

17

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!

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Mitsuru
Oishi——
The Worldly Maestro

“Let me
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Ai Yashajin —
Oracle of the Future

“I will
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Ai Hinatsuru —
Ryuo’s Fledgling

“Time
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“This
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MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

With the Ryuo and Crown Titles, he is the youngest dual title holder in history. Late to join the sauna trend among young Shogi players, he is now fully on board. Unfortunately, his nose tends to run after leaving the cool water bath.

AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice and Women's Legend Title holder. She designed the sauna room at her family's inn. An instant success, sauna enthusiast magazines contacted her for interviews even before Shogi journalists came calling.



AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice and Women's Dual Title Holder. She insists that Kobe is the origin of saunas in Japan. Her passion when telling stories about overcoming the Kobe earthquake burns hotter than sauna stones.



GINKO SORA

Yaichi's older sister apprentice and first female professional Shogi player in history. She often challenged Yaichi to battles of endurance in the sauna at their local bathhouse while the two were live-in apprentices and boasted an overwhelming win rate due to her incredible willpower.

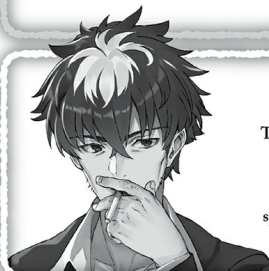


IKA SAINOKAMI

Women's Empress. Her parents live apart. On days when she sees her father, the two spend time at a public bathhouse with a spa. After thoroughly enjoying the facilities on their own, the two end their day with ramen without saying much of anything. That is rather enough for them both.

SOTA KUNUGI

First elementary school-age professional Shogi player in history. Now in junior high, he is spending nights alone in a hotel after his matches last well after sundown. While hotels with large baths are his favorite, saunas are too hot for his liking.



MITSURU OISHI

The only Ranging Rook player in A League. His nickname is The Worldly Maestro. Rather than the declining win rate of Ranging Rook players, it is the sudden spike in fuel cost for the bathhouse he owns that gives him headaches.

HIUMA KAGAMIZU

Former Sub League 3-dan division member. Returning to his hometown in Miyazaki prefecture and taking up farming, he actively seeks out groups of young people in his new field. His delight in pitching a sauna tent in the wilderness continues to grow.



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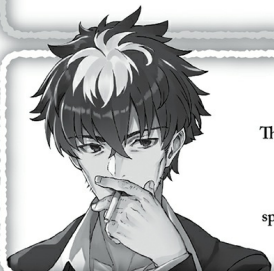
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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 17

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork and all illustrations

Shirabii

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PROLOGUE

“Hey, hey, Master?”

“Yeah? What is it, Ai?”

Back around the time Ai first moved in with me as my (temporary) live-in apprentice.

This girl who’d crammed her head full of Shogi rules and Shogi puzzles, but had no idea how the Shogi world actually worked, asked me out of the blue one day, “How hard is it to become a professional Shogi player?”

“Hmm Let me think.”

We were on our way home after she’d spent hours playing against everyone she could find in the Kansai Shogi Association’s classroom on the second floor while I was in the Player’s Room on the third floor doing the exact same thing.

The sun was starting to set as we passed through the shopping arcade. I decided to share this story with her.

“My brother is dumb, so he went to the University of Tokyo.”

“Uwhee?”

“You see, a certain pro was asked the same question you just asked, and he quoted his older brother. It’s legendary at this point.”

“Legen dary?”

Ai opened her big eyes even wider.

“The University of Tokyo Isn’t that the hardest university to get into in all of Japan?”

“About 3,000 students get accepted every year. But for the most part, only four people can become pro Shogi players each year. That’s a much, much smaller window than the University of Tokyo.”

“Whaaat?! 3—3,000 people get into the University of Tokyo every year?!”

“That’s what surprised you?!”

..... Well, I was shocked the first time I heard that number, too

“The Sub League used to have a system based on victory stars. Win enough in one year, and any number of players could turn pro. The problem was there were too many pros, so the 3-*dan* division was created to fix that. That’s where we are now. Another system called Free Class was added later that let players who just missed turning pro twice join because the rules were too strict.”

“Oooh.”

“There’s also a rule that lets successful amateur players test into the 3-*dan* division. I’ve heard it was so that the age limit wouldn’t slam the door on a pro career but

It’s still really hard to do. And you won’t be a pro right away: you’ll just be allowed to join the 3-*dan* division.

“I think I get it.”

That nod wasn’t all too convincing. Still, she grabs my hand and asks, “By the way, Master?”

“Yeah?”

“About the professional player

The one whose brother went to the University of Tokyo. Who was he?”

“Hmm? I wonder

GRAVEYARD

I thought I would retire if I were ever demoted to B League, 2nd Class.

As for declaring myself Free Class, I refuse to grasp at straws like that. In Free Class, I'd lose my seed in most matches and cannot be promoted back into A League after one season. My pride would never accept it.

No.

My pride isn't the only issue. It would be an immeasurable loss to the Shogi world itself. The match records I've made, gems in their own right, would be forever hidden from the fans.

———It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Staring at the B League, 1st Class Placement Results and seeing a *Demoted* next to my name, I had no choice but to think back over the painful truth.

Since when?

When did my Shogi life become jinxed?

Was it when the strategy I poured sweat and blood into making a reality was conquered?

But I have been constantly creating new strategies with different formations since it was rendered useless. New ideas flowed into my mind like pure water from a spring.

———Was it when software showed up?

Because that vile rating system turns hard-working players' strategies into impudent numbers?

No.

That moment must be it.

That 16-year-old who was nothing like a child Younger than my own children, in fact It was the instant that upstart appeared in front of me as a challenger less than a year after becoming a professional player.

How was I supposed to take him seriously?

He was a mere child who only played Double Wing Attack, admittedly child's play among Shogi strategies, and I innocently went along with it.

———A proud Ranging Rook player like myself

If I could redo anything, I would redo that title match in a heartbeat.

Forget the arrogance, abandon my worthless pride, and use the strategy I perfected. Had I done so, I would have won. Easily.

Had I won, the sequence that followed would have never happened.

I was supposed to be the one to block the Meijin's Eternal Septuple 100th title season.

That bland, click-and-play style of Shogi from software only spread to this extent throughout the professional world because that child claimed the title of Dragon King Ryuo, the most prestigious title in Shogi. Human players with pride like me have all been forced to reside in the graveyard known as B League, 2nd Class.

The Ryuo, the player who represented every professional, was never meant to pen a book explaining the ins and outs of using software. The very notion should've been laughable.

But the absolute hardest thing to accept———

His elementary school-aged apprentice went on an ego trip just because she won a Women's Title and suddenly thinks she can bully all of us professionals.

———Has she no respect for Shogi's history?!!

Yes, that is the moment everything went wrong.

Being defeated by Yaichi Kuzuryu in that 7-match Ryuo Title series.

RECORD 1

桐
創
多

SOTA
KUNUGI



SCOLDING

"I will win. It doesn't matter who I play against."

That's me talking on the podium.

"Then, I will take an Entrance Exam as soon as the rules allow and become a professional. That's what's next for me."

The Women's Legend Conferring Ceremony.

It happened at the Tokyo branch of my family's inn, the HinaTsuru. Right now everyone close to me is watching a recording of what I said at the ceremony.

They are the ones who have always, always been there for me.

In other words, they are my second family, but Shogi is what holds us together.

Only an hour ago, they were happily laughing and crying all for me but now their faces look completely different.

Despair.

Disappointment.

Resigned and despondent. Doubtful and perplexed. Those kinds of faces.

Grandpa-sensei——Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan wails with his head in his hands.

"..... Is this getttin' around"

"Oh, it's gone viral," says Tamayo Rokuroba women's 2-dan angrily.

She, who is super popular and affectionately called Tamayon by Shogi fans, was in the picture with me. The comments are filled with sympathy for her.

"Looks like Tamayon'd rather be anywhere else."

"Ai-chan went waaay off script for sure."

"Bet she's too scared to look out over the audience."

"Welp, every Shogi pro has a new enemy number one"

“Tamayon lolled hard.”

Tamayon-*sensei* desperately set to work after I made my announcement and managed to get the ceremony going again.

She played it off like I was joking.

It is thanks to her that the air cleared and the ceremony itself ended on a good note, but

“Why the heck did you have to say *that* up *THEEEEEEEEE?!!*”

The internet is in a frenzy right now.

Tamayon-*sensei* is just saying what everyone here is thinking

“Didn’t you see the 3,000 people in the audience?! Didn’t you know the media was there in droves?! Not just Shogi media either, but the big news networks were filming you from all angles *in real time!!* Don’t tell me you didn’t!!”

“I knew.”

“Then why didn’t you behave yourself, you *moroooooon!!*”

She yells and shakes the collar of my kimono with all her might.

Jin Natagiri-*sensei* would normally step in to calm her down, but even he is silently standing in the corner with his eyes closed.

“This ain’t somethin’ I wanna say to my own granddaughter apprentice, but

Grandpa-*sensei* lets out a long sigh and then gives me the coldest stare I’ve ever seen from him.

“There’s a limit to how lightly ya can take Shogi, Ai.”

“

I was ready for this. I knew the people I cared about would be angry.

That’s why I didn’t say sorry.

———If I apologized all this would end with me having just made a mess for everyone.

Now that I have said it, I have to see this through to the very end.

Give up, and everything I've done up until now will have been for nothing

"H-Hold it, everyone!! Please calm down for a minute, okay? We all stayed behind to hear Ai's side of the story, didn't we?"

Keika intervenes.

"Has that ever happened before? This *Entrance Exam thing* There's something in place that only lets people join the Sub League, right? What Mr. Karako did"

Shoji Karako is a 3-*dan* Shogi player in the Kansai Sub League.

The age limit forced him to leave the 3-*dan* division once before, but he won enough amateur tournaments to qualify for a chance to rejoin it by taking an exam. I'm pretty sure he's about the same age as Natagiri-*sensei*.

But that is not the exam I want to take.

I want to take one that lets me join the professionals right away without going through the Sub League.

"There's no system in place, but it has happened before."

"When? How many times?"

"Once, 60 years ago."

"That's not good enough, " Keika says with a long, long sigh. She shakes her head and looks like she's about to cry. Her hair, which she had done up beautifully for the ceremony, is a mess.

She must have been absent-mindedly scratching her head a lot. Keika has a habit of doing that whenever she is about to lose a Shogi match.

"....."

A heavy silence falls.

This room is where I put on my kimono before the Conferring Ceremony.

The very place where I first heard that Mom is pregnant now feels more like a wake.

“Pardon me.”

There’s a knock at the door and I can tell someone has come inside.

The fresh air they brought with them eases the tension a little.

“I apologize for interrupting your meeting, but may I have a moment of your time?” says the newcomer, a man in his mid-twenties, in a bright and cheerful voice.

Grandpa-*sensei*’s eyes go wide in surprise.

“Aren’t ya Yaichi’s...?”

“It is wonderful to see you again after all this time, Kiyotaki-*sensei*. You see, I used my little brother’s connections to get hired here at the HinaTsuru.”

Seeing this man always makes my heart jump.

He just looks so much like the most important person in the world to me. Even his voice is almost identical.

To be honest, he’s someone I’d rather not see.

Especially at times like this

Because I can’t help but think, “What if Master walked in just like this?”

“Never thought ya’d end up workin’ at an inn. Don’t get me wrong, this here’s a top-class establishment But ain’t yar skills suited for somethin’ else?”

“Oh, not at all, Kiyotaki-*sensei*! This inn has started to incorporate the latest technology, so the owner was gracious enough to find ways to use a scientific mind like mine!” Master’s older brother says and holds up his smartphone. “See? There’s apps like this one now. I designed it, by the way.”

“Wh-What am I lookin’ at?”

“Automated Owner, Number 18!”

There’s an anime-style character based on my mother on the screen.

What are these called again?

V-Tubers? Something like that

“The golden measure for surviving in the hospitality field is how efficiently

one can turn space into profit. While that includes the availability ratio of all rooms, of course, I programed this A.I. to comprehend every situation and issue commands directly to our staff. It is as if the owner has been transformed into an artificial intelligence! Although I programed it by analyzing her movement patterns, it amazes me that even this cutting-edge technology still fails to replicate everything she does on a daily basis. That woman is nothing short of a god———.”

Grandpa-sensei is clearly uncomfortable right now.

I’m grateful that he’s not glaring at me anymore, but

“Um, excuse me? We’re in the middle of something important Could you get to the point?”

“Oh, of course! I’m so very sorry, Miss Hinatsuru!”

Master’s older brother starts bobbing his head, saying something like, “The owner was very direct in stating I shouldn’t be too talkative, but” and apologizing. “I’ve brought a message from the owner and head chef. Rooms have been prepared for you and it would be an honor to provide hospitality this evening.”

Master’s older brother sets out keys for everyone here on the table before stealing a glance at me and whispering.

“That and, um”

“Please, don’t mind me.”

“..... They sincerely apologize for their daughter’s behavior.”

Mom and Dad have been busy doing damage control ever since I said those words. They still are.

Both of them were upset that the HinaTsuru couldn’t host the Women’s Legend Title Matches.

So, at the very least, they wanted my Conferring Ceremony to take place here.

They bent over backwards to make it happen and I made it all for nothing.

Not to mention Mom has a baby in her tummy.

I know that she's in a stable period, but I can never apologize enough to make up for causing her so much stress.

"W-Well! I'll take my leave."

With that, Master's older brother goes back into the hallway.

Once Grandpa-*sensei* was sure the door was closed, he picked up where we left off.

"Natagiri, would ya say somethin'?"

"Let me see"

The A League member had stayed quiet since the beginning. He pulls a few strands of hair off his forehead with his slender fingers as he turns to face me.

".....!"

I unconsciously brace myself.

I'm scared.

After leaving Master Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* behind, he is the closest person I have to a Master right now. How is he going to react?

Plus, his opinion affects the Shogi World because he's one of the best of the best as one of the ten members of A League.

And Natagiri-*sensei* says———

"I can relate to your feelings, Ai."

Surprisingly, he said so in his usual, gentle tone.

"When it comes to the Sub League the 3-*dan* division specifically, I agree that it's a waste of time. I'm also sure that anyone who has lived it would say much the same thing. That it did nothing to sharpen their skills."

"W-Wait just a minute, Jin-Jin! If you go that easy on her———"

Natagiri-*sensei* silences Tamayon-*sensei* with a smile. Then, this man who challenged for the Meijin Title the past season looks back at me and continues with words sharp enough to cut me into pieces.

“But, as someone who fought my way all the way through it to become a professional, I would refuse to let someone else skip it altogether.”

“..... Even if I beat every person who made it through the 3-*dan* division?”

“That’s not the issue here. You seem to be misunderstanding something very important in that regard, Ai.”

Natagiri-*sensei* somberly shakes his head no.

He had to overcome so many obstacles to become a professional player because he was born in the Tohoku region, far north of Kanto. But he didn’t try to convince me by talking about those things.

“If you believe that I want the 3-*dan* division to continue so that up and coming players will have to suffer like I did or to keep the number of professional Shogi players down, then you had better rethink your stance immediately.”

“You don’t?”

“Oh, no. I most certainly do not. This isn’t about protecting privileges.”

He couldn’t have been clearer.

Almost like pointing out an instant death sequence I never noticed was there.

“I feel *it would be incredibly unfair to all my fellow players who didn’t make it*. There are even some people who have taken their own lives because of it before.”

“Ah!”

“With that much weight on my shoulders, I can’t make this dream of yours come true, Ai. If you’ll excuse me.”

With that, Natagiri-*sensei* takes a room key off the table and leaves.

Taxis are still running at this hour.

If he wanted to go home, he definitely could.

That’s why his staying at the inn tonight toed the line on the amount of kindness he was willing to show.

But, of course, not everyone was that kind.

“Nope, I’m out. I’m so done with you,” Rokuroba-sensei snarls at me without trying to hide how angry she is. “I can understand letting a title go to your head, but belittling so many people like this Honestly, I can’t stand breathing the same air as you.”

“.....!”

That is the harshest thing she has ever said to me.

I look down at my feet so she can’t see the tears welling up in my eyes.

“Until you take that back and issue a public apology, don’t bother coming back to my room. I’ll ship your junk to you C.O.D. Bye!” Tamayon-sensei walks right past the keys and leaves without taking one.

“Sorry,” starts Grandpa-sensei as he slowly gets to his feet. “But I can’t approve ’o this or cheer ya on. If it gets allowed I’d feel too sorry for Ginko”

Hearing him say that name cut deeper than I thought it ever would. And in so many ways.

Then, the one and only person who tried to take my side, Keika “..... I truly am sorry, Ai. I need some time. Enough to process all this”

“Keika”

She lowers her shoulder to help Grandpa-sensei walk and grabs room keys for both of them before closing the door behind her.

And now I’m the only one left.

The tablet playing the video of the ceremony is still on the table. Comments are flowing in one after another.

“A little girl wants to go pro without going into the Sub League?”

“The arrogance of her.”

“Won’t happen. Not even in 100 years.”

“Trash’s apprentice is trash.”

Just as I wanted, my speech is spreading all over the world. Numbers spread very easily over the internet, and at an unbelievable pace.

Even so, I'm all alone.

"..... Everyone left, " I mumble out of the weakest of smiles.

Because I know I'd cry if I let my face be sad.

That's why I'm forcing myself to smile.

Three thousand people gathered for my Conferring Ceremony, but not one of them stood by me once it was over.

SHOGI 100 YEARS IN THE FUTURE

“Let’s create the Shogi people will be playing in 100 years, together.”

Inside a room filled with black boxes lined up like gravestones, a girl flips long locks of black hair over her shoulder like a wing before extending her white, delicate hand out to me.

Ai Yashajin.

An 11-year-old who is my second apprentice along with being my current live-in apprentice.

This artificial island outside Kobe feels more like a lifeless realm of the dead.

Everything here was created by human hands.

It’s here that this girl———was solving a game created by gods.

“100 years Are you saying this calculator can skip a whole century?”

“I am,” says Ai with an innocent smile.

“This *Awaji* is the fastest supercomputer in the whole world right now. In other words, it can come the closest to an answer to the game we call Shogi, closer than any other machine on earth.”

Professional Shogi players stand at the highest peak of human achievement.

There are about 200 of us, give or take.

Around 3,000 new match records are created in league matches every year.

Meanwhile, this supercomputer can create match records much faster and more precisely than we can. In one year, it can pump out hundreds of millions.

It takes mere seconds to arrive at a place it would take 100 years to locate for the best and brightest human minds.

When it comes to Shogi, this is as good as a time machine.

It sounds like something out of a sci-fi movie But this is real.

“..... What’s the software?”

“A deep learning system that we developed independently... though it was heavily influenced by Go software.”

“Deep learning

It can create match records so much faster and with a larger scope than the conventional software pro players use to research at home. In fact, using it means Ai had access to so many more records than the rest of us toiling away on our keyboards that it’s not even funny.

This is not some child’s pipe dream.

The Shogi Ai played to win the Queen and Women’s Throne Titles are enough to prove that everything she said so far is true.

“The Go software that surpassed humanity was originally developed by a venture company in England. A large corporation in the United States bought it from them and perfected it,” says Ai.

Go is a much more complicated game than Shogi and was seen as a last bastion of human superiority over computers.

“Since Go has spread around the world, unlike Shogi, they must have seen it as a good way to showcase the software’s capabilities. Like chess.”

“..... Go pros gave us a lot of flak when software beat a Shogi pro for the first time.”

But a computer wiped the floor with a Go world champion only a few years after that.

After a semiconductor chip called a TPU was developed for the sole purpose of outdoing the human mind, the defeated Go world champion had this to say at the following press conference: *“I lost to a stack of cash, not to a machine.”*

He practically spat into the microphone.

“The strongest one in the world right now was developed in China. Go is played by tens of millions of people and is much more popular than in Europe or the United States. They surpassed Japan’s technology a long time ago.”

“China, huh

“It’s the company that makes those mobile games for smartphones. You know, Original Sin, Crazy Royal, those kinds of games. Haven’t you heard of them?”

“Their commercials show up everywhere.”

I’m pretty sure Master Kiyotaki plays one.

“Their servers get freed up late at night when most mobile gamers are offline. That’s when they pour their resources into Go. There’s even a saying: *Go A.I. gets stronger every time the sun goes down.*”

“That does sound possible, but

“All an urban legend if you ask me.”

“That’s enough chit chat.”

I step forward with enough force to squeak my shoes and interrupt Ai.

“You brought me all the way out here. You’re going to let me see it, right? Shogi from 100 years in the future.”

“If you’re happy with match records, help yourself.”

Ai holds out a tablet.

The future of Shogi is jam-packed behind a screen faintly glowing in the dark.

This is it: Pandora’s Box.

Open it up and there is no going back. My heart is beating so fast it is almost painful

“.....”

My mind set, I pick up the tablet.

“Th-This is Shogi 100 years from now?! *This?!?*”

Records that go far beyond my wildest dreams open up one after another.

Something feels wrong, very wrong. It’s all I can do to keep my head on straight.

So many emotions are flying around, faster and faster.

The pressure is building in my chest, about to explode———

Then, after the dust settles I don't know what to call what's left, but *hope* sure isn't it.

"..... Well I didn't see that coming"

"Is it what you thought? The conclusion of Shogi."

"..... More or less"

Everyone's probably thought about the final answer to Shogi at least once.

Shogi is a game of information that requires two players to complete, and can only end with the offense winning, defense winning, or a tie.

And the one and only gap in the rules has been fixed thanks to my battle against the Meijin in the Ryuo Title Match.

"But this It's horrible. By far the worst possible scenario that ever crossed my mind"

"That's right. Now do you understand what I've been through?"

Ai shrugs and lets out a sigh, almost a little too obviously.

"It's not as simple as just playing the right moves. After seeing these it's hard to motivate myself to play Shogi in the first place anymore."

"..... I bet. I wish I never saw them."

"But you did."

You forced me to look: I wanted to tell that imp of a girl standing in front of me, but I barely managed to hold it back because I understand that I'm the one who zipped out here

There is no doubt in my mind that I would be screaming in despair if I were alone right now.

"Now that you have seen the records, you can't pretend they don't exist. *Sensei*, surely you can find useful sequences and formations much better than me, right? Oh Demon King of the West."

“.....”

“I read that book of yours,” says Ai as she takes out her smartphone.

The digital version of my well-received writing debut is right there on the screen.

“*Kuzuryu’s Notebook*, was it? The title notwithstanding, it was a good read.”

“..... Thanks.”

“Deriving standards from the way software plays Shogi. Finding meaning within inorganic lists of 0’s and 1’s. It’s mind boggling Actually, people would think the author was out of their mind if anyone else wrote it.”

“A young pro in Kanto said something just like that to me.”

“But you’re using these strategies to win matches. Not only that, other players are starting to copy you: the Meijin included.”

She is right that sequences I wrote about in my book showed up several times in the last Meijin Title Match series.

Also, there are top-level players like the last Meijin challenger, Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*, who are trying to recreate their Shogi sense to match what was in my book.

I realize that I’m the one who opened this door.

This door that leads to utter despair.

But the fact that I raised Ai Yashajin into this monster is what scares me.

I have to take responsibility for it. Leaving her the way she is now would be

“..... I guess that is possible”

“Then why not be a little happier? I’m offering to pay a fortune to help you find the answer you’ve been chasing all this time.”

“.....”

“We’re the only two people who have seen this future. Yaichi Kuzuryu and Ai Yashajin, that’s it. We’re the only ones who have turned our backs on the gods

and eaten the forbidden fruit.”

Original Sin.

The game title Ai brought up a moment ago fits a little too well.

“..... Anyone could see it once technology catches up, right?”

“Someday, yes,” Ai acknowledges with a shrug.

“But that’s at least a decade or two away.”

“Don’t computers improve seven-fold every year or something like that?”

There is a good chance household computers may be able to do what this supercomputer can in five years or so.

“Oh, what was it called? Moo’s Law?”

“Moore’s Law, idiot.”

That quip came from the very bottom of her heart for the idiot in front of her.

This. This is what has been missing. That is the Ai Yashajin I know. What a relief

“Yes, the market will become inundated in a few years and it’s true that the semiconductor chip Awaji is using right now is already a little outdated,” says Ai Yashajin as she gently slides her fingers over Awaji’s massive casing. Its lights flicker in the dark all the while.

“However, mother and father designed this Awaji to excel in application, not just simple calculations.”

“???”

“Think of it this way. Running speed is important for soccer players, right? But a world champion in the 100-meter dash wouldn’t necessarily be a world-class soccer player.”

“I see your point.”

“So, even having the fastest calculation speed in the world wouldn’t be useful if it can’t address the problem. That’s why Awaji’s focus on all-purpose computing allows it to produce answers faster than machines designed to

specialize in specific areas.”

I’m lost

Maybe it’s like the way the Meijin is still the strongest player when playing Ranging Rook even though he’s an All-Rounder? I guess?

“Think about it.”

Ai gestures around this bizarre space and says, “Do you think anyone other than me in the entire world would use the fastest computer in existence to run Shogi software?”

“No I highly doubt it

“This miracle was only possible thanks to the Yashajin family’s wealth and connections. Funneling this much calculation power into researching an analog board game only played on an island country in the Far East This may sound strange coming from me, but it makes no sense.”

Yeah, the probability that anyone other than Ai Yashajin comes up with this idea and has the resources to make it happen ever again is next to zero. This chance won’t happen again.

“That’s why I said this is Shogi from 100 years in the future.”

“.....”

Then she walks right up to me, her gaze locked up at mine.

“If I said this was all my way of getting your attention would that make you happy?”

She reaches out to take my hand with a bewitching smile on her lips.

How am I supposed to take that?

Ai appointed Akira Ikeda, her closest aide, to head a company that is now in charge of renovating the Kansai Shogi Association building, founding a brand new Women’s League Title and implementing a web service to assist all Shogi players.

What’s more the Shogi Association Chairman, Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*’s shadow always seem to be around her. He’s the Eternal Meijin who introduced

me to Ai Yashajin in the first place.

It's like she's manipulating the entire Shogi world from behind the scenes.

———First impression: a poison apple. For sure.

Take it, and it's instant death.

Nobody'd normally bite on a move this blatant. I should leave this fishy-as-heck building without a second thought, pretend this whole thing never happened and go back to my old life.

Mend bridges with my Women's Title-holding first apprentice and wait for my convalescing girlfriend to recover.

———Can I go back? Is that realistic?

I don't know.

But if there is one thing I know for sure...

It is that I don't want to use this Awaji for my own benefit.

To become the best Shogi player on earth.

To claim all the titles for myself.

To find sequences no one has ever used before.

If that is what I wanted, I probably could have left. Going through with it would have been extremely unfair to all the other Shogi players.

But I decided to stay.

——— I want to see.

This is my only chance to see Shogi that I would never see if I lived out an ordinary life.

Pure, genuine curiosity as a Shogi player won't let me put on the brakes.

"..... I can't guarantee I'll live up to your expectations."

I clasp my other hand over hers and whisper, "What's this? Wimping out already?"

"I don't know what you think about it but I've only found my own way to

use software. There's a gap between me and the guys who go all-in. I have to catch up with them

"Like Yo Okito?"

"Okito-*sensei* and Futatsuzuka-*sensei* are more like me than anything else."

King Yo Okito was the first human pro to lose to a computer.

The weight of that nearly pushed him to take his own life, but it also drove him to reinvent himself by incorporating software. He paved the way for computers to spread throughout the Shogi world when everyone else hated them.

Okito-*sensei's* research partner, Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* then took the reins and gave software a more direct purpose with younger pro players who now walk the same path.

They're now in the process of developing their own deep-learning software.

But They're *researchers* at the end of the day.

They're just *good at using computers* rather than *wanting to actually become one*.

They're also aware that *they don't have the talent* to do that if they tried.

"The ones trying to install software into their own minds are these two."

With that, I open a Shogi broadcast app on my phone and show Ai who's listed at the top.

The names of two beasts that are sticking outside the realm of humanity.

"Ryuo Tournament, Group 6 Final: Sota Kunugi 4-*dan* vs. Ika Sainokami-*Empress* (First move pending)"

CONFRONTATION

The whole of Japan was beginning to discover him.

“There he is!”

“Kunugi 4-*dan*!”

The reporters who had gathered in front of the Kansai Shogi Association building raised their cameras en masse, all aimed at a handsome boy in a school uniform with a neatly clipped collar.

The sound of shutters going off spread like waves in every direction.

However the cheers from throngs of middle-aged women drown out the clicks.

“So-chaaan!”

“So adorable!”

“Look over here!”

Ladies of Osaka had flooded the narrow sidewalks of Naniwa.

The scene harkened back to Roman foot soldiers inundating city streets in an overwhelming display of strength.

Several begin spilling over the guardrail and into the street with their phones held high in their pursuit of a clear picture. As for the cars honking at them to get out their way, the Osaka ladies couldn’t have cared less.

Afternoon talk shows had become the epicenter of this ever-widening *So-chan boom*. There was no doubt that his streak of victories following his debut had fueled the fire.

But, moreso than his Shogi skills, it was the personality of this boy named Sota Kunugi that struck a chord with the world more specifically, the housewives.

The idle son.

Smart, virtuous and easy on the eyes.

His devotion to a classical art like Shogi at the young age of 13 drew many comparisons to Kabuki actors, but the fact that he didn't walk around with a chip on his shoulder like many Kabuki actors did raise him to full-blown celebrity status.

Stories about him had completely hijacked morning, afternoon and evening news programs throughout the Kansai area. Professional and Women's League players who had become regular contributors during the *Ginko Sora boom* not too long ago were now speaking about Sota on TV nonstop despite barely ever having spoken to the boy themselves.

"The youngest ever! Twenty-five consecutive victories after debuting as an elementary school student! And we'll be bringing you the latest updates about the flawless Sota Kunugi 4-*dan* live from Kansai! Accompanying me today is everyone's favorite Women's League player, Tamayo Rokuroba Women's 2-*dan*."

"Hello, hellooo~☆ Look who's in Kansai for the first time, ever!"

Tamayo had a tendency to come off as overbearing, but her high energy and willingness to talk the ears off anyone were a perfect fit for Kansai television.

In an ironic twist, her fight with Ai Hinatsuru had become a spark that propelled her career even further.

"Would you look at this crowd, Ms. Rokuroba. Now that the historical record of 28 straight wins is in sight, it seems the whole of Japan is tuning in!"

"Don't forget that he's playing against a member of the Women's League today. Even counting back when he was in the Sub League, this is probably his first time! We'll have to see if that bit of pressure comes into play."

"But aren't professional players head and shoulders above Women's League members? If that's true, then isn't it safe to assume the streak will continue to 26?"

"Oh, no, no! Not at all."

"Really?"

"Kunugi-sensei's opponent today, Empress Ika Sainokami, isn't just *some*

Women's League member. Her record against pro players is by far and away the best of anyone in our league. Her winning percentage is 60 percent!"

"Whaaat?! Does that mean she's better than over half of the professional players?"

"That it does! It just so happens that one of the pro players she bested is the one and only Naniwa's Snow White, Ginko Sora 4-*dan*!"

"She beat the first female professional Shogi player?! Then why in the world is she still playing in the Women's League?"

"Well, there's the Sub League and a whole bunch of Shogi world regulations, bu-u-ut."

It was a blatant appeal to the audience, hinting that there wasn't enough time to explain the entire reason now, so she should be invited back as a regular on the show. However, that kind of business savvy went over very well with the Kansai crowd.

"With a win today, Empress Ika Sainokami will become the first Women's League player No! The first woman to ever take part in a tournament for any of the seven professional titles! Today will go down in Shogi history no matter who wins!!"

———I'm making plenty of news, Mr. Kagamizu.

As Sota placed all of his electronic devices inside a locker in the Player's Room on the Kansai Association building's third floor, he wished there were a way to have Hiuma Kagamizu hear all the noise outside.

Sota hadn't seen him since the party for Ginko's 4-*dan* promotion and Hiuma's retirement, nor had he heard from him.

"..... Hmph. He's the one who up and left for retirement in his hometown, so it's the standard for him to be the one to contact me, isn't it?" he mumbled stubbornly, but his true feelings weren't as resolute.

Sota was reluctant to talk about Shogi after Hiuma had given up hope of ever becoming a professional after his efforts came up short. Sota was aware of it, as

well.

His solution was to play a little bit better every match and start making headlines.

That way, news of his achievements might reach Hiuma where he now lived in Miyazaki. Hiuma might reach out to him after seeing Sota's match records because his inner Shogi player's spirit wouldn't be able to resist Pulse quickening, Sota checked his messages one last time. And, seeing nothing, his shoulders sunk with disappointment. This cycle had happened 25 times already.

——— But Today isn't so promising.

Sota let out a short sigh outside the arena as he arrived.

It was a small room called *Minase* at the very back of the fourth floor.

Considering the implications of this match, it should be taking place on the fifth floor. The Ryuo Tournament was considered to be supreme in the Shogi world.

There was a reason this out-of-the-way room was selected to host such an important match.

Officially, it was due to media coverage.

Every one of Sota's professional matches up to this point had been broadcast over a live feed, so there was no reason not to do the same for the final match of Group 6 in the Ryuo Tournament.

However, no live camera, or even an observer, would be present for this one.

———That's how unpredictable my opponent is, I guess.

The live broadcast had been canceled at the last minute due to *various reasons*. Keeping the match on the fourth floor could only mean one thing: she was dangerous enough that confinement was deemed necessary.

"Good morning."

Sota slid the *fusuma* door out of the way and stepped inside only to find Ika leaning against the wall and picking at straws in the *tatami* mat.

———Yeesh. If it wasn't part of my job, I'd never want to play Shogi with her.

It was the worst possible first impression.

Careful not to let anything show on his face, Sota set his belongings down on the mat and politely greeted Ika. She was currently sitting in the upper seat, which would typically belong to Sota as the professional player, but he chose to let her keep it out of seniority.

“So, you’re Ika Sainokami. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Famous yourself, aren’cha?”

After blowing the scraps of *tatami* off her fingertips, Ika started rolling her shoulders as if warming up for the clash that was to come.

“Never been in Kansai for a league match before and I gotta ask, is ever’body in Kansai pissed at me or something? I mean, I get the evil eye ever’where. Did crushing Ginko get that far under ever’body’s skin?”

“.....”

“You and Ginko, you guys went pro at the same time, didn’cha? You must hate my guts and wanna kill me, huh?”

“Actually, no,” Sota answered instantaneously.

“I couldn’t care less about her, to tell the truth. I’m more thankful that you got rid of her, honestly.”

“*Hi-hi-hi!* That right?”

Ika’s voice fluctuated with glee as her lips curled into a striking crescent moon. Her high-pitched *hi-hi-hi-hi-hi-hi hi-hi-hi-hi-hi-hi* squeals of laughter echoed throughout the small room.

“Man, am I happy you get it, So-chan. So happy, I can’t contain myself!”

Dragging her nails across the *tatami* mat like a cat at a scratching post, Ika’s eyes positively teemed with excitement.

Shoji Karako 3-*dan*, the recorder for this particular match, had just finished preparing tea and slid the door open just a crack to peek inside. He thought better of it upon seeing that now was not a good time and closed it again.

“..... You monsters can take your time.”

Shoji's voice never reached Ika's ears, however. She was far too excited about the shine she was taking to this junior high student and first-time opponent to stop talking.

"And here's the thing. That silver hair has always, always, ALWAYS been an eyesore, yeah?! Not even a shred of talent, but she just followed Yaichi here, followed Yaichi there, followed, followed, FOLLOWED, FOOOOOOLLOWED HIM EVER'WHERE!! Her stench is STILL all over this building and is DRIVING ME FREAKIN' CRAAAAZY!!"

"Is that so? In other words———" Sota began as he opened the piece box and started setting up the pieces. "Whoever cares more for Yaichi will win this match. Correct?"

"IHEEEE!"

Ika lifted her eyepatch, revealing the left eye she had kept hidden.

It swiveled left and right at a breakneck speed until locking onto Sota's gaze. ".....So, you *are* a fun one after all, So-chan. That same stench as mine is pourin' outta you like there's no tomorrow."

"I don't find myself to be the least bit entertaining," the newly junior high school—aged prodigy snapped back without trying to mask his displeasure. "Besides, Yaichi's taste in girls has always been horrible! Ginko is too weak to be worthy of him. He should understand couples unbalanced to that extent are doomed to fail."

"You *do* get it! That white-headed brat is better off gone."

"Even worse was the piece of work he dated before her He's amazingly good at Shogi, but his carnal preference formula is so catastrophically defective"

"Aggh?"

Yaichi would have shouted, "We never dated!" had he been present, but that rumor had already made the rounds within the Shogi world.

That was especially true in Kansai. The story had developed to include Ika *advancing* on Yaichi's apartment while only sporting her birthday suit.

Sota took all of it into account to reach his conclusion.

“Yaichi doesn’t need a woman at his side at all! I have to take it upon myself to manage his daily life for his own good!”

“*Hi-hi* You’re kinda starting to irk me, kid.”

“171 days.”

“Huuuuh?”

Even as Ika looked over at him with her head twisted up at an extreme angle that should have snapped her neck, Sota went into greater detail.

“In the event that Yaichi and I hold all seven titles and we challenge each other for each of them———”

Snap. Snap. Snap.

The two were completely out of sync lining up their pieces, but each was now fully prepared for the imminent battle.

“Should each series be drawn out to an ace match, I would spend 157 days with Yaichi, including travel time. Include regular league matches as well as review sessions lasting past midnight into the calculations, and I could spend 171 days out of the year with Yaichi.”

“.....”

“171 days. *Tee-hee!*”

Sota giggled with a hint of red in his cheeks.

He was having so much fun that he couldn’t help it.

White fingertips ran across the lips of a strangely crimson hue for a boy his age.

“That isn’t nearly enough! Which is why I have to gain as much notoriety as possible and flood the Shogi world with extra income. Even more titles will be created, and then I can spend every single one of the 365 days in a year together with Yaichi. For now, I’ll settle for beating you,” Ika answered.

“You’re nuts.”

“Quiet, stalker.”



Sota quipped back without missing a beat.

“I’m saying that I want to be with him while following all rules and regulations. What you do is an actual crime. Do you realize that?”

Shoji Karako, who had snuck into the arena, listened from the boardside table as the two players traded verbal blows and silently snarled.

———You both are off your rockers.

However, this is what he actually said.

“It’s time for the piece flip.”

Since all five of the pawns landed face up, the young boy was given the first move.

Sota Kunugi unclipped his collar, boldly opened the Bishop’s Path and declared, “Time to deal with a stalker. I’ll make you understand who is worthy of Yaichi.”

IN A FARAWAY PLACE

“Hiuma! How about a break?”

A man put down his tools after hearing his childhood friend’s energetic call.

Hiuma Kagamizu had been reinforcing the mango tree greenhouses to prepare them for the typhoon that was almost on their doorstep. Once he wiped the sweat from his brow, he sat down to eat a late lunch, which she had prepared just for him.

Miyazaki prefecture, Kyushu.

Having returned to his hometown post-retirement from the Sub League, Hiuma had kept busy working as a local farmhand.

“What’cha watching?”

“Hm? Nothing

His lifelong friend sat down right next to him and craned her neck to get a peek at the smartphone in Hiuma’s hand.

Her being close enough to brush shoulders had made him a bit uncomfortable when he first arrived But he reasoned that this was just how childhood friends were and was completely used to it at this point.

“..... Messaging a lady friend you left back in Osaka, maybe?” she ventured in a probing voice.

Two years his junior, she had adored him like a big brother since she was little.

Now 28, her feelings for him seemed very much the same.

She threw a fit, crying her eyes out and begged to go with him when Hiuma said he was moving to Osaka to become a professional Shogi player, but everyone could look back and laugh about it now.

“You were so popular back in the day, Hiuma! I never had an honest-to-goodness boyfriend, but older and younger girls were asking you out left and

right! You don't expect me to believe you don't have a special someone waiting for you in the big city, do you?!"

"A girlfriend? No, I don't."

Hiuma dismissed the notion with a laugh.

Though he had dated a fair number of women during his tenure in the Sub League, none of those relationships had lasted long, except for one.

And he had said some of the most hurtful words to her, the woman who had been his rock for years

"You're the reason I can't win."

Hiuma had been hesitant to get too involved with any women ever since that painful day. That also allowed him to spend more of his time concentrating on Shogi.

He hadn't become antisocial, however.

Spending the last few years of his time in the Sub League working with a boy far younger than himself had gone a long way.

"If anything I'd say he's more of a little brother. He's already so much better than me," said Hiuma as he looked down at a picture of Sota Kunugi on the screen and squinted as if to shield his eyes.

The boy glowed in that junior high school uniform with the clipped collar.

———He's grown up a bit, but still cheeky as ever.

A hint of nostalgia overtook him until he saw the match record appear on the screen.

"Ohhh? You're not seeing anyone? Uh-huh, " whispered his lifelong friend, but Hiuma didn't notice that or the fact that she had discreetly pumped her fist. His eyes were far too focused on the match record.

The Shogi was bizarre.

Ika Sainokami, who usually played Ranging Rook, accepting a Bishop exchange while on defense was strange enough already But it seemed like every move she made from that point on smashed Hiuma's Shogi sense into smaller

and smaller pieces.

Ika had *shifted her Rook to the right edge of the board.*

“First-File Rook

It was a valid strategy, to be sure.

Classified as Static Rook, it was employed by a handful of players as an ambush strategy, but a standard never emerged. It therefore allowed for an enormous level of freedom.

However, that didn’t mean anything goes.

The King never left starting position.

And the edge Pawn had ventured extremely far forward.

That opened the way for the Rook to take a seat in the center of the board.

“..... Twisting from here

“Twist?

The young woman looked down at the lunch she had made, puzzled.

Of course, Hiuma was commenting on the strategy, not her cooking.

———Maybe the formation came from Twisting Rook

But that conjecture was based solely on the Rook’s position. Hiuma

No, the people of the world had never seen the Shogi playing out on that board ever before.

Ika’s Knights were bounding across the board, setting the stage for the epic clash that would take place in the 8th and 9th columns.

——— King at starting position, edge Pawn forward, Ranging Rook player

That was similar, but still

A strategy that sparkled radiantly in the annals of Shogi history came to the forefront of Hiuma’s mind.

It had made serious waves through the Shogi world when Hiuma started training and was the main reason he switched from Static Rook to playing Ranging Rook himself.

———There were so many Sub League members just like me back then.

Software had permeated the modern Shogi world to such an extent that the idea of players switching from Static Rook to Ranging Rook en masse was unfathomable.

Even Hiuma had entrusted his fate to the *yagura* during his final season in the 3-*dan* division.

The times had already buried that strategy, as well as the prodigy who created it. Even Ranging Rook

“Um, Hiuma.”

“Yeah.”

“You won’t be going back to Osaka, will you? You’re here in Miyazaki for keeps, yes?”

“Yeah.”

Hiuma wasn’t listening. His mind was too absorbed in the match record to care that his childhood friend was pressing her fully matured, 28-year-old figure against him or to put any thought into answering her questions.

“Do you think you’ll be staying on the farm?”

“Yeah.”

“Say Hypothetically, okay? My dad said he’d be up for you taking over the family farm if you were on board with it Would you want to?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah.”

Every smidgen of Hiuma’s mental energy was being poured into the ever-updating match record on his phone. His childhood friend’s words were literally going in one ear and out the other.

Sota was playing quickly, but Ika’s speed was inhuman. Not only had she used a scant two minutes of her waiting time so far, but most of her moves were played in three seconds or less.

It was reckless, on par with driving 200 mph on a track they'd never seen before. Neither of them crashing, yet it stunned Hiuma to his very core. How many times would he have died already, he wondered. No one would ever play these moves after reading through the board. At the same time, clashes of strength like this one cannot be fought with memorization alone

“..... How did you pull this off?”

“How? Well, you would move in as my husband I-I-I mean! D-Dad loves playing Shogi, too! And he admires your courage, moving to Osaka all by yourself to follow your own dream!”

“Yeah Uh-huh?”

