew all along look on her face, sort of like she’s enjoying our reactions. The wily fox is scary, too.

“It was quite the spectacle. I showed up early at the association with my camera and waited for the Assassin to show up. Who knows, Kansai players might try to kidnap her before she got inside the association, right? Kanto and Kansai were at each other’s throats and Rina Shakando was just that hated.”

“Kidnap her? No matter the reason, that’s way over the line

“Well, it turned out I wasn’t the only one who thought something might go down.”

“?! Who——”

“Rina’s opponent that day was already waiting at the association building entrance when I got there.”

For whatever reason, I can visualize the events of that day nearly 20 years ago

very clearly.

A young, beautiful and lethal Shakando-*sensei* slowly making her way down Naniwa Street.

And standing in front of the red brick building a resolute, handsome young man.

“That player smiled from ear to ear at the opponent carrying pieces meant to kill him at the hobbling assassin with a cane, Rina Shakando. I’ve been lookin’ forward to our match, he said while offering his hand. Let me help ya inside.”

Women’s League players were scorned in that era.

... Called the Assassin, forced to take on all these dirty jobs.

And here was her target, treating her with more kindness than she’d ever known

“..... Yeah, I’d get the hots for him, too,” the scary one Ryou says with a soft twinkle in her eyes.

Considering Shakando-*sensei*’s love knights and chivalry, she must’ve been head over heels.

Kayaoku-*sensei* softly adds, “I thought he was a heck of a guy. Given that his older brother apprentice was Seiichi Tsukimitsu, he had a hard time getting out of his shadow. But I was certain that it was only a matter of time before the Meijin Title was his Think about it. The guy was so manly that in a single blow he knocked out the Assassin, who’d never shown any interest in men whatsoever. It was a no-brainer!”

Hm? Older brother apprentice? Tsukimitsu-*sensei*?

That would mean the ironclad wall was Tsukimitsu-*sensei*’s younger brother apprentice?

“..... Huh?”

Part of me probably knew exactly who Kayaoku-*sensei* was talking about from the very beginning.

Knew but my brain refused to say his name.

Because seriously

“Um, would you hold on a second, please? Was he? He wasn’t——”

The person blocking my best friend’s marriage couldn’t be my——, could it?

“That he was. Has it finally dawned on you, Ryuo?” says the Sage with a smirk as he names the ironclad wall.

“Kousuke Kiyotaki. Your Master, the one and only.”

PEOPLE WHO CAN'T COMMUNICATE

It's the day before the fourth Women's Legend Title Match.

Careful not to run into the players and staff leaving Tokyo for the venue, I get on the bullet train and travel west.

"..... I never thought I'd be stuck traveling back and forth between Tokyo and Osaka so much It'd be fine if it were for matches, but this is completely different"

Even cupid doesn't have to work this fast.

I arrive at the Kiyotaki house in Noda a little bit past noon.

"I'm home!"

Since Keika insisted on me announcing myself like this every time I come back to this place, I've kept doing it even though I'm not a live-in apprentice anymore. Big Sis does the same thing whenever she passes through this door, too. Keika greeting us with welcome home is the standard sequence.

But today it's the man of the house who comes to greet me.

"Here, are ya?"

"Master? Where's Keika?"

"Upstairs. Think I might'a ruffled her feathers a bit."

Master glances up the stairwell for just a moment before heading toward the *tatami* room in the back of the house. Taking off my shoes, I follow him.

"By the way, Yaichi," says Master in a sharp voice as we walk. "I heard ya dropped by the break room at the third Women's Legend Title Match. Why didn't ya say anythin' to me, yar Master?"

"I've been so busy with my book just coming out. You just don't understand because you've never written one yourself."

"That pamphlet, a book? It'll never sell. Ya'd have been better off not

publishin' the thing."

"You don't have to be a sore loser about it, Master."

Hearing that Master read my book made me so happy that I couldn't stop myself from getting in the last word.

Don't get me wrong, I'm still upset that he let Ai transfer to Tokyo without my permission, plus the fact that he won't tell me where Ginko is right now.

Just now that some time has passed and my head has cooled off, I realize that he made the right call every time. Admitting it hurts just as much as acknowledging my own weakness, but still.

"Headin' to the venue, are ya?"

"I might or might not. It's not like my being there will have any effect on the results."

"Ai'd like to see yar face, I'm sure. How 'bout droppin' this stubborn attitude?"

"I don't think I'm being all that stubborn"

"She's up 'gainst a powerful foe. I know how she is, but she'll take advice so long as it's comin' from ya. Sure, ya can't tell her how'da play, but nobody'd care if ya gave her a pep talk outside the arena."

"I know that Shakando-*sensei* has tons of experience in title matches. But you'll never achieve anything your whole life if you can't overcome that on your own."

"Nah, nah. Not 'at Ai."

"You mean Yashajin?"

With everything that's going on with Shakando-*sensei* and the Women's Legend Title Match, I haven't had time for much else. Now that I think about it, the schedule for the Queen Title Match and Women's Throne Title Match overlap almost perfectly with Women's Legend. They're up to the fourth match as well.

But there's nothing to worry about over there.

"This is her second title match, so she'll be fine! Don't forget that she forced

Big Sis into a repetition draw as the defender, so her Shogi is more than capable of——”

“Ya kiddin’? She’s fallin’ to pieces. Behind 2 – 1 in both series.”

“What?!”

“She ain’t playin’ no ordinary girl, but a girl who’s made it into the 3-*dan* division in the Sub League. Is she thinkin’ she’s gettin’ free lessons from a better player? There’s been several moves in the early game that didn’t make a lick’a sense to me.”

“Ai Yashajin is I see”

When I talked to her on the phone, though, she didn’t sound stressed at all. Was that actually a call for help? It sure didn’t sound like it

“Re we go Ah. Have a seat.”

Stepping into the *tatami* room, Master lowers himself into the upper seat.

I sit down on the lower seat side of the small table. Keika would usually bring out tea and snacks around now, but there’s nothing because she hasn’t come down from the second floor.

“So tell me, is it true what they’re sayin’? Did Kannabe really pop the question to Rina with a ring an’ all?”

“Yes, it’s true. He’s serious about it.”

“That boy”

Shakando-*sensei* brought Ayumu here to spend the night many times. He pestered Master to teach him about *yagura* castles, and Master loved how straightforward his Shogi and personality was.

They also met in a league match A B-2 League Placement Match to be exact.

I thought it was just two Shogi players fighting with their pride on the line when I saw their intense dual.

But now I understand there was a separate, more complex emotional aspect to that match. Maybe that’s why Ayumu mustered up the courage to press too far forward?

—It's like he was fighting against the ex-boyfriend of the lady he idolizes and wants to marry.

On the other hand, Master kept a cool head throughout the match despite that major slip-up in the early game.

That difference has to mean something.

How does Master feel about Shakando-*sensei* now?

"So, please tell me what happened between you and Shakando-*sensei*."

Rumors are all over Kanto, and I'm sure the truth is in there somewhere.

But there are things that only the ones directly involved understand. Things like how they felt about what was going on.

That's why I need to hear their stories in their own words.

"I heard that you almost got married. Is that true?"

"..... True 'at people were talkin' 'bout it non-stop, yeah."

Master acknowledges it, but I'm not sure what to make of that face.

"Talks were moving ahead between Rina's Master, Ashigara-*sensei*, and Zaou-*sensei*, who was standin' in for mine. Not 'at the two of us heard a peep Whadda ya know 'bout Kanto an' Kansai fightin' over a new association buildin'?"

"The Sage told me about it. He also told me that Shakando-*sensei* was sent to eliminate Seiichi Tsukimitsu but you stopped her."

"Yeah. My gettin' hitched with Rina was supposed to be a way for them to mend bridges."

"Like a diplomatic wedding?"

"Ain't that high-quality'a thing," says Master, plucking his beard.

That's a tell of his that he's trying to hide embarrassment.

"In exchange for puttin' the new buildin' on the back burner, Kansai'd fall in line with the administration back then. The other thing was that Rina wouldn't hafta be an Assassin anymore That last bit was the most important to me."

"Then you were on board with the marriage?"

“.....”

Haaaaa Master continues after a long sigh.

“She was a looker, far outta my league And her Shogi was beautiful.”

“Her Shogi”

“Apprentice of a true competitor, and in the Women’s League. Tons’a players made assumptions ’bout her just ’cause of that, but her first match against me was pure, orthodox *yagura*. It was refined to perfection, like what ya’d see in Meijin Title Matches.”

It’s been a while since I heard the words orthodox and refined. They’re very human ways to compliment Shogi that computers can’t get right.

“She played Shogi the way it was meant to be. But her havin’ to change herself just ’cause didn’ sit well with me. The Shogi world seemed twisted to me.”

That’s exactly how I pictured Master would answer.

Rather than praise appearance or personality, he complimented the beauty of her Shogi. The picture of a Shogi buff from the 80s the cool, gritty player that Ginko and I always wanted to be.

I understand why Shakando-*sensei* fell in love with him. Honestly, I get it.

But something seems off.

After listening to everything Master has said, it sounds more like he sympathized with Shakando-*sensei*’s situation rather than had romantic feelings.

“But in the end you didn’t remarry. Why not?”

“Couldn’ forget my wife after she passed. That’s all.”

Master adds an extra detail after that short answer.

“‘Cause Keika looked more an’ more like her every day.”

“Ah”

“Keika asked me the same thing after the Third Women’s Legend Title Match, believe it or not. She got real bent outta shape when I told her the same thing.

Quit pushing everything on me! or whatnot Wasn't meanin' to."

"Master."

I sit up straight on my ankles, grab my knees, and ask.

"Is it possible that having live-in apprentices was part——"

"I took Ginko and ya in after everythin' with Rina had played out. Ya got no blame to take, period. Don' go thinkin' ya do, understand?"

"..... Yes"

"That's 'nough diggin' up the past."

".....!"

Those words were nice enough, but his tone let me know that it was a direct order.

If I didn't know better, I'd say I slammed up against an ironclad wall.

"Mr. Tsukimitsu cleared everything up with a neat little bow. That's includin' the new buildin' problem and the status of Women's League players. Y'all don' gotta worry 'bout a thing."

Another order dressed up in nice words.

"The old association buildin' will be gone along with the old Shogi world. We wanna leave ya with the best stuff we can, like parents wanna do for their kids. Mr. Tsukimitsu, Rina and I we all want ya, Ayumu and the Ais to only hafta focus on Shogi. There ain't no changin' the past, so we gotta make a bright future."

I understand what Master wants to say.

I also understand he's saying it out of love. Just as the strongest modern Shogi came from software that built a new style of Shogi from zero without using human knowledge, those who favor the past will get left behind in the future. The only way to get stronger is to constantly look to the horizon and press forward.

It's just.

"..... Then"

—What’s going to happen to Ginko?

“.....”

I swallow my words.

Is she part of what Master calls the old Shogi world? Is she going to get caught up in the system because she got too strong and be used as a tool by the people at the top like Shakando-*sensei* did? She’s suffering already beaten to a pulp.

—How is she any different from Shakando-*sensei*?

The more I learn about the past, the scarier it gets. Are my apprentice’s achievements going to make people forget about Naniwa’s Snow White?

Worse, if we forget what happened in the past we’re doomed to make the same mistakes. It’s like the way you lose if you don’t research old match records.

“Story time’s over! Ya headin’ straight to the fourth match venue?”

“No, I was thinking I’d spend the night here And I never said anything about going to the Women’s Legend Title Match!”

“That right?”

Master nods and then looks up at the ceiling.

“Long as yar here, would ya tell that sulkin’ rebellious daughter of mine everything I told ya?”

I'VE RETURNED!

The Fourth Women's Legend Title Match is going to happen in Kurashiki City, Okayama Prefecture. It's only an hour and a half away from Osaka by bullet train, but this is my first time coming here.

On the other hand, *Shakando-sensei* has been here at least 20 times.

"People of Kurashiki City, I've returned!"

All the Shogi fans who came to the opening night party cheered when *Shakando-sensei* started her speech that way.

Kurashiki City has a woman for a mayor. She's been doing that job for over 20 years now, and she's made it her mission to help women succeed. That's why the city hosts a Women's League Title Match.

Shakando-sensei has held the Women's Legend Title ever since the mayor was first elected. She's even helped organize amateur tournaments and done instructional matches at the mayor's request all this time. Even after a hard-fought match, she still leads Shogi classrooms with the same spirit as fighting to protect her title.

Traveling with her from place to place for these title matches has shown me that there's a reason for everything Sensei does. I can tell that she has devoted her life to advancing the Women's League

That People of Something City, I've Returned is the way she opened her speeches at all the opening-night parties. It means that she has been to every single venue that we visited so far.

I'm saying nice to meet you, but Sensei is saying I'm home.

Hakone and Kamakura aren't the only ones. All of Japan is *Shakando-sensei's* home, And I was to learn the hard way that she meant more than just the Shogi venue the very next day.

"The time has come for the match to begin. *Shakando-sensei*, the first move is yours."

The observer signals us with a bow.

I was nervous the first time, but I'm used to it now that it's my fourth time starting a title match.

Also, I'm the defender for this one. There's no need to tense up because I can just read and react to what she does.

—I won't try to force things like in the third match. This time, I'll play naturally

Rokuroba-sensei's offhanded play like usual and she won't stand a chance advice sounded trivial at the time, but now those words are so reassuring.

"I shall."

Shakando-sensei's opening move is—advancing the Pawn in front of her Rook, 2 Six Pawn.

"Whooooaaa!!"

All the photographers who gather around to take a picture of her first move can't help but get excited.

"..... The Women's Legend chose a Double Wing Attack?!"

"She won the last match with it, but lost the first two, remember?"

"What courage Or maybe she's already figured out the challenger's best strategy?"

Just one move.

That one move says so much at the same time. But it's almost impossible to tell which of those things are right and which are wrong. This kind of pressure never happens in regular one-match tournaments, and it's almost crushing me already.

Of course, I thought she might make that move.

I have a strategy ready for it.

Even so After seeing 2 Six Pawn on the board, I'm not sure if it's the best one.

"..... Hey, she isn't playing anything."

“It’s been five minutes already, so what gives?”

Media people are getting restless. I wanted to make my move after I had calmed down a little, but the get on with it vibe in the arena pushes my hand toward the board.

I play——3 Four Pawn to open my Bishop Path.

“She rejected the Double Wing?!”

Cameras flash from every angle.

“Well, well.”

Shakando-*sensei* sounds surprised as she puts down her teacup. The moment I hear it clink on the saucer at her side, she has already opened her own Bishop Path.

My next move takes a lot of guts.

“.....!!”

All my might is in my fingers as I slide my central Pawn forward.

If the media people were excited before, now they’re in a frenzy.

“WHAAAAT?!”

I don’t blame them. After all, no one would have expected me to play this strategy.

This opening is for Ranging Rook.

“Gokigen Central Rook, is it? Well, you certainly prepared a surprise for me.”

Sensei really doesn’t look surprised at all. Actually, she’s excited more than anything else and I’m already regretting my decision.

The Eternal Queen plays both Static Rook and Ranging Rook. She’s a perfect all-rounder, just like the Meijin.

No. Lots more Women’s League players play Ranging Rook, so she might have even more experience than the Meijin playing against it.

I don’t know if any player is more of an all-rounder than Shakando-*sensei*.

——If she can stop any strategy in its tracks then was I better off with

doing a Double Wing attack after all?

I have to shake off that idea!

“Here!!”

I put my fingers down on my Rook and slide it across the row.

Heat pulses through my veins once I see my Rook in the middle of the board. It brings back so many memories of learning how to play Ranging Rook at the Gokigen Bathhouse with Master.

—Even if I can’t be as creative with Ranging Rook as Ten-chan if I can be worldly in the late-game ...!!

I start building up my formation just like Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan* would do it.

Shakando-*sensei* watches the board transform and says with a bit of nostalgia in her voice, “Oh? That is some light, feathery piecework for a Static Rook player. Why, I even feel pressure similar to what I felt facing off against the Worldly Maestro in his youth.”

“!!”

“That is to say—that lad was slightly stronger, even in those days.”

Her saying the name of exactly who I’m trying to imitate makes my blood run cold. Shakando-*sensei* immediately rushes her right Silver to the front!

“Rapid Attack!”

It’s the strategy that is called the perfect counter to Gokigen Central Rook, Rapid Attack 3 Seven Silver.

Of course, I have a plan against it.

But—

“Uwhaaa?!”

Shakando-*sensei*’s Silver charges right over the 3 Seven line!!

That Silver is attacking even faster than the Rapid Attack! It’s like she’s completely ignoring every trap that I have set up! How is she so confident?!

“Too too fast!!”

“Elders are not known for their patience.”

That Silver is storming my defenses like Joan of Arc leading the charge——!!

▲ A PLACE TO RETURN

“Do you remember those bald spots?”

“Huh? Bald spots?”

Keika is asking while pointing at the carpet.

There are a few round, threadbare spots over there.

Four of them are small circles the same shape as the legs on a Shogi board. The others are a bit further away and about the size of kids’ knees.

“That is where you and Ginko always sat.”

“Yeah We backed away from the board because Master told us to. Stuff happened when we got too close.”

“Like literally butting heads.”

“It’s obvious Ginko was doing that on purpose. It never happened when it was her turn, not once. She used to yank out my hair when she lost, too”

Keika and I have been taking a trip down memory lane for a while now.

But the sun is about to set.

It’s about time I brought up the important stuff. Shogi and what Master said.

The fourth match.

Ai Hinatsuru’s strategy of choice is——Central Rook.

“There’s nothing wrong with playing Ranging Rook on defense. That itself isn’t a bad idea at all.”

Ai learned how to play it from Mr. Oishi directly. Combine that with her talent for reading in the late-game, and it’s a potent combination.

“Just Snubbing her ace strategy in favor of a desperate ambush like this, her chances of winning are slim to none.”

An ambush can only be called an ambush if the opponent isn’t expecting it.

The problem is that the player known as Rina Shakando has thorough knowledge of a wide array of strategies and an infinite ability to transform the board into her own little room like she did in the third match. Her decades of research allow her to compartmentalize each stage of the match and to get the best result.

Which is exactly what she did starting in the early-game of today's match.

"See, look at this here. The way the Bishop shifts starting with the 29th move."

I'm explaining along with the match record on the broadcast.

"Shakando-*sensei* is the only player who shifts the Bishop Path even while doing a Rapid Attack. There are only three other examples of this sequence, and all of them are labeled Rina Shakando. This is her world, where only she knows what moves are good or bad."

"I've been to that world before," says Keika, looking up from the match record.

Her eyes are looking into the past, though.

"It's like a forest of thorns No matter how you try to attack, you end up getting hurt. I was on offence, but for some reason the formation kept changing against me"

"You won in the end, right, Keika?"

"I was lucky."

The kids room on the second floor of Master Kiyotaki's place.

Keika and I are analyzing Ai's Shogi, but she looks toward one corner of the room and says, "I fought back in desperation, and one of my punches made it through the thorns."

The countless trophies and awards that Ginko and I won over the years are lined up in that corner.

Just one of them belongs to Keika.

It's from when she was an amateur She took third place in a tournament when she was in elementary school, probably third grade.

There's a picture right next to the trophy from when she won it.

Keika looks as nervous as could be holding up the trophy, and a young Rina Shakando is standing next to her.

"Looking back I'm not sure if I actually won because of my skills. Somehow I get the feeling I'm only allowed into Women's League out of sympathy. Because"

"....."

"Because I'm Kousuke Kiyotaki's daughter"

"Keika"

"In my head, I know that she is not the type of person who would soil Shogi's good name. But once emotions are involved, you know? Sorry, that was a weird thing to say."

I couldn't say a word. The only silver lining is that Keika doesn't know what was going on behind the scenes when Shakando-sensei was called the Assassin.

This probably has something to do with the fact that Keika has barely won any matches since becoming a Women's League player. I haven't been able to stand seeing her in so much pain because of those losses, and it's even worse ever since she found out about Master's past relationship with Shakando-sensei

That's why I decided to stay in Osaka and spend time with Keika.

Today is the fourth match.

But I didn't go to Kurashiki.

Two hours is all I would need to get to the venue from Osaka, but I don't have the guts to see it through to the end.

I want Ai to win. Even though I don't want to talk to her face-to-face just yet, that much I know in my heart.

At the same time, though, after learning about Shakando-sensei's painful past, it's become so much harder for me to only root for Ai

I'll say it loud and clear.

Right from the start, I was hoping that *Ayumu's proposal would fail*.

Seeing it actually happening scares me. If I saw a Master and apprentice who were that far apart in age get engaged before my very own eyes something inside me might break.

Ayumu and Shakando-*sensei* are too close to me to ignore the situation outright

But now.

I can empathize with Shakando-*sensei*, the person who raised Ayumu. Part of me has started wanting her, the one who loved my Master, to find the happiness she deserves.

And I've started thinking about what happiness would be from her perspective.

"Is this what Shakando-*sensei* is trying to do?"

"Do? Do what?"

"To make her opponents question themselves."

I say what comes to mind.

"For example even Shakando-*sensei* would be in a tough spot if Ai used Double Wing Attack every match. After all, she even had me sweating bullets more than once in our matches."

"....."

Keika quietly listens.

"But Ai squashed her best opportunity to use it on her own. Even though Shakando-*sensei* played 2 Six Pawn, Ai didn't respond by advancing the Pawn in front of her own Rook to 8 Four."

Even as I'm talking, something feels off and I can't shake it.

Could it really be true?

Is that what Shakando-*sensei* is aiming for? If she plays Double Wing Attack again would Ai have a chance?

—It isn't that simple.

My instincts as a competitor whisper to me.

Rina Shakando the one feared as the Assassin wouldn't be afraid of small details like that.

If there's anything I know for sure right now, it's—

"Shakando-sensei is playing *a series*. But Ai is giving a *demonstration on game strategy*."

Harsh, I know, but it had to be said.

Ai isn't actually looking at her opponent. She's using sequences that make her look decent.

Shakando-sensei can see through it and is adjusting Ai thinks she's lining up an ambush, but all it's going to do is get her caught in a trap.

"The final fifth match is going to be the real battle."

The fourth match is still going on, but it's obvious how it's going to end.

Shakando-sensei's abnormally fast Rapid Attack has Ai's Gokigen Central Rook under lock and key.

Forget being worldly, there's no way to put a decent attack together like this. Ranging Rook's miserable side is on display. The Maestro would be furious if he saw what happened to this Shogi.

"No matter what happens with the piece flip If you can't find a place to come back to, the same thing is going to happen over and over again."

A place for Ai to come back to.

Where is that—?

"..... I might be the one being tested here," I whispered under my breath, sitting next to Keika in the kids room of Master's house where I spent my days as a live-in apprentice.

Staring at the bald spots left on the carpet.

The fourth Women's Legend Title Match ends on the 109th move with the Women's Legend claiming victory.

The Challenger got out to a quick lead by winning the first two matches of the

five-match series, but now it will come down to a climactic battle at the end.

Both have an equal 50-50 chance of winning. The momentum, however is with Rina Shakando.

RECORD 4

神鍋歩夢

AYUMU
KANNABE

山刀伐尽

JIN
NATAGIRI

WITHIN MEMORIES

“We’re here. Get up, *Yaichi*.”

“..... Uwaah?”

After getting woken up with my nose pinched shut, there’s a crabby looking seven-year-old with silver hair staring back at me.

Oh, now I remember. This girl the two of us came to Tokyo together. On the bullet train.

“When did I fall asleep? I had made up my mind that I would see Mount Fuji this time for sure, too Why does getting past Shizuoka take so long?”

“How should I know, stupid?”

Ginko tries to push her way past me from the window seat to the aisle. Cut it out, I’m gonna fall

“Hey! Ayumu!!”

We get off the bullet train at Shinagawa Station and meet up with Ayumu in Shinjuku. It’s been two months since we last saw him.

He looks at us, surprised, and asks, “Are you two going to hold hands the whole time?”

“Master told us to.”

Ginko and I answer at the same time. Master only gave us permission to come to Tokyo if we promised to always hold hands when we’re not playing Shogi, or else he would kick us out.

Ayumu leads us to a big hotel right next to the station.

“How wonderful of you to come! I am grateful for all you do for my apprentice.”

Rina Shakando Women’s Quadruple Title has just finished defending the Women’s King Title. She invited us to Tokyo as a way to thank Master for

allowing her apprentice to stay at the Kiyotaki household while she played a match in Miyazaki.

She paid for our transportation, lodging and she is even treating us to afternoon tea in the lounge of this hotel. I've never seen sweets this fancy in my life!

Ginko is sitting next to me, chowing down on all the cake she can get her hands on. Ayumu, on the other hand, is pouring tea for *Shakando-sensei* and bringing her cake. Wow, fifth-graders are really grown up.

"Will you remain holding hands during the duration of your visit?"

"Yes. Master told us to."

We didn't overlap this time. Ginko is refusing to talk.

Since my suddenly shy younger older sister won't do it, I introduce her instead.

"She This is my older sister apprentice, Ginko Sora. She's not in the Sub League or Practice League though."

"Kousuke has told me so much about you. It's nice to make your acquaintance Is that right?"

"....."

Ginko never does introduce herself properly. But she doesn't leave a crumb of cake uneaten.

"Hey, Ayumu! Hey! Is it true you can't have practice sessions at the Kanto Association Building?"

"Yes, it is. There are far too many professionals and Sub League members here for that to be allowed."

Shakando-sensei is too busy to teach us herself, but we jump right into the reason we came with Ayumu who's showing us around in the building.

Crushing classrooms or I guess it's more of a classroom tour.

"Which is why practice sessions are mainly done in local classrooms. They are

the dens in which professionals dwell in Tokyo. You understand what is waiting for us once we go inside, correct? Are you prepared to taste it?"

"Bring it on."

Ginko talks tough, but I know she's nervous because her palm is sweaty.

We start in Shinjuku, then Hachioji, Kichijoji, Kamata, Ryogoku, Ogikubo, Okachimachi Fighting our way through all of Tokyo's Shogi hot spots like samurai on a mission.

The three of us played nothing but Shogi during our weeklong winter vacation.