Sota had seized control of the 8th column.

Not only had he successfully traded Knights for Silvers with a Promoted Bishop in his ranks, but Ika's King hadn't budged since the start of the match. All the defender had to show for her efforts was getting a promoted Pawn in the 9th column.

The battle over the edge seemed like it would settle the entire match within a few turns

But that wasn't the case.

“..... Hard.”

The defensive formation looked flimsy at best, but it refused to crumble.

“Hard? Was my *onigiri* that over-cooked?”

“.....”

“Say, Hiuma? If you're willing to inherit the farm Wh-Why not take me along with it? Hahaaa”

“.....”

“I don't mean to toot my own horn, but I think I'm pretty good in the kitchen And I'll do my best in o-other things, too I'll do anything you ask Y-You know, like In the bedroom———”

That is when a move so outrageous appeared that it made Hiuma jump to his

feet and yell.

“Reverse?!”

“Wh-Whaaa?! R-Reverse?!”

Ika pulled back the Promoted Pawn that had finally started to advance.

Hiuma couldn't figure out the reason for the life of him But he could see doing so maintained the defender's balance by the slimmest of margins. His whole world was on the verge of falling apart.

———Even after retiring, Shogi still makes my heart skip a beat

Sota looked to have the advantage.

Given this much of an edge, there shouldn't be a way to upend that prodigy at this point.

The youngest professional Shogi player would inch even closer to the all-time winning streak record and send the whole country into a tizzy. An unprecedented Shogi boom was surely on the horizon. Sota was following through on his promise with Hiuma.

For Hiuma, however, seeing moves he would never play no matter how many times he could relive his own life appear on the board in such quick succession was

“W-We should get back to it! C'mon! We've got to finish up before sundown!”

Hiuma's childhood friend said, blushing up a storm as she smacked the dirt off the backside of her pants after getting to her feet.

“..... Yeah.”

He reluctantly returned his smartphone to his pocket and made for the greenhouses to start working once again.

The wind was starting to pick up.

A warm, humid wind that could only mean the typhoon was drawing near.

———A decisive shift is starting.

The Shogi world was rocketing down a path of no return, or so Hiuma felt as

that ominous breeze passed through the air.

..... As for the one-way route he had stumbled onto with his childhood friend, that is a story for another time.

The two distant events would never cross paths.

CHILD SUPPORT

The Shogi match came to a sudden end.

“2 Seven Knight?”

Empress Ika Sainokami plays that move without a second’s hesitation.

After seeing that, how could I not ask if she meant to?

“..... Are you sure?”

I didn’t get a response. Not in human words, anyway.

“Hi-hi-hi. HI-HI-HI-HI-HI-HI-HI-HI-HI!”

She lifts up that eyepatch and hones in on my King even as her pupil whirls around like it is caught in the drum of a washing machine. It seems that Miss Sainokami can’t hear anything from the outside world at this point.

Well, not that it really matters now that she let go of the piece.

“I see. Then please go ahead and die.”

I snatch up a different Knight of hers with a 2 One Pawn promotion.

The moment I take it, she leaps the first Knight forward to take my Silver without a single second ticking off her waiting time.

A contest of speed.

We both slash with swords, competing to see whose blade connects first. The endgame, as chess players would say, has thrilling and interesting elements different from Shogi proper.

Except this particular match is obviously decided. I’m nowhere near the edge of my seat, so to speak.

A 17-move checkmate.

It is not even a difficult one. All I have to do is line up the pieces.

If this is how the human who has taken down plenty of professional players, including Ginko, to become the first Women’s League player to come within

one victory of taking part in one of seven major title tournaments plays then it is an extremely disappointing curtain call.

“..... Aha?”

The final move is 5 Five Gold.

My deploying it right in the center of the board completely shut down the defending King’s hope of escape.

Now, after playing this far, it seems Miss Sainokami has finally *read* her own defeat.

She’s frozen still, her pointer finger on top of the King and her mouth wide open.

“I-can-t-move?”

“Ms. Sainokami? You are surrendering, yes?” the match recorder asks hesitantly.

Her King is already helplessly trapped. In check already, she’d lose if she moved any other piece. That’s not allowed under the rules, so she would lose on the spot. Losing that way in a professional match would be horrible for her on many levels.

“Excuse me, Ms. Saino———”

“It’s fine. Please close the match, Mr. Setsuko.”

“That’s *Karako*, brat.”

The old guy taps the tablet a few times to officially end the match, muttering something like “I whipped your scrawny butt in the 3-*dan* division” under his breath as he leaves to print out the match record on the third floor. The 3-*dan* division? I’ve forgotten all about that ancient history.

Now it’s just the two of us left in the arena.

Miss Sainokami is just staring up at the ceiling, making small grunts and groans of despair.

A bit of drool drips off her chin and onto the *tatami* mat.

Reporters will flood this room in a few minutes.

There is something I want to confirm before then.

“Today’s Shogi will be remembered as a mundane match that failed to deliver on the hype. Something along the lines of the Women’s League player buckled under the pressure of the big stage when her ambush came up short and she couldn’t see the final check path. That, at the end of the day, that is all Women’s League players can do.”

Professional players will think so. I guarantee it.

Except———for me, Sota Kunugi.

“..... To be frank, I didn’t think you were anything special. Slightly better than Ginko, but beneath at least half of all professionals. But———”

This player named Ika Sainokami, still poking her trapped King with her finger.

I need to reassess my evaluation of her.

“This *way of death* made me see you in a new light. You *have completely abandoned your humanity.*”

There were signs even in the early game.

How she used waiting time, too.

Playing so well despite obviously not reading anything.

Since my way of thinking is rather different from most people as well, I can pretty much tell just how far she has strayed from humanity.

“It’s discomfoting, even for me. Aren’t you the least bit scared?”

“..... Ahaaa,” grins the stalker girl even though she lost.

Did Yaichi really date her? That is actually impressive. What are the chances *this* develops feelings for anyone?

“I can tell you’re not following any of this. Well, I suppose it can’t be helped after breaking to this extent. But there’s still one question left unanswered,” I say mostly to myself.

“Um Sorry to interrupt your review session.”

The reporters are already inside the arena, and one representative is holding

a microphone out to me.

“I’d like to get your thoughts on today’s match if that’s all right with you.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

The reporters must think Miss Sainokami spazzing out is from the shock that comes from losing to an instant death. They look so apologetic. Don’t worry! This person was a spaz to begin with.

“Then we’ll start with your comments as the victor, Kunugi 4-*dan*.”

“Sure.”

Huge waves of camera flashes wash over me if I so much as nod or blink. I look away to shield my eyes, but even that gets called *refined* on the internet, apparently. Public opinion is putty in my hand.

“Would you give us a quick overview of the match?”

“Hm Let me think. From the start all the way into the midgame, I thought my opponent played very well.”

First, praise the defeated.

This is very important, even if it is vague. People will eat it up, posting things like, “That’s our Sota-kyuun!” on social media. It also makes defeat an easier pill to swallow for the loser. That way, I never make enemies no matter how many players I beat.

Well, it is true that something surprised me during this match, strategic quality aside!

“Especially the 46th move, moving the Promoted Pawn backward. I hadn’t considered that sequence, so my heart jumped a little”

“When were you aware of your victory?”

“Once I promoted my Pawn at 2 One, I had a feeling that I was starting to pull away”

“Thank you.”

Shogi specifics don’t do very well for audience ratings, so that line of questions gets cut off there. Which is nice.

“This is your 26th victory in a row. Now that the record of 28 is so close, what do you think are your chances of breaking it?”

“Rather than the record, I want to focus on the next match in front of me.”

“You are now the champion from Group 6 of the Ryuo Tournament. Please tell us your goals once the main tournament is underway.”

“I’ll be doing my best to secure 28 of 171.”

“171? What?”

“I want to play in the title match! That’s what it means. ≡”

A little mysteriousness is the key to becoming popular.

That, and a smile that jumps off the screen. As long as I have got those, notoriety will never be a problem. They are life hacks!

“Thank you very much. Now then———”

The reporter points the microphone at the upper seat and works up the courage to talk.

“..... Pardon me, Ms. Sainokami? If there’s anything you’d like to say

“..... aa pa”

“U-Um Since Kunugi 4-*dan* has already provided some analysis of the match, I’d like to get your opinion on another topic. A certain Women’s League player said she wanted to test into the professional league the other day. What is your view on

“Hyeee pa *pa-pa-pa-pa*

“.....”

Everyone can tell that she’s in no condition to do an interview.

The reporters give up and start getting ready to leave when suddenly.

“Pa-paa.”

“Huh?! What did you say?”

All of them turn back to face her at once to decipher what this drooling girl is babbling about.

The loser then says.

“I gotta get Papa to chip in more child support.”

..... That truly odd statement was cut from their reports and never saw the light of day.

No one except the people in this room knew she ever said it, and I’m probably the only one who thought anything of it.

Who is this *Papa* Ika Sainokami mentioned?

And what does *child support* mean in this instance?

A GROUP OF PLAYERS BOUND FOR RUIN

Shogi Association Building in Sendagaya, Tokyo.

A single match was taking place in the special arena at the very back of the fourth floor that day.

“I surrender.”

“Hm

The player in the upper seat lightly put down a piece in resignation and Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan* acknowledged it with a nod. It was already past midnight. Little trace of formations remained on the board, as was common when players are aggressive enough to smash their opponent’s defenses into nothingness. It had been a fierce battle to say the least.

However, very few people were around to witness it.

The match recorder walked out of the room to print out the match record, leaving only three people in the arena. All members of the press were currently in Kansai. Even association staff had been deployed across the country to help.

Mitsuru glanced around the nearly empty arena and muttered, “Last season’s Ryuo Challenger doesn’t make it into the main tournament I know you’re not getting demoted, but this still has to sting, yeah?”

“It must, if a second-ranking player in A League who could have challenged for the Meijin Title had won one more match says so.”

“Okito Was that sarcasm just now? I didn’t know computers had that feature

“Only the latest version.”

King Yo Okito responded without the slightest hint of a grin and began the review session, rearranging the pieces to the point where his defeat had been decided.

Indeed, his lack of emotion in victory and defeat made him appear mechanical.

These two players had been mainstays of Group 1 in the Ryuo Tournament for well over a decade, but they had already been defeated and forced to compete in the so-called *back alley* route to appear in the main tournament.

“Well, I suppose it’s about time for the geezers to lick each other’s wounds, eh?”

The Worldly Maestro stumbled into fifth place within Group 1, the last spot to qualify. The joy from winning the match made him tolerant enough to play along with this banter.

“Look I get that there’d be some bumps for me now that I’m playing Ranging Rook again, but how are you struggling this much when you’ve mastered all that cutting-edge software, huh?”

“The first move advantage has ceased to exist. All players had difficulty incorporating software into their training regimens, but a single book has solved the problem. That is the issue.”

“*Kuzuryu’s Notebook*, yeah? That kid put out a real pain in the neck.”

“Mr. Natagiri bragged that he had purchased a total of five copies. While I doubt that the number of books increases efficiency of research, his recent improvement may indicate that my stance needs to be changed.”

“Don’t bother. That guy isn’t normal.”

The two men who hailed from the same generation of Shogi players traded verbal jabs while conducting their review session. However, a college student who had yet to turn 20 years old was intently watching every single move from her seat a short distance away.

“.....”

“You.”

Yo addressed her——Asuka Oishi without looking up from the board.

“What about over there?”

“Over there?”

The girl momentarily drew a blank, being called on out of the blue.

“Ah! I-If you’re talking about Kansai, Kunugi 4-*dan* won the match! Um it was a surprisingly fast match Sainokami-*sensei* lost by instant death on the final turn”

“..... Thanks.”

Yo briefly made eye contact with Asuka and voiced gratitude.

His gentile gaze took her by surprise. This was the man who took her father’s title, someone she should hate, and yet

The Maestro, however, wasn’t having any of it.

“Hey. Don’t spoil my daughter, got it?”

“From my point of view, I simply acquired the information I sought in the most efficient manner.”

Mitsuru opened his mouth to object but could only produce a long sigh. The flow needed to change.

He won today’s Shogi, but he was losing verbal matches left and right.

“Yeesh Since when do Kansai Practice League members sit in on a Kanto review session, anyway? Have you got that much extra time to burn in college? Think of the parents stuck payin’ tuition.”

“I-I don’t have *any* extra time! I’m only in Kanto to see Ai’s Conferring Ceremony”

“What, seeing your Master’s match was just something to do *while you’re here?! Want to start lookin’ for a new Master, huh?!?”*

“Th-Then, I’d break off my relationship with you, too!!”

“Did you hear that, Okito?! This is the thanks I get for putting her through college and letting her join the Practice League, as my apprentice, no less!!”

“This should be a proud moment, yes? University is a place where you can choose what you should learn.”

“Oh, come on Does that latest computer of yours have a parenting function on top of Shogi?”

“Because finding generally versatile applications for artificial intelligence in

everyday life has continuously proven to be an important topic, yes.”

“General versatility?” Mitsuru repeated.

Unable to let that remark slide, he smacked a Rook down onto the board.

“If you think you’re so clever Get back to me after you can play decent Ranging Rook, not just Static!”

“As a viable strategy, Ranging Rook is already dead,” came Yo Okito’s emotionless response.

However, it was his next sentence that was unexpected.

“And, *software didn’t reach that conclusion*. A single human prodigy did. The strategist with the greatest mind at his disposal.”

“.....!”

Mitsuru gulped as it dawned on him.

A prodigy strategist.

Only one person in the Shogi world matched that description.

Even the Meijin, who was revered as a Shogi god, was one or two steps behind that player when it came to creativity on the board.

“Mr. Usui, huh He’s already been demoted out of Group 1 in the Ryuo Tournament and he’s fallen down to B-2 in the Placement Matches or was it C-1? I remember when *Ryou* was synonymous with him just like the Meijin is now.”

“Ranging Rook died when Takeru Usui faltered. Other human beings and computers have no chance of accomplishing what he could not.”

“Hey, aren’t you forgetting about the Worldly Maestro?”

Mitsuru’s attempt at a brave face fell short, and he laughed at his own expense.

“..... My record isn’t good enough to back me up on that. I haven’t created new strategies like he has, either.”

The Maestro then fixed his posture. That was his way of signaling that this

review session was over.

Yo Okito silently acquiesced and began putting the pieces away.

“Hey.”

While waiting for the title holder to finish cleaning up, Mitsuru Oishi softly lobbed a question.

His voice was surprisingly quiet for someone who had just won the match.

“Do you really think Ranging Rook’s days are over? Even with help from that deep learning software you’re developing, do you think new strategies can’t be created? Ones like Mr. Usui came up with Something that’ll take the pros and the Sub League by storm. A gamechanger”

“That is what the math indicates. Otherwise all research done with software up to this point would become null and void.”

“Uh-huuuh”

The Worldly Maestro folded his arms and fell deep in thought.

Even Asuka, sitting beside the board, looked into her lap and clenched her fists. Rather than someone who came to learn about Shogi it looked as though the girl had sat in on the match for another purpose altogether.

Yo cast a gentle gaze upon her once again and said, “Though.”

“Hm?”

“I, personally, would like it to remain. I, too, am a father.”

SHARING

Click Click Click

Dry mouse clicks echo through the dark room.

“..... That one, too?”

How many hours have I been sitting here? 20? 30? I lost count.

After sitting down to look through Awaji’s match records in my apartment in Nishinomiya, I got tired of getting up to turn lights on and off, so the computer screen is the only source of light in here right now.

“That one And that, that, that, thatthatthatthatthatthatthat———”

I’ve been combing through all these records.

And trying to find out if *that* is still around 100 years from now.

“..... If this is destiny, what about all we’ve done so far Hm?”

Is someone else in here? I turn around to look and———



A beautiful young girl dressed in an extravagant kimono is there, leaning against the doorway.

“I’m home,” says Ai Yashajin in one short breath and locking eyes with me.

..... Is Ten-chan angry?

“Oh? Ohh. You’re back.”

“I’ve been standing here for a good 20 minutes already, by the way.”

Ai wearing that kimono means she must’ve been getting ready for the conferring ceremonies for her two Women’s Titles.

Queen and Women’s Throne.

Defeating a member of the Sub League 3-*dan* division in two consecutive series, Ai Yashajin was now officially a dual Women’s Title Holder.

Part of me is happy that the two titles I know so well went to my apprentice rather than someone else entirely.

But, at the same time it adds an extra twinge to the loneliness crushing my heart.

I turn back to the computer so my apprentice doesn’t pick up on it.

“Th-There’s just too many of Awaji’s records to go through Seriously, tens of billions of them. Even a hundred years wouldn’t be enough to look at every single one———”

“Isn’t there something you should say after seeing me dressed like this?”

“..... School picture day?”

“Do you want to be target practice?”

J-Just kidding A joke, okay?

“W-Wow! You look stunning! And I have to say, only you would buy the rights to both title series so you could do both ceremonies at the same time, Lady Ai!”

“All eyes are focused on remodeling the Kanto and Kansai Association buildings. I could buy out all the women’s titles, create three more, and still have change.”

There'd be more Women's Titles than pros if you did that.

"Besides, we were anticipating going into the red to manage the series, but our timing may turn out to have been perfect. Thanks to Sota Kunugi, no less."

"The *So-chan Boom* I really don't think people would be so eager to cheer him on if they knew what he's really like."

Strangely enough, he has seemed to love spending time with me for years. I don't have anything against him, but there is something I cannot put my finger on, too.

"Yaichi, are you free after this? Yay! Then would you please spend the rest of your life just playing Shogi with me? ≡ You said you were free, didn't you?"

That stuff just rolls off his tongue. Is that not scary?

"Well? What gifts do you have in mind for the guests at your ceremony?"

"Oh, yes. Match records, perhaps?"

"Ones that you played? With self-commentary articles?"

It's not unusual for players to hand out match records from their title series with their own thoughts and analysis bound in a little book to guests at their Conferring Ceremony. Fans would be over the moon to get one.

"No." Ai points at the computer I'm using and says, "The ones you're toiling over right now."

"?! Y-You don't mean———"

I look up in disbelief. How could a decision so world-altering come out so easily?

"You're going to give out Awaji's match records?! For real?!"

"Finally, you look at me properly, Yaichi."

Her lips curl into a satisfied smile as Ai walks into the room.

Then, once she is at my side, Ai starts taking me through her plan.

"I'll wing my own Conferring Ceremony. It's Awaji's ceremony I'm talking about."

“???”

“And, by the way, you won’t be attending mine. There’s other work I’d like you to do.”

“That’s fine, but no, it wouldn’t be, would it?”

I was just about to mention how unprecedented it would be for a Master to miss their own apprentice’s title ceremony, but I just missed Ai Hinatsuru’s the other day.

Even from a balance standpoint, only going to Ai Yashajin’s ceremony might be a bad move. Ten-chan might also trying to be considerate to Big Sis

“More importantly, what’s this Conferring Ceremony for Awaji?”

“I’ll announce that Awaji has been certified as the fastest supercomputer in the world. Well, the development team will, anyway.”

“..... So that’s what you meant. I get it now”

But how does that relate to match records?

“And the benchmark software we’ll be using is———”

“..... Shogi software, right?”

“Yes.”

Seriously?

“It’s not all that crazy. Shogi software has already been chosen as benchmarks for hi-speed CPUs. Those are for personal use though.”

“Ah, NPS”

Nodes Per Second. It’s a measure to show how many moves a computer can read in one second. The higher, the better.

“But yeah Shouldn’t you want to use something more general as a benchmark? Shogi software is a bit too specialized———.”

“There are two reasons.”

Ai holds up one finger on each hand.

“The first is that we’ve already used Shogi software as a benchmark for Awaji

before. My parents were the ones who developed it, after all. Call it their personal preference.”

“They made the software, too?”

She said it was heavily influenced by Go, so I assumed they hired another company to handle the research and development.

“It wasn’t anywhere near as strong back then, but yes. My mother was the first to apply the Monte Carlo method, which is used for Go, to Shogi.”

“For real?”

That would mean the person who laid the groundwork for deep learning Shogi software was Ai Yashajin’s mother.

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

While her father had the accolades, like being Amateur Meijin, her mother didn’t seem to like Shogi all that much. Surprising, but true.

“My mother did mention that it was all thanks to inspiration from a particularly exceptional underclassman in the Shogi club. Who could that have been?”

“..... Beats me.”

“And the other reason.”

Ai gets back on topic with the same air as flipping a switch.

“The value of Shogi *content* has spiked thanks to Sota Kunugi. This way, it can ride that wave into the spotlight.”

“Combining Shogi with the world’s fastest to make it easier to sell Awaji to the masses Right?”

“I’m not doing this to make money,” Ai declares.

Then she declares something else in exactly the same way.

“But if it makes money, it’s better to make as much as possible.”

“Very true.”

We are professionals. And the best way to rate a professional’s skill is their

prize money.

It costs a ton of money to use Awaji at all. Best make as much as you can while you have the chance!

“I’ll be releasing 100 records.”

“100? That’s all?”

I thought that was not nearly enough.

But that might be for the better. Showing the future as Awaji sees it all at once Unleashing the shock Ai Yashajin and I felt on the whole Shogi world would pack too much punch.

People would get so depressed that some might quit Shogi altogether.

“Record selection And yes, analytical comments should be added to the especially important ones, don’t you agree? The best one for the job would be — — —”

“The Ryuo Me, right?”

“I knew you’d catch on, *Sensei*! It saves so much time. ≡”

She goes out of her way to flatter me and leans in for a hug.

So this was the *work* she brought up earlier.

“Shouldn’t you ask the Meijin instead? I think his name would grab more attention than mine.”

Sota might be the hot topic in the Shogi world right now, but Shogi only gets noticed at all thanks to the Meijin.

A legendary player, the strongest ever to play the game, he had lorded over the Shogi world for ages when a young prodigy appeared on the scene. That kind of story sells very well.

Not to mention the Meijin has ranked number one in winnings for the past 30 years running.

Then there’s the fact that he has four titles, over half of all of them. The difference between him and Sota, who’s still at 4-*dan*, is day and night.

Meanwhile, the number two earner and youngest player to be a Dual Title Holder is here, but has been completely forgotten while people argue if Sota could defeat the Meijin. Then again, maybe the all-mighty masses never were interested in the first place.

“I considered approaching the Meijin, but I’ll be asking you for this one. I’m not playing favorites, just so you know.”

“Oh? Then can I ask why you rate me so highly?”

“It’s the Meijin, remember? Give him Awaji’s match records, and nobody would hear from him for a least a year or two.”

..... Good point.

“I want quality and popularity, but there’s also a deadline to meet. It’s pointless to ask someone who can’t deliver.”

The Meijin is not only the strongest player in history, he’s also Shogi’s biggest *otaku*.

That is him in a nutshell.

Just like Toya-Meijin in *Hikaru no Go*, he would retire if that meant he could play against a strong opponent. Giving up his titles and forfeiting all his league matches to hole up for a year or two? He would do that without a second thought.

The chance to see Awaji would be too irresistible.

The irresistible allure of seeing Shogi from 100 years in the future

“..... I’m fine with taking on the job, but I can’t possibly choose the records like this. As I said before———.”

“I know. Akira is already preparing the solution.”

I don’t have a complete grasp of Awaji’s match records yet.

Because I’ve been too heavily influenced by modern Shogi: the Shogi human beings play.

———If only I could start from scratch. Go back to *before I learned how to play Shogi*

That desire only got stronger after seeing Sota and Ika's match.

"I can't wait to see the future of Shogi you're going to present."

Leaving that fancy kimono in a heap on the floor, Ai laughs to herself as she climbs into my bed.

She must be planning to sleep here tonight.

I didn't tell her to go back to her own room. It is not like I will be sleeping tonight anyway, so she can do whatever she wants.

Turning back to my computer screen, I start going through more match records.

Even though I said I couldn't make a decision about which records to release right now I don't think it will be all that hard.

" There's too much we *can't show*."

It is actually Ai Yashajin's erratic behavior that has me worried.

Her title match against Big Sis was one year ago.

She has made moves to systematically take over the Shogi world ever since.

———What is she after?

At first, I thought she wanted to use Awaji to get a decisive advantage over other players but too much doesn't add up if that's the case.

Use Shogi as a means to turn Awaji into a business venture?

Or is she simply trying to get my attention?

In any case, someone is going to have to find a way to keep her under control. Her parents aren't around to do that anymore.

Her grandfather is currently in the process of making Ai the head of the Yashajin Group, but I haven't been able to contact him for a while now.

———In which case I need to acquire the same level of power as Awaji
.....

I have to prepare.

Get ready to ditch my human perception.

“There’s something I have to do, right now, to make that happen!!”

Sliding my gaze away from the computer screen, I strengthen my resolve.

There’s a single sheet of paper there.

A piece of paper that will soon contain a vow absolutely necessary to fight off despair———the most sacred contract in existence.

RECORD 2

雛
鶴
あい

AI
HINATSURU

夜
叉
神
天
衣

AI
YASHAJIN

GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP (HALF)

Two hands come together over a piece of paper.

One, the large hand of a man. The other that of a small, small girl.

“Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

“Yes!”

“Do you solemnly swear to take this girl, Charlette Isoir, to be your apprentice? To guide her out of love, in sickness and in health?”

“I do!”

I strongly nod.

The man who heard my declaration turns to face the little girl but she isn't tall enough to be seen over the counter.

“Well then Miss Charlette Isoir.”

“Oui!”

“Do you take Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu as your master, taking his lessons to heart in all circumstances, and pledge yourself to becoming a Women's League player?”

“Cha, Cha does!”



Hopping with glee, she agrees and a new couple no, she swears to become my newest apprentice.

“Hn. Very well, I will ratify the documents.”

Practice League Director Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan* says with a gentle nod

— — —

That’s the moment Charlette and I were officially united!

Ayano Sadatou, who is here to witness it, has to wipe the tears out of her eyes so many times that her handkerchief looks heavy. She couldn’t be happier for us.

“Charlette This is wonderful! I’m so glad that you get to be Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s apprentice!”

“Yaaay! Cha’s your apwentice, Masta!”

Oh, yeah. This isn’t a marriage ceremony. She’s joining my Shogi family. Right, right

Asuka Oishi, who’s standing next to Ayano, looks excited as well. She’s been repeating, “That must be nice!” like a broken record ever since we signed the paper.

“Can you believe it, Ayano? Charlette is now Yaichi’s No, Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s apprentice. I’m so jealous

“Asuka, you are your father’s one and only apprentice. As a Ranging Rook player myself, I’m incredibly envious that you get to learn from Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan*!”

“E-he-he

Asuka grins, trying to hide the fact that she’s also happy about that.

After how much Mr. Oishi used to be against letting Asuka play Shogi, I think he must see more in her than just enthusiasm.

I had a chance to see her play in the Practice League, and she had more than a few worldly *wow* moments. When it comes to joining the Women's League, I think she's got more than enough talent to get in.

My train of thought reaches that point when I realize Kuruno-*sensei* has come over to me.

"Everyone brought their best effort in today's Practice League matches. I think having a Dual Title Holder in the room had a lot to do with that. You're free to visit every time, if you like."

"Uhh Ha-ha-ha."

I laugh off the invitation.

It's true that I came here regularly when Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin were Practice League members, but that was more because I was worried those two might cause problems rather than checking on their progress. There is no need to worry about that with Charlette whatsoever.

"But it's a weird feeling."

I forcefully change the subject.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd have three apprentices back when I first brought *her* here."

"Hn. For me as well, knowing that two of my former students have blossomed into title holders As the director, it's the second happiest moment in the world. It really hits home when I see two graduates doing so well in the Women's League."

"The second?"

What could be a happier feeling than seeing your own students win titles?

"Then what's number one?"

"The moment I find out that former students are excelling in other walks of life after leaving the Practice League," says Kuruno-*sensei* with the clear, gentle firmness of a teacher. "When I first took the job as Practice League director I wanted to instill mental fortitude that could help my students overcome the difficulties they will face moreso than how to play Shogi."

Getting results is not an absolute necessity.

Just, he wanted to know that his teachings were there to help each and every person so they did not have to face life's inevitable rough patches alone.

If that happened, then he would realize the meaning behind taking the Practice League director job. And even learning Shogi in the first place served a bigger purpose, Kuruno-*sensei* tells me.

He sounds just as calm as usual, but there's fiery passion in his words, too.

"Shogi is merely a tool to make life more interesting. As professionals, Shogi itself is our life. But that's not the case for the overwhelming majority of young people who learn the game."

"..... The Practice League sure isn't the Sub League."

I think for a moment and something occurs to me.

"You have never taken an apprentice, have you, Kuruno-*sensei*? Why not? You'd probably be able to raise them better than anyone"

"Hn. You give me too much credit."

He forces a smile and elaborates.

"Fairness is absolutely necessary to be a good director. Some students win in the Practice League, others do not. Disconnecting my personal feelings to create an atmosphere where anyone can grow isn't all that difficult."

"Wouldn't that also be great for raising an app———"

"But a Master has to carry the weight of every win and loss of one specific child. That's where I struggle. All the ups and downs have an adverse affect on my Shogi. If I were to take an apprentice, it wouldn't happen until I've retired."

"....."

"You are an outstanding Master, Mr. Kuzuryu. You also have the makings of an outstanding director for the Practice League. Give it a try once you've lost your titles."

"..... Sure."

Part of me wants that day to come, part of me doesn't.

I'm just not sure right now.

If there's anything I do know that day will never arrive if Shogi dies off.

"I'm home!"

With the Practice League activities over, we take the train one station over to the Kiyotaki house in Noda.

Ayano walks in right after me, followed closely by Charlette and Asuka.

Greeting us at the door with the smell of curry in the air is Keika, of course.

"Come on in! Is everyone ready to spend the night?"

"Yes!!"

The three of them hold up their bags.

They are all so happy to be here, it is infectious. Even I am getting excited now.

"Thanks, Keika. Is she here?"

"Oh, yes. Waiting for you in the back."

"And Master?"

"Who knows? He goes out a lot these days without saying a word."

Shrugging, Keika offhandedly follows that up with something unexpected.

"Sometimes he's gone for days. Maybe he has a girlfriend?"

G-G-G?! Girl... friend?

"..... Well, it's happened before."

It is a big world. There are bound to be more women like Shakando-sensei who have horrible taste in Rather, have a thing for skilled Shogi players with beards. I mean, Master Kiyotaki has been married before, too.

Still

"Are you okay with that, Keika? With your father getting remarried."

"That'd be better for him than shoveling money into some 2D fantasy girl,

wouldn't it?" she answers nonchalantly before turning to Ayano and the other girls to say, "Go put your things in the kid's room upstairs."

Today is the day for the Grade Schooler Practice Group to get together.

I got in contact with Keika to set it up here after Ayano said she wanted to keep this practice group going when we spoke in the middle of the Women's Legend Title Match.

— — —It's not like we can go back to my old apartment

Hosting another session like I did in those days is impossible. The Yashajin Group bought the whole building with plans to do a major remodel. I'm too sad just thinking about it to go see for myself.

But I wanted this session of the Grade Schooler Practice Group to be as much like the old days as possible, so I invited a guest.

Then again, only half the participants are grade schoolers.

Asuka started college this spring and Keika is old enough to have graduated from it years ago.

Keika muses as she watches the three girls race up the steps, "Tweens, a college girl and I also want to be part of the Grade Schooler Practice Group!"

Something feels off Keika is too old to join.

"You're a bit too"

"Asuka is in, isn't she?"

"Yeah, but"

"..... Meaning?"

The bones in my neck whine under the pressure of her grip. I swear, even King Enma couldn't be this intimidating when judging souls of the dead.

"I'm in my twenties, I'll have you know. That's still young, very young in the grand scheme of things. Though I supposed I must come across as a cougar to a lolicon like the Ryuo!"

"I know you're not old!"

“My word you used to say things like *I’ll marry you when I turn pro, Keika!* all the time. But you only pay any attention to younger girls in the end. Traitor”

“Ginko is my older sister apprentice, so I don’t see her as younger.”

“Then what about Charlette?”

“Younger, definitely younger.”

“Traitor.”

Taking this verbal abuse from Keika isn’t all that bad.

One more participant is sitting on her ankles in the *tatami* room.

“What kept you?” the dark-haired grade school girl who arrived first———Ai Yashajin asks, clearly annoyed.

Four Shogi boards are out and completely set up. Yeah

“Sorry, sorry. Things took longer than I thought.”

“What? Did a Repetition Draw happen in the Practice League?”

“No, that ended on schedule, but the paperwork took a while. Registering Charlette as my apprentice

“Huh? Why would handing in a single sheet of paper ever take that long?”

“Hey! Charlette and I were making a sacred vow!! These things usually require three days and three nights of celebrations!”

“..... Mine didn’t even take five minutes.”

Ai mutters something under her breath. Probably a complaint, knowing her. That’s all I’ve ever heard her say.

“Well, not that I really care.”

Flicking those black locks over her shoulder like a wing, Ai laughs through her nose.

“Less time that I have to spend instructing those brats.”

“Whaaat?! T-Today Are both of you going to give us instructional matches?!”

Ayano’s glasses nearly fall off her face in shock.

I told them that Ai Yashajin would be here as a guest beforehand, but Ayano must’ve assumed she’d never get to share the board with her.

Most likely, she was picturing Ten-chan and I playing practice matches while everyone else played their own next to us. This revelation had to have hit her like a bolt of lightning.

Satisfied that the surprise hit home, I turn to Kobe’s Cinderella.

“With the two of us here, it’s possible to have four simultaneous matches. That’s okay with you, right, Ai?”

“I don’t mind. So long as they don’t mind me playing simultaneously———”

Hands shoot up before Ai can finish that sentence.

“Yes, yes, yes! I would love for a chance to learn from you again, Ten-chan!”

“Cha, too! Cha wants to pway Shogi wid Ten-chan, too!”

“I-I also would like t-to learn from Yashajin-*Dual Women’s Title*! S-Side Pawn! I-I want to receive your Side Pawn Capture!! *Haa-haa*!!”

While I’m fine with Ayano and Asuka rushing up to Ten-chan and trying to get her to play against them first, Charlette literally just became my apprentice. She’s climbing into Ten-chan’s lap. Talk about mixed feelings

In the end, everyone agrees to draw straws.

Sitting down in front of two boards across from Ai Yashajin are Asuka and one other.

Seeing her brings out Ai’s impish grin.

“Oh? Are you sure you want me teaching you?”

“I would be honored.”

Keika, who once played against Ai in the Sub League with a handicap, lowered her head in a respectful bow.

“There’s plenty of value for me, even if you are doing two matches at once I believe your skill level is that far above mine. I’m honestly happy for an opportunity to learn from a Dual Title Holder.”

“..... I’m ready when you are.”

The metaphorical chip falling off her shoulder, Ai bows in kind. She must realize her pride wouldn’t let her do the same thing in Keika’s shoes. A painful realization, by the looks of it.

Pieces start snapping on all four boards right away.

“Cha, Cha want to pway an eben match!”

“I-I also want to play without a handicap! I know that’s rude to ask of a Dual Title Holder, but”

“Don’t worry. Hit me with everything you’ve got!”

I played with a six-piece handicap and with a two-piece handicap against these two at the first Grade Schooler Practice Group session. They’ve come a long way

Half the members have changed, but the group lives on.

That happens a lot in the pros, too.

———That’s what happens when you take it seriously. Sad, but true.

It’s also proof of your own growth. The people surrounding you change as your skill level increases.

What’s on the board, not sentiments, is everything for Shogi players.

“Heeeh Your early game needs refinement, but you have an interesting sense for Shogi.”

Ai Yashajin has never played Asuka before. Surprisingly, she gives some encouraging comments during their review session.

“I suppose that should be only natural, with the Worldly Maestro being your father. Your sudden jump in strength during the mid-and late-game stages reminds me of his playing style. I would’ve been in trouble had I let my guard down.”

“Well, of course. I mean, Asuka beat———”

Ai Hinatsuru playing Central Rook! — I was about to say but quickly swallowed my words because the mood in here will come crashing down the moment anyone mentions that name.

Ai Yashajin gives me a blank stare and presses.

“What?”

“..... Oh nothing. Just thinking blood is thicker than water.”

“That’s what I just said. Is your memory going? Are you about to kick the bucket?”

Our fun, fun practice session goes until the sun goes down. That’s when everyone chowed down on Keika’s curry, took turns taking a bath and came back for more Shogi.

Late into the night, nonstop.

The most adorable snoozing noises are coming out of the kid’s room on the second floor.

“Zzz Zzz”

“Mngh mngh Cha, Masta’s apwentice ≡”

“..... One Central Rook match Two Central Rook matches Three Central Rook matches He-he, today it’s Ranging Rook everywhere you look”

Charlette and Ayano played until they were completely exhausted. Asuka seems to be counting sheep, except they’re Shogi matches in a live broadcast. Yep, she’s a bit out there.

I bet they’re all having wonderful dreams.

Each of them looks happy and contented off in dreamland. How long has it been since I saw Ayano and Charlette look like that? My heart feels so full.

“Is that everything on your list?”

“Yes.”

Ai Yashajin, who is suddenly standing behind me, asks. I answer without turning around.

“Thank you for letting me be selfish today.”

“I don’t think it’s selfish at all.”

I wasn’t expecting her tone to be that gentle.

“We let our younger employees indulge themselves with women of their choice just like this before going out on long assignments. What are those places called again? Strip clubs?”

“A-All I did was play Shogi with some grade school girls at a practice session! And I’m not trying to indulge myself, but to keep promises I made to them ———”

“I’m joking. Why are you getting so defensive?”

“.....”

Cut that out. Girls your age shouldn’t be toeing that line

“Still, French Fry Goldilocks there is my younger sister apprentice now, isn’t she? Unlike a certain irresponsible older sibling of mine, I intend to do right by her.”

“..... Thanks.”

An irresponsible older sister apprentice———Ai Hinatsuru.

That name was on everyone’s mind today, but no one ever said it. Even Charlette was being courteous.

———Why did you say that without talking with me first, Ai?

Actually, speaking with my overeager first apprentice rushing to become a pro is still on my list

But I don’t have the right to approach her.

I mean, I turned down the perfect opportunity to mend bridges and chose to follow another path.

I follow Ai out of the house to where Akira is waiting with a car.

Usually, it's to pick up *her lady*, but she had it prepared for someone else tonight.

"My Lady, how do you intend to return home?"

"A regular taxi will do. Akira, make sure *Sensei* makes it to his destination, and before he has a change of heart Okay?"

"As you wish."

Opening the back door, Akira invites me out for an evening drive.

"Shall we, Kuzuryu-*sensei*?"

"..... Yeah. Let's go."

And so, I was whisked away from life as usual.

The dark place called the future is waiting for me up ahead.

▲ HISTORY

“My most sincere apologies. You would have been able to speak with me long beforehand had we not faced one another in the Women’s Legend Title Match.”

I make my professional match debut in a week.

Today I’ve come to talk with a player I respect.

The woman with more experience playing against professionals than anyone ———Rina Shakando-**Women’s 8-dan**.

“You have surely been toiling all by your lonesome, Ai Hinatsuru.”

“N-No! I owe you the apology for not coming to congratulate you on your appointment to 8-*dan*! Um, this is Kanazawa’s signature confectionery, *Choseiden*!”

“Pay it no mind. Praising me is rather difficult in your position, as you are aware.”

It’s unusual to see Shakando-*sensei* showing this much emotion as she clinks the cup while stirring her tea.

“Why, it is almost as though my promotion to 8-*dan* was purposefully synced with losing my title! A message from the board of directors saying *leave the titles for the youth*, is it not?!”

My taking the Women’s Legend Title from her left Shakando-*sensei* without one for the first time in 30 years.

Would it be right to treat a person who has achieved so much like a regular Women’s League player?

After a lot of deliberating, the board of directors decided to gift her with the rank of 8-*dan* At least, I think that’s what happened. Whether the recipient thinks it was a gift, I’m not so sure

Once she takes a sip of tea to calm down, the world’s first woman to have the rank of 8-*dan* starts again.

“..... Though I must say I cannot complain about attaining the same rank as my apprentice. I chose to accept. That chairman’s power of persuasion cannot be taken lightly”

Her 8-*dan* apprentice is A League player Ayumu Kannabe-*sensei*, who she has dubbed God Cauldron because of the characters in his last name.

He is always at Shakando-*sensei*’s side as her assistant. A lot has happened between them recently, but it seems like they’ve gotten through it and became closer because of it.

I still see the scene that unfolded after the fifth Women’s Legend Title Match whenever I close my eyes.

If I could become an apprentice like that It’s my dream.

Even if I know it’s impossible.

“Where is God-*sensei*? Is he not here today?”

I look all around the room, but I don’t see him anywhere. Shakando-*sensei* puffs out her cheeks and answers in a frustrated voice.

“We had a spat.”

“Whaaa?!”

“The first spat of my life. Apparently, it irks him that I take too long on the phone.”

“Take too long on the phone?”

Why would God-*sensei* be angry at her about that?

“Ayumu had expected progress toward marriage from the very beginning In other words, for us to become lovers.”

I thought so, too.

After that last Women’s Legend Title Match I saw them from the arena window. It looked like they had such a strong bond and love was in the air.

They walked together, happily hand in hand, like going down the aisle.

But Shakando-*sensei* adds with a sigh, “He claims that he has *already waited*

nine years and cannot bear to wait a single second more, but Shogi has been the center of my life for more than three decades at this point. Changing after all this time isn't so simple, now is it?"

"Um Aha-ha"

"Have a spat with your own Master, oh Women's Legend Hinatsuru?"

"?! I, um———"

I look down but can't stop all the words from coming out. So many memories of him flood my mind.

"..... I did. Many."

"I see."

Shakando-sensei answers gently with a kind smile.

"You loved him, yes? Truly."

"....."

I just silently nod.

It's not past tense, though. I still do.

But if I say it out loud, it'll only cause problems for Master. Right now that's scarier than anything.

"I do not know every detail of the process my own Master, Sadatoshi Ashigara 9-dan the gambler known as the Demon of Hakone underwent for his Entrance Exam."

Shakando-sensei brings it up herself. It's almost like she read my mind.

"But his diary was left in my possession after he passed away."

"His diary?"

"Gamblers played Shogi with money on the table. Thus, they kept meticulous records of to whom and how much they have won or lost. My Master continued doing so after joining the Professional League, including the time when he underwent the exam."

".....!"

“That said, it is merely a ledger. Nothing more than a collection of numbers and match records. His family left it in my care, but I believe you may have more use for it.”

“A-Are you sure?! It has to be really valuable

“Do not get your hopes up, understand? As I said, the vast majority of its pages are a ledger

Huh?

Wait, doesn't that mean———?

“There was a time in which the feasibility of an Entrance Exam to become professional was explored. My Master's diary was referenced.”

“.....!”

I spring to my feet only to hear the harsh reality.

“However, a route to professional status without traversing the 3-*dan* division never materialized. The proposal was crushed beneath overwhelming opposition.”

“It was?”

According to Shakando-*sensei*———

When the Shogi Association was reorganized into a public entity, the Sub League's age limit became a problem.

Shouldn't everyone have a chance to become a professional Shogi player if they seriously pursue it

There were two proposals to solve the problem.

The first was a way to skip the Sub League: a Professional Entrance Exam.

The other was a way to join the 3-*dan* division: the 3-*dan* Entrance Exam.

Both had happened at some point in the past, so the board of directors had a formal meeting to discuss it

They surveyed professional players and members of the Sub League, too, but zero people supported skipping the Sub League. So the proposal was thrown out before it made it to the floor of a Player's Meeting.

On the other hand, most of the directors and players liked the idea of a 3-*dan* Division Entrance Exam and the system was created without much fuss at all That's Shakando-*sensei*'s explanation.

"You are aware of the specifics for the 3-*dan* Division Entrance Exam, I assume?"

"Yes. First, you have to win a national level amateur tournament———"

Then you have to participate in Sub League regular activities to face active members. Win enough victory stars, and you're allowed to join the 3-*dan* division.

"Pass that step, and you're a 3-*dan* for two years So you have four chances to make it through the division. Even if you don't make it, you can do the whole process over again by winning another amateur tournament"

"Precisely. This system essentially eliminated the age limit. At the very least, the full-time employees of the association believed it to be gone."

Shakando-*sensei* pauses there and sighs.

"But surely you can see the issue already, yes? The number of professional players is still very much limited in this system."

"And Women's League players aren't part of it."

"Indeed. While retired Women's League players are a given, those who have ever joined the Women's League can never return to amateur status even if they resign from the association. That is not the case with former Sub League members."

People who leave the Sub League with a *kyu* ranking can participate in amateur tournaments right away.

Dan ranking members have a *mourning period* after they leave, but even they can play in amateur tournaments once it's over.

Professional players and Women's League players, on the other hand, can

never be *amateurs* ever again.

That's why I'll never be able to play in another amateur tournament, and never be able to take the 3-*dan* Division Entrance Exam as a result.

There are lots and lots of other problems, too.

Taking the exam itself costs a lot of money, and 3-*dan* players have to take time off their regular jobs during the day to work as match recorders.

Mr. Karako quit his regular job so that he could take the exam.

Honestly it feels like the system wants something more than just Shogi skills.

"Suffer for Shogi's sake."

At least, that's the message I'm getting.

"It seems odd to me, as well. The thought process of this tribe of Shogi professionals who insist on passing the 3-*dan* division."

On paper, it looks like the door is wide open.

But for Women's League players who don't have a voice in the Player's Meetings, it's still locked. Whether that's on purpose or not, I'm not sure

"One query still remains. Yourself."

"Me?"

"Ai Hinatsuru. Why are you fixated on a Professional Entrance Exam? With your skill and talent, you are more than capable of clearing the 3-*dan* division already. Take a leave of absence from the Women's League and undergo the 3-*dan* Division Entrance Exam. As a sixth grade elementary school student, time is still very much on your side."

".....!!"

"Your talent is on par with Naniwa's Snow White. From a health standpoint, you surpass her. Declaring that you wish to circumvent the 3-*dan* division entirely sounds naive to my ears."

She cut me down with words.

Each one hurt that much.

“..... You were aware of that when you made your intentions known, yes? I wish to know what stokes the willpower to face such critiques.”

“.....”

“I won’t press should you wish not to say. However, others surely will. Have an acceptable answer ready for them before then.”

“..... I will.”

Even that kind of basic preparation is too much for me right now.

It’s becoming more and more obvious how short-sighted I’ve been, but there’s still something else I need. So, I work up the courage to ask.

“Um may I ask you a question, too?”

“Certainly. Ask whatever you wish.”

“How can you tell what I’m thinking so easily, *Shakando-sensei*? How can I understand other people in the same way?”

“I just know. So long as it’s an opponent I have played a high-stakes match against yes?”

It’s possible to understand someone on another level by sharing the board with them.

Lots of players say so.

It’s not like I haven’t experienced that before. There are people I’ve gotten to know a lot better after playing against them, like Ten-chan and Keika.

Also, I thought I knew Mio through and through until we played our hearts out against each other. I learned so much about who she is as a person during that match.

Just there are moments in matches when I read so far into the board that I forget about my opponent. I can’t understand what they’re thinking, especially not to the extent that *Shakando-sensei* can

“Ryuo’s fledgling.”

Sensei pulls me out of my thoughts.

And throws me for a loop.

“Henceforth, simply defeating your opponent will not suffice. Nor should your Shogi be intended to break their spirit.”

I can’t just beat them?

What’s that supposed to———

“Strengthen them. Your opponent’s minds.”

“Make them stronger?”

I couldn’t believe my ears at first.

I mean, Shogi is a game about making the other person give up.

But I heard *Shakado-sensei* correctly.

Strengthen.

“Make them stronger, to the point that they no longer fear change Make the inhabitants of the Shogi world want to play against you at the professional stage.”

“.....”

Can I really do that?

So many questions are still swirling around in my head. Even so, I thank *Shankando-sensei* for her time and leave.

Moving forward is the only choice I have.

..... Immediately following Ai’s departure from Rina *Shakando*’s shop....

A door connecting to the next room opened to reveal a girl with her hair done up in unique buns that resembled cat ears.

“I thought your patience wouldn’t last until she left,” said Rina with a teasing grin as Maria *Kannabe* huffed.

“Unlike my moronic brother, one such as I has self-restraint! I would never go

against my Master's direct orders."

"Is Ayumu still hot under the collar?"

"Enough to cook an egg."

"What to do with him He-he."

Annoyed with the dreamy look on her Master's face, the girl who is the same age as Ai Hinatsuru collected her thoughts.

As someone who had chosen to pass through the Sub League in order to become a professional, Ai's comments sounded like weakness to Maria.

However, her opinion had shifted ever so slightly after hearing Ai speak with Rina.

———Has she perhaps chosen an even more treacherous route?

It wasn't just in the professionals. Ai Hinatsuru's declaration had set off a firestorm of opposition among the Sub League players and there was no end in sight.

There were even some members who encouraged the others to boycott working as match recorders if and when she appeared in matches against professionals.

Their opinions were set in stone.

———The 3-*dan* division has become sanctified. Even professionals dare not tread on its ground.

Shogi strength was not the issue.

A different obstacle one which could only be called *history* loomed like a mountain.

Maria thought it would be impossible for a single elementary school girl, even a title holder, to turn it on its head. Particularly now that she understood how rigid the system was as a member of the Sub League, the very bottom of the association's totem pole.

"Is it truly possible that a Professional Entrance Exam can be created?"

"For her? Yes," answered Rina as she gestured for her apprentice to refill her

tea cup.

The first woman to be recognized as 8-*dan* then explained.

“For she is the one who gave me a *tomorrow*.”

THE ROOM OF SPIRIT AND SHOGI

“Wow The room looks great. I was expecting something a bit more bare bones.”

I’ve been brought to a room inside a building in Kobe.

There was a big tarp hanging over the outside of it. I’m pretty sure we’re the only ones in this place.

“This is a hotel and our company is overseeing its construction. High priority was placed on completing this particular room.”

Akira says this place is going to be a hotel catering to business travel.

It not only accommodates regular tourists, but it’ll be equipped to handle business people working remotely, not just staying the night. The Wi-Fi network has been reinforced and amplified so that it can host e-sports tournaments in the future, too.

In her words, it's a hybrid office and hotel built to accommodate the times.

“All of your requests have been met, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. The room is stocked with a month’s worth of basic supplies. Please contact me should it not be enough.”

“Thank you, Akira.”

Everything I asked for is in this windowless room.

A bed with a firm mattress. A shower with a wide tub.

A large fridge jam-packed with energy drinks and chocolate bars.

Then there’s a VR headset and glove and a Shogi board.

As for why all this has been prepared just for me———

“But if I may ask do you really intend to play Shogi continuously without speaking with anyone else? Won’t you step outside from time to time?”

“Because I have matches, yes. Of course, I can’t just take leave or not show up

without saying a word, but I might forfeit some matches if I think it's necessary."

"Are you sure? Aren't matches what Shogi players live for?"

"Players live for something else."

Running my fingers across an eight-and-a-half inch tall Shogi board for matches played on the floor while sitting on your ankles and a 2.8-inch board designed for matches played on a table while sitting in a chair, I say, "When there's Shogi we've never seen before, players dive head first. That's what we live for."

"Isn't that Shogi obsession?"

"Probably."

Akira's all-too-accurate remark makes me chuckle.

But after turning pro and winning titles Strangely, it feels like I've drifted away from that happy obsession I had with Shogi.

So I'd like to go back, reignite the fire I used to have for it.

"It was quite a surprise when you asked to play against Awaji for yourself, *Sensei*. Even my lady was taken aback. What point is there in playing against a computer in this day and age?"

"I don't think it's the smartest choice either."

I give her a straight answer as I try on the headset.

Switching the power on, a Shogi board and pieces appear in the lifeless VR world in front of my face. Whoa!

"No one made of flesh and blood stands a chance playing against a Shogi god. They'll just get trounced over and over. A smarter person would come up with a more efficient method, but"

"Are you saying this supercomputer is a Shogi god?"

"Pretty darn close, I think."

Seeing Awaji's match recorders was enough for me to tell.

It's on the verge of an ultimate solution to Shogi Well, the chances that what I saw *is* the answer are pretty high.

"If a compilation of thoroughly analyzed match records can be called a god, the Ai Yashajin has one at her disposal... not that she knows how to use it."

"....."

Akira gives a light sigh and says, "The tutorial will teach you how to use the equipment. The settings have already been adjusted to your preferences, as requested. While the smaller details couldn't be added due to time constraints, the atmosphere itself should be more than passable."

"This is a first for me, playing VR Shogi. I'm looking forward to it."

Slipping my hand into the glove, I try grabbing a piece that isn't really there.

Uh-hmmm.

I can't say it feels like the real thing, but it shouldn't take that long to get used to this.

Akira gave me a preview of the VR system that she herself had a hand in creating while working as the representative for Loli Home, the real estate developer the Yashajin Group is using as a front.

It hit me that the system could be useful for online matches when I tried it out during the third Women's Legend Title Match.

"There was a robotic arm on the other side of the board back in the day. But that takes up way too much space, don't you think? Then again, I can't focus on a match if I have to keep clicking on a mouse."

"I tried the program for myself as well, and it was quite immersive."

Yes. Immersion.

What I'm trying to do right now needs as much of that as possible.

I have to *fool myself* into thinking everything is real.

"But are you certain I was the best person to make these settings?"

"Hey, we made a game together, didn't we? Even pulled a few all-nighters at your office."

“How intense those days were!”

Akira once founded a gaming company in Kobe and produced a *rhythm action game for lolicons* and brought me, a pro Shogi player, in as an advisor. Apparently, she thought of my experience raising young girls as a valuable resource

I saw what Akira is capable of back then, so I went behind Ai Yashajin’s back to make a *certain* request.

She agreed as a way to pay me back for my help with the game.

Honestly, I didn’t think she could do it in the little time she had, but———

“Creating a single, younger, 3D version of my lady required a painstaking amount of time and effort back then, but technology has progressed to the point that it can create an even a better one in mere seconds. That is the power of deep learning software.”

“Like magic.”

“Agreed. Not only 3D, but a *moe moe* 2D illustration is but a mere enchantment away from existence. The end of illustrators has arrived.”

“Really? I think they’ll keep going strong.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because Shogi players still have jobs even after pros were the first to lose to software.”

But even we could be just candles in the wind now. Once Awaji’s version of Shogi’s future gets out, plenty of people will probably choose to quit altogether.

However I’m going to resist it with everything I’ve got.

Akira must’ve picked up on my resolve. That’s why she was willing to help me while keeping her *lady* out of the loop.

“My lady will surely punish me if she finds out”

“But you like it, right? Getting yelled at by her.”

“Can’t say I don’t!”

Man, am I glad Akira has a quirky side.

Said quirky yet skilled and busy woman has completed her assignment and turns to leave.

“I’ll see myself out. Though I will be back to check on you periodically.”

“You’ll be monitoring the match records, right?”

So long as new ones come in, that’ll prove I’m still alive. There’s no need to travel all the way out here.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you played Shogi posthumously, *Sensei*.”

“Are you worried about me?”

“This property was only just developed and cannot afford a black mark even before it opens,” says Akira with one foot out the door.

“This door *can only be opened from the outside*, just as you requested.”

Ker-chk.

The auto lock clicks into place as that metallic door closes behind her.

“..... I’d end up running away if it did. Probably.”

But now, there’s no escape.

I’m about to lose to a computer over and over again.

Not just simple losses, though.

The kind that will make my formations worse the more I play, an endless swamp of agonizing defeats. I doubt I’ll ever make any progress.

My mind and physical endurance are going to be ground to a pulp.

And I might not have anything to show for it in the end.

Worse, there’s a real chance my Shogi sense will get turned inside out and my skills will suffer. I have to keep playing Shogi despite the risk of losing everything on my shoulders. I have to turn my back on reality, all of it.

That’s what it takes to jump 100 years into the future.

“That’s what Ai Yashajin was doing before her title matches, wasn’t it? Yeesh

..... doesn't she have any attachment to the real world at all?"

The depths of darkness within that 11-year-old girl send a chill down my spine as I set to work on the tutorial and confirm the setting Akira installed for me.

"Oh wooow! Th-This is incredible!!"

A room I know so well flicks into existence right before my eyes.

The kids room on the second floor of Master Kiyotaki's place, where I lived when I was a live-in apprentice.

It's immersive beyond belief.

"Everything is just as I remember it! Holy right down to those scratches on that wall"

———Playing and losing against a godlike entity nonstop.

I've lived through this once before.

Days when I lost no matter how much I played.

Days facing an opponent whose skill could only be explained as beyond human.

Continuously losing to someone younger than me. My pride getting utterly destroyed over and over again. Days of despair, watching them rise further and further away without being able to close the distance.

There's a reason I could endure those days without running away.

A virtual rendition of that reason is sitting on the other side of the board.

"..... Long time, no see."

I used to worship her.

Almost like a god.

To the point I thought she was a Shogi ghost that haunted a pro player's house.

Then I played Shogi as much as I could, losing over and over again, all so that I could prove myself to be even somewhat useful to her.

I think that's what made me strong.

Which is why I wanted to try the same thing one more time.

Artificially relieve my time training as a live-in apprentice using the latest technology.

If there's any other way to get closer to a god———I can't think of it.

"Now, let's play Shogi," I say to her and sit down in front of the board.

To the person I've played the most matches against in my life, and the one who's beaten me far more than anyone else.



NEBULA TOURNAMENT

My debut match against a professional player is going to happen quietly in the back corner of the Shogi Association building.

“The Nebula Tournament, yeah? I’ve played in that.”

Rin Koiji Women’s 4-*dan* was not only gracious enough to sign up to be the match recorder for my match today, but also to meet me in a burger shop in Sendagaya two hours before it begins. We start chatting about our experiences the second we sit down.

Rinrin-*sensei* had a Women’s Title for one season.

She’s lived through a lot of what I’m going through right now, so she’s been secretly supporting me like this.

“The tournament is sponsored and put on by CS Broadcasting’s Shogi/Go channel. The waiting time in the preliminaries is short, like only 25 minutes. Once that’s gone, you only have 30 seconds to make a move. But hey, that’s pretty normal for televised stuff, yeah?”

“So that it can fit into a time slot?”

“Yep, yep, yep. That’s right.”

Rinrin-*sensei* keeps talking even as she picks up onion rings like Shogi pieces, with just her fingertips.

“Well, the prelims aren’t put on air, though. The main tournament matches are televised, but players only get 15 minutes of waiting time.”

“15 minutes

“But they do get ten one-minute sets of consideration time once that time’s up. You know what that is, right, Ai?”

“K-Kind of

Even with that, I’ll have to play fast. One little mistake will be fatal.

“Make it through today’s prelims, and you’ll wind up in the lowest of eight

blocks in the tournament. It's designed with the Paramas Method———"

"Paramas?"

"The system that's set up like a big staircase. You have to face the one who's waiting on the next step. Instant death style."

Staircase? Instant death?

Most of that went over my head, but the path will open as long as I win, right?

"Also, there are two recording sessions a day for the main tournament, so you've got to play in the afternoon if you win in the morning. That's why it tends to be the up-and-comers with momentum and amateurs used to playing fast who make it through the blocks."

"Two matches a day"

That reminds me of the MyNavi Women's Open.

Professionals typically only play one match a day because they have so much waiting time. Women's players and amateurs, on the other hand, play many matches in a day which means I might have an edge there.

Then again, I've heard some professionals prefer this system, too.

"That's also, like, what *dan*-ranking members of the Sub League do. Play two matches a day."

Yes.

I'll definitely be playing against *senseis* who just got promoted to 4-*dan* after leaving the Sub League.

Some of them are actually more skilled than veteran 9-*dan* players even though they're ranked lower, so I don't think they'll be easy to beat.

My chances might be less than one percent.

But those are the matches I absolutely can't afford to lose.

What would happen if someone who announced they wanted to go pro without doing the Sub League were to lose to a 4-*dan* who just finished it?

People would never listen to that person again, ever.

“The winners of the eight blocks go to the finals. To get that far Ai, you’re gonna have to win 13 matches in a row, counting the prelims.”

“13 matches in a row against professional *senseis*?”

Since eight players make it to the finals, I’ll have to win 16 in a row to win the tournament.

I won the Women’s Legend Title, but I lost three matches during the league season. I’ve also never won a tournament without losing before.

Someone who couldn’t even beat 10 Women’s League players in a row now has to beat 13 professionals one after another.

Anyone would say that’s impossible.

Which is why I need to go do it.

“Beating 16 in a row would mean I could win a tournament where all professional players are eligible, right? No one could ignore me if I did it, right?”

“.....!”

An onion ring slips through Rinrin-*sensei*’s fingers and lands on the tray.

“That’s your plan? Do you like have the confidence to actually pull it off?”

“Confidence Well Honestly, I don’t know.”

I lined up the records of today’s opponents.

Playing through their matches, I couldn’t really tell if they were strong or not. None of their moves really jumped out at me.

It might be different once I’m sitting across from them, but———

“But I think playing fast will be my best chance to win. The only times I could pressure Master were when we played fast.”

“Ha-ha!! Any grade schooler who can honestly say they *pressured* Yaichi Kuzuryu has what it takes to win the Nebula Tournament, hands down.”

That’s the first time I’ve seen Rinrin-*sensei* smile since we got here.

Now that he has two titles, Master has even more *trust* than the Meijin in the Shogi world. That's especially true in Kanto. The players here almost seem afraid of him, dubbing him the Demon King of the West. Being so good and young has that effect.

But Master's kindness doesn't come across at all.

"Um"

"Yeah?"

"How is Tama Rokuroba-sensei?"

"Fuming. Whadda you expect?"

""

"You've gotta figure out for yourself why that is," says Rinrin-sensei, but it's obvious.

What I said on my own at the Conferring Ceremony caused all sorts of problems for her. There's no other reason And no guarantee she'll ever forgive me.

Even if I do become a professional some day.

"Welp, I'll be off! Got to start prepping for the match."

Rinrin-sensei stands up with her empty tray. I look up to offer to join her but stop myself in the nick of time.

The two of us getting spotted together will only cause more problems for her.

It's 15 minutes before my match.

I avoided people as much as I could on my way into the association building and came straight to the arena without greeting the employees in the office or stopping by the Women's Player's Room.

But a girl my age is going to stick out no matter what.

It's crowded here today because there are a lot of matches going on. This is my first time showing myself at an event with Shogi people since the Conferring

Ceremony.

“.....”

Their gaze feels sharp somehow, different from before.

My nerves make me more sensitive to other people looking at me before matches. I don't want to be the center of attention, but this is all my fault to begin with. I sit down in the lower seat and close my eyes.

Those oversensitive nerves of mine are picking up the auras coming off the professionals and Sub League players in the room.

Hostility, hatred and

———What's that?

Like interest or excitement Is that expectation in the air or are my nerves playing tricks on me?

“Morning.”

It's seven minutes before the match and I can tell someone just stepped up to the upper seat.

The first professional Shogi player I'll be facing in a real match.

Keiji Souza 7-*dan*.

He's a player in his late 50s who declared himself to be in the Free Class.

Grandpa-*sensei* is in the same generation, so I'm facing a veteran.

———He doesn't play the newest strategies but I can't let my guard down.

People call him the Ultimate Bouncer.

That's because even though he always belonged to C League Class 2, he sent many promising new players crashing back to earth. That includes the Meijin when he was young.

I look up at this man who has been fighting in the professional Shogi world since long before I was born, put my hands on the *tatami* mat and greet him.

“It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Yaichi Kuzuryu's apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru. I'm

honored to be playing against you today.”

“Ahh Yes. Likewise.”

Souza-*sensei* looks uncomfortable as he settles himself onto the cushion. Maybe it’s because the little girl who declared she would beat professional players at her Conferring Ceremony actually has decent manners?

He mutters something through those dry lips.

“..... Kuzuryu”

He played against Master in Placement Matches two seasons ago. Master dominated the match with a Bishop Exchange.

That was the first time Souza-*sensei* had been in danger of demotion, ever. So he changed to Free Class instead.

———He’s afraid of Master, isn’t he?

This is the first time I’ve used off-the-board tactics since joining the Women’s League.

I’ll do anything to win. I threw away my pride. All the trust and friendships I built, too. If it means winning, I’ll drink straight out of the gutter.

———Lose, and it’s all over So, I will win!!

The piece flip gives me the first move.

Then, once the time comes, Rinrin-*sensei* takes a breath and says, “Hinatsuru-*Women’s Legend*, please begin the match.”

“I’m ready when you are!”

I make a quick, forceful bow and move the Pawn in front of my Rook forward right away.

“.....”

Souza-*sensei* sips his tea before doing the same, advancing the Pawn in front of his Rook. Static Rook players call 8 Four Pawn the Ruler’s Hand. It means they welcome whatever the offensive player wants to throw at them.

I thought that might happen since he’s a higher ranking professional.

Then I move my Pawn another space forward, but I do it as cheekily as possible.

“..... A Double Wing, is it? Against a little girl”

More words mumbled from those dry lips.

I hadn't seen any competitive fire in Souza-sensei's fingertips until now. He snaps his Pawn down at 8 Five hard enough to make echoes fill the room.

“Seems I've been taken lightly, too.”

Rather than fear, hearing that makes me feel nostalgic. I've been told something similar before.

It was the first time Master and I played Shogi.

The Double Wing Attack was the only strategy I knew how to play back then. But challenging a professional to that kind of contest of strength can be taken as *arrogance*. It's like the way asking a veteran player not to take a handicap during an instructional match is considered *disrespectful*.

I had no idea at the time.

Now I know. That's why I'm taking advantage of it as an off-the-board tactic.

“Hngh!”

I make my next move so fast that our fingers nearly touch. This match is short on waiting time, but not using any at all is irritating and could be taken as a taunt.

The Double Wing is on the board.

———He took the bait!!

It feels like I've got a big fish on the hook.

“The line'll break if you reel it in right away. Let him swim all he wants to tire him out first,”

my father once told me while fishing at Nanao Bay, right next to the place I grew up. His voice is in my head as I quickly, but carefully set up my formation without using waiting time.

Souza-sensei's King is lightly defended, but he starts to attack even though he's on defense.

Being attacked by a professional player It's scary. Especially when I can't afford to lose.

But.

———Shakando-sensei's research went so much deeper

All the research I did during the series of five Women's Legend Title Matches and the experience I gained give me breathing room.

Shakando-sensei reviewed and revised her past matches over and over. Her passion for Shogi never wavered, even though she was a title holder for years and years while working so hard for the Women's League and raising an apprentice.

I don't get the same feeling from Souza-sensei.

Arrogance and carelessness are showing up in his formation. There's no crisp power to his advance, like muscles held back by a layer of fat.

I block it without much trouble at all.

"Mngh More solid than I thought. Interesting"

He breaks posture and crosses his legs to spend time thinking in this match without much time to begin with. It means he's confident that he can finish me off in the late-game without waiting time as long as he can think things through right now.

I'm sure professional players like him can read a lot.

But!

———Tsukiyomizaka-sensei was faster.

The Aggressive Archangel makes you endlessly face difficult choices in a Double Wing Attack. I've never beaten her, not once.

Even if I could read faster than her, Tsukiyomizaka-sensei's natural feel for Shogi runs circles around my reading ability. Flies circles actually, like she has angel wings.

——Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei* showed me why relying on reading speed alone was a weakness!

And I could say the same thing about this elderly player sitting in front of me.

“..... Mngh”

I keep blocking the moves that Souza-*sensei* managed to squeeze out of his brain after using all that time without having to use my own.

Waiting time is only melting away on Souza-*sensei*'s side. His formations can't gain ground. Impatience and irritation are radiating from across the board.

Once that irritation reached the breaking point.

“..... Let's settle this!!”

Souza-*sensei* suddenly lines up for a killing blow.

It's obvious that he's underestimated me, assuming that he'd win by using his professional skills to keep up the pressure by skipping the mid-game and going straight into the late-game.

He is certain he's going to win.

That level of arrogance paired with a strong fighting spirit coming across the board is almost abusive.

But!!

——Kugui-*sensei* was more tenacious!

Machi the Tormentor used everything at her disposal to plunge opponents into despair, on the board and off it. She taught me what was necessary to claim victory.

The Double Wing she played against me in the final Women's Legend League reminded me so much of Master, I thought he was playing it.

It threw my heart and my moves into chaos.

Compared to the heart-wrenching pain I felt that day, it's easy to keep a cool head as I shut down each sequence this professional tries to use against me.

“Souza-*sensei*, your waiting time has expired. Please make your moves within

30 seconds.”

“I know!!”

Souza-sensei can't hide his irritation anymore and snaps back at Rinrin-sensei. He's also scratching his head so loudly that I can hear it.

It's surprising how deep into the board you can read in 30 seconds if you can stay calm and think. But your vision narrows a lot if you lose your cool and it's easy to miss something.

“Tch!”

Souza-sensei's eyes dart between the clock and the board. I still have over twenty minutes left. He must feel like he's fighting a fully armored knight in his underwear.

———Which is why he should start playing defensively!

I clench my pant leg right above my knee. Hard enough to make wrinkles.

Professionals have a higher gear once they realize their back is against the wall. It won't be easy to put him in checkmate once he reinforces his formation. Chances are he won't willingly give up playing against a grade schooler like me. Round 2 starts now, and I have to be ready for anything!

But Souza-sensei plays a move that mocks my resolve.

“Huh?!” I say in surprise without meaning to.

It's because Souza-sensei chose to press the attack even after it had completely run out of fuel.

Something breaks inside me when I see that move.

“.....”

Plip, plip

Tears start coming out of my eyes. I stop and use some waiting time for the first time in the entire match.

But not to consider my next move. I have to wipe off my cheek.

“Wh-What's wrong?” comes Souza-sensei's startled voice.

Then he huffs through his nose and starts lecturing me like a teacher would do to an underperforming student.

“Yes, it hurts when you’re about to lose. But crying in front of your opponent is just plain rude. Kuzuryu may be your Master, but you’re part of the Kiyotaki line. If he ever finds out about this———”

“No That’s not it.”

Sniffle! I wipe my nose and accidentally say what I’m thinking.

How I really feel.

“..... You’re too weak”

“Too what?”

I reach out over the board.

When I pull it back, both Souza-sensei and Rinrin-sensei gasp in shock.

“Whaaat?!”

I boldly move in for a direct check path against the defending King.

It’s a longer sequence, one that might be missed when there’s a 30-second time limit. People might be surprised if one like it showed up in an amateur or Women’s League match.

But there’s no excuse for a professional not to notice.

“Ch checkmate? An instant death When did?”

Seeing the shock on his face makes my heart turn cold.

———After everything I’ve been through, he asks *when*?

Is this all? Is this the best professional players can do?

All the time and energy I put into getting to this match.

All the things I sacrificed just to sit here today.

Thinking back on everything It hurts so bad that the tears won’t stop.

Shakando-sensei told me to play Shogi that *makes my opponent stronger* but How am I supposed to feel that way? I have no idea.

“..... Too weak, was I? You may be right”

Souza-sensei's head drops in disappointment, like a puppet when its strings get cut. He signals his surrender with his hands but stays seated.

We never do a review session.

I played a Double Wing Attack in my afternoon match, too. Just like in the morning, I won with plenty of waiting time to spare.

Even though these matches weren't broadcast, word of the *little girl* who cried because her professional opponent was *too weak* spread like wildfire.

MATCH RECORD JOURNAL

“Well Let’s get started,” I say with a head bowed out of habit before realizing everything in front of me isn’t real and laugh at my own expense.

This fabricated scenery from Awaji is more realistic than the real thing, but the only setting in place is Shogi.

Then again———

“.....”

I could’ve sworn the silver-haired illusion of a girl sitting across from me just nodded.

———..... My imagination?

Did Akira throw in this feature as a bonus? Or is my brain bugging out because I want to see Big Sis so bad?

Either way, my competitive fire is burning now.

“Well, now that I’ve shown my respect”

With the first move, I build the formation that’s known as Shogi’s bread and butter.

A yagura.

Big Sis and I played it in our first match against each other.

Idolizing Master Kiyotaki’s *yagura* is what started us on the path to become Shogi pros.

“It’s been around for 400 years. It’s time to see if it’s still around after another 100!”

Full go from the first move. My brain is firing on all cylinders.

The introduction of software brought *snowroof* strategies into the forefront, and even I once said that the *yagura* was over.

But A League players Ayumu and Natagiri-sensei each used their own *yagura*

style in Placement Matches As far as I could tell, they worked out evenly.

———Natagiri-sensei lost to an instant death in that match, but let's see about the world's best supercomputer!!

Cutting right to the conclusion:

The *yagura* is still around 100 years from now.

It's here, but

"What's this"?

Awaji's move on the 20th turn stops my hand cold.

Once I had a *yagura*, Awaji changed to a Rapid Attack strategy, which computers tend to do. It's sort of a mix between the *yagura* and the Double Wing Attack, with some younger players dubbing it the 7 Seven Silver Double Wing rather than a *yagura* But that's fine.

As someone who specializes in the Double Wing, I can play my best Shogi out of this formation.

But Awaji plays something I can only call bizarre. Just a simple attack, sacrificing the Pawn in the Rook's column by moving it forward to 8 Eight.

"..... Is that viable? A straightforward trap like this."

I look up from the board and sneak a peek at the Big Sis across from me.

Of course, her expression doesn't change. It's artificial, so why would it?

"....."

On full alert, I read deeper into the board. Indeed, this sequence would let the defender take control of the pacing, so it's on me as the offender to prevent that from happening. It's necessary But.

"..... Are you saying building a *yagura* with the opening move already puts the offender at a disadvantage?"

Is the *yagura* already extinct then?

I boldly take Awaji's forward Pawn with my own to find that answer.

Big Sis no Awaji plays its move a second later.

The next column over, 7 Five Pawn!

“?! Forcing the Bishop’s Path open, huh? In that case!!”

In for a penny, in for a pound.

I take Awaji’s invitation and do the exchange. It immediately deploys the Bishop it took into position to take either my Rook or one of my Golds.

“Think I didn’t see something that obvious coming, did you?!”

I deploy my newly captured Bishop on the left edge of the board. It’s lined up to skewer both a Silver and the defending King. Now Awaji is on defense.

“Your attacks aren’t all that sharp for the world’s strongest! Can you block?!”

Sending in my Rook to promote to a Dragon on one side, I complete the pincer by deploying a Knight on the other. Slide my Bishop up into position to take the King, and my onslaught will be unstoppable.

———Wait I might actually have this.

Even though I haven’t read to checkmate, I like how this is shaping up. I can win———!!

I confidently press forward, but the end comes out of nowhere.

“Ngh?!”

Awaji’s counterattack hits my formation’s weak spot perfectly, like a laser-guided counter cross punch to the chin.

“..... 7 Eight Pawn. I see, that makes”

A hidden hole just got exploited.

That move makes my defeat all too clear.

I had no clue that weak spot was there It’s obvious that I’ll never win a race to checkmate now.

“Good match. I’ve lost this one.”

I throw in the towel after 56 moves. What really irks me though is Big Sis returning the bow. This time, I know I’m not imagining it.

“..... Awaji. Can I see the log?”

A detailed record of the match we just played appears in my line of sight along with a percentage rating for each move.

At the point where I knew I was in trouble, the rating was already 90% in the defender's favor. To be blunt, I didn't think I was *that* far behind For a supercomputer, that's the same as a loss.

The problem is finding exactly where things went south.

"The move where I went on the offensive Nope. Ah, now I see. Then was it taking the Pawn at 8 Six? The player with the first move shouldn't do that either?"

Shocking revelations hit me one after another as I rewind the match.

"..... Advancing the Pawn in front of the Rook after my opening move made my rating fall? Huh? Before that? Opening the Bishop Path?! No way!!"

The *yagura* isn't all that's over.

That's what Awaji is telling me.

The age of *yagura*, Double Wing and Bishop Exchange is over.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! This can't be right! If those openings make the formation worse, then there's no advantage of going first at all!"

Sure, Ranging Rook strategies are left, but I mean, come on.

No offense to the World Maestro, but I have my doubts.

Apparently, there was a time 20-some years ago when a bunch of Static Rook players switched to Ranging Rook, but that fad ended real fast.

"..... All right. Why don't you show me how it's done? Playing the first move."

That's when the real shocks start.

Awaji considers the opening move for a split second.

Once I see it I nearly quit Shogi.

"..... Huuuh?"

The supercomputer showing itself as Big Sis reaches out and grabs——the King.

And moves it one space forward.

5 Eight King.

The Pawn in front of the Rook is still in place and the Bishop's Path is shut.

Not only that. The King is now blocking the Rook's horizontal path.

"Y-Yeah That's not Static or Ranging Rook, but But!!"

Anger starts bubbling up.

How could it not? This supercomputer just snubbed 1,400 years of human progress.

"..... Trying to be funny, huh?! I'll tear you to shreds!!"

I set out to punish Awaji for that ridiculous opening move but got beaten back so hard I had to throw in the towel before the 30th move.

"Nope, can't do this. Not in a million years. I mean, that's not even Shogi."

"Griping on day one?"

Submerged all the way to my neck in the bathtub, I report to Ai Yashajin what happened in today's matches.

Smart speakers have been installed in several spots around the room, so voice commands are all I need to do pretty much anything. The bath fills on its own and I don't need to turn the knob to start the shower.

It's even possible to communicate with the outside from the tub, like I'm doing right now.

"It was taking it easy on you, actually, because the settings won't let it read for more than a second. Today's Shogi was maybe 20 years from now, let alone 100."

"20 years That's it?"

Which means I'd be playing that in my prime, just before hitting 40 years old.

This would've been a blessing beyond words just a few years ago At least, it should've been.

Because right now, I'm too exhausted to feel joy or frustration. That's what Shogi will look like in 20 years All the research pros are doing right now is meaningless.

Ai changes the subject out of the blue as if the conversation had already run its course.

"Have you heard of the boiling frog?"

"Is that Chinese food?"

"A warning in business, moron," says the business savvy prodigy, scorning her Master who never went to high school. *"A frog will jump away if it's thrown right into a boiling pot of water. However, it will miss its chance to escape if the heat is slowly turned up and be boiled to death."*

"Oh, I see now. You think I'm a frog."

The bath temperature isn't too high, is it?

"I'll keep it so the settings aren't lethal. By the time you're done, you'll be able to communicate with Awaji as a full-fledged oracle of the future."

"That's the hope"

I scrub my face with the sloshing bathwater. I always have since I was a kid, and Big Sis used to call that *gross* back when we'd bathe together.

The refreshing jolt that comes from washing your face helps reset the mind. It's safe to say that a refreshing splash of water to the face is the one thing players look forward to in the middle of a match, for men at least.

Now then There are a few strategies I can use to contend with Awaji.

"By the way, are there any standards programmed into Awaji?"

"No. Standards would be pointless."

Ai shoots that down in no time flat. There goes my best tool for making a plan.

I was thinking I could memorize the standard sequences Awaji used for

reference. That would be the quickest method to fight back, but

“Besides, all of Awaji’s resources aren’t being devoted to your matches in the first place, Sensei. It continuously plays matches against itself to grow stronger. Its moves get more precise the stronger it gets. What point is there in models based on research from a bygone era?”

“Then it’s growing fast enough to rewrite the standards themselves So much for trying to come up with a strategy.”

“.....”

Playing tons of matches in the old-fashioned way is the only option. Then again, that’s fine by me because there’s no point winning with shortcuts.

“..... What are standards, anyway?”

“Come again? The standards are standards, yeah?”

Getting philosophical all of a sudden

Since Ai has already spent a lot more time with Awaji than I have, there’s no doubt she has the most advanced Shogi sense in the world right now.

———There has to be a meaning to each word, but

I still can’t pick up the tiniest piece of it.

“You’re in for a long battle. I’ll have them support you whatever you need, so let me know.”

“Some encouraging words would be great.”

“Moron.”

Click. She hung up on me.

“..... I was being serious.”

Of course, playing so much takes a toll on me physically, but it’s all over if my fighting spirit breaks from all these matches. Any lingering attachments I have to the Shogi I’ve learned before now could slam the door to the future closed.

Curiosity is my fuel.

“All right What Shogi are you going to show me tomorrow?”

Awaji wiped the floor with me today, but I'm still curious.

As a human being, I had no way of looking a few hours into the future.

Otherwise, I'd have known that this mental leeway would be obliterated by the second night.



Tsubasa Gakumeki Women's 1-*kyu* and I get into the sauna at the HinaTsuru after playing a few practice matches.

"Hfff Hfff S-So hot"

"I'll use the *loylykauha* ladle, Tsubasa."

"Whaaat?! A-Ai You're going to make it even hotter?!"

Hssshhh!

The aromatic water hits the hot stones, filling the room with mist that smells like a pristine forest.

"*Hyeeee*! H-Haaa!! Hoooooot!!"

My mother insisted on making everything here as authentic as possible. The vapor bath is designed to work exactly like the ones in Finland.

"Okay, shall we get out?"

"Huh? I-I'm fine. I can stand a bit more"

"Only stay in the sauna for eight to twelve minutes. Then half an hour in the air bath completes one set. That's the cycle."

"Wh-What about getting in the water"

"That's uniquely Japanese, and many people don't like it. An air bath gets great results by itself. Oh, and don't forget to hydrate."

"A-Ai Are you really in grade school"

I get two bottles of ion water out of the fridge that opens directly into the sauna and we gulp them down.

Then we have a review session of today's Shogi while looking out over Tokyo's night skyline. It's amazing how many sequences come to you after sweating in the sauna that you missed during the matches! See, great results!

About three months after moving to Osaka, the stress of living without a big

bath got so bad at one point that I collapsed.

———Back then, I thought not having a hot spring close by was the problem

Now I understand that playing Shogi had thrown off my nervous system.

Strange things happen to me during matches.

Blurred vision, increased heart rate, nose bleeds, not being able to sleep after important matches, those kinds of things.

I can focus extremely well when the switch is flipped.

That's where my strength comes from But it's also a weakness.

The more matches I play, the stronger my opponents are My small body works so hard that I get exhausted really easily.

Going into a sauna like this helps force my nerves back into order. Now I can finally get to sleep after matches.

"I've heard the younger professionals love saunas Sub League members, too It's refreshing And you can do review sessions at the same time Like this"

"....."

"Your strategy in the Nebula Tournament worked like a charm Didn't it? It's hard to beat a professional player's research when you're both playing Static Rook Making them play against your best strategy is the only choice"

"Yes. And it was all thanks to your suggestion, Tsubasa."

"He-he E-Even I think it's a little unfair"

I should focus all my preparations on my best strategy, the Double Wing Attack.

The first question I asked when Tsubasa said that was: *"What if he plays Ranging Rook?"*

Tsubasa's answer was direct and clear.

“Mimicking software is enough to handle that More Women’s League players play Ranging Rook, so we have the experience to keep up with the professionals already right?”

She’s right that software is making life hard for Ranging Rook players.

“B-But There’s so many types of Ranging Rook”

“There’s a good trick A sequence that limits Ranging Rook options with just two moves”

“There is?! R-Really?! Are you sure?”

Tsubasa taught me how to do it.

And she was the one who said I should use my standing as a girl in elementary school to my advantage. That’s how you take control of matches and learn to hold your own in the Shogi world.

*“I-I lose when I try to play head on against another Static Rook player because my early game isn’t good enough So I planned on *nyugoku* from the start. If I can get my King all the way across the board, I’ll have experience on my side”*

Tsubasa used to be in the Sub League.

She played against people who are professionals now. She always had to tread water, finding ways to close the distance between her and them in a battle for survival.

*“Even though they knew that’s what I was doing, men want to protect their pride. Many let me do it I got called a *submarine* or a *bottom feeder* but that was the only way I could win in the Sub League”*

“.....”

*“But, with your skill in the late-game Forcing a Double Wing Attack with *that trick* You should be able to beat a professional”*

*“..... Uh-huh. And *that* worked pretty well during our practice session, too.”*

Even if all the Static Rook young professionals standing in my way refuse to play a Double Wing Attack, *that* strategy gives me a fighting chance. That

miraculous ambush, which was refined with ultimate speed.

More importantly

Now that Tsubasa brought up *professionals* and *Sub League members* on her own, now is my chance to ask her something I've been wondering about for a long time.

"Tsubasa, um"

"Wh-What is it, Ai"

"I was sure you would be the first person to abandon me."

"Whaaaaaaa?! Wh-Wh-Wh Why"

"With what I'm trying to do I thought you would see it as unfair, like cheating"

"Ahh"

Tsubasa was forced out of the Sub League because of the age limit. She's one of the *players who didn't make it* that Natagiri-sensei mentioned.

And I'm trampling all over their feelings

"..... Please don't take this the wrong way"

Tsubasa hesitates, like trying to find the best words for something that's hard to say.

"Out of everyone I know who has left the Sub League, I don't think many at all have quit playing Shogi."

"Uwhee?! R-Really?"

"If they don't play in an amateur tournament for a while, I get an *I wonder what they're up to* kind of feeling. Nothing dark or grim at all."

She doesn't look like she's putting on a brave face.

Actually, it looks like there's relief in Tsubasa's eyes even though she's talking about her life's biggest failure.

"Of course, I was depressed when I had to quit, but I don't think people can stay all that depressed for too long Once I figured it out, that is."

“Figured what out?”

“That I love Shogi, but hated the Sub League

I’ve heard plenty of stories about how rough it is in the Sub League.

But most of the people I’ve ever talked about it with made it through to become a professional player in the end. So I’ve never heard anyone be so bluntly negative about it.

Everything feels so real coming from someone who had to leave, and it’s all I can do to listen to every word.

“It’s nice that you’re trying to be considerate of players who had to leave, but We don’t really want pity I think.”

“.....!!”

“We’ll only ever be thought of as *poor* for the rest of our lives that way.”

It’s like she can see right through me. I drop my head without even realizing it.

“..... I’m sorry.”

“No, no! I’m sorry, too. It was the same for me I felt guilty just like you when I first joined the Women’s League, but I didn’t have to

Tsubasa’s kindness, trying to stop me from going through the same pain she did, warms my heart.

The former Sub League member turned Women’s League player looks out over Tokyo’s night skyline and says, “But for me personally? I was in the Sub League for almost ten years but didn’t make a single friend

“.....?”

“Ah, I didn’t mean it like that. I had war buddies. Like my older brother apprentice who left the same time I did And there are some who still cheer for me now that I’m in the Women’s League

What’s Tsubasa trying to say?

That she’s happy we’ve become friends? Is that it?

“But no friends that I’d talk to outside of Shogi.”

“.....”

“I devoted everything I am to the Sub League. I joined in sixth grade, right after becoming the Elementary Meijin. I hit a wall right away and barely ever went to class in junior high. I mean, if I had time to study, I should be using it for Shogi. I never went to high school either, in case that wasn’t obvious.”

But Tsubasa continues as she wrings the empty plastic bottle between her hands.

“By the time junior high graduation rolled around, people were starting to say things like *that one’s not gonna make it into the pros*. My parents and my Master begged me to go to high school. I told ’em I was going to take entrance tests, but spent the whole time playing Shogi in a net cafe. How was I supposed to pass a high school entrance exam having hardly ever gone to junior high? Like that would ever happen.”

There’s a strange heat in her voice when she talks about the Sub League.

It’s pouring out of every word.

“My Shogi got worse the moment I entered the Sub League,” says the girl known as Undying Wings in a voice so low it gives me chills. “Getting into the Women’s League and playing the practice matches with you I finally feel like I’m back to where I used to be When I was playing in the Elementary Meijin Tournament. So———”

“So what?”

I have an idea what she’s going to say.

“I’m going to keep getting strong and aim for the pros, too!”

An optimistic statement of some kind.

But I was wrong.

Her tone is dark, filled with a need for vengeance.

“Ai I want you to tear that whole thing to pieces. Mess it up just as badly as it messed up my Shogi. I want you to tear down the whole Shogi world!”