I thought about asking Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, who lives in Hachioji, to join us, but Keika said to never ever do that. So I'm following her advice. It seems mixing her with Ginko would be dangerous.

"Dang it! I can't win against that geezer no matter how hard I try"

We ran into a wall, the lord of one particular classroom.

"That does it! I'm beating him three times in a row before going back to Osaka!"

"I'll skewer the baldie in Osaka."

"He's a pro, Ginko!!" I warned my uppity older sister apprentice before asking my best friend, who always stays calm even when he loses. "What about you, Ayumu? Do you have a goal yet?"

"To achieve A Rank," he answers while looking at a big poster with all the different leagues pinned to the wall.

Pretty much all the strong classrooms have their own league system, and the A Rank League is nothing but amateur titleholders, members of the Sub League or young pros. They're players we couldn't even dream of playing as we are now.

"Seriously?! You want to be on that list? In just seven days?"

"No. I'm not interested in *this* A League," says Ayumu as he looks back down at the board. Seven years later, those words have come true.

“Man, I feel like I’ve gotten so much stronger!”

Our weeklong Shogi baptism is over in a flash.

“I’ve got so many sequences I want to try out once we get back to Osaka! You think I could take a match off Mr. Kagamizu?!”

“Big Brother Hiuma is too good to fall for those tricks.” So Ginko says, but her fingers are twitching.

It’s so obvious she can’t wait to play more Shogi. We’re holding hands, so I can tell.

Ayumu has come to the bullet train platform to see us off, and I point right at him to declare, “I’ll catch up to you in 5-*kyu*, you’ll see! Let’s fight it out in the 3-*dan* division!”

“Yes. I’ll be waiting for you.”

I hate how he always looks down on me! Sure, I’ve got a B in 6-*kyu*, so I suppose he’s allowed, but still.

“Hey,” Ginko asks him this question right before we leave. “Why’d you choose Shakando as your Master?”

“.....”

Ayumu’s face goes stone-cold. Was it because she didn’t add sensei to his Master’s name? No.

It’s because Ginko and I heard so many grownups comment on it while playing Shogi next to Ayumu all week.

“Your Shogi is so genuine despite being an apprentice of a Women’s League player.”

With Ayumu’s talent and track record, he could be an apprentice of any top pro player. If he asked one of the big Shogi families to take him in, it would be a piece of cake for him to get into the pros.

So then why? This is how Ayumu answers.

“..... I saw similarities.”

“In your Shogi?”

“No.”

I'll never forget the next words that Ayumu said just as the bullet train doors closed.

“Our souls.”

I thought he was joking, but those words stuck in my heart for some reason. Ginko squeezes my hand strong enough for our skin to get hot from the friction.

Then I wake up on the bullet train one more time.

“..... Whoops! That was too close. Why do I always fall asleep right before Mount Fuji?”

The train is passing through Shinagawa. Since my kind but ill-tempered older sister apprentice isn't here to pinch my nose, I have to wake up on my own.

Looking at the empty window seat next to me, I say, “That was a lot of fun Do you want to go again so much that you showed up in my dream, Big Sis?”

SILENT PHONE CALLS

There's a big crowd of people outside of Harajuku station. They're all crowded around two beautiful girls.

"Hurry it up, Trash!"

"Yaichi? Making me wait like this, have you become more adept at playing hard to get?"

It's Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui standing in front of the station.

Except they're not wearing their usual clothes—they're dressed up in the cutest gothic outfits I've ever seen!!

"Wh-What's What's with those clothes, you guys?!"

"This is an appeal to Shakando-*sensei*'s personal tastes."

The Kyoto beauty dressed in a black ensemble casually waves her arms and the crowd around her goes nuts. Shutter click sound effects from their smartphones go off all at once.

What is this, a photo shoot?!

"As we wish to hear what she has to say, would it not be best to appease her on sight?"

"Dressin' up like this isn't the worst thing in the world. So yeah, when in Rome. I make this look good, don't I?"

Ryou looks more like, how should I put it? A hostess who could convince an otaku to fork over all the money he has.

Dressed in a frilly pink and white outfit, the Aggressive Archangel actually has tiny white wings on her back.

"Get moving, Trash. And stick out your arm."

"Say what?! W-We have to link arms?!"

"I am rather unfamiliar with this area. Escort me, will you not, Yaichi?"

I'm locked in position with Ryou on my right and Machi on my left. Hate rains

down on me from the crowd as I get half dragged down Takeshita Street.

“What’s that nobody doing with two 10☆-level chicks like them, eh?”

“Is he a whale or something?”

“He’s got dirt on them, for sure. His eyes scream foul play.”

..... It’s these pretty girls who have me in an armlock that play dirty

Still, it’s been a long time since I’ve been to Harajuku.

“Walking down Meiji Street seems reasonable, but doing the same down Takeshita Street must be a challenge for elders like myself.”

“Only kids on field trips or tourists from way out in the boonies bother coming places like this. People born and raised in Tokyo like me go other places to have fun.”

That kind of makes sense. I grew up in Osaka and hardly ever go to touristy spots like Shinsaibashi.

“Then, where do you go, Ryou? The center of Shibuya, maybe?”

“Kyoto. Osaka, maybe.”

Wow, she really doesn’t have any friends in Tokyo

“You last came here to attend one of Ginko and Shakando-*sensei*’s practice sessions, yes? Around the time a picture of Ginko dressed as a gothic lolita went viral?”

“Yeah. I watched their practice session more than anything else. Shakando-*sensei*’s Normal 4th File Rook absolutely destroyed Big Sis’s *anaguma*.”

“..... It appears that the Assassin talk was not pure fiction”

“..... Is that hag a demon? ’Cuz whatever she is, it ain’t human.”

Machi and Ryou shudder. Even though it was just a practice session, the idea that Big Sis could actually lose has to be a shock to Women’s League players.

Shops come and go all the time along Takeshita Street, but one of the smaller ones that branches off of it that’s called Brahms Lane is much more stable.

Our destination for today is all the way at the back of it, a small building that looks like a castle.

Ryou sounds fed up with the outfit she's not used to wearing as she leans over and says, "Let's make this quick. We're in for a long night tomorrow either way."

"That's true."

"Agreed."

I nod along with Machi as we step through the front door.

"Welcome, meeeeOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW?!"

We are instantly greeted by a member of the shop staff with a squeaky voice.

The one with her hair up like cat ears and dressed in an over-the-top lolita maid getup is none other than Ayumu's younger sister, Maria Kannabe.

"Wh-What are the likes of you doing here?! A sneak attack?! Have you come to assault Master now that Ai Hinatsuru is on the verge of defeat?!"

"Calm yourself, Maria," the lord, or should I say lady of the castle says in a gentle tone.

This is Shakando-sensei's fashion shop and also where she does her Shogi research. This location is perfect because the Shogi Association Building in Sendagaya is within walking distance. All these areas are actually in the Shibuya district.

Ayumu was here last time, but——

"You have Maria looking after the shop for you now?"

"I have instructed God Cauldron to focus solely on his own Shogi. Day-to-day activities at the shop are no place for an A League Shogi player, are they not?"

Shakando-sensei answers me before looking at the beauties on my left and right with wide eyes.

"Oooh!" With the same enthusiasm as someone appraising a work of art, she says, "Both of you already fit my tastes, but garments such as these truly bring out your existential beauty. He-he-he. I could gaze upon you for hours on end"

Oh yeah. Big Sis was pretty much her toy at one point, too

Back then, I had a wrong idea that because she'd been single all this time, maybe she was actually into girls, didn't I?

"Well? You wish to speak with me, correct? What is it you wish to speak of?"

"Sensei. Before that, could you send Maria away"

"..... That may be wise. Return to the front."

"B-But Master! You would be in danger by yourself! If these ruffians should attempt to——"

"A young maiden such as yourself would be in a much more precarious situation should such a thing take place. The young Ryuo would lose himself in the heat of the moment."

"You have a point."

Maria abruptly changes course and leaves the room. Absurd

"That girl has set foot in the realm of trials known as the Sub League. Perhaps she should be made aware, but I feel it would be better to sever the chains of the past."

Saying something similar to Master, I make eye contact with the woman who was once called the Assassin.

"Please tell us. What happened between you and my Master Kousuke Kiyotaki?"

"Who have you spoken with thus far?"

"The Sage. Master told me his side, as well."

"Is that so? Kousuke has He-he. It is still a bashful topic."

Trinkets crinkle as Sensei opens a western-style lace fan to hide her face.

"That said, my relationship with Kousuke is not one that needs to be concealed. Every player in our generation is aware of it, and I'm fairly certain it's common knowledge within the Kanto Women's League."

"I had no clue."

"That aspect is part of your charm, oh Aggressive Archangel."

Shakando-sensei smiles as Ryou sulks. Once she has a sip of her tea, Sensei starts talking.

It's a very, very long story.

"I was raised by my Master by Sadatoshi Ashigara 9-dan as a live-in apprentice. Right alongside his biological daughters, in fact. Even now, after he has passed on, we still share a sisterly bond Well, that is beside the point."

I heard that much from Master Kiyotaki, too.

Ashigara-sensei thought, considering Shakando-sensei's disability, forcing her to travel back and forth would be too much for her. So he opened his home to teach her Shogi.

"Thus, he became a father figure and his words were law, even outside of Shogi. *That included matters of the heart.*"

"What kind of things did he tell you?"

"You are forbidden to date until you have a title."

".....!"

I nearly jump out of my chair.

Because, well, Master told Big Sis and I pretty much the same thing.

"Then, once I had a title to my name, possessing a second title became the new condition. Claim a second, a third was required The problem became that I soon possessed all the titles that existed at the time. What do you think Master said after that?" says Sensei, giddily tapping her fingers together. "He reversed course, telling me to *get married and have children.*"

"How selfish"

"Indeed, but that is a phrase that girls hear time and again. Love and romance are taboo until high school graduation, and then pressure comes to settle down *with someone nice* upon passing their 20th birthday," adds Machi.

"Really?"

"Very much so. Yaichi, let's get married, hm?"

“..... Master had become desperate.”

Shakando-*sensei* grins at my small conversation with Machi, but her expression suddenly turns dark.

“Advanced in age, he had taken every promising child he could find as an apprentice, but hadn’t the time to raise them properly in his haste And all were crushed underfoot.”

Ashigara-*sensei* sent over 50 teenage boys into the Sub League, but not a single one of them became a pro. That reputation became so bad that he had zero hopefuls knocking at his door at one point.

“These all originated from my Master’s wish to *produce a Meijin out of his apprentices*. Do you happen to know where he is coming from?”

“Being a >gamester.”

“Precisely. And he was the ultimate gamester, so much so that he was given the nickname The Demon of Hakone. Not only did he have support from many influential people, he was rumored to have skills comparable to the Meijin. Income as well.”

“Those influential supporters of his made arrangements for him to undergo the Entrance Exam, and he was allowed to join the professional ranks directly at 6-*dan*. He distinguished himself in the A League and even challenged for the Meijin title. It was all the newspapers of the time were talking about,”Machi added.

“And then he got humiliated.”

I looked over those match records before coming.

The Meijin back then the 15th Eternal Meijin to be exact, dominated the matches from start to finish. Ashigara-*sensei* barely had any pieces left at the end of the match series.

I don’t think Ashigara-*sensei* thought it was possible for him to lose.

He lost chances to surrender with dignity every single time and wound up looking pathetic in the end

“Master was in a stupor after losing the fourth consecutive match. The Meijin

of the day said to him with a laugh during that final review session: *Mr. Ashigara, you'll only ever be an amateur*. Master bawled in the break room, or so I heard It was then that he realized why the association had made him into a professional in the first place.”

“A public execution

“Precisely. And to ensnare him within the cage that is the world of professional Shogi.”

He was unquestionably the best gamester around, but even he couldn't put up a fight against the Meijin. The *behind closed doors* elements of society were purified once that fact was brought to light.

The Meijin took out all the gamesters and their supporters at once by making an example of their leader, *Ashigara-sensei*.

That's how the association created a monopoly over the *game* of Shogi.

I don't think that's a bad thing And it's lucky for my generation. Without any dirty work to do, we get to enjoy living the dream of making lots of money by playing all the Shogi we want as a job.

“Let me be clear. Aside from his obsession with the Meijin title, my Master was a good man. And Women's League players had no connection to the Meijin title from the start. That is why he cherished and raised me with such adoration.”

“..... Pretty ironic.”

“As his failures raising a male apprentice piled up and my prowess continued to increase, however, that was no longer the case.”

I was wondering how this story would lead to her engagement to Master.

It turns out it was the worst way possible.

“Upon learning that he was not long for this world, my Master planned to have me, a woman with strong Shogi acumen, bear a child and then adopt said child to raise to become the ultimate Shogi player.”

That's crazy. I can tell everyone here agrees.

Seriously, none of our parents are pro Shogi players.

“Naturally, he wanted to arrange my marriage to a strong Shogi player he deemed worthy. While there is no guarantee that the child of a Shogi player will themselves be a strong player Master had lost the ability to understand common sense by that point. His head was permanently in the clouds, watching his dream unfold. Thus, as his apprentice and his daughter I wanted to give him that one last lullaby

But, she says, setting up the arranged marriage didn't go as easily as expected.

“As the holder of every Women's Title of the day, my schedule was fairly full Not to mention that strong Shogi skill may not have qualified as an appealing attribute.”

Shakando-sensei's words trail off. I guess that means that no Kanto players wanted to have the Assassin as their wife.

“Therefore, Master set his sights on players in Kansai. The first to catch his attention was the Meijin Ryuo of the day, Seiichi Tsukimitsu.”

Ms. Oga would be furious if she heard about this.

“Tsukimitsu-sensei said that he almost lost to you in an exhibition match of some kind.”

“Yes, back in my school days.”

The arranged marriage stuff happened years later but, thinking back on it, Ashigara-sensei might have been already trying to put things in motion

Shakando-sensei remarks, “Once it was revealed that Mr. Tsukimitsu's eye problems were likely hereditary, Master changed course. A child born with visual and physical disabilities would have a much more difficult time playing Shogi, or so he thought Please, do not be angry with him. That was his way of showing affection

It's official. Ms. Oga wouldn't be the only one furious to hear about this.

Forcing myself to calm down, I say, “That's why my Master, who couldn't measure up to Tsukimitsu-sensei on the board but was healthy as a horse and had plenty of spirit, caught his eye?”

“Khh! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Shakando-sensei tries and fails to hold back laughter.

Then, with tears in her eyes, she says, “He-he-he. Where do you think he Where did Kousuke take me on our first date?”

“A restaurant, right? Don’t tell me it was a bar

“When it comes to Osaka, Kaiyukan Aquarium is a sure bet. That type of atmosphere is the setting for a perfect date,” Machi chimes in.

“The Shogi Center.”

“..... Huuh?”

“I ain’t good with words, so let’s go play Shogi!” was his invitation. The Shogi Center beneath Tsutenkaku Tower was still in operation in those days, and that is where he brought me.”

“What was that geezer thinking

There is no comparison with the New World Shogi parlors I took Ai Yashajin to for training. It’s a tourist spot now, but it used to be a place where criminals and gamblers put tons of money on the line. That’s where Master decided to take a woman with a bum leg on a date?!

“Kousuke was also the first one to take me to a ramen establishment. The term *handicapped accessible* was a long way off and the restaurants I could enter on my own were rather limited. Thus Kousuke said, *Long as I’m here, let’s go somewhere ya can’t usually eat* And he brought me to a rustic ramen shop located beneath the train tracks!”

Sensei giggles as if she’s reminiscing about good days.

That look in her eyes it’s like a girl in love for the first time.

That reminds me of the time when Shakando-sensei took Ayumu and I to *Home Ken*, a ramen place in Sendagaya—especially how happy she looked slurping down ramen.

Just how much does she?!

“When we spoke on the phone, he would inevitably say, *Let’s do some Shogi puzzles! Lemme tall ya the formation. First* The topic was always Shogi with him.”

“Shogi puzzles over the phone?”

Even kids who are obsessed with Shogi puzzles don’t do that.

“It would have made sense to end the phone calls while thinking and then dial again once we had solved the puzzles. But we remained silent and on the line for hours The phone bill was outrageous. I was always the one to call, you see.”

Shakando-*sensei* made it clear that she was the one taking the initiative rather than Master.

“Kousuke’s daughter was reaching a certain age and he tried to respect that. Whenever I would call in the evening, he would choose the puzzle as quickly as possible and then call me back using a public phone outside of his house. All so we could sit in silence time and again.”

“Keika didn’t know about your engagement until recently.”

“..... I did that girl an incredible disservice. I only hope she does not misunderstand”

Shakando-*sensei* is probably talking about the match when Keika beat her to get into the Women’s League. I understand better than anyone else that she didn’t lose that one on purpose.

I mean, there’s a good chance I would’ve lost the Ryuo title and both my apprentices if that hadn’t happened.

“Be that as it may, those silent hours we spent on the phone were some of the most joyous of my life”

“So then why——”

I can’t stop myself from getting up and yelling.

“If you like him that much, why didn’t you get married?! Master certainly didn’t have anything against you, and you know how he is. He can’t express himself with words, but he couldn’t have said no.”

If Shakando-*sensei* was serious about going through with it.

There’s no way Master could have refused.

After all, he accepted an apprentice who had so many health problems that

no one else would take her.

“I never found the courage. Waiting for the man to ask was all I ever did I couldn’t say the words myself”

Looking into her lap and letting out a long sigh, *Sensei* tells us her biggest regret.

“All of those hours had passed over the phone in silence. If only for one minute No, 10 seconds would have sufficed. If I could revisit 10 seconds of that time A different future would have been waiting for me. It would be a falsehood to say I do not have the visions of what could have been.”

Shogi players don’t get to have a Mulligan.

But there are countless moments when we wish we could’ve had a do over. All those regrets make us want to scream late at night when we’re all alone.

—How many nights like that has *Shakando-sensei* had?

“..... *Shakando-sensei*.”

I muster up the courage to ask.

This is the most important question.

“Are you still waiting for Master to pop the question? Is that why you couldn’t accept Ayumu’s offer?”

“.....”

Silent moments slip by.

All of us quietly wait for *Shakando-sensei*’s answer.

When finally—

“..... If I”

Barely above a whisper.

Words drip from her lips like thoughts that have built up too much to keep them stored away.

“..... If I were younger and easier on the eyes if I had the sheen of my golden age, then”

The droplets that made it out formed both no and yes.

Does that mean She could tell Master how she feels if she were in her prime?

Or

THE ASSASSIN AND THE SQUIRE

“It seems I have talked my throat dry Can I offer another cup of tea?” I asked the three young ones in order to break the heavy silence.

Their faces bring back so many memories.

The children who faced off on the Elementary Meijin’s grand stage.

Budding talent gathers once every year to be put in the spotlight. My deceased Master always insisted that I work commentary for those matches.

All so that he had the chance to identify potential and to take promising children as his apprentices.

Even after his death, I continue doing commentary simply for the sake of carrying on the tradition. Once it had become such a part of my routine, breaking that habit is no simple matter.

“..... Now that I think about it.”

The young Ryuo asks after drinking down his cup of tea in a single gulp.

“Why did you decide to take Ayumu as your apprentice, Shakando-*sensei*?”

His clumsy grip on the teacup handle bears a striking resemblance to Kousuke. The nostalgia opens my heart and loosens my tongue concerning my younger days.

“Why do you ask such a question?”

“The finals were between Ryuo and I, remember? I already had a Master at that point, but she didn’t. Most of all, a Women’s League player had never taken a boy for an apprentice before, right? Wouldn’t that make Ryuo the best candidate for you to take as an apprentice?”

“Perhaps personality played a part in the decision?” said Machi.

“Maybe she thought Ayumu looks pretty good compared to the crybaby who couldn’t understand how I whooped her so badly in the semis, hm?”

Machi the Tormentor and the Aggressive Archangel trade verbal ribbings.

These two have not changed in the slightest Their relationship has not been hindered by the fact they are polar opposites. Their friendship continues despite the constant tension. It's a rather rare instance of friendship between players.

"It still goes against expectations, yes? I would think it more logical that you have taken the Elementary Meijin of the previous year and the first girl to ever take the title, Tsubasa Gakumiki, to groom for entrance into the Sub League."

"My reasoning for taking God Cauldron as an apprentice Is it?"

The tea Maria brewed for us still shows clumsiness in its preparation, but that lack of precision is what allowed me to revisit those days in my memory.

"The first moment I spoke with that boy with Ayumu Kannabe, I realized something quite odd. Our souls had much in common."

The first time I felt *it* was during that very Elementary Meijin Title Match.

It was when he was undergoing a review session following his match against the Archangel.

"Hm? Are you?"

I thought he remained in silence out of the frustration that *he had lost to a girl*. That it was all he could do to keep the tears at bay.

Upon closer inspection, however, a different reason came to mind. Thus, I whispered into his ear, "..... Be at ease. Heed each of my words and the worst shall never befall you. Understood?"

Though surprised at first, Ayumu gave the slightest of nods and remained at my side from then on. Others present that day would not have felt anything amiss once he was speaking normally again.

Then, after the awards ceremony and the broadcast crew had packed up their belongings, "Shakando-sensei! Um"

Ayumu appeared at the door to my personal break room, fearful yet mustering courage.

These are the words he asked once he found his voice.

“Would you Um Would you take me as your apprentice?”

“I’m afraid to say that I cannot.”

I had no choice but to explain the situation to that heartbroken boy.

“The current rules stipulate that Women’s League players cannot take boys as apprentices. This has nothing to do with you personally Forgive me.”

Dyslexia.

Ayumu had immense difficulty reading characters during his years in elementary school. His fixation on a board game on Shogi was mainly a byproduct of it.

Surprised?

Dyslexia caused him to stay within his shell throughout much of his early life not by impairing his sight, but his auditory senses. Speaking was far from his expertise.

It was not so acute as to require treatment.

He could, in fact, read what was written but it took him twice as long as his peers. His symptoms gradually waned as he got older, but Being unable to acquire knowledge from strategy books within the Shogi world would certainly be a handicap. There was no need to say it out loud. Judging by your facial expressions, it looks as though only Machi realized the situation.

He was the quiet, slightly slower child who can be found in any classroom of any school.

However, when compared side by side within the confines of a classroom within the school system, his struggles were quite apparent.

That boy left quite an impression on me.

Had my Master still been alive, he would have no doubt passed on the opportunity to take him as an apprentice. His obsession with the Meijin Title left him blind to all but the most perfect talent.

I, however thought differently.

Could a perfect talent seriously achieve what they wished in the Shogi world?

Wouldn't someone who had to contend with imperfection be better suited to press past the Shogi world's many barriers?

As with me and my bum leg Wouldn't someone with the *talent of being unable to escape from Shogi* be more desirable?

That led me to challenge the association for the right of a Women's League player to take on a male apprentice.

That meant facing the man who once used me as the Assassin.

"Oh, come on. Don't push it."

He spoke to me as if I were a hunting dog who had long since lost her worth.

"No one'd be surprised by you beating a pro in a league match anymore. You're too strong, and all the girls you raised into Women's League players also became too strong. Pros nowadays shrug off losses to women like it's nothing. Too bad for you."

"In which case, should not Women's League players be governed by the same rules as professionals?"

"That's apples and oranges right there."

The chairman at the time, the one who held the position before Mr. Tsukimitsu, felt that Women's League players had lost their value.

"Petitioning at the Players Meeting won't get you anywhere. You killed too many. Even when they retire, pros still have association membership and a vote. So long as the generation that despised the Assassin is still kicking, you'll never get a word in."

"..... I admit a great deal of professional players have reason to hold a grudge against me."

That is when I deployed my ace.

"However, the outside world holds me in rather high favor. Women's League players as well."

"!! W-Well, that's just!!"

“I have with me a list of influential persons who wish for the Women’s League to break away from the Shogi Association. You shall recognize the names of sponsors and businesses who would support such a venture.”

“..... Going to break up the association, are you? You’re the one who stopped Kansai from pulling that stunt, so you of all people should understand how crazy it is.”

“I do not wish for that to transpire, but the times are demanding that women stand on their own two feet. On a side note, this list of potential sponsors’ essential condition for a new entity is——”

“That you’re at the top Yeah?”

“Which means that your worthless assassin may still yet be a useful tool for the Shogi world.”

“.....”

“I trust you’ll have a word with the board of directors, chairman?”

Thus, Women’s League players taking a more active role in Shogi events became the association’s way of marketing toward a wider audience, to allow them more independence than ever before. Women’s League players who reached 4-*dan* were also given membership and their own vote during Players Meetings.

In other words, that allowed women to take male apprentices and participate in the Sub League.

That being said, there is a drastic difference *between being allowed to do so on paper and actually doing it*. That is the reality.

Although approved by the slimmest of margins, there was only one professional player who voiced their support for this new arrangement at the meeting.

“Are you willing to become my apprentice despite these challenges Ayumu Kannabe?”

“Yes.”

There was no hesitation.

A child with an intellect like his surely understood what would lie before him. One look at his face was all I needed to understand that he was prepared to face it.

“Very well. We have an accord.”

Thus saying with an outstretched hand, the boy took it.

He then looked at me with eyes as clear as crystal and cautiously asked.

“How can How should I repay you, *Sensei*?”

“While I desire nothing more than your becoming a worthy Shogi player in your own right Yes. For starters, I ask that you learn how to prepare delicious tea.”

Thinking back on it now, that may be the moment I first stepped out from beneath my Master’s yoke.

However, the disdain that I brought upon Ayumu exceeded even my wildest dreams. He received far more resistance than the girls attempting to join the Sub League.

“If you lose to that boy being taught by a Women’s League player, find yourself a new Master.”

“Crush him, understood? You are forbidden to speak with the Assassin’s apprentice.”

“That witch! How much does she have to soil Shogi’s good name until she’s satisfied?!”

Ayumu heard it all.

And yet he passed the Sub League Entrance Exam and rose through the ranks without so much as shedding a tear. His Shogi lacked flair but more than made up for it with consistency. Never once was he in danger of landing with a B.

He made visible process, walking forward step-by-step without ever retreating. He was the living embodiment of a Pawn, the very piece, which bears his name, the character *ayumu*. That boy climbed the ladder and never looked back.