There's a twisted glimmer in her eyes that turns my straightened nerves upside down again.

———How can I shoulder these feelings?

The fear of opening a door that should've been kept closed sweeps over me.

The fear of knowing that my own words and actions are leading to a place I never expected.

They're closing in now, even after how far I've come.

"I knew it the instant you stood up in front of all those *pro senseis* and made your declaration. What I really wanted was revenge on the Shogi world. I have nothing against any of the players, but Shogi history will only remember me as *retired*. I want this system to pay dearly."

"....."

That's when I finally realized what I felt during the Nebula Tournament preliminaries.

It came from the Sub League members people who are in pain like Tsubasa.

Can't win, but can't quit Shogi either.

It was hope being pinned on me by people who are suffering in the present perfect tense.

That's not the same as support.

They want someone to destroy this Shogi world, but they don't care who.

———..... I can't carry feelings I've never had myself

My heart is about to snap.

I feel so alone, in so much more pain than I ever did playing against a professional player.

"..... Save me Master, " I whisper inside my own mouth so Tsubasa won't hear me. Save me. Save me, please

Of course, no one will. This is the path that I chose for myself.

I have to keep going forward.

No matter what destiny is waiting for me, I have to go into the future.

RECORD 3

生
石
充

MITSURU
OISHI

生
石
飛
鳥

ASUKA
OISHI

CONTINUATION - MATCH JOURNAL

Day 2 playing against Awaji.

I'm still getting the snot beaten out of me. The opening moves don't make sense.

The log says that my moves were terrible when I look back after the match, but I don't have a clue why. Everything Awaji plays feels off somehow, but there are moments when I feel like I understand. Then, when I play a natural response to it, my rating plummets for some reason.

There's no coming back from that no matter how much water I tread. It's like being trapped in a bottomless swamp. I committed tons of waiting time to each of my moves today while Awaji barely used a second. Yet I can't even hold my own ground.

I'm just going to play as many matches as possible tomorrow in hopes of finding an opening of some kind. Even a sliver of hope would mean the world to me right now.

Day 3.

I went all out on quantity today.

I hit Awaji with every Static Rook strategy I could think of, from the latest trends to really old standards, but got absolutely nowhere. Rather than getting left in the dust during the mid-game, I couldn't get any traction from the get-go. For whatever reason, my rating is in free fall from the very first move according to Awaji's log anyway. I still don't feel like trying out Ranging Rook.

Are 2 Six Pawn and 7 Six Pawn really bad opening moves?

Whatever Awaji is playing, it isn't the Shogi I know.

I feel like I'm stranded in some far-off country with no idea how to speak the language. This loneliness might kill me.

Day 4

It's funny how futile my efforts have been. I have no idea what I should play from the very second I sit down at the board, which is a first.

Rather than being painful or agonizing from all the defeats, it's this *loneliness* that's getting to me. The fear of not knowing what's going to happen next. I came here to see Shogi from 100 years in the future, but I can't see anything at all.

Seriously! What have I been doing with my life?

If every Static Rook strategy is wiped out in the next 100 years, then all the research that other pros and I are doing right now will eventually be used to prove *Static Rook was wrong*. It's like solving math problems, but the very first line isn't right. The rest of the pro Shogi world has to know ASAP

But who could I tell?

Day 5

I tried mimicking Awaji today. Like moving the King forward first. That one.

But I got slaughtered, of course.

Maybe the early-game isn't the problem. Am I just weak? If that's the case, there's hope

Day 7

Today marks a full week in this room.

I haven't spoken to anyone in so long, I'm afraid I might forget how to talk.

How long has it been since I completely shut myself off from the outside to play Shogi? Since I moved out of Master's place to live on my own? But Big Sis let herself in all the time and I had other young pros stay over quite a lot before Ai Hinatsuru showed up. I never felt alone in those days.

This place should be the perfect environment for me to focus on Shogi But I can't seem to concentrate on it no matter how hard I try.

Maybe I could communicate with Awaji if the machine specs are lowered? Part of me feels like that would defeat the point of me being here, though

I'm starting to forget how I used to play Shogi

Day 8

Ginko has shown up in my dreams pretty much every night since I got here. Then again, I suppose that's only natural.

The one that comes up the most is from the time before I joined the Sub League, when the two of us went to amateur tournaments.

Ginko's family was in the dream I had today. I remember her mother, who looks just like her, very well. But her father, not so much. Now that I think about it, they live somewhere in Osaka Ward but never once came to visit Master's place. I remember seeing them come to root for her at tournaments, but did they not want her to feel homesick or something?

That train of thought was my escape from reality today. My Shogi was a complete disaster.

Day 10

..... So much pain.

I'm depressed the moment I wake up. Turning the headset on physically hurts. How awesome would it be to just be lazy and lie around in bed? Just thinking about another match against Awaji zaps any desire I have to play Shogi at all. This throbbing headache could split my skull open any time now. I'm sweating buckets nonstop, and constantly feel like I'm going to puke.

"Should I just call it quits?" I yell into my pillow over and over again.

Quit what? Playing against Awaji?

Or quit Shogi?

Would there be any point in living if I stopped playing Shogi?

I picture what it would be like to leave this room. It all feels wonderful for a

fleeting moment before despair floods my body from head to toe.

If I left here right now I'd have to live an ordinary life while being the only one who knows how humanity is going to end. That's an even deeper, darker despair.

Nothing can be the same again now that I know the future.

Day 15

Pain. Pain.

Painpa

Day 20

Oh, now I get it.

I just have to uninstall.

COMPUTERS AND SHOGI PUZZLES

I make a heart shape in front of my chest and look into the camera.

“M moe, moe kyun≡”

Ker-shak! Ker-shak, shak!

Flashes and clicks go off again and again in a room inside this cheap-looking building in Akihabara, Tokyo.

One beat later, the young woman behind the camera starts yelling at me.

“Your smile’s stiff as a board! Again!”

“Moe, moe squee.≡”

“The heart mark was twisted! Again!”

“Moe, moe squee!”

“Your voice fell flat! Retake!!”

“Wh-Why?! Voices don’t matter for pictures!!”

“Because I’m taking video as well, naturally. The times call for video! Sound is paramount! Even the mere clicks of Shogi pieces sell as ASMR! A female student’s hair and voice can turn a profit here in Akihabara!”

Special units of the local police would get sent here if they heard some of the things Machi Kugui-Yamashiro Ouka is yelling at me, and her strict demands keep coming.

Kugui-sensei is doing a field piece for a Shogi magazine today, and she asked me to help out.

..... So then why is it I’m in a maid outfit taking pictures with an omelet I made myself?

What does any of that have to do with Shogi?

Kugui-sensei looks down at the camera screen and thinks for a few long moments.

“Only the very first photo captured the fresh purity of an elementary school student. It’s settled! This picture it is.”

“

Squeee

“I’m surprised you went out of your way to reserve a café just to take pictures, though It looks like a maid café that isn’t open to customers yet. How did you get to use this place?”

“Simple. I am a tenant in this building.”

“Whaaat?! K-Kugui-sensei you run a maid café in Akihabara?!”

“No, no. It’s a *con-café* that has maids, is all.”

“Con-..... café? Like a crime?”

“That’s short for concept café. A genre that maid cafés are part of, if you must be specific.”

“Uwhee?”

“The *yagura* is the most well-known of all Shogi strategies, but the *yagura* is only one of many Static Rook formations, no? That is the same relationship between maid cafés and con-café.”

Akihabara is complicated

“This one is due to open this fall as a Shogi con-café. Specifically the theme is *using Shogi to fend off demons that have descended upon this maid café in the human realm*. So the maids are the demons, in a sense. Customers have many treasure troves to choose from lately, thus much effort must be committed to the concept. Otherwise, the net will never catch wind of its existence, let alone go viral.”

“

I take a closer look at the menu.

Moe moe omelet: 1500 yen.

Demon☆ Fuel Energy Drink: 2000 yen,

Pics: 500 yen each.

Mixed in there is Instructional Match: 3000 yen, which is the only price that kind of makes sense.

There are staff pictures on the wall, too. But the *cast* is wearing cat ear tiaras and two of them are labeled *Machi* and *Ryou*

“Huh? Two of those demon maids look a lot like Women’s Shogi Title Holders

“That’s the demons playing tricks on you.”

Kugui-*sensei* then changes the topic, very bluntly.

“Ah, it is such a relief to have quality photographs on hand! I have big plans, something along the lines of *Women’s Legend Ai Hinatsuru Exclusive! A Day in the Life of the Beautiful, Prodigious Women’s Title Holder! An 11-year-old’s summer only comes once!* It needs a cover worthy of the title.”

“It’s a Shogi magazine, right?”

“That it is. Why ask the obvious?”

She starts lamenting strange things, like it would be perfect if only I played a more defensive, *receptive style*. Apparently, the key words *Akiba*, *maid*, and *receive* really strike a chord with Shogi people. I wonder why.

“I had been hoping for an interview with both sister apprentices. On the bright side, the leftover pages can be devoted to more of your photos. Put the whole set into the digital release, pair that with videos and ratchet up the price 10,000 yen a pop A steal, for sure!≡”

“Ten-chan refused to do an interview with me?”

“In a heartbeat, yes.”

Kugui-*sensei*’s eyes jump for a second and she rushes to explain.

“But not because she didn’t want to talk with you, Ai. She refuses all interactions with the media. Perhaps she developed a distaste for us journalists after what violating the rules cost her in the Queen Title Match against Ginko?”

“I know Ten-chan was upset when that happened, but

She told me that she liked the article I wrote about that match, so I don't think she has a grudge against media people.

I haven't tried to contact her after I moved to Kanto.

If I had the chance to talk with her what would I say? There are so many questions I want to ask, but I'm afraid to hear her answers to any of them

Thinking about all this is making me sad, so I change the topic.

"Are you sure opening in Akihabara is the best choice? There's no connection to Shogi here at all."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

Kugui-*sensei* points one of her white fingers out the window at a building in front of the station.

"The owner of that building there, the Akihabara Radio Kaikan, was a famous Shogi puzzle creator."

"Whaaat?! S-Shogi puzzles?!"

"His pockets ran deep. According to my Master, the scent of money would lure Shogi people to Akihabara to show off their own Shogi puzzles and collections they'd unearthed from the Edo period. Then again, Shogi puzzles were just an excuse to strike up conversations and ask to borrow money from him, as it were."

"Debts"

Akihabara is sacred ground for *otakus* and technology.

Finding out it used to be the same for Shogi puzzles makes my heart race.

"For regular people, Shogi puzzles are just that: puzzles. Making the long, complicated 17-move checkmate ones takes time, and only a handful of pros will sit down to solve them. There's so much more demand for the 3-move checkmate puzzles."

As someone who learned how to play Shogi with Shogi puzzles, I'm not sure how to feel about that.

I know that no one can make a living just making Shogi puzzles anymore.

Professional players say they're a waste of time because those sequences never happen in real matches.

Even Master told me he *couldn't recommend making Shogi puzzles during training*, point blank.

But, I

"The cream of the crop creators got together to make a crown jewel of unreleased puzzles. The association was even on board to publish it and made a manuscript. They even set up the royalty payments. But the whole project fizzled when the Radio Kaikan owner passed away. The creators who sold their works for profit could very well have complained had the release been pushed through."

"..... Where is it now?"

"Pardon?"

"The manuscript with the puzzles. I'm curious what they're like"

"Filed away in the editor's office, I believe. I'll copy it for you should I happen across it. Think of it as my thanks for today."

"Thank you so much!"

"But anyone coming to Akihabara in pursuit of Shogi material these days has their eyes set on a computer. Times sure have changed," *Sensei* tells me as she puts her equipment away. "Well! Now that the photo session has concluded, why don't we take care of your errand, Ai?"

"Y-Yes, please!"

I'm actually the one who asked *Kugui-sensei* if we could meet in Akihabara today because it would fit into my schedule.

Today———I'm here to choose a computer.

TO BUY A COMPUTER

“Um Kugui-*sensei*? A-Are we really going outside dressed like this?”

“Naturally.”

I’m getting pulled out of the building and onto the street known as Pedestrian Paradise. It’s a bit scary, but Kugui-*sensei* sounds like she can’t wait.

“Since we’re already here in Akihabara, what better way is there to do some advertising for the magazine and the café than a costumed jaunt through the streets?≡”

I’m still in a maid outfit, but with kitty ears and a tail.

Kugui-*sensei* is next to me, also wearing a maid’s outfit Except, she’s got fox ears and a big, bushy tail.

If Maria were here, she’d surely be yelling, “Do not mimic one such as I!”

“Hawaiian shirts are the standard for the Hawaiian islands, no? Cosplay is much the same for Akihabara. When in Rome, as they say.”

“I really, really don’t think that’s true”

Yes, there are maids handing things out to people along Pedestrian Paradise everywhere I look.

Their outfits are pretty skimpy because it’s summer out. They’re more like girls standing outside in their underwear with frilly headbands than maids.

Compared to them, we shouldn’t stand out at all.

..... But I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“M-My word, the quality of those two maids is off the charts!!”

“That one’s a tween, don’t you think?!”

“The other’s got a massive pair! What are those, J-cups?!”

“Excuse me! Can I get a picture, please?!”

“Fox dance, fox dance!!”

We get swarmed the second we step out onto Pedestrian Paradise. It's already so bad, we can't go anywhere.

Then.

"Settle down, settle down! Give them some space!"

The man who's accompanying me today steps forward and starts directing people around using the kebab he's holding like a baton.

"One picture per person, no exceptions! Change out with the next person in line as soon your picture is taken! If you upload to social media, make sure to add the hashtag *Shogi Con-Café!*"

It's Master's older brother.

Mom has put him through strict training as a new employee, and it looks like he has enough basic customer interaction skills to work at a hotel.

"If I may———"

Kugui-*sensei* asks the plainest questions once the first wave of pictures are over.

"You are Yaichi's elder brother, correct? Why have you been at Ai's hip all day? Have you become her manager of sorts?"

"Company orders. The manager assigned me to join the young mistress on her errand today."

That's what he says, but I'm pretty sure he's here to stop me from making any more *announcements* during the interview.

My frustration starts coming out.

"..... Shouldn't you be working?"

"A good deal of my job can be done remotely. That's how the system was designed."

"In other words, you cannot contribute enough for others to notice your absence, yes?"

"Hah hah hah!"

He laughs at Kugui-*sensei*'s remark and chomps down on his kebab. That laugh sounds just like Master's. Just the laugh.

"I used to come here all the time back when I was in college. I know these streets like the back of my hand."

Came here to do what, I wonder. Now, I'm even more nervous

..... But once he guides us to a computer shop, Master's older brother talks to the clerk and gets everything I'll need together like clockwork.

Kugui-*sensei* and I stay back and watch him work. Another swarm would show up in no time if we stepped out in the open

"Do you use a high spec computer as well, Kugui-*sensei*?"

"In my case, writing match articles is the main purpose for my machine. Women's League matches often deviate from the software's best moves at an early stage."

"Double Static Rook also doesn't happen very much compared to professional matches."

"That said, software can be most helpful for devising against Ranging Rook strategies as well. Placing Golds beneath the King for defense, for example. Or the Millenium formation."

"One *sensei* is racking up victory stars with Millenium right now, too."

I offhandedly bring up what I heard from Tsubasa, and Kugui-*sensei* keeps her tone friendly and casual when she asks.

"Surely your reason for purchasing a computer today isn't to go on a tear of your own in the Women's League, now is it, Ai?"

"..... No."

I've gotten into the main stage of the Nebula Tournament and also finished the first day of recording with victories. That makes four straight wins against professionals, including the preliminaries

But the real challenge starts at the next recording session.

I hide the pressure I'm under as best I can and shake my head.

“Against the younger professional *senseis* waiting for me in the main tournament, I won’t stand a chance if I can’t use the latest software programs. I might even lose right from the early-game

“Is Ginko included in that list of *younger professionals*?”

That question rolls off her tongue. It’s a big signal that the *interview* is actually still going on.

———Actually, this is the real one

Kugui-*sensei* is trying to find out why I want to test into the professional league. Now that we’re just chatting after the scheduled interview, she’s hoping to catch me with my guard down

But this is also the moment I’ve been waiting for.

I answer like it’s just small talk.

“Sora-*sensei* will be back. Sooner rather than later, too.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because you seemed very rushed during our match *Sensei.*”

“.....!”

The air next to me changes in the blink of an eye.

It’s the same vibe as a wounded animal. One where you can tell it’s looking for the slightest opening to sink its teeth into your throat.

A menacing, deadly air.

I know fully well I’ve stepped on that animal’s tail but press on without missing a beat.

“You’re usually so calculated when you play, but you showed all your cards in the final Women’s Legend Tournament match, Kugui-*sensei*. Your connection with Master, the results of your research with software, pulling out all the stops. I think I would have lost the match if you hadn’t been in a hurry.”

“..... Why no. My loss would still stand, regardless.”

Once she shoots me the bewitching sideways glance of a wild animal, *Machi*

the Tormentor pulls back her claws and takes on a friendly air again.

She's calling for a truce.

But I press a step further.

"Sora-sensei can still play Shogi, I think. She wasn't trying to distance herself from the game She needed space from him, probably."

My old self would never have pushed the envelope this far, especially not with a higher-ranking player like Kugui-sensei.

But we're on even footing now that I have a title. When I see a battle I can win, you can bet I'll press my advantage.

"..... I can relate more to Sora-sensei now that I'm trying to become a professional player, too."

"That so?"

"Her whole thought process is based on *what to do to get stronger*. I doubt that's changed"

My phrasing had to come across like a taunt, something like *we are on a different level, one that you don't understand*, depending on how Kugui-sensei takes it. But she just listens.

"I have to become a professional to have a chance to battle against her. That's why I want to take a Professional Entrance Exam and why I need a high-spec computer. Is that answer good enough?"

"Half."

"Huh?"

"That's half of what I'm after. As for the other, I'll do some investigating myself which is my line of work."

She then shapes her right hand like a fox and grins from ear to ear.

That sign means Kugui-sensei is closing off her true feelings.

"By the way, Ai. With whom have you been playing Shogi with as of late? Practice partners must be scarce, no? I've connections with strong amateur players should you wish to meet them."

“Tsubasa is Gakumeki Women’s 1-*kyu* has been doing practice sessions with me.”

“Now that you mention it, she was the match recorder for the fifth match in the Women’s Legend Title Match. Close, are you?”

“Yes!”

“Socializing has never been that girl’s strong suit. It’s so nice to hear she has a friend in you, Ai. What’s she up to today, I wonder.”

“She’s on a date.”

“..... Pardon?”

Kugui-*sensei*’s jaw drops, making her pretty face stretch for just a moment.

Then, looking more shocked than I’ve ever seen her before, she grabs both of my shoulders.

“Un Undying Wings is dating someone?! Wh-Wh-Who?!”

“He’s a former Sub League member and used to be her older brother apprentice. I don’t think they’re trying to keep it a secret or anything Ah, she just sent a picture.”

I turn my phone around to show Kugui-*sensei* a selfie Tsubasa took with her boyfriend.

They look so happy, holding hands right outside the aquarium.

“Th-That certainly looks to be Miss Gakumeki”

“He’s the one who asked her out and said he was serious about getting married. Tsubasa told me she wanted to wait until she had established herself in the Women’s League a bit more, but she said that her *resolve was as solid as a Silver Crown Anaguma* but his *Primitive Climbing Silver* was just too persistent!
≡”

“Undying Wings u-using *Shogi love metaphors only women who play Shogi would understand* that Undying Wings?!”

Kugui-*sensei* doesn’t usually taste defeat, but she sure is now.

With a dry laugh, she says, “Here’s a living *Hachishaku*, that specter with long

rivers of black hair, striding through an aquarium on a lovey-dovey date with her boy toy Yet here I am cosplaying in Akihabara with some little girl on my day off Machi the Tormentor has fallen, indeed Ha-ha"

"Excuse me?"

Sure, Tsubasa is wearing a pretty white summer dress and a matching wide-brimmed hat with her long hair flowing out the back Huh?

She does look like a *Hachishaku*, doesn't she"

"This may sound strange coming from myself But doesn't love seem to be in the air throughout the Shogi world recently?"

"*Sora-sensei* might have had something to do with it."

Tamayon-*sensei* said it all the time: "more than half of Women's Players could never make enough to live on just playing Shogi."

The pay is close to a part-time job, but it's nowhere near as consistent as shifts working at a restaurant.

"There are other options for side income, like modeling or TV spots, but balancing those jobs with Women's League matches is very hard. So the best way to keep playing Shogi———"

"Is to be a housewife for the stability, yes?" Kugui-*sensei* finishes my sentence.

Sora-sensei becoming a professional brought Women's Shogi into the spotlight.

But that bubble popped right away because she took a leave of absence All that's left are lots and lots of girls who joined the Practice League because they wanted to be like her.

The number of Women's League players could double in a few years if the qualifications for joining the league aren't changed. The pie is already too small, and more players coming in would only reduce the pay even further if more matches aren't added"

"Actually, I started the con-café with the intention of providing Women's League players with a place to work while playing Shogi It may be a

meaningless drop in the bucket though.”

“I don’t think it’s good for the Women’s League for one strong player to hold all the titles. It probably wouldn’t be a good thing for that person, either.”

“An interesting point. Thus, the woman who has grown too strong should have an avenue into the professional league. That very well could be a necessity moving forward.”

It sounds disrespectful coming from me, I know.

———After only winning a single title match So arrogant.

But it’s not just me.

Ten-chan and Empress Ika Sainokami.

Those two are so much stronger than nearly all of the Women’s League.

I beat Miss Sainokami when I was in the Practice League, but she wasn’t taking me seriously. I don’t think I was ever on her radar. She was laser-focused on Master and inflicting damage on Sora-*sensei* next to him by toying with me.

———What would happen if I played against her for real?

She recently played against Sota Kunugi 4-*dan* using a weird strategy, but lost to a sudden death in the end. The media people wrote it off, blaming her mistake on jitters from being in the spotlight. But there’s no way she could’ve beat Sora-*sensei* if playing against a little boy with so many people watching made her nervous. Nothing about that match made sense, including *overlooking* a sudden death sequence.

But what really made no sense at all was———

“..... Ten-chan”

The first thing I did after my title match was over was line up every single one of Ten-chan’s title matches.

10 total matches against 3-*dan* members of the Sub League.

The image I got playing through them felt off in every way. Especially when Ten-chan lost, it didn’t feel like she was making the moves.

———Media people explained it as, “She made mistakes against a higher ranking player”

The Ten-chan I know plays an extremely calculated style with almost no mistakes.

Defensive players can’t win if they mess up.

There were several times I wasn't sure if Ten-chan was playing correctly.

The Ten-chan I know wouldn’t have played any of those moves.

More like———

“..... It wasn’t the Shogi I know”

How can I put this *off* feeling into words?

It’s like the same one I got from Miss Sainokami, but so much more advanced Yes, there’s an *advanced* sense to Ten-chan’s Shogi.

A sense that shouldn’t exist in this world.

There’s something else that scares me even more.

———Why did that Shogi *feel nostalgic to me*

“Young Mistress? Miss Hinatsuru?”

“Wha?! Oh Wh-What is it?”

“Everything’s done. Your new computer is squared away.”

Master’s older brother bought everything while I was lost in thought. He even arranged to have it delivered. Was I thinking for that long?

“Th-Thank you for doing so much”

“There’s no need to thank me. Just doing my job.”

Kugui-*sensei* stretches and says, “Shall we adjourn?”

“Huh? Don’t we need to buy the software?”

“Software is readily available for free online, so no.”

“Huuuh?”

Use free software? How can it be powerful enough?

Master's older brother and Kugui-*sensei* start walking away even though I'm confused. They start taking turns explaining it once I catch up.

"The most powerful software accessible by average citizens right now is open-source. It improves as more and more people use it. While there is an *inventor*, they only go by an alias. No one knows their real identity."

"There was a period long ago when many suspected they were a student due to the unusual update timings."

"Right. The root was seriously twenty points higher in the mornings and evenings!"

"Rumor nowadays has it that they have found employment, based on the severe drop in update frequency."

"I'd believe it."

Student? Employment?

Before all that though Nobody knows who made it?

"Isn't that a little too unreliable?"

The two of them look like they're having a great time talking about this computer stuff, but I'm not sure how to express what I'm starting to feel about it.

Using software has become so normal in the Shogi world recently that it's almost a given.

That Meijin, *Master*, God-*sensei*, and Natagiri-*sensei*, too All the top professionals are doing their best to add elements of software into their Shogi.

Basically, it's starting to become humanity's instruction manual.

And that software is being passed around the internet for free but no one knows who made it!

"There's no money in developing Shogi software. Packaging it up and selling it in stores isn't worth the investment, so developers make it as a pet project of sorts. It's similar to long-sequence Shogi puzzles, to tell the truth."

"Should it be marketed as a video game, the program needs only be strong

enough to be slightly challenging to a person, you see.”

“U-Um!”

I ask a question to Master’s older brother’s back as we walk.

“How do you know so much about Shogi?”

“You didn’t know, Ai?”

“Uwhee?”

“This man here is most likely an even stronger player than I am.”

“Whoa, whoa! I couldn’t defeat an active Women’s Title Holder, no way. I’ve barely touched a board since graduating from university.”

“University?”

Something about that word sticks out to me. Then it clicks.

The people who first taught Master how to play Shogi.

His father, and———

“I was the Student Meijin three years ago, as well as the President of the Shogi Club at the University of Tokyo, a fan so obsessed with the game that I took a year off to pursue the Student Throne Title which also delayed my job hunting and nearly made me unemployed.”

“University of Tokyo?”

It’s the best school in all of Japan.

You have to be really smart just to get in. Professional Shogi players are often compared to students at the University of Tokyo, at least inside the Shogi world. Master taught me that, as well as a certain *legend*.

W-Wait It couldn’t be?!

“I’m the *brother who went to the University of Tokyo because I wasn’t smart enough*.”

■ AN AMATEUR'S DAILY LIFE

"Have another, Hiuma! Go on, take the whole bottle! Up with 'at wrist!"

"I'll accept your offer."

With his fieldwork over, Hiuma Kagamizu had been taken out for a drink by his childhood friend's father.

The idea of pouring the *sake* into elegant, saucer-like cups didn't exist in these parts. Drinking straight from the bottle or a fist-sized glass made of clay was how the farmers of Miyazaki Prefecture preferred to drink *shochu sake*.

"Couldn't work tomorrow anyways, with the typhoon an' all. Drinkin' *shochu* is 'bout all there is to do at times like this, yah?"

"It sure is."

Constant rattling and the howling winds had Hiuma on edge, but he raised the bottle to his lips.

It had been a decade since he'd ridden out a typhoon in Miyazaki, and this one made typhoons in Osaka seem like a windy day by comparison. Leaving the building was next to impossible until the storm passed. Since the greenhouses had been reinforced, all that was left was to shoot the breeze and enjoy a nip from the bottle.

———People are so small.

It's said that residents of Tohoku play Shogi when they're snowed in during the winter, but it's also true that that's how the people of Kyushu Island pass the time during summer typhoons. Hiuma felt that saying their playing styles reflected it might be a stretch. Kyushu people weren't that patient to begin with.

After downing a full bottle of sweet potato *shochu sake*, brewed right here in Hiuma's hometown of Miyakonojo City, the red-faced older man brought out something rather nostalgic.

A Shogi board.

“Care fer a match?”

“..... Of Shogi?”

Back in the Sub League, he wouldn't have even dreamed of playing Shogi with alcohol in his system. Not only could it have caused him to pick up strange habits on the board, he'd have taken it as an insult to Shogi itself and been furious at whomever suggested it.

But, for whatever reason, none of those emotions were triggered this time.

His childhood friend, however, nearly had a heart attack.

“D-Dad?! Whadda'ya think you're doing?! Hiuma tried his darndest to be a pro!! You can't just challenge him willy-nilly———

“It's all right. I'd be honored.”

Legs still crossed, Hiuma lowered his head and emptied the piece box out onto the board.

They were a classic style known as *bantaro-goma*. Heavily used, the corners had been chipped away and the characters on the pieces themselves had faded.

Their rough surface, the first pieces he had touched in nearly half a year, lit a fire in his belly not so different from the *sake*.

Pain washed over him in an instant, but was gone just as quickly.

“A 3-*dan* division player's at the board. Get the guys from the other branches over here.”

Shogi was particularly popular around Miyakonojo, with the local *sake* brewery being a main sponsor of the Women's King League. Shogi fans literally weathered the storm without raincoats, flocking in droves for this rare opportunity.

It went without saying, the place livened up in no time.

“Yer 3-*dan*, a'right! I'll need more'an a two-piece handicap to stand a chance!”

“I'll take next, so long as ya drop the Bishop!”

“Just the Bishop? Hah! He'd blank you playin' six pieces down!”

Challengers appear one after another, each confident in their skills. But Hiuma flattened them all with elegant yet overwhelming power.

———This is fun.

Whether it was the *sake* or something else entirely, Hiuma wasn't sure. However there was no denying he was enjoying each match, a sensation he never experienced during his time in the Sub League.

These weren't instructional matches and nothing was at stake.

How long had it been since he'd seen Shogi as just a game?

Another round of *sake* was brought out as soon as Hiuma had given everyone a turn.

He was in the middle of their circle, genuinely smiling without a care in the world for the first time since he returned to Miyazaki.

The conversation shifted to the Shogi world's inner workings. This was yet another thing Hiuma would have never participated in only a few months prior, but little stories with unimportant details paired very well with *sake*.

Once that conversation had run its course, a farmhand Hiuma had come to know broached a different topic.

"Ah, 'at reminds me I came 'cross this real interestin' article on a Shogi site. Didja hear 'at grade school girl who took Rina Shakando's title's been rackin' up wins against pros———?" said the young man as he pulled out his phone to show Hiuma. "This one here, see? She's sayin' she wants to bring back a Pro Entrance Exam'er somethin' like that to go Pro."

"They have one of those?!"

Hiuma's childhood friend jumped into the conversation as she brought a bowl of spicy chicken from the kitchen.

"No, no exam like that exists. There is one to get into the 3-*dan* division, though. One person managed to pass it and get back into the division when I was there."

His childhood friend fell silent, her lips echoing the words "back into" as Hiuma explained.

He knew that Ai Hinatsuru said she wanted to test into the Professional League.

Former members of the Sub League who had been forced out like himself had gone out of their way to call him and ask his opinion on the matter. Even current members of the Sub League had voiced their fury in emails.

But Hiuma's first thoughts dwelled on the professionals who had to face Ai Hinatsuru.

———Talk about pressure I don't envy them.

He remembered a professional player telling him: *"Amateurs still have a career if they lose. If a pro loses there's no escape."*

Hiuma had faced his share of amateur and Women's League players in events like the Newcomer's Tournament, so he knew the torment that the players went through playing against someone below their rank.

Not to mention the times he'd worked as a recorder in matches where a professional tripped over their own feet in a crucial moment and lost to an amateur as a result. Watching their faces contort under the pressure of knowing they *should win easily* was a sorrowful experience

Ai was still in elementary school, and a girl to boot.

No player could pull out all the stops against her in a league match. Just the thought of having to play against Ai Hinatsuru if he had become a professional made his innards cringe.

Ai was on a roll against professional opponents right now, but she would also face the same pain should she succeed in her endeavor to become a professional.

Just as Ginko Sora had when she lost to a Women's League player and took leave after a single match.

———Maybe not becoming a professional was for the best after all

The topic had shifted to *whether a Professional Entrance Exam* should be created while Hiuma was lost in his own thoughts.

"Wouldn't 'at be a big leg up for players from out in the countryside?"

“Don’t forget young ones like Sota Kunugi pop up all the time in that world, so what chance do the older folks really have?”

“Speakin’ of Kunugi 4-*dan*, ya two were in the Kansai Sub League at the same time, right Hiuma? Didja ever play ’gainst him?”

Suddenly the center of attention, Hiuma’s response was instantaneous.

“So- Kunugi-*sensei* was still in grade school. Meanwhile, I was some guy coming up on 30. We were both in the 3-*dan* division for one season and only played one match together.”

“Whoa! You played against that boy-genius?!”

“Who won?!”

Hiuma answered with a shrug.

“Kunugi-*sensei*, of course. I played myself into a sudden death.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

The happily buzzed group shared a big laugh.

Hiuma’s wounds were still fresh, but for whatever reason, they didn’t sting at all right now.

———Because of the alcohol? Or maybe

Hiuma wanted to see if any passion for Shogi was still burning within him. Resetting the board to the starting formation, he posed a suggestion to the group.

“Would you like me to line up the match for you?”

“Please!!”

Sub League match records were kept under strict lock and key. The chance to see one of Sota Kunugi’s unreleased match records enthralled them more than Hiuma could’ve imagined.

“I played the first move, and built a *yagura*———”

Hiuma moved the pieces, playing out the match as everyone else leaned in for a better view. No matter how hard he tried to forget this match, the sequences

always seemed to pop up whenever his mind wandered for even a moment.

“Is it really a good idea havin’ the Rook-head Pawn ’at far forward?”

“Slidin’ the Rook that far?!”

“I think moving that piece over here woulda been better———”

It started as a lively review session.

But as the match progressed Each of the observers became too overwhelmed by the brilliance unfolding on the board to voice their own ideas.

“M-My gosh

“Ya won this Right, Hiuma?”

Then came the final sequence, the trap set for a prodigy.

The stunning 6 Two Silver and the 19-move checkmate that followed rendered the onlookers speechless.

“.....”

Their expressions, already as blank as a sheet of ice, cracked in disbelief. One Shogi match had sobered them up in the blink of an eye.

At first, Hiuma assumed they were in awe of Sota’s talent, but———

It was his childhood friend’s father who eventually broke the silence.

“..... Ya can play like this. If that Pro Exam thing ever happens, shouldn’t ya give it a shot, Hiuma?”

“Yah! You workin’ the fields out here in the boonies is a huge waste

“We’ve got your back! If there’s a way to get you in the pros, Hiuma, we’ll help you!”

“What if we got everybody from all the branch farms to sign a petition?!”

“The Women’s King Title Match is comin’ to Miyakonojo real soon! Give it to one of them association folks———”

Hiuma never expected this turn of events.

“W-Wait! Hold on a minute, please!”

He rushed to elaborate.

“Former Sub League members have to wait a year before playing in amateur tournaments anyway. I don’t know what the qualifications might be for a professional Entrance Exam, but what point is there in pushing when I can’t even register for league matches?”

“..... Phew. That could’ve gone better.”

After washing his face in cold well water, Hiuma thought back on his rash decision and regretted it.

He’d come here to cut Shogi out of his life and live quietly in the countryside. And yet, drunk or not, he’d gotten ahead of himself.

“I really shouldn’t have shown them that match should I?”

The farmhands wouldn’t take no for an answer no matter how many times he tried to curb their enthusiasm. It was all he could do to escape to the restroom. Now, standing outside the door, he felt someone’s embrace from behind.

“..... Hiuma.”

It was his childhood friend.

She sounded on the verge of tears as she buried her face in his sweaty back.

“You’re not going back, are you? You won’t move back to Osaka, right?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I really wanted to stop you That day you left for Osaka. I’ve prayed and prayed every single day since then.”

There, in that dim corridor, Hiuma’s childhood friend revealed a secret she had kept all this time.

“Prayed that you wouldn’t become a professional Shogi player. That you’d give up on that dream and come back to me.”

“.....!”

Her words hit him like an unanticipated ambush.

Hiuma was certain that the only people in the world who prayed for him to fail were his rivals in the Sub League.

“Sorry I shouldn’t have done that, I know. But———”

“I’m not going back. Your father just got excited, that’s all.”

“Really?”

“If there’s one thing I know for certain, it’s that I won’t move back to Osaka. I’m done. It’s over.”

He had entrusted his dream to Sota.

And, true to his word, the boy had triggered a new Shogi boom. There was no point in Hiuma staying in the Shogi world anymore.

“..... I know her very well, the girl who wants to test into the pros. She’s a prodigy far beyond me.”

“But she’s a girl.”

“There are some unbelievably strong girls, actually. Monsters in their own right.”

“Like Naniwa’s Snow White?”

“.....”

Unable to answer her last question, Hiuma turned around to face his lifelong friend and returned her embrace.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be staying right here with you.”

———This kind of soap operatic story must happen every day all over Japan, I guess.

This was reality for former Sub League members.

The connection he felt with the Shogi world was still there. It made everything else he did feel like an act, and he was simply witnessing events in other people’s lives

Though Hiuma couldn’t understand why, an angry Sota Kunugi appeared in his dreams that night.

TWO SUPERSTARS

“Young Mistress. You have guests.”

“I do?”

It’s past lunchtime on Sunday.

I had been cleaning the bath at my family’s inn on my own when Master’s older brother used the intercom to deliver a surprising message.

“Another member of the staff will take your place. Please change clothes and come to the lobby. You will be showing the guests to their room once you arrive.”

“..... Haaa. I’m on my way,” I reluctantly answer.

Kugui-sensei managed to find that collection of unreleased Shogi puzzles and gave them to me. I was working on one in my head while cleaning, so now I’ll have to start all over again.

The title is *Shogi Suizou*, named for a *drunk elephant* piece used in some variants of Shogi.

Every single one of those puzzles feels fresh. They’re nothing like anything I’ve solved before.

———Wh-What is this?! It’s like the author is *challenging* readers to figure it out!!

That first page blew me away. Once I memorized all the puzzles, I’ve been battling it out with that author in my head while scrubbing the floors.

It feels like I’m back to the time before becoming Master’s apprentice.

“And I was so close to solving it, too!”

Darabuchi But customers are customers, so it can’t be helped.

It’s things like this that make living and working in the service industry with my parents difficult, but Tokyo is no place for a girl my age to be living on her own.

“..... I won lots of money when I got my title, but I never thought I’d have more trouble spending it than I did earning it”

It’d be so nice to move back in with Rokuroba-*sensei* Once I changed out of my school P.E. uniform into a presentable kimono, I walk to the lobby and see———

“Hey! Makin’ some noise over here in Tokyo, aren’t you, Ai?”

“Oishi-*sensei*?! Asuka!!”

“A little bird told me about a great hot spring in the heart of Tokyo. So I thought I’d scope out the competition.”

“I-It’s a natural hot spring, right?! Wow! I’m jealous”

Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan* runs a bathhouse with his daughter Asuka in Osaka. Back when the stress of a tiny bathtub at Master’s apartment was getting to me, Oishi-*sensei* let me stay at their bathhouse for a while in exchange for working there. He also taught me how to use Ranging Rook.

“Wh-What brings the both of you here”?

“I’ve got a match tomorrow, see? Against a certain wiz kid Well, ’suppose he’s a bit too old to be a *wiz kid* now that he’s in junior high, eh? Anyway, the match is getting tons of coverage thanks to him. I can’t afford to embarrass myself, so I thought I’d stay someplace nice so I can go in there fully charged.”

———The still-undefeated Kunugi 4-*dan*!

It makes sense that he’d eventually run into Oishi-*sensei* since he’s won so many matches in the Ryuo Tournament.

For it to happen when he’s on the cusp of setting a new record with 29 straight wins is amazing!

The whole country would take notice if he beat an A League player and former title holder to do it. Of course, Oishi-*sensei* is being talked about on news shows, too.

But, as hard as it is to say, he’s the villain

“Think we can go straight to our room? I’m bound to get stoned by some

random passerby if I stay out in the open too long.”

“Yes! It would be my pleasure!!”

I take their bags and lead them down the hallway, but I have to try my hardest to keep from skipping with joy along the way.

“All right You got a board, Ai?” asks Oishi-sensei as soon as we get to the room.

“Join me for a practice session, would you? I’ve already got the go-ahead from the manager.”

I race back to my room to grab a 2.5-inch board and set it down on the low table the moment I get back.

“You make the first move, Ai. I’ll defend.”

“I would be honored!”

“Let me put this out there up front, I know how good you are, Ai. So I won’t be holding back, yeah? I won’t be playing along with a Double Wing, either.”

“!! Okay!”

Oishi-sensei sticks to his word, opening the Bishop’s Path with 3 Four Pawn after I open with 2 Six Pawn.

A Double Wing Attack can’t happen anymore——But!

“Here!!”

I push the Pawn in front of my Rook one more space forward.

Then I reduce my defenses to the bare minimum by bringing out my right Silver!

“Mgh?!”

My ambush catches Oishi-sensei off guard, and I’m not giving him the chance to get his Rook into position. I push even harder, sacrificing my two big pieces in an all-out rush. The defending King is pinned back in no time at all.

“W-Wow!”

Asuka looks on with her eyes wide open.

“I’m dead to rights in only 39 moves There’ve got to be holes in that ambush somewhere, but even pros might not be able to spot ‘em in a high-speed match. Does it have a name?”

“Extreme Rapid Silver. I’ve been researching it with Miss Tsubasa Gakumeki”

“From the looks of it, I’d say you’ve tweaked that sequence to work on defense too, eh?”

I wipe the sweat from my forehead and nod. Doing ambush strategies makes me so thirsty

“Kay then. One more match,” Oishi-*sensei* says after resetting the pieces, but there’s fire in his eyes this time.

Neither of us thought that the first match was important. The real one starts now!

“Show me how you deal with Ranging Rook!”

“Here!!”

My first and second moves don’t change at all.

Just advancing the Pawn in front of my Rook!

“..... Interesting. Forcing the Bishop up takes Gokigen Central Rook and Bishop Exchange variants of Ranging Rook out of the picture That’s like tryin’ to fight with both hands tied behind your back for a Ranging Rooker.”

“You’re free to play Central Rook if you’d like,” I tell him as I open the Bishop’s Path, but the Worldly Maestro doesn’t answer.

Instead, he turns to his daughter sitting at the side of the board.

“Asuka. Go take a bath.”

“Whaaa?!”

“The real research starts now. The pros only kind.”

“!! Okay”

Asuka gets up and leaves without another word.

The tension in here sky rockets. It's almost like the room's thermostat got turned up to maximum. Sweat is dripping down my forehead Hot!

Since Oishi-*sensei* has already moved his Bishop once, triggering a Bishop Exchange himself would put him one move behind. Does he want to exchange Bishops so much that he'll accept that loss or will he choose a different strategy?

Sensei closes the Bishop Path and slides his Rook.

4 Two Rook. He's playing 4th File Rook.

———The formation is so secret, he's hiding it from his own daughter is this a Normal 4th File Rook?

I'm stunned, to tell the truth.

As long as I make an *anaguma*, Static Rook would have a huge advantage. The two of us build our formations like normal, but at some point along the way It shows up.

"Huh?"

I couldn't stop that sound from coming out. Oishi-*sensei's* move was just that unexpected.

"Whaaat?! Th-That formation doesn't make sense!!"

At first, I thought *Sensei* made a mistake.

But his eyes are laser focused on the board. Really?! *This* is what he wants to do?!

———It's a new move! But But!!

Rather than cutting-edge it looks clumsy, somehow. Like how someone who's just learning the game would play

But the worldliness that followed was a work of art.

"Ah Ah, ahhh"

Oishi-*sensei's* strategy turns out to be so cutting-edge that I can't do anything

to stop it.

———I mean What am I supposed to play against that formation? It's way too

Should I attack or defend?

I get so wrapped up in trying to figure that out that I'm in checkmate before I know it. I still don't know the answer either

"..... I don't have any moves left. I surrender"

"Yeah. Good match."

Oishi-sensei sounds relaxed, but his fingertips are still quivering just a little bit.

"S-Sensei? What was that"

"You're the first person I've used it against."

".....!!"

The realization hits me.

Oishi-sensei developed this strategy specifically for playing against Kunugi 4-dan. That's why he had to hide it, even from his only daughter.

That sequence is more important than life itself, and he showed it to me.

He has acknowledged my skills as on par with professional players. Otherwise, he'd never let me see it.

"..... Thank you so very much!!"

I bow my head again. This time, it's so that he can't see the tears welling up in my eyes

"Group H in the Nebula Tournament, eh? Meh, that's not a bad block to be in."

Oishi-sensei leans back against the room's *tokonoma* alcove and drinks the whole cup of tea I poured for him in a few gulps.