In fact, he was so happy on his first promotion that he said, “Um Can I marry you if I become a professional player?”

How adorable that was. He-he

He did cause one problem, however.

It was around the time that he had achieved 1-*dan*.

While doing a review session with another 1-*dan* Sub League member in his twenties, Ayumu struck him without warning.

I doubted my ears.

You yourselves understand he isn't the type of child to do such a thing, yes?

Furthermore, Ayumu was victorious in the match.

In which case, what could have possibly triggered the incident?

The Sub League director intervened and let Ayumu off with a strict warning. As the incident occurred after the match's conclusion, the results were left unchanged. That was perhaps the silver lining of the whole situation

Why did he do what he did?

The director never gave specifics, and Ayumu never once broke his silence, but A member of the Sub League who was there to witness the incident informed me. It was a certain phrase spat in frustration during that review session.

“What's so good about that gaudy old lady anyway?”

Those words spurred Ayumu to raise his fist for the first time.

The original reason for my wearing frilly dresses was on the orders of my Master, so that I would not need to sit on my ankles while playing matches. A skirt that concealed my legs was a must, and coordinating my outfits to match was what led to my preferences.

Ayumu is such a kind boy, yes?

However, that is not where the story ends.

He arrived at the next session of regular activities in the Sub League wearing a pure white suit.

His manner of speech also began to resemble mine.

The director issued further warnings and the other Sub League members were merciless in their comments, but he silenced them all with victory stars.

Yes His fashion sense originated as a way to protect me.

While dressing in a way that would draw criticism from anyone, he became strong enough to silence criticism from everyone. And he did it by playing orthodox Shogi without a hint of a flaw.

He was attempting to validate my path in life, which was warped as the Assassin, on his own by showing that even the apprentice of a Women's League player could become a professional. That was his way of showing gratitude.

How could I scold him for that?

To go along with his tremendous progress, I bestowed Ayumu with a new name to match.

"Silver Chevalier God Cauldron That is your name henceforth. You are my Knight."

"Yes, Master!"

The first shades of masculinity began to appear in that meek boy's face.

From that point forward, I instructed him to accompany me to my matches whenever possible. That included my league matches, not just practice sessions.

The outward appearance was that of him offering assistance to me. However——

"Becoming a worthy Shogi player requires a wide array of skills. Witness and steal them for yourself."

"Yes, Master! My gaze will never leave you, not even for an instant!"

He-he Steal from my opponents as well."

Although his dyslexia had all but disappeared by that point, it seemed as though he could gain much more by witnessing actual matches than from books.

“Formation is fashion. Trends come and go, but the beauty is eternal. Have I made myself clear?”

“Crystal clear.”

Before I knew it, I was traveling across Japan at the arm of an apprentice who was now taller than I.

“People may be treacherous, but having more pieces will never betray you. Remember this well.”

“I have carved your words into my very heart, Master.”

Skills that I honed during my golden age were beginning to wane. It was necessary for me to pass down the very techniques that turned me into the Assassin while I could still use them.

..... Why didn't I do so directly by playing against him, you ask?

Yes, that would have been ideal and efficient Though I'm afraid that boy could never harness the entirety of his abilities while sitting across from me. It was quite a problem

There was, of course, criticism.

Some in the media claimed that Ayumu was an illegitimate child of mine. However, the stronger the wind howls outside, the stronger family bonds become. As you are well aware... young Ryuo.

Until one day—the moment finally arrived.

The moment my apprentice ascended to the professional echelons by completely and utterly dominating the 3-*dan* division of the Sub League.

It had been fourteen and a half years since someone broke through in a single season.

And, doing so as a first-year high school student made him the youngest professional player since the current system was adopted. That is until he was surpassed by you, young Ryuo.

His record of 17 wins and one loss itself was superb, but Him achieving that feat by playing orthodox *yagura* is what truly brought joy to my heart.

With results and a playing style like this, it was entirely plausible that he could

climb the placement match ladder right out of the gate.

I was free from Master's yoke, but a desire to raise a player who could accomplish one thing, possessing the title of Meijin, still also resided within me.

"Congratulations. You are the first professional of the Ashigara Shogi line. There is no doubt my Master is smiling down upon you"

"Do you see me as worthy now?"

"He-he-he. Now that you possess 4-*dan*, a Women's League player such as myself is obligated to address you as *sensei*. Is that what you wish, Kannabe 4-*dan*?"

"No. I still have much to prove as a player and fully understand that fact."

"Hm? Then in what way are you asking if you are worthy?"

The boy who had exceeded my height before I knew it halved that tall frame by kneeling before me.

He then took my hand gently in his own and said this.

"I adore you dearly. As a Master and as a woman."

"....."

Even as those words left his lips I was not the least bit surprised.

That was because I had an inkling that was the case.

Yes, I had noticed it long beforehand.

It was when the fragrance of the tea he prepared took on a different aroma.

When there was more than just kindness in the strength in the arm that supported me.

And I manipulated those feelings to make him into a stronger player. I knew what would happen if I used the same techniques on him that I did on the girls who wish to join the Women's League out of admiration for me.

That is why my emotions were muddled.

Surely you can empathize, young Ryuo?

You, who have taken young girls as apprentices.

And driven them away from the nest.

▲ AYUMU'S EX-GIRLFRIEND

"..... It seems the tea has gone cold yet again. I shall have Maria bring us a fresh pot."

Shakando-*sensei* rings a bell she has next to her and the cat-eared girl dressed as a maid comes into the room with a new pot of tea right away.

"....."

Her eyes are red. It's obvious that she was eavesdropping, but Shakando-*sensei* doesn't scold her for it. Maybe she wanted Maria to hear all along?

"Thank you, Maria. Go home for today."

"..... One such as I will take my leave."

She does the cutest little bow to us and does what she's told without complaining. That *one such as I* thing is adorable.

"Darling, isn't she? Envisioning her progress is my favorite pastime these days," says Shakando-*sensei* with thin, smiling eyes. "The construction of new association buildings, the expansion of Women's Titles and the maturation of my apprentice I believe I have received happiness far beyond what I deserve, considering the immensity of my sins."

"I think you're a victim, *Sensei*. Do you really have to be so hard on yourself?"

"Pressuring Naniwa's Snow White to this extent is my sin. Reflecting on that fact——"

"You're overthinking it! Big Sis became a pro because she wanted to. She made the decision herself including taking this leave of absence."

I won't give any ground on that point.

Me being her main motivation for making that decision is the one thing I can cling to.

"..... It was my Master who desired the title of Meijin, but he has passed away. God Cauldron has his sights set on Meijin because that's where his talents guide him. One so blessed by the Shogi gods as he deserves a partner

who is not a prisoner of the past like myself.”

“Does he really not have a chance? Ayumu——”

“I tire of this, Ryuo.”

Her words cut right through me. She’s not trying to hide her annoyance anymore.

“.....”

The air gets really heavy. Shakando-*sensei* takes a sip of tea as if to say: this conversation is over.

“Hey, can I say somethin’?”

That’s the moment.

Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, who hadn’t said a word the whole time, decides to raise her hand and drops this bombshell.

“Speak as freely as your own talents guide you, Aggressive Archangel.”

“Ayumu and I dated for a while.”

Clatter!

An ornate teacup rolls across the floor before any of us could gasp in surprise.

It’s Shakando-*sensei*’s.

“..... Apologies. My fingers slipped.”

Still smiling, *Sensei* reaches down and picks her cup up off the floor.

Luckily, it was empty and didn’t break. There’s no spilled tea or shards to clean up.

“Would you please continue?”

Shakando-*sensei* pours herself another cup. Meanwhile, Machi and I are losing our minds.

“What is this now?! O-Ryou, you never once said a word!! When was this going on?!”

“Started in the summer when I was 14 and lasted about a year.”

Wait? 14 That would overlap between her second and third years in junior

high school.

Wasn't that when she?

"Ryou, weren't you in the Su——"

PINCH!!

Machi digs her fingernails into my thigh under the table the second I start talking. Ow, ow, OUCH!! And that spot is *dangerously close*!!

"You were saying? How was Ayumu as a boyfriend? We are all so interested to hear the finer points, are we not, Yaichi?"

"Y-Yeah! And seriously, friends don't hide this kind of thing from each other, right?!"

"My bad, my bad. Ayumu wanted to keep it hush-hush."

With a quick glance at Shakando-sensei, Ryou goes into bragging mode.

"Oh, well, I used to call him *Ayu* back then. He just called me *Ryou*'cuz he was too shy for cutesy nicknames."

"Have you got any proof of it? A picture of some sort?" asks Machi.

"I might have one left, hang on Ah! Found it."

Ryou opened her smartphone and found a picture in almost no time flat.

It's the two of them when they were both in the third year of junior high.

Whoa, they're young! And Ryou looks like she's nothing but trouble!!

"My, my! How lovey-dovey!!"



“Such innocence. Were you Ayumu’s first girlfriend by chance, O-Ryou?”

“Pretty sure, yeah. I got a lot of his firsts.”

Ryou laughs up a storm while the rest of us pass her phone around.

Of course, *Shakando-sensei* takes a look.

Mnnngggghhhhhh

The air around her is so heavy I can almost see the sound effects raining down. I’m particularly sensitive to it because I used to see the same sparks from Big Sis and my apprentices

Whether Ryou picks up on that aura or not, she keeps going and picks up steam.

“We went on dates, probably once a week, maybe? We both had school to go to and lived on opposite sides of Tokyo. But when we had time, we were all over each other.”

“Sounds reminiscent of my relationship with Yaichi.”

“Yeah, Machi and I had

Hey! We never dated!! Don’t go trying to change history!!”

Not to mention the fact that I was in the sixth grade when Machi was in her second year of junior high. That’s way too early.

With that warning firmly in place, I look at Ryou and ask, “..... Well? What did you do, specifically, while you were dating?”

“We were at that age when curiosity kicks in, yeah? And we went at it from any position every chance we got.”

SLUUURRRRP!

“..... Pardon me.”

That’s odd. I’ve never heard *Shakando-sensei* make a sound while drinking tea, let alone something so loud. It’s almost like she was trying to drown out the conversation.

“You know how straightlaced and normal Ayumu is? You’d never believe the stuff he tried on me when it was just us. Putting it in places you normally

wouldn't use, for starters."

"I can relate very well. Yaichi and I were very much the same."

"Oh yeah, Machi and I were busy around the clock But not like that!! Nothing happened between us, got it?!"

"Oh? Denying it so hard makes it sound like you did get up to something. Actually, you two've been acting weird around each other for a bit now. Since we're all fessing up about our pasts, how about you guys join in?" suggests Ryou with an evil spark in her eyes.

"While I hate to rain on your parade——," the Eternal Queen interrupts us in a tone I've never heard her use before. "..... It is high time that I returned to my research. Can I ask you to see yourselves out?"

It's already dark outside when we leave Shakando-sensei's shop.

"I'm starving! Why does that hag have to drone on and on? Let's snag something good to eat before heading out."

"Rumor has it there's a wonderful little place located along Meiji Street in this area. One that serves ramen."

The girls take off at a brisk pace and I call after them.

"Ryou. There's something I want to check before we eat."

"Yeah?"

The Gothic delinquent turns to look at me.

"You talking about this getup? Well sure, I'll stand out like a sore thumb going to a ramen joint like this, but who cares? After hearing the hag talk about it so much, I'm craving ramen like nothing else."

That's not it. Well, she's right, but that's not what I'm talking about.

"About what you said earlier, dating Ayumu >That was at the same time, right?"

"It's exactly what you and Machi are thinkin'."

She admits it straightaway and bares her teeth in a wicked grin.

“She was just too stunned to connect the dots. It’s not like it’s a crime, yeah? Rather than just opening up about it, she gets her undies all twisted. What’s a hag doin’ acting like a petty schoolgirl anyway?”

“You may very well have squeezed several years off *Shakando-sensei*’s lifespan with that performance, O-Ryou. She hadn’t many left to begin with. The best medicine may be a bitter pill to swallow, but that bordered on the traumatic.”

These two seriously don’t have any idea what the phrase *respect your elders* means.

“Very traumatic But it might be the jolt that we needed to move forward.”
Shakando-sensei’s reaction made her feelings all too obvious.

“That being said, would you please give me more details about what happened between the two of you? I’ll have to fix this later. *Shakando-sensei* is in no shape to play Shogi right now.”

“What’s the problem with letting your apprentice take the title?”

“Everything! Ai won’t be happy if she finds out that’s how she won!! And——.”

“And?”

The two Women’s Title Holders ask in unison and I say, “I think that’s Ai’s key to victory. Bringing out *Shakando-sensei*’s true strength the way that she beat pros back when she was called the Assassin.”

“You just contradicted yourself. She’ll lose it if the hag goes all out, right?”

“Well, yes, but Man, I can’t figure out how to put this into words.”

Wracking my brain, I tilt my head and try to collect my thoughts——

Press≡

“Wha?!”

I glance down to figure out what the soft pressure is and see Machi wrapping herself around my arm.

“Say, Yaichi.≡”

“Wh-What is it, Machi?”

This slightly older woman looking up at me has my heart racing. Not to mention the fact that she offhandedly asked me to marry her

“When O-Ryou revealed her past with Ayumu, the two of us were watching Shakando-sensei’s reaction, were we not?”

“..... For sure. She was blindsided.”

“Well, I’m fairly certain O-Ryou had her eyes on someone else.”

“Huh?”

“H-Hey, Machi! The hell are you——?”

Ryou turns bright red.

Hold up?! Th-There’s no way!!

“Don’t tell me You think I might be jealous because Ayumu got a girlfriend before I did?”

“.....”

Wh-Why aren’t they saying anything?

Machi presses those incredible chest pillows even tighter against my arm.

“Like myself, he cannot pick up on things even if they get spelled out directly. Do you believe such ambiguous hints would even come across for this obstinate person?”

“Thinkin’ about it that way, Ayumu is really something else Saying everything up front and never giving up even after getting shot down every time.”

The two of them seem to understand something. Ryou looks up at the beautiful moon overhead and whispers, “..... He should be rewarded, straight up.”

RANK A

The morning after hearing Shakando-*sensei*'s story in Harajuku, I arrive at the Shogi Association Building in Sendagaya.

"Yo."

"Ah, good morning, Ryou."

She's setting up an analysis board in the Katsura no Ma on the fourth floor when I get inside.

"You're the first one here? Wow, you're really psyched up."

"Meh, I guess? This is my ex's first match in A League (lol)."

"It's up to us to root for him isn't it?"

Nobody will show up to the Katsura no Ma today. Younger players have an obvious grudge against Ayumu. Older players hate seeing a Women's League player's apprentice getting so close to the Meijin Title Match.

Meanwhile, tons more fans are tuning in than usual.

"Machi upstairs?"

"I think so, yes. She isn't working as a journalist today, but as part of the broadcast crew. She'll be on the fifth floor most of the time."

One of the rooms that was originally for players to spend the night was refurbished into a broadcast booth. That's where all the computers and equipment are. The Katsura no Ma has a *tatami* floor, so it's not suited for leaving that stuff.

"The Kanto Association has the break room on the same floor as the arenas I'm still not used to it."

"What difference does it make?"

"We do our own analysis in the Player's Room in Osaka, and that's on a completely different floor from the arenas. We can relax and talk as loud as we want without worrying. But here, the slightest sounds might——." I say, taking a look around the room when suddenly.

“.....!! Ayumu”

One of the players arrives on this very floor.

This is his A League debut, but he’s doing it with absolutely no shame in that white cape of his.

Ayumu is already locked in. Without noticing me, he disappears down the hall and into the special arena.

I haven’t seen my best friend since the day of the proposal.

That aura, it’s overwhelming. I’d say it’s at about the same level as *Mr. Oishi and Chairman Tsukimitsu*

“..... He actually did it. He has A Rank”

At the very back of the fourth floor only a few meters away from here, there’s only one match taking place today in the special arena.

An A League Placement Match. The first one of the season.

Looking at the league rosters posted on the wall in the Katsura no Ma, I get flashbacks of when Ayumu, Big Sis and I looked at the roster in one of Tokyo’s Shogi classrooms. That list of names in A League.

I thought that those guys were way out of my reach back then.

It’s been seven years.

And now, Ayumu Kannabe is written as one of the only nine people who are allowed into the real A League in the Shogi world.

But the spot where his opponent should be listed for today is blank.

The reason for it is that no one knew who he would face at the time the poster was printed.

“..... I gotta say though, this timing is so weird”

“I agree. This match is usually scheduled for *after the seventh Meijin Title Match*——”

This time, however, it was set up right after the fourth Meijin Title Match, the last one.

The schedule isn’t the only unusual thing, either.

“Huuuh?!”

“*S-Sensei*, your clothes?!”

The fourth floor erupts. We step out of the Katsura no Ma, absentmindedly following the noise coming from the arena.

The other player has just arrived, but Ryou and I can’t believe our eyes when we see who it is.

“Those are Japanese clothes, right?”

“Y-Yeah but him? Wearing *that*!”

A Ranking players who show up to an A League Placement Match in a kimono isn’t all that strange.

But this, it’s unprecedented. At least It’s definitely not normal.

His kimono is nothing but wrinkles.

No *haori* overcoat. Fabric that should have luster is covered in dirt and grime.

The man’s face is in the same shape.

Early stages of an unkempt beard. Hair uncombed.

The man looks like a samurai returning from the front.

The top ranked player of A League and of the Meijin Challenger last season——
Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*.

Having just had the door slammed in his face by the Meijin, he appears in the special arena doorway and apparently hasn’t changed clothes since that match.

“Well, it’s been a long while, hasn’t it, Ayumu?”

“..... Yes. I apologize for my lack of communication.”

Out of everyone in here, Ayumu is the only one not in shock, even though he’s already sitting at the board.

“Let’s see, we haven’t exchanged pleasantries since the day you declined to do practice sessions with the Meijin and I, yes? It’s amazing we haven’t run into each other in a match since then. Disappointed to be playing me today? Or perhaps are you relieved?”

“.....”

Silence is the most eloquent answer here.

I’m sure that Mr. Natagiri is the opponent that Ayumu wanted today.

This is because the title of *Meijin* will only be worth something to him if he fights a series of matches against the man he refers to as *the god* to claim it.

Fighting that Meijin—is the only way to become the real Meijin.

“Let me start by thanking you for agreeing to my request for having our match early.”

Mr. Natagiri opens the piece box a bit rougher than necessary, pulls out the King, slaps it down into his territory and says as if narrating a flashback, “That title match was a whole other world. Fighting him in that series, he was a completely different person from any other title matches. That kind of strength is in another dimension”

“.....”

“Even after our review session ended, I stayed behind at the inn that hosted the match, replaying all four matches over and over, desperate to hold on to those sweet, sweet moments!”

He yells like a man obsessed. He’s fixated on the Meijin title.

“That’s why I want to go back there even a moment sooner! Get back into that world and play Shogi with him so, so much more! I can’t wait for the next Meijin Title match, that is!!”

“Save those words——”

Ayumu glares across the board at Mr. Natagiri, a King pinched between two fingers.

“For after you have defeated me!!”

The match begins.

Offense and defense are decided before Placement Matches start. In other words, you can plan out your strategy in advance Except this one is unusual because no one knew who would be playing.

Ayumu has the first move, but what kind of strategy will he choose under these circumstances?

An ambush to nullify his opponent's research?

Or go with the latest style of Bishop Exchange or Double Wing Attack?

"Haaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Ayumu Kannabe flings his cape to the side with vigor and constructs a viable fortress on the board.

Ryou and I say it at exactly the same time. The strategy he's using.

"*Yagura!!*"

What's more, he's combined two Golds and one Silver into the most orthodox Yagura Castle!

After hearing about him from *Shakando-sensei*, just seeing him make a *yagura* on this, his first match in A League, is enough to get our blood pumping

"..... He's really doin' it."

"Yeah. He's made up his mind to play *yagura* no matter who he's playing against. That's exactly No! Ayumu wouldn't have it any other way!"

"*He who walks the noble path becomes Meijin.*"

That's what Ayumu's *yagura* is shouting from the board. That it will fight and win with elegance and beauty. That willpower is even stronger than diamonds Intense!!

However.

"Aww *Yagura* again?"

Mr. Natagiri looks disappointed.

"A Rapid Attack Yagura, I could understand, but The rock-hard type you always play won't accomplish anything in A League. It's an antique"

"Reheat the old to discover the new. I understand that the *yagura* falls under that category of strategies. No matter how the trends change, however, that beauty is eternal."

"Ohh, no, no."

Mr. Natagiri shoots that down right away and then explains the reason. That shocking reason.

“It was so written in *Kuzuryu’s Notebook* Yes?”

“.....!!”

“Being best friends with Yaichi means you got a signed copy before release, didn’t you? I’m so jealous! Would you give it to me if I win today?” whispers Mr. Natagiri as he reaches somewhere strange. “I mean, either you haven’t read the book *or its contents went over your head!*”

The move he makes—shatters the standard!!

“Mgh?!”

Ayumu leans all the way over the board to get a closer look at it... to examine that reckless move.

It goes against common sense, not just expectations.

Even though his defenses are wispy at best, he’s launched a full-scale assault against Ayumu’s castle wall!

Why would he be so rash?

“Kuzuryu’s Notebook, Chapter 2, Part 6: *In modern Shogi, software has proven that increasing the mobility of pieces within your own territory carries the same value as promoting a piece in your opponent’s territory. Thus, strategies which impeded the King’s movement such as the yagura are invalid. Your territory is a turret, not a castle.*”

The whole paragraph rolls off Mr. Natagiri’s tongue. I’m pretty sure that was loud enough that the whole floor heard him, too.

Ryou is cringing.

“Does he think he’s quoting scripture?”

“Maybe he’s a missionary?”

There’s no doubt about it. He’s the one who bought my book at that megastore in Shinjuku!

“But there’s no way that Swiss cheese is rated the same as Ayumu’s

castle? Seriously?”

Back at our analysis board in the Katsura no Ma, I explain it to Ryou.

“The Bishop and Silvers are balanced in such a way that their ability to move diagonally keeps the King protected. Diagonals are harder to spot than vertical and horizontal lanes. That’s why people tend to overlook them and using software can help you find good moves that were hidden in plain sight.”

Ayumu literally hasn’t budged since he saw Mr. Natagiri’s move.

His eyes glued to the board, Ayumu mutters, “..... You seem to have read Drakin’s book a great deal.”

“Of course, I’ve read it. It was written by the strongest player alive, and by the one and only person to efficiently integrate software into his playing style, the Demon King of the West!”

As the author, I’m over the moon that he likes it so much. Even if the book doesn’t sell, just knowing that the Meijin challenger referenced it so much is enough for me. I’m not just saying that!

“Yaichi continues to stimulate the Meijin and I Why, this past Meijin Title Match was a contest to see which of us understood him on a deeper level.”

Th-The Meijin!! He liked my book that much?!

“I know that the two of you grew up as fierce rivals, pushing one another to greater heights. I’m also aware that you made it through the 3-*dan* division and rose through the Placement Leagues faster than him. That includes the pride you take in devising new sequences for that orthodox *yagura* of yours.”

Ayumu’s mind is racing to figure out his next move, but Mr. Natagiri tacks on even more verbal pressure.

“But you haven’t affected the Meijin or myself in the slightest as of yet.”

“.....!!”

“Even just considering that little fact, you don’t have the qualifications to become Meijin—the qualifications to stand on top of an era.”

Influencing others is not easy.

But it’s still much easier than *changing yourself because of others*.

It would take a lot of courage to completely abandon the Shogi sense you've built up your entire life to learn how a young player like me sees the sport. If you fail, you lose everything.

"But actually doing it is scary."

"You think so?"

"Yes. For the longest time, I thought that the Meijin kept his titles for so long by turning his own Shogi sense into books and planting ideas in other players' heads."

But there's one thing about that idea that comes up short.

"That way won't work unless you're absolutely confident that *you can grow faster than anyone else*. Everyone would just study your books and overtake you if you couldn't, right? That fear Hm? Fear?"

"Something wrong, Trash?"

"..... No. I just feel like I'm onto something"

Just now, I felt fear.

Before I had my titles Before I was ever the one being pursued, I never thought that fear existed. Now, it's trying to tell me something.

But, before I can figure out exactly what it is——

"Yaichi, Yaichi, Yachiyaichiyaichi, YAIIIIIIIICHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!!!"

"Whoa?!"

Machi bursts into the Katsura no Ma, completely forgetting her *Mato* persona despite the way she's dressed!

"Wh-What's wrong? You sound like my apprentice in the late-game"

I'm picking up some of the obsessive vibes that Ai gives off.

"Haaaah Haaaah Or- Orders"

"Orders?"

Ryou and I share confused looks.

"Didn't they just order lunch?"

“Too early to be thinkin’ about dinner, too.”

“Not for food! Book orders!!”

“Books? Books No way! You don’t mean?!”

“Orders for *Kuzuryu’s Notebook* are piling up by the second! Current stock can’t hope to handle it! Additional printings!! Mountains of additional printings!!”

“HOOOOOOLY COOOOOOOOOW!!”

I suppose I should expect this much.

Tens of thousands of people are tuning into this match online, and only the hardcore Shogi fans are watching in the middle of the afternoon.

If one of the players happens to recite a memorable phrase and say something like *the Meijin loves it, too* while I have an advantage on the board, of course fans are going to want the book. What is this, a sales program?

“Thank you, Ayumu! Thank you, Mr. Natagiri! And thank you, Meijin!!”

I get swept up in an intense wave of gratitude when suddenly Machi snatches me by the collar.

“Now is hardly the time to get absorbed in a match of Shogi! The editorial department needs signed copies!”

“Huuuh?! But I need to go to the office to write my signature on certificates——”

“What luck that you happen to have the necessary tools with you.≡ As for the certification, everyone is after the Meijin’s signature, so what does it matter who signs it?”

After saying something that would really make people working in the public relations department angry, the shrewd beauty of an editor whisks me all the way down to the basement

“M-My arm My right arm is dead It’ll be days before I can even think about playing Shogi”

The 5 p.m. chime echoes through Sendagaya.

Finally I get released from the underground dungeon. In shambles

“Way to keep at it, Trash.”