"Do you think so?"

“Cuz I’m not in it, yeah?” *Sensei* says with a grin.

I answer with a soft laugh.

After losing so badly, I’m really not up for this kind of banter.

“I hate to break it to ya, Ai, but the only A League player you’d stand a chance against is probably Natagiri. Playing fast isn’t his strong suit ’cuz he doesn’t have that much talent.”

“Natagiri-*sensei* is really strong.”

I pour him another cup and politely offer some proof to back up my claim.

“He looked after me for a long time. But out of all the matches we played, I only ever beat him twice.”

“..... I was just kiddin’ around”

Oishi-*sensei*’s face sours. Was the tea too strong?

“But in all seriousness, the Nebula Tournament’s best aspect is always getting matched up with someone around your skill level. The lower level players get to feel exactly how much they’ve grown. It fits you like a glove right now, Ai.”

“Yes! And getting to play two matches if I win is also really nice!”

I agree with Rinrin-*sensei*’s opinion that Women’s League players have an edge.

“The thing is, though, no amount of success in that tournament will ever lead to a Pro Entrance Exam.”

His cold tone sends shivers up my spine.

“The real divide between pros and amateurs is getting results when you’ve got hours of waiting time. The skill to challenge for a title, yeah? Tearing up fast-paced regular matches is good and all, but that doesn’t mean you’ll put a dent a pro’s armor.”

..... I had a feeling that was the case.

There are some very successful amateur players around who’ve moved up to the main tournament or won tournaments that didn’t have professionals playing in them.

But no one talks about letting those amateurs into the Professional League

“If you’re really going all-in on this Pro Entrance Exam thing, the only feasible choice you have is getting results in the Emperor Tournament where you were already qualified in the women’s quota. Even the prelims give four hours of waiting time in that one.”

“Four hours

Just the thought of it makes me dizzy.

“More than that———you can play against him.”

The player listed next to me for the first round of the preliminaries.

Oishi-sensei’s pianist-like skinny fingers tap against three *kanji* characters that I can’t read.

“Um *Son, usu, hyou* 9-dan?”

“Takeru Usui.”

Takeru Usui.

I know I’ve heard that name somewhere. But the characters for his name are really complicated.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember? Yaichi is really all you see, isn’t he, Ai? Heh. Is that all Takeru Usui is to kids these days?”

Oishi-sensei looks hurt, which doesn’t happen often.

“To Ranging Rookers like me, he is like a god among men. The Shogi world has two superstars, you see.”

“Two superstars?”

“The charismatic face of Static Rook is the Meijin, not that you needed me to spell it out for you. And Ranging Rook’s superstar is him, Takeru Usui.”

“Aren’t you the face for Ranging Rook, Oishi-sensei?”

“People call me the Worldly Maestro, but all I do is play the notes. It’s Mr. Takeru Usui who wrote the music and conducts the orchestra.”

“!!”

Oishi-sensei, who just showed me that cutting-edge strategy, thinks that much of him?!

“He stood at the top of the Shogi world long before you were born, and he did it with Ranging Rook. In the golden age of collaboration research, he created a completely new strategy all on his own that was strong enough to take the Meijin title. We Ranging Rookers still strive to be just like him.”

“By himself

“I had a chance to see Mr. Usui’s research notebooks back in the day. He had mountains of them, literally stacked up to the ceiling. Each and every one had the same thing written at the very top.”

Offense ——— Usui

Defense ——— The World

“The World!”

“That includes software nowadays, mind you.”

Software doesn’t value Ranging Rook, so that playing style is in an *ice age* right now.

All the title holders right now play Static Rook.

Oishi-sensei is the only Ranging Rook player in A League.

“Mr. Usui himself has fallen all the way down to C1 and is part of Group 3 in the Ryuo Tournament. Now that his seeding is gone, it seems like his heart isn’t in researching anymore. He even surrenders way early in more matches, too.”

Even so ——— The Worldly Maestro continues with the face of any excited little boy.

“Even so, every Ranging Rooker in Japan Every single Shogi fan will lose their minds when he finally decides to use *it*. Pros will too, of course.”

“.....”

An excited boy talking about his favorite hero, to be exact.

“The Sub League was miserable. I made it through to go pro at 17, but I bawled like a baby when the 3-*dan* division slammed the door on me. If I’m being honest here, I personally can’t shrug off what you’re trying to do with a *that’s nice* and move on.”

I can tell he’s implying something more.

“But if Usui-*sensei* Ranging Rook’s superstar acknowledges me, a lot more people might be willing to listen Is that right?”

Oishi-*sensei* doesn’t give me an answer right away.

———He can’t say for sure!

That reaction alone is enough for me to see light at the end of this dark tunnel. It’s more like a single star in the night’s sky, but it’s still there.

There aren't many top professionals who play Ranging Rook anymore.

But if you include the Women’s League, then more than half of professional Shogi players use Ranging Rook. Lots of retired players use it, too.

On top of that, Shogi fans have even more influence than all of us put together.

Most amateur players use Ranging Rook.

If I can play well enough to get their attention!!

“The thing is, though”

Oishi-*sensei* puckers up a little as he drinks the last drops of strong tea in the bottom of his cup.

“As I see it, pigs’ll fly before Mr. Usui offers to support you. That grudge is a bit too strong.”

“Grudge? But I’ve never———”

“More accurately, it’s against that Master of yours. Mr. Usui had a certain title, you see. Not that he paraded it around.”

Everything lines up the second he tells me that title.

Who Takeru Usui 9-*dan* is, where and when I met him, and why he'd see me as an enemy.

"The previous Dragon King Ryuo. That blockhead of a Ryuo took it from him."

..... I'm already checkmated, aren't I?

OPENING MOVES

There is a room called *Chairman's Office* at the Shogi Association in Sendagaya.

It's the only room reserved for the use of a single person in a building that can hardly contain all the players and staff that frequent its halls. That person is of course the one for whom it is named, the chairman of the association However, it rarely served that function.

"My time is split between Kanto and Kansai, and my eyes can't take in the splendor, yes? What point is there in having all the extravagant decorations if I can't see them?"

Seiichi Tsukimitsu had no interest in all the pricey renovations the previous chairman had made to the room and it had been used as a meeting room since he took the position.

In fact, a *certain player* had been interviewed there so many times that the room itself had been dubbed something else entirely. Today, however, it was playing host to its intended occupant and his guests.

"Marvelous," remarked an enthralled Rina Shakando Women's 8-*dan* as she observed one of Ai Hinatsuru's matches in the Nebula Tournament on the big-screen TV left behind by the previous chairman.

Since the Nebula Tournament was recorded for TV, the results were kept secret until the matches were broadcast.

Being on the board of directors, Rina had access to the results beforehand. However, she had deliberately taken herself out of the loop and had sworn those around her to secrecy.

This was all in an effort to enjoy the Women's Players Matches in the same manner as Shogi fans.

"There is no other word to describe her play. That's five consecutive victories against professional opponents. Not to mention matching Static Rook players tit for tat and elegantly forcing them into checkmate. What an invigorating sight!"

“I’ve heard this style—9 Six Pawn Double Wing Attack—originally came from software. As an old-guard Shogi player myself, it feels so unnatural But it seems Miss Hinatsuru’s creativity is putting it to good use. That is no easy task.”

“Yes! The essence of that child’s Double Wing is far different from the one I know. There’s no connection with the Twisting Rook style that defined Shogi in the 1970s and 80s. The opening remains a Double Wing, but it can evolve into a Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver or even a Snowroof. It wouldn’t surprise me if she also played *yagura* using the same concepts.”

“You seem to be onboard her bandwagon.”

“And you aren’t, Seiichi? Considering her love of Shogi puzzles.”

“Indeed. She seems to be creating her own originals, as well. The Ryou apparently forbade it, but others have told me about her work. Each shown with an extraordinary gleam.”

The level of trust these two had built over the years came across in the ever-polite Seiichi’s jolly tone. Most people wouldn’t believe the chairman could speak in such a way.

The air in the room, however, was terrible.

Seiichi spoke up as if something had dawned on him.

“Oh yes, Ms. Oga. Have you served Rina no, Ms. Shakando a cup of tea?”

“One forgot,” said the chairman’s secretary, Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*dan*, in a voice many times colder than normal before leaving the room with a loud slam. Her return was announced by yet another door slam moments later.

She had a plastic bottle of tea in her hand.

“Here. One hopes black tea is okay.”

Rina’s broad smile never wavered even as the 600 milliliter bottle was unceremoniously placed before her.

“Sorry for the trouble,” Rina responded. “My own apprentice seems unwilling to prepare tea at all today for some reason.”

“I had forgotten,” said Ayumu Kannabe 8-*dan* flatly, his face void of any

expression.

Both Sasari and Ayumu made no attempts to conceal their foul moods despite standing directly behind the people they served. Seiichi seemed to find their behavior more entertaining than anything else and got the conversation back on track.

“I must say Five straight Double Wing Attack matches, is it now? Thinking back, that announcement at her Conferring Ceremony may have been the true opening move.”

“Opening move?” came Sasari’s puzzled voice.

Rina offered an explanation in Seiichi’s place.

“An elementary school student, a girl no less, delivered an open letter of challenge to professional Shogi players in a public setting. Of course the world took notice. Now that child is using her first-move advantage to bring her best strategy, the Double Wing Attack, into play Now, are professionals able to avoid it?”

“Ah!”

“She must have been planning this for some time. He-he. Off-the-board tactics on this scale are truly a thing of beauty.”

“The more Ai Miss Hinatsuru plays the Double Wing, and the more she wins with it, the less professionals are able to force a different formation. Even with the opening move, advancing the Pawn in front of their Rook becomes the only option. If they don’t Suppose they win with something else, everyone will only say they *ran away* from the Double Wing”

“That alone is a loss for professional players.”

Rina brought Sasari’s thoughts to a conclusion in a few words.

Despite having said so herself, Sasari still couldn’t believe it.

She had been able to watch Ai Hinatsuru from the time the young girl first registered with the Kansai Shogi Association. The thought that such an earnest child would employ off-the-board tactics like this

“..... I might end up going along with a Double Wing Attack even if I were a

Ranging Rook specialist,” Seiichi added quietly.

Winning by sliding the Rook across the board would draw criticism that he had *avoided the opponent’s best strategy*. Lose after denying the Double Wing, and the resulting avalanche would be brutal beyond words.

“Say I had resolved to play a completely different strategy beforehand, distress from the pressure once the match actually began might be too much to handle.”

In an extremely fast-paced format, that distress would continue until the very last move.

A league player, Seiichi Tsukimitsu was very familiar with just how disadvantageous an unstable mindset was during a match.

“I also expect Miss Hinatsuru has a plan in place for if and when players go out of their way to avoid the Double Wing Attack. An ambush of sorts that would be hard to identify at first glance.”

“More than likely, yes. Yet another challenge in a string of challenges Show it once, and professionals lose their lone escape path. A one-off ambush would suffice for such a role.”

“Intolerant as always, Rina.”

“He-he. The pot is calling the kettle black, Seiichi.”

“..... If I may, Master. One point remains uncertain,” interjected the other A League player in the room as if competing for his Master’s attention.

“And that is?”

“These victories are only possible in a fast-paced format and with her ace formation. Given those conditions, could she truly be acknowledged for *surpassing* professional players?”

“Precisely. Wonderfully put, my darling apprentice.”

Rina paid no mind to the other people in the room as she placed her hand on Ayumu’s and nodded.

“Many victory stars alone will not suffice. She must veer away from

established history and then overcome it.”

“History?”

For the still 20-year-old A League professional, the concept was well over his head.

“Similar to the way Naniwa’s Snow White cleared the 3-*dan* division?”

“I, too, am at a loss for what move to make.”

Seiichi broke into the conversation between Master and apprentice.

“She is the granddaughter apprentice of my own younger brother apprentice, after all. Even if that were not the case, the Kiyotaki line stands out like a sore thumb.”

“Kousuke is just doing the best he can But he seems destined to fall all the harder the more effort he commits to a certain end.”

“Indeed. That is one of his most charming attributes.”

“He-he-he. Still adorable after all these years. Ah, Kousuke”

Ayumu had been completely left behind.

“.....”

He became more and more irritated as the two veteran players continued chatting away.

The poor boy Sasari thought to herself as sympathy for his situation cooled her head ever so slightly.

That is why she was able to hear footsteps approaching from outside the door.

“He has arrived.”

The room immediately tensed.

There came a soft knock and then the door swung open.

“I apologize for calling you here today,” said Seiichi as the strongest player in Shogi history stepped through the frame.

“There is a matter on which I would like to hear your thoughts. Please relax as

if using this room as you normally do Meijin.”

A REASON TO PERSEVERE

A whole month has passed since I started playing against Awaji.

“Here, here, hereherehereherehere!”

Not a single victory, either.

Actually, I haven’t even been statistically ahead for a single turn. All this pain and suffering have really started to take a toll.

Rashes, headaches, and nausea seem like a walk in the park to me now.

The right side of my face started going numb last week, and now it feels rock solid. Every move my opponent makes feels like another nail being driven into my chest.

“Here, then here, hereherehereherehereherehereherehere— — — HERE!!”

I slam a piece down into this virtual board.

Fighting until battered and bruised, squeezing every ounce of strength out of my brain to read as far into the board as I possibly can, literally taking days, weeks, months, or even years off my life to play a single move.

And Awaji beats it in less than a second.

“Koff! Ngh Haaaaaugh!!”

A dry heave of despair. The shrill pain twisting my heart spreads through my whole body, making me cry out.

Then that pain— — —

“Haaa, haaa, haaa Ugh?! I never thought of that He-he Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is something else!!”

Once I get my heart pumping again by whacking my chest a few times, I force the half of my face that still works into a grin and look back down at the board.

81 spaces, that’s it.

Knowing that there are still moves in this tiny little area that have never crossed my mind turns this dreadful abyss into something close to joy.

“KHAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Pain.

Struggling, overpowered, and I can hardly breathe. Even with all that, I can still somehow keep on playing.

It's like I'm destroying myself so I can rebuild everything from scratch.

This never-ending hell does have an end, actually. A loss.

“Phew——— I lost!”

The match ends at 378 moves.

My chances of winning disappeared ages ago. So I've changed my approach to just holding out longer than the last match.

Longer matches, not victory, that's the goal.

Just keep adding more moves. If Awaji found the answer to Shogi by playing against itself then there should be a point in playing this way.

Strangely enough, my performance got better once I changed my mindset.

The rating used to drop like a rock with every move I played and I'd fall flat on my face in utter defeat, but now it's more of a smooth glide into my inevitable demise.

“Rather than losing 100 points right off the bat for a near-perfect loss, I can hold my ground through a good three innings now! Sure, 100 points go up in smoke in the fourth inning and I lose anyway, but still.”

I have no idea if my skills have improved at all, and there's no way any of this will be useful against human opponents. Heck, it might make me worse against them.

But I can keep playing against Awaji because I want to see more. I want to understand this Shogi from 100 years in the future at an even deeper level with my own fingertips.

That, and one more.

A reason I can hang in there and keep getting destroyed again and again

———

“Here and that one. You actually would play those, wouldn’t you, Big Sis?”

I casually chat with the virtual image across the board from me during the review session.

“.....”

Of course, the 3D model doesn’t say anything.

But even in silence, it’s become my greatest support against the endless despair.

———I get to see Ginko here.

Those first two weeks were beyond painful mentally, and I only made it through because of this 3D model.

“Oh yeah Do you remember?”

I’m so used to there being no answer that I can just jump into non-Shogi topics and keep on talking.

“Back when we were living at Master’s place, it used to be my job to answer the phone, yeah? Sometimes, when it was your parents calling———”

The memories come flooding in and words come pouring out.

That includes things that I’d have a hard time saying directly to her.

“I got a chance to talk to your mom when that happened. It was mostly just boring small talk but She always said goodbye by telling me to *be like a real brother* to you. That’s what’s making this hard. How am I going to tell her I became your *real boyfriend*?”

The younger version of Ginko sitting across from me wasn’t constructed from old pictures I submitted for modeling.

A base model was made using recent pictures and videos of Big Sis on the internet and then Awaji calculated what Ginko would’ve looked like a few years ago to turn back the clock.

“..... Incredible. It almost looks like she’s breathing.”

I saw Big Sis more than anyone back in those days, and even I can't see much of a difference between this model and the real person.

Since all my brain's resources get channeled into the board during matches, I've felt like I've slipped back into the past a lot more than once.

"It's hard enough to keep track of time in matches already Huh? Time"

Lightning strikes my brain at that very moment.

Awaji was able to turn back time.

And, through high speed calculations, it can accurately predict the future. Therefore, going forward in time should also be possible.

Then——— Could it?!

"..... Awaji, I've got a request."

I'm used to talking to empty air.

It's just like using a smartphone. Well, this is the fastest supercomputer on the planet, so I guess it'd be rude treating it like a phone, wouldn't it?

"About this model of Big Sis, can you make her grow?"

.....

No response.

"Oh, sorry. I have to be specific, don't I? Umm, okay Can you make her look my age? Around 18?"

This time, the response is instant.

"Ah"

Jaw hanging open, I stare at that illusion in disbelief.

My heart's been stolen.

That's the only way to come close to describing this experience. My whole world is crashing down even harder than when I first saw Shogi from 100 years in the future. I really could flatline at any second.

If only I could kick the bucket with a shock of pure joy like that I've been

yearning for what's right there for so long that the thought doesn't sound half bad.

Seeing Ginko blossom into a young woman.

"Gi n ko!!"

Tears are dripping out from under my headset before I realize it.

I can't reach out and touch her and this image won't respond to anything I say.

Even still Seeing Big Sis as an adult brought me back from the brink.

———I *will* see her. This version of Ginko.

My inner Ginko *clock* stopped ticking the last time I saw her. Now, at this moment, it's moving again.

So what if it was sparked by a gem created by computer calculations?

"You're amazing, Awaji! No Mr. Awaji! Let me call you Sir Awaji!!"

A god!! This thing has to be a god!!

Humanity has created something truly marvelous. To think that my deepest desire could be granted just like that!

But human desire has no limits.

As I take in the beautiful spectacle that is an 18-year-old Big Sis a little bit of discontent in one area sets in.

An area that doesn't seem to have grown at all.

That's a miscalculation, right?

"Sir, could you you know? You get it, don't you? An all-powerful supercomputer like yourself doesn't need me to spell it out, yeah?"

Awaji doesn't respond.

I guess it needs direct orders from a human being to do anything. Ngh!

———Should I say it?

There's a line that A.I. should never cross.

What I'm about to ask Awaji to do is the same as photoshopping my crush's face onto a supermodel's body.

As a man, it's shameful. I get that.

But I've also shut myself away in the room and kept my nose to the grindstone for a full month now. I deserve a reward of some kind, don't I? I'm only human!!

So I yell the secret that I've kept hidden in my heart at the top of my lungs!

"Ginko's boobs! Make them bigger!!"

..... Huh?

"Wh-What's wrong, Awaji? You've granted every single one of my wishes so far! You can do that much, right?! RIGHT?!"

It must need something more specific. I work up the courage to ask for a B cup at least No, I want to see her with a set of full Ds! But just as I was about to issue the order.

"ERROR"

Red letters flash in front of my eyes. What's this?

"Erotic? Am I getting reprimanded by a computer?"

Now I wanna cry.

But I figure out my mistake right away.

"Oh! That says *error*!"

Not going to high school is one thing, but knowing I shouldn't be doing what I was trying to do must've made me see things.

But, yeah, um

“E-Even the world’s strongest supercomputer can’t give Big Sis’s chest a boost”

Awaji has already produced a prediction of how Shogi will be played 100 years from now, and this is what it’s saying Ginko Sora’s future will be.

“Destined to be flat as a board.”

“Aaaargh!!”

I look up to the ceiling with a lamenting wail.

This is just too cruel

Even after I reunite with Big Sis, I’ll be taking this secret to the grave with me.

“..... Oh well. Big Sis with big boobs just wouldn’t be Big Sis!”

I force myself to look on the bright side and take off the headset. No, I throw it off!

What greets my eyes the second I come back to reality is———

“What’s this about Ginko Sora’s breasts?”

Ai Yashajin is standing in a space that should be completely empty.

Next to her on all fours and at the end of a chained collar is Akira

“Good morning, *Sensei*. Would you please tell me about the future you saw?”

———Yeah I die.

The vision came to me in a flash. A vision of what’s going to happen in a few seconds.

I didn’t even need Awaji to run the numbers to hit the nail right on the head.

RECORD 4

九頭龍八一

YAICHI
KUZURYU

空銀子

GINKO
SORA

REWARD

“Yaichi, what was it you told me? That even if beating Awaji was impossible, you might get strong enough that you wouldn’t lose? Was that it?”

“Yes.”

“And to do that, you needed a *secret weapon*, I believe that’s what you called it?”

“I did.”

“I was far too busy with my Conferring Ceremonies and Awaji’s debut to ask for specific details about this *weapon* and left it in the hands of my most trusted subordinate. All I did was confirm your match records on Awaji’s log because I trusted you.”

“Thank you.”

“And I was satisfied, very satisfied. Here was Yaichi Kuzuryu, living up to his reputation by stoically continuing to play Shogi even after losing in a few short moves for the first week. It made me so proud to see my Master steadily expand the matches bit by bit. To be frank, *I fell for you all over again...* which is why I wanted to come see you, to surprise you. You know, do one of those *guess who?* pranks when you finish a match. That’s what I had in mind. But I found a low-down no-good traitor instead———”

Jangle.

There’s a long, silver thing in Ai’s left hand. Like an accessory but ten times thicker. It’s a chain, the kind that would be used as a leash for a doberman.

Except it’s Akira Ikeda in the spiked collar at the other end. She’s crawling on the floor like a dog

I’m already pale as a ghost, and my voice cracks trying to say her name.

“Akir———”

“My apologies, Kuzuryu-sensei

This stunningly beautiful young woman is obviously in the middle of being punished. Still on all fours, tears and drool flow down her chin as she offers an explanation.

“I’m truly sorry But, as you can see I absolutely love the taste of my lady’s lash≡”

Oh yeah That’s right.

Her quirks

“A little *reward* was all it took to make Akira confess. I know you’ve been playing against a CG model of Ginko Sora in virtual reality all this time. Yes, I’m the one who left everything to her, but I just cannot stand knowing you two planned this behind my back.”

“Wh-What else was I supposed to do?! There’s no other way to keep playing against software!”

“Do you want to see Ginko Sora that badly?”

“..... Of course, I do.”

I know how Ai Yashajin feels about me, so saying what I’m about to tell her makes me feel really guilty.

“She’s my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend, huh? It’s just teenage hormones making your head spin, if you ask me.”

I really wanted to counter that with something like, “What about you then? Is that why you’re *head over heels* for me?” But I couldn’t muster the guts.

Basically, Ai Yashajin is furious.

“The human mind is complex, but the way it’s built is so easy to hack. Do you know how much money it takes to run a supercomputer? Your yearly income vanishes with every hour. And this was your *secret weapon*?! It’s basically just a game that spits out smut whenever a puzzle gets solved!”

“.....”

“Awaji. Delete this disturbing creation immediately. Never display it again!”

On the orders of its true Master, the model of a majestically beautiful, mature Big Sis is forever destroyed.

“Ahhh It’s gone”

“Don’t make that pathetic face over computer graphics.”

It was worth a lot more to me than that.

Rather than CG, it was the only thing I had to remind myself that Big Sis is still alive.

“Moving on!”

Ai kicks Akira out of frustration. Akira moans with glee.

“The real reason I’m here is to give you your reward.”

“Re ward?”

“You finished sorting the match records like I asked, remember? Awaji’s debut went extraordinarily well, and your work deserves to be rewarded.”

Oh, that.

Around my twentieth day playing against Awaji, I finally had enough mental leeway to choose one hundred match records and add some analysis to the important ones.

It went pretty smoothly because *there wasn’t much choice in what could be released in the first place*. Ai must have gone ahead and made those records public at some point.

Being cut off from the outside world has really thrown off my perception of time. I’m not even sure what day of what month it is right now and, after a while, I stopped caring about things outside this room to the extent that I might’ve missed Placement Matches. They started recently, right? I don’t have a clue.

Just I have a pretty good idea what’ll happen once those match records are out there for people to see.

There’ll be a huge divide.

Some people will panic, others won’t care whatsoever.

That's the tipping point that determines which groups live on and which groups crumble.

"About this reward, though."

I say while plucking stubble out of my unshaven chin.

"Honestly, I thought getting to use Awaji was a reward on its own. It costs hundreds of millions of yen to run, right? There's not much else I could ask for"

"You were just using it to gawk at a CG Ginko Sora."

Sorry about that

""

Ai starts pacing around the room. Every step she takes pulls on Akira's chain, and she whines with glee each time.

"It's settled," says Ai after a long, contemplative sigh. "If you want to see her that much, I'll take you to her. The real one."

Huh?

AWAJI SHOCK

“Sorry to take up your time, busy as you are.”

“No, no. I was already at the association to work on something else.”

I’m at the Kanto Shogi Association building in Sendagaya just as the rainy season starts.

The person called the *Sage* hands me a colored sample of an upcoming magazine article while I look around at all the people busily working in the editing department set up inside the association’s basement.

“It must be really hard work making books.”

“Once you understand the flow, all you have to do is keep up. Well, things can get a bit dicey before the manuscript comes in,” the Editor-in-Chief Kayaoku 7-dan tells me with a shrug as he fans himself with a folding fan.

People come in and out of here so often that the air conditioning doesn’t make much difference. Basements get muggy too

“And an avalanche of demand that only comes once every few decades just hit. With summer vacation starting in schools, I’m planning to have Ayano come up and pitch in part time.”

“Ayano is coming here?!”

“Yes. Sota Kunugi’s winning streak set off a massive Shogi boom, haven’t you heard? I need all the help I can get.”

Kayaoku 7-dan, also called the Sage, is both Kugui-sensei’s and Ayano’s Master. That’s part of the reason why he’s so kind to me.

He’s the one in charge of the Shogi magazine and even made this page just for me. I want to ask him about getting information on a Professional Entrance Exam included in the article.

“Anything to say about the pictures or the layout?”

“..... No. This is fine.”

“Great! I’ll have the page inserted as is. Sorry about that cover shot mix up.”

Kugui-*sensei* told me the picture of me cosplaying as a maid in Akihabara would be going on the cover, but I managed to have it changed to Kunugi-*sensei* instead. Now my picture is squeezed into the corner of the insert and I’m pretty happy about that.

The plan was to have my interview included in black-and-white along with everything else But....

“Now then, the reason I had you come down here in person...”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry about this, really But I want to shave it down a bit. A very important piece of news has come up and I need more space. You have my word you’ll be getting a full-page spread in next month’s issue.”

“News? Is it about Kunugi-*sensei*?”

“I think it’d be faster if you heard it with your own ears.”

Kayaoku-*sensei* closes his fan and stands up. Then, he guides me to a meeting room in the corner of the editing department.

There are two people sitting on a sofa built for four, and they look really serious.

One is Kugui-*sensei* dressed in her reporter clothes.

“Have you had a chance to see Awaji’s match records?”

“I have. And they’re insane.”

The man facing her is Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*, I think.

He’s a young professional in Kanto and played against Master in a placement match, at least I’m pretty sure he did.

What really stuck with me is how much Master lifted him up, saying things like, “If only I were as smart as Mr. Futatsuzuka” or “If I’d gone to university like Mr. Futatsuzuka.”

What in the world could they be talking about?

Ah! Maybe are they talking about Master?!

The Sage tells me to “Go on in,” so I quietly sneak my way closer to the sofa so I don’t disturb them.

“Using Shogi software as a benchmark for the world’s best supercomputer was a total surprise. Who came up with that idea? Whether to call them a genius or a devil, I don’t know.”

“Software is the issue, not the hardware,” says Kugui-*sensei* as she both records the conversation and takes meticulous notes. “The supercomputer named *Awaji* is using a CPU along with deep learning software. Do you believe this to be true?”

“I would say so, yes. Judging by the match records.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“The way deep learning software plays Shogi it’s rather boring.”

“Boring?”

“Yes, plain and boring. All it does is search for ways to extend a lead. Another identifying characteristic is the use of Golds. It’s a hyper defensive style that crushes attacks before they happen.”

“Strong defensively. I see”

“Also, it places no value on Ranging Rook at all. It’s even harsher on those strategies than existing programs, and it’s not even close.”

“There were 100 total *Awaji* match records released, and not one of them used Ranging Rook.”

“From the software’s point of view, Ranging Rook must be over.”

Over? Ranging Rook?

I can’t keep up with all the words flying back and forth. So a *super* computer has been running Shogi software?

“It’s important to remember that deep learning software is known to occasionally overlook major details in the late-game. It’s due to the system specs being insufficient, or accuracy problems, but———”

“Those flaws don’t appear in Awaji’s records?”

“It could be that the records with those issues weren’t released. It’s impossible that only 100 records of its automated matches exist, after all. There should be hundreds of millions, so these matches must have been cherry-picked as a means to an end. What concerns me more than that is———”

Futatsuzuka-*sensei*’s next words make me gasp in surprise.

“——the fact that Yaichi Kuzuryu agreed to select the records and provide analysis. What route did the Demon King of the West take to come across this line of work? Personally, I believe that you put him up to this. After all, you had him writing that bombshell entitled *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*.”

“I wasn’t involved.”

Kugui-*sensei* shuts him down right away.

“However, I do have an idea who it might be.”

“Is that so? Then you claim that someone other than yourself has the financial means and influence to use the world’s strongest supercomputer to run Shogi software?”

“Yes. There is a person who would resort to this *childish fantasy* to draw the attention of Yaichi Kuzuryu probably the only person in the world.”

Then, Kugui-*sensei* looks over at me.

“Isn’t that right, Miss Hinatsuru?”

“..... Yes.”

I connected the dots too.

———It’s Ten-chan.

That strange feeling I got while looking through her records of the Queen and Women’s Throne Title Matches. There were times when her formations fell apart at the seams. Ten-chan doesn’t play that way, but something else dawned on me at the same time.

———Master likes this style.

It’s like a painting that’s not finished yet.

There are rough edges everywhere, but there's power behind it. Every move inspires all sorts of new sequences to spring up in your head. That kind of Shogi.

If Ten-chan is using a supercomputer and the latest software to come up with new strategies like that I suddenly feel so insignificant clicking away on the personal computer I bought in Akihabara.

Just how much progress has she made?

Ten-chan is already supersmart on her own, but put her in that environment

"There's a technique to making deep learning Shogi software more powerful."

"A technique you say?"

"It's based on Go software, and it has the same flaw in that just running the program won't lead to improvement. That's why it couldn't surpass existing programs. In fact, attempts to research Chess, a game with many similarities to Shogi, with deep learning software haven't yielded many results as of yet."

"Then, you believe Awaji's records were created with full knowledge of this technique?"

"Okito-sensei does, yes."

Kugui-sensei's pen is flying across a page of her notebook, but hearing King Yo Okito's name makes her look up.

"There are circumstances, you see. Even though he was developing a high accuracy program, he has devoted more resources to analyzing these 100 matches. Apparently, they're *tastier*."

"..... Tastier?"

"Our team, we consider ourselves foodies. And we love big meals."

Everyone knows that King Yo Okito is developing his own deep learning type software but a foodie? Who is he talking about?

"You."

Futatsuzuka-sensei calls out to me out of nowhere, like an ambush.

"You're Women's Legend Ai Hinatsuru, are you not?"

“Oh! I-I’m honored to meet you, Futatsuzuka-*sensei*! Master told me a lot about you———”

“Did he?”

It’s hard to tell what this young *sensei* is thinking. He sits up a little straighter and turns to face me.

“Is it true that Kuzu Mr. Kuzuryu only recently started using software? Maybe a year and a half ago.”

“When I first became his live-in apprentice, I don’t remember seeing him use it. He was glued to the computer screen for a long time after losing the first match against the Mejin in the Ryuo Title Match but it was a very old computer.”

“I’ve heard that story several times before and I still can’t believe it”

Now, I think so, too.

I never noticed it when Master was close by, but now I can tell his true talent is flexibility. No matter what kind of Shogi he sees, Master finds a way to fit it into his brain.

It could be Grandpa-*sensei*’s *yagura*, Chairman Tsukimitsu’s Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, Oishi-*sensei*’s Ranging Rook or even the all-rounder Meijin’s playing style.

And If my arrogance can be excused, my late-game skill.

What would happen if he played Shogi with a supercomputer?

“The Demon King of the West is a decade ahead of the rest of us. Who knows: one false move and he could end up seeing a century into the future. If that happens———” Futatsuzuka-*sensei* almost sounds fed-up as he says, “Only actual Shogi Martians will stand a chance against him.

KIDNAPPING

“I’m saying I’ll arrange for you to see her. Ginko Sora.”

My response to Ai Yashajin’s proposal for a *reward* is an instant *don’t bother*.

I mean what else is there to say?

Machi knows where Big Sis is, too. She even offered to tell me at one point while I was writing *Kuzuryu’s Notebook*.

But I refused.

Because I knew going to see her wouldn’t guarantee things taking a turn for the better.

Big Sis made the decision to take a leave of absence so that she could play Shogi in peak condition and then left without telling me anything. She probably thought seeing me would only delay her recovery.

In which case, I shouldn’t barge in on her before she’s ready.

Of course, I want to see her. I’m dying to see her. There’s no way I’ll be satisfied with generated images. I want to see her, hold her in my arms and tell her I love her.

But I can’t. Not yet.

Now that I have my counterpoints set just in case Ai insists on *arranging a meeting*, I’m ready for her next words. But———

“Alright then.”

Huh?

She backed off right away

“Then think of something else for a reward.”

“S-Sure

“Do you need anything before going back?”

“Um Hold on a sec. What day of what month is it?”

After living like a mountain hermit, my sense of time is all messed up. Worse, her answer nearly knocks me off my feet.

That was way too close. I nearly blew off a league match

“I need to go to Tokyo for Placement Matches very soon, so a haircut would be good. Oh, and I’d like a good night’s sleep at the apartment in Nishinomiya tonight.”

“Consider it done.”

With that, Ai Yashajin leaves the room with the chained Akira in tow.

Employees of the Yashajin Group clad in black suits show up after that. They take me to a barber shop and then back to my high-rise apartment, for which I’m still paying off the loan. It’s been ages since I’ve had a big bed like this, and I’m out like a light the moment my head hits the pillow———

The next thing I remember is being bound from head to foot on the floor of a van, the worst possible situation.

“Oh? Awake, are you? Kuzuryu-sensei.”

“Hm? Hrmgh?!”

“Fear not. My lady, benevolent as she is, spent the evening trying to come up with another suitable reward for you but could not. I was ordered to *make it happen however I see fit* and now I’m escorting you there personally.”

That’s Akira’s voice!

I’m blindfolded and gagged, so I have to rely on my imagination. But I have a pretty good idea what’s going on. I’d love to be wrong, seriously. Please, let my gut be wrong about this. But I think I’ve been kidna———

“The problem was that you wouldn’t accept our incredibly gracious offer. Thus, we had to resort to the proper course of action in my line of work.”

“Nrgh?”

“Proper course of action Yes, kidnapping.”

“Nrrgggghhhh———!! MNNNNNGH———!!”

“Tch. Struggling will only make things worse You. Another dose.”

Shlp.

Something long and thin slides into the back of my neck.

Everything goes dark. The next sensation I have is That’s the smell of grass.

A soft breeze is flowing across my skin.

Am I in a field? Was I dumped here? I can feel soft earth beneath my exposed skin. This is nuts. What if no one finds me here? What about my matches? Seriously, where am I? What if bears show up?

My brain starts racing, but I hear footsteps.

“Nh!! NMGH!!”

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Something is coming this way.

Akira fat chance.

The steps aren’t heavy enough to be a bear, though.

I thought about keeping quiet for a second, but my chances of dying out here are much higher the way things are now. So I try to get help.

“NMHHHH———!! NMMMHHHHH———!!”

“Hold still.”

A girl’s voice.

Delicate fingers slide across my face and remove the blindfold.



“What are you doing on the ground?”

Silver hair brushes against my cheek.

Eyes like ashen blue gems just like the ones I’d seen in my dreams so many times are peering down at me.

Part of me had a feeling this was coming.

Akira mentioning the reward hinted at where I was being taken.

But the other part of me still had doubts, and I wasn’t fully prepared for this.

So I———

“L-Long time, no see Ginko

Barely managed to get the most average of average greetings out of my mouth.

“Uh-huh. Long time.”

“Umm Y-You grew your hair out, didn’t you?”

“Uh-huh.”

Wearing a free-flowing white dress, she runs her fingers through hair that’s gotten longer since I last saw her.

Just like in a dream.

Seriously She’s so much prettier than the girl I saw so much in dreamland

Even Awaji’s CG, which I thought was absolutely marvelous, can’t hold a candle to the real thing Thinking back on it now, it looked like a cheap copy ——

“S-S-S-Sorry!”

Panicking, I sit up with a start and start reeling off an explanation.

“It’s um Ai Yashajin! I told her not to bother, but she had me kidnapped and dumped out here! Dah! That doesn’t mean I don’t want to see you! Being

apart for so long has been killing me, but I'd resolved to endure

Yeesh What am I saying?

This was supposed to be a cooler moment. Something suave should've rolled off my tongue.

"I-I'll go, right now! Where can I get a taxi?! Ah my wallet! Where———"

I frantically rummage through my pockets in the middle of this beautiful meadow surrounded by mountains.

The one silently watching me———

"....."

Tug.

".....?"

I didn't realize there was so much strength in those delicate fingers.

Looking away, she bluntly says, "Since you're already here, why not stay over?"

That visage is exactly the Ginko I know.

My heart clenches as it finally clicks that I'm definitely not dreaming.

STAYING OVER

“This will be our campsite.”

The words *stay over* made my heart skip a beat as Big Sis explains.

This meadow is owned by the medical facility where Ginko is staying. Since I just showed up without going through the proper channels, I’ll never be allowed to spend the night inside. So camping under the stars will have to do.

I’m still a bit shaken after being kidnapped, waking up in the middle of nowhere, and all that but This isn’t half bad.

Actually, I’d almost call it exciting.

What Big Sis called the *Bam! And it’s ready!* thing is actually a nice, surprisingly spacious tent and her set of camping chairs are comfy and have sturdy backs.

So I’ll be sipping coffee or whatever under an open sky and can fool around with the girl I love without worrying about anyone happening by Does it get any better than that?

The biggest shock for me about this whole thing is Big Sis being so decked out with camping gear. Her skin barely lasts a few minutes in the sun.

“How’d you get all this stuff? Shopping online?”

“Keika left it here.”

Keika

“She would stop by just to read on the terrace and drink tea at first, but it escalated from there.”

Big Sis explains that it all started when some former classmates of Keika’s invited her out for a barbeque. She jumped at the invitation hoping that some of them were still single only to find out they all had significant others, or even kids. The anguish of being left behind stung so hard that she invited Big Sis to a barbeque with her to soothe the wounds. Oh Keika

“..... Does Keika come here often?”

“All the time.”

She answers almost like it’s a bad thing.

“She comes nearly every weekend these days, and was here most of last week. We started camping because it’s getting warm outside.”

“Camping is trending right now.”

“It’s just eating and sleeping outside. Keika starts drinking in the morning, has more in the afternoon———”

“A-And at night, too?”

“She’s already out by then and drinks more when she wakes up the next afternoon.”

Keika!

“I thought she was worried about me at first, but I think she’s only trying to get away from reality. Marriage is a lost cause now, isn’t it?”

Guilt is hitting me hard.

The only explanation for Keika’s stress level is Ai Hinatsuru and I. As Ai’s Master, it should be me dealing with her situation.

I hate that I’m having to leave the whole thing on her shoulders but As a title holder, I can’t turn my back on the sponsors. This whole Professional Entrance Exam thing could split the Shogi world in half. I can’t just put my opinion out there without careful consideration———

“It’s ready.”

“Huh? What’s ready?”

“Food.”

“Wha?! Already?!”

I was sure she was joking, but then the smell reached my nose.

The dish Ginko whipped up in a camping-sized frying pan over a gas cooker is

———

“Shrimp and mushroom *ajillo*.”

“Oh

It looks like perfect *ajillo*.

However, this follows the standard thus far. All looks good until the shock of it hitting my tongue makes it humanly impossible to swallow I dip my spoon in and slowly raise it to my lips. This time, the shock is completely different.

“Mnnn?! Th-This is good!!”

Yes. It’s delicious.

Spreading it on a thin slice of baguette turns it into an absolute delicacy!

“Whoa, something I can actually eat showed up How am I supposed to react in this situation?”

“I’ve got a pike with your name on it.”

It’s been more than half a year since I’ve felt Ginko’s raw malice.

“*Ajillo* is just a seafood mix boiled in olive oil and store-bought seasoning. Anyone could make it.”

“Says the person who couldn’t even boil water

“Agh?”

“S-Sorry

I apologize through tears as Big Sis grinds her knuckles into my cheek.

Now this is happiness.

This meaningless sequence has played out hundreds of thousands of times since we were kids. But now it’s hitting me just how much I’ve missed this married couple comedy routine.

I love this girl.

To the point that nothing else matters.

We talked and talked and talked from that point on until sunset.

All the while being very careful to skirt around bringing up her current condition, when she might come back or why she left without saying a word to me

But it wasn't all that hard. At least, not as hard as I worried it would be.

Ginko, who read all the way through *Kuzuryu's Notebook*, starts asking me specific questions about the sequences in it.

Our campsite turns into a verbal practice session. A high-level one, too. It's obvious that Ginko doesn't have any rust at all. I even get ahead of myself and jokingly tell her, "Whew, I cut the deadline so close that my editor forced me into a cram session at an inn." Her response is like a splash of cold water to the face.

"I know."

She then silently pulls out a bookmark that was in her sample copy that came directly from the editor's office and hands it to me. And there, written in flowing calligraphy letters, is: "You had best return quickly, else I shall take him for my own."

I thought I'd triggered an instant death. That hasn't happened in a long time

But the jealousy on Ginko's face is so adorable.

All sorts of emotions are passing across her face, none of which I ever saw on her after she turned pro, or even when she was in the 3-*dan* division. She always just looked exhausted.

And I watch that face the whole time the sun goes down.

I gave her the watch that's shining on her right wrist. My heart skips a beat whenever that twinkle happens to catch my eye.

Now that it's dark, Ginko builds a campfire and starts making dinner.

This time, it's pizza toast made on a sandwich griller.

"Anyone can make it by putting toppings on bread," says Ginko, but it's pretty obvious that she has been practicing what Keika taught her.

“..... This is good.”

“Uh-huh.”

Just thinking about who she had in mind when practicing makes me so happy I could die.

“So, um.”

Our conversation picks up again in front of the crackling fire.

It's gotten a lot colder since the afternoon and Ginko put on a cardigan. Seeing her dressed like this is so new to me, I can't help but check her out from head to toe.

“You didn't seem all that surprised to see me laying on the ground back there. Shouldn't that have been more of a shock?”

“You didn't seem surprised to see me either, Yaichi.”

“Why would I? You haven't changed a bit.”

“Where were you looking just now?”

It's scary how she can sense my line of sight when it's so dark out. Is Ginko actually a cat?

Big Sis cups her chest with both hands and says, “..... I'm still 16. A second year in high school, yes? A lot can happen before I turn 20. Who knows, I might be wearing knit sweaters that bring out my curves by the time I'm the same age as college students!”

“True, true,” I answer with a smile.

Ginko is the type to never throw in the towel until a Gold gets deployed right in front of her King. As a Shogi player, I highly respect that. It's just

———Sir Supercomputer has already spoken.

This is just sad.

If there's barely any hope at all, human nature compels people to hang onto it. Even those with a strong will like Big Sis Just to be clear, I didn't say

barely because she barely has boobs, okay?

Ignorance is bliss when you don't know what's going to happen.

It's like how a Shogi match can keep going if both players don't realize they're on a check path.