Walking back into the Katsura no Ma, Ryou doesn't bother looking up from her phone to say hello. She doesn't budge from her spot sprawled out on the floor, either.

There's also one other woman in here sitting off in the corner next to a massive suitcase.

“Ah Sorry to disturb you, Kuzuryu-sensei”

“Ms. Rokuroba Long time, no see”

Tamayo Rokuroba Women's 2-*dan*.

A popular Women's League player who learns Shogi from Mr. Natagiri and lives in his research room.

Right now, in that very same room another girl should be there, too.

“Um H-Hey, how's A-A-”

—How's Ai?

I can't get those words to come out and break off eye contact with her.

“..... Has the match progressed?”

“A lot, yeah. But I don't understand what's going through the defender's head.”

Ryou raises one leg from her spot on the floor and uses it to swing herself into a sitting position with a *nnhh*!

“Enlighten me, oh prophet. What's up with ol' Natagiri? Did losing four straight against the Meijin break him?”

“I wouldn't say he's broken so much as he's doing the breaking.”

“To himself?”

“Yeah. The Worldly Maestro once told me that Mr. Natagiri used to be a mainstay Static Rook player who only played *yagura* back in the Sub League.

Only after years and years of practice and effort did he become an all-rounder, the Switch Hitter as he's called today."

Unfortunately, he could never outdo the Meijin, also an all-rounder.

"That's why he's trying to copy something stronger than the Meijin. That being software."

"Like that computer professor guy?"

"Okito-*sensei* is definitely the best at incorporating software in their generation, but even he misses things in the late-game. There are limits, after all."

Taking advantage of that is how I got my second title.

And I put everything I learned in my double title matches against Okito-*sensei* into words with *Kuzuryu's Notebook*.

"My Shogi used to be a balanced style, similar to how software plays. I'm pretty sure it's because Big Sis used me as a guinea pig whenever she learned a new standard. Trying to figure out defensive sequences that weren't in the book all the time warped my sense."

"Dang, Ginko"

Yaichi Kuzuryu chose the *my style is already like software, so people will come to play like computers* route.

Ayumu Kannabe thinks along the lines of *perfecting the human way to play and picking the best parts of software*. The same is probably true for the Meijin.

As for Jin Natagiri, he subscribes to the *play style is a human trait, but I'll force myself to play like a computer* way of thinking.

"I honestly don't know if Ayumu or I is right."

Only the Shogi gods know what the sport will become in the future.

"Just the path Mr. Natagiri chose is the same as Mr. Okito. Playing a balanced style means you have to constantly read your King's safety as well as your attacks. Using that style in a long match with lots of waiting time like Placement Matches is the same as running a marathon at a full sprint. It might sound cold of me to say this, since I wrote it in the book, but you'll lose by

instant death in the late-game unless you are extremely confident in your calculation ability. How do you solve that problem?”

Ms. Rokuroba, who'd been silently listening up to this point, asks, “..... Does that mean Jin-Jin is behind?”

“There's no way to say for sure.”

I try to reassure her by revealing some of my best friend's few weaknesses.

“He has an advantage at this point in the match, and Ayumu can't play his best at night. He had a massive advantage against my Master when they played in B League 2nd Class but ended up making a mistake in the late-game that cost him the win. And there's the time I played him in the Crown League two years ago——”

Memories of that long, long night come back to me as I talk.

The intensity in that girl's eyes, which pushed me to victory.

“..... Dragging that slugfest of a match late into the night is what allowed me to turn the tables at the last possible moment. So, trust me Whoever's heart holds out the longest is going to win this match.”

HALF NAKED HAVOC

Night falls upon the special arena, and he and I are nearly out of waiting time.

Natagiri 8-*dan* is absent from his seat while I reach my own conclusion.

"Ngh! Too far The enemy king is too far out of range"

My advance had run his defenses clean through At least, it should have.

The jeweled blade forged by humanity known as the Yagura 4 Six Silver, 3 Seven Knight formation has enough power to lay waste to a defender's feeble walls in a single strike. My Pawn has broken through enemy lines, promoted to the rank of Sub-Gold and is now on the King's doorstep.

"Then, why?! Why can't I claim victory?!"

No matter which sequence I read the enemy King slips through my grasp.

Even worse, my forces left behind within the ruins of his shattered walls become nothing but cannon fodder for his entertainment

There is no choice but to acknowledge the merit of his tactics.

At the same time, the boost in blood cells provided by the *roasted Leviathan strips with a side of innards stew* (grilled eel and liver soup) I consumed for sustenance earlier this evening has beset drowsiness upon me.

"..... Be calm. Time and options yet remain."

Applying eyedrops and intaking caffeine from a cup of strong tea, I regain my composure.

My strength always wanes when the night comes.

I No, I mustn't be vain in my heart. Those words still ring within my mind.

"The yagura is dead."

Nearly a year has passed since Drakin uttered that phrase.

Just as he foretold, the Yagura Castle is on the brink of extinction within the Shogi world.

Double Wing Attack and Bishop Exchange strategies birthed from software

have taken its place. They aim to control the entire board, leaving the King loosely defended while seizing enemy territory in a balanced approach.

“..... The thicker the King’s defenses, the lower the software rating becomes”

At first, the *yagura* faithful turned a blind eye to computers and their number generators. But once those numbers were reflected in victory stars, they abandoned the *yagura* one by one for greener pastures.

“No! I refuse!!”

I give myself a verbal slap on the wrists, take hold of the Bishop on my piece stand, and place it in position to take either the enemy Rook or a Silver.

“The *yagura* is immortal! I shall revive it with these very hands by claiming the Meijin title!!”

Over 100 moves have been played. Vision clouded, my body feels weighed down as if caked in mud.

A balanced style requires the enemy to split what resources remain between *attack* and *defense* in an incredibly strained state. All I must do is make him uncomfortably aware of that fact. Thus, proving the superiority of the *yagura*: this allows me to dedicate my focus entirely to attack.

—I have faith! Humanity built the *yagura* over 1,400 years, and it will not disappoint!!

“A move has been made.”

“Thanks.≡”

Natagiri 8-*dan* has returned to the arena. He offers a swift gesture of gratitude to the match recorder for updating him on the situation before taking a seat across from me with featherlight grace.

His numerous whiskers are shaved smooth and his messy locks have been tamed. Chances are he had a short siesta in a room on the fifth floor Beholding his well-adjusted guise of experience in nocturnal battle, my own weakness once again threatens to break through my hardened visage.

“Oh-ho? Well, isn’t this a flashy move you have for me,” says last season’s

Meijin challenger, patronizingly peering over at me. “Trying to rattle me by flinging one of your big pieces onto the board, hm? That’s cute.≡”

“.....”

“Advancing to the late-game means exchanging pieces for speed.”

“Mngh?!”

“In this new game, which is completely different from the mid-game where numbers and efficiency are of the utmost importance, the value of each piece differs from the earlier stages. Those who understand that change are the ones who will conquer the late-game and Shogi itself. —Kuzuryu’s Notebook, Chapter 7, Section 2!”

Reciting the memorized phrases with the zeal of the prophet, Natagiri 8-dan unleashes a move to make them come true on the board!

“Sacrificing the Rook?! Inconceivable!!”

My composure is lost once again. Why would he utterly ignore the Bishop I deployed to take his Rook?! It couldn’t be

“..... However! That move shall have no impact on——”

“You can help yourself to more than just the Rook.”

“Gah——”

This time, I truly question if I’m hallucinating at this very moment.

“The Bishop as well?! Are you so fixated on advancing your King that you will sacrifice all your big pieces to do so?! Th-This sequence How could it be viable?!”

“Surprised? This is Shogi’s future.”

Sporting a devilish grin, Natagiri 8-dan advances his King from the fourth row into the fifth.

“Can you keep up with the evolution? This overwhelming speed?”

“..... Enough!”

I put on a brave face. Then I take both his Rook and the Bishop for my own. Whether it is an enemy provocation matters little.

“Numbers shall never betray you.”

A teaching from my beloved Master.

One that has become part of my being. Severing it is no longer possible.

“A borrowed sword inspires no fear! To think, one bestowed with the name Switch Hitter would forget something so basic! Is this the power of the Meijin allure?!”

“There’s no denying I’ve borrowed some wisdom from Yaichi.”

Sliiiiip

Natagiri 8-*dan* inserts his right hand deep into the folds of his kimono. What could be the purpose of this unsettling movement?!

“But you know what? *Wisdom isn’t all I borrowed.*”

“?! What do you mean?”

“You know what they say about teaching an old dog new tricks? For an old pup like me to play a new style of Shogi I need the best trainer around!”

With that, Natagiri 8-*dan* spreads his arms to thrust his bare torso out of the confines of the fabric!

“Stripped to the waist?!”

“I’ll teach you the Shogi I’ve beaten into my body.”

Then the Switch Hitter clinches both fists.

“Here——”

After which he places them on the *tatami*, knuckles down.

“Here Here Here Here Here Here, here, here, here, here, hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere!!”

“That’s! The spitting image of Drakin’s apprentice——!!”

Even the aid of software does not necessarily improve late-game skill.

Reason being that the same formation never appears twice.

That is the same argument used against Shogi puzzles for late-game training. For it is merely a Shogi quiz utterly detached from the reality of an actual

match.

However—should Ai Hinatsuru come into play.

“Her late-game abilities exceed even Rank A players. Add in the fact that she all but *co-wrote Kuzuryu’s Notebook*, and then I receive an endless stream of *practice puzzles* whenever I so please! She is the goose who lays golden eggs!! Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—HERE!”

SNAAAAP!!

Echoes spread from the whip snap of his fingers putting the piece down. Sacrificing his big pieces allowed Natagiri 8-*dan* to seize offensive positioning. He unleashes hellfire upon my King!

“Here, here, here, here, HERE!!”

“Kgh?!”

“Hereherehereherehere!! HEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEE!!”

“Arrrgh!!”

My gorgeously constructed wall gets torn down piece by piece with every flick of Natagiri 8-*dan*’s wrist.

The thick armor is showing cracks!

“Heh! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Build up a defense thicker than your opponent? That way of thinking is long gone! Balance is the name of the game now, where you don’t stiffen up right away!! Nudity is so freeing!!”

Natagiri 8-*dan*’s ultimate goal is to advance his King to my territory, *nyugoku*.

Paths for his King to escape open wider by destroying each piece of my defense. Of course, I can read the path he is building to my end of the board But halting the King’s advance is impossible.

“Yet you continue to insist on playing that heavy, hard *yagura*?! Oh, Future Meijin?!”

“I love what I love——”

Though teetering on the edge of oblivion, I counter with a question.

Not a tactic or a taunt. I'm genuinely curious.

"What is wrong with that?"

"Those who holler those words on the board come in two types," says Natagiri 8-*dan* at the top of his lungs while extending two fingers. "Those who hide behind the word *love* and have given up on ever reaching the top! And! The prodigies whose natural born talent allows them the freedom to do what they wish on the board! As I do not have that kind of talent, I have no choice but to become strong despite that disadvantage! Even if that means being ridiculed with *monkey see, monkey do!!*"

The Icarus who challenged the god by trying to overcome lack of talent with sheer effort pinches a piece between those two fingers and drives it onto the board directly in front of my King.

The aggressor's forces have been obliterated and now the King is in check.

"If you think you are a prodigy, go ahead. Try to stop my King's march."

A prodigy? Myself?

I know that I am not far better than anyone else.

I began my journey further behind the starting line than any other. Had Master not taken me under her wing, the professional ranks would have remained but an unobtainable dream.

I am not a dexterous individual. I am incapable of dramatic aerial battles that the Aggressive Archangel can achieve. I do not have the talent to function as both a Shogi player and a journalist like Machi the Tormentor, nor do I have the ability to ignite a revolution like the Demon King of the West. Becoming an All-Rounder like the god of Meijin is out of the question

It is not that I only play *yagura*. *Yagura* is all that I can play.

Anxiety has hounded me from the moment my ascension to A League was decided. Nightmares of going winless and demoting after my first season occurred whenever I managed to fall asleep and robbed me of its sweet solace many nights.

Thus, I spent those late-night hours lining up match records.

Specifically, records left behind by the Eternal Meijins of each era. I built and rebuilt each of the *Yagura* Castles the gods built for themselves.

All of this was in hopes that strategies lost to time would reappear in the modern era.

If I were asked if I felt stronger due to these efforts, I would have no choice but to answer that I was unsure.

“I love the *yagura*.”

Even so, my sole option is to meet this new challenge head on. All so that I may become Meijin.

“That’s why—I will defeat you, Jin Natagiri!!”

“Give me your best shot!”

The special arena is ablaze.

The first to exhaust his waiting time, Natagiri 8-*dan* bears the burden of finding the correct move within the span of one minute. A single mistake will result in his instant demise. Yet I cannot help but admire my adversary’s physical endurance and intense concentration even as the clock continues to advance deeper into the twilight hours.

Those finely toned, interlocking muscles make it all too easy to envision the harsh grind that Natagiri 8-*dan* undergoes on a daily basis. The fruit of his labor shines through in his physique, much like a flawless *yagura*?

However—I cannot afford to lose!

“Burning!” Our voices echo in unison!

I shed layer after layer of clothing in an effort to stave off the fatigue and drowsiness attempting to bog me down. Only when I reach to dispose of yet another layer do I realize that I too have become naked from the waist up.

Natagiri 8-*dan* pays homage.

“What a sharp build you have! Even your inner shirt accentuates your allure Very well! I acknowledge that you have the bare minimum requirements to fight in A League!”

“A true knight strives for beauty even where it goes unseen! That is my Master’s teaching!”



My white suits and capes are all in homage to my beloved Master.

Her circumstances demanded that she adorn particular clothing, but in my case, they are intended to lift my spirits and to hide my flaws. But of course, others would see them as antics.

“Kannabe-*sensei*, one-minute Shogi begins now

The match recorder, looking as out of place as someone who wore a business suit to the poolside get-together, cautiously informs me with an awkward stare.

“Acknowledged!!”

My defenses, my clothing and even my waiting time.

With all the protection I have been afforded nothing more than a memory, I have no choice but to find a way to stop the enemy King’s advance.

If there is but the glint of hope remaining, it’s!!

“Behold my *steed*——”

Mere seconds remain as I reach for my Promoted Bishop.

“Upon it’s back rides Death!!”

Sliding *it* diagonally, I initiate a check path from behind the enemy King!

“Discarding your Horse? Ha-ha! The pressure is getting to be a little too much for you, isn’t it?!”

Natagiri 8-*dan* slays my Horse with a Gold. Unfazed, I continue my assault on his King.

Six checks in instantaneous succession.

“I already told you once that speed is what’s important now! All your attack from the rear is doing is boosting my speed! Didn’t your Master teach you the true meaning of *Cut off the King’s escape*? You have to knock it back!!”

She did, naturally. Hearing that phrase again is rather nostalgic.

Memories erupt at a blazing speed all while under the pressure of one-minute Shogi. One of the utmost importance comes to the forefront.

Why it was that I began playing *Yagura* Castles in the first place

Because playing *yagura* brought joy to the one I love.

“You played wonderful Shogi.”

Because I saw her smile with those words. Beholding it was even sweeter than victory in the Sub League and League Matches.

I believed that those who play strong *yagura* hold the key to her heart.

Just as Kiyotaki-sensei did in a bygone era.

Once I shared the board with him in a League Match, once I suffered a humiliating defeat, I realized that I was missing something vitally important when it came to playing *yagura*.

Which was—a strong heart.

A cool head and a strong heart that blazed with confidence were invaluable when it came to surviving long, drawn-out matches.

Thus, I sought to strengthen my heart.

It was no easy challenge. Even within this dystopia where artificial ratings have seized control over humanity, software could never calculate the strength of the heart.

Only one possible method to test



my progress came to mind.

Of all the players I know, I had to face the one with the strongest heart.

If I could defeat him in battle using a *yagura*——!!

“I’m all the way in. ≡”

It has penetrated the very back of my territory, Natagiri 8-*dan*’s King.

And, for the sixth consecutive time, my check has been broken.

“..... Strong!” I mutter through clenched teeth.

Because this person has just pulled off a miracle akin to safely running from one edge of a battlefield crisscrossed with bullets and dotted with landmines to the other while in the nude.

Not to mention that he did it so soon after four consecutive losses to the Meijin, when anyone’s heart would be in shambles!

“Now! All that’s left is for me to put you in checkmate.”

Just as I had put him through a rush of checks moments prior, Natagiri 8-*dan* returns the gesture by unleashing a rush of his own.

All while in *nyugoku*, the safest possible location for his King on the board.

He intends to deliver the final blow to my vulnerable King now that my defenses are in ruins.

“Come!!”

I parry and evade the onslaught that started with a Knight by the slimmest of margins.

First the Knight, then a Pawn, a Gold and then a Silver each brandish their blades at my King’s throat, yet I still press forward. That is where my last hope for victory lies.

“Ah-ah-ah! I won’t let you escape out the top.”

Natagiri 8-*dan* puts the advance for checkmate on hold and returns his focus to his own territory.

“He-he, no need to sweat it at home, is there? I can concentrate on ending this. Pinning down that King of yours is all that matters now”

Venomous snakes do not feel pressure.

Rather than forcing the kill, he has elected to tear out my remaining strength on the board by the roots.

Which means, of course, he is most concerned about my King reaching deep into his territory for a double *nyugoku*.

“But don’t go thinking you’d have a chance even if your King happens to make it all the way over to my territory!”

Natagiri 8-*dan* eyes my piece stand.

“You’ve lost all your big pieces trying to put me in check! See for yourself! All you have are Golds, Silvers and Knights! They’re not nearly enough——”

That tongue clicking away like a well-oiled machine comes to a sudden stop.

“..... Golds and Silvers? On the piece stand D-Don’t tell me?!”

“I didn’t read *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*.”

I didn’t think it was necessary.

“Reason being that my muscles also learned that Shogi.”

That Shogi fascinated me since the day we first met.

The Elementary Meijin Tournament, the encounter that changed my life.

There was an odd strength within him. Two years my junior, his Shogi shown brighter than anyone.

Now I understand the origin of that shine.

It’s the same that I now bring to bear on the board—the shine known as courage!

“Haaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Check!

Check! Check! Check! Check!

Check!! Check!! Check!! Check!! Check!! Check!!

“A-Are you trying to checkmate my King when it’s already reached the back row of your territory?! Is that why you threw away your big pieces in favor

of stocking new pieces?!”

With unsteady hands, Natagiri 8-*dan* finally realizes my end-game while his King twists and bends for its very life.

“I-Is this The Future Meijin’s Shogi?!”

“That is not my name.”

At the end of a 13-check sequence.

I bring it to bear! My silver blade!!

“Master has bestowed me with the name——Silver Chevalier God Cauldron!!”

Raising the final piece on my stand, a Silver on high, I slap it down to the echoes of a victory fanfare.

A 27-move checkmate.

The defending King, that had arrived at the deepest row of offensive territory, was escorted all the way back to starting position and finally impaled by that 27th sword.

“.....”

With nowhere left to run, Natagiri 8-*dan* observes his nude, completely exposed King until five seconds remain on the clock.

“That’s Checkmate.”

Mere whispers, but the white flag of surrender.

It was a battle to the very, very end. This is proof of how this person committed every fiber of his being to today’s Shogi.

His voice shaking in anguish, last season’s Meijin challenger poses a question.

“..... When, did you notice it? This victory sequence

“When I withdrew my steed to initiate the check path.”

“Ah!!”

The truth dawns on Natagiri 8-*dan* with those words.

“Now I see. You *tossed your big pieces to speed me up*, didn’t you? You *wanted my King to arrive*!”

Halting the *nyugoku* was impossible.

However, pressuring it from behind to alter its path and speed was not.

This sequence was not of my own design.

I saw it once before, against the Meijin in the Ryuo League Challenger Match.

After the match was reset following a Repetition Draw, I employed a new version of the Snow Roof formation created by a computer. It was hence destroyed by the Meijin’s hand with this very method, from a *yagura*.

“..... I had not read the sequence to the very end, however.”

“But your gut told you where your fingers needed to go. That sure sounds like a difference in talent to me.”

“.....”

“Can I trouble you for one more answer?”

Natagiri 8-*dan*’s visage rises from the remainder of our battlefield to make eye contact.

“If, for whatever reason, you realize that you could never become Meijin playing *yagura* Would you still persist?”

“I had doubts. Up until the middle of this match, I wavered”

Putting on airs at this point serves no meaning, so I admit to my own weakness.

“Those doubts were silenced just now.”

When the pressures of one-minute Shogi mounted, and I slid my steed into action.

My mind was filled with her smile.

It was an epiphany. I play *yagura* not to claim the Meijin title, but——

“..... You have my gratitude.”

“Oh?”

I lower my head to Natagiri 8-*dan* as he looks on in confusion.

“My Master informed me. At the Player’s Meeting in which the topic of bestowing Women’s League players full membership status was on the docket, it was you who spoke——”

In an era when Natagiri 8-*dan* was still a greenhorn.

As many veteran players glared at my Master with vile loathing, it was this man who stood up with a suave smile and said: “*Miss Shakando is a stronger player than half of us here, including me. Does her having a male apprentice make things, shall we say, too inconvenient for you?*”

This is why *I wished to face this man in battle.*

Many a player has displayed a strong heart on the board.

However, those who have done so off the board are incredibly scarce.

“You were the one and only player to acknowledge my Master within Kanto from the very beginning.”

“..... Refuting that would also mean refuting myself. After all, I’ve lost all three of my matches against Ms. Shakando.”

He has become accustomed to losing.

However, he is not so weak as to deny those losses.

“That being said, I am regretting speaking up right now. If I kept my seat back then, I’d be on the fast track to challenge the Meijin again this season!” remarks Natagiri 8-*dan* with a grin.

Teetering on the brink of exhaustion, fumbling for the last strands of consciousness I thought I heard a voice.

“*You played wonderful Shogi.*”

So saying, a gentle hand strokes my hair.

PRACTICE RUN

The review session is over. Since the last train is long gone and taxi companies have called it a night, we decide to walk over to Yoyogi and find a restaurant that would let us stay until morning.

“I know just the place,” says Mr. Natagiri after changing from his kimono (not that there was much changing that needed to be done) into a suit that Ms. Rokuroba brought for him because she thought he would *definitely need it*.

“Let me show you where I used to go on the *longest day*! We can all enjoy the nightlife!”

“I shall accompany you.”

Ayumu’d been walking around listlessly until a giddy Mr. Natagiri takes his hand and pulls him to the front of the group. Ayumu being Ayumu, it seems like spending 16 hours in the same room with Mr. Natagiri made them feel comfortable around each other. It’s the magic of Placement Matches

By the way, *the longest day in the Shogi world* is the final day of A League Placement Matches. Since commentators and analysts don’t finish up until about two or three in the morning, it’s become tradition for people in the Shogi world to gather in bars or old-style restaurants in Yoyogi on that day every year.

“Oh, no, no, no! I’ll get a room at the association, so count me out!”

As for Ryou and Machi, they’re giving a reluctant Ms. Rokuroba an invitation to come with us. She’s not so much *reluctant* as *refusing*, but

“What’s the problem, eh? Ya shacked up with Natagiri the whole time during the Meijin Title Match, didn’t ya? So, how far did ya get? Spill it!”

“Seconded. It’s about time we partook in some girl talk.”

“Girl talk? With you two, it’s interrogation!!”

Ms. Rokuroba’s shoulders sink in resigned defeat as two Women’s League Title Holders have a stranglehold on both her arms.

“..... ’Sides, he is going back to the Shogi à la mode life starting tomorrow

anyway. More Shogi than he's had since way before he was in the Meijin Title Match

There're tons of things I also want to ask Mr. Natagiri and Ms. Rokuroba, so I am really happy I get a chance to eat with them tonight. Ask what? No comment.

"Yaichi? Why are you lagging?"

I'm a few paces behind the group and Machi tries to get me to keep up.

"Oh, I need to make a phone call. Go on ahead and I'll catch up."

"You better. You're one of the sponsors and don't you forget it."

"Yeah, yeah"

There's an unwritten rule in the Shogi world that the winner and the highest ranking player foot the bill. Considering who's here tonight, that would be Ayumu and I. In other words, I spent the last 16 hours worrying about my best friend and now I've got to pay money. Not that I can complain after seeing that awesome match, though!

Once everyone's voices have faded off into the distance, I take out my smartphone and make a call.

"Good evening. I trust that you saw the match?"

"..... *And what a match it was! I shall admit as much,*" answers Women's Legend Rina Shakando in a stiffer voice than usual.

It seems to me that she's trying to suppress the overwhelming joy she's feeling right now.

"However, one victory in A League still only amounts to one victory. The path to the Meijin is still yet long Will that suffice? Surely you placed this call in search of a different answer?"

"No. I thought this was good timing to set the record straight."

"What is it, young Ryuo?"

"What actually happened between Ryou and Ayumu. Their *relationship*."

"Concerning that matter——"

“It was the Sub League.”

“.....?”

“Ryou left the Women’s League to join the Sub League at 5-*kyu* in the summer of her second year of junior high school. She probably wanted to chase Ayumu and I.”

“Ah”

Ryou wrote a self-commentary article about that time in her life when she faced Machi in the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match.

It’s surprising how good she is with the pen, the passion that comes through.

“But she couldn’t win. The Sub League is a guys’ world, and everyone was desperate not to lose to her because it would be *humiliating* to lose to a girl. Ryou’s personality certainly didn’t help things. None of the other members would do practice sessions with her Except for one.”

“*You couldn’t mean—*”

“You’re exactly right. Ryou went to Ayumu and begged for versus matches. Ayumu agreed on a certain condition.”

There was no merit for him to accept her request as is. With Ayumu’s severe stance on Shogi, he needed compensation for sharing his time and skills.

“*M-My apprentice used Shogi as bait to initiate a dating relationship?*”

“No, not at all. Please have a little more faith in him Ayumu has only ever had eyes for you going way back, Shakando-*sensei*.”

“*Then what did he ask of Archangel?*”

“Practice runs.”

“*Huh?*”

Now Shakando-*sensei* is completely lost.

I explain.

The complete idiocy of my pure-hearted best friend.

“He had Ryou stand in for you so he could practice going on dates! Since it was all practice, they apparently didn’t even hold hands.”