———She's better off not knowing

I only recently found out how hard it is to carry big secrets———

“..... Chi? Yaichi? Are you listening?”

“Ah! S-Sorry. I was thinking.”

“..... Something naughty?”

“Why would you think that?!”

Is it because I was just looking at her chest?! Say that when you've got a massive pair!

“I'll tell you why I wasn't surprised.”

Big Sis looks me right in the eyes.

“Because I've thought about it every day.”

“About what?”

“Seeing you.”

I forget to breathe.

“I’ll tell you one more thing. Why I like it here so much.”

With that, Ginko puts out the fire.

Then she takes my hand and pulls me down to the ground next to her.

“Look.”

Both of us look up at the clear night sky and she says, “See? It’s almost the same as that night.”

It was almost exactly a year ago tonight.

Ginko and I looked up at the stars from my hometown during the *tanabata* season.

The Milky Way in the sky and its reflection on the ground.

We opened up to each other under those very stars on that precious night. I played the biggest move of my life.

And this sky does look like the one we saw when she went from being just my older sister apprentice to my girlfriend.

“The view looked like my second favorite thing in the world, so I decided this place was okay.”



Ginko says with her eyes on the night sky.

I ask without thinking, “What’s the first?”

“I haven’t seen it yet but you already know, right?”

“..... Yeah.”

Yes, I do.

Ginko Sora took a leave of absence from Shogi to play against Yaichi Kuzuryu.

The view she wants to see most of all is from the board. The two of us playing on a professional stage. Ginko Sora chose that tiny, narrow piece of wood over this vast sky filled with stars.

Which is why it hurts. My heart aches.

We’re so close right now.

We love each other so much.

But in reality, that view is further away than the thousands of light years it took for these stars to shine in that sky

Like shooting stars falling out of a sky that was too full of stars, emotions come pouring out after my heart got too full to keep them in.

“I love you.”

“Uh-huh

“You are my number one, Ginko. No matter how many times I could relive my life, that would never change. I’ll love you forever. Even if

If I never played Shogi, is what I was about to say but I stop myself. Hearing that wouldn’t make her happy, for sure.

So I tell her this instead.

“Once we’re married and have kids, let’s all go camping together. I want our future kids to see this beautiful sky don’t you?”

The instant I saw her again.

The moment her longer hair came into my line of sight, I felt our hearts come

together.

“I want to see you with long hair in a wedding dress.”

She remembered me saying so and is growing her hair out to make it happen right now. We are seeing the same things in a future that is just around the corner

Her answer is one word.

“..... Doufu.”

Then, hand in hand, we snuggle up together in the tent and fall asleep.

The happiest sleep there is.

The next morning.

“Nmm”

I wake up to the sun’s rays. I must be more sensitive to them after living in a windowless room for so long.

Next to me is Ginko, still facing me as she snoozes.

Part of me was worried everything that happened yesterday was all just a dream, but the feeling of her fingers between mine erases all those worries instantly.

Slowly unweaving our hands, I get up and step outside the tent. Then



“Good morning, Yaichi.”

“.....!”

I recognize just who is standing there right away.

Even though the last time I saw her was nearly 10 years ago.

“Do you remember who I am?”

I nod without a word.

This person’s name is———Shoko Sora.

Big Sis’s mother.

■ GENETICS

“Sorry to pull you aside like this when you’re so busy before your matches.”

“It’s alright

In Ginko’s room inside the facility, I’m face to face with Ms. Shoko Sora my girlfriend’s mother. On a side note, the room is number 18. That’s like my name, because eight can be *ya* in Japanese and *ichi* is one. Ginko jumped in to explain it was just a *coincidence* before I could ask. But she looked away the whole time.

She went off for a medical exam on her own, warning me *don’t get ahead of yourself* before leaving.

There’s not much in the room, just the way Ginko would like it.

That made the pictures set out on the table stick out.

Two pictures, to be exact.

One was taken outside Master Kiyotaki’s place. Master was still in his prime in A League at the time, and Keika was there in her high school uniform.

A really young Ginko is standing in front of her, one hand holding my hand and the other clutching her magnetic Shogi board.

“U-Um!”

Pulling my eyes away from the picture, I square my shoulders with Ms. Shoko Sora and bow.

“I’m the one who owes you an apology! Showing up here unannounced like this———”

“Don’t worry about it. I was hoping for a chance to talk with you properly,” she answers with a gentle smile.

Holy crap. I had no idea being alone with my girlfriend’s mother would make my heart pound against my ribs so hard. Thinking back on it now, I really shouldn’t have left Big Sis alone with my mom when we visited my hometown

.....

Still They look so much alike.

Even though her hair is more of a white hue than Ginko's silver.

And she seems so much calmer than Ginko's constant battle mode and cold, lamenting expressions.

Yet the resemblance is uncanny.

I've thought so going back to when Ms. Shoko Sora was younger, too.

Looking back at the other picture on the table, I say, "This is a family photo, right?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't sure which was my older sister apprentice at first glance."

It seems like Ms. Sora was pretty young when Ginko was born. Seriously, this picture could've been taken last week if Ginko was given a one-year-old baby to hold.

"And her father looks so young, too! I didn't see the resemblance when I met him once a long time ago, but I definitely see it here."

"That's because this is Ginko's biological father."

I thought I flatlined for a second.

"I've remarried But our hair color makes such a strong impression that we've always been told she takes after me."

"I-I think so, too! She's just like you!! In fact, I feel like I'm talking with my older sister apprentice right now because you look so young!!"

"He-he. You have a way with words."

Crap, crap, CRAP! I've stepped on a landmine!!

Getting blindsided by the word *remarried* shook me to the core Is that what she wanted to talk to me about?

Is she planning to let me in on their family's dirty laundry before I ask for their blessing to marry Ginko?

I gulp, my mouth dry and straighten my posture before asking, “S-So what do you want to talk with me properly about?”

“Her condition.”

“.....!”

She must be able to tell I’m shaken again, because Ms. Shoko Sora gives me another gentle smile.

“It doesn't have to be today. If hearing about it from me would be too much pressure, Dr. Akashi and Kiyotaki-*sensei* can tell you.”

“..... Master knows what’s wrong with my older sister apprentice?”

“Yes. I told him everything when he took her in.”

“He’s known for that long”

Fssshhh A dark shadow falls over my heart.

Right after Ginko turned pro, so right when she and I officially became a couple, Master forbade us from dating out of nowhere.

———Did it have something to do with Ginko’s health?

“We’ve hidden it from you, Yaichi. But if your heart is telling you to spend the rest of your life with my daughter with Ginko, then I want you to know.”

“..... Please tell me.”

A quick response now would only sound half-hearted, so I add.

“I want to hear it from you, Ms. Sora Right now.”

“Thank you. And thank you for caring so deeply about her.”

Then she starts talking.

Explaining a side of Ginko I never knew.

“Her sickness is a heart condition. She was born with it, and modern medicine doesn’t have any way to effectively treat the problem.”

“.....!”

I thought it would be serious.

But *this* serious?!

“Th-Then, it’s incurable?!”

“Calm down, Yaichi. To make a long story short, she has already healed. Akashi-sensei confirmed it himself around the time she turned 15.”

“Huh?”

That’s a surprise.

The only way to recover from an incurable condition is to let nature take its course, naturally In other words, to let her grow out of it as she got older.

“Just This has been an agonizing journey for her. It wouldn’t be easy for her to believe that she healed naturally, and she’s never been a hardy girl. Her body gave out on her in the middle of yet another harsh battle.”

The pain in Ms. Shoko Sora’s eyes builds as she talks.

“By the end of the 3-*dan* division season, simply sitting at the board made her nauseous. She holed up at home, frightened that a doctor would step in and stop her from playing. Her fever never broke and recovering stamina took ages. It was plain to see she had overtraining syndrome”

That comes up a lot in sports.

It’s a condition where training only results in chronic fatigue syndrome. In the worst case scenario, the athlete has to retire.

I did a little investigating myself after seeing Big Sis, and that’s what seemed to make the most sense So I was right

“I thought she would be in the clear after promoting to 4-*dan*, but I was naive. In fact, it only made her condition worse. I shouldn’t have let her play against Miss Sainokami It’s too late now, I know.”

“.....”

In hindsight, that might’ve been the best call. But I don’t think anything would have stopped Big Sis from playing that match considering how she felt at the time.

I’m not sure how to feel about all this going on behind my back.

But the more I hear about it, the more assured I am that Ms. Sora and everyone else involved made as close to the best moves as possible.

“..... So that’s what happened”

Some of the resentment I had for Master and Keika is starting to unravel. I can feel it.

“So it’s been a long time since you saw her. What’s your impression?”

“I thought she’s doing much better. We even did some verbal Shogi research.”

“That’s great! Ahhh And it’s all thanks to you, Yaichi”

She smiles for the first time.

“The reason why she Ginko chose to step away rather than push herself into a spiral of self-destruction was because of her desire to play against you in a league match. Having you as a rival is what made Ginko strong. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“She did the same for me!”

I blurt out.

“I needed Big Sis needed Ginko to get stronger. Just how much was made all too clear to me recently”

I had made up my mind to ditch human Shogi sense altogether and reshape my Shogi from scratch, but I needed one person A girl named Ginko Sora was indispensable.

I couldn’t uninstall her.

But that’s okay. Even if she’s the reason I couldn’t measure up to Awaji, I’ve chosen a future with her!

However.

“..... If only you could’ve just stayed rivals,” says Ms. Sora as her face takes a sorrowful turn. “But now that the two of you have feelings for each other You have to know what lies ahead.”

“There’s more?”

“Her heart condition is hereditary.”

“.....?”

“Even if the person has healed, there’s a possibility it could be passed down to their children. That possibility is very high if the parent shows symptoms. That’s how genetics works.”

Genetics?

Hered itary?

My brain can’t keep up.

“It’s you I’m worried about, Yaichi.”

“Me?”

“You might have to suffer the same way I did. Not only having to watch as the one you love writhes in pain, but also take care of the newborn child who's suffering from the same hereditary condition and be powerless to do anything to help them. As someone who’s lived through that, I had to be the one to tell you.”

My blood runs cold.

Just like failing to see a sudden death sequence before it’s too late, everything goes dark and a river of sweat rolls down my back.

“..... Wait,” I whisper without meaning to.

I want a do-over.

But this isn’t a game where you can say *wait* and get a do-over.

Do-overs don’t happen in real life.

———She remarried.

———A genetic heart condition.

I’ve made a terrible assumption.

Ginko looks so much like her mother, I had been sure the heart condition came from her.



“Then Ginko’s condition was passed down from her father, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

Ms. Sora nods.

“And *I lost my first husband* not long after Ginko was born.”

She tells me that she was in no condition to raise a child after being told her daughter didn’t have long to live so soon after losing the first love of her life.

“I couldn’t take it, having to see her cry in so much pain day in and day out. I just couldn’t watch her slowly fall into an early grave.”

Normally, it would be absurd for anyone to entrust their child, a four-year-old girl no less, to be a stranger’s live-in apprentice. Even if a doctor recommended it.

But all that changes if the mother isn’t able to fulfill her role.

“That’s why I asked Kiyotaki-*sensei* to take her. I let go of my only daughter, let her become a child of Shogi”

A child of Shogi.

I had always thought of my meeting Ginko at Master’s place as a happy twist of fate. Just like any naive, innocent little kid.

And yes, it was the best twist of fate from my perspective.

But a horrible reality was on the other side of that coin

The ramifications of which are hitting me like a truck right now.

“It’s nothing short of a miracle that Ginko’s condition has healed, physically at least.”

Ms. Sora explains that Dr. Akashi confirmed it personally and the staff at this facility haven’t discovered any abnormalities while doing daily exams since Ginko arrived.

She can play Shogi and can even have kids if she wants.

“But mentally, she carries many scars and any child she bears very well could be born with the same condition. The chances another miracle will happen for them are

I may be an idiot, but even I can tell those chances are very close to zero.

———I really really am an idiot!

Without any idea about the hell Ginko and her mother have lived through, I’ve been throwing around words like *marriage* and *kids* and *family* just because they sound nice.

I’d convinced myself that our meeting was *destiny*.

Guilt builds up to the point that I can’t take it and cry out.

“Uuurgh. UHHHHGH!”

Even gritting my teeth can’t hold it back. I’m trembling from head to toe. Trembling is all I can do in the face of all this anger toward myself and how powerless I am against this reality.

———I’m just some perfectly healthy, happy-go-lucky piece of trash!!

No matter how I scathe my past self for what I’ve done, this is the way things are and there’s nothing I can do about it.

My head in my hands, getting one simple question out takes everything I have.

“..... Does Ginko know about this?”

“*I haven’t told her. Not yet.*”

Ms. Sora shakes her head no with an exhaustion that could only come from enduring so much pain.

All that’s left is deep resignation.

“She may have figured it out, though. It would be harder not to notice even if it’s a reality she doesn’t want to see.”

I’ll have to be the one to tell her if we really do get married.

“Please don’t blame yourself, Yaichi. You’ve done nothing wrong,” says a

thoroughly defeated Shoko Sora. “This was part of destiny, too

After that———

I left the facility without seeing Ginko again.

My excuse was that I have a match in Tokyo.

But the truth is that I didn’t know what face to make if I saw her.

No, that’s not quite right.

I didn’t know what face I would end up making.

Ginko is finally getting back on her feet, feeling well enough to play Shogi and be hopeful about the future and I might accidentally plunge her back into hell with a slip of the tongue or by letting some emotions show by accident.

Not to mention I have one more thing that I need to hide from her———

TAXI DRIVER

Today is a special day.

“..... I’m heading out.”

It’s still early. Fully dressed and ready to go in the dim morning light, I whisper to myself in the starkly empty front lobby.

Today is the first preliminary match of Group E in the Emperor Tournament.

It’s my first time ever playing in a tournament for one of the seven professional titles, and I’m leaving home extra early so nerves don’t get to me on several levels.

“Wait right there, Ai.”

“..... Mom?”

I get told to stop in the empty lobby.

Since Mom is in the stable stage of her pregnancy, she’s been working here and there. I see her sometimes, but this is the first time she’s talked to me on the morning of a match. Well, morning is the busiest time for the staff at an inn.

“I hailed a taxi for you today. Take it.”

“A taxi?”

I wanted to yell *don’t go over my head like that* at first.

“But the professional *senseis* take the train, so if I show up in a taxi They’ll hate me even more than they already———”

“Ai.”

She glares down at me with eyes as cold as ice above her baby bump.

“Aren’t you taking your opponent too lightly?”

“Huh?”

“He’s none other than the former Ryuo, Takeru Usui. If you’d like to increase

your chances of beating him even slightly, you'll preserve your stamina by taking that taxi. Am I wrong?"

".....!"

This will be my first time playing a match with four hours of waiting time, so I've done everything I can to make sure I'm in the best possible shape.

But Mom was right I've been so focused on making a Professional Entrance Exam a reality that I was overlooking the match right in front of me.

But thanking her is just too hard, so I look away and ask her.

"..... Do you know Usui-*sensei*?"

"Of course. I attended him personally when he stayed with us as the title holder—as is expected for the owner of any establishment. Though, you probably only saw the challenger Yaichi Kuzuryu at the time."

Agh

"I've interacted with hundreds of thousands of guests, and Usui 9-*dan* stands out from each and every one of them. He"

Mom stops herself in the middle of the thought.

She never reveals information about her customers, even to her own daughter.

"..... As you have undergone training to inherit my position as owner one day, you'll surely notice on your own. Do not forget to watch your opponent closely during the clash."

"Okay!"

This time, I look up into Mom's eyes, and her belly, to nod.

"How is the baby?"

"Energetic. Maybe a little too energetic. They're kicking up a storm from the inside every day."

"Uwhee?! B-But, doesn't that hurt?"

"Well, yes. But———"

Phew Mom's face relaxes and she adds.

"There's nothing more reassuring for a parent than to know their child is healthy. Now, go out there and start kicking up your own storm."

I climb into the taxi that pulled up in front of the inn.

"Where to?"

"To Sendagaya Um, do you know where the Shogi Association Building is?"

"I sure do! My daughter goes there all the time. To the classroom on the second floor."

I was about to say something back when.

".....?!"

I see something unbelievable on the window next to the headrest.

A professional Shogi player's autograph.

"I-Is that a real one?"

"You know what it is? Well, I happened to drive Ginko Sora 4-*dan* to her pro debut match."

Sora-sensei was in this taxi

Coincidences like this don't just happen. Did Mom set this up?

"Sota Kunugi gets all the headlines nowadays. It's like e-e-everybody forgot that Naniwa's Snow White still exists," complains the taxi driver.

And before I can ask anything else myself, he starts rambling.

"She sat right where you're sitting now, miss. She had the same quiet air about her, too. The kind that makes it hard to strike up a conversation But it wasn't the same *don't talk to me* aura that celebrities have. How can I describe it"

"Divine?"

"Yes! Like something that ought not be touched. Do you know what I mean?"

“I do.”

It’s especially true for Sora-sensei but I think all Shogi players take on a divine air of some kind on their journey to an important match.

I admired that sacred aura but still reached out to touch it. I got hurt but have no regrets.

Having no regrets, no matter what, is my goal moving forward.

“About this autograph Did Sora-sensei choose the wording?”

“Sure did. I asked her if she would do an autograph for my daughter, and that’s what she wrote. I did a little research afterwards, and it turns out this is pretty rare, isn’t it?”

“Yes. She chose to write *Infallible*. The impression I have of her is that she likes to write popular sayings in the Shogi world rather than her own words.”

I take that message on the window to heart.

Rather than the mindset of someone on their way to a big match it sounds like they're *fighting against a whole world full of absurdities*.

What kind of burden was she carrying?

I have no idea.

But it’s probably very different from the one I have.

On the other hand, I think I understand her a bit better now that the world is against me.

“We're here.”

The taxi pulls up to the association entrance.

Today there are *two* matches in this building that matter a lot to me.

Mine, in the large arena.

And in the special arena———

“Oh yes. May I ask you your name, miss?” asks the driver as he gives me the bill.

“Ai Hinatsuru I’m a Women’s League Shogi player.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m sure my daughter would’ve recognized you on the spot. I’ll look you up as soon as I’m done for today.”

Words won’t come out, so I just bow my head. I might disappoint him. Compared to Sora-*sensei* who always faces everything head on, I probably come across as a big coward.

“Miss Hinatsuru May I ask you a question?” the driver asks hesitantly. “Sora 4-*dan* will come back, won’t she?”

“Yes! Of course, she will,” I answer without missing a beat and look up at the association building.

That is the only thing that’s certain right now.

“No matter where she goes, I’ll drag her right back here.”

BROTHERS

The man who called me out to Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden is sprawled out on the grass.

There's almost no one here yet because it's a little after nine in the morning. The gates just opened a few minutes ago. Finding him was easy.

"Yo."

He sits up when he notices me coming and casually waves.

"Hey"

We haven't seen each other in almost a year, but the hellos end there.

That's just how brothers are.

"Want to sit?"

"No, I'll stand."

My brother pats the grass next to him, but I shake my head no. That way, he'll get the message that I don't want to stick around any longer than necessary.

Not to mention that I don't want my pants to be dirty where I'm heading after this.

Show up to the special arena with grass stains? No thanks.

"You've slimmed down, Yaichi. Are you eating right? One perk of my job is that a professional chef makes my lunch and, I swear, I've put on 10 pounds since I started working——"

"What's this about?"

I cut him off and my brother smiles back.

"There's something I'd like to know about those Awaji records."

"They came with analysis, yeah? Read it."

"Oh, I did. And each one was more shocking than the last," says my exceptionally skilled amateur Shogi-playing brother with excitement. "Everyone

from pros to amateurs to the people developing Shogi software can't get enough of the matches you released. I don't blame them, either. They show how to maintain perfect balance across a wide range of strategies and come with bonus commentary from the youngest Dual Title Holder that ever lived. Out-of-place artifacts if I've ever seen them!"

"Awaji is the impressive one, not me."

I shrug it off and press my brother to get to the point.

"And? Is there anything else?"

"You see, I'm more interested in *the records you didn't release*. And there are tons, right? The world's fastest supercomputer only producing 100 records? Give me a break."

As usual, my big brother plays his biggest move with a cool head.

"Yaichi. Each of the records you released end a little too perfectly. Yes, they're long matches and very plain, which is expected for deep learning software. But, you know? The picture they paint at the end is still too pretty."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"Yes, it's subjective. My point is that they should look weirder to human eyes."

"....."

"And Shogi that looks pretty to the human eye only happens when the players are evenly matched. Since no two players are at exactly the same skill level, their match records look more human. But if something can keep playing at the same skill level without making a mistake as in a computer playing against itself, the outcome must be something humans cannot predict, don't you think?"

"You haven't changed at all"

He's always been bright.

When it came to book smarts, he was always in a league of his own.

Even though he taught himself how to program computers, he's gotten so

good at his hobby that he's left his mark on the world stage.

He's quite a bit older than me. We spent six years living together before I moved out to Osaka, but I can only remember back to when I was about three years old. I don't have too many memories of him, to be honest. Just that no matter what I tried, I couldn't win against him. That's how brothers who are separated by quite a few years are. For the younger brother, the older one is just a pain in the butt.

With one exception.

I stood a chance in Shogi.

Thinking back, he probably took it easy on me so that I'd keep playing. Even so, he realized that I had talent and never once complained about having to play against me.

My brother was there the day that Master Kiyotaki came to do instructional matches at the Shogi classroom that he and I attended.

I'm pretty sure my brother was still better than me at the time.

But Master recognized me as the one *with talent* because I was younger.

That's why I committed to Shogi. It was the only way I could beat my brother.

That's how it is for male siblings.

"Do you want to know what Shogi will be like in 100 years? Do you want to see the despair within the match records I've intentionally kept hidden from the world."

My brother doesn't say anything. He just looks me straight in the eyes to egg me on. He probably has an idea what's coming.

As for me, I've been wanting to tell someone.

This secret is too heavy to shoulder on my own.

"They all ended in either Repetition Draws or Double *Nyugoku*."

My brother usually carries himself like he's got the whole world figured out. But at that moment, he gets serious. A dark satisfaction fills my mind as I explain more details.

"The best opening move wasn't opening the Bishop's Path or advancing the Pawn in front of the Rook. It was moving the King. Keeping the Bishop back always resulted in a Repetition Draw. Zero records with a completed Bishop Exchange managed to avoid a Repetition Draw either. Shogi's limits have been found."

I released a mere 100 matches.

What's more, they were all from the earlier stages of Awaji's advance, probably Shogi 20 or 30 years from now. The other hundreds of millions of records ended in a draw.

Every single one!

"Yagura, Bishop Exchange, Double Wing Attack, Side Pawn Capture and Ranging Rook All of them were created to squeeze every ounce of potential from the big pieces, and they were all disproven. Humans were so distracted by their dynamic movements that we learned to play the wrong way. One thousand four hundred years were wasted."

"Did you try locking the formation in place and having it play that way?"

"Yes. Those are the 100 matches that were released."

A supercomputer analyzed the *formations* and *standards* devised by human beings and spat out a tragic result.

"Side Pawn Capture will lose on defense. The first move with a *Yagura* or Double Wing will either win or draw. The first to shift their Rook loses. Oh yeah! In Double Ranging Rook, the defender is guaranteed to win. Shogi is basically a game where the first one to move their Rook loses. Ha-ha!"

"..... I see."

There's a twinge of sadness in my brother's eyes as he comes to terms with it.

I'm sure I've seen that look somewhere Right.

———At Grandpa's funeral.

When he was mourning the death of the man who taught us how to play Shogi in the first place

“..... If Shogi had a natural handicap feature like Go to balance offense and defense, it probably would’ve lived a bit longer,” my brother manages to say.

We’re here today attending a funeral for Shogi. This is the moment the game we love comes to an end.

“But it doesn’t,” I answer him while thinking back on the massive sunset I shared with Big Sis. This world will be over soon.

And in the worst way possible.

“Could you work to perfect that craft knowing how it will end? Do you think you could devote your life to it as a pro?”

Shogi is done for.

But there’s something I absolutely can’t let come to an end.

“Could you tell Big Sis Tell Ginko this answer?”

I’ll protect her from it even if it kills me.

“Could you deliver this news to someone who’s just getting back on their feet? Say that *a burnt wasteland is all that awaits at the end of this path?*”

“Yaichi

“I can’t.”

No, I can’t. How could I?

She went pro all so that she could play Shogi with me.

She loves me to death. She loves Shogi to death.

But the worst possible future is waiting for us.

Could I take Shogi away from her on top of that?

..... Just how messed up is destiny?!

“So I’ll pretend, and I’ll come up with a fake future.”

I chose those 100 matches before being reunited with Ginko, but now I'm absolutely certain I made the right choice, now that I know her secret.

No matter how advantageous the opening move becomes, no matter how many specific formations die out along the way, I will stall Shogi's demise.

That is now the reason I play.

Now that I have overwhelming strength, I'll crush anyone and everyone who pursues the despair I know is coming. That way, I can extend Shogi's lifespan. Ai Yashajin tends to rampage, so I'll have to limit her usage of Awaji as much as possible.

All to delay Shogi's death by even a day.

"It's time. I have to go."

Stay any longer, and I'll get caught up in some pointless conversation.

Just as I turn to leave———

"Yaichi!"

My brother yells as he gets to his feet.

"You didn't just come up to Tokyo for your match or to see me, right? You want to turn this whole thing on its head with your own hands, don't you? This future 100 years from now drawn up by a machine!"

"....."

"If you want to hear my answer, here it is——— *That kid can!!*"

He yells as I walk away without so much as turning around. I'm on my way to play against a human being for the first time in a long while.

It feels like going to a movie when you already know how it ends.

RECORD 5

空
笙
子

SHOKO
SORA



DARK TAISHI

Walking into the special arena in the back of the fourth floor, a suave smile is there to greet me.

“Good morning. I believe this is our first league match, is it not?”

My first opponent in B League, Class 2 is Taishi Shinokubo 7-*dan*.

He’s 25 and had one season as a title holder.

Dubbed *Lord Taishi*, he graduated from a famous private university and became the most popular young pro in Kanto with his suave yet sharp play style. Ayumu stacks up pretty well on the handsome scale, but gets blown out of the water in terms of common sense and social skills. That leaves Mr. Shinokubo alone at the top.

“Pardon me,” I say and quickly settle into the upper seat.

Since I’m the Ryuo, my matches typically get scheduled in Kansai. Placement Matches, however, are different. B-2 plays ten matches over the course of the year and one of mine happens to be in Tokyo.

The fact that it happens to overlap with one of my apprentice’s matches is a complete coincidence.

“I ought to thank you, Mr. Kuzuryu. If it weren’t for your status, I wouldn’t be playing in the special arena today. The large hall is actually anything but, not to mention it’s filthy and the restroom tends to be crowded. How nice it is that we have a restroom all to ourselves over here!”

I get my area set up while absentmindedly listening to him.

There’s a reason why I’m not giving him my full attention.

“Placement Matches last long into the night You have to be considerate of the veteran players if you’re stuck in the large hall and it’s impossible to concentrate if you happen to be near someone who constantly fidgets and mumbles to themselves. Being as sensitive to these things as I am, it can become rather overwhelming. But I don’t have to worry about any of that today

..... Losing the Emperor title also meant losing the right to use this room, you see.”

“.....”

That negativity doesn’t match the smart, handsome Lord Taishi at all. I just close my eyes and let it all go in one ear and out the other.

I’ve heard rumors that he became a lot more pessimistic after the Meijin took the Emperor title from him It looks like they were true. Modesty has a line, and he definitely crossed it. Some people even say it’s an off-the-board tactic. Ignoring it as much as possible is the way to go

Suddenly, someone is on my right.

“?!”

Looking up, a healthily tanned beauty’s profile is in front of me and my heart jumps.

Today’s match recorder———Karen Noboryou is pouring a cup of tea for me.

“..... Thanks.”

This is awkward, but I still thank her. She gives me a silent nod before sitting down at the boardside table.

———She seems kind of down. I can’t blame her, though

I bet her Shogi sense got trampled to pieces during her double title match against Ai Yashajin.

She’s having a rough time in the 3-*dan* division this season, too. Not only have her chances of promotion to the pros gone up in smoke, she’s in danger of getting knocked back down to the main Sub League so soon after joining the division.

But something doesn’t add up.

Why would she go out of her way to work one of my matches? Especially a Placement Match of all things.

“Members of the 3-*dan* division are given priority when they work as match recorders. So, naturally, most prefer to avoid Placement Matches because of

the long waiting time. Thus, her choosing to work this match could only mean ———”

Mr. Shinokubo muses to himself, “Just seeing the match record wouldn’t be enough. She must want to take it in as closely as possible, to feel the atmosphere herself just as a supercomputer showed you how Shogi will be played a century from now.”

..... It seems my brother was right. Kanto’s young pros and 3-*dan* division members are swarming Awaji’s records like there’s no tomorrow. I take a moment to observe my slightly restless opponent.

———I thought he’d be one of the ones to jump at those records, but this much?

It’s become the norm to see Taishi Shinokubo 7-*dan* as someone who claimed a title at 22 years old because he was quick to incorporate the Snowroof, Bishop Exchange, and Side Pawn Capture strategies, all of which are easy to research with software.

So many younger pros do that much now that it’s almost a given.

Mr. Shinokubo was also one of the first to use a high-spec computer and figure out how to use software for research. When it comes to making standard sequences, he’s head and shoulders above most pros.

Most people didn’t realize just how far he was ahead of the curve when he won that title.

But that was two years ago. Use software to analyze his matches from back then, and it’s clear as day that he progressed through the early stages playing his own game.

———Basically he was an oracle from the future too.

Okito-*sensei* strove to become more like a computer, but Mr. Shinokubo used it to find answers.

Developing standard tactics.

It was called *digging* back when software first came out. A lot like how people *mine* for virtual currency today, he turned electrical power into sleek new

sequences.

The better computers get.

The higher the electricity bill climbs.

The more software will dig for new standards on its own.

Tons of victory stars and titles are the returns for that investment.

And Mr. Shinokubo won matches left and right. That only makes sense because he saved all the time and energy required for researching standards with one press of a button. Traditional research methods required you to share information, but that's not true with a computer.

But the Shogi world isn't so forgiving that it'll let that strategy work for long.

———Deviate from the standards just when playing against him.

That's actually how the Meijin wiped the floor with him. Even though he deliberately put himself at a disadvantage during the early-game by using outdated strategies, the Meijin's mid-game skills were too much for Mr. Shinokubo to handle.

Once that strategy was used on the title match stage, everyone started avoiding the latest standards against Mr. Shinokubo in league matches. His winning percentage has dropped so low, it makes his glory days of a few years ago look like a fever dream.

On top of that, everyone has started using software well enough to negate the head start Mr. Shinokubo had when it came to strategies.

Even still, he's not to be underestimated.

Because no one knows just how deep the dark roots running under his developed standards go.

"So tell me, how does it feel to dig for standard tactics with an extremely fast machine set aside for your own personal use? Just as comfortable as being allowed to use this special arena? What say you, Mr. Demon King of the West?"

If I let that suave smile and charm convince me to let my guard down, I'll get sucked into a negative black hole of a sequence. That's why people have a new

name for him.

Dark Taishi.

“It’s time. Shinokubo-*sensei*, please begin the match.”

The clock strikes 10, meaning it’s time to start.

Mr. Shinokubo wastes no time advancing the Pawn in front of his Rook up two spaces. Getting a Pawn to 2 Five followed by jumping the Knight forward is the latest trend for Static Rook, so of course I’m aware of it.

Then Mr. Shinokubo opens the Bishop Path.

The formations are now limited to either Bishop Exchange or Snowroof.

“I’m showing you my research, so you better show me yours!”

That’s Dark Taishi’s message.

“..... Five years.”

A small voice comes from the boardside table. Was the twinge of despair just my imagination?

A Bishop Exchange develops on the board.

Mr. Shinokubo had the opening move, but he’s playing very reserved.

———Was it Ayumu who compared Shogi to a card game?

Out of all Shogi’s strategies, Bishop Exchange seems to be the closest to battling with cards.

Both of us have *research* cards in our hand, the question is when and where to play them. Our strategies will be tested from that point forward.

I decide to play a rare card at this point.

“Giving me the edge column for free? Well, well that is a rare card indeed.”

“..... Ten years.”

Noboryu 3-*dan* mutters in incoherent despair so deep, she may as well be sitting at the bottom of Hell.

The formations heat up even further.

We're locked into Bishop Exchange Double Reclining Silver and the war could break out at any moment.

Our Knights have jumped as far as they can and our *hands* are short on cards. Now's the time for me to play one more.

My King is perfectly safe at 3 One, but I move it up to 4 Two on purpose.

"Oh!"

Mr. Shinokubo immediately senses something off about that decision.

"..... 20 years."

There's that voice from the boardside table again.

But Awaji didn't come up with this move. I thought of it myself before then, actually. The point of moving the King closer to the battlefield is to speed up the opponent's advance, but———

"..... That's about enough."

Mr. Shinokubo then starts shifting his Gold side to side, a *forced stop* card.

With that, the match ends with a Repetition Draw on move 53.

———He gave up the first move advantage?!

I ended up playing two rare cards, but there's no doubt in my mind that he still could have had a decent shot at picking up a very important Placement Match victory had he kept playing.

There's only one explanation as to why he would choose to start over from the beginning.

———Simply put He's prioritized absorbing my research over the victory star

Dark Taishi's devotion to standards sends a chill down my spine.

"He-he. I'm hoping for a stronger card this time."

Picking up only his valuables, Mr. Shinokubo grins at me as he leaves the arena.

The redo starts 30 minutes later.

Now that the first move is mine, I call on my most-treasured sword: Double Wing Attack.

———Standards don't mean anything now. I'll crush him with pure power!

I go in there ready to unleash an all-out offensive But.

".....?! That's"

His movements are much more refined than I expected.

———How did he dig this deep on a household computer?!

His early-game is built like a deck of cards specifically designed to prove that the Double Wing isn't just a contest of strength anymore.

Then———he makes his big move on the 66th turn.

"..... Repetition Draw. We'll restart the match in 30 minutes," says a fiery Noboryu 3-*dan* as she taps away on the tablet.

People must've picked up on the strangeness unfolding in here. I can hear voices out in the hallway.

But Dark Taishi doesn't seem bothered by it at all. Putting the pieces back, he says in a chipper voice, "Why don't we play Snowroof next?"

Sure enough, he plays the trending first-move Snowroof once the redo gets started. It's almost like he's daring me to teach him a move that will stop this trend once and for all

It's still early evening when the third Repetition Draw happens.

"Haaah! That was a rather interesting early-game sequence you let me see," says Mr. Shinokubo in a giddy voice while wiping himself down with a moist towelette. "Six hour Shogi is fantastic, yes? There's still plenty of time to play even after three Repetition Draws."

It's obvious what he's after now. He wants to know how deep the water goes.

Thinking that there's more hidden underneath, he keeps throwing rocks into

my research to measure how far they sink.

———And it's annoying.

Beyond annoying.

He has no idea about the heavy burden I'm carrying as I fight.

I'm doing everything I can not to play any of Awaji's early-game sequences.

Here I am, trying to extend Shogi's longevity, and he's throwing rocks!

———What do you have to complain about, huh?!

There was once a Shogi pro who said, "The Meijin is nothing but trash."

It was to that Meijin's face, actually. When he responded with, "Well, what does that make you?"

The player answered, "A fly drawn in by the stench, probably."

It's painfully obvious to me now what he meant by that.

I have status as Ryuo, the influence my title gives me, and Awaji showed me the future.

But I'm still trash who can't even save one girl.

"..... You know what? Fine, " I mutter to myself after Mr. Shinokubo and Noboryou 3-*dan* leave the arena.

My resolve grows stronger every second I sit here alone.

"You want to see the Gates of Hell that badly, I'll show you."

And, with the first move changing hands yet again 30 minutes later, I show him that move.

The strongest card in my hand.

"F———"

His handsome features twist the second I take my hand off the piece.

"5 Eight King?!"

Mr. Shinokubo leans all the way over the board with his eyes locked on my

King until looking up with a breathless start. His gaze drops back down a moment later as if staring down into the abyss.

A hint of delight comes through in the voice from the boardside table.

“100 years.”

THE FORMER RYUO

There are some differences between the Kansai Association Building and the Kanto Association Building here in Sendagaya.

The best arenas are on the 5th floor in Kansai, but they're on the 4th floor here. There's a special arena all the way in the back, but I'll be playing in what's called the *large hall* today.

The doors that separate the *Takao*, *Kimine*, and *Unkaku* arenas are all taken out to make one big space, and it's amazing how many boards are lined up in here.

There's a match in the special arena as well as other league matches going on at the same time as my Emperor League Preliminary Match.

———W-Whoa The room is so full!

It was overwhelming to see how many people were here for the final match of the Women's Legend League, but there are at least twice as many crammed in here now.

I pass 3-*dan* division members working as match recorders, Shogi journalists gathering material for their articles, and so many others as I weave my way through. The air in here is stifling and the matches haven't even started yet.

———Will I ever get used to this?

Sora-sensei played her last match of the 3-*dan* division and her first match as a professional here in Sendagaya.

Just how strong is her will? *Those words* in the taxi I rode here weren't exaggerating one bit

"..... Pardon me, " I say to no one in particular and sit down at the board reserved for the highest-standing players. Of course, in the lower seat.

It's my opponent's *standing* that got us assigned to this spot, not mine.

That does mean I get to use a very nice board and an expensive set of pieces, but I would've preferred to have the match someplace that doesn't stick

out so much. It's hard to concentrate being so exposed

It sure doesn't help that *he* is playing right next door.

"Good morning, Miss Hinatsuru. As your match has been selected for live coverage today, may I take a photograph for the blog?"

"Oh, go ahead."

I turn around to see Kugui-*sensei* dressed in her journalist suit.

What I didn't expect is who's standing behind her.

"Uwhee?! A-Aya———"

"I will assist with the coverage today. I look forward to working with you."

She steps beside Kugui-*sensei* and greets me like we've never met before. But she winks from behind her glasses.

———It's not summer vacation yet But she came here for me?

My chest twinges with the realization that my friend skipped school to come all the way to Tokyo out of the kindness of her heart.

"..... I look forward to it, too. I promise to play great Shogi today!"

I can do this.

All the pressure goes away in the blink of an eye knowing I've got a friend here. Now I can play my own Shogi. My frozen fingertips feel warm again!

But that burst of confidence gets crushed like a paper balloon one second later.

"Good morning!!"

Every single player and Sub League member in the large hall say all at once. The air in here tightens like someone flipped a switch.

They're all looking at———

"Same."

A man.

He looks to be in his fifties.

Probably about the same age as Grandpa-sensei But there's something that couldn't be more different about him.

Presence.

".....!"

Takeru Usui 9-*dan*.

———Before Master He was the Ryuo!

It was hard enough to breathe in here before. Playing Shogi would've been almost impossible.

But even that stifling air felt comfortable compared to this arctic chill.

Just breathing it in makes me wonder if my lungs will ever work again.

Usui 9-*dan* walks over to our board. Then he takes a look up and down the rows of boards in the large hall before mumbling under his breath.

"..... A graveyard, plain and simple."

———Graves?

He doesn't even acknowledge me as he sits down and starts getting settled.

How do I greet him? We had to have seen each other before, and there's a chance he remembers me. In that case, saying *nice to meet you* would be rude.

But———

"It's nice to meet you," I say with a bow.

Even if I did speak with him as the daughter of the inn's owner.

As a player This is our first time playing against one another.

"My name is Ai Hinatsuru. I look forward to our match today!"

"So it's you. The kid who cried because pros are too weak."

".....!!"

Those words come at me so strong that I want to run away.

All the professionals I've faced before they never had animosity toward me or at least they never showed it.

Assuming that would be the case again today left me open, and the realization sparks a mix of fear and fury so strong it makes my vision shrink

“The real kicker is that you want to turn pro without passing the Sub League. Think getting a few victory stars with the Double Wing like that Master of yours did makes you stronger than pros, do you? Laughable!”

“.....”

“Well, so are the pros who lost.”

After the match recorder’s piece flip makes Usui 9-*dan* the defender, he says loud enough for the whole room to hear.

“Come. I’ll make you bawl loud enough to hear next door.”

SYSTEM

Ai Hinatsuru showed no hesitation in her opening move.

“Hn!!”

Lips drawn out in a straight line, she played the same move she had always opened with thus far: advancing the Pawn in front of her Rook.

“I would like to play a Double Wing! As a professional you can’t say no, right?”

“I refuse.”

However, Takeru Usui opened the Bishop Path without using a single second of waiting time.

He had rejected the Double Wing Attack outright. No professional had done that before.

“..... !!”

“Something wrong? You didn’t think me naive enough to play along with your Double Wing, did you?” Takeru snorted at Ai’s knee-jerk glance up from the board. “I can’t speak for other players, but those tactics won’t work on me. That Master of yours already burnt me pullin’ that stunt once before.”

“.....”

“You’ve still got something up your sleeve, right? Well, let’s see it.”

Ai looked back down into her lap and grasped her knee with her right hand.

Of course she had a strategy prepared.

Opening the Bishop’s Path with the first move was perfectly normal for Ranging Rook players. Which was why, as Takeru pointed out, Ai had a trap in the works.

“Just keep advancing the Pawn like a Double Wing”

The technique Tsubasa had shared with her, which sealed Gokingen Central

Rook.

“That forces the defender’s Bishop up to 3 Three and limits their strategic options And you don’t have to memorize as many standards”

There was no greater reassurance for Ai, who was weak in the early-game, than knowing she could take away not only Gokigen Central Rook, but all of Takeru’s research on Bishop Exchange Ranging Rook strategies.

———There’s no reason for me not to choose 2 Five Pawn.

Yet, Ai’s hand remained frozen on her knee.

Part of it was fear that her own preparation would be outdone, as had happened against Mitsuru Oishi, but a voice other than Tsubasa’s was in her head.

“Henceforth, simply defeating your opponent will not suffice. Nor should your Shogi be intended to break their spirit.” Rina Shakando’s words echoed.

Mitsuru Oishi’s comment wasn’t far behind.

“Even so, every Ranging Rooker in Japan every single Shogi fan will lose their mind when they finally decide to use it. Pros will too, of course.”

In truth, she had made the realization a long time ago. She knew what those two were hinting.

———I’m not enough Just winning won’t do

Ai understood that her playing style had identifying characteristics.

Even her mother, who was a complete novice when it came to Shogi, said that Ai’s matches had a distinctive flair.

More specifically, a flower that bloomed into an instant checkmate in the late-game.

Limiting Takeru’s options in the early-game by pressing her Pawn forward would certainly increase her chances of winning.

But there would only ever be one flower blooming in her matches if that was all she did.

“..... I want to see,” Ai whispered before even she realized it.

Takeru Usui's blossoms were in his prodigal early-game sequences.

Even if one flower wasn't enough.

Even if he didn't take an interest in Ai Hinatsuru's Shogi.

———If I can just get one more flower a new path might open!

That was the moment when Ai's frozen left hand finally moved. However, it was to the *left* side of the board.

Machi and Ayano, who were watching through their cameras, yelled in unison, "She opened the Bishop Path?!"

Ai's second move was 7 Six Pawn.

She devoted an entire ten minutes of waiting time to make that one move.

A sweaty, wrinkled palm print was left behind just above her knee.

"Is something wrong?"

"An elementary student just used ten minutes on the second move"

"Huh? That's a standard move, though."

Players in the large hall exchanged confused comments.

Indeed, it was a normal move.

For Ai Hinatsuru, however, it required more courage than any move she had ever played.

It contained a message for her opponent as well.

"A little girl tellin' me to *do my worst*?"

Takeru glared at the girl who had just, in a manner of speaking, taunted him even worse than her Master.

"..... Fine. You asked for it."

Then, Takeru closed the Bishop Path.

His fingers slid the piece across the board with an elegant grace, as if leaving a rainbow in their wake.

His move after waiting so long for Ai's———4 Two Rook.