That kind of storyline shows up in books and manga all the time. Since it's fiction, that sequence can lead to some steamy situations.

But this is Ayumu and he isn't about to change for anything.

"In his own words, Ayumu wanted to *practice interacting with the opposite gender to avoid offending the woman he cares about most* Even though she didn't have any romantic feelings for him, I don't blame Ryou for getting angry when she heard him say so."

Just to be clear, when Ryou said, they were *all over each other* and *tried many positions*, she was talking about Shogi. Ayumu always played *yagura* in versus matches against me, but he'd absolutely crush Ryou if he used it against her. That's why he used that chance to try out different strategies instead. The *putting it in places you wouldn't normally use* She was talking about his King in the corner of the board for an *anaguma*!

"..... Well, well Not in all my years have I"

Sensei sounds lost for words.

And yes, what Ayumu did was horrible. Though I'm sure he regrets it, considering how much of a straight arrow he is.

"Their versus matches ended after Ryou was demoted to 6-kyu and forced to leave the Sub League after about one year."

"..... It appears that I owe Archangel an apology. An apprentice's failings fall upon the Master's shoulders."

"I have a message from Ryou about that."

"A message?"

I take a deep breath and do my best Ryou impression as I say, "*Quit actin' like you're pullin' every dang string to make the world dance in the palm of your hand, hag! My life is mine, including my screwups! Hurry up and pass the torch, got it?! And there you have it.*"

"Wha-!!"

"I agree."

Since the Women's Legend's stunned silence continues, I add, "My older sister

apprentice has nothing but respect and gratitude for you, Shakando-sensei. Responsibility for the moves someone makes fall squarely on their own shoulders. That's how Shogi players are."

Just like the way Ayumu bared his pure soul today.

He wanted Shakando-sensei to see his true feelings.

"So please focus on yourself, Sensei. Both on playing an intense title match and on giving Ayumu's proposal some serious thought."

"....."

"I'll come ask for an answer after the final Women's Legend Title Match. I think Ayumu made his position clear in today's Shogi."

There's no response. But that's for the best. I end the phone call with a quick: *sorry to disturb you so late at night.*

Either Shakando-sensei will protect her title or Ai Hinatsuru will become the new Women's Legend.

Then will come her answer to the proposal. I have no idea how this will turn out. The future holds countless possibilities All we can do is walk the path we believe in and face it head on.

That's Shogi after all.

"Now then! I'd better catch up."

Hoping that those two will play a match so intense that it makes today's intense, fiery A League Placement Match look like a practice run, I race down the night streets to meet up with everyone else.

▲ A FINAL BOOST

“Tsubasa, Maria. Thank you for coming to the practice session today. Help yourself to anything you like.”

“.....” (*Gulp*

In the dining hall of Tokyo’s HinaTsuru Inn.

Tsubasa Gakumeki Women’s 1-*kyu* and Maria Kannabe Sub League 4-*kyu* sit on either side of Ai Hinatsuru at the counter, their stomachs growling.

Not only had they spent many hours holed up in a *tatami* room playing Shogi until now, but Ai’s father was also whipping up some of the most delicious-looking food they had ever seen before their very eyes

“Thank you for all you do for my daughter. My wife also wanted to greet you today, but she is unfortunately a bit under the weather.”

“.....”

Ai was unsure how to take her father’s words.

If seeing her in so much pain was what caused her mother to get sick with worry, Ai couldn’t help but feel responsible.

—But she could be a little nicer

Although Akina, her mother, traveled to the venue of the first match to help her dress and decorate her hair, she left right away without waiting for the conclusion of the match.

She had taken the stance of *now is the time for self-reliance* after the second match and hadn’t even spoken to her daughter face-to-face since.

—Maybe she really wanted me to follow in her footsteps as the owner after all?

That seemed to be the only explanation for her mother’s curt demeanor.

“You are of age, isn’t that correct, Miss Gakumeki? Would you be interested in a hard drink?”

“Um Ah, y-yes”

“May I recommend this *sake* as a light appetizer before the main course? It’s a pure rice wine from Ishikawa Prefecture called *Tsuru no Sato*. This particular bottle has been aged for three years.”

“Y- Yes, please”

Once she had bowed her head enough times to thank him for the trouble of preparing it for her, Tsubasa took the glass in both hands.

Then she downed the glass of clear liquid in a single gulp. After so many fierce, drawn-out battles against Ai during their practice session, she had become extremely thirsty.

“Phew That’s goooood”

“Tsubasa. Thank you very much in advance for working the fifth match.”

“O-Oh! It’s nothing. This is an important match for you”

A mental hurdle came with working as a match recorder for a younger player, but doing so for a title match was downright painful.

The number of people willing to work as match recorders in recent years had declined for that reason. As such, an automatic system to record matches using artificial intelligence had recently entered the testing phase in the Women’s League.

Despite all that, her friend volunteering herself to work as the match recorder meant the world to Ai Hinatsuru.

“A-And There’s some...thing I want t-to say to Shakando-*sensei* Nghzzz”

“Uwhaa?! T-Tsubasa?! Did you fall asleep?! Tsubasa!”

Ai shook her friend to wake her. However, it seemed that one glass was enough to knock her out completely.

“What is it that she wants to say to Shakando-*sensei*? I’m curious”

“Venting her frustration, no doubt. To tell Master how much she suffered after being ushered into the Sub League by her hand,” said Maria.

“Do you think Tsubasa would say things like that?”

Ai curiously tilted her head as she draped a blanket over her older friend's shoulders while she slept.

“Now is not the time to discuss such things. There's a more important matter at hand.”

“Wha-? What is it?”

Barely any time passed between Ai's casual response and a yelp of disbelief.

“WHAAAT?! G-Grandpa-*sensei* and Shakando-*sensei*?!”

“Indeed. Which would indicate that your Grand Master and my elder brother are rivals in love. Ayumu has already proposed to Master.”

“He asked her to marry him?!”

“That he did. Before your Master's very eyes, he said, *Marry me once I become Meijin*. It is for that reason my elder brother has redoubled his efforts to claim that title.”

“B-But Shakando-*sensei* and God-*sensei* Their age gap”

“The soul cares not for numbers.”

“.....!!”

Maria's resolute words shook Ai to her core, to the point that she forgot to breathe.

“Marriage is two souls harmonizing as one. Things such as age have no meaning.”

“..... Aren't you surprised at all?”

“Surprised, you ask? Hardly! Not after that fool has been having visions of grandeur about taking Master as his wife after taking the Meijin title for his own for as long as one such as I can remember.”

“Uwhaaa?!”

That indicated Ayumu had romantic feelings for Rina Shakando ever since he became her apprentice.

He would've been the same age as Ai around 11 years old.

“Men cannot help but fall for women with Master's beauty, grace and Shogi prowess. Your Grand Master is a buffoon. Though my elder brother's Shogi senses leave something to be desired, even one such as I, his younger sister, must admit that his fashion sense is second to none.”

“That cape is pretty cool.”

Ai gave a strong nod.

Romance between Master and apprentice was not an irrelevant topic to her.

What kind of face would Yaichi make if she asked him for a date *if she became the Women's Legend*?

“Oh, I get it That's why God-sensei's Shogi was so incredible in that A League match”

That match had become the predominant topic within the Shogi world.

Ai remembered how her guardians in Tokyo, Jin Natagiri and Tamayo Rokuroba, had returned to the apartment in the early afternoon following that epic battle and then slept 30 hours straight.

Seeing someone devote themselves physically and mentally to such an extreme both came as a shock to Ai and made her cringe at how naïve her own approach to Shogi had been

Maria, on the other hand, had a much harsher appraisal.

“Yes, the opponent was top ranked in A League, but the match took place immediately following an utter beat down at the hands of the Meijin. Had my elder brother not been able to defeat a man in that sorry state, he would have had no chance of dethroning Meijin even if he became the challenger.”

“But the Meijin turns 50 really soon, right? God-sensei is only 20. Even if it takes a few years, he'll naturally——”

“Drakin will rise to A League after two years.”

“.....!!”

“Though vexing That Trash Ryuo is strong. Unfairly so. In terms of age, he is two years my elder brother's junior. He shall become stronger still”

“Master will

Ai could only watch in surprise as shades of terror passed over Maria’s face.

Nonetheless, Ai began to have more complex feelings than adoration for her Master who could instill fear of this degree in others.

“In order to combat that Demon King, my elder brother must tip the seven-stage Meijin battlefield into his favor. From his perspective, this season is one of his few chances to do so. If he intends to carve his name into history as an Eternal Meijin this could very well be his final opportunity.”

“Does God-*sensei*——”

“Of course, he is aware. Master as well, in reality

“?”

Ai couldn’t understand why the Sub League member her own age had fallen silent and looks over at her.

“Ai Hinatsuru.”

Maria squares her shoulders and makes direct eye contact.

“Please! I beseech you to set Master free!!”

“Huh?”

“One such as I am not telling you to seize the title for your own. More along the lines of

Maria lowers her head, bobbed hair cat ears and all, as low as she can, while searching for the correct words. The ones that would help Ai understand her request.

However, the perfect phrase never came.

“I believe that Master has been lying to herself about her own feelings. Both on the board and off it. She is too constrained by the events of the past

Her deceased Master’s obsession with the Meijin title.

Her time as the so-called Assassin.

Her past relationship with Kousuke Kiyotaki.

Her sending talented girls like Tsubasa Gakumeki into the Sub League.

Each of these chains from the past continued to prevent Rina Shakando from moving forward in a different sense than her disabled leg did.

“However she will not listen to one such as I off the board no matter what. Thus, she must be convinced on the board, yes? Don’t you agree? Don’t you?!”

“I

Ai was about to say, “I couldn’t possibly,” out of reflex.

How could someone who still didn’t know how to fight, like herself accomplish something like that?

RECORD 5

雛
鶴
あい

AI
HINATSURU

九
頭
竜
八一

YAICHI
KUZURYU

50-50

“I’ll now do the piece flip,” Tsubasa, the match recorder, says while she picks up five Pawns from *Shakando-sensei*’s side of the board. Her fingers are shaking.

I’m sitting in front of the board in the same kimono I wore for the first match.

This is my first time at this inn. There’s a big river flowing just outside the window. The surface sparkles in the sun. It gets too bright for my eyes, so I gaze out at the cliff on the opposite shore instead.

..... I’m too scared to watch Tsubasa do the piece flip.

“50-50

The words slip out of my mouth.

I never found a way to defeat *Shakando-sensei* in the end.

My brain could only come up with one strategy.

So it all comes down to this 50-50 chance. My whole plan might go up in smoke.

The one thing I do know is that I can’t win if I don’t go all in.

“Five Pawns face down.”

“Oooh!” the media people respond.

“.....”

I reach behind my head and touch the ends of my hair.

There was a 50-50 chance I would get the first move advantage, and I got it. Now I can play the strategy I have in mind.

—My gamble paid off. The two to one odds

Suddenly my body temperature rises. We still haven’t played the move, but I’ve broken a sweat.

I open my fan and swish it back and forth hard enough that I can hear the breeze.

“Azure sky beyond the clouds.”

The words that I wrote before the beginning of this series flash in front of my eyes. They came out looking really pretty, but..... That’s all. They don’t inspire me to feel anything more.

A little bit of me does regret leaving my most treasured fan in my room.

But I just can’t open it.

If I saw his handwriting now, I just know I’d lose my determination.

I cut that weakness out of my life, just like my hair.

—And now I’m finally here, strong enough to fight on the title stage

I look over at the alcove and see someone else’s handwriting.

“He-he

I can’t help but giggle. That scroll has been encouraging me since the first match.

The observer clears his throat, almost like trying to scold me, the challenger, for not understanding the magnitude of the moment.

“The time has arrived. Hinatsuru Women’s 2-*dan*, please make the first move.”

I silently bow my head and take a deep breath.

“*Wheew*———— Hm!!”

Focused, I advance the Pawn in front of my Rook.

Shakando-*sensei* makes the same move after drinking some tea.

Pieces click one by one, almost like a ritual designed to reach one particular formation.

“The latest version of the Double Wing Attack. Just as you hoped yes?” she says as if she can see right through me. “The time for tactical maneuvers is at an end. We shall collide at full force. Do not hold anything back.”

The Women’s Legend’s voice gives me goosebumps as she opens her arms wide and waits for me to make a move.

She already has the glow of a young girl——

“Come——let us play Shogi.”

“..... I’m ready when you are!!”

And so, the fifth Women’s Legend League Match starts.

The final battle of my first title series.

GRADUATION TRIP

The fifth Women's Legend League match is happening directly between east and west.

Right in the middle of Japan: Gifu!>

"Man, talk about the boonies."

Ryou doesn't hide how annoyed she is as we finally step out of Gifu Station.

"Hey! Watch what you say. There's no telling who might hear"

"Who cares? I don't know anyone this far out in the middle of nowhere."

"You guys stick out way, way too much in the countryside!!"

Every single person does a double take as a dark-haired Kyoto beauty, a delinquent (and also a beauty) and a (dashing) man in a white cape pass by. I'm such a fish out of water being the only normal-looking person in this group and our group stands out more than the golden statue of the feudal era *daimyo* Nobunaga Oda in the station square. Just what is with that anyway? All that gold is a little much

We have come to Gifu a full day behind the players and staff. Scheduling played a part in it, but the biggest reason is so no one else finds out what we're doing here.

Once we grab a taxi, I take out my smartphone and pull up the match broadcast.

"It's already started"

"Past matches in the series would indicate this one may be over quickly, as well. We must make haste," says Machi.

An old hotel called *Jurokuro* is hosting the match.

"According to the blog the building is located right along the Nagara River. It has a rich history, and you can even get on cormorant fishing boats from right inside the hotel. It seems like the players went on those boats before the opening night party yesterday."

Ryou slaps her knee and suggests, “Perfect! We sneak on to one of those boats after the match, take the hag out for a ride and we all live it up out on the ocean. How’s that sound?”

How does it sound? Like a terrible idea.

Ryou is in vacation mode, but Ayumu is the complete opposite. He hasn’t said a word since we left Tokyo. Even now, sandwiched between Ryou and I in the back seat of the taxi, he’s a nervous wreck.

“Ayumu.” I address my anxious friend. “You may have caught on because we didn’t try to stop you when you said you *wanted to go to Gifu no matter what*, but——”

“.....”

“To put it simply, I think you have a chance.”

“.....!!”

Ayumu grabs my shoulders to get me to talk faster.

“But just because there is a chance doesn’t mean it’s going to work. That’s the way relationships are. My Master and Shakando-*sensei* are living proof.”

“.....”

Sir Ayumu deflates with disappointment like a sad puppy. That was cute

“Because there is a chance, I want you to stay out of sight until the match is over. There’s no telling how Shakando-*sensei* will react if she sees you And this match is very important for my apprentice.”

“Naturally.”

Suddenly, with the strength of someone completely different, Ayumu Kannabe declares without a moment’s hesitation, “Master would never acknowledge some barbarian willing to destroy the sanctity of an arena.”

Jurokurou is right in the middle of Kawaramachi, a touristy little town at the foot of Gifu Castle. We find a sweetshop on the other side of the road and go sit at one of the tables on the second floor. Apparently, the owner of this place is a local celebrity and also one of Machi’s acquaintances.

“You have a lot of friends in high places, Machi.”

Players have a free pass to get into a match venue. However, should three title holders and an A Rank pro suddenly show up, the place would go nuts. One wrong move, and we might end up distracting the players and affecting their Shogi.

“The good news is that the commentary is taking place at a different inn that’s ten minutes away on foot. Even if someone does find us here, we won’t get volunteered to do analysis because it takes so long to get there.”

“The commotion should not become an issue in that case.”

Machi nods as she pours tea for all of us.

“Exactly. By the way——”

Indulging in a local fish-shaped pastry, I change the subject.

“I came here for two reasons. First, to see my apprentice’s title match all the way through to the end and second, to get an answer for Ayumu’s proposal.”

“I have come to assist my younger sister apprentice, who is working as a journalist for this match.”

“I am concerned for Master’s well-being,” Ayumu manages to say without looking up. “This is Master’s first sojourn in this particular lodging. As this old building shows signs of having been remodeled many times over, the substantial number of stairwells will prove difficult for her disabled leg Even if I cannot reside within the arena with her, I would at least prefer to be within range to help should a situation arise,” says Ayumu, clearly worried about Shakando-sensei’s safety.

I can tell that it means so much more to him than the answer *to his proposal right now*.

Moved by my stoic friend’s answer, I look at the last one of us.

“And? Why’re you here, Ryou?”

“Wanna die?”

Once she smacks me in the arm, she crosses those long legs of hers and answers while shifting around like there isn’t enough room for them under the

table.

“..... Yeah, I get that I’m the only one who hasn’t got a good reason for coming. There isn’t anything to do in Gifu anyway”

“So you say, O-Ryou, but you seem to frequent Kansai without any particular reason as well.”

“Shh!”

Be quiet! She’s about to say something good!

“I don’t have a reason for coming. But, you know? Coming along on a trip together for no reason at all Ain’t that what friends do?”

“.....!”

Friends.

To think I’d live to see the day I heard that word come out of Ryou’s mouth

“People have labeled us as Shogi buddies or something ever since we were the best four in the Elementary Meijin Tournament, but I think there is a bond there. ‘Cuz seriously, you guys are the only people I ever talk to outside the association building. I get a lot of hate, you know?”

“And I as well, Archangel,” says Ayumu as if trying to comfort Ryou. The thing is, though, he’s wearing a cape

But Ryou starts as she looks up at the ceiling.

“It kinda hit me during my title match against Machi. I’m sacrificing friendships all ‘cuz I play Shogi.”

“O-Ryou”

Their relationship returned to normal after Machi defended her title.

Except that was only because they both maintained the titles they already had. What if Ryou had taken Yamashiro Ouka from Machi?

The bond they had would’ve been severed forever.

“Now they’ve got that, what do you call it....? Women’s Placement Match League starting? We’re gonna be ranked whether we like it or not. Every

Women's player will be given a number. If I'm not number one, then I!"

WHAM!!

Putting the teacup she had in her hand on the *tatami* floor, Ryou squeezes out these words, "..... I don't know about you, Machi, but from where I'm sitting, fat chance we can carry on like old times once it starts up. So long as we got numbers over our heads, being buddy-buddy'll be too much for me!"

I can relate so much that it hurts.

So long as you're number one, there's no problem.

Any other number That's when pain and jealousy kick in.

Worse, it doesn't go away until the next season of Placement Matches. If you don't claim the top spot then, you have to wait another year. If not, then the next year

It's an endless cycle of burning pain that never stops.

So long as we remain competitors, anyway.

"Machi and I ain't the only ones. Trash and Ayumu're going to clash in a title match or in A League sooner or later. Like hell we can keep giving each other a helping hand like this, yeah?"

No one could tell her otherwise.

But deep down Part of me just can't go along with Ryou's logic.

Yes, Shogi is important.

Learning about Shakando-sensei's past taught me that Shogi gets in the way of everyday life for adults, too. I also learned that there are people who use Shogi as a tool to get rich or as a method to knock others down, too.

—But isn't friendship completely separate from that?

Aren't there things in this world just as important as Shogi? Can't I have them and play Shogi at the same time?

Like how Big Sis and I confirmed each other's feelings

Isn't there a smarter way to go about our lives?

After all we're not just Shogi-crazed little kids anymore.

“That’s how important Shogi is to us, yeah? One loss could have us cryin’ for days All we think about is how to beat the other guy. That’s a disease. I’ve tasted failure plenty of times, but I know this disease ain’t ever going away.”

Ryou’s words are the exact opposite of how I think.

It sounds to me like she wants to go back to what *life was like in grade school*.

“So, yeah I wanted to head out and mess around one last time, the four of us. Ayumu came up big time for me in the Sub League. This is my way of showing gratitude. If you wanna kill time ’til the match ends, I’m there.”

Ryou grins as she wraps her arms around Ayumu’s neck.

“Oh, and to throw you a cheer-up party if you get rejected!”

“..... The same,” comes Machi’s solemn voice. She’s staring into the empty cup in her hands. “This seems to resemble a graduation trip of sorts.”

For some reason, this gorgeous scenery that the four of us have never seen before starts to feel nostalgic.

WORDLESS ADVICE

“No one involved with Shogi should find you in here

“Thanks, Ayano! I owe you.”

The one who found an out-of-the-way entrance for me to get into Jurokurou is Ayano Sadatou, who arrived here yesterday to work on a Shogi article.

As for Charlette, she got too excited with this being the fifth match and got a fever. She’s at home right now. That’s adorable. I better make sure to get some nice souvenirs for her.

“Sorry about all this, though. You could be in the arena working on your article right now, but you’re here with me

“Please don’t worry! I wasn’t intending to spend this time in the arena or the break room in the first place. My plan was always to get inspiration here in the galley.”

“I was really surprised when they let us through the back door. You must be really good at getting material.”

Apparently, the staff here at the inn is really accommodating to a grade schooler looking for things to write about. They offered many photo opportunities, including the snacks and meals that are being prepared for the players in the galley. Considering how shy Ayano is, she’s really going all out!

“..... That is not the case

Ayano looks at her feet and bites her lip.

“I can’t go into the arena. Even if I do, I can’t decipher what is happening in the match So I can’t write anything

She admits that she’s barely been inside any of the arenas since the second match.

I know she was so excited about being allowed inside before the series started

“Even with your assistance understanding the first match, Kuzuryu-sensei, all I

did was line up secondhand information It made me feel like there was no point in my writing an article

“Ayano

“I can’t even tell what Ai is thinking when she’s sitting at the board anymore She’s just too far beyond me now

I agree that Ai has changed a lot since those two played against each other in the Grade Schooler Practice Group.

That includes her living address and fighting stage.

Is that how she and Ayano drifted apart? Is this the end of their friendship?

Heart twinging, I yell, “Ayano! Even so——”

“But, I have already realized it.”

Our voices overlap.

“I must observe Ai even closer because there’s so much I don’t understand. I have to take Shogi more seriously than ever before. Because if I don’t Ai will only get further and further away. And——”

Ayano’s heart never left Ai’s side.

That notebook of hers that was brand new before the first match is barely recognizable now because of the wear and tear.

“The efforts of so many people make title matches happen. I’ve come to see bringing their stories to light as my purpose for writing. Even if I’m still not good enough to analyze Shogi on my own, I can use different expressions to convey the passion of everyone working here.”

“Ayano You’ve grown up a lot

I’m tearing up.

Man, am I glad I met them every member of the Grade Schooler Practice Group.

“Let me ask you one more time. Please, please stay friends with Ai.”

“Yes! Of course, I will!”

Machi and the Sage are sure in for a surprise when they read this girl’s article.

That same Machi went in by the front door as a distraction and is waiting for Ayano in the break room. She stands out too much to stay hidden for very long. I, on the other hand, am plain and boring

“The players’ meals are nearly ready!”

With lunchtime drawing near, the galley comes to life.

“Any word on the match?!”

“The players in the break room seem to think it will end quickly——”

“That’s not enough to go on for when to start the after-party! Should we start prepping the food just to be safe?!”

“The press conference happens before that, remember?! Is the venue ready?!”

“Hey! Isn’t it about time to take the players’ lunches to their rooms?!”

“We have to take the identical dishes to the break room for the press to get pictures, right?!”

“Make sure the supplies are set and ready to clean the arena while the players are eating! Ah! And don’t you dare touch the Shogi board!!”

I’ve always been involved as a player, so I had no idea this kind of a warzone was happening behind the scenes.

Seeing all the effort that makes a title match happen with my own eyes, I can’t help but make a connection.

The staff here is doing this all for my apprentice.

“..... It’s intense back here.”

“It sure is! Turning that intensity into words is my work!”

A certain someone with even more intensity is in another room of this inn.

There’s a monitor set up in the galley with a live feed of the arena.

A girl is on screen, desperately trying to read a sequence like it’s the late-game even though it’s still before lunch time.

“Here, here, herehereherehereherehereherehere——”

Ai's unmistakable voice is coming out of the speakers.

That violent rocking she does has become a symbol of this five-match series.

“After the 5 Four Pawn Shakando-Women’s Legend played on the 66th move, the challenger has been thinking for almost twenty minutes straight.”

"It's because Ms. Shakando has purposely left a weak spot out in the open. It's like an invitation saying come and get me."

The analyst hits the open space above Ms. Shakando's King on the big board with his fist.

“This match has followed the latest trends of the Double Wing Attack. The defender, Ms. Shakando, is acting as a matador, whipping her Rook back and forth like a red flag to keep her opponent in check. It’s on the challenger to make the final decision. She does have a few options——”

"Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—————HERE!!"

After swaying so far forward that she nearly hits her forehead on the board, Ai makes a decisive move!

"Sh-She moved! Sensei, what do you make of it...?!"

"Such youth."

The pro doing commentary squints as if blinded by Ai's move and voices his support with a few short words.

One thing that all competitions have in common is the idea that the challenger should be aggressive. Ai's posturing fits that perfectly, so I don't think anyone is going to criticize her for pushing so far up the board. *Even if it results in a loss.*

"Hmm

After a quick glance at the clock, Shakando-sensei addresses the match recorder, Gakumeki Women's 1-kyu, "*Shall we adjourn for lunch? Subtract the remaining time from my own Undying Wings*"

Giving up her own waiting time to begin the lunch break early, she leaves the arena first.

The Women's Legend League allows one hour for lunch. That's pretty normal.

However, the path from the arena to the Players Rooms is surprisingly long, and this old building also has tons of staircases. Considering Shakando-*sensei*'s bum leg, I'm sure she wanted a little extra time for insurance so she doesn't have to rush.

"Well, that's what you'd normally think"

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*? Have you noticed something?"

"This is bait."

"Bait"

"Shakando-*sensei* has been spreading bait for Ai. This extra break time No, this *path to victory*."

In the first match, Ai played with a clear mind.

She happened to come across a winning sequence by chance just before the lunch break and took full advantage of it at the time.

"That's perfectly fine. There is no way Shakando-*sensei* thought Ai would push that far forward and got caught off guard because she didn't read it. That 1 Two Silver"

"I agree! That match record was one of Ai's greatest ever!"

"But she got greedy in the second match, trying to win the same way."

Racing past the early and mid-game stages like that.

It was a one-sided offensive the whole way. She used her late-game skills to force her way to victory. Ai learned that she could win that way.

"Then came the third match. She had the first move, just like in the first match, and the juicy bait of a title was dangling right in front of her. Of course, she'd try to win the same way again."

"And That was the opening Shakando-*sensei* used against her?"

I nod with a *yeah*.

"But there's something more important to it than that. The thing that scares Shakando-*sensei* most of all *has nothing to do with the late-game*."

"Huh?"

It completely went over my head until now. Ai definitely hasn't noticed.

Why? Because we're too young.

It's really hard for us to put ourselves in our opponent's shoes, to figure out what about us truly scares someone far older than ourselves from the other side of the Shogi board.

Without figuring that detail out, the Shogi and the game strategy demonstration are over.

—If only I could give her a hint. I've come this far already!

Giving verbal assistance is forbidden, though.

I have to get it across but how?

"The challenger is still sitting at the board thinking things over even though lunchtime started"

"Most likely because she doesn't want to let a single second go to waste. Win this match, and the title will be hers."

Ai is still thinking. Her eyes are glued into enemy territory.

Ms. Gakumeki gives Ai a few awkward glances before quietly leaving the arena. Unlike the journalists who can come and go as they please, resting as much as possible during lunch is part of the match recorder's job.

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehere Whew——....."

At long last, Ai takes a deep breath. She gets up like that was her own personal signal and quickly leaves the arena.

"The challenger left her seat!"

"All right, people! Now is our chance to clean!"

The staff members who'd been on standby spring into action.

That's when it happens.

"Ah, " Ayano gasps while looking up at a monitor showing an empty arena.

"Is something wrong, Ayano?"

"I'm just surprised The cushion positions are so different."

“The cushions?”

Ayano points right at the screen.

“Shakando-*sensei*’s cushion is all the way back there, but Ai’s is so close that it’s practically brushing against the board legs. I think that shows how incredibly focused Ai has been during the match, but

It is a striking image for sure.

The aggressive, forward-leaning challenger against the calm, defending Women’s Legend.

Their standings in the Shogi world come across simply by looking at their cushions.

It’s the fact that the arena is empty right now that makes it stand out so much.

“..... Cushions? That’s it!!”

That’s when a brilliant idea hits me like a bolt of lightning.

“Yes, that would do it! Thanks, Ayano! You’re the best match journalist ever!”

“Eeep?! K-Kuzuryu-*sensei*?!”

I pick her up in a hug so quickly that my cheek knocks her glasses to the side. Who cares if the staff is watching?

It goes without saying that I can’t talk to Ai directly, and I should avoid physically going into the arena myself.

In which case, the absolute limit to what I can do is——

“Excuse me! Can I ask you a favor?”

I flag down the nearest staff member.

It’s normally their job to empty the wastebaskets and change out lukewarm drinks for cold ones, but

Betting on one little ray of hope, I make a different request.

“There’s something I’d like you to adjust. It’s not the board.”

BEYOND THE CLOUDS

I tried eating a little bit when I got back to my room, but I threw it all up in the toilet.

“..... Let’s go!”

I leave my room once I rinse out my mouth.

I was in there three minutes, maybe? But my nerves just can’t take it.

My brain doesn’t slow down unless I can see the board It’s been like this ever since the third match ended.

Now back in the arena, I slide back onto my cushion and start thinking again.

“Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehere——”

I need every second I can get.

All by myself in the arena, I look at the match record to see how much waiting time has been used. It gives me a clue how *Shakando-sensei* will use her remaining time once the match starts up again.

“Herehereherehere Yes. Uh-huh. Yes It should work”

Just hearing that in my own voice is reassuring. And I tell myself that it’s okay over and over. This match is lining up with my research. I can lead it to a point that, even if I lose, I’ll know that there was nothing else I could have done!

Tsubasa comes back into the arena. She looks surprised to see me as she takes a seat at the boardside table.

The clock ticks until it’s time to start again.

“..... Th-The lunch break has ended Please continue the match”

But it’s *Shakando-sensei*’s turn. She isn’t back yet. Lucky me. Now I get to have a few extra minutes to read the board and the confidence that comes with it.

——I can read faster and I’ve had longer to think So I’ve read deeper into the board!

Read. Read deeper and deeper.

I reach out for the answer that is waiting for me on the other side of the thick clouds. I have to believe that wide open azure blue skies are there!

How much time has passed?

There's a rustling sound on the other side of the board. Is someone else here?

“T- Time is running”

“Yes.”

Shakando-*sensei* says with a nod. Then, slowly but surely, she tilts her head to think about her next move.

10 minutes pass. And then, after 15 minutes

"..... This shall do just fine."

Finally, *Shakando-sensei* picks a Pawn off her piece stand and puts it on the board.

7 Five Pawn.

She is setting up a rapid attack to put me in check with a 7 Six Knight on her next turn.

Exactly what I thought she would do—Switch: on.

"Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere"

End the match quickly. That strategy worked in the first match.

That's the only way that I can beat Shakando-*sensei* as I am now.

—This move will take this match right into the late-game!! Be brave!!

“.....!!”

I see Tsubasa leaning over the table out of the corner of my eye. She can't believe I'm doing this. But!

—I believe in myself! In my own research and late-game skills!!

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

Here it goes!

Time to break through the clouds and watch the blue sky open up with the best move!!

Azure skies, here I come!!

And—————Huh?

“..... What?”

I I can't reach!!

My fingertips fall just short of the piece I'm trying to grab and I nearly fall off my cushion.

“Wh-Why? Why is the board so far away?! Huuuh?!”

I reach as far as I can, but my fingers can't go where I want them to. This didn't happen to me all this morning

Ah! Did someone move my cushion away from the board?! I was so focused that I didn't even notice

“But who?”

I only left the arena for a few minutes during the lunch break.

Somebody might've come into the arena to clean it while I was gone. Maybe they don't know much about Shogi and didn't think about how much shorter my arms are than *Shakando-sensei's*, so they put my cushion back into the usual spot?

"Ai. You're too close to the board."

That voice.

"..... Huh?"
It belongs to someone who shouldn't be here
So I quickly recognize where that voice is coming from.
Memories carved into the very bottom of my heart.

"You've finally started squeezing your knee to play efficient moves but sitting so close to the board is making you play just off your reactions."

"S-Sorry, Master But I'm trying so hard to find the next move that I didn't realize how close I was"

"Then just move your cushion back."

"My cushion?"

"That way you can't lean in too close even if you wanted to, right?"

"Oooh!! I get it! You're a genius, Master!!"

"I didn't come up with that."

"Hub? Then, who did?"

"My Master taught it to me. It's one of his little tricks."

"Grandpa-sensei's?"

"Yeab. And he learned it from his Master."

"Master's Master's Master"

"We're all connected, going all the way back."

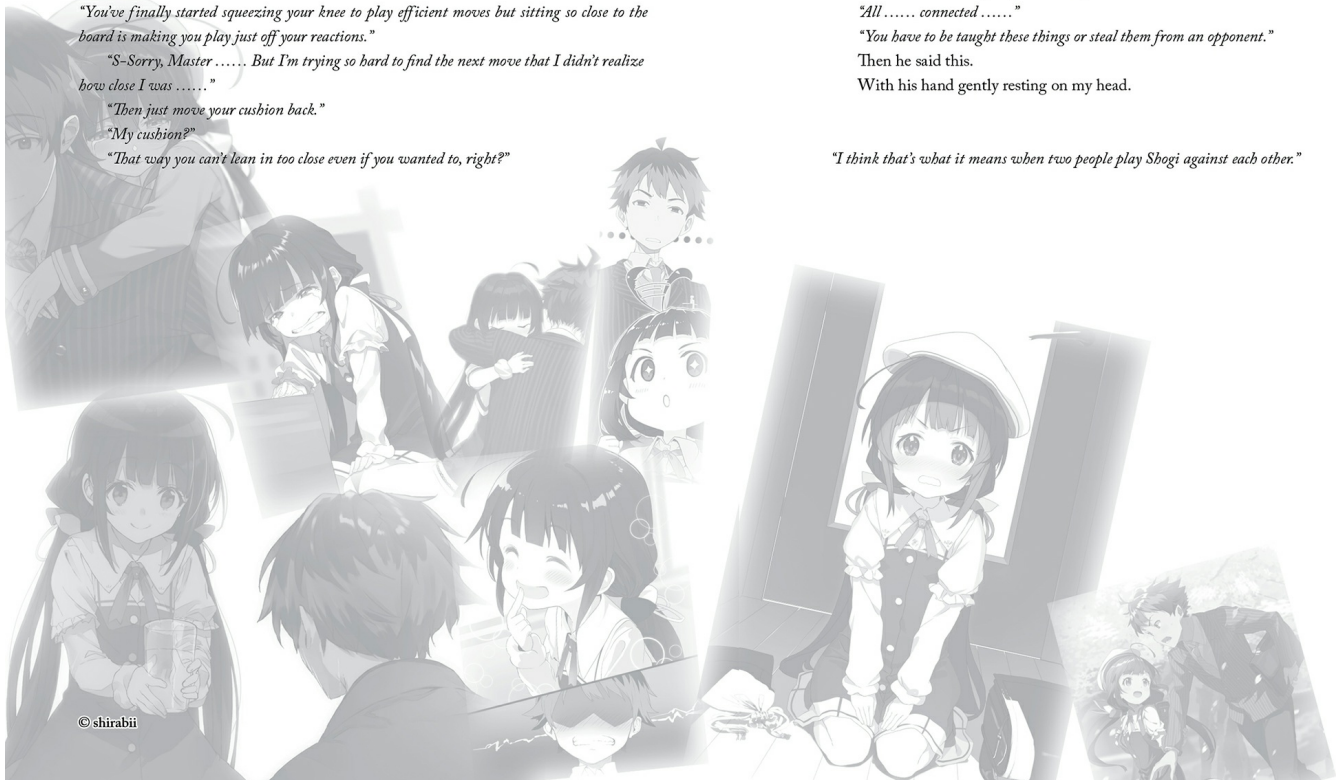
"All connected"

"You have to be taught these things or steal them from an opponent."

Then he said this.

With his hand gently resting on my head.

"I think that's what it means when two people play Shogi against each other."



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“..... Master”

So many scenes that I had forgotten come flooding back.

First one, then another and another one after that

All of them had been pushed to the very corners of my mind to make room to memorize all sorts of standards and sequences I researched. So, so many memories.

Master’s lessons about how to play gritty Kansai-style Shogi.

Sora-sensei showing me what frigidly burning determination looks like.

Keika demonstrating how effort will always come through for you in the end.

Ten-chan teaching me the agony of defeat.

Mio letting me know that it hurts to win, Ayano working toward her dreams, Charlette’s innocent smile What they were all trying to tell me. The important things.

And the scroll *he wrote* that’s been hanging in the alcove ever since the first match

— I have to remember. What is my weapon? My real weapon

There’s time.

“*Wheew*——.....”

I pull my hand away from the board and take a deep breath.

And then—

“Pardon me! I’m a little hungry, so can I ask you to order something for me?” I ask Tsubasa during my turn, but I don’t think she was expecting it.

“Huh?!”

“Some *onigiri* rice balls would be fine.”

“Oh Okay. No, right away! I just need to order some *onigiri*, right?!”

I’m not sure what she’s thinking, but Tsubasa looks straight into the camera and makes some hand gestures like rolling a rice ball into a triangular shape above her head.

“Um, Tsubasa? You don’t have to do that. There’s a phone in this room that you can use

“Oh Right. S-Sorry, Ai P-Phone, phone

“He-he!”

I don’t mean to be mean to Tsubasa, but a lot of tension is gone thanks to her.

Getting up, I gently readjust the position of my cushion and stretch my muscles and joints while I’m at it.

The *onigiri* comes in and I wolf it all down.

“*Munch, munch*! Phew

Now, with warm tea in my tummy, I sit back down at the board and finally feel relaxed.

A comfy, warm feeling spreads through me as I pick up a fresh towelette and wipe my fingers clean.

Fully determined, I take hold of my *hakama* trousers and squeeze.

So that there will be tons of wrinkles just above my knees.

“..... Okay!!”

Then I play my move.

But it’s not one to end the match as quickly as possible like the one I had in mind before.

“Huh?!”

Surprised, Tsubasa drops the pen she was using to write the match record. She had been about to write a completely different piece and position.

The move I decided to make——2 Nine Rook.

Bringing the Rook all the way back into the deepest row of my territory to extend the match, a defensive move.

“Heh

Shakando-*sensei* hadn’t made a sound until then.

“Good grief It seems my scheme was ousted because a certain someone

repositioned your cushion during the lunch recess, hm? Now I'll have to work my fingers to the bone to defeat you

That sounded like a complaint, but she said so with a giddy smile.

Which means I made the right move. There could've been a better one somewhere else, but I probably would've lost anyway if I made it.

The thing that scares *Shakando-sensei* the most.

The one and only thing that I have that can beat her. That's—

"..... Do you know what the sky is like in Kanazawa?"

"Hm?"

"It's along the north coast, so it's always cloudy and rainy. You're lucky if you get to see a blue sky"

Azure sky beyond the clouds.

Shogi players like to use that phrase a lot when signing fans and autographs.

I thought it meant exactly what it said, blue skies spreading out in every direction on the other side of the clouds. That's what everyone said it meant.

But I was wrong.

The blue sky I had in mind was just my imagination.

The path called *Shogi* isn't that easy. It's much harsher, steeper and never ends

There's a mountaintop to climb up once you get past the clouds!

"I never knew what the top is like. I just started climbing without knowing the mountain was there and thought I'd be done once I got past the clouds. So I just closed my eyes, gritted my teeth and went for it"

I couldn't have been more wrong.

A steeper and harsher path than I've ever seen keeps going beyond the clouds.

The path to the summit.

"..... That is a unique feature in a series of matches."

Shakando-*sensei* answers, “The vast majority of league matches are one and done. Not to mention the idle time that passes between them. In a title match on the other hand, where two must play many matches in a short time span alternating offense and defense, one cannot help but *see the intricacies in the other’s play style.*”

I didn’t bother looking.

Meanwhile, Shakando-*sensei* figured out my style and adjusted.

Of course It’s only natural that I couldn’t keep winning as the series progressed.

“A certain player used romantic relationships as a metaphor to describe title matches I, however, think them more akin to that of a Master and an apprentice. Though brief, the majority of our daily lives are spent together. We travel together, dine on the same food, behold the same scenery A high-ranking player’s greatest fear is that all the knowhow they have built up over the years as a player will be stolen from them over the course of that series,” says the woman who hasn’t been without a title for 29 years.

“A loss within the series is but a trifle compared to that looming fear. After all, one can simply refine their skills and reclaim the title at a later date even if they should lose it.”

High, that’s my first thought.

—Where Shakando-*sensei* and the Meijin are High enough to see through everything

The only weapon I have that can really scare the person nicknamed the Eternal Queen

That’s———how quickly I can improve.

“I want to win.”

“I want a title.”

Those feelings gave me tunnel vision. They’re what made my skies cloudy in

the first place.

I wasn't focused on Shogi.

I got so distracted by the pretty, glittering things in front of my eyes that I forgot what's really important

It's not treasure, that's for sure.

All of that was fake.

What I really need isn't a title. That's just a step in the process. Only a result.

"..... I have to get strong," I say with my eyes closed. "Because if I don't if I never get stronger the path will always be closed!!"

I repeat over and over to shut out the background noise.

"Get stronger."

Then, once I opened my eyes again, I meet Shakando-*sensei*'s gaze head-on.

"I've been wasting the perfect opportunity to get stronger all this time. These matches were my best chance to learn Shogi from you, Shakando-*sensei* Four of them are already gone"

I regret it.

Just like how I regret not learning more from Master when I had the chance.

"But I still have this match! I will overtake you this time, *Sensei*!!"

I, the challenger, yell in front of this living, breathing piece of Women's Shogi history.

—This mountain! I will conquer the summit!!

"Yes. I am the apex."

Women's Legend Rina Shakando's fingers and wrist move completely differently this time.

She shifts her Silver to 4 Two. I get the feeling this match is going to last a long time.

“Shall we begin? Ai Hinatsuru?”

“Yes!! I’m ready when you are!!”

I look up and finally see the face of the person on the summit.

It lets me know that my fight against the real actual Women’s Legend is about to begin.

“Now! Let us compete!!”

EX-BOYFRIEND, ADMIRATION, BEST FRIEND

“Wh-What an unexpected turn of events! The challenger has elected not to press forward like in the first match, but to draw out this one as much as possible!”

The professional player doing analysis is in a state of disbelief at how the match was unfolding. Ryou Tsukiyomizaka stood on a small cliff overlooking the Nagara River listening to every word.

The Women’s League player doing commentary looked confused.

“The rating shows that Shakando-Women’s Legend has an edge. Do you think Miss Hinatsuru has miscalculated?”

“Hmmm Weak moves happen all too often when trying to attack. Especially in meaningful Shogi like this.”

“Then, do you think pressure will be the reason the challenger loses if she can’t recover?”

“That may be one way to put it, yes However, I think it’s a little harsh. Expecting that kind of mental fortitude out of a girl her age sounds a bit unrealistic.”

“..... No clue.”

Ryou turned off her the device before picking up stones at her feet and roughly hurling them into the river below.

“They’ve got no clue at all! Not even close!”

Spaloosh! Spaloosh! Spaloosh!

Large splashes erupted one after another as the stones rain down, but the river calmed instantaneously as it flowed by.

“.....”

Ayumu Kannabe quietly watched her tantrum.

The two stood on the low bluffs directly opposite the venue and had a direct view of the room where the match was taking place. At the very least, they

wanted to watch over the match from afar.

“..... Hey. Tell me something and be honest.”

Ryou, bored of throwing stones, turned to ask Ayumu.

“Back when I was in the Sub League Do ya think I could’ve lasted longer if I played just to get stronger like she’s doing rather than getting caught up in victory stars?”

“I do,” Ayumu answered without missing a beat.

Ryou snorted, “You’ve grown a ton as a man, you know that?”

“In what regard?”

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka answered to her *ex-boyfriend*’s question.

“You’re better at lying.”

“Dad, are you watching?”

Keika Kiyotaki came downstairs to find her father, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* glued to the computer in the *tatami* room.

They were the first words father and daughter had exchanged in nearly a month.

“Yeah,” her father responded, but his mind was clearly somewhere else.

Keika couldn’t harbor anger toward him any longer.

Apparently, he had dauntlessly told Yaichi that he *couldn’t forget his wife*, but Seeing the way her father looked at Shakado-*sensei* on the screen, his lingering attachment was palpable.

—I know Yaichi isn’t any different, but why are men like this?

“She really is incredible, Shakando-*sensei*.”

Keika sat down next to her father for a closer look at the screen while searching her own memories.

“The first instructional match she gave me was when I was in the fourth grade. I remember it so clearly, even now After all, it was the reason why I

wanted to join the Women's League in the first place."

Someone so beautiful and strong existed in this world

She was far more appealing than any actress or singer in Keika's eyes.

The whole experience had been like a dream, but she couldn't remember anything about the instructional match itself.

The one thing that did remain in her memory was how her admiration lead her to write that letter.

A letter from her 10-year-old self to her 20-year-old self.

At the same time, however Shakando-sensei was also her reason for giving up on Shogi in the sixth grade.

—The summit was just too far away

"Wasn't it Shakando-sensei who said *no soul remembers the name of the second highest peak*? That's just how big the difference is between first and second place"

When it dawned on her that she would never be able to become like Rina Shakando, Keika quit Shogi in a heartbeat.

—I was worthless in the Shogi world if I couldn't become number one.

That same feeling caused her to sputter when she made her second attempt to join the Women's League and clouded her Shogi senses.

But.

The girl facing off against Rina Shakando on that screen at this very moment taught her a valuable lesson.

She made Keika realize her pure love for Shogi.

So long as that held true she could pursue her dream even without any special talent to set her apart.

Therefore, Keika was rooting for Ai with all her heart.

Then again a lonely twinge set in at the same time.

"Back then if this were the Shakando-sensei who gave me an instructional match, Ai wouldn't have stood a chance. I know it was a fluke, but even I

managed to beat this older version of Shakando-sensei"

"Ya got it all wrong, Keika."

"Huh?"

"Rina's the strongest and most beautiful she's ever been. I can tell jus' by lookin' that she's much stronger than when she played me in our first league match," said the elder Kiyotaki without taking his eyes off the screen, but his voice carried no traces of flattery.

In fact It sounded as though a clean-shaven, virile man in his thirties were sitting next to her——

"?! Couldn't be."

Taking a moment to rub her eyes, Keika saw that, sure enough, a bearded man in his fifties was there.

Ai Hinatsuru and Rina Shakando's match was also receiving international attention.

That included a certain country in Europe.

"The defender has this! She's a Grand Master who's had all those titles, so how could she lose?"

"Are you crazy? The offense has it in the bag! Youth and momentum are everything, no matter what sport it is!"

The Internet allowed people to watch the match live despite the considerable time difference. One group was engaged in a heated discussion.

They had gathered in front of one laptop before the crack of dawn to watch the match.

A girl about Ai's age was in the middle of them.

Board games flourished in this country due to heavy snowfall at high latitude. Specifically, analog board games that pitted two people against each other like chess were commonplace.

Which is why it was only a matter of time before the unusual board game

made of wood that the girl brought with her from an island in the East would catch on.

Congenial, she had established enough connections to organize a tournament of nearly 100 people already.

“Rather than appearances, we should discuss who has the advantage on the board instead.”

The arguments came to a halt. Whenever that slim man spoke quietly, people stopped talking to listen

He held a Grand Master rank in chess and even a few European Go titles. Despite having only picked up Shogi six months prior, he was already holding his own against high *dan*-ranked amateurs.

“The AI says the defender has the edge. From what I can tell, it’s nearly impossible for the offense to turn the tables at this point. That’s assuming the defender doesn’t make a horrible mistake But this woman named Sha-kan-doh is playing nearly every move the AI recommends. Were I in the offense’s position, I would have resigned long ago.”

His words were convincing, and everyone agreed.

With one exception——

“The little girl will win.”

The young girl’s comment reignited the discussion.

She had shown enough competitive knowhow to force a draw against a Grand Master the first time she ever played chess in this country.

It was the allure of that overwhelming talent she displayed that allowed Shogi, the game she introduced, to spread so quickly.

“She never gives up no matter what the odds are and she grows faster than anyone. That’s why she’s going to win.”

“*Why do you believe in her that much, Mio?*” the group asked and she responded with a clear-cut answer.

“Why? Ai is my best friend and my biggest rival!”

GOLDEN AGE

“How is she so good with small infantry pieces?! This attack is all Pawns, so why can’t I?!”

I remember Keika telling me about this, but I’m still overwhelmed.

Pawns, they can only move forward.

Pawns, they can only move one space at a time.

Two of them can’t be in the same column, regular old Pawns.

She’s using the most limited piece in all of Shogi to hit me with wave after wave of attacks like magic. My Shogi sense gets flipped every single time.

Shakando-sensei’s King has hunkered down at 5 Two, like a queen sitting on her throne, and hasn’t budged.

Meanwhile, mine is having to dance back and forth to avoid the Pawns she keeps summoning.

“Huff! Huff! >W-Wow!!”

The more moves we make, the more sequences I’ve never seen before get thrown at me by Shakando-sensei.

I’m beyond surprised or scared at this point. To be honest, I’m in awe.

—Shakando-sensei is amazing! Shogi is amazing!!

There’s a part of me that was satisfied with the word *talent*.

Many people have used it to describe me, a girl who is challenging for a title less than three years after learning how to play Shogi.

That’s why I had the wrong idea.

Late-game skill.

Reading speed.

I thought that they were my best weapons because so many people said I was really good at them.

Part of me wants to just depend on those——

“No! Further I can take this Shogi to an even higher *place*!!”

My fingers are digging so deep into my knee that the skin might scrape off as I read the board up to my absolute limit.

——Don’t read in a straight line! Wider! In a spiral!!

Since I learned how to play Shogi using Shogi puzzles, I have a habit of reading one narrow area as deep as possible.

But Shakando-*sensei* is teaching me how wide and how deep a Shogi board really is.

Just by sticking out the edge Pawn.

Just by advancing a Lance one row.

How moving the King one square——completely changes the outcome. Shogi is so much wider!

“Nggghhhh! Kaaaahhh!!”

I have to rebuild my senses to go beyond my reading limit. That means shattering all 11 of my mental Shogi boards.

A sense of how all the pieces on the board connect and interact.

A sense of how to control the pieces on my stand.

“AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

My head screams as I force all the neurons in my brain to connect in a new pattern.

“More! More!! More, more, more, MOOORRREEE!!”

Even if I get knocked down on my way up, all I have to do is keep crawling on the ground!

Get muddy, be gritty, and keep looking up!

“Grittier! More intense!!”

I repeat those words again and again, over and over!

My mental Shogi boards and late-game skills: I was born with them.

What about all the strength I built up with my own effort?!

“Strong, gritty, Kansai Shogi!”

I have a place to return to.

It’s the place I started playing Shogi.

“There’s still no way for me to match the number of matches you’ve played, Shakando-*sensei*. But———!!”

Acknowledging that I’m still young and inexperienced is what helps me pull myself out of the mud.

All so that I can get one more second of Shogi lessons from the royalty sitting across from me.

It truly amazes me how much Shogi has been crammed into the mind of the little girl sitting before my eyes.

“..... Tenacious.”

My tongue snaps at her overwhelming resiliency. How can this girl truly be the same age as Maria?

No. This is more than simple tenacity It’s worldliness!

Ferocity escalates with every move, pieces trading hands like clockwork.

The moment when one disappears from the board, it warps to a position more beneficial to its strengths the next. Common knowledge of conventional Shogi is being rewritten as if the very laws of physics were being contorted in real time.

The pieces themselves come together with an unperceivable *density* that nullifies my advances.

——My formation is strong! It is So why can I not reach?!

I was aware of her offensive talents.

However, I was entirely unprepared for this level of defensive prowess.

A never-before-seen type of All-Rounder, one with a curious blend of sound Static Rook and overarching senses of Ranging Rook, now sits before me.