Ai could've sworn she heard the metallic *shing* of a blade being withdrawn from its scabbard. Takeru Usui had called upon his most-treasured sword.

———Blocked Bishop Exchange 4th File Rook!

Only six moves had been played up to this point, but Ai's heart thundered inside her ribs as if the late-game had arrived.

"Th-This Isn't this?!!"

In the hands of anyone else, it was simply 4th File Rook.

But with Takeru Usui's fingers at the helm, the strategy was known by another name.

Ai spoke aloud the name of the strategy that went beyond theory.

"System."

"That's right," said the former Ryuo with a nod and a smirk. "Your Static Rook's fate is set once I move this Pawn. There's no going back now."

Takeru flicked his wrist with extra gusto to emphasize the gravity of the situation as he took hold of the edge Pawn.

9 Four Pawn.

That was the final lock on a rusty seal that hadn't been opened for far too long.

"T-Takeru Usui brought out System!!"

A veteran match reporter who had been going up and down the large hall to photograph other matches was so stunned that he dropped his camera onto the *tatami* mat.

Shock zipped through the entire building like a thunderbolt.

"The real Usui System?!"

"How many years has it been since the real thing has been played?!"

The other matches in the large hall came to a standstill as the players started stealing glances at Ai and Takeru's board.

———It's nothing like before!!

Ai had received nothing but the cold shoulder since entering the arena, so she was both confused and exalted by the sudden shift.

The girl had done nothing but try to show off her own strength until now.

She abused her age and status as an elementary school girl to constantly taunt her opponents in order to force a late-game where her skills could shine.

That was the only way she could win.

And she wanted to win no matter what.

———But that's not good enough!

The professional players would never acknowledge her if reputation as an upstart grade schooler stayed stagnant.

"I want to face Ai Hinatsuru."

How could she become a professional if none of them thought that way? Professional Shogi players were not enemies.

They're competitive rivals.

———I want the fans to acknowledge me, too! Not just the professionals!

If they want to see strong Shogi, fans could just watch computers play.

Ai had also seen the match records from Awaji that Ai Yashajin and Yaichi released. They were so far over her head that she barely gleaned anything from them.

Was that the future of Shogi?

Would fans enjoy watching it?

Ai had been constantly mulling over those questions even as she bought a high spec personal computer in Akihabara to use software she never could get the hang of in order to study early-game sequences.

What was the meaning behind her Shogi?

What was the meaning behind the Shogi humans beings play?

In an age where software exceeded human abilities, it was necessary to mimic software to be strong.

Of that, there was no mistake.

However, the Shogi world hadn't regressed in the slightest despite computers becoming stronger than people.

Actually, Shogi's popularity had hit an unprecedented fever pitch.

Ai mulled over possible reasons for it as she built her formation. A deep voice echoed from across the board.

“Static Rook is already dead,” Takeru declared on the 42nd move.

———He's not bluffing!

Ai knew.

In Usui System's debut match over 20 years ago, the Kansai-born Static Rook player on the receiving end had been driven so far back that he bowed out after only 47 moves.

“The board will only twist further out of reach whatever move you play next. How about saving us both some time and surrendering now?”

“ Here ”

Ai started violently swaying to and fro.

“Here Here Here, here, here, here,
herehereherehereherehereherehere
herehereherehereherehereherehere— — —”

Rather than throwing in the towel, Ai answered by making a move.

“Here!!”

She sent a Gold normally set aside for defense directly to the front line!

A clearly annoyed Takeru Usui snapped back, “So, you won’t go down quietly Eh? Got that cheeky playing style from your Master, did you?”

“Herehereherehereherehereherehere!”

Takeru's words weren't reaching Ai's ears.

In fact, she was beginning to feel that the four hours of waiting time she wasn't sure how to use before wouldn't be enough.

The live coverage team had set up their base of operations in the *Katsura no Ma*. Machi Kugui gave an SD card full of pictures to her younger sister apprentice along with instructions.

“I shall input comments into the blog feed. Please post corresponding pictures to match.”

“I understand!”

“Now, I would like to gather quotes from professional players, but———”

Under normal circumstances, players would never come into the *Katsura no Ma* so soon after matches commenced. Machi was intending to call them instead. However that would be counterproductive today.

Reason being, players were filing into the *Katsura no Ma* one after another.

“That 5 Five Bishop on move 19 into 3 Six Pawn is very interesting. That little girl is taunting *the* Takeru Usui with feints.”

“This formation was thoroughly researched around 20 years ago. The defender shouldn’t have any problems using it but Looking at it right now, I’d rather be playing offense.”

“I mimicked this so much back in the day. Not just System, but I’d even cross my arms to strike Mr. Usui’s famous reading pose while looking out over Hatomori Shrine”

Professionals in their thirties and forties gathered around an analysis board and began trying to outdo each other as they reminisced about the past.

Any place else, and it would’ve been mistaken for a class reunion.

“But didn’t computers already prove the Usui System cannot withstand modern Shogi strategies?” Machi posed with an air of doubt.

The players, however, laughed through their noses and retorted, “What do computers know?!”

The Shogi world wasn’t the only one getting riled up.

The word *System* had started to appear all over social media and even

electronic billboards. The younger generation caught on quickly once #system started trending, but they thought it was an error of some sort. The situation devolved into outright panic once the internet caught on that it was a Shogi term.

“Today’s turning out to be one heck of a day. Not only has Takeru Usui unleashed System on a sixth grade girl, Shinokubo and Kuzuryu are playing some ultra-new sequences in the special arena and piling up Repetition Draws. Man, am I glad I brought that extra help.”

“Master!”

Only when Kayaoku 7-*dan* walked in carrying boxes of top-rate sushi did Ayano realize she hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast.

“This is a total surprise! I know about System because I play Ranging Rook, but I had no idea it would get a response like this

“That’s Takeru Usui for you. The guy is Rambo.”

“*Ram bow*? What is that?”

“Today’s kids need to learn about him, too.”

It was a film that came out long before Ayano was born, much like System’s heyday.

“It’s an old action movie about a guy who fought against an army by himself and won.”

“Is that possible?!”

“In movies, yeah,” responded the Sage with a shrug. “But Mr. Usui pulled it off in real life. In the Shogi world, at least.”

“.....!”

“Rambo took on waves and waves of enemies in that tank top of his, standing up to missiles and helicopters with a hunting bow and a knife. Mr. Usui did that, too. He built a perfect strategy all by himself, and claimed the title of Dragon King Ryuo

“..... Why

“The Usui System was too perfect. Anyone could try to copy it, but only Takeru Usui himself knew how to make it click for real Because, well, it’s built on the resolution to constantly create something new.”

“The resolution to create

A prodigy with overwhelming talent and aspirations that went well beyond the clouds.

Those aspects doomed Takeru Usui to solitude.

Movies can end on a happy note but Shogi players have to keep fighting throughout their decline.

“He sealed away System, and even Ranging Rook, to play Static Rook instead. The Title Match series he played against Ai’s Master was all Double Wing Attacks. Since they could turn into contests of strength at the drop of a hat back then, maybe Mr. Usui thought his creativity would give him the edge?”

“Back then?”

Ayano tilted her head at her Master’s words.

Machi’s fingers vigorously danced across her keyboard, eyes glued to the screen as she mumbled under her breath, “..... Standards are starting to form in Double Wing Attacks through the power of software.”

Machi, who played one of those standards against Ai Hinatsuru in the final match of the Women’s Legend League, sounded as though she regretted her decision.

If Takeru’s opponent today were a younger professional fluent in software research or a mid-level professional who had experience against System, this intense match of Shogi would not have appeared before her eyes.

Only because he was facing an opponent worthy of unleashing System in the immature Ai Hinatsuru could this heart-pounding match of Shogi come into existence.

And, of course, because choosing 7 Six Pawn required Ai to have courage. The courage she inherited from her Master.

———This Shogi very well could change the course of history.

Even as she input comments on Ai and Takeru's match, which was having an even greater impact than the cutting-edge battle taking place in the special arena, into the blog at lightning speed, Machi couldn't help but notice that her heart pined for this old style of Shogi.

“..... My apologies, Yaichi. I'll be having an affair today.”

Every one of Takeru Usui's moves that day were a work of art.

"Oh, wow"

"This is what the real deal looks like."

A chorus of impressed sighs rang out with each turn. The players and Sub League members gathered in the *Katsura no Ma* gazed in awe as Takeru's moves went far beyond any of their expectations. Fans watching online reveled, hailing the prodigal strategist's return. This was the match when System Ranging Rook would reclaim its former glory.

Just as Takeru declared on the 42nd move, the board had indeed started to twist in his favor.

It was as if destiny were being rewritten before their eyes.

"Th-This is System!!"

Ai leaned over the board, analyzing each section between quick, shallow breaths. The difference in waiting time had tilted all the way to two hours in her opponent's favor.

His defense always seemed to stiffen when she attacked.

But her defenses crumbled whenever she tried to reinforce them.

"Huff Hfff Haaa"

There was no dinner break during Emperor Tournament matches, including both preliminaries and finals. Having not left the board even once since lunch, Ai was well beyond her physical limit.

"So? How does real Ranging Rook taste?" asked Takeru nonchalantly.

"Kuzuryu's Ranging Rook borders on heresy. Gokingen 3rd File Rook? Just a pile of table scraps from a cheap chain restaurant. Only once someone can be as worldly as Oishi can they be called legit. Taste steak from a restaurant that only serves steak, why don't you?!"

Everything lined up with his research.

He spoke with an arrogance fitting of a man who had continuously fought against the entire Shogi world.

“I suppose a kid who grew up on cheap chain restaurants couldn’t tell the difference in flavor. Only after being toughened up in the Sub League can someone even be called a novice. I won’t say a word against you. Surrender already and go test into the Sub League.”

“Urgh khh Huff! Hff!!”

Ai couldn’t maintain focus.

———The air it’s too thin

The air within the Shogi Association’s large hall had become harsher than any battlefield and wispy to the point where Ai couldn’t make use of her best weapon, the late-game.

The large hall at night was a wasteland and the beastly groans of professional players echoed off the walls.

Instincts had taken over and the men were chomping at the bit to take a piece out of anyone in their path.

It was an inhuman sight to behold.

Women’s League matches never lasted into the night. The Nebula Tournament was recorded in a studio.

For the first time ever, Ai found herself in the midst of a professional war zone.

———..... I’m scared

Facing a grown man alone would be enough to make any grade school girl lose her nerve.

The fact that this one was sitting so close and radiating pure malice could almost be considered abuse. The daunting reality of playing against a professional in their world had reared its ugly head, and Ai withered under the pressure.

———I'm scared So scared

Ai's concentration lapsed as the formations shifted even more into her opponent's favor. She began taking notice of other players stealing glances at her board, which only drew her attention further away from the match.

The players looked to be on even ground, but the odds were skewed from the very beginning

"Accept destiny with grace. You cannot break System. You cannot beat me. And you cannot become a pro," remarked Takeru in a sympathetic tone.

"..... Des tin"

Those few syllables were all Ai could muster.

———C-Can't breathe!!

Lack of oxygen had taken a heavy toll. Flashes of her battle with Ginko Sora during her Practice League Entrance Exam overlapped with the large hall as Ai's consciousness faded in and out.

Her first match with everything on the line. Her first loss.

Playing against an opponent with a despairingly large skill advantage, Ai had made mistake after mistake on her way to a crushing defeat.

But there was a tiny flicker of hope within those memories.

———Back then I got back on my feet because?

The answer was so close to coming back, but her brain didn't have enough oxygen to bring that memory to light.

Just then.

Slide.

A dry echo filled the room as the sliding door opened.

At first the players were so absorbed in their boards that they didn't bother looking up to see who had come into the arena. Matches were in the late-game

and every second of waiting time was precious.

However.

“.....!!”

The extraordinary presence made a few of them look up, and there he was.

The strongest man of all.

“De mon King?”

The Demon King.

The very person who should still be in the special arena, the Ryuo ——— Yaichi Kuzuryu was standing in the door frame.

Seeing him with a bag over his shoulder as if he were on his way out of the building was enough to make the players forget about their matches and whisper among themselves.

“..... Didn’t he have a Placement Match?”

“..... There were three repetition draws, too How is it over already?”

“..... Against Shinokubo? You’ve got to be kidding”

“..... There’s strong, and then there’s unreal”

Almost as if to punctuate those whispers.

“.....”

A barely conscious Taishi Shinokubo staggered past the open door.

He was a pale man to begin with, but now he almost looked translucent. Ghostly, even. What kind of Shogi could have that effect on a person? The professional players shuddered.

Yaichi Kuzuryu set foot inside the large hall.

“!!”

The players withered under his aura, much like elementary school girls.

“..... Hm”

Even Takeru Usui avoided making direct eye contact with Yaichi.

Everyone stared down at their boards, as scared stiff as adventurers who had been found by a roving dragon It was crystal clear that despite their eyes being laser-focused on their pieces, the Ryuo had their full attention.

“It’s stuffy in here.”

The Demon King of the West muttered to himself and walked to the back of the hall. Once he pushed aside the decorative panels, Yaichi opened the window directly behind them.

Air rushed through the hall. Crisp night air.

“Ah

Ai instantly felt that wave of fresh oxygen clear the shadows blocking her mental Shogi boards.

Then Yaichi began to walk about the hall, leisurely looking at all the boards as he went.

The imposing dragon uncoiled, scrutinizing each match at his own pace.

Whenever the Ryuo stopped at a certain board for even a second longer than the others, the players at that board failed to hide their glee despite the air of indifference they were trying to maintain.

Strength was the only way to prove one’s existence in this world. There was no better cause for celebration than being acknowledged by the strongest of all.

“

Yaichi Kuzuryu kept walking around the large hall without so much as a word.

Soon enough, he came to a stop in front of the last board left.

Right in front of where the previous Ryuo sat.

“Tch

Takeru Usui looked up at Yaichi Kuzuryu for a quick second.

“You’re next.”

That glance and the formation on the board spelled out Takeru’s message.

The newly revamped System would first utterly destroy Yaichi’s apprentice. As

long as he didn't go along with any Double Wing shenanigans and played his own Shogi, a child who only recently joined the Women's League could never beat him. Takeru was out to prove it.

His endgame was to seize the title of Ryou back from Yaichi.

That was Takeru Usui's plan.

But now, with Yaichi standing right before him His aura was suffocating. That fact only irritated Takeru further still.

“.....”

The large hall that had been so turbulent moments ago was now eerily quiet. Piece snaps were but a momentary break in the silence. Many were afraid to so much as breathe.

Save for one.

Only one person in the room found their second wind thanks to the dragon's presence.

The smallest, tiniest person in the room a girl.

The Ryuo had come to a stop right behind her back.

He didn't look at her, let alone address her directly.

All he did was stand on her side of the board and contemplate the match.

“.....”

Ai couldn't turn around.

Because she would surely cry if she did.

Thus— — —she willed herself to keep her eyes locked onto the board.

“..... way”

Takeru took issue with the words that fell from the girl's lips and leaned right up to her.

“Agh?”

She didn't flinch despite the imposing tone.

Her fear was gone.

Changing posture, Ai clenched both her hands into fists on the *tatami* mat and started slowly swaying back and forth. The words she took to heart before the match echoed through her mind over and over.

The message Ginko Sora had written on that taxi window.

Her words were:

“Destiny, get out of my way.”

The characters lacked their usual vigor. They weren’t written with a brush.

The lines of ink even seemed to tremble in places. All the anxieties of a 16-year-old girl were on display and not fit for decoration.

That was why those words made such a resounding impact on Ai’s heart.

———I don’t know how cruel a destiny Sora-*sensei* has been carrying but!

As a player, Ai Hinatsuru had a destiny to face.

That meant only one thing.

She focused her entire being on the board.

And———set out to break System, destiny itself!

“Here Here Here, here, hereherehereherehereherehereherehere———”

The girl who was on the brink of running away from the match had completely returned to form.

She hadn’t seen him.

Just hearing his footsteps Feeling his aura made her strong.

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere
———!!”

———That’s right. Now I remember how I overcame that loss.

An old wound throbbed once again.

It was the scar of her first loss, but also the first scar of adolescence. That pain reawakened Ai Hinatsuru.

The reason she kept playing despite defeat staring her in the face.

The reason she continued treading water in her quest to become a professional now.

It was———seeing Naniwa's Snow White shine *because* of adversity!

———I made a promise! That I'd get stronger and sit across from Sora-sensei again!

Ai had carved her last conversation with Ginko into her heart, and now she was sitting here.

So she yelled.

With visions of the most beautiful, poised and strongest-willed professional player she had ever met shining in her mind.



“Destiny! Get out of my way!!”

Invigorating herself with a sharp war cry, Ai took hold of her Rook and slid it across the board. Its target: a piece that loomed over her like a wall.

“This Rook———is going through!!”

The board flipped now that her Rook burst through Takeru’s formation and promoted into a Dragon.

“!! Cheeky little

Takeru had been so certain that Ai would commit to defending that he was stunned to see her go on the offensive.

And once she followed up that advance that piece proved to be more than a thorn in his side.

The piece known as the Dragon King.

“..... Could you two brats be any more agitating?!!”

Shoving his armrest away, Takeru snatched a Pawn from his piece stand and slapped it down onto the board. This would be the wedge that broke the offense’s formation.

Compared to the Dragon’s attack, however, the move seemed too little too late.

“Here!!”

Ai deployed a Bishop in position to simultaneously attack and defend. Not only did it allow her to protect her King, the fear of being checkmated also forced Takeru to devote his resources to defense.

“The tables turned?!”

“Which way?!”

The sequences were so jumbled that confusion could be heard from every

direction.

In fact, the formation was still very much against her. As was the clock.
However.

“Herehereherehereherehereherehere— — —”

The girl had grasped the future.

A chance at a comeback. The power to change destiny with her own hands.

Yaichi Kuzuryu had disappeared from the large hall at some point, as well as from Ai Hinatsuru’s consciousness.

Leaving behind only the Dragon King on the board.

WHAT HISTORY IN SAYING

Now that her eyesore of a Master is gone, I can finally focus. Nausea hits just as everything else gets back up to speed.

———How could I, Takeru Usui be intimidated by that brat?!

“..... Herehereherehereherehereherehere”

The girl’s last leg was failing her just a second ago, but now she's showing signs of life and making me go on a wild goose chase to get her King playing one-minute Shogi.

Her reflexes are good, I’ll admit. I’ll even acknowledge that her late-game abilities or whatever they are seem to be strong enough to win against pros when playing fast. That said, I may have made mistakes if I were in her position as well. Compared to my prime, age has not been kind to my own late-game skills

However———I’m in prime form today.

“Girl! This is your grave!”

My offensive puts her in check 15 times in a row and forces her King from the left edge of the board all the way to the right. She’s desperately trying to prolong her life with offensive and defensive moves, but I can see through all of them.

I survive a few would-be check paths from deployed Knights and then boldly move my Dragon into position to start the final sequence.

“I’ll show you how a pro finishes a match.”

“Ngh!”

The girl deploys a Gold right in the middle of her territory.

Once I see it go down at 2 Six, I grab a Knight off my piece stand and slam it down in no time flat.

Grinding it into the board for good measure.

My 3 Five Knight!

“..... What a move!”

“This! This is Takeru Usui!”

We’ve already played 155 moves, huh? All the other matches in the large hall, including Placement Matches, have already wrapped up.

The players who’re done with their matches are glued to mine, the last one still going on.

“See that?!”

I roar beside myself.

I’m up on my knees, declaring my own return to prominence, that System’s glory has been restored.

“Surrender now, girl! Even you must be able to see that taking my Knight with your Gold seals your fate!! No matter where you run, no matter what move you try, your chances of winning are gone!! You are already dead!!”

“.....”

The girl stops cold even though she’d been fidgeting nonstop up until now.

It’s much more challenging to read the opponent’s *unplayed* moves all the way to the end than the moves that are already realized on the board.

Read one path to victory, and it’s yours. However, being able to prove the opponent won’t use those hidden moves requires reading all the way through several possible sequences.

Literally reading through all the possible sequences on the board!

“It’s impossible to read everything in a single minute! It’s already come to this You have no chance!!”

“.....”

“I will force the end, I tell you! I’m using System because it’s specifically designed to trigger the late-game! Little brats like you can whine and cry all they want, but *I will close the distance!* Give up and surrender already!!”

I lost.

There's no doubt in my mind those will be her next words.

But———

“..... You can't”

“Stubborn to a fault, aren't you?! Deny it all you want, the end is inevitable
———”

“..... I'm not saying so.”

“Not you?”

Is she just running her mouth?

“Who then, huh? That Master of yours? Or some computer?”

“..... History is———”

“Hm?”

The words coming out of the girl's mouth were out of place, especially since she only had seconds to read the board.

“History is saying you can't!!”

History she says?

“What right does a puny girl have to lecture a professional Shogi player ABOUT HISTORY?! ME OF ALL PEOPLE!!”

Ask anyone what the greatest achievement in the Shogi world has been over the past 30 years, and they'll say *System* without a doubt.

My name is forever carved into history itself. It's ridiculous that a nameless little girl thinks she can teach me about it.

Yet she keeps going and means every word.

“I have solved lots of Shogi puzzles From ones written hundreds of years ago to ones that just came out. They're not perfect But more than what you

say or what number a machine tells me———”

The match recorder starts counting the final ten seconds.

At 58, a little hand reaches for the piece stand.

“I believe in the people who made Shogi puzzles, in human history!!”

So saying, the little girl plays 3 Nine Knight on the final second. A Knight?!

———It couldn’t be!!

I take hold of my Dragon and slide it across the board with enough vigor to drive off the nightmare that flooded my mind for a brief moment.

“What could that move possibly defend?!”

My 3 Seven Dragon burst into battle! Now that I have a Bishop ready to deploy, the time has come to finally put the final nail in the offensive King’s coffin.

“Here!!”

She takes the Dragon in a single second, and I grab the Bishop I just took and slam it down on the board. Check!

“Here!!”

The girl slides her King one space forward as if deftly avoiding the Bishop’s charge.

“I’m coming for that King, and there’s nothing you can do about it!!”

I grab my last piece, a Silver, and plant it down as if kicking that King back to the bottom of its grave even as it desperately tries to climb up.

“Move in! Move in! MOVEMOVEMOVEMOVEMOVEMOOOOOOOOVE!!”

“Here!!”

She swipes that Silver up and puts it on her own stand with the speed of a cat and continues her forward advance. Every move is instantaneous. Only now does doubt swell within my mind.

———N-No Was an approach truly impossible?!

It was.

I gawk at the offensive King in disbelief the moment I comprehend that my piece stand is empty.

The King has escaped to a place I can't put it in check

"Popped through?! But my King still has a trio of Silvers and Golds for protection! I still have a solid four minutes! The next round has only just———"

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere
——————HERE!!"

It was I who didn't have a chance.

I only let up for one turn, making her check my King with a Knight at 8 Three, then she returns the favor in the blink of an eye by driving my King all the way to the edge of the board and deploying piece after piece. It's like she's shoveling dirt onto a corpse.

"?! My Silvers and Golds Th-They're getting in the way!!"

My King is trapped in its grave the next thing I know.

The girl then slides the Dragon across the board like ripping open the casket before deploying another Rook to put me in check. There's no hesitation in those fingers. An instant checkmate is there.

———Did she read all the way through?

Not only could she tell that I couldn't reach her King in less than a minute, she found a reverse check path that would render my King helpless. A little girl

"History"

This long, long bout of 190 moves is coming to a close.

Considering how I should use the remainder of my time I venture a question.

"..... Hey."

"What is it?"

"Do you really think you have a chance? Creating a test to get into the

pros without going through the Sub League, turning the entire Shogi world against you.”

“I I don’t know. But———”

But?

“Oishi-sensei told me about a player who challenged the whole Shogi world to a fight.”

“.....!!”

“And if I could beat him, then maybe That was my mindset today.”

“.....”

I close my eyes and lean my head back. So, that’s it

Once I gather my thoughts, I face the board again and pose another question.

“..... Where?”

“Huuuh?”

“I’m asking you where my fatal mistake was.”

The girl sits there, eyes glazed for a moment before she understands that I intend to surrender.

“Th-Thank you for the match!”

And she throws her head down into a hurried bow.

What really agitated me is that it didn’t even take a second for her to answer my question.

“Um If you had slid your Dragon one space here instead of two

“Hmph. So one space should have been the correct move.”

If it weren’t for that mistake, I, the defender, would have won. I lost, but System wasn’t broken.

The crowd hovering around the board starts jabbering.

“Everybody was thinking, *one, just one slide!*”

“But he moved two and made us trip over our own feet!”

Then they start discussing my lost match like they've all gotten together for drinks at some pub. The match recorder, Sub League members, journalists and the broadcasting staff join in. Heck, even the part timers in the Shogi classroom downstairs have come up to the large hall to give their two cents.

How long has it been?

I can't remember the last time one of my review sessions got so lively

"Usui System is back! I'll start playing it tomorrow!"

"It's too soon to say it's *back*, but That won't stop me from playing it!"

"All the customers in the classroom today played System!"

I thought this was a graveyard. Having to play Shogi in the large hall, having to play a little girl in the preliminaries.

But I might've been wrong.

The real one might've been inside my heart, convincing me that this place was a graveyard at all.

I lost my seeding in preliminaries?

I can't challenge the Meijin without being in A League?

Now I can see that being unable to prove my own strength had me in an ugly spiral, arguing for argument's sake. What right do I have to harp on a Professional Entrance Exam?

Get back up after falling. The ladder is right in front of me. I just couldn't see it.

"At the very least, I'm still better off than a little girl who keeps fighting without a path to move forward"

"?"

I guess all the people analyzing the board around us are speaking too loudly for my embarrassing comment to reach the elementary-school aged girl directly in front of me.

The players have been left out of the crowd's seemingly endless review session. I cannot keep up with this.

I grab my jacket and slip it on as I get to my feet.

“..... It’s gotten late. Kuzuryu has surely left by now———”

“No, it’s fine.” The girl no, Women’s Legend Ai Hinatsuru shakes her head and says point-blank. “I’ve decided that the next time I see him, he won’t be standing behind me but sitting on the other side of a Shogi board, face to face.”

“Hmph Planning to challenge the Ryuo, eh? You really are a cheeky girl!”

Does she actually comprehend how difficult that will be?

The majority of pro players’ careers end without ever facing a title holder in a league match, even after decades in the Shogi world. It makes me wonder if all those fresh-faced 4-*dan* pros that say they dream of *being a title holder* are all that serious about it.

But that look in this girl’s eyes———

“We’re going.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying I’ll make sure you get home.”

“Huuuuuuuuuh?!”

She must be overjoyed, receiving such an offer from me, Takeru Usui. I remember getting rides from veteran players all the time back in the day. It felt like they were acknowledging my skills, and that was a joyous feeling indeed.

“Um, but well I-I can make it home by myself”

“Just take the offer.”

“Uh”

The honor must have been too much for her, because Ai tries to turn me down again and again.

I thought she was an impudent brat cut from the same cloth as her Master, but it seems she’s got a surprising amount of modesty. Likable, even. It might be fun to teach her Shogi some time.

The taxi shows up right away.

“Something the matter? Do you not want to go home?”

“Ah Sorry. Could I, um, have a moment?”

Ai has all her belongings neatly packed and stands up, but kneels beside her cushion for some reason.

Then she gently runs her fingers across the *tatami* mat.

That’s where her Master stood.

“.....”

Is she looking for traces of warmth that disappeared a long time ago?

Like a little bird taking in the warmth of its nest before taking flight

“I’ll be downstairs. Don’t take long.”

The warmth is gone.

But something else remains. I take the match record from the recorder, fold it up, and slip it into my breast pocket. There’s a definite warmth to it an intensity.

Once lit, a fire burning within the heart never dies.

COMPILING NAMES

“Welcome home, Miss Hinatsuru!”

Waiting for me in the lobby after Takeru-*sensei* paid for my taxi home is Master’s older brother.

He seems excited about something.

“You have guests! Come on, now! Hurry!”

“At this time of night?”

The last trains have already left.

They must plan to spend the night, but who?

———Ah! Maybe Just maybe!!

I look up at Master’s brother’s face and my heart leaps.

Even though I didn’t see *his* face, we were both in the same room today. So, there is a chance!!

But my high hopes fizzle out the moment I see the door Master’s brother leads me to.

“In here. Everyone is waiting for you!”

“This is”

After the Women’s Legend Conferring Ceremony.

It’s the same room where I talked with the most important people in my life. It’s my dressing room. Now my heart is aching for a completely different reason.

“Miss Hinatsuru has returned!” Master’s brother announces and flings open the door before I can get my thoughts in order.

And what I see on the other side is———

“Huh?!”

I'm too stunned to breathe.

Everyone is here.

All the people who left on that day are right in front of me

"Ya played a heck of a match!"

Greeting me right inside the door is Grandpa-*sensei*.

That day

His air is so much different now compared to when he said he couldn't support me and walked out.

Actually, he's totally tan?! What happened?!

I'm thrown for a loop while Grandpa-*sensei* starts recounting a story from a long time ago.

"At meant a lot to me, ya breakin' Mr. Usui's System, Ai After all, I was Usui System's first victim!"

"That's the legend."

Natagiri-*sensei* comes up to his side and teases him.

"Your surrendering after a mere 47 moves is what put Usui System on the map in the first place."

"Yeah. I'm always makin' legends. Even now."

Now?

What does he mean by that? My heart is beating like wild. It takes all my willpower to keep my voice steady as I ask.

Slow and steady.

"U-Umm Everyone? What are you doing here?"

"At my beckoning over the phone," explains Shakando-*sensei*, the only person in the room sitting down.

"What? I simply used you as an excuse to have a long phone call with Kousuke for the first time in ages. My heart was all aflutter It seems I appeared to enjoy it so much that Ayumu is still bent out of shape."

“Do you see how tan Father is? It’s because he’s been outside so much,” says Keika from her spot close to the table.

There’s a big tray next to her with a big bowl of Kansai-style *nikusui* beef soup.
..... It’s one of my favorites that she used to make for dinner all the time

Including that time I was so depressed coming back after losing my first league match at the Kanto Shogi Association building

“Father went around visiting retired professionals in Kansai. He didn’t even come home.”

“Retired players?”

I can’t

The corners of my eyes are warming up with tears ready to fall.

I can’t get my hopes up The last thing I can do is drag all of them into this, and yet part of me is still hoping

———Professional players have a vote in the Player’s Meeting even after they retire.

Grandpa-sensei rubs his dark brown skin, saying, “Active players can’t avoid backlash. But retirees’ll roll with ya when ya give ’em the right push. Drinkin’ together and lowerin’ yar head usually does the trick. Just say, *It’s fer my darlin’ granddaughter! I beg ya!* and they’ll do what ya want!”

His stark white teeth look so funny against his dark skin that I giggle when he smiles.

A bunch of tears come out at the same time.

Someone kindly offers me a handkerchief.

A pretty, perfectly ironed handkerchief.

“I did what I could to help as well. That said, I just went down the list of phone numbers and said my student could use some support.”

I knew who it was right away.

Because I’d seen that handkerchief so many times when I was in the Practice

League

“Kuruno-sensei

“Hn. Ever since I played against you in your Practice League Entrance Exam, I knew your talents were well beyond the Practice League and even the Women’s League.”

Sensei has been watching out for me all this time. As he does for all his students, fairly.

Even after I left for Kanto without saying a word

“Besides, as one of the Practice League directors, the fact that Women’s League members are shut off from the professional league should be my problem to tackle.”

“But I was so rude to all the professional *senseis* I ruined my Conferring Ceremony and caused so much trouble for everyone in Kansai ———”

“Learn Shogi to become life’s Meijin.”

“.....!”

“I’ve tried to teach every Practice League student how to live a great life even after they’ve graduated from it. Our time was brief, but some important lessons should have come across through Shogi.”

Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan* gently places his hand on my back.

Then, just like he would always do when I lost in the Practice League, he offers encouragement.

“I, the Practice League director, am proud of you, Ai. It’s time to look forward.”

“Women’s League players are really proud of you, too, Ai!”

Rin Koiji Women’s 4-*dan* has a file in her hands.

“Everyone is and always has been. The catch is that nearly all of us can’t vote in Player’s Meetings and over half have pros for a Master. Speaking up for you might’ve actually hurt your cause It’s a tricky spot to be in.”

I thought they made the obvious choice.

That's why I couldn't believe the next words out of Rinrin-sensei's mouth.

"Everyone without a vote signed petitions saying *Please support Ai Hinatsuru* and brought them to the Women's 4-dan players like me."

"Wha?"

"As to who chipped in the most I don't hafta say, now do I?"

Rinrin-sensei steps to the side.

Behind her is exactly who I expected.

"Tama yon sensei"

Out of all the people in the room, Tomayo Rokuroba Women's 2-dan is the only one looking the other way and not making any effort to hide her discontent.

Rinrin-sensei pushes her back toward me as she talks.

"Only Women's League members 4-dan and up have a vote at Player's Meetings. But Tamayon isn't like the rest. That had to've been tough, yeah? Not being able to help you in any way."

"Ms. Rokuroba came to Kansai, actually," Keika adds. "She was so shy about it at first, saying it was *just for work*. But she told Father and I about how hard you worked and everything you went through in Tokyo. Also, she's the one who told people in Kansai it was okay to oppose you, but not until they'd seen how strong you are *with their own eyes*."

———Then that's why Oishi-sensei came!

It finally clicks. Now I know where I went wrong.

A mistake so bad I can never take it back.

———I was trying to protect Tamayon-sensei

I mean, she's already given me so much that I could never repay her for everything as long as I live. How could I ask for more?

But if I were in Tamayon-sensei's position———

“..... Here’s the deal!”

Tamayon-*sensei* grabs my collar and pulls me in close.

“I wanted to be on your side! I’d made up my mind to be there to protect you even if the whole world hated your guts! Nobody forced me! I *wanted* to!!”

And I rejected her passionate support.

Anyone would be upset if that happened to them.

Right now, I’d love to go up to the me who set off on her own without even understanding how the person closest to her felt and slap her in the face with all my might.

“We lived in the same room, looked at the same ceiling But it turns out you were looking much, much higher the whole time. And that That!”

She loosens her grip and looks me square in the eyes.

“It can wait until it’s all over, but tell me. Talk to me about the weight you’re carrying.”

“..... Okay

How can I ever thank her? She’s so kind, I don’t even know where to start. Nodding and leaking tears is the best I can do

“I’m sorry Thank you!”

“While I hate to interrupt the moment you’re having.”

Natagiri-*sensei* holds out a smartphone.

“I can’t say I’m completely on board with your way of thinking, Ai. But there’s someone else who’s been waiting their turn to share their thoughts with you!”

“.....?”

Slowly, I take the smartphone from him and put it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“It’s a pleasure to speak with you.”

I shiver from head to toe once I hear that voice.

The person on the other end keeps talking quietly while I can't even breathe.

"Your match against Mr. Usui was very exciting to watch. I had to tell you so myself. Personally, I feel it's only natural that you would like a chance to become a professional without playing in the Sub League and support the courage it requires to announce it to the world."

My match today? This person was watching my Shogi?

I can't even get *thank you* out of my throat.

If I ever sit across the board from him I'd tremble so hard that the pieces would slip out of my fingers, for sure.

How did Master ever beat him?

"Destiny smiles on the brave. Please pursue the path that you believe is right. I earnestly hope that you can smile from the bottom of your heart one day."

That's where the call ends.

It feels like I dreamed the whole thing The conversation didn't even last 30 seconds, but I'll never, ever forget it.

Natagiri-sensei takes the phone out of my trembling hand.

"Just so you know, I didn't put him up to this. He keeps an ever-watchful eye on the entire Shogi world and you caught it a long time ago."

"But, to be frank, this alone won't amount to much," says Shakando-sensei in a slightly dark tone. "Arrangements with sponsors couldn't be completed, and we couldn't line up current title holders' endorsements. The Meijin has expressed his support for you behind closed doors, but he cannot afford to make any public moves. Your Master and younger sister apprentice included."

Master Yaichi Kuzuryu—*Dual Title* and Ai Yashajin—*Dual Women's Title*.

The opinions of the two people who should be closest to me might draw a lot of attention from the public.

“It also hurts,” adds Natagiri-sensei, “that there is no input from current 3-*dan* division members or young 4-*dans* who just exited the Sub League. They’re the ones who’ll face the greatest impact, after all.”

Shakando-sensei nods along with him.

“Public opinion is the largest wild card.”

Public opinion what people outside the Shogi world think.

“It changes with the wind. Should the gust be strong enough, getting their support is quite a simple matter. It’s triggering that gust that is a challenge. Even if your string of victories against professional players continues, it will be overshadowed by the likes of Sota Kunugi. Timing was not on your side.”

“.....”

“Making your intentions known once you have a stronger stance is a viable path. There is no shame in it. The choice is yours, Ai Hinatsuru.”

“I will fight, right now,” I answer immediately.

Part of it was the adrenaline left over from the match, and I’m sure hearing how passionate everyone is helped, but that’s not everything.

———Because, I don’t think there’s much time left.

I press the corners of my eyes.

When Usui-sensei said *we’re going*, I managed to trick him by touching the *tatami* mat right away, but *that* was definitely eating away at me.

Master’s older brother comes back into the room carrying a sheet of nice paper and an inkstone.

“Then let’s draft a petition to the association right now! E-mails don’t cut it for this kind of thing!”

Everyone watches as I pick up a brush and write out the message in a few quick strokes.

“I intend to become a professional Shogi player. I formally request that the Shogi Association of Japan institute a Professional Entrance Exam.”

Once I add another sentence that the directors and Player's Association should be the ones to decide what is included in the test itself, I sign the petition as *Women's Legend Ai Hinatsuru*.

Then, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* and other professional players add their names as endorsers.

AT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

Today the world revolved around a certain boy.

“So-chaaaaan!”

“Go get ‘em!!”

Osaka seemed to draw people in like a magnet. The road from the Kanjo Line’s Fukushima Station to the Kansai Shogi Association building was inundated with people hoping for a glimpse of Sota Kunugi. It had, for all intents and purposes, become a pedestrian byway.

“..... I wish I could’ve shown Mr. Kagamizu this in person,” Sota muttered to himself as he watched the scene on the TV in the association’s office room and thought it would be broadcast in Miyazaki as well.

On this day, airwaves throughout the country had been hijacked by Sota Kunugi.

A young prodigy who hadn’t lost a single match since his debut was now tied for the longest winning streak ever at 28 matches in a row. Today he played to make his mark on history with a 29th win.

His opponent today was an A League player, someone who outclassed all the other professional, decorated amateurs and Women’s League players Sota had defeated thus far.

While not the Meijin, this opponent had about the third or fourth most popularity and name recognition of all Shogi players. The latest Shogi boom the *So-chan Boom* had reached a new fever pitch.

“Kunugi-sensei. Please make your way to the arena.”

“Oh, right.”

Sota collected his belongings and made a quick stop at the Player’s Room next door.

Only one league match had been scheduled inside the Kansai Shogi Association building today. The classroom, gift shop, and even the restaurant

had all been closed for the day. With the unprecedented number of media and all of their equipment inside the 40-year-old building, there was a very real concern the floor might give way. Not only were live commentary and analysis not being held, professional players and Women's League players had been asked to refrain from holding practice sessions in the building.

However, there was one person in the Player's Room. A rather fidgety girl who looked to be of college age was sitting in front of a monitor displaying a live feed of the arena.

"Good morning," Sota greeted her upon entering the room and she literally jumped to her feet.

"K-Kunugi 4-*dan*?! G-GGGGG-Goo———"

Sota ignored the girl spattering *goo-goo* sounds Asuka Oishi, and placed his smartphone and other belongings into a locker.

He checked for new messages before turning off his phone, but there was nothing from the person he was hoping to hear from.

"..... It wouldn't kill him to send me a text like *I'm rooting for you* or *keep a cool head* at this point, would it?"

Sota grumbled under his breath but was quick to reassure himself that there was nothing he could do about it.

After all, his opponent was someone Mr. Kagamizu held in high regard.

While he would be supporting Sota, of course, being caught in the middle between the two players must put Mr. Kagamizu in a complicated position

Taking the private stairwell up to the fifth floor, Sota walked into the arena only to be assailed by countless camera flashes from the army of reporters who had been stationed there.

"Flash photography is prohibited before matches! Please have some consideration for the players!!" an association staff member warned again and again, but the general media paid them no heed.

The intelligent boy understood that becoming famous came with a few drawbacks and simply waited for them to finish taking pictures.

Once the flashes finally died down———one man came into view.

He was sitting in the *Onjyodan no Ma* arena's upper seat and intently focused on wiping the Shogi board.

———Yaichi did the same thing sometimes, now that I think about it.

Sota had once asked him about it.

"I'd say I clean the board a lot when I play Ranging Rook."

"Why would you do that?"

"I'll be sliding the Rook, yeah? Wiping the board first makes it easier to slide."

———I thought he was teasing me back then.

But now, watching this man clean the board with enough intensity to draw out beads of sweat on his forehead, Sota thought that Yaichi may have been surprisingly on point.

He waited until Mitsuru Oishi had finished cleaning the board before taking a seat.

It was so immaculate that Sota could see his reflection staring back up at him. While he was surprised by his own exaltation, he said in a loud, confident voice, "I'm so glad for a chance to learn Ranging Rook from the best there is, the man called the Worldly Maestro, Mr. Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan*!"

"That you are, huh?"

"Yes. Today will be one to remember."

Then Sota spoke quietly so that only Mitsuru could hear.

"Because today is the day Ranging Rook comes to an end."

THE FUTURE I PLAY

The match began.

Sota, by advancing the Pawn in front of his Rook, and Mitsuru, by opening the Bishop Path. The reporters photographed these perfectly normal opening moves as if they were the scoop of the century.

Once the army of reporters crammed into the *Onjyodan no Ma* left after those opening moves finished, Mitsuru propped himself up with one knee on the upper seat. The A League player dropped the act and let his outlawesque aura shine through.

Meanwhile, his opponent gently tilted his handsome face down with the collar of his school uniform securely fastened.

Though the two had briefly encountered each other a few times in the Kansai Association building, the Worldly Maestro stood so far above the boy that the two never exchanged words.

———He certainly has an aura.

He once heard that this man was on good terms with Yaichi, but he had also seen older members of the Sub League like Hiuma Kagamizu correct their posture out of nerves alone when hearing that the Worldly Maestro was in the building.

As a former Ranging Rook party member, Mitsuru was something close to a god in Hiuma's eyes and he had informed Sota about him on many occasions.

"No one can copy Oishi-sensei's worldliness. Not even the Meijin. And, of course, software can't even come close."

"Just once, I'd love to play a match the way he does. Win on Shogi sense and instincts, the ideal Ranging Rook victory."

Sota had looked at Hiuma with a cold stare.

———His rating isn't all that impressive. None of his Shogi matches are, either.

It goes without saying that Sota had reviewed Mitsuru's matches beforehand.

Was he strong? Yes.

That was particularly so in the mid-game. Sota calmly deduced that this man's sheer reading power and acute mid-game instinct may very well exceed his own.

But that was based on the notion that Ranging Rook players *were fighting with a self-imposed handicap from the beginning*, and only applicable in certain situations.

———In layman's terms, I just need to play in a way that prevents those situations from coming about.

What's more, software had shown him exactly how to do it. For that reason, Sota didn't feel any nerves despite the gravity of this match, nor did he shrink from the spotlight.

Mitsuru, on the other hand, couldn't seem to get comfortable. He rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a small, white box.

A pack of cigarettes.

"Sorry, but," said Mitsuru to the rightfully surprised Sota as he pulled one out with an apologetic look in his eyes.

"I'll be holding one as we play. Chalk it up to habit I won't light it."

"I think that's cute, actually. Is it a good luck charm?"

"Funny, is it?"

"No."

Sota shook his head from side to side and picked up the necktie that was set out on his side of the board.

"I also brought my good luck charm. It's been with me every match since my professional debut."

That answer got a smirk out of Mitsuru. The boy he thought had molded his brain into a computer suddenly had a bit more charm.