It is almost as if the Iron Clad Wall and the Worldly Maestro reside within her

—Is the style of Shogi conceivable?!

It is as though I'm bearing witness to the rejection of all 1,400 years of Shogi history.

The two separate philosophies of Static Rook and Ranging Rook have melded together within this one girl.

The senses I have honed throughout my life are of no use. A future as uncertain and unstable as the weightlessness of outer space is budding before my eyes.

"Hfff Hfff Hfff Haaaaah!"

My brain craves oxygen.

Having fought the majority of my battles at the apex, this altitude should be but a trifling matter.

—Is this girl attempting to go further beyond?!

Her strength grows with every move.

Absorbing my own techniques all the while.

—This girl Ai Hinatsuru Was she talented beyond my own measure?!

I believed she possessed great potential.

Born into a comfortable family situation, she was blessed with good health and mental calculation skills. She is what all seek in an apprentice.

However, her gifts have also resulted in *kindness*.

—I identified it fully during our first match and saw her limit.

Kindness leads to arrogance.

Arrogance leads to carelessness.

Carelessness leads to missed opportunities.

Missed opportunities lead to failure.

The difference between kindness and arrogance is paper thin. Just as the

older generation of Shogi professionals patronized the Women's League, the kind young players today have a carelessness that resembles arrogance.

My physical handicap has allowed me to see through that kindness and arrogance.

—That itself was the talent bestowed upon me by Shogi divinity.

Irony, all things considered.

My inability to escape from Shogi. Meeting battles head on being my only option. That is how my heart acquired a playing style with far fewer holes than any other.

—Naniwa's Snow White as well Much like myself, Ginko transformed a weak physical condition into an immensely powerful heart.

Being straddled with those weaknesses enabled us to break through the wall.

The highest wall in the Shogi world, that of being *women*.

The girl before me however, is playing with such light-footed agility that it is hard to believe she ever had to clear that wall to begin with. Even now, she is closing in on the apex at breakneck speed.

—Just what is this strength?! This powerful will!!

She is precisely the type of girl I had been hoping would appear.

A girl who simply wanted to learn the intricacies of Shogi to become stronger without any other mental baggage.

Now that such a perfect talent has shown her face, however I cannot help but shudder.

—If only If only I had the strength of my golden age!!

Pressure the likes of which I have never felt before scorches my veins, urging me to strengthen my formation with all haste.

It is not a sense of loss originating from my life's path being refuted.

Nor is it jealousy toward this girl who possesses talent I do not.

Nor even is it from the terror of losing the only title I have left.

It comes from my core, the belief that if our paths had crossed while I was still

in my golden age I could have become a stronger, more positive forward-leaning player than I am today.

“Fierce.”

That word creeps up on me so quickly that it escapes my mouth.

An emotion which has no name.

“Pardon me!!”

Ayano Sadatou entered the arena at the exact moment delicately balanced formations swung drastically into one player’s favor.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Ai Hinatsuru’s vigor blew as a torrent, sliding her Bishop all the way across the board and compounded it by advancing her Rook deep into enemy territory. Promoting her two big pieces gave Ai Hinatsuru the opportunity to counterattack she desperately needed.

However.

“All for naught!”

Rina Shakando summoned a golden shield onto the board and easily deflected the Rook Ai had sent to her flank. That only further deepened the disparity between the formations.

—But I have a Dragon now!

The young challenger’s eyes pulsed to life. The light blinded her *to the uphill battle she faced*.

“This Dragon will be the difference I’ll win!!”

“Not if you perish first.”

That was Rina’s opening bell to a slew of checks against the offensive King.

“?! Why is she trying to finish it now?!”

This wasn’t a mere check, but a sequence of six in succession. An ambush fueled by nearly all the battle strength Rina had accumulated on her piece stand!

“Ngggghhhh!!”

Ai’s King had been driven to the very corner of the board.

At long last, Rina returned her attention to her own territory.

“Perhaps now is time to alleviate this Dragon-shaped thorn in my side. That piece is quite troublesome. He-he.”

The Master took a short pause.

“Kh!”

The challenger dangled on the edge of the cliff, finally given a chance to secure a handhold. However, the Eternal Queen’s sharp heel stomped on those fingertips and plunged her into eternal despair.

——But I still have another Rook!!

Ai gritted her teeth and continued to endure. Placing all her remaining hopes in the one Rook still at her disposal, she crawled through that muddy ravine and began to climb once again.

After being forced all the way into the left corner of the board, Ai’s King was driven back to the right and had finally climbed up to the third column.

Rina’s King was still sitting on its throne in the fifth.

These movements were enough to know how heavily the scales were tipped.

The one factor that kept Ai’s heart intact was——the big piece clearing the way for her King.

“Here!!”

Her remaining Rook pierced through the defender’s formation and promoted into a Dragon.

Not only could this beast threaten the defender’s King from the deepest position within enemy territory, it also secured the offensive King’s escape route. Realizing that the possibility of *nyugoku* had risen dramatically breathed more life into Ai Hinatsuru.

“The Dragon King, such a nuisance”

Rina managed to contain it with the combined efforts of a Bishop and a Gold,

but Ai deftly maneuvered the Dragon along a singular path to reach the corner of the board, the safety of 1 One.

“It got away!”

“I wonder?”

Rina reached for her piece stand—and delivered a blow that turned Ai’s world on its head.

Deploying a Silver so close to the offensive King that it may as well been a hair clip, 2 Seven Silver!

“Giving up a Silver for nothing?!”

That move was a frightful one indeed.

Rina had pursued the Dragon around the board all to bring it into fruition!

“T-Take it with the King and I can’t block with a 4 Seven Dragon?! Oh no——!!”

The sequence had robbed her Dragon’s ability to protect her own territory. Now that she realized taking that Silver would be her own demise, Ai moved her King to the side to avoid the Silver altogether.

That moment was when Rina took another pause to set her sights on her own territory. Pawn in hand, she deployed it directly beside Ai’s Dragon to complete the cage.

“That should seal it.”

“Ah?!”

“I shall see to it that it remains there for the duration of this match.”

Now, Ai’s Dragon had been rendered useless and a Silver directly in front of her King had established an enemy stronghold in her territory.

The formations had become completely different from just a few moves prior.

—M-My Dragon My poor Dragon

There was no going back now.

Ai’s final ray of hope had been snuffed out.

“Agh Ah, ahh, ahhhhh”

Spirit weakened; Ai placed her right hand on the *tatami*.

Then, the Women’s Legend made her heart scream.

“May you be felled by your most beloved piece, Ai Hinatsuru.”

Rina moved a Dragon at 9 Seven, putting the offensive King in check from the opposite side of the board.

“.....!!”

All hope was lost.

An announcement from the boardside table drove Ai even further into despair.

“H-Hinatsuru-sensei One-minute Shogi begins now”

With her waiting time expired, Ai couldn’t find a moment to surrender.

However, she continued to endure despite the noose tightening around her neck. Her only hope was trapped on the other side of the board, so continuing to break through check after check merely prolonged her torture

Tsubasa faithfully recorded each of the moves until a bizarre pattern caught her so off guard that it escaped her lips.

“..... How many times have I written *taken by offensive King*?”

The longevity and endurance of Ai’s King, its gritty determination to survive was awe-inspiring to her.

However—its outlook was grim.

The defender was already in victory position. Tsubasa was certain that she would have given up in the challenger’s shoes.

Tsubasa, otherwise known as Undying Wings, was particularly skilled at turning the tables on her opponents with *nyugoku*. Thus, a glance was all she needed to discern that the offensive King’s chances of escaping into enemy territory were next to zero.

In fact, it was the defender’s King, which maintained a powerful position at 5 Two, that had a secure escape route to the opposite side of the board while

continuing the fight.

—So meticulous. Too strong

No matter how deep she read, Tsubasa couldn't find a sequence that gave Ai the victory. The plight of her younger friend weighed heavily on her heart, and she couldn't bring herself to look at the profile of Ai's face

Ayano, however, had a much more positive outlook on the situation from her seat next to Tsubasa.

"Ai! Her eyes, they're still!!"

"Her eyes?"

Tsubasa lifted her gaze from the match record and looked at Ai from the side.

The young girl's line of sight was not fixated on her own King—but on the enemy King.

Then, she plucked a Silver off her piece stand.

"..... Check?"

Setting the scene.

Or so she thought. The only purpose that Silver could serve was delaying Ai's inevitable surrender.

For the first time in 100 moves, Rina's King changed positions.

That was her signal to end the match. As if indicating that the title of Women's Legend would never fall from her overwhelmingly powerful grasp, Rina boldly used her King to capture the Silver that was deployed directly in front of it.

"Here!"

Ai immediately deployed a Bishop to put Rina's King in check for a second time.

"..... Still haven't had your fill?"

The Women's Legend's voice was rife with disappointment and annoyance.

The 210th move came and went, marking this match the longest and most intense in the league's history. The last thing Rina Shakando wished was for this



—This is the kind of move that kills people.

Rina took hold of her armrest and leaned as far forward as she physically could for a better view of the board.

“What could be the meaning behind this irregular Pawn?!”

There was only one logical conclusion: moving her King would spring a trap.

The question was whether taking the Pawn would trigger it or if running away would result in her own demise.

—Even with hours No, even days on end would not suffice for me to read this sequence properly.

It was the type of formation where a solution would come to mind randomly years after the fact, far too complex for a human brain to tackle all at once.

Rina had five minutes. Reading was not an option.

In fact, trying to do so would be her own downfall. In which case—

“I never retreat. Not from destiny or anything else.”

Rina Shakando made her choice.

Taking hold of the Knight protecting her King’s rear flank, she used it to remove the Pawn blocking the Queen’s path.

“Taken with Knight.”

Tsubasa held off a wave of nausea to write that move on the match record.

Not even a heartbeat later, Ai leaned all the way over the board and reached for a certain piece on the other side.

Her fingers clasped—the Dragon.

“Here!!”

2 Two Dragon.

The Dragon King made its return to the board by devouring the Gold that kept it at bay.

Taking that Dragon with the Pawn was a simple matter. Simple, but—

“..... Take it with the Pawn, and I lose?”

Rina trembled.

Not because she had glimpsed her own defeat.

It was due to the check path Ai had initiated on the board. It was gorgeous

“In-Incredible Not a single Pawn is necessary? How could a final formation such as this still exist after such a fierce battle?!”

The board looked as if it belonged in the Sogyoku Shogi Puzzle Anthology.

Rina Shakando was mesmerized by *the death that awaited her in 23 moves*.

“Such beauty No matter which piece I select, the outcome is inevitable. Absolute checkmate”

The possibility of 2 Two Dragon had been in the back of Rina’s mind ever since her seal was complete. She had been explicitly careful to maintain her defenses in such a way that a single Gold could never put her in checkmate for just that reason

However——

“You had already identified this check path when you deployed that Bishop at 4 Two on move 213, had you not? With your Horse at 5 Two, you realized that my King would be cornered no matter which direction it ran.”

“..... Yes, but something else had to happen first”

“Which explains the 5 Five Pawn”

Defeat had been unavoidable. No amount of best available moves was going to change that.

Thus, Ai needed to bait Rina into making a mistake. Using her opponent’s tendencies against her was the only path to victory.

She had to understand her opponent at the deepest possible level in order to deceive her——how a gamester would.

“If you had chosen anything other than your Knight to take my Pawn You would have won if you had retreated, *Sensei*.”

“Far less than a 50-50 chance. Did you not think it foolhardy to entrust your

hopes to such unfavorable odds?”

“I didn’t—,” Ai responded loud and clear as she explained why she placed her destiny on that trap.

“When forced to choose between defending and running away, you always hold your ground.”

“.....!”

Rina’s eyes shot open.

Over the course of 220 moves, Ai had come to so thoroughly understand Rina Shakando the Shogi player that she could set a trap for her at the very end. The battlefield shifted away from board theory once Ai showed Rina a move that she *would not regret even if it resulted in a loss*.

“..... Well done. That is the very essence of competition between two people.”

Indeed. Rina Shakando does not run away.

With her disabled leg, escape was never an option.

Not to mention the fact that there is no retreat path from the very highest summit.

“Allow me to impart another piece of knowledge.”

The very picture of grace in defeat, the Women’s Legend continued.

Rina Shakando had identified Ai’s habits over the course of their five-match series. Specifically, an identifying characteristic that the girl herself would not notice but others would be able to say *this is Ai Hinatsuru’s Shogi* at a glance.

That being—

“Ai Hinatsuru becomes stronger whenever a Dragon King is present on the board. And she refuses to give in.”

“.....!!”

The match was still going on, but the young challenger’s eyes were filling with tears.

The third match proved to be fateful.

Ai’s Rook had remained at 2 Nine the entire match. It had been delegated to pressuring Rina’s King in the third column and never promoted into a Dragon

However, Dragons appeared several times in this Shogi.

One of them proved to be the deciding factor in Ai’s victory

“Being satisfied with it caged away in the corner of the board was my downfall. I should have eliminated it posthaste, yes?”

Rina tapped her fist against the side of her head.

Even Ai, who was already leaking tears, couldn’t help but giggle at Rina’s girlish behavior.

“I advise you to fix your habit of constantly staring the Dragon down. Your desire to play 2 Two Dragon was laughably obvious.”

“You sure do like to collect Pawns, *Shakando-sensei!* You even have nine of them on your piece stand right now.”

“..... Numbers will never betray you. Nothing more, nothing less. It is not as though I have a fondness for the character written on the piece”

A dusting of pink appeared on Rina’s cheeks as she broke eye contact. This time, Ai couldn’t stop herself from laughing out loud.

Just then.

Rina Shakando happened to catch a glimpse of the young man standing atop the small cliff opposite the river just outside the window.

“Ahh

She squinted as if looking into a blinding light.

The setting sun had tinted the water’s surface a blazing golden orange, which momentarily cast the surroundings in a divine glow.

“I never imagined my last moment as a title holder would be so beautiful”

Then she straightened her posture and extended her right hand toward her piece stand—but just before it arrived.

“Shakando-*sensei*.”

The challenger posed a question.

“When is your golden age?”

“My golden age?”

The question put her so off guard that Rina forgot to surrender as she searched for an answer.

“I wonder? Perhaps when all Women’s Titles were in my name or it may have been the era when I thought myself invincible even against professional players as the Assassin At the very least, it has long since passed. My golden age is, in fact, ancient history.”

“.....”

“That being said, I assure you that the title you have just acquired has not lost any luster——”

“I get it now You never saw *it* because you were always facing the other way”

“*It* being?”

As the higher-ranking player, Rina had always sat in the upper seat with her back facing the arena’s alcove.

Which was why she never saw the scroll hanging there until Ai pointed it out.

“..... Ah?!”

She turned to look over her shoulder and read the words for the first time.

As well as who wrote them.

“*My golden age is tomorrow.*”

Tomorrow.

The one absentmindedly optimistic enough to see as an opportunity a word that normally struck fear in the hearts of those over the hill was—

“Kousuke’s seal I see I never once came to that realization”

Rina Shakando was at a loss for words.

The man she had admired so much that he continued to have a place in her heart, Kousuke Kiyotaki.

The Rina Shakando of not too long ago would have noticed, no doubt. Even without the seal, she would have immediately identified the writer by his penmanship alone.

It was now that she realized it was that love which had become ancient history.

“Grandpa-sensei Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan always says things like that. *I’ll be back stronger tomorrow!* or *Let yar youth shine!*”

Ai rephrased her question.

“I’m sure your golden age starts tomorrow, Shakando-sensei. Don’t you agree?”

Since Rina still couldn’t find the right words, Ai shouted.

“Someone who can play strong Shogi like that hasn’t lost a step! I defeated the strongest Rina Shakando to claim this title! My golden age starts right now!!”

The girl continued to shout like a child having a temper tantrum.

“That’s why I know for sure that you—will be even stronger and more beautiful tomorrow!!”

Her logic didn’t hold water. Ai understood that better than anyone.

Nevertheless, she continued.

Continuing was all she could do. After all, true defeat only happens when the heart breaks. That’s what the person she cared about most taught her.

“So ngh So!!”

Tears streaming down her face, Ai did her best to convey her feelings.

Her own clumsiness with the words came to vex her.

She was sure she could do a better job following through on Maria's request.

Ai wanted to pass along the *courage* she once received from Yaichi way back when.

To the> Shogi player Ai Hinatsuru—that was the summit she strived to reach.

“..... Golden age Hm”

Shifting her gaze from the scroll back to the window, Rina continued.

“To think I would one day receive motivation from Kousuke's granddaughter apprentice He-he! What bliss I have found! This is far more happiness than I ever intended to acquire”

“.....”

“That being the case Why not attempt to possess even more?”

“!”

Ai's face swung up as if shot out of a cannon. The woman who was once known as the Assassin couldn't help but smile at the sight.

“I leave the rest to you.”

“Yes! I will take over from here.”

Ai bowed her head all the way to the floor.

That was the moment a title held by the same woman for 29 consecutive years was transferred to an 11-year-old girl.

Tsubasa and Ayano could only stare as the scene unfolded before their eyes.

It seemed too peaceful, too happy for a moment that changed history.

“Ah! *S-Sensei* Here!!”

Tsubasa sprang to her feet the moment that she saw Rina collecting her things and gave her the match record.

“Thank you, Undying Wings.”

“N-No! Th-Thank you Um”

It took Tsubasa a moment to find her courage.

“..... Sh-Shakando-*sensei*, I’ve been meaning to apologize to you for the longest time for not getting any results in the Sub League

“.....”

“But, I can still be involved with the sport I love thanks to your giving me a path into the Women’s League. It’s because of you that I have friends like Ai. So——...” Tsubasa flung her head into a deep bow and said, “Thank you so much for leaving Shogi for me.”

Seeing Tsubasa remain with her head down for so long made Rina’s heart ache. It was all she could do to muster these words.

“..... I have left a deep scar on your destiny. Not only you, but many girls who I deemed to have potential

“B-But I chose this path. I could never hold a grudge against you, Shakando-*sensei*. Neither I nor Miss Sora

Ai’s shoulders twitched ever so slightly at the mention of that name.

“Thank you for everything, *Sensei* You don’t need to carry that burden anymore,” said Tsubasa as she stood back up and smiled.

It was an awkward smile that she had only regained after joining the Women’s League.

Rina looked away from that smile, but her cheeks sparkled.

She then kindly addressed Ayano, who had been respectfully quiet during their exchange.

“My apologies. Here you are, ready to write an article and I rob you of a review session. Will you forgive this rude elder of yours?”

“There’s nothing to forgive! You’ve shown me more than enough Already.”

But! Ayano was quick to add.

“I still don’t know how to put today’s match into words. Would Would you please show me lots and lots of Shogi in the future? I want to keep walking alongside you forever

“..... Why, thank you.”

Giving her a nod, the former Women’s Legend left the arena with her disabled leg in tow.

WALKING WITH AYUMU

Exiting the hotel, Rina Shakando's cane clacked as she made her way toward the river.

Her legs could barely move after sitting for so long. Even her grip on the cane was precarious after a fierce match that lasted over 200 moves.

"Kgh!"

For some reason, however, a strange power was welling up deep within her. It reminded her of her golden age. That is what allowed her to move forward.

"..... There"

Then, just as she set foot on a large bridge that spanned the river, a young man walking toward her from the other side came into view.

Rina gathered up every ounce of strength she had left and rushed forward.

—Oh? It seems I'm still able to run.

As it had been nearly two decades since she had exerted herself to this extent, Rina was out of breath right away as her heart pounded against her ribs.

Ayumu raced from the other side of the bridge.

Then, when they were only a few steps apart—Rina's legs failed her.

"Oh? Whoops."

"Master!"

Her apprentice sprang forward to catch his falling Master.

"He-he It seems my golden age is long past after all," Rina Shakando admitted as Ayumu's masculine arm supported her in place of the cane she lost at the beginning of her stumble.

Age had indeed caught up to her.

"I was felled by instant death. The mirror opposite your Placement Match Will you not laugh at your fainthearted Master's expense?"

"..... No. I had read the same sequence and believed taking that Pawn with

the Knight would lead to victory.”

“That you had? Then both of us would have been felled as one.”

Rina appeared content, even happy despite the loss.

Where should one begin reading when the formations are complex? In which move should one entrust their fate when reading deep into the board? A player’s personality was most apparent when answering these questions.

Most people would refer to that as a *gut feeling*. Some players may think of it as *sense*.

However, if it could be called *the soul*?

Their souls were quite similar indeed.

“..... I will become Meijin. A Meijin renowned enough to be carved into the annals of history,” said Ayumu in much the same way as his marriage proposal.

This time, however, he had more to say.

“I also recognize the time will come when the title will be wrestled from my grasp. Status and titles do not last forever.”

“Indeed, they do not. I have proven thusly just now.”

“When that time arrives, I wish for you to be at my side just like this. Meijin or no, I want for our paths in life to continue supporting one another until the end of time.”

Marry me once I become Meijin.

Those words had brought Rina anger rather than joy when she first heard them. What if you never become Meijin? What happens when you are no longer Meijin? Do you expect me to discard you once that happens?

The fact that she became angry in that moment made the answer all too clear.

What she lacked was courage

She acquired that courage just now in place of the title she lost.

“My beloved Master.”

Rather than kneeling, Ayumu Kannabe continued to support his Master’s side while speaking these words.

“Will you walk at my side? Forever as one?”

“.....”

Rina Shakando didn't answer.

Moments passed in silence. Then, her gaze fixed on the setting sun, she said, “..... These past five matches have made it painfully apparent that traveling on my own is far too demanding. It seems that a superior apprentice of mine has done so much for me over the years that I have become unable to do anything by myself.”

“.....?”

“Said apprentice came to me with that proposal on the eve of a title match. Can you understand the hardship? How much time I spent debating? Hardly any energy was left for Shogi.”

“Y-You have my deepest apologies”

“Do you still not understand? It struck me after hearing Archangel's account, but you are indeed the Meijin of obstinance!”

The words came to Rina Shankando in that moment.

Her cheeks puffed out like those of a young maiden, tinted red by the setting sun.

“I do not wish to let you go.”

Let us walk together, my dear knight—



■ ANOTHER'S MATCH RECORD

The break room is up in arms.

“Well?! What happened?! Is she checkmated or not?! Which is it?!”

“It looks like they’re talking!! It’s Women’s Legend Rina Shakando’s turn!! Has she surrendered?!”

“The timer is still running! She must not have surrendered yet!!”

“The software showed them as dead even Wait! Th-The defender has the lead?!”

“Now it’s saying the challenger is in victory position!! Is the computer broken?!”

Filling a cup with water in the galley, I head to the arena all by myself.

All those voices spill out from behind the breakroom door as I pass by.

The ever-shifting software rating has them on the edge of their seats.

Apparently, people who have gotten too used to analyzing matches with software can’t figure out a formation like that on their own.

Yes, it’s very complex. No match has ever ended like this in Shogi history, and the conclusion is buried under so many different possible sequences that it blinds the software.

The only people who could find it at this point in time are me and——

“Great job, Ai.”

My grip on the cup tightens.

Ai should have found the answer the checkmate by now. The hatchling has shaken off the last bits of shell from her tail and truly taken flight.

“You’ve gotten so strong Really”

All alone, I walk down the hallway that leads to the arena.

With that single cup of water in my hand, the heavy silence that dominates that sacred ground becomes denser the closer I get.

I know for a fact that she is going to need this.

After reading all the way to checkmate at the end of a title match your throat turns into a desert.

—I'll give her this water to start mending bridges.

She's already a great Shogi player in her own right. She claimed a title while still in sixth grade.

I fulfilled the promise I made to her parents, that she would have a title *before graduating junior high*, with four years to spare.

Now that promise has been kept, Ai can be a Women's League player for the rest of her life.

It's official We'll be Master and apprentice forever.

—Which means we should get back on good terms, the sooner the better.

We can talk about whether she wants to move back in with me or to stay here in Tokyo after the hatchet has been buried instead .

"I mean, she could move in with Ai Yashajin and I Well, Akira is there too, so there'd be four of us rather than three. There's already an open room, so we could all be roommates."

I take a seat on a sofa that happens to be in the hallway and plan out what to do from here.

There's no need to go into the arena.

I'll wait for Ai right here, just like she waited for me with a cup of water way back when. That way, I know our paths will cross again for sure, just like they did that one day.

I've not only read to the checkmate, but the future that lies beyond.

"Oh, that's right. What about the other Ai?"

There are a few minutes left in Ai Hinatsuru's match, so now's a good time to see how Ai Yashajin's match turned out.

"Her match should also be about over by now"

Placing the cup of water on a side table next to the sofa, I take out my

smartphone and pull up the match record online.

*[Final Match] Queen Title Match, Formation: Unknown, Karen Noburyou 3-dan
– Ai Yashajin Women’s 2-dan*

Yep, the match is already over.

It got to a full set, the piece flip was carried out and she became the defender. But, knowing how thorough Ai is about strategizing, she probably wouldn’t care.

What I’m really curious about is——

“..... Formation: Unknown?”

Ai has a huge bag of tricks.

She really likes ambushes like Bishop Head Pawn, butwould she really play that with everything on the line?

“She started out with Ranging Rook and switched over to Static Rook in the match when she forced a Repetition Draw against Big Sis, but that was after a reset. Besides, Bishop Head Pawn is the kind of ambush you can only use once. I highly doubt she would try it again?”

The instant the match record pops up.

It draws me in like a magnet.

In a heartbeat.

“..... Wha?”

Here, in front of my eyes, is Shogi I’ve never seen before.

The almost whimsical formation that doesn’t have a name makes the pieces fit together in a completely new way, and it hits me like a ton of bricks. The rest of the world gets shut out as my train of thought plunges into that match record.

“What is this? I I don’t”

If I had to call it anything, yes.

Future Shogi.

This match record is like a time machine that came from the distant future, not just a few decades from now. It ensnares my attention.

I couldn't care less who won at this point.

Before I knew it, I'd pulled up the match records for all of Ai's title matches.

The first match only showed fragments of the future in Ai's Shogi. Maybe a few years from now The second match was clearly from a new era. Even though a few sequences look familiar, no player had ever seen these before. That includes me.