———This is my first big match against someone younger than Asuka, isn't it?

The Worldly Maestro sat in bewilderment as he finally realized that his opponent today was a full six years younger than his daughter.

Yaichi Kuzuryu was Asuka's age, and he had only ever played Ginko Sora in practice sessions. No league matches, yet.

“.....”

Mitsuru pushed an edge Pawn forward one space and then took a sip of tea.

Sota promptly moved his own King.

It was a move that young players and Sub League members had set to researching with software after seeing it in Awaji's match records. There would be no loss no matter what move the opponent played.

As if turning his back on the trend, Mitsuru set out to blaze his own path.

And advanced the edge Pawn yet another space forward.

“Claiming the edge so early on? Don't tell me Are you playing Static Rook?” Sota said as he stole a glance at the Worldly Maestro.

Though the man was a genuine member of the Ranging Rook party, he had recently started playing Static Rook from time to time. Although he lost the title of King to Yo Okito, Mitsuru had emerged victorious in a Double Static Rook duel in the first match of the series.

———When will he slide? Or does he really intend to keep that rook in place?

Mitsuru once announced that he had *renounced Ranging Rook*.

He had since returned to playing the style, but not a single match using Ranging Rook had been included in the batch of Awaji's records Yaichi had analyzed.

Now the Ranging Rook party was going extinct in the Shogi world.

“..... I've been playing Shogi with my daughter recently,” Mitsuru muttered right after Sota made his next move, almost as if he had been waiting just for that.

His hand swayed back and forth over the board.

As if deciding between two possible paths

“I tried to stop her from joining the Practice League, but she wouldn’t listen to her father. Know what she said just the other day? She wants to join the Women’s League now.”

“Oh? How old is your daughter?”

“18.”

“She might have a difficult time getting in if she’s only now trying to join. I hope she has the talent to do it, though.”

“Talent That’s something I couldn’t give her,” said the father in a self-deprecating tone as his hand continued to wander. “That’s why I didn’t want her anywhere near Shogi. There’s only one thing I can pass on to her And even that’s just a candle flickering in the wind.”

Sota barely registered Mitsuru’s mysterious words.

“Any idea what that is?”

“Beats me.”

Sota shrugged at the question. He honestly didn’t care and wanted to focus on the match before him. For the boy prodigy being pursued wherever he went in the country right now, league matches were the only time he could enjoy a match of Shogi without the threat of being interrupted.

“Money, perhaps? Or connections?”

“Heh!” Mitsuru snorted. “The only thing I, the World Maestro can pass on to my daughter as she tries to become a Shogi player.”

Mitsuru’s hand came to a sudden halt.

As if taking hold of what should be passed down to his daughter.

Which was———

“*Ranging Rook*. What else?”

The right hand that had been meandering from side to side finally grasped a piece.

The Rook.

“My Ranging Rook———is the future!!”

Fourth File Rook.

That was the formation Mitsuru chose.

“Normal Fourth File Rook, is it? Well, it’s true that Ranging Rook is over once the Bishop Path is open.”

A specific strategy came to Sota’s mind.

“Usui System.”

Created by the prodigal strategist Takeru Usui, it was the most beautifully elegant strategy in all of Shogi’s 1,400-year history.

Ika Sainokami’s strategy that took down Ginko Saro, Tomahawk, was also based on Usui System’s version of Third File Rook. Thus, it was just a System copycat.

Sota had heard through the grapevine that the original was played by Takeru Usui for the first time in many years just the other day. Though he hadn’t bothered to review the match record for himself because he was far too busy researching Awaji’s matches.

———A stationary King, Rook in the fourth column and a forward edge Pawn? All of that adds up to System, yes?

A hint of adrenaline passed through Sota’s veins as he waited for the next move. But it was more akin to what a little boy would feel seeing dinosaur fossils in a museum than nervous apprehension.

However, that excitement withered away the second he saw Mitsuru’s move.

“The King moved? So, it’s not System after all?”

A cigarette still pinned between his fingers, the Worldly Maestro shifted his King diagonally forward and to the right.

That meant Mitsuru Oishi's strategy wasn't System, but a plain and simple Fourth File Rook.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about that.

It had been played for centuries, until the advent of software rendered the strategy completely outdated.

However, in that moment for some reason that outdated strategy looked brand new in Sota's eyes.

The reason———

"You built a defensive formation around your King at 7 Two? What is it?"

"There's no name yet," said Mitsuru bluntly.

The formation was so crude, the idea that anyone would try it in a real match was absurd.

A Silver meant for offense was parked directly in front of the King and the Knight used for defensive support had bound to the front line already.

It looked incomplete from every angle.

———Software would never build defenses like this.

Sota snuck a glance up at his opponent and could have sworn the man was smiling.

"You're the second person to see it."

"Who was the first?"

"Heh."

Mitsuru, who had no intention of divulging that information, just laughed.

"Okay, sure. It's not like you can beat me with that formation anyway."

A computer would never, under any circumstances, select this arrangement. Mitsuru's rating must have plummeted like a rock.

———Now, how should I break it?

Sota started thinking through sequences to target the King that was only

somewhat protected. However, that *somewhatness* was what kept that King surprisingly far out of reach.

Then———

“Hm?”

Sota rubbed his eyes.

“Did it just?”

From Sota’s perspective, it was almost as though a beam of sunlight had reflected off Mitsuru’s King.

Unlike in Sendagaya, that would be a truly rare occurrence here in the windowless Kansai Shogi Association building. For that matter, it was physically impossible for pieces to glow out of the blue.

———But it did glow I saw it

Almost as if he saw Sota waver ever so lightly, Mitsuru decided to sneak in a few words.

“It’s not quite a Mino Castle What’s the city next to Mino? Ah, Mikawa. How about calling it a Mikawa Fort?”

“Was that just a corny dad joke?!” Sota snapped back.

“In that case, I’ll form a Mino Castle. That way my defenses will be stronger.”

If there are no avenues of attack, defending is the best bet.

However, an *anaguma* would work against him because Mitsuru already had a strong edge position.

The offense building a Left Mino Castle would leave him far more constrained than the defender. But Sota determined that choosing *thick* over *thin* was the most logical decision after seeing Mitsuru’s formation.

In fact, the board shifted in his favor.

“You’re not half bad, whiz kid. To think you could use a Mino even better than me.”

“Software is quite fond of the Left Mino Castle. I’m not the strong one here.”

Sota wasn't trying to be humble.

———Poor guy.

The boy truly felt sorry for Mitsuru. He and adults like him had been born so far away from Shogi's true essence, had been given a weapon called Ranging Rook that impeded them more than it helped and their research had them digging in the wrong direction in pursuit of new standards. The real kicker was that computers had already proven they were closing in on a dead end.

Even the great Takeru Usui was defeated by a girl in grade school. It was clear as day that Ranging Rook was obsolete.

That fact would be further spurred should the only Ranging Rook player in A League be defeated by a 13-year-old boy today. The Ranging Rook party would never win again. The families of its members would go hungry. That thought was depressing.

———Even so I'm allowed to win, right Mr. Kagamizu?

"I want to always love Shogi."

The boy who inherited that dream along with the necktie shuddered.

Become a professional. Keep winning.

Despite achieving his goal of sparking a Shogi boom the likes of which had never been seen before, playing Shogi as a professional wasn't as enjoyable as it was during his time in the Sub League for some reason.

However, his play became crisper the further he fell into depression.

"Nice move, kid."

"Thanks."

Even a compliment from a veteran of the Shogi world wasn't enough to lift Sota's spirits.

"Haaa Why do I have to waste my time like this? Yaichi is pulling further and further ahead while I'm stuck here"

"Think playing against a Ranging Rooker is a waste of time, huh?"

"Yes. It's pointless," said the child of modern Shogi without a second thought.

“God made two mistakes. The first was placing the fruit of knowledge so close to Adam and Eve and the second was allowing the Rook the freedom of moving from the starting formation. If it had to stay put like the Bishop, Ranging Rook would’ve never been born in the first place.”

“.....”

“Ranging Rook is destined to die. That conclusion for the game known as Shogi is already set in stone, and human beings can’t fight destiny.”

“Destiny eh?”

Not a single match of Ranging Rook could be found within the match records produced by deep learning software operating on a supercomputer. At least, none of the records released by Yaichi used that strategy.

That meant Ranging Rook would be gone 100 years from now.

The vast majority of young players interpreted it that way.

Takeru Usui used System but was defeated by Ai Hinatsuru. A prodigal strategist’s demise at the hands of a little girl is what convinced young professionals that Ranging Rook’s final days had arrived.

If.

Just if that was destiny———

“Then destiny, get out of my way!”

Strange as it was, Mitsuru echoed Ai Hinatsuru’s words and deployed the Bishop he had just claimed back onto the board diagonally behind Sota’s King.

A move that prevented the Knight at its side from jumping forward, 9 Seven Bishop!

“I’ve already read a layman move like that.”

Sota then proceeded to calmly, and perfectly, block the Worldly Maestro’s aggressive advance.

The offensive King had been driven all the way to 9 Nine, but the King’s prairie dog hillesque defenses were turning into a stout fortress right before his eyes.

However Mitsuru was also calm.

“Heh.”

Returning his focus to defense at the perfect moment, he covered the weak spots.

What emerged on the board was a bizarre hodgepodge of a formation.

The child prodigy’s hand came to a halt for the first time. This situation would never appear when only using software for research.

“.....?! ”

———What?! Why in the world is the defending Rook glowing?!

Sota furiously rubs his eyes.

Mitsuru’s Rook hadn’t budged since shifting into the fourth column.

Yet Sota could feel a distinct pressure emanating from Shogi’s strongest piece at that very moment.

“A Dragon A glowing dragon is coming for me!!”

“That’s a nice name,” said Mitsuru with a pleased nod. “I dub this new strategy the Glowing Dragon Fourth File Rook from now on.”

In that instant, a new strategy was born unto this land.

Glowing Dragon Fourth File Rook.

A gem of a formation composed of human instinct, knowledge and courage created by Mitsuru Oishi without the aid of a computer.

That in itself was Ranging Rook.

“Tch! It’s a single space off of a Mino Castle! How can it be this impenetrable?! ”

“School boy,” says Mitsuru as if testing Sota while tapping his cigarette against the board. “You’re hunching.”

“.....?! ”

Sota fixed his posture so swiftly that the fabric snapped.

Then he wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

“..... Pardon me.”

The boy took off his uniform jacket and folded it into a neat square before setting it down at his side. Then he explained why.

“I’m too hot.”

He then stopped to think for a long time.

Sota cared little for the precious seconds of waiting time that were melting away and kept thinking. It was almost as if the boy was about to declare an answer to Shogi itself.

———Don’t rush! It’s impossible for Ranging Rook to be stronger. I know I have the advantage with Static

Sota mumbled but almost sounded as if he were enjoying his position.

“..... That Fourth File Rook is really annoying, okay?! I’m busy enough as it is researching Static Rook formations. If only Ranging Rook could take the hint and just disappear already. Besides, you claim to be in the Ranging Rook party, but aren’t moving your Rook at all!”

The boy unleashed it.

A decisive move.

“Then———I’ll use mine instead!!”

Sota slid his Rook over to the second column before launching it all the way to the other side of the board to summon Shogi’s ultimate piece.

The Dragon King.

“The Dragon is closer than the regular Mino Castle! There has to be a way to attack!”

Placing a Dragon on the very back row was a move designed to pry open a weak point in Mitsuru’s formation.

But this was the moment the Worldly Maestro had been waiting for. He

slapped a Lance down in his own territory to pin that Dragon in place.

“School boy.”

Then he quietly addressed the boy sitting across from him.

“That Dragon is crying.”

“Whaaat? How could a fragment of wood cry? Use some common sense when you speak, please. Common sense.”

“Heh.”

The man who had successfully destroyed common sense on the board flashed a meek smile before deftly disarming the prodigy’s carefully laid traps with his fingertips.

Creating a new strategy when most of the Shogi world believed that new strategies would never come into existence was a miracle on its own, but the Worldly Maestro had already mastered it. His fingers moved across the board as if he had been born to play this new creation.

Denying Sota’s every advance with a light flick of his wrist, Mitsuru thought to himself: ———My encounter with Ranging Rook and all the powerful opponents I’ve fought to get here today.

“If that isn’t destiny, then what is?”

Flutter, flutter.

Mitsuru elegantly disassembled the prodigy’s all-out attack as if leaving a trail of cherry blossom petals in his wake.

A worldly sequence that left software reeling as it searched for a rating.

However his opponent was also chosen by the Shogi gods.

“There!!”

Spinning pieces between his fingers, Sota put the defending King in check five turns in a row and made an absolute mess of Mitsuru’s formation in the process. Then he deployed a Silver directly in front of the Knight pressuring his own King.

Although it appeared to be a defensive shift it was actually a hidden weak

spot in the defender's position.

"Noticed, have you? But!"

Mitsuru maneuvered his Promoted Bishop, a Horse away, and could sense the match was nearing its conclusion.

"Not so fast!"

Sota thought the seventh column where the defending King sat would be the key, so he pulled back his Dragon to contest the Horse.

It was a curve driven by momentum built up over the longest winning streak in history. Sota played a dangerous dance where one wrong move would result in an instant checkmate and the end goal of his furious offensive was difficult to discern.

However, Mitsuru had already read to the end of this stanza.

The cigarette still pinned between his fingers, Mitsuru reached for his piece stand and grabbed———

"Already told you, didn't I? Your Dragon is cryin'."

And deployed it directly before Sota's Dragon: a Pawn.

If left alone, Sota would lose his safety net of a Dragon on the next turn.

On the other hand, if he took that Pawn now the Dragon's cover would disappear and leave his King open to checkmate!!

"..... !!"

———Tears?! My Dragon really is crying!!

Now that the boy prodigy realized this one Pawn had driven him all the way to the brink of defeat, a new level of reality dawned on him for the first time since becoming a professional Shogi player.

The reality that he was about to lose.

"You'd better remember this, school boy."

Mitsuru addressed the boy who was shaken to his very core.

"No matter how deep you read into the board, no matter how detailed your

research gets, no matter how strong you are, you'll still lose some," whispered the Worldly Maestro while slowly lifting a certain piece.

A piece which had been sitting at 4 Two for over 100 moves.

"That's Shogi."

The Rook.

A quick slide to the side, and that Rook took the only piece of value left in Sota's arsenal: the Horse!

".....!!"

Sota felt his own rating crash like a guillotine through his neck.

The boy took that Rook as time closed in on him, but———

It wasn't the beginning of a counterattack so much as a stunt to buy enough time to come to grips with the situation.

"Aaagh. Now I'll have to do research on Ranging Rook, too It'll be extinct in 100 years and I have to come up with pointless strategies to deal with it Thanks for nothing, old man," Sota muttered as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of his junior high school uniform's jacket. Then he downed the last few gulps of water left in his glass and said the words.

Words he'd be saying for the first time as a professional.

"*Whew* I lost!"

Members of the media exploded through the door as the *Onjodan no Ma* become overrun in the blink of an eye.

Their hurried footsteps made the building shake. Cheers and lamenting wails from the crowd outside came through at the same time.

"Kunugi 4-*dan* lost!"

"Ranging Rook is back!"

"The Worldly Maestro stopped the 29th win record with a new strategy!"

“What in the world was that formation?!”

Countless reporters armed with cameras and microphones descended on the players. A Practice League member could also be seen timidly flowing in behind them.

“Thank you for that excellent match. To begin, I’d like to ask today’s winner, Oishi 9-*dan*———”

Mitsuru kept his answers to the representative sent by Kansai Shogi Journalist Club as brief as possible. Victory was his, but he knew that he wasn’t the star of today’s match.

“You’ve now qualified for the three-match Challenger Match with today’s win. Who are you going to tell first?”

“Lemme think

His kind gaze fell on Asuka, who was sitting on her ankles in the back corner. Then the man who protected Ranging Rook’s future said with a satisfied grin, “I’ll probably tell my troublemaker of a daughter she’s up waaay past her bedtime

“.....!!”

Asuka couldn’t keep the tears at bay any longer. Hot streaks rolled down her face before dripping off her chin and onto the *tatami* mat

“Thank you very much. Now, Kunugi 4-*dan*.”

“Yes?”

“Unfortunately, a new record of 29 consecutive wins couldn’t be realized today

Could you comment on how you’re feeling right now?”

“I’m satisfied with my winning percentage.”

“Huh?”

“In other words, it was about time for me to lose and my opponent today wasn’t like anyone I’ve faced thus far.”

The reporters present weren’t sure how to comprehend this 13-year-old boy who claimed that he was satisfied with a loss.

“Everyone loses sometimes. My winning streak was luck, plain and simple.”

Sota interpreted his own statements.

“And I missed out on the Challenge Match series this time because I wasn’t strong enough. I’ll go back to the drawing board and try again when I’m much, much stronger.”

With that, Sota bowed for the cameras.

Flashes rained down on him like a typhoon as the arena was filled with the sound of clicking shutters.

No one could hear it because of the noise, but Sota made one more quiet statement with his head down.

“..... So please be patient a little while longer, Yaichi”

THE COURAGE TO STEP FORWARD

An overwhelming number of ladies are waiting to meet me when I leave the association.

“So-chaaan!”

“Cheer up!

“You fought so hard!”

I’m surprised, actually.

It’s already after midnight.

The last trains are long gone and I lost the match, but there are so many people here standing in the street waiting for me. It’s not just ladies, either. There are men and children, too

———Why?

I didn’t understand at first. Did they want a picture of me being depressed that badly?

But, one look at them and I understand that’s not it at all.

They’re genuinely worried about me and came to cheer me up.

“Thank you. I will keep trying.”

I bow and they applaud. What I don’t understand is why the loss hurts so much right now when it didn’t bother me at all when it happened. The agony is making my eyes hot.

Oh I see now.

I’d only thought about how someone had to suffer every time I win up until now.

But I wasn’t quite right about that.

There are people who are happy when I win and people who feel more pain than I do when I lose. Some people have placed their own livelihoods on my

shoulders.

— — — That's what becoming a professional means.

Something else hits me at the same time.

The importance of expressing emotions.

I'm a smart person, so I tend to make the assumption that most things don't need to be said to be understood.

But, smart as I am, many things click for the first time now that emotions are coming across.

Which means I had better speak up, too.

Like *that* person who came up to me and said, *Let's play Shogi!* no matter how many times I coldheartedly brushed them off.

Now it's my turn.

Rather than just waiting around I have to say what I want in my own words.

"Kunugi 4-*dan*! May I have a moment?!"

Just then.

A reporter breaks through the throng of people and holds out a microphone.

This is probably a freelancer working for one of those tabloid magazines or a YouTuber who couldn't get clearance to enter the association building.

"You've made headlines with your record-tying winning streak, but Women's Legend Ai Hinatsuru is also getting attention for setting a record as the first Women's League player to defeat ten pros in a row!"

"Hinatsuru? Oh yes Yaichi's apprentice."

I played against her once before in the Player's Room. Wait, was it with his other apprentice? Whichever one it was, I've forgotten the match entirely.

I'm pretty sure I saw her during a practice session at Kiyotaki-*sensei's* house, but Hmm It seems remembering girls' faces is challenging for me.

I stop walking to search my memories, but the reporter took that as their cue

to continue with their question.

“Miss Hinatsuru is pressuring the Shogi Association to create a Professional Entrance Exam by defeating as many pros as possible! Basically, she wants to skip the 3-*dan* division entirely and become a pro. What do you think about her proposition?!”

“A Professional Entrance Exam?”

One that would allow someone to join the professionals right away, not just the 3-*dan* division?

Well

“Could anyone take that exam?”

“There aren’t any specifics yet But a gambler apparently did something like it in the past. But they played with money on the table, and a criminal like that would never be allowed to join nowadays———”

“That’s a fantastic idea.”

“Wha?”

The reporters must have assumed I would be angry because they’re staring back at me in disbelief.

As someone who took the *correct* route through the Sub League to reach the professional ranks, I guess they thought I would be staunchly against a fast-track option.

“I think a Professional Entrance Exam is a wonderful idea! The Shogi world is based on strength, after all. I’ve only made it to where I am today because gender and age aren’t barriers in this world. While gambling on Shogi matches is a crime, that doesn’t mean people who have made mistakes in the past shouldn’t be given another chance if they genuinely regret their actions, does it? The great thing about Shogi is that you can start over from the beginning as many times as you want.”

“B-But, Kunugi 4-*dan*, you worked so hard to clear the 3-*dan* division

“There are strong players who didn’t make it through.”

I know that for a fact.

There's one killing time by putting seeds in the ground or something in his hometown right now.

"The Shogi that professionals play has gotten old because software has become so strong. If someone comes along who's become stronger than professionals without playing against human beings, I think having to play in the Sub League and 3-*dan* division is just a waste of time."

"B- But, then there is no way to know for sure if they're a strong player — — —"

"Sure there is. If they play against me."

Just in case the stunned reporters misheard, I repeat myself as clearly as possible.

"If this exam ever materializes, I would happily volunteer to play against the candidates as an examiner myself!"

I check the paper the next morning and see that the Entrance Exam idea is getting just as much coverage as my winning streak coming to an end.

"Kunugi 4-*dan* Approves Pro Exam!"

"Declares Wish to be an Examiner!"

"'Keeping someone strong enough to beat Kunugi out of the pros makes no sense!' The World Sounds Off!"

The idea of a Professional Entrance Exam is starting to catch on like wildfire, both on the airwaves and the internet.

There seems to be a lot more to say about it than my winning streak, and all sorts of people are chiming in.

"There we go!"

Now that I know I'm still in the news, I open the mail app on my smartphone and start worldly working my way through the inbox. It seems everyone and their mother is desperate to secure a piece of my now-open schedule!

But I politely turn them all down.

Once that's done, I start composing a message of my own.

I already know what work I'll be doing to fill the time I was planning to use for a 7-Match Ryuo Title series against Yaichi.

Something I decided to do myself!

"Now Oh! I have to buy sunscreen!"

Once my message is on its way, it's time for me to go shopping for the first time in ages. There's so many things I need to buy. After all, I'll be going somewhere I've never been for work.

The sunlight has to be very strong in Kyushu.

UNINSTALL

“The bullet train carrying *Kuzuryu-sensei* has left Shinagawa Station. It will arrive at Shin-Kobe Station in 150 minutes’ time. Shall I arrange to have him picked up?”

“Don’t. He’ll ask too many questions if he finds out I’ve been monitoring him.”

“Understood.”

I brush my fingers against Awaji’s case and pray that my experiment works this time.

My newborn sister is exceptional, but she’s still very young.

I couldn’t handle this little girl creating an endless stream of Shogi records at an unfathomable cost. However, the records she creates playing against herself are useless to humanity. Just like all the leech-like children Izanami birthed right after her marriage to Izanagi in Japanese folklore Pursuing the essence of Shogi and getting stronger by looking that those matches don’t equate. Not in the least.

Then———

“Akira.”

“My lady.”

“What did he do for Ai?”

“Open a window, or so I’m told.”

“A window?”

“Yes. Letting fresh air into the arena.”

“..... That’s it?”

“That is it. As it was during a match, I believe he refrained from offering any advice or encouragement that would violate the rules.”

My heart twinges.

Ai Hinatsuru's Shogi was on the verge of collapse, and that was all it took for her to recover. At the same time, Yaichi Kuzuryu believed that was all his apprentice needed.

Their bond is far stronger than I thought.

But Ai Hinatsuru doesn't need to be on my radar anymore. I couldn't care less if she will become a professional player or not.

"The current professional system will fall apart sooner or later."

What she and I are doing is the same, in a sense.

Yaichi Kuzuryu is uniting the professional Shogi world while I'm doing the same in the Women's League. The two of us will become so strong, we'll be untouchable.

Once that happens, we'll conduct the final title match on planet earth.

No other title matches will attract any interest after that series is complete. Just as classical music is still being performed today, everything that follows perfection is just a rearrangement. This binding status quo has proven to hold true over the past few centuries.

"Defeating professionals with Awaji is easy," I say as the log gets split out in front of me. *"Just lower the specs.* As long as it's just a little more powerful than the machines my opponents are using, I can outresearch them by just enough. After that, it's just rinse and repeat."

For a person who is familiar with software, it's not difficult to play a *software* move in response to a *software* move.

That's simple enough for anyone with pro-level Shogi skills.

Therefore, this approach becomes more effective the more a professional player has reached that level of software fluency.

"But *It's much more difficult to play a software move in response to a human move.*"

Only those with enough talent can pull it off.

That is a realm that only those who have uninstalled human Shogi senses can

reach. Even with the advantage of Awaji, defeating them will be a difficult task.

“Sota Kunugi is close, but he still makes mistakes now and then.”

His decision making against Ranging Rook is particularly suspect. The Rook sliding to the side leads to mistakes across the board. Mitsuru Oishi made that weakness apparent during the Ryo Tournament.

“Ika Sainokami has abandoned her own humanity to the point that it’s safe to say she has become a software program. At the same time, however, she’s prone to make the same kind of mistakes as software does.”

“Then, what of Kuzuryu-sensei?”

“He plays moves that *go beyond software*. In certain circumstances, at least.”

I had anticipated him forcing repetition draws or stalemates against software.

After all, it’s possible to standardize the first 10 to 20 moves and trigger a Repetition Draw with Bishops on the piece stands as a valid strategy. Even I have reached that level.

But who would have anticipated this?

A human being outdoing software on a formation that’s never been seen before!

“I saw Awaji’s log. As hard as it is to believe, in his final match at the end of the marathon his rating recovered in the mid-game.”

A chill not coming from the server room’s cooling unit runs down my spine and makes me shiver.

Just one move.

Calculating the chance of victory, he improved by 0.001 percent.

Yaichi Kuzuryu surpassed Awaji while playing defense. Just for a second.

Even that goes beyond my expectations. How could a human being find that move while playing against the world’s fastest supercomputer?!

I turn to face Akira standing a few paces behind me.

“Your idea to pit him against an illusion of Ginko Sora was fantastic. Well

done.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

She’s the one who came up with it first. I gave permission.

Something that elaborate could never be created without extensive preparation. I only tracked down Ginko Sora’s location a few days before Akira took Yaichi there.

It was a risky bet But after seeing Yaichi’s Shogi right afterward, I knew the gamble had paid off.

“Allowing a person to see someone important to them right before a big job has been a common tactic within the shadier side of society for a long time. For instance, their mother, child or———”

“A lover?”

“..... Yes.”

Akira nods and then makes a wringing gesture around her neck.

“That way, they choose to leave that individual behind on their own volition.”

“That’s how his humanity was uninstalled.”

I comprehend it all.

I knew the last piece Yaichi Kuzuryu needed to surpass a machine.

“Make him into a heartless machine that has given up on love, kindness and hope.”

There is no doubt that Yaichi is despairing over Shogi’s future.

That much is obvious from the match records he selected. He’s desperate to hide the truth that the game called Shogi is unraveling.

“It was the same in his Placement Match against Taishi Shinokubo. Yaichi did his utmost to hide the future from humanity, but the rest of them misinterpret his actions as trying to hoard Awaji’s blessings all to himself.”

Even so, Yaichi still tried to hide the future at first.

But Shinokubo’s No, the unyielding egotism of creatures known as Shogi

players plunged Yaichi into despair after all those Repetition Draws, and that cracked his shell.

The last shell holding onto his humanity.

“Thus, he played like a machine against a human, utterly destroying them

Yaichi Kuzuryu completely uninstalled his humanity after the third Repetition Draw.

His heart had been the last block. Removing it turned him into a machine in front of that Shogi board. He played every sequence Awaji had subjected him to, and he did it without using any waiting time. Shinokubo couldn't keep up and lost by instant death before long. That match record alone is enough to strike fear into the hearts of all who see it.

Yaichi Kuzuryu has perfected Shogi beyond perfection

“But he must see something different from my own conclusions.”

Surely, Yaichi is *under the misconception that Repetition Draws and stalemates are the final answer to Shogi*. He's taken the fake future Awaji showed him to heart without questioning it.

Believing that I have shown him absolutely everything.

“Now, Awaji. Can you show me all the data this time?”

I whisper over the supercomputer's groans as it continues calculating, telling it to show me the real future

INHUMAN VS. INHUMAN

There are so many strange things about this title match.

It's being held in a building that's deep in the mountains and far away from civilization.

I was told that it's a certain company's exclusive resort, but word is that it used to be a specialized medical facility. The place even popped up as a *haunted hotspot* online. Seriously?

Transportation to the site was all chartered without anyone using public trains or bus routes whatsoever.

The Opening Night Party was a dinner for the players and people directly involved.

It goes without saying that no public gatherings for analysis and commentary are happening, and no events for the fans. Internet reception in the area is so poor that broadcasting a live stream of the match in real time wasn't an option. It will be recorded and broadcast at a later date.

The title match's name———Empress.

At the request of the Empress Title Holder, King Yo Okito was selected as the observer.

"Anyone else, and I die."

Empress Sainokami had stated her wishes on a visit to the association office while pressing a shaving razor blade against her carotid artery.

That's a threat, isn't it?

A current title holder acting as an observer is an irregular among irregularities, and I never got any explanation for that.

One more thing.

Another pro was summoned to the arena at the Empress's request.

Crown Yaichi Kuzuryu. Me.

The same coalition of five newspaper companies sponsor the Crown and Empress Tournaments.

They explained to me that it was *a collaboration between the titles!* and asked me to write a review about the match for the newspaper. But anyone inside the Shogi world can tell that nothing about this is business as usual, and I've got a pretty good hunch who made me come out here and what they're trying to do.

I could've said no. My own Crown Title Match is right around the corner.

But it wasn't just Ika who wanted me here, it was the *challenger* too. So I'm on my way to an arena where someone I'd rather not see is waiting.

"Aha! ≡ You caaame! ≡≡≡"

The extremely limited Opening Night Party has started. It's been about two years since I last saw the girl smiling at me from ear to ear, Ika Sainokami.

Honestly, I'm surprised how coolheaded I am sitting across from the girl who tore Big Sis apart with her Tomahawk strategy.

The people sitting here with us probably have a lot to do with it.

This table was built for four, and we're a strange bunch for sure. It's hard to put the atmosphere here into words as we eat.

Sitting next to Ika is the observer, *Okito-sensei*.

The Empress Challenger is next to me.

Two tables are usually set up for this type of dinner party so that the players don't have to talk to each other right before the match, but

"Seriously, Ika What are you trying to pull? It's weird enough to have the title holder and the challenger sitting at the same table, but dragging *Okito-sensei* and I into it is———"

"Don't be like that, Yaichi. I wanted to introduce you to my papa. ≡"

“..... Papa?”

I’m the only one completely shocked by this revelation.

The other three are sitting at the table like it’s just any other day. Furthermore, there’s only one other man here.

Huh No, that can't be Could it?

The challenger, dressed in black, looks over at me and says as if talking about tomorrow’s weather forecast.

“Him right there, King Yo Okito. He’s Ika Sainokami’s biological father.”

The challenger———Ai Yashajin-*Dual Women’s Title* says the shocking truth matter of factly in the middle of cutting up her rare Kobe steak.

“They’re not registered as such on paper and have never lived under the same roof. But genetics prove they are in fact father and daughter.”

“How?”

How did you know about this? I try to ask, but my head is spinning so fast I barely got the first word out.

Okito-*sensei* did mention it to me before.

He said that he had a kid about my age who was a Shogi player. And he only found out about the kid two years ago.

So I assumed Okito-*sensei*’s research partner Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* was the one.

Then again, Okito-*sensei* never said they were a pro and Ika and I are the same age.

It lines up Everything lines up, but...!

“A-Ai! You You knew about this and still gave the go-ahead?!”

“Yes, I did.”

The thing that is most important for an observer is neutrality.

That's why they can't be a Master, apprentice or sibling apprentice of either player. Even if they're not in the same *Shogi* family, siblings related by blood and spouses of the players involved never work as observers or match recorders.

"Because checking to see if the rules about *Shogi family restrictions* apply when the child wasn't aware of their parentage would be a pointless waste of time. Actually, I'm more worried about her feeling extra pressure with him in the room. Plenty of kids couldn't concentrate on class at school if their parents were in the room. Sainokami strikes me as that type."

Ika grins at her biological father the whole time Ai spoke, but I guess she never picked up on the irony.

Okito-sensei, sitting diagonally across from my second apprentice, quietly asks, "Why did you know?"

"My match against her in the Women's Throne Tournament is what tipped me off," says Ai as she points at Ika with her fork. "I won because her formation broke apart in an aerial battle. I didn't realize it at the time, but I did once I analyzed the match afterward with Awaji's deep learning software."

It was right before Ika's match against Big Sis.

Her behavior was more erratic and she obviously wasn't feeling well. Ika's winning percentage was at an all-time low.

Thinking back on it now That's a lot like what happened to me when I started playing consecutive matches against Awaji.

"Ika Sainokami had absorbed tons of deep learning software—based match records and was in the process of molting. Her outright rejection of pure Ranging Rook Party players was even stronger than mine, yes? But, I digress The important thing is *how did a regular Women's League player get their hands on match records created by deep learning software?*"

Pro players are much less apprehensive about using software these days.

When it comes to developing said software, though, it's a different story.

I know of one player who recognized the potential of deep learning software

early on, incorporated the technology and sees its ratings on the same level as the Shogi gods.

Yo Okito.

“Looking into it once I figured that out wasn’t difficult. Even without DNA testing, comparing your features and body types using pictures online was enough to label you as father and daughter. Awaji could tell in less than a second.”

“Acknowledged. Deep learning software particularly excels at analysis via visual materials.”

“I’ll be putting it on the market at some point.”

“Excellent.”

Okito-*sensei* seems very interested in that aspect. All I see is households being wrecked on a worldwide scale

“By the way, were they delicious?”

“Hmgh?”

Ika had lost interest in the conversation and was shoveling food into her mouth with her fork like a toddler when Ai asked that question. She looks up and says, “The meat? Hi-hi-hi! Hell yeah, they’re all delish———”

“No. I’m talking about the match records I released.”

“..... !!”

“One hundred of the best match records Awaji produced, and the most pivotal ones came with analysis

But you haven’t read any of them, have you? Big words don’t seem like your strong suit.”

I’m the one who chose the records and wrote the analysis, though.

Ika lets out a big, “IHIII!” and shudders from head to toe.

Then, after licking all the meat juice off her chin with that long tongue, she burps with satisfaction and says, “Gi-hi-hi

Oh, they’re tasty, all right! The flavor went so much deeper than any of the ones Papa gave me, that’s for sure.”

“How nice. Then, shall we dance to our heart’s content tomorrow?” says Ai Yashajin-*Women’s Dual Title* getting to get feet and holding out her right hand like an invitation out onto a dance floor.

“The *depth* you tasted is nothing but the tip of the iceberg. I’ll teach just how deep it really goes. The darkness the deep, deep abyss.”

The girl attempting to claim half of Women’s Shogi’s six major titles then flips her long, black hair over her shoulder like a glossy wing.

That’s when it all dawns on me.

The reason why I don’t feel anything when I see Ika’s face.

I, Yaichi Kuzuryu, and my apprentice Ai Yashajin have uninstalled our humanity by peering into the darkest depths of Shogi. We have become just as inhuman as Ika Sainokami———

“Let me show you the dark abyss from which there’s no return.”

FOR THE AFTERWORD

“Is the absolute answer to Shogi a victory for the offense or the defender?”

I think this question has been debated since the very moment Shogi was created and has spanned fourteen centuries to today.

It was also the main theme for Book 5 of *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* But the idea came to me after reading a book of Meijin Yoshiharu Habu quotes so I didn't have anything to add to the discussion myself.

When it comes to what is closest to finding that absolute answer nowadays, I doubt anyone would disagree that supercomputers are closer than human beings.

So I tried asking the leading authorities on Shogi software development for myself.

The question: What do you think is Shogi's answer?

I got many different responses.

But if there was anything they all had in common, it was———

“A definitive answer will come out in the next few years.”

The specific number for *the next few years* varied.

Also, the content for said *answer* was just as varied.

Since Shogi software development has historically been open-source, the individual developers have been able to make use of their personal talents to push the technology along.

It only makes sense that they would have their own opinions on the answer.

My conversations with them branched out beyond the realm of Shogi.

The excitement in their voices was palpable when the latest cutting-edge technology came up and their creativity constantly left me in awe.

Interviewing in person to gather information became a much bigger challenge

due to Covid-19, but the power of technology made it easy to bridge the gap.

A computer-based Shogi tournament known as the *Denryu-sen* took place completely online (and almost completely automated), and it is now possible to *grab* pieces using a headset and a glove in the *Metaverse*.

Of course, I focus on Shogi when out gathering information.

But at the same time, I got to learn about the latest happenings within virtual reality as well as the scope of deep learning software and supercomputers.

Shogi is, without a doubt, an analog game. However our conversations veered to the latest technology circles before I knew it.

I wanted to express that unusual sensation in novel form and used Book 17 to show a version of the future using Shogi.

A long-awaited match is coming up next.

Ai vs. Ai.

They haven't collided since Book 2.

How will Yaichi feel when he sees his more mature apprentices go head to head? And Ginko———

Don't miss it!

**REVIEW
SESSION**

REVIEW SESSION

“Hiuuuma! How about lunch?”

Hiuma Kagamizu, crouched over the soil, stood up at his childhood friend’s call.

Nothing but green fields as far as the eye could see.

This year there was a bountiful harvest of *satsumaimo* sweet potatoes.

Kagoshima prefecture was synonymous with sweet potatoes, but when it came to producing them for alcoholic drinks like *shochu*, Miyazaki prefecture sat alone at the top.

No matter how many were produced, it would never be enough to fill demand for *shochu*.

Looking over the fields his lifelong friend’s father had entrusted to his care, Hiuma felt satisfied.

The very sweet potatoes he grew with his own hands were distilled into *shochu*, which made many people happy. He could never feel this type of fulfillment by playing Shogi, which didn’t create anything tangible.

His childhood friend came right up next to him with a picnic basket. The two sat down to eat and she leaned in to strike up a conversation.

“Um, Dad said he wanted you to teach him some more Shogi today.”

“Sure.”

“And to spend the night at our place.”

Hiuma silently nodded along with her sweet voice as his thoughts turned toward the future.

———It wouldn’t be all that bad, would it? Working the land and settling down with her.

He loved the competitiveness of the Shogi world.

He'd also loved the version of himself who lived in that world.

But now that he was free of the constant tension and pressure that came with belonging to the 3-*dan* division, he found that he also loved this version of himself.

Hiuma even pondered if he had been cut out for that cutthroat environment in the first place.

The young woman at his side gazed upon his profile and whispered, "..... You've changed, Hiuma."

"Changed? Me?"

"Yep. You had this scary look in your eyes when you first came back."

"I did?"

"But, this new you it's, um"

Her face turned an almost aggressive shade of pink as she finished that sentence.

"..... It's like the Hiuma I loved has finally come home≡"

She was clearly making a big move, one that could seal victory. However, Hiuma didn't make any attempt to avoid it.

Happiness had fallen into Hiuma's lap like a sun-kissed mango, and all he had to do now was reach out and take it.

A happiness that had eluded him during all those years playing Shogi could be his, and it would be so easy

That happiness was mercilessly smashed by a boy dressed in a junior high school uniform appearing out of the blue.

"Oh, there you are. Heeey! Mr. Kagamizu!"

"..... Sota?" Hiuma muttered in disbelief.

He thought it was a mirage. After all, that boy couldn't possibly be here.

“S-Sota Kunugi 4-*dan*?! Is that actually him?!”

His childhood friend positively glowed with reverence, as if an angel had descended upon the sweet potato fields.

“Th-The prodigy everyone in Japan is talking about? What’s he doing here?”

“Work, what else?”

The only person not covered in sweat beneath the sweltering southern island sun, for whatever reason, stepped right into the fields in his leather shoes.

“Miyakonojyo City hosts the Women’s King Tournament every year, remember? I’ve been asked to do big board analysis. I didn’t think the mass media would follow me all the way to the boonies like this and, what do you know, it’s been an absolute circus with all these small, local news stations and papers hounding me. People in the Shogi Journalist Club follow the rules. But it seems like everyone in the countryside doesn’t have a clue what the rules are.”

Sota never stopped talking, not even after coming up to Hiuma’s side.

“Anyway, I had a terrible time there. Nobody’s heard of Women King Something-something zaka and challenger What’s-her-face, so aaaaaall the reporters swarmed me instead. On top of that, the *shochu* makers keep asking me to do commercials for them And that company president, his speeches last an eternity. I’ve never seen someone open a scroll like that before!”

Indeed, the owner of the *shochu* brewery that sponsored the Women’s King Tournament was known for long-winded speeches during the Open Night Party and he’d become famous for unrolling his notes for the opening address.

What’s more, Hiuma had attended many of those parties while working as a match recorder during his time in the Sub League A new wind blew into the weak spots of his heart, reigniting the old flame from back in those days.

“By the way, Mr. Kagamizu.”

“Yeah? What is it, Sota?”

“Who’s that woman there?”

“O-Ohh She’s, yeah. This is”

Now suddenly embarrassed, Hiuma stepped forward as if to hide his childhood friend from Sota's view. The boy quickly walked around to the other side, but Hiuma still tried to hide her

After a brief moment of consideration, Hiuma answered Sota's question.

"My lifelong friend. Her father hired me to work these fields."

"Hmmm? A lifelong friend, is she?"

Sota studied her from head to toe, much like an appraiser would.

Until finally, "Heh." Sota was assured of his own victory and declared, "You're ugly."

"?!"

Hiuma's childhood friend gasped after witnessing the boy prodigy's true face, the one that would never be shown on TV. Hiuma panicked, knowing full well what the boy was likely to say next———

"I far outclass her in looks, Shogi sense and personality! Your standards have fallen hard since you left, Hiuma. Have you spent so much time looking at potatoes that you find people who look like them attractive now?"

Then Sota Kunugi takes a step beyond Hiuma's expectations.

"Now, come on back to Osaka."

".....Huh?!"

Both Hiuma and his friend gasp in unison.

"W-Wait just a minute there! Are you listening, Sota? Stepping away from Shogi, I feel like I've got something really good started here. You're going to live out my dream, right? I don't need to be———"

"Yes, that's what you said before you left, and I made a brand new Shogi boom just like I promised, haven't I? I kept my word, so now it's your turn to keep yours."

"My word?"

"You promised to play Shogi with me again! Now that there's a Professional Entrance Exam, go meet the qualifications and play against me!"

“Slow down, slow down. Nothing has been decided for an exam———”

“It’s inevitable. I already volunteered to be an examiner,” Sota stated innocently, as if he truly believed there was nothing in this world that wouldn’t go exactly as he imagined.

“Th-That’s not your decision to make! You might be the wonderboy everyone’s talking about, but that doesn't change the fact that Hiuma and I are going to be very happy together!”

“Hah! Mr. Kagamizu could never be happy away from me, without Shogi in his life. You can’t understand something that obvious? Don’t be so dumb when your face sets you up for enough jokes already.”

The young woman screamed at the top of her lungs, but Sota was prepared to land the final blow.

“It’s time we visit your parent’s house, Mr. Kagamizu. Show me the way.”

“M-My parent’s house? Why would you want to go there?”

“To meet your parents, of course. *I’ll be taking care of your son from now on. You have my word, I’ll make him into a professional Shogi player.* It’s only courteous, right? Oh, and you can have them ship your things to Osaka later.”

The prodigy didn’t hesitate for an instant, grabbed the dirt-covered Hiuma Kagamizu and pulled him out of the field with the same absolute confidence as when he walked in.

“This is just how it is!”

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Professional Shogi player was the first occupation many thought would be *stolen* by AI. On the contrary, it became the first occupation to *take full advantage of AI*. It may sound overblown, but I believe we have reached this point today because the players devoted themselves completely to competition. I got to experience every element of this new era by researching for this story, and was happy to write the 17th book in a series about Shogi.

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I referenced every piece of art since Book 1 for Big Sis's design now that her hair has grown out, and only now did I realize that she is the only character to have a solo cover, including limited releases.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 17

Story by Shirow Shiratori

Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 17

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