Ai found them all by herself Impossible.

Prodigies can skip a step or two here and there, but not whole flights of stairs. The idea that one person could advance the clock this far all on their own is crazy.

But the fact remains that Ai Yashajin is doing it.

If she can play Shogi like this——

“..... I have to go”

Smartphone still in my hand, I get up from the sofa.

I set my sights on *there* and start walking.

Completely forgetting about the cup of water that isn't in my hand anymore.

A CUP OF WATER

“..... What a relief!”

I think the media people misunderstood what I just muttered.

“Claiming your first title is a big weight off your shoulders, isn’t it?!”

“The first comment after the end of the longest match in Women’s Legend League history, *what a relief!* It’s perfect!”

“Ah, no Um”

Shakando-*sensei* and God-*sensei* are walking hand in hand on the bridge outside the window. The words came out before I realized it

Nobody but me is looking outside the window, though. No one else seems to have noticed that Shakando-*sensei* left the arena either

Everybody in here is waiting for what I’ll say next.

The world changed. But I’m still exactly the same.

“Please save your questions for the press conference!”

Someone from the association steps inside to shoo everyone away and I’m finally free from the questions and cameras.

Tsubasa, the match recorder, and I are the only ones left in the arena.

That’s when I realize my throat is bone dry. My first thought is to look for my water pitcher and cup next to the board, but they’re both empty. I remember there being so much there before, so I can’t believe I drank every single drop already.

But I’m still thirsty. From head to toe

“Ai A-Are you okay? Can I bring you anything?”

“..... Thanks for offering, Tsubasa! I’m fine now.”

I answer my friend with a big smile. I’m lying, but I had a thought.

—I can’t let anyone see me look weak anymore.

Putting on the armor called a title that *Shakando-sensei* wore all this time means I'll have to live like this from now on. No one specifically told me that. I figured it out myself while playing Shogi. So I keep smiling and make a request.

"Can I stay here a little longer by myself?"

"S-Sure I-I'll see myself out"

With that, Tsubasa collects her things and stands up to leave.

Just before going out the door, she bows her head really low and tells me, "Please excuse me *Hinatsuru-Women's Legend*."

The air temperature in the room drops all at once now that everyone else is gone.

It's comfy, like a cool breeze

"*Wheeeeeeeew*——....."

Now that I've had a deep breath, I have to do one final thing. A title holder's work.

I reach under the board to get the piece box, take my beautiful victory formation apart and put all the pieces neatly into the box.

Once I put the box into a decorative bag and pull the drawstring tight, I place it right in the middle of the board and——

"..... Thank you very much."

Show my gratitude and take another deep breath.

I used everything I had in that match. Now that my hollow body has some fresh air in it, I climb to my feet.

Unfortunately, I'm not a balloon and still feel heavy.

"*Haaaah Haaaah Haaah Aghhh?!"*

My *hakama* trousers are a mess, and also long enough that I trip over the hem and tumble to the floor.

I must look like a little ball rolling down the hallway.

——I have to stand up, now!!

No one can see me like this! I have to look and act like a strong title holder!

—I have to always act like nothing fazes me, like *Shakando-sensei*!!

But my muscles just won't listen.

In my head, I know exactly what I have to do but my feeble legs won't do what I say.

"Nghh Khh Ahhh!!"

I just claimed a title, but here I am crawling on the floor. It's so funny and pitiful to think about I could cry.

"What's that?"

I look up and see a sofa further down the hallway.

More accurately—the side table next to it.

My eyes immediately locked onto what's on top of that table And my heart overflows.

One cup of water.

I knew right away. Who left it there and who was here.

"M- Mast-er?"

Next thing I know, I'm up on my feet and holding the cup in my hands.

"Master Master!!"

When he fell in the hallway just like I did, I gave him a cup of water just like this.

Then he said this to me.

"I'll do whatever you want if I win the title."

That's the message that Master is sending me with this water.

That he'll always, always be watching over me. That he'll forgive me for my selfishness.

And him not being here is his way of encouraging me to press forward

because he'll always be there to protect me.

It's the best possible reward I could've imagined for winning the title.

"Thank you so much Master!!"

Tears come pouring out.

Enough of them roll down my cheek to make the cup overflow. I just keep crying in the corner of the dim hallway with a glass cup in my hands.

The fight isn't over.

Actually, this is when the fight I chose for myself really begins. I'm finally on the starting line.

There's no going back now that I have a title.

Even sitting down, my knees tremble.

"..... But I have to."

I whisper to myself and squeeze the cup even harder.

Water left in the bottom ripples around.

That's because my hands are shaking.

Shakando-*sensei* in her golden age I try telling myself that I could've beaten her, the Assassin, but I still can't stop shaking.

"I I need to get even stronger. The path will open for me if I'm strong enough."

I repeat, over and over: Get stronger. Get stronger, Ai Hinatsuru. Now isn't the time to be trembling!

I gulp down rest of the water and get back on my feet.

This dim hallway keeps going on forever.

A path has opened for me because I have a title.

Being naïve or letting my guard down for even a moment will surely end in disaster. It's the harshest battleground on the planet Earth.

—But, just for right now I can open up a little, right?

I press the empty cup against my lips and quietly whisper.

To make sure that this feeling doesn't get washed away with all the tears.

"I love you Master"



THE ORACLE FROM 100 YEARS IN THE FUTURE

A girl stands up on top of that hill.

“Oh? Come to see me?”

The girl dressed in black must have heard my footsteps because she stands up to greet me before I have a chance to say hello.

This small hill overlooks the city of Kobe.

I’ve been here enough times to know that it’s always windy.

But right here and now The girl standing in front of the black gravestone seems different from the one I know

“..... I came to present the match record,” I say to the girl and the gravestone behind her.

That’s where her parents were put to rest.

“Since you were so insistent that I don’t watch your matches, I only had a look at all the match records after the series was over and was planning to show them to your parents. So I didn’t see any of your double title series match records until——”

“After Ai Hinatsuru’s Shogi finished, yes?”

The girl hits the nail right on the head like she saw it herself.

But her tone makes it sound like it happened in some far off, distant place.

“And you abandoned her to come here as soon as you saw my Shogi. You dropped everything Right? Yaichi.”

“How?”

How are you always right about everything? I nearly ask but swallow my words.

Considering who she is, there’s no need to ask.

It’s not what she’s seeing or hasn’t seen She wouldn’t have any problem predicting exactly what’s going to happen next. That is, if my absurd theory is

correct.

“..... Are you?”

I look that girl square in the eyes and ask.

“Are you really Ai Yashajin?”

“Aha.”

Her face brightens with glee.

Then she clutches her ribs and erupts with laughter.

"AAA/

She laughs so hard that tears are rolling.

"I knew you would, Master! I knew that you of all people would notice!"

“ ”
.....

“Everyone else makes assumptions based on my looks. But you, you only *look at my Shogi*. That’s why I knew Though, I do wish you would pay more attention to my appearance!”

“..... Does this have anything to do with the new company you used Akira to start?”

Sure of myself, I lead with my theory.

“Rather than running software on personal computers, you’re using servers designed for large enterprises to run Shogi software Isn’t that right?”

Ai wipes the tears out of the corners of her eyes before taking my hand.

“Come, Yaichi.”

She takes me by my wrist to the bottom of the hill.

TICKET

An inn that stood in a quiet corner of Tokyo had become the epicenter of attention that day.

Passersby could only gawk and wonder what could possibly be taking place inside, and all of them doubted their ears when they heard it was a Shogi event.

Women's Legend Conferring Ceremony.

The Shogi Association had rented out the entire facility to host some 3,000 people for this event.

An event on this scale was unprecedented for the Shogi world.

Who would've guessed that the star of the event was an 11-year-old girl still in her sixth year of elementary school?

"There Okay! That should do it, right?"

Ai checked to see if her *obi* sash was tied correctly at the back by looking over her shoulder in the mirror.

It was double folded and much bigger than usual.

As the daughter of the woman who owns the prestigious HinaTsuru Inn, Ai's skill at wearing traditional Japanese clothing had been instilled to perfection.

"If I remember right, the folds need to be bigger on formal occasions. But they'll look childish if they're too big"

There was a technique to putting on a kimono, and Ai's skills had been honed to a higher level during the series of title matches.

However, that was more akin to equipping battle armor. More formal occasions such as this conferring ceremony called for a different, livelier style altogether.

"Mnnngh! Why couldn't Mom come help me today?!"

She had been told *now is the time to be independent* during the title matches,

but what was the problem with being spoiled a little before her ceremony? Ai pouted, her cheeks puffed out in frustration.

There was no need for *hakama* trousers today.

Since she wouldn't be sitting on her ankles either, Ai had tied her *obi* a little bit tighter than usual.

"I put on a little weight during the title matches, didn't I? Some people get thinner, so why do I have to be the one who gets fat?"

She cursed her own body type because she heard both Ginko and Ai Yashajin had lost weight

"Th-This isn't my fault! It's because Mom and Daddy's genes were——"

"*Is now a good time, Ai?*" asked her father from outside the door.

"It's open!"

She answered loudly without taking her eyes off the mirror.

"Hey, Daddy! Why didn't Mom come to help me put on my kimono today?"

The final touches on decorations in her hair complete, Ai turned around to see——

Her mind went blank as soon as *it came into view*.

"M-Mom is that?"

Thinking back on it now, there were signs.

The fact that her mother was wearing Western-style clothing when she came to the first match to help her put on her kimono. The fact that she always looked uncomfortable.

The fact that she hadn't seen her in person since that day.

How she never said anything to her even after Ai's consecutive losses

"Oh I really wasn't paying attention to anything else, was I?"

Ai's mother——Akina Hinatsuru's stomach had a prominent bump.

“..... I didn’t say anything until today so you wouldn’t worry.”

“Is what I decided to say we should say.”

Ai’s father, Takashi, hesitantly explains his wife’s place.

“The truth is that I was worried that it would harm the baby if your mother got too stressed, so I stopped her from going to the matches and checking in on you, Ai.”

Ai and Akina still hadn’t made eye contact with each other.

“It seems I only made things worse for both of you.”

Ai didn’t hear the bulk of what Takashi was saying.

“Mom

There was surprise, and some happiness too, of course.

However, Ai’s first emotions—were guilt and regret.

“..... Can I ask one thing?”

“Go ahead.”

“Is this Is this child meant to take over the HinaTsuru in my place? Because I kept my promise of getting a Women’s Title——”

“No, Ai. Not at all.”

Akina refuted the notion right away but in a soft voice. At long last, she had met her daughter’s eyes.

“Just the opposite.”

“Oppo site?”

“You discovering Shogi sent you on a path completely different from the one we had planned for you. It’s true that our plan for the future isn’t going to work anymore. The future that we, as your parents, had in mind won’t happen.”

“

“I was so anxious every day after you left home to go to Osaka

Akina reflected on the past two years of upheaval.

“Just when I came to process the fact that you were living with a young man, you started playing more and more important matches against adults despite your age. It wasn’t long before we became involved with the people you met through Shogi

Their connections with the Shogi world had grown deep after hiring Yaichi’s older brother as a full-time employee and hosting one of Ginko and Ai Yashajin’s title matches at the HinaTsuru.

—What if that’s all unwanted pressure for them?

That thought made Ai’s heart churn. Was it truly acceptable for her to continue down this path?

—If I keep going I’ll only be causing them more problems

However Ai couldn’t have imagined her mother’s response.

“But you know? It’s been so much fun!”

“Huh?”

Ai had been the perfect daughter and an outstanding student until Shogi came into her life.

Never once disobeying her parents, she considered housework to be just a part of life since she was in diapers. She attended every lesson her parents arranged for her without fail and consistently achieved high grades at school.

“A daughter who forges her own path and goes far beyond what her parents ever thought possible is millions of times more appealing than the daughter who only does what she’s told. Realizing that made me want to have another one just like her.”

“We’ve been keeping ourselves way too busy.”

Takashi chimed in as he put a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“We lived by the mantra that happy customers are our happiness and resigned ourselves to that lifestyle. Which is fine for us, but we tried to do that to you, too

“Dad! I don’t feel like that at all——”

“We know you don’t. You’ve told us many times that Shogi is just a fun hobby.

While we appreciate the thought, now's not the time to let you be nice for our sake."

The stubbornness of a hard-working man came through in Takashi's face as he got to the point.

"After seeing how the Shogi world does things, I'm starting to wonder how important bloodlines actually are. Techniques and mindset get passed down through generations even without being related by blood. We can train up our own apprentice to take over the HinaTsuru when we step down. That'll be in our customers' best interests, too."

"We would never have realized that if you had never started playing Shogi," said Akina, gently embracing her daughter who had been frozen on her feet since she turned around to greet her parents. "You taught us what true happiness is."

"..... My"

Large eyes glistening, Ai did her utmost to string words together.

"My learning how to play Shogi made you happy? I-Is it okay for me to believe you?"

"Every word," said Akina gently as she took her daughter's hand and placed it lightly on her stomach. "What surprises does this little one have in store for us? I get excited just thinking about it. I hope they take after their sister."

"..... M-Mommy!"

Tears spilled down Ai's cheeks.

Then, in the middle of a family hug, she squeezed out these words.

"Daddy, Mommy Thank you. Thank you for letting me be so selfish"

The family of three no, four ... shared a tighter embrace.

That's when the little girl said what she's been wanting to get across for the longest time.

"Thank you. Thank you for for being my our parents!"

Once she finished redoing her makeup under her eyes, Ai Hinatsuru made her entrance onto the grand stage.

Certificate of Confirmation

Those characters graced a big piece of Japanese-style paper she held high over her head. A stream of countless camera flashes and applause washed over her.

Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu, the one who gave her the conferring certificate, stood at her side applauding.

Sasari Oga Women's 1-*dan* was right next to him, the black tray that once held the certificate still in her hands.

It was the same scene that she had watched unfold from below the stage when her Master, Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* received his second title.

This time, Ai was standing there.

—This is what Master saw

It was surprisingly easy for her to pick out faces in the crowd.

Shogi players had gathered closest to the stage. A whole lineup of familiar faces greeted her eyes as she looked down over them.

Keika, holding back tears as she clapped.

Kousuke Kiyotaki right next to her, bawling his eyes out.

Ayano, pen at the ready as she desperately prepared to immortalize Ai's moment of glory in writing.

Charlette was right next to her, giddily taking pictures left and right.

Kuruno 7-*dan*, the director of the Practice League who watched over Ai's first steps. Oishi 9-*dan* and his daughter Asuka had closed their bathhouse so they could wish her the best in person. Ai then spotted Jin Natagiri, who was cheering her on with a polite golf clap.

New friends she had made in Tokyo, Tsubasa Gakumeki and Rin Koiji.

Players who had fought against her in the Women's Legend League, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui.

There were also many veteran Women's League players in the crowd. Ai was now able to comprehend how substantial it was that they were spending what little time they had away from housework and raising their children to come see her.

Rina Shakando and Ayumu had respectfully declined to attend, citing that *the presence of the defeated would only sour the mood*. Maria was attending in their stead and devouring enough food for both of them.

Ai had never dreamed that so many people would come to her Conferring Ceremony.

But

—Nope, not here. I should've figured.

No matter where Ai looked, the three people that held the largest places within her heart didn't seem to be at the venue.

She wasn't saddened.

For she already knew this wasn't the place to see their faces once again.

"All right, ladies and gents! It's time for interviewing☆ Women's Legend Ai Hinatsuru!" announced Tamayo Rokuroba Women's 2-dan, who had fought for and claimed the right to be the MC.

Her bright, energetic voice echoed through the venue as she stepped up next to Ai with a microphone in her hand.

"Would you tell everyone what's next for you? Multiple titles, maybe? Or do you want to be the first champion of the brand new Women's Placement League?!"

"No. One Women's Title is enough for me."

"..... What?"

Tamayo's voice nearly cracked in surprise.

Murmurs spread through the hall.

Ai paid them no mind and continued.

"A Women's Title gives me the right to participate in professional league

matches. I intend to win those matches as a Women's League player."

Become strong.

Become strong and the path will open.

That goal had made Ai strong enough to get this far. Now, Ai declared the conferring certificate in her hand to be a ticket that allowed her to tread a brand new path.

She would kick all the pro players out of her way as she advanced.

Ai Hinatsuru had just declared war on every single player at the event. A cold, competitive aura began emanating from Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu beside her. The smiles that looked up at her from beneath the stage before were gone. The professional players were now glaring at her, their eyes as sharp as spears.

"I will win. It doesn't matter who I play against," Women's Legend Ai Hinatsuru declared without a hint of fear.

"Then I will take the Entrance Exam as quickly as the rules allow and become a professional. That's what's next for me."

FOR THE AFTERWORD: “VOICE”

My mother dealt with a disability: her lungs.

She was involved in a horrific car crash when she was a second-year high school student. The injuries to her face and throat were particularly bad, including her vocal cords and windpipe being crushed. She survived the ordeal but always looked in pain because she could never breathe in the same amount of air as a healthy person from that day on.

Several rounds of surgeries made her scars barely noticeable, but one remnant of that accident was obvious to everyone she met.

Her voice.

Apparently, the loudest voice she could muster was something barely above a faint whisper.

Why only *apparently*? Because I never noticed the difference.

As strange as it sounds I, her only son, understood everything she said as plain as day.

Not once did I think she sounded raspy or too soft. I could hear her voice from wherever she was in the house.

I discovered a latent talent for hearing that would be an interesting premise for a novel, but I think that what I experienced was normal.

Only my mother's voice was that easy for me to understand.

Which was why whenever my mother was the butt of a joke When I heard other people laughing while speaking in a raspy voices, I didn't understand what was going on right away most of the time.

Even after the fact, when my mother was in tears, I didn't feel any anger or hatred toward those people.

“There's nothing wrong with your voice, Mom. What's the problem?” I would ask with complete honesty.

She would stop crying after that and tell me.

“Clearly, some higher power made sure to give me a son who could always understand me.”

She passed away five and a half years ago.

I can still hear her voice just as clearly now.

As a person in good health, I think it's exceedingly difficult to write about characters with disabilities.

Deciding not to include them in the story was an option.

Looking back on it, I think my mother's influence is why I decided to have characters like that appear in this series.

Now that I'm a father, it's become painfully obvious just how amazing she was.

How in the world did she raise me all on her own? Disabled, no less.

I believe society treating her as *weak* is what gave her a strength that I can't even imagine.

So I wanted to express that kind of strength in this book.

Now! In addition to my wonderful supervisors from Saiyuki, I also worked in collaboration with some Shogi software programmers this time around.

Specifically, the match between Ayumu Kannabe and Jin Natagiri was inspired by match records given to me by Tayayan-san, the developer of *Suisho* Shogi software. I took a few excerpts from matches between *Suisho 5* and *dlshogi* and ordered them in my own way to create that battle. *Kinoa Shogi's* Yamada-san was also kind enough to recommend a few match records that matched my story points.

These were all received in return for donations to the nonprofit corporation *AI Denryusen Project*. I contributed and got match records in return (ha-ha).

I was also lucky enough to receive lectures about Shogi software and what the future may hold from *Jinzou Kishi 18-Go's* Tama-san and *Yaneura-Oh's*

Isozaki'san.

Thank you so much for all your help. I look forward to working with you again in the future!

Professional Shogi players debate how to process the match records created by software every single day That includes authors whose job is to express Shogi in words.

Match journalists' ability to watch a match between two people and transform it into literature was so inspiring to me that I began writing *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done*! It truly amazed me how they could take a sheet with a bunch of numbers and characters and make it into a battle for the ages.

Shogi software constantly produces truly remarkable match records. So it stands to reason that combining those records with the characters I've created would make for an even more intense story, yes?

Computers don't have emotions, but human beings have an incredible ability to be moved and inspired simply by looking at match records.

Just as the treasures produced by nature can be refined into something even more beautiful by human hands, couldn't match records produced by computers become the ore that produces something even grander and more intense than ever before?

I would like to use> the good times I have left to pursue that answer.



REVIEW
SESSION

REVIEW SESSION

This is my first time riding the *Portliner*. Of course, I heard of it before, but

“This was the first driverless public transportation system in the world,” Ai Yashajin brags from her seat next to the window.

We’re the only ones inside of this train-like vehicle that connects Kobe’s Sannomiya to Port Island. The terminal station is Kobe Airport.

I’m used to trains running alongside the ocean, but this thing is driving right over it.

“This is a monorail, right?”

It’s easy to see the whole island in the middle of the strait through the window.

The thing is that I really don’t like heights. I try my best to hide how scared I am of this thing zipping along above the water and strike up a conversation.

“This isn’t a train or a monorail. That’s why it’s called *the new transportation system*.”

“Neither one?”

“Not to mention that Port Island, our destination, was the first *waterfront* artificial island in Japan and was the largest in the world when it was first constructed. Didn’t you know that?”

“This thing’s been around since before I was born, okay? Kobe is an amazing city, I get it

“That’s right. Kobe is full of world firsts and world bests,” she adds with pride.

Seeing this childish side of her is a bit of a relief. This is definitely the Ai Yashajin I know

“..... How about you tell me already?” I asked, not able to take it anymore. “Akira said her company’s server would give Women’s League players access to the latest Shogi software. You were doing a demonstration throughout the match series, weren’t you?”

“Go on?”

“In other words you are trying to prove that signing a contract with your company would make them stronger than trying to use their own personal computer, right? This country still hasn’t seriously tried to develop top-rate Shogi software as an industry. That real estate company is just a front to hide what you really want to do, which is——”

“Get up. This is our stop.”

“Huh? Oh”

While being prodded forward like cattle, I catch a glimpse of the station name——

Keisan Kagaku Center Station.

I can’t imagine why anyone would name a train station *mathematical science*, but Ai explains it to me on the way.

“The name changes all the time. It used to be called *Kay Computer Station.*”

“Kay? Computer?”

I’m sure I’ve heard that name before, but I can’t remember where.

“I’ve said this before, but I’m not exactly head over heels.”

Leading me into a building directly connected to the station, Ai starts talking again.

“I don’t see myself as the number one prodigy in the world, nor do I think you’ll ever treasure me as the number one. I just know it.”

“Know what?”

“That you are the number one Shogi prodigy in the world and that what you love isn’t human.”

“.....”

“No matter where you try to run and hide, no matter how far you travel, in the end you’ll always come back here, to Shogi.”

Ai takes me deeper and deeper into the building.

I follow her without saying a word.

“I’ll let you in on something. I don’t believe in myself at all. I *believe in Shogi*. That’s why being apart from you doesn’t worry me at all. All I have to do is play Shogi no one has ever seen before, and you’ll be transfixed.”

“Th———”

That’s not true!

..... Is what I started to say. I swallow those words halfway through.

“.....”

I can’t deny that I’m stuck in that cycle.

It happened again just now. I threw away the perfect chance to get back on normal terms with Ai Hinatsuru to seek out Ai Yashajin.

“The Yashajin family made its name as the proprietor of harbors and such, but we branched out and became heavily involved with the construction of Port Island. And we also provided financial and manufacturing support to lure the mathematics institute to relocate to the island.”

The point is, Ai continued.

“We are the reason that *Kay* was built here The supercomputer that used to be number one in the world.”

“.....!”

I get it now. The supercomputer.

I had assumed it was somewhere in Tokyo To think, it was here on Port Island in Kobe the whole time

“My father and mother both attended university in Tokyo. Although they met through the Shogi club, they also just happened to be in the same department majoring in the same scientific field. That’s how they grew close.”

“The same major?”

It feels like the world is turning on its head.

No, the opposite.

It was the way I view the world that was twisted.

To me the world revolves around Shogi. Obviously. I’m a pro, so playing Shogi

is how I make money.

But Ai's parents were amateurs. In other words, their real job was *outside the Shogi world*.

Maybe the reason her parents are buried on that hill isn't to watch over their daughter.

But to keep an eye on something else?

"That's right."

Nods of the girl dressed in black as if she's reading my mind.

Beep.

Using her palm print to confirm her identity, Ai goes inside the room in the deepest corner of the facility.

"This is where Mother and Father worked. Their mission was to create the next generation of supercomputers."

Inside that room are——big black things.

Just like those gravestones on top of the hill, they're square and dark But so much more massive. There are tons of them all lined up.

"There are 432 casings. They contain a total of 150,000 individual CPUs connected in a vast network to create a single computing system. It's currently the most powerful calculation machine on earth and will stay that way for the foreseeable future," says the girl dressed in black in the middle of a room that could pass for a graveyard.

"The world's fastest and most powerful next-generation supercomputer——*Awaji* ..."

Ai Yashajin says while gently running her fingers down the side of a black casing.

"Like me, this computer is a product of Father and Mother's love Basically, we're sisters."

“Awaji?”

“According to Japanese legend, Awaji was the first island the gods Izanagi and Izanami created after their fated meeting around the *Ama no Mihashira* pillar.”

Everything she’s saying reminds me of that striking island I saw outside the window of the Portliner on the way here. But something else has been on my mind the whole time. Those 10 matches that Ai Yashajin played

The answer is right in front of me.

This calculation machine from the future created by human hands. This is the answer I’ve been looking for.

It’s just that using the world’s most powerful supercomputer to analyze and dissect a board game sounds like a child’s daydream and would normally get ditched without a second thought.

I believe, though. It’s because I have proof.



The Shogi Ai played during the Queen and Women's Throne Title Matches.

There's no mistaking it—that Shogi came from the future.

"Ai You didn't Don't tell me you used this to?"

"Aha!"

The girl who has the key to the future takes a swift step back to hide behind one of the black casings before poking her head out from the other side.

With that devilish grin of hers.

"Now take my hand, Yaichi."

A little hand reaches out from the other side of the darkness as Ai Yashajin says my name.

"Let's create the Shogi everyone will be playing in 100 years, together."

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

We've made it this far at last It's Ai Hinatsuru's first title match!

Ai is now one step away from fulfilling the promise she made to her mother way back in Book 1. It took six and a half years to get to this point, but only two in the story itself. But I'd say that two years of an elementary school student's life are more valuable than twenty for a middle-aged author like me, so getting this far in six and a half is quite an achievement!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Two versions of Book 16 are available in Japanese edition: the regular release and one with a collectio of artwork through Book 15. Please have a look.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 16

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

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RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 16

